



Figure 1. McCosh. *Composition #1*. (See Endnotes for full description)

## David McCosh / Entanglements

David McCosh's work in his last 25 years as a painter was often about the relationships and complexities he saw in intimate landscapes. A few well-placed trees, some bushes and associated undergrowth with everything growing freely right in front of him was an ideal situation for his art to explore.

The lines and marks he laid down in these paintings are the energies and entanglements of growth as he saw them. If you follow his marks closely, your eyes will move around the painting as he did as he observed the bit of landscape that was his subject. His paintings reconstruct his process of discovering the visual consequences of growth in nature, seen up close.

Energy, movement, purposeful color and moments of beauty are everywhere in these paintings. There's also a feeling of intimacy in this work that reflects his familiarity with his subject. He shows us things about these bits of landscape that

no one else has seen. This is a personal approach to painting the land that was unmistakably his and his alone.

A few years ago, I wrote about his black and white *Night Drawings* from this period. Made in his studio from memory, they have the character of meditations that contemplate the structure and order he found in chaotic masses of wild vines, branches and other vegetation, seen up close.

This exhibition, “Entanglements”, presents a different aspect of his close views of freely-growing vegetation. These works are his direct observations of his subject, made on site in all the places he painted. They’re fresh and lyrical. Their colors are rich, vibrant even radiant at times. Once again, he’s translating his personal experience of his subjects into highly effective paintings and drawings.

Art that is vital, alive and yet so different from the other art of its time raises the question – where did it come from? We know that McCosh always began a painting or drawing by carefully observing his subject to learn its character. This has much to do with the success of his art, but there’s more to it than that.

There was a fundamental change in McCosh’s art in the early 1950s. He moved away from an approach to painting that focused on organizing forms that represent elements of a landscape into an integrated and visually interesting design. Instead, he began to look for ways to reconstruct in his paintings the activity of observation itself. He wanted his art to present how a careful observer discovers and actually sees the relationships and complexities in landscape settings. This is an entirely new approach that required him to develop new painting techniques and methods. This is why his paintings from this later period look so different from his earlier work and, for that matter, from the work of his contemporaries. He had become an innovator.

McCosh had been painting steadily for 30 years at this point in his career. He was nationally recognized and well respected. But he wasn’t known as an innovator. It’s reasonable to wonder what gave him the ability to paint in such new ways. He understood the issues and problems of painting as well as any American painter of his time. His creative imagination evolved during his career and his ability to find solutions to visual problems grew. But one other factor seems to have made a difference – during the 1950s, he began to focus on close-up views of small

landscape settings. This subject was recognized as a genre or category of landscape painting that had long been noted for stimulating painterly innovation. How this may have benefitted his work needs to be understood to fully appreciate his accomplishments.

Genres of painting developed in response to the interests and needs of painters. Originally, the purpose of a landscape painting was to find beauty and harmony in the broad forms of the countryside seen at a distance. The features of an iconic scene and all of its complements were summarized by the painter and adjusted as needed to create an idealized vista and a pleasing visual statement.

But the landscape was too rich and powerful a subject to be confined to scenic views. By the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, all of nature had become subjects of art. Plants were presented in all of their variety – in natural groupings in forests, marshes and meadows and as cultivated in gardens and farms. Individual specimens were depicted with stunning accuracy and at all points in their life cycle to better understand their growth and habitat. Geological features, rock formations, mountains, rivers, lakes, ponds, the sky, the weather, the seasons, even the time of day – hour by hour – were all faithfully represented.

Much of this art was motivated by science – the desire to learn and classify, to understand and pass on knowledge. But by the early 1800s, artists found other uses for nature in their art. The Romantics gave nature human emotions, characteristics and moods. An ancient tree might be portrayed as an old warrior, bent, broken and shaped by its battles with the elements. Some artists wanted their paintings of the natural world to be as restful and restorative for viewers as the experience of nature was for them. Others believed that the creative process of making art would allow them to understand and even become one with the creative forces of nature.

