



NATIONAL
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DES BEAUX-ARTS
DU CANADA

Hampton, Chris. "Sky Glabush Paints the Story," *National Gallery of Canada*, Jan. 28, 2020.



Sky Glabush
"The Boarding House," 2018
Oil and sand on canvas
80 x 60 in
213.6 x 152.6 cm

Sky Glabush began his *The Valley of Love* series with a simple, scabrous observation: contemporary painting seems to have lost the plot. A century earlier, modernists like Ben Shahn and Marc Chagall told vivid stories within their painting. More recently, however, narrative has become diminished, or else idiosyncratic and illegible. Contemporary painting, Glabush says, tends to valorize the creative process in pursuit of the "interesting," "innovative" or novel. But when he drilled down into the stuff of art, he found that storytelling was its bedrock.

For his recent return to large-scale painting — the format the London, Ont.-based artist was acclaimed for a decade ago — Glabush contemplated the building blocks of traditional folktale. "Good guys, bad guys, a forest, a marriage," he lists, tropes and structures so embedded in our sense of narrative that they influence the way we understand our own lives. The various motifs formed the subjects of *The Valley of Love*, a suite of five paintings, shown at Toronto's Clint Roenisch Gallery in fall 2018. The National Gallery of Canada acquired two works from the exhibition, *The Boarding House* and *The Clearing*, both currently on view in the contemporary galleries.

The Boarding House pictures a multi-storey residence built from polychrome puzzle pieces. With its inconstant architecture and its cheery palette somewhat dirtied, the lodging transmits mystery. It invites all manner of stories upon it and into it. Glabush was inspired by post-Viking churches in Norway, their aesthetic carrying a "dark kind of energy." The structure of *The Boarding House* is an amalgam of about ten different buildings, he says, also including Edwardian churches as well as make-believe spaces. It is designed in such a way that each floor forms the foundation for the storey above, each following its own architectural logic. Its "construction" was similar to how a painting gets built, Glabush says: he renovated the structure here and there, making additions, demolishing walls, affecting stylistic alterations. And by those same operations, *The Boarding House* also stands as an allegory for the act of storytelling: the way narratives grow and change with each retelling, like an old home remodelled.

Glabush wanted to include a landscape in the show — not his own observed landscape, like those he had painted years ago, but the emblem of a landscape. So he worked from a tiny watercolour by early 20th-century British painter Paul Nash that he had found online. He made a drawing, and then a watercolour from his drawing. He then blew it up on a three-metre canvas and worked with oil and sand. *The Clearing* peers out from the forest thicket, which is denuded, eerily fingerlike and rendered in foreign shades. Journeying into the deep landscape, crossing the dark forest, such adventures form an archetype stretching back through literature, poetry and oral tradition. There, the woods often represent an entrance to the unknown. Their danger is both physical and psychic. To escape the woods, to reach the clearing, is to experience growth from the encounter. Picturing that threshold, as Glabush has here, charts the narrative arc as tension tips toward resolution and entanglement toward enlightenment. His hero can now return home.

So what did this study of storytelling all yield? From the start of his art-making practice, Glabush has been trying to understand the relationship between spirituality and art. "I went into it poetically. I went into it conceptually. I went to it theoretically. And I also went at that question in a very literal way." The query ceased, he says, with the realization all art is spiritual. "All art is an evocation of this spirit. It's like the relationship between rhythm and dance: of course there is one, but it's an intrinsic relationship." And just as "rhythm isn't always the subject of dance," he resolved that spirituality needn't be the subject of every painting — it would comprise it regardless. The *Valley of Love* series marked something of a leap for Glabush, as he accepted "art is an evocation" and focused his excavation instead squarely on the concept of narrative. Meanwhile, the deeper he dug, the more spiritually significant his unearthings. These paintings brought him to recognize that the stories we hold onto tightly, the ones we pass between generations, those that gird whole cultures, tend to address our basest human questions: Where did we come from? Why are we here? How should we act? "That's exactly what I came to," Glabush says, "these foundational stories are always underpinned with our search for meaning." It is perhaps the reason we tell stories in the first place.

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