

Juan Escauriaza: The Poetry of Place

When painter Juan Escauriaza visits America, wherever he finds himself—in New York City, in Portland, Maine—he studies his surroundings, sizing up his chosen milieu for subject matter. Inevitably, he is drawn to those elements of the landscape that many of us might pass by without registering or giving a second glance. By way of acrylic brushed on linen with masterful prowess, Escauriaza reminds his viewers of the poetry of place and the beauty of the prosaic.

These paintings engage the eye, but also the heart—not through any sentimentality but through the fresh lens of an artist in love with the overlooked. The façade of a down-at-its-heels restaurant is resonant with lives lived in some city side street. A rocking chair in a sun-lit yard takes on a poignant air as a symbol of a discarded past.

At times Escauriaza's paintings seem like stage sets, alive with the potential of people entering and exiting—ghosts, perhaps, of former occupants and owners or the taxman come to serve notice. In *Yes, We're Open*, the red cart on the porch of "Essex Radio & TV" begs to be pushed—to be reactivated—as the shadows of columns fall across the wall.

Tied to this theatrical quality is Escauriaza's sense of architectural drama. In the remarkable painting titled *Maine*, the broad triangle of the end of a building cuts into the sky, each of its six windows offering an element of abstraction within the geometry of the whole. For a painter from Spain this structure represents the essence of Maine: severe lines, surface and depth, forthrightness and mystery. This image is about architecture and attitude.

Escauriaza composes his paintings with the care of a documentary photographer. Indeed, his passion for signage brings to mind Walker Evans as much as it does, say, Richard Estes. He sometimes touches on the surreal as in a painting of a seagull perched atop a pole that juts out of nowhere into a blue sky. Likewise, a motorboat named *Hermes* (the swift messenger of the Greek gods) set on supports in a woods-edged yard appears about to fly.

The paintings in this exhibition blend an abstract-geometric esthetic with a clean realism. Escauriaza loves the pattern of clapboard and brick, the zigzag clarity of a New England roofline, the humble charm of an apartment house with stairs climbing its exterior. He also relishes how utility wires cut across our line of view and how foliage may create lively shadowplay on a door front.

Edward Hopper stated early in his career that he yearned to "paint sunlight on the side of a house." Escauriaza shares that simple desire, but also emulates Hopper's Ashcan School tendencies: to eschew the picturesque in favor of the evocative. There are exceptions, of course: Escauriaza, like Hopper, can't resist a lighthouse, although his depiction of the top section of a coastal beacon is far from the cliché representation we know so well.

New England's raking light serves as a kind of protagonist in these canvases. The painter recognizes that light has the power to give an inert, manmade structure the living quality of nature.

Maine has a long tradition of capturing the attention of artists from around the world. Thanks to them, we can see anew what lies around us—and what we often take for granted. Juan Escauriaza joins that select group of painters who manage to trigger a special awareness. For that, we are grateful—and gratified.

Carl Little

Author of *Edward Hopper's New England*, *Paintings of Maine* and other books
Former associate editor *Art in America* magazine