Beginning in the 1820s, the painters who came to be known as members of the Barbizon School, after the town of that name near the Forest of Fontainebleau in France where they painted, sought to become ever closer to nature by focusing on its most intimate aspects. They often painted close-up views of the nature that lived in the dappled light under the trees in the forest – the entangling vines, low-growing plants and shrubs, and the colorful flowers that found the sunlight

that reached the forest floor. The Barbizons were the first to make their subject the tangles of growth we see in David McCosh's work.

The Barbizon's genre became known as sous-bois painting – paintings of undergrowth – that which grows 'under the trees'. They focused on an aspect of the natural world that other painters overlooked. Their paintings could be dark, cluttered, rough, even gritty – but their subject was the real stuff of nature, not what the painter imagined it to be.

Sous-bois painting became quite popular in the middle years of the 1800s. Its authentic, visceral manner appealed to Romantics, Naturalists, Transcendalists – it spoke to its time.

And, of particular interest for our purposes, sous-bois painting played a role in the development of modern art. The Barbizons were admired by many early Modernists, including the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painters Claude Monet, Camille Pissarro, Vincent van Gogh and Paul Cézanne. It wasn't just the source of their work in nature that was admired. The early Modernists were intrigued with the innovative painting techniques and methods the Barbizons used for translating the gritty, visceral natural world that the painter saw into forms, colors, and structures of art that matched its character. And this is exactly what David McCosh was focused on in his paintings of entanglements.

Some of the innovations the early Modernists admired can be seen in *Forest of Fontainebleau* (Figure 2), by the Barbizon painter, Narcisse Virgile Diaz de la Pena. Its subject is a forest scene consisting of a few trees and the vegetation which lives at their bases. There is no horizon or sky in this painting. This gave Diaz the ability to focus entirely on the small bit of forest that was just a few feet in front of him – and that's where the innovation occurred. Seen up close, this bit of forest was packed with the energies of growth. To present this to the viewer, Diaz used a stacked organizational structure that brought all the elements and activity in the painting up front and close together.



Figure 2. (See Endnotes for full description)

He also emphasized the relationships among the forms of plant life in the scene by using carefully-coordinated colors which he applied in discrete strokes and patches to build masses of vegetation growing together. These innovative approaches to structure and

paint handling were motivated by the characteristics of his subject.

The manner of painting we see in *Forest of Fontainebleau* is typical of Barbizon art and its influence on the early Moderns was considerable. Paul Cézanne knew and admired the work of the Barbizons, and the innovations of *Forest of Fontainebleau* bring to mind the revolutionary work he was doing 10 and 20 years after it was made.

The print, *Wooded Landscape at the Hermitage, Pontoise (Paysage Sous Bois, a L'Hermitage (Pontoise))* (Figure 3), by the Impressionist Camille Pissarro, is much in the Barbizon manner. It presents a close view of a group of trees and shrubs with vegetation growing below them and glimpses of more distant farm buildings, houses and a farm worker visible between their trunks. The trunks and large branches act as elements that organize this spatially complex scene into compartments which interact with one another. This innovative compositional device brilliantly serves the organizational needs of Pissarro's sous-bois subject matter.



Figure 3. (See Endnotes for full description)

Vincent van Gogh wrote often to his brother, Theo, about his admiration for the work of the Barbizon painters. Van Gogh's *sous-bois* paintings in the late 1880s, – which have received much well-deserved attention recently – brought him closer than ever to nature, which is exactly what he wanted. His paintings of undergrowth helped him develop the modernist techniques and methods he needed to express more directly his personal experience of the land.

His rapidly painted, slashing lines and staccato marks in *Undergrowth* (Figure 4) effectively present his experience of strands of vegetation and small but intensely colored flowers writhing and tumbling together along the ground. The rough forms of his tree trunks surge upward out of the emotional colors he used to describe them. He was completely engaged, immersed and, yes, entangled in this setting. Every stroke is no more or less than his direct and immediate response to the nature at his feet.



