

## ADRIAN DECKBAR: A NEW NATURALISM

By Peter Frank

A native of New Orleans and resident in southern Louisiana for most of her life – with a notable few years spent in the San Francisco Bay Area – Deckbar has always been surrounded by dramatic vistas and distinctive vegetation. In Louisiana, the connection to the land retains its strong agricultural impulse, gripping tradition to the point where human and natural phenomena fuse into a comprehensive experience we identify as Delta culture.

No one Deckbar painting can be identified as uniquely “Delta,” in subject or in spirit; only her oeuvre as a whole, comprising views across lakes and fields as well as detailed studies of vegetation, might be identified as such. Deckbar takes inspiration from her region, but in doing so, she celebrates the universality of nature – her primary purpose. [What is remarkable is *how* Deckbar paints the landscape – and the kinds of landscape Deckbar paints.]

In that regard, Deckbar has made a stylistic transition over the past few years, a transition perhaps not readily apparent, but ultimately evident – and ultimately crucial to the spirit and meaning of her work. When she shifted her focus about six years ago from figural subjects to landscape, Deckbar also shifted her focus literally, from a photo-realist style to a more painterly approach. Having been trained under leading photo-realist painters in San Francisco in the early 1970s (Robert Bechtle and Richard McLean) who had been central to the emergence of photo-realist practice not long before – Deckbar had established herself as a leading practitioner of hyper-realist painting in the South.

Deckbar found that she could not ultimately divest her pictures of sentiment *per se* – and that, in fact, her own sentiments, and attachments to the natural environment, were driving her choice of as well as approach to her subject matter. This did not mean abandoning the technical gifts she had cultivated for decades, but modifying them, softening their edges, broadening their appearance, without losing their precision. Deckbar now allowed herself to work with a somewhat fleshier brushstroke and, even more importantly, to emphasize the emotional qualities of light. By opening up her technique, Deckbar was now emulating not how the camera sees the world, but how humans see it.

She was also emulating how great landscape painters have dealt with their chosen subject throughout the history of picture-making, finding in the rendition of space the magic of the ineffable. Light has always been the key here, but the relationship of objects such as trees, clouds, and bodies of water to the overall view – that is, as compositional as well as subjective elements – comprises the affective drama here, a drama that light sets in motion. In its muted lushness, Deckbar’s recently adopted approach now inheres rather than depicts luminosity, as if she were not only painting light but painting *with* light.

In this respect, Deckbar has re-found not only her connection to her subjects, but her connection to art history. The photo-realist regard for earlier representational painting was ironic and conflicted, reluctant to admit to (much less build upon) its own admiration for the realist painting that had preceded it. But the best photo-realists were, at heart, profoundly historical in their motivation, struggling with the implications of

photography on the way we look at things – including the way we look at paintings. Deckbar had struggled, and finally found that, for her own sensibility, the poetics of visual observation are interpretive, not objective, and demand a nuanced intervention.

Finally, then, Adrian Deckbar has re-found and re-cast herself as an impressionist, in the broadest, most expressive sense of the word. Her world works on her soul – and ours – through her eyes, always promising another small, delicious revelation that at once reifies the endurance (however delicate) of nature and renews her (and our) connection to natural phenomena. Deckbar's art finds its place in the grand tradition of realism and naturalism because, like all great realists and naturalists, it celebrates not realism, but the real – not naturalism, but nature.

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