

# PLUS

Staff. *Textures of Time and Place.* Plus Magazine, September, 2024.



Portrait of Sky Glabush. Courtesy the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, New York

Sky Glabush's work invites viewers into a rich dialogue where language, nature, and form converge. Through his use of textured landscapes, blending sand and oil paint, Glabush creates surfaces that feel almost sculptural, evoking both the organic and the abstract. Drawing inspiration from modernist influences and Seamus Heaney's poem "Alphabets," his current exhibition, *The Letters of This Alphabet Were Trees*, reflects a deep connection between painting and language, where forms carry historical and emotional weight. By balancing abstraction and representation, Glabush transports viewers into spaces that resonate with memory, nature, and the passage of time, offering a contemplative experience that lingers beyond the visual.

PLUS: The exhibition title, *The letters of this alphabet were trees*, is inspired by Seamus Heaney's poem "Alphabets," where letters and forms evoke historical and emotional layers. How do you see this connection between language and painting playing out in your current work?

Sky Glabush: I've always been deeply connected to poetry, especially after studying English literature alongside painting. Seamus Heaney's work, particularly "Alphabets," speaks to me because it reflects on language as something deeply rooted in nature and history. When I create paintings, I often find myself returning to poetry, reading lines that resonate with the visual energy of the work. In this case, the line "The letters of this alphabet were trees" opened up something for me, something about the relationship between nature, form, and language. It's as if the poem helped articulate what I was trying to capture in the painting—a dialogue between the organic and the symbolic, between the visual and the verbal. That connection has become more intentional in my work over the last few years.

P: How did the theme of this exhibition come together, and what do you hope visitors take away from it?

SG: The theme emerged quite naturally from my process. I wasn't working from a strict concept but allowed the paintings to evolve organically, often drawing on specific landscapes near my home. I hope visitors take away a feeling of being transported—not just to a physical place, but to a state of mind where they feel a connection to nature and the passage of time. For me, it's about evoking that sense of presence, where the viewer is invited to stand still and reflect, just as I did while making the work.

P: You're known for mixing sand with oil paint to create textured, relief-like landscapes. Can you walk us through how this technique developed and what it allows you to explore in terms of light and form that more traditional methods might not?

SG: The use of sand mixed with oil paint began as an experiment, a way of physically engaging with the landscape. I wanted the surfaces of my paintings to feel tactile, almost sculptural. Sand introduces an element of texture that traditional paint alone doesn't offer. It changes how light interacts with the surface and allows me to explore depth and relief in a way that feels more connected to the Earth. This technique also lets me blur the line between abstraction and representation, as the texture itself can suggest forms that aren't fully realized but are felt.

P: Your work draws comparisons to modernist giants like Pollock, Newman, and Monet. How do you navigate those influences in your practice, balancing homage with your own distinct voice?

SG: I am heavily influenced by modernist painters. I live and breathe their histories, their processes, and even their materials. But I'm not trying to replicate or hold on nostalgically to modernism. What fascinates me is the tension they wrestled with—between abstraction and representation, nature and form. I think that the same tension is alive in my work, though it is filtered through my own experiences and sensibilities. My goal is to engage with these traditions while also pushing them forward, finding new ways to express those same fundamental questions.

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P: Early Light at Roblin Lake is your largest painting to date. Could you talk about the emotional and physical process of creating such a monumental piece and how scale changes your approach to painting?

SG: Early Light at Roblin Lake was an improvisation, but its scale required a different kind of focus and energy. When working on something so large, you have to think about how the viewer's body engages with the work—you want them to feel immersed, almost enveloped by the painting. Emotionally, it was about capturing the feeling of that place, the stillness, the quiet early morning light, but on a scale that overwhelms the viewer. The physicality of working on such a large canvas also forces you to step back to move differently in the studio, which changes the way you approach both form and detail.

P: The interplay between abstraction and representation is a key part of your practice. How do you decide when to obscure elements of a scene versus when to reveal them, particularly in pieces like Early Light at Roblin Lake?

SG: That's always an intuitive process for me. In Early Light at Roblin Lake, I wasn't trying to create a literal representation of the place but more of an emotional response to it. As I worked, I found that certain forms would start to emerge, and then I'd decide whether to let them come forward or push them back into abstraction. It's about finding a balance between suggestion and clarity, where the viewer can recognize something familiar but also feel like they're discovering something new within the work. It's not about depicting reality but evoking a sense of place that feels true to me.



Sky Glabush, 'Early light at Roblin Lake', 2024. Oil and sand on canvas, two panels, each: 213.36 x 243.84cm (84 x 96in), overall: 213.36 x 487.68cm (84 x 192in).  
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