*Figure 4. (See Endnotes for full description)*

When nature is painted up close a segment of the natural world is viewed as a whole. The painter must ask – what marks are sufficient to indicate the living presence of each of the dozens of leaves that strive for the light and float on the breeze? How do I present the rapid movement I feel in the vines that flow and weave and then dive into the depths of this scene? What colors can I blend to show how I see the sunlight working its way through this tangle. And the endless complexity that nature this close to me reveals – how is it possible to give my painting the experience of all that I see and feel?

These are the issues McCosh deals with in the works in this exhibition. His drawings of the countryside near Cornwall, England show him finding ways to express the searching qualities he saw in the low-lying, twisting vines and scraggly shrubs which grow on the hills near the beaches there (see the drawings *Hillside* (Figure 5) and *Landscape in Cornwall* (Figure 6)).



Figure 5. (See Endnotes for full description)



Figure 6. (See Endnotes for full description)



What he learned from these drawings allowed him to present the extraordinary layers of energy and color that we see in the painting, *Cornwall Ground Cover (Spring Flowers)* (Figure 7).



Figure 7. (See Endnotes for full description)

In the drawings, *The Ground #1* (Figure 8) and *Trees* (Figure 10) we see similar efforts by McCosh to simplify and organize the complex spaces in a close view of a Pacific Northwest forest.

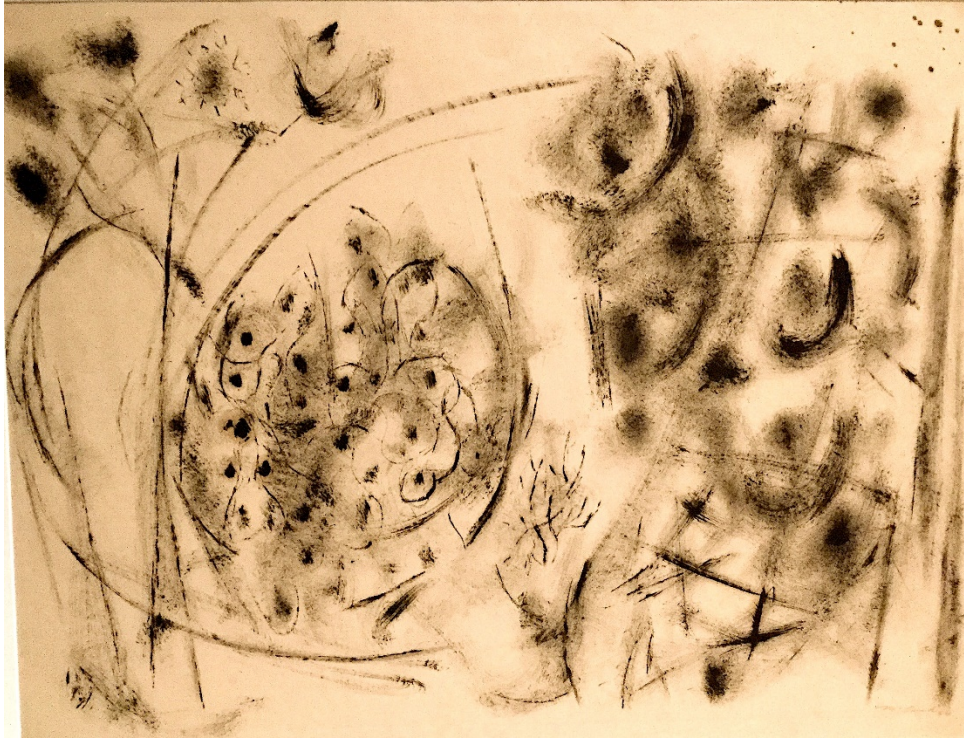


Figure 8. (See Endnotes for full description)

