



LENNOX WOODS ~ THE ANCIENT FOREST
DEBORAH PARIS SEARCHES FOR THE SUBLIME IN NORTHEAST TEXAS

by Elizabeth L. Delaney

A veteran landscape painter and self-described artist-naturalist, she