

Counter-Slowness in the Work of Tomás Sánchez

Madeline Murphy Turner

In his 2016 painting *Inner Lagoon...Thought-Cloud*, Cuban-born artist Tomás Sánchez depicts a pristine landscape divided into three registers: in the foreground, a field of fresh green grass, tousled only slightly by a breeze and a long path tread by a solitary, miniscule figure who sits at the forest's edge. At the center of the composition, an oval lagoon punctuates the forest's expanse into the horizon while above, a single cloud hovers over the scene, casting its oblong shadow upon the infinite greenery.

Executed with meticulous attention to detail, *Inner Lagoon...Thought-Cloud* shows a landscape that, despite its hyperrealism, seems unimaginable in today's reality. We are now bombarded by images of forest fires, floods, oil spills, and waste, contemporary scenes that illustrate the detrimental impact that human life has inflicted on the planet, leading geologists to designate the current epoch as the Anthropocene. That Sánchez's painting seems to exist beyond the realm of the real aligns with the process of its creation: the fictional scene is imagined by the artist, whose visions of landscapes are assisted by his decades-long practice of meditation and Yoga.

Featured in the exhibition *Tomás Sánchez: Inner Landscape* at Marlborough New York, *Inner Lagoon...Thought Cloud* is shown alongside nine other paintings and five drawings, all made by Sánchez since 2014. Most of the exhibited works present images of nature that reference a now seemingly distant world, one that remained unaffected by human presence. Engaging with the modern history of landscape painting, Surrealism, spirituality, as well as the ecological crisis, his artwork invites an interrogation into the validity of the landscape genre in the twenty-first century. However disquieting the question may be, we must ask, particularly in the context of Latin America, home to the Earth's most essential yet threatened forest: what is the role of landscape painting when the very land it once depicted is disappearing? Especially in the case of Sánchez, what does it mean to dedicate such extended time to a vanishing nature?

An internationally recognized figure for over four decades, Sánchez first began his work as an artist in the 1960s while studying at the Escuela Nacional de Arte in Havana under the guidance of Antonia Eiriz, a key figure in Cuban neo-expressionist art; however, by the late 1970s, he began to work on his now signature landscapes. Sánchez gained international recognition in the Cuban artistic scene when in 1981 he participated in the groundbreaking exhibition *Volumen I*, a major turning point in the establishment of socially, politically, and culturally engaged art on the island.



Inner Lagoon...Thought-Cloud, 2016; acrylic on canvas; 78¼ × 78½ in. / 200 × 199.4 cm.

In her catalogue essay for the exhibition at Marlborough, art historian Susan L. Aberth explains that in the highly-politicized context within which Sánchez began making his landscape paintings, the genre was considered retrograde and unfashionable.¹ Nevertheless, the artist's engagement with the genre has proven his profound knowledge of its history, as well as its consequences. Conversant with the work of 18th- and 19th-century landscape painters such as Albert Bierstadt, Frederic Edwin Church, Thomas Cole, and Caspar David Friedrich, Sánchez, however, in contrast to these figures, does not romanticize the natural world. Rather, as Giulio V. Blanc proposes, the artist "uses landscape to convey a statement about man and culture in the natural environment."² In *Isla y meditador en diagonal* (2019), for example, he employs geometrical forms that create a representation of nature as ordered, structured by a mathematical rule that can be rationalized by a human viewer, whose presence is mirrored in the painting by a miniscule figure meditating at the edge of the ovaloid island of towering, systematized trees. The image defies the romantic landscapes of Sánchez's predecessors, who depicted nature as untamed and ready to be civilized, as illustrated by Church's monumental *Heart of the Andes* (1859).

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Isla y meditador en diagonal, 2019; acrylic on canvas; 39 × 475/8 in. / 99.1 × 121 cm

While Early Modern landscapes now fill the halls of international art museums, it is crucial to recognize how the genre was instrumentalized throughout the colonization of the Americas. That is to say, the concept of landscape is predicated on processes of differentiation, which unfold by positioning nature as something ontologically separate from the human. Scholar Jens Andermann details how the detachment of the human from nature positioned the very idea of landscape as an “imperial apparatus” within colonial expansion; the land became a material for use, for visual pleasure, and finally, for capital and consumption.³ In the context of Cuba, for instance, land was crucial to Spanish colonization of the island vis-à-vis the sugar industry, which turned nature into a raw material to be extracted and exported.

In recent years there has been what one might deem a “return to landscape” by a younger generation of Latin American artists that includes Hulda Guzmán, Marina Rheingantz, Sandra Gamarra, or even the photographer Suwon Lee, who inverts the view of landscapes that have been exhaustively represented throughout art history. These artists and others work with the genre to interrogate the history of landscape as an imperial apparatus, understanding its embeddedness in the colonial history of the region, or to look for ways to reconstruct relations of equality between human and nature. Sánchez, who is of an earlier generation than the aforementioned artists, seems to work at the crux of these tendencies: using his paintings as a way to commune with nature, while maintaining an awareness of the power of the genre with which he works.