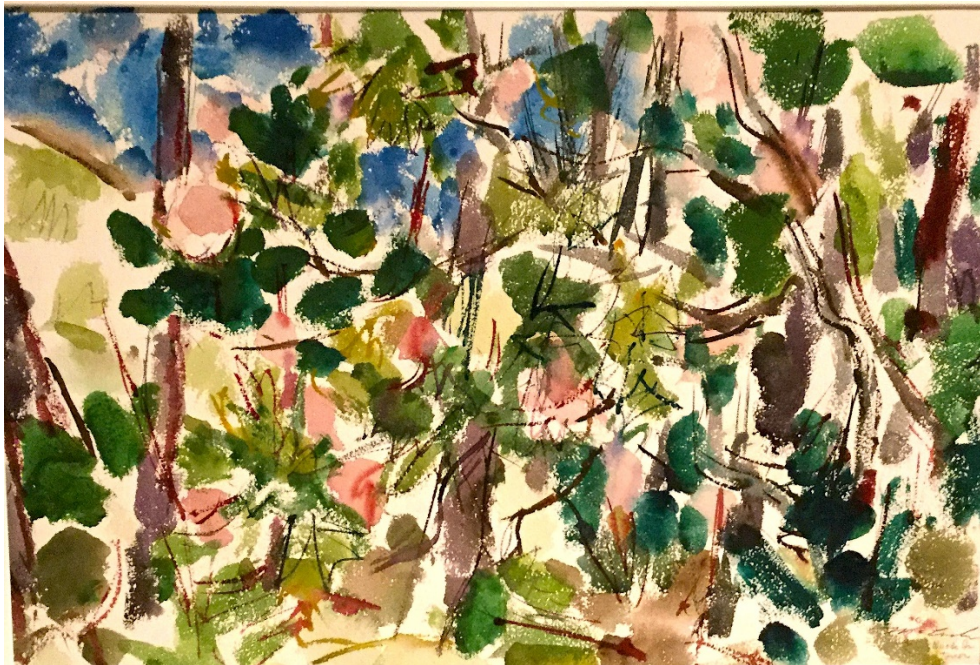


Figure 9. (See Endnotes for full description)



Figure 10. (See Endnotes for full description)

These drawings gave him the information and techniques he needed to create the dance-like freedom of light and growth in *Woods in Spring* (Figure 9) and the surging vertical energy and deep colors of the light in *Forest Curtain* (Figure 11) .

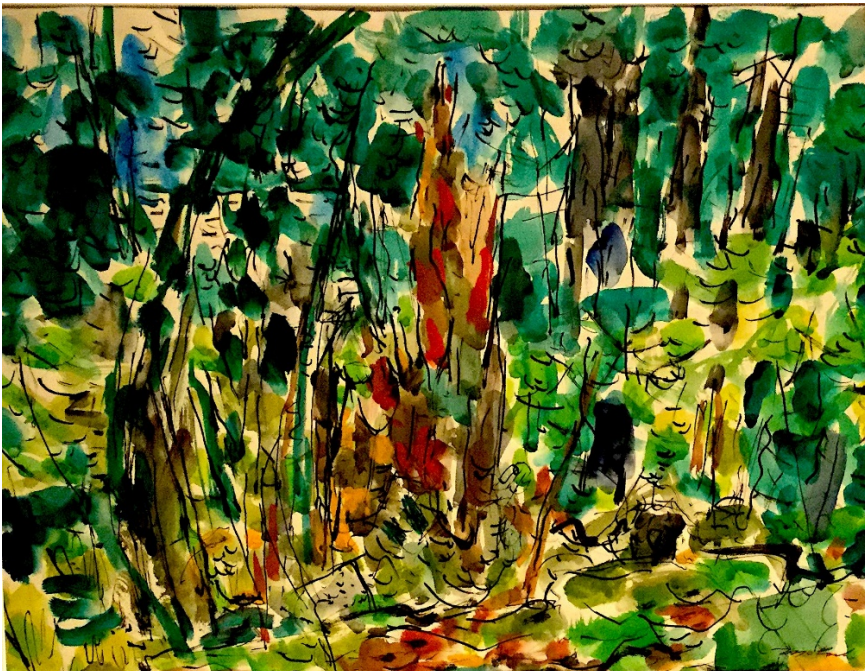


Figure 11. (See Endnotes for full description)

These are the opportunities, the challenges that energized the work of David McCosh and the sous-bois painters before him. His 'entanglements' were the laboratories where he developed the methods and techniques he needed to present in his paintings and drawings the order, the beauties and the vital energies of life that he found in the most intimate of landscape settings.

Roger Saydack  
June 2019

### Sources

This show and the idea of placing McCosh's later landscape work into the context of Barbizon painting resulted from my recent visit to the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam where I saw the exhibition "Hockney / Van Gogh: The Joys of Nature", which presented David Hockney's billboard-size depictions of growth in the Woldgate Woods in Northern England side-by-side with Van Gogh's easel paintings of undergrowth. The art of both painters, different as it may be, is firmly founded on each painter's close observation of the natural settings he painted.

As I looked more deeply into Van Gogh's undergrowth paintings, I came across *Van Gogh – Into the Undergrowth*, the catalog for a 2016 exhibition at the Cincinnati Art Museum which placed that Museum's Van Gogh painting, "Undergrowth with Two Figures", and a fine group of his other undergrowth paintings into the context of the work of the painters of the Barbizon School. (This exhibition catalog, which contains several informative essays and an excellent bibliography, is cited below. \*)

McCosh admired Van Gogh's work, the drawings in particular. I believe we can see the connections between the two most clearly in their paintings of undergrowth, which caused each of them to focus on a challenge that transformed their art - how to honestly and authentically present their visual experience of a close view of nature.

\**Van Gogh – Into the Undergrowth*. (October 15, 2016 – January 8, 2017.)  
Cincinnati: Cincinnati Art Museum in association with D Giles, Limited, London.  
Essays by Cornelia Homburg, Simon Kelly, Laura Prins and Jenny Reynaerts;  
Catalogue by Laura Prins.

For a discussion of McCosh's *Night Drawings*, see:

Saydack, Roger. "The Night Drawings of David McCosh" in *David McCosh / Learning to Paint is Learning to See*. Eugene, Oregon: Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art. 2016.

### Endnotes

Figure 1. David McCosh. (1903 – 1981). *Composition #1*. Watercolor on paper. 15 ½ x 21 ½ inches (paper).

Figure 2. Narcisse Virgile Diaz de la Pena. (1807 – 1876). *Forest of Fontainebleau*. 1868. Oil on canvas. 33 ¼ x 43 ¾ inches. Dallas Museum of Art, Manager Fund, 1991.14M

Figure 3. Camille Pissarro. (1830 – 1903). *Wooded Landscape at the Hermitage, Pontoise (Paysage Sous Bois, a L'Hermitage (Pontoise))*. 1879. Soft ground, aquatint, dry point and scraping. Platemark 8 5/8 x 10 3/16 inches. Cincinnati Art Museum, Gift of Herbert Greer French, 1940.425.

Figure 4. Vincent van Gogh. (1853 - 1890). *Undergrowth*. 1889. Oil on canvas. 28 ¾ x 36 5/15 inches. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation), S51V1982 F 746.

Figure 5. David McCosh. *Hillside*. N.D. (c. 1959). Ink on paper. 13 ¾ x 20 ¾ (paper).

Figure 6. \_\_\_\_\_. *Landscape in Cornwall*. 1959. Ink on paper. 11 x 14 inches (paper).

Figure 7. \_\_\_\_\_ . *Cornwall Ground Cover (Spring Flowers)*. 1959. Watercolor on paper. 15 x 22 ¼ inches (paper).

Figure 8. \_\_\_\_\_ . *The Ground #1*. 1954. Oil on paper. 20 ¾ x 27 ½ inches (paper).

Figure 9. \_\_\_\_\_ . *Woods in Spring*. Watercolor on paper. 15 5/8 x 23 1/8 inches (paper).

Figure 10. \_\_\_\_\_ . *Trees*. (c. 1954). Oil on paper. 27 ½ x 20 ¾ inches (paper).

Figure 11. \_\_\_\_\_ . *Forest Curtain*. Watercolor on paper, 18 x 24 inches.