



Curt Hanson, "Buddho," oil on canvas, 26 by 20 inches



Curt Hanson, "Making Merit," oil on canvas, 16 by 20 inches.

A Visit To Cornubia Hall

BY CAROL SIMS

In the pastoral countryside of northwestern Connecticut, sits Cornwall Hollow. At the heart of the hollow stands a centuries-old maple. Bradford Brook flows gently into the Hollenbeck. Overlooking the hollow with its open fields, small pond and scattered apple trees is the studio of Curt Hanson. The studio is housed in a mid-Nineteenth Century Greek Revival church building and is as inspirational as the landscape. In keeping with the large, softly hued, tonalist paintings that are hung up to the 20-foot-high ceiling, the color of the wall is a muted golden grey-green. Paintings are everywhere — hung on the walls, sitting on easels, resting on the hardwood floor, sequestered away in the loft.

Huge, and I mean huge windows let in the diffused light of a cloudy March day. The track lighting illuminates the canvases without creating any hot spots. A mix of fragrances — incense, turpentine, black tea and wood smoke — permeates the air. Directly ahead is a large carved wooden statue of Buddha. At the statue's feet burns a stick of incense. A woodstove throws off a blanket of heat to dispel the wet chill outside. Artist Curt Hanson gives a warm welcome. On Hanson's *taboret*, a sleek 18-inch laptop plays meditative music. He has been working on a canvas of a lotus pond. Or is it a lily pond? It is one of his Thailand-inspired paintings; we'll call it lotus.

Curt Hanson, "Griswold Point, Evening" oil on canvas, 30 by 36 inches



Curt Hanson, "Fisherman in the Lotus Pond," oil on canvas, 16 by 26 inches.

Curt Hanson, "Dawn on the Mekong," oil on canvas, 18 by 28 inches



Sitting on a table is the book, *George Inness: Writings and Reflections on Art and Philosophy* edited by Adrienne Baxter Bell. It represents Hanson's ongoing relationship with Inness's writings and art. Hanson says, "In my early twenties I came upon the later paintings of George Inness and it stirred something inside of me that has set me on the course that I am still on today, almost 40 years later. There is a unity in those paintings that is transcendent of a mere physical unity.

"As I later began to study his writing it confirmed what I had felt, standing in front of his canvases. This journey has taken me far beyond just the making of pictures. In recent years it has led me to Thailand where this past winter I spent much of it at Wat Pa Nanchat, a Buddhist forest monastery that was founded by the great Theravada master Achaan Cha."

Spending part of the year in the remote Isan region of Thailand where water buffalo are a common sight, and the rest of the year at his beloved New England studio, Cornubia Hall, Curt Hanson offers us the best of both worlds through his quiet but radiant canvases. Connecticut with its higher latitude and four seasons, moist air and abundant deciduous forests contrasts nicely with Thailand and its tropical climate. Vistas of Thailand and Connecticut hang side-by-side and one over the other. It is a harmonious blend. No doubt that is a result of Hanson's approach to painting.



Curt Hanson, "April At Cornubia," oil on canvas, 34 by 40 inches

Curt Hanson, "Snowing at the Brook," oil on canvas, 40 by 34 inches.

He says, "The landscape is something that is happening and I am just watching or awakening to it every day. My work is a meditation on the harmonies of nature."

Hanson spent decades doing *plein air* painting, and while he occasionally will paint out of doors "out of nostalgia," he now uses digital photography, memory and his lifelong experience of identifying what is essential about the composition, tone and colors. He starts his paintings with a wide, house-paint type of brush and lays in the composition very quickly. Then there are subtleties added. Then the painting "goes into incubation" — a resting time that allows Hanson to reflect on the work for several days or weeks before finishing it.

Hanson says, "Copying nature is not what my work is about, though getting a believable sense of my subject is part of the language I work in. Actually they are getting less and less literal though not always. I am still in awe at the physical beauty of nature. Simplification is a huge part of what goes into it, though. Otherwise it is just tiresome to paint and tiresome to look at."