Such a sensitivity to the legacy of landscape and its ties to the planet’s present diminishing state is demonstrated in Sánchez’s decades-long commitment to his “wastescapes,” paintings that unite the landscape genre with images of the remains of human, or capitalist, consumption.⁴ Subverting the historical concept of

landscape painting as a depiction of untouched nature ready to be conquered by man, *Con la puerta abierta* (2015) shows a field of meticulously painted refuse that accumulates into rolling hills of never-ending garbage. In a darkly humorous reference to the history of Western art, the infinitude of trash is accentuated by the frame of a broken door that guides the eye to the composition’s vanishing point. Cardboard boxes, plastic bags, Coca-Cola bottles, and old shoes all represent the landscape of the Anthropocene. Inspired by the discarded objects commonly found in 1980s Cuba and the heaps of trash the artist saw in Mexico City in the 1990s, the source material for these imagined scapes is grounded in the artist’s lived reality.⁵ While Sánchez’s fields of trash have been juxtaposed with his more seemingly paradisiac images such as *Inner Lagoon...Thought-Cloud*, these two parallel bodies of work are intricately linked: the historical representation of the land as a space ripe for human intervention can be argued to have led to the current proliferation of the landfills that characterize Sánchez’s wastescapes.

The artist’s prolonged engagement with landscape in all its forms—both idyllic and bleak—evidences his commitment to the genre in ways unexplored by earlier artists. Returning to the question at the start of this text, I would argue that Sánchez dedicates himself to remaking landscape painting for a world where nature is disappearing. With his working process, which as previously mentioned includes meditation, he practices an art that is characterized by slowness—he often spends months or even years on a single painting. This aspect is invaluable when understanding his practice within a global culture that frames climate catastrophe as rapid, unexpected, and spectacular. Even *Diagonales opuestas en un paisaje interior* (2014), a composition that shows a tornado in the distance—debris swarming around it—is explicit in its reference to the destructive power of nature. A horrific image of impending destruction, the painting is a representation of environmental urgency. Nevertheless, as scholar



Con la puerta abierta, 2015; acrylic on canvas; 78½ × 97½ in. / 198.4 × 247.7 cm

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Rob Nixon points out, ecological devastation is rarely as sensational as we perceive it to be, but instead is a delayed destruction that he calls “slow violence,” a violence he explains is “neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive...”⁶ Environmental catastrophe is gradual, and images of rapidly approaching tornados and the destruction it leaves behind are just one symptom of a problem that unfolds largely unseen.

In this context, Sánchez’s extensive working process can be framed as an act of counter-slowness; a demonstration of care and attention dedicated to the landscapes that appear to be thrillingly disappearing before our very eyes, evidenced by paintings such as *Light: Outside, Inside* (2021), which the artist spent over two years producing. In an interview, the artist explains, “My focus on the landscape is the result of a confrontation, of my internalization of the land. Although I like to make quick watercolor sketches where I slightly capture the emotion of the landscape, I prefer to go to the forest, climb the trees and eat their fruits, swim in its rivers, and experience nature in its sensorial form.”⁷ Beyond his extensive labor over the painting itself, Sánchez experiences and holds in his mind these landscapes that exist beyond a time and a place, traversing and protecting them through his elongated engagement with the forests, rivers, and lagoons that he puts on canvas.

- 1 Susan L. Aberth, “Tomás Sánchez: On the Razor’s Edge,” in *Tomás Sánchez: Inner Landscape* (New York: Marlborough Gallery, 9). Sánchez also references his status as an outsider due to his focus on landscape in a 2003 interview. See Tomás Sánchez in conversation with Edward J. Sullivan, *Tomás Sánchez* (Skira: Milan, 2003), 19
- 2 Giulio V. Blanc, “Tomás Sánchez: Recent Work,” *Art Nexus* 10 (1994).
- 3 Jens Andermann, “Introduction,” in *Natura: Environmental Aesthetics After Landscape*, Andermann, Jens, Lisa Blackmore, Dayron Carrillo Morell, eds. (Zurich: Diaphanes, 2018), 11.
- 4 Francisco-J. Hernández Adrián, “Tomás Sánchez on Exorbitance: Still Lifes of the Tropical Landfill,” *The Global South* 6.1 (Spring 2012).
- 5 Edward J. Sullivan, “Tomás Sánchez: transitando múltiples senderos,” in *Tomás Sánchez* (Milan: Skira, 2003), 10.
- 6 Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.
- 7 Tomás Sánchez in conversation with Edward J. Sullivan, *Tomás Sánchez* (Skira: Milan, 2003), 19. *Mi enfoque del paisaje es el resultado de una confrontación, de mi interiorización de la tierra. Aunque me gusta hacer bocetos rápidos en acuarela donde capto un poco la emoción del paisaje, prefiero ir al bosque, subir a los árboles y comer sus frutas, nadar en los ríos y experimentar la naturaleza de una forma sensorial.* (Translation mine).

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Diagonales opuestas en un paisaje interior, 2014; acrylic on canvas; 43¼ × 58½ in. / 109.5 × 147.6 cm



Light: Outside, Inside, 2021; acrylic on linen; 39¼ × 31½ in. / 100 × 80 cm

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