



Diane Burko: *Palami Pali (October Flight, 2000), #5, 2001, oil on canvas, 60 by 96 inches; at Locks.*

PHILADELPHIA

Diane Burko at Locks

Diane Burko has been hunkered down on the front lines of contemporary landscape painting for over three decades, fearlessly doing her part to fortify the vitality of the genre. She has become known for her ability to take on the ephemeral in nature and do more than just approximate it in paint. Her subjects have ranged over the years from aerial views of the Grand Canyon (the apparent forerunners of her recent "Volcano" series); moody, cloud-fringed Italian lakescapes; wave-battered coastlines; and swirling water reflections. Burko seems to have an innate ability to get inside her landscape subjects and tackle their very material in paint. Her rocks speak like a geologist, her skies and clouds seem to take shape from the hand of an experienced meteorologist. Burko now appears to be channeling vulcanologists

(not to mention consulting them) and has stumbled upon perhaps the mother lode of landscape subjects for an artist with her painterly powers.

The 20 paintings that make up her exhibition "The Volcano Series" are mostly based on aerial photographs, many of which Burko took herself on expeditions to Costa Rica, Hawaii and Italy. The resulting translations of the photographic instant into paint allow Burko to apply her grab bag of brushwork effects. In her rendering of one hallmark of the volcanic landscape—the steam cloud—Burko applies a subtle vortex of translucent, purplish-white strokes that hover, swirl, obfuscate, and then seem to dissipate. Elsewhere, searing reds, oranges and yellows make the oil paint seem to have been heated to thousands of degrees. But it's not all fire and brimstone. In paintings like *Volcan Poas 2* (1998) the scene is disconcertingly placid. The painting depicts a calm, cerulean blue crater lake, ringed by craggy rock that flickers from lavender to cream, ocher to gray. In the immediate foreground, a plume of steam seeps from an unseen crevice. It is barely there, a fugitive, ghostly portent of the chaotic forces churning below.

Given Burko's predilection for attending to the patterning of natural surfaces, the subject of abstraction eventually crops up in most discourses on her work. If there is abstraction on view here, credit the lava and rocks, but commend Burko for her ability to not let it go unnoticed. Her volcano paintings seem to crystallize her method of effectively sampling nature's readymade abstraction as one way of directing our gaze to the essence of her subject. When she crops a view of lava cascading over a cliff, it becomes formal and splashy at the same time, leaning more toward Morris Louis or Pat Steir than a flaming Niagara Falls. In *Halema'uma'u crater #3* (2000), skeins of oozing lava form a marbled lake of reds and violets that seem to prove that Mother Nature is a Pollock fan after all.

Burko excels at conveying a landscape's natural color variations. A standout example here is a group of three modest paintings that depict aerial views of Vesuvius. Burko has rendered the volcano's cone

from three vantage points, faithfully monitoring the tonal shifts of the ashen slope at different angles of light; her subtly analytical approach is reminiscent of Monet's haystacks or views of the Rouen Cathedral. These terse, forlorn views are at turns seductive, mysterious and sinister.

By distancing herself from her subject and forcing us to peer down with her at the stark surfaces below, Burko seizes on a perceptual device that enables us to see the volcano in all its simmering, congealing magnificence. There is something poetic about making art out of nature's own act of creation, and Burko unironically allows us to access feelings of awe in contemplating the earth turning itself inside out.

—Brad Hampton