Three lovely canvases at the studio catch the wet coldness of a New England snowfall. These works bring to mind Willard Metcalf, and to some extent, John Twachtman. The palette he uses is low key, and the overall tone is soft and subdued. Hanson chooses views that are within a stone's throw of his studio — a little brook winding its way through the snow banks and the leafless, grey trees. Far from being dreary, the colors are warmer than one might expect. In the painting "Snowing at the Brook," Hanson handles the falling snow with subtlety and creates soft, believable imagery.

Since his approach to painting remains constant no matter which side of the world inspires his work, subject matter is a key distinguisher between his Thailand works and the Connecticut pieces. Obviously, "Water Taxis at Ko Phi Phi," a monumental painting with a stillness that beckons, is one of his Thailand pieces. Water buffaloes, monks or rice paddies are other themes that bring the exotic aura of Thailand to his canvases. In his painting "Drying the Robes in Chiang Mai," Hanson shows a monk tending to the laundry. Sunlight illumines the brilliant orange robes that many of the monks in Thailand wear, pouring over and through both the fabric and the surrounding foliage. Because the hues are relatively close in

value, the painting maintains Hanson's tonalist approach. "What is really the tone?" asks Hanson. "The color can confuse the tone. It's the tone that is most important."

Hanson, working with digital photography, has freed himself from the constraints of season and location. In progress is an autumn painting of an apple tree laden with apples, a summer scene of lotus plants floating on a span of reflective blue water, and, hidden away in the loft, a new series of paintings featuring the Todong monk blend with earthen path that winds its way through the verdure of Isan.

Hanson writes, "In the northeastern part of Thailand their sect of Buddhism that is revered is the forest tradition. Near Ubun Ratchithani at a monastery called Wat Pa Nanchat, I stayed and practiced this past December [2007]. Out of my time there, came a series of paintings depicting the alms round, which happens daily. I walked

behind the monks on this ritual referred to as Bindabot, where they would receive offerings of food that would make our only meal of the day.

The local residents in small villages near the monastery were such an inspiration to me, with the devotion that they paid as they kneeled down beside the road. The sun coming up with a solitary figure walking on the stark lonely road is the motif for many of the paintings. I have been painting landscapes for more than 30 years, and never before in these rural areas of Thailand has the figure felt so much at home. It is also the same with paintings with the rice farmers and the fisherman. I often think of John Everet Millais and the Barbizon school and a time in the West when there was this same kind of connection with the figure to the landscape."

Hanson studied at Fort Wright College in Washington State with Charles Palmer and Stan Taft. In New York City he greatly admired the Barbizon school paintings and found inspiration in the work of George Inness. Moving to Boston, Han-

son studied for three years in the atelier of Ives Gammell, the Boston School painter who had trained with William Paxton. He acknowledges his debt to great painters of the past. "I am building on top of that base. I can't ignore it because it is a part of me now," says Hanson, who feels that the expectation in the art community, that something must always be "new" in an art-historical sense is limiting and short-sighted. Like inspiration from meditation, which has been around for millennia, the inspiration Hanson gets from painting is "new to me. Painting is always a discovery to me." Indeed, there is more timelessness than time in Hanson's work.

The opening weekend of Hanson's exhibition of recent works titled "In Homage," is May 10 and 11, from 11 am to 5 pm at Cornubia Hall, 400 Cornwall Hollow Road, Cornwall, Conn. The show will be open on weekends, 11 am to 5 pm through June 15. Paintings are also displayed on www.curthansonpaintings.com. To arrange an appointment, call 860-672-0576 or email curthanson@optonline.net.



The artist Curt Hanson in his studio, Cornubia Hall. Photo by Bob Houser.



Curt Hanson, "Drying the Robes in Chiang Mai," oil on canvas, 26 by 20 inches.