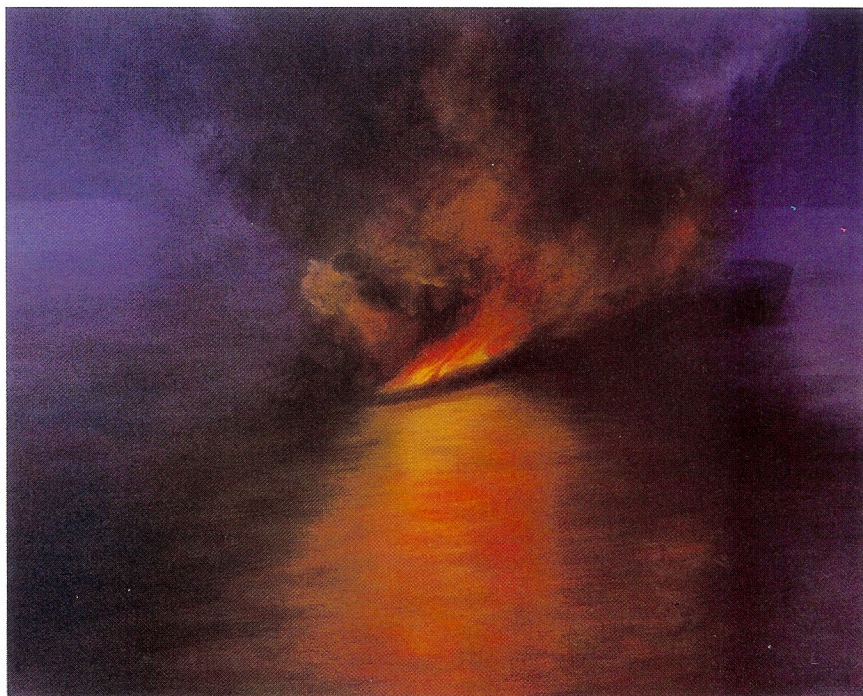


Jeffrey Spalding

The Drabinsky Gallery



Jeffrey Spalding
Sea Blaze 1991
Oil on birch
48 x 60 in.

Jeffrey Spalding's paintings have consistently revealed the melancholy and fierce beauty concealed within nature. His meticulously painted works in oil capture the shivers of light that burst from the midst of a fluttering fire or that race erratically through the blackness of the night sky. His paintings of Niagara Falls — the rumble of water tipping over the lip in a transparent

green arc — are among the most haunting and enigmatic of contemporary landscape paintings.

In this most recent show Spalding is even more attentive to light, and to its evanescent sheen and movement. In paintings such as *Sea Blaze*

and *Fall/Fire* (both are oil on birch), splinters of colour pierce the darkness with a glassy brilliance. In both works, Spalding speaks simultaneously about the terror and the beauty that compose the world. He isolates and describes a moment of nature's force, but — unlike his Romantic precursors — he does not attempt to moralise about it. In *Sea Blaze*, the hulk of a burning ship blazes at sea, spewing into the air tumultuous smoke and brilliant flames. In *Fall/Fire* what looks like a campfire burns into the night air spitting out shards of ochre, vermilion and gold. Spalding goes beyond an ironic alienation from the natural world — a common theme in contemporary art from Gerald Ferguson to David Bierk — attempting instead to discover the rawness at the centre of nature. Like us, the artist can do little more than stand back and marvel at the inexplicability of it all.

In several other works in this recent show, however, Spalding falls short. Neither *Daybreak*, *The Pass* nor *Dark Resolution* have the sense of mystery or passion that inform the other paintings. The largest painting in this show, *Dark Resolution*, depicts a flurry of fireworks in a harbour city, perhaps Vancouver. The painting, though active and colourful, lacks a sense of the rumbling shadows of night sky or of the ecstasy released by bursts of colour. *Daybreak*, *The Pass* is an image of mountains and the sharp contours defined by the rising sun. But here again we get a picture of nature that is oddly frigid, devoid of the tender play between light and dark.

Spalding has been active throughout his career as a curator, a critic and a teacher. His paintings, though — for example his feisty and unpretentious little canvas of a lightbulb illuminated — are not burdened by academic baggage. At his best, he leaves the intangibility of natural phenomena intact, reclaiming their wonder and the attempts of the human eye to come to terms with their enigmatic forces.

PETER O'BRIEN

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