

Art Review: Artist depicts beauty through natural destruction

By Frederick Koeppel

In “Natural Course,” her exhibition at David Lusk Gallery, Maysey Craddock tells us that what is natural is not always pleasant, and that nature’s courses may be hideously destructive. Though never mentioning Hurricane Katrina, now five years in the past, Craddock depicts the devastation of wind and flood on the built and natural environments as well as the historical and geological power of the irresistible Mississippi River.



“Gravity Sky”



“Natural Course”

Craddock’s approach, as always, is more poetical and expressive than purely realistic and all the more evocative for that technique, though the essential mystery and elusiveness that typically invest her work give way to a more explicit character. For her surface, the artist has long used “found paper” in the form of large paper sacks that she unfolds and sews together, so the plane on which she operates includes the symbols and logos of the paper manufacturer as well as the evidence of her stitching; already, then, there are traces of ruin, time and nostalgia before she even puts pigment to the surface. That pigment is gouache, a form of watercolor that is denser, more opaque and “chalkier” than typical watercolor.

Craddock treats her subjects with iconic focus and intensity. In the large and impressive “Gravity Sky,” for example, a wood house seems to explode

upward, as if impelled by the force of the heavens to give up its structure and substance. Boards fling themselves away from the house as if they were javelins hurled at an enemy; the whole central image is enveloped in a dark cloud of gloom. The artist depicts the dynamic power at the instant of its most destructive energy, while the wrinkled paper that serves as the ground for the painting acts as an appropriately shabby backdrop.

In “Faultline (Coach and Four),” the frenzy of destruction has passed and only the aftermath remains: a jumbled pile of wreckage, unrecognizable as a former motel. With its swirls, jagged swatches and heaped layers, this is as close as Craddock gets to abstraction in this exhibition; the piece manages to exude both an “after-the-storm” sense of calm and a feeling of almost palpable desolation and loneliness.

Because of its almost abstract, universalizing quality, “Faultline” and a few other works in the show achieve an aura of what 18th century aestheticians called “the sublime,” that powerful feeling in which beauty, awe and terror are equally mixed. This sense is made explicit in “Ninth Ward (After Friedrich),” a reference to Romantic-era German artist David Caspar Friedrich, whose paintings were notable for their appeal to the viewers’ fear of and longing for isolation and grandeur. The reference is to Friedrich’s well-known painting, “The Polar Sea” (1824), in which great shards of ice crush to oblivion a hapless ship; in Craddock’s piece, a house practically dismantled by wind and water sags against a brilliant blue sky.

In what could be called the “river paintings,” Craddock presents skeins of color that dip and turn and loop in continuous and overlapping lines that represent the course of the Mississippi over time, as its bed shifts and changes, leaving ox-bow lakes behind. So many real or hypothetical courses are braided in these works that the artist seems to be offering all possible courses that the river might take, reaching not only into the past but into the future.