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## OPTIC NERVE: Out Of Thin Air

### French artist's urban and landscape paintings sometimes sing, sometimes ring flat

By Chuck Twardy

Michelle Auboiron follows a long and respected tradition of painting outdoors at the subject site—en plein air, as the French say. And Auboiron, like the impressionist painters of her native France, is as at home celebrating the splendors of the landscape as she is grubbing around the grimy corners of the cityscape.



A detail from "Starview Motel" demonstrates Michelle Auboiron's impressionistic style.

The results of her 2001 visit to the Southwest, along with companion, driver and photographer Charles Guy, are on view in Las Vegas, one of her destinations, but they are so sprawling, they take up two galleries. Auboiron's selection of Las Vegas cityscapes, *Motels of the Fifties*, is at the Charleston Heights Arts Center, and her views of Utah and Arizona landscapes are collected in Colorado, at UNLV's Marjorie Barrick Museum. Both close December 7.

If you watch the accompanying video at the Barrick Museum, or peruse her website ([www.auboiron.com/index-gb.htm](http://www.auboiron.com/index-gb.htm)), you get the sense that Auboiron likes to work quickly. It's not a gimmick, in the manner of a tourist-trap caricaturist. She clearly values capturing the tones and values of a moment, in the manner of Monet. Nor is her work vigorously gestural, although you can distinctly read the brush strokes. Nothing about her soul is revealed, beyond the desire to set an instant's quality of light and color in paint.

But whereas her impressionist forebears sought to evoke ambience through judicious juxtaposition of tones, Auboiron seems more concerned with creating the color she wants for a particular passage and getting it on the canvas. She has a deft touch for the deliriously deep cerulean of the rural Western sky, and the silky grades of aquamarine in the urban twilight. The five vertical canvases along the far wall at the Charleston Heights gallery read as the visual analog of a musical chord, chiming the idea of dusk.

In these views of motels, she has selected quirky urban slices, often with long shadows, and rich, saturated color. But little gradation or subtlety is evident. You get the sense she's painted as well as the fleeting moment allows, but that the moment demands more. She's trapped somewhere between the seamless intricacy of a photorealist and the urgent vitality of an expressionist, and while the results are often striking, they're oddly less than gratifying.

Auboiron's approach might be better suited to the great outdoors, and the generally larger canvases in the spacious Barrick hall are, for the most part, more successful. In her views of Lake Powell, she plays horizontal and vertical strokes against each other in evincing the geological layers and the play of light and shade along canyon and mesa walls. Her colossal view of Dead Horse Point seems to unite gesture and image with an almost literal sense of the sweep of the landscape. "Yavapai Point," a large, square canvas, is densely layered in rich color, with accents of fiery yellow-orange tracing the edges of low-angle sunlight. In other paintings, the color play is less overt, and she uses pale, matte tones to depict striations of dry rock.

But too often, the uneasy tension between fidelity and gesture intrudes, and the canvas seems a welter of solid brush strokes working too hard to resolve into something. I don't mean to suggest that the work is poor; on the contrary, it is obviously the product of practiced talent. But you wish Auboiron would either let loose and slash away, or step back and patiently polish. Wordsworth spoke of gathering impressions from nature, then crafting a poem later from "powerful emotions recollected in tranquility." Plein air has its joys, but so does the tranquil studio.

Life is  
too short.



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