

Broad Street Review

Burko with a camera, not a brush

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By Martha Ledger

The landscape painter Diane Burko has always traveled with a camera. Throughout her four-decades-plus career, she typically shot slides to gather information for her paintings. Back in her studio, she projected the slides onto canvas and selected outlines that she would work in color. The nature and placement of color was always in her sights.

Throughout the past decade, even while she continues to paint, Burko has embraced photography as a second medium. Interestingly, her latest photographs, currently on exhibit at Locks Gallery, have a lot in common with her paintings.

The exhibition of 19 photographs includes landscapes Burko shot at Glacier and Yellowstone National Parks, in Montana and Wyoming; and along the Delaware River canals in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Like paintings, these photos send the eye traveling to pick up details and effects. Like Burko's own paintings, they're highly composed and concerned with color and sinuousness of line.



Detail from 'Opal, June 3': Shooting down.

Into the guts of the earth

In the beginning of June, I traveled with Burko to Yellowstone, the site of her most recently shot images; and along with a Montana friend who knows that park well, we spent five days there. I went just for the adventure, not intending to write about her exhibition photos— which, in fact, I hadn't seen and were just then being framed. But watching her shoot and knowing the landscape she worked gave me a perspective on the images she made.

Burko said she wanted a landscape different from that of Glacier and Pennsylvania's Delaware Valley. Yellowstone's weird and dramatic geology fit the bill. Throughout the highly volcanic area we visited, superheated water beneath the earth's surface gives rise to airborne veils of steam, geysers, colored ground pools and glistening flows tintured by mineral-loving bacterial colonies. It's a window into the guts of the earth.

Looking down

No matter what the setting, Burko doesn't photograph landscapes in a traditional way, where the eye looks out on a scene that includes earth and sky. You'll see no skies in her photographs, and common

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landscape features such as trees are distorted or made unrecognizable.

Burko mostly looks down on a landscape. In Glacier, she hired a plane to get aerial views (though she also hiked there to give herself a high vantage point). In Yellowstone, she often shot from park boardwalks built above or alongside thermally active ground.

Burko's need to be above her subject sometimes had us shouting, "Get off there, it's thermal." The mineral crust is thin and brittle, and scalding temperatures beneath the surface can stew the skin off a person in minutes.

Sometimes we didn't dare yell to Burko but just held our breath, like when she went to the very edge of a canyon ridge to photograph trees and boulders on the opposite stone face. If Burko was afraid of anything, it was bears, but either she had faith that we, who carried the two cans of bear spray, would use them if needed or, as the old joke goes, she thought she could outrun at least one of us.

The active viewer

The images produced from her downward gaze are at first disorienting, and they provoke questions. What am I looking at? Where is Burko standing? What is the scale of her material? Am I seeing what's just underfoot, or acres-full?

The viewer becomes actively involved, like the woman I overheard reacting to a Bucks County photo of golden droplets of light on water: "Oh look, there's a leaf," she told her friend. "Now I get the size of things."

Subtle details

The images are strong compositions. In *Water Below 1* (from Glacier), for example, a string of starkly different colored areas—green vegetation, blue water and white snow— moves the eye diagonally from lower left to upper right, a sweep reinforced by smaller patches of snow. Shadows in the surrounding rock and straight shores at the top and bottom of the water balance this movement and also insure the discovery of subtle detail elsewhere.

Canal Spring 2 (from Bucks County) plays strongly vertical dark shadows against golden grasses that move horizontally beneath the water, even as the photograph is primarily concerned with the multi-directional abstract shapes of rippled water and the clearly seen underwater landscape.

The question arises: Why not just paint something based on this landscape and composed on canvas? The answer is that Burko shoots with a Canon EOS 5D Mark II, a 21-megapixel digital camera that can record an image with startling sharpness, and she shoots everything in focus. No one could possibly reproduce the multitude of rich and subtle detail in this and all her other images—not even the most anal of artists.

The painter's eye

That these are photographic images and not paintings adds to their power. What we see actually exists. Burko didn't invent these scenes; she recognized compositions in the landscape or isolated strong compositions on her computer, when she made square prints from her camera's rectangular format. (The show includes both full-frame and cropped images.)

When Burko crops a picture, what and how much she leaves in is critical. For example, in *Prismatic, June 3*, from the Yellowstone images, she holds on to a thin band of in-focus grass and rock at the bottom edge of the photograph. Behind it, there's steam, and behind the steam, there's more in-focus landscape. The transitions from sharp to amorphous to sharp again give this very complex image tremendous depth. You can sense the painter's skill at work here, carefully manipulating what abuts what.