

Old paintings in the New World: Magical Realism in the *Ohio Lands* paintings of Eric Wright

By Will Corwin

Mapping myth onto familiar territory, Eric Wright re-imagines his native patch of Ohio. Mount Gilead is a small town of 3,661 souls in the center of the state. The biblical Gilead, or “heap [of stones] of Testimony” (according to its entry in Wikipedia), is ubiquitous in the Old Testament, but mostly as a backdrop upon which history passed through, rather than a specific origin or location of any major events, say like Jerusalem or Jericho. Perhaps this is what made the name appealing to the early Ohioan settlers who christened it Mount Gilead in 1832. A location in the Midwest for the miraculous, without the pressure of having to live up to anything in particular. Eric Wright has created *Ohio Lands*, a painting cycle of dozens of landscapes depicting the town of Mt. Gilead and its environs, which will be exhibited at the River House Gallery in Toledo Ohio this fall. The artist is taking a second pass at history, and he “re-biblicizes” his subject matter with meticulous detail. The forbidding crags, sudden drops and heroic vistas he paints in oil on canvas don’t seem native to Ohio, but in fact it’s an inscrutable mix of conjured up locations and actual sites from his past. Wright’s illuminations are mountains, pastures, and fields, with tasseled banners floating in mid-air inscribed with their borrowed ancient names. “Balsam Trees of Gilead” (2020) depicts a rough, saw-toothed mountain range shrouded in clouds fading into the distance, with a gnarled grove of *Pistacia Terebinthus* at the front. Are we really expected to believe this is Ohio?

These are simple landscapes in composition, that seem the typical fare of storybooks and epic poems. But they are also records and retellings of accrued human stories emanating from a specific place, Mt. Gilead, and they grow more exaggerated over the generations. Wright’s point is that in his mind, and perhaps that of the community, they have grown to fit their surrogate biblical titles. *Ohio Lands’* narrative is about this accumulative process, and the trajectory from normal life into legend. Some of the paintings, rather than embrace a legendary landscape, focus on the pursuit of finding the supernatural in the simplest architectures. “Baptismal” (2020) depicts an odd, T-shaped white shed; a baptismal pool emerges from the interior, literally through the front door, bisecting the rectangular house. From the angle which Wright has painted the little structure, entry is impossible with stepping into the water, in a kind of forced baptism. The works hover between tall-tales and God-is-in-the-details. The sheer number of works and their Lilliputian scale position the series as a home-grown encyclopedia.

The ancient Mt. Gilead is best known as the origin of a multi-use fragrant sap called balsam, which in the bible is called “balm of Gilead” and interestingly enough, it can also be used as a fuel for incendiary weapons: it’s highly flammable. Wright uses it in his paintings as well as a kind of stand oil, an arbitrary infusion that secretly sparks yet more signifiers.

Eric Wright's studio is reminiscent of the famous image of St. Jerome in his Study by Antonello da Messina from 1475, a purpose-built scholar's cubby where the shelves, cupboards and storage bins seem to receive equal space with the artist himself. Wright works crouching over a small desk on the narrow mezzanine that comprises his workspace, accessible by a sturdy but handmade ladder, above a gloomy storage room filled with artificial trees from the black forest, the remains of the collaboration *Transromantik* (2000) with his wife and artistic partner Cathy Ward. The images of Mount Gilead he has been painting for the past year are physically tiny, but like many of the medieval manuscripts and panel paintings from which they draw their inspiration, the worlds they enclose are not miniscule. Wright's paintings are oil on canvas, but their dimensions arise from the tradition of wood panel painting that defined church altars throughout Western and southern Europe. In those works, each image is an episode out of a story, and each of these clips features a new backdrop to frame the action.

Wright's imagery plays on the key symbols and episodes in the narrative of an event—but doesn't tell the story itself. His works are bereft of figures, but vibrate with the tension of what has happened, or what is going to happen. The Old Testament revolves around the idea that the story being told is a special history—the battles that take place and the streams of refugees coming and going, often to and from the land of Gilead, have more import than similar events taking place at every other location in the world. The founders of Mount Gilead in Ohio felt that they could harness that idea of the unique history by appropriating the names of legendary places. In a very biblical, but ironic sense, Wright has chosen to legitimize their strategy. Like an itinerant painter working in Siena 800 years ago, he is now painting a universal narrative of magic and legend, but using the specifics of his own locale.

Wright couldn't stay in Mount Gilead much after his youth. He had no desire to found a church, like his cousins, or work at a bible camp, and so needed to find spiritual sustenance elsewhere. He studied graphics at Ohio University, mostly technical instruction for design layouts and advertising. His painting craft he honed almost exclusively at the proletarian school of Bob Ross. Wright moved to the East Village in New York from which vantage point he could more skeptically view the miraculous land from which he originated in middle America. Wright became part of the East Village art scene in the 1980's, a network of gritty artist collectives, storefront galleries, basement clubs and experimental theaters. It offered an eclectic mix of styles as well; from the mainstream Post-Modernism to street art, performance, video and realistic painting. Downtown wasn't bereft of traces of the desire for re-mapping the ancient onto the contemporary either—he found and spent time at King Tut's Wah-wah Hut and the Pyramid club, among other downtown landmarks.

Except for a turn towards quirky aggrandizing myth-making, the East Village shares little with the current Gilead paintings, but the mountainous topography does reflect the majestic Canadian Rockies where Wright met his ex-partner Cathy Ward at the Banff Center, on an artist residency. After that stint, he decided to relocate to the U.K. His personal practice has tended to center on painting, while his collaborative practice, as Ward and Wright, created surreal

interactive environments. *Transromantik* at the Horse Hospital in London, was an immersive diorama of the Black Forest: tortured tree-trunks festooned with repoussé copper plaques and ceramic figurines, a nightmare-scape of Bavarian Kitsch-imagery hinting at much darker subtexts both of politics and fairy tales. *Tender Vessels* at Aspex, in Portsmouth, U.K., drew on both real and imagined histories to create a selection of enigmatic ritual objects. There are connections between the collaborative projects and the current *Ohio Lands* series of paintings: a cryptic interpretation of one's real world surroundings and a self-consciously anachronistic aesthetic.

In the middle ages, tales of distant and foreign tribes were constantly reiterated to European, and for the most part, illiterate audiences. The artists sought to soften the strangeness of the bible's stories by relocating them to more familiar territory. The figures were dressed in local costume and the landscapes looked more like Tuscany or the Flemish lowlands, than they did the deserts of the Sinai or the shores of the Dead Sea. Wright has gone one step further; while he does include local imagery pulled from regional Mount Gilead landmarks such as the octagonal schoolhouse, the buildings of Ohio University, and the 4H Hut on the fairground, he also retells local miracles that took place in Mount Gilead. There's the legend of the Cuyahoga River waters that caught fire in AD 1969, due to vast quantities of petroleum flotsam floating on its surface—a parable of the Mount Gilead oil-boom gone horribly awry. There are some direct connections to the Hebrew Testament: Wright's High School yearbook was called the Mizpah. The artist illustrates the story of the Mizpah in his painting cycle with a work called "Behold This Heap" (2020)—the bible story of the peace treaty between Laban and his father-in-law Jacob, symbolized by another pile of rocks and a fissure splitting the stony foreground in half. Wright also includes his own miracle, a Magical Realist moment—"Lightning marks The Shirt" (2020)—when as a teen-ager his T-shirt, one that the artist still owns and wears, was struck by lightning while it was left on the laundry line to dry. These details reinforce the idea of the power of the place: that every location has its own energy of biblical proportions, as in-the-middle-of-nowhere as it may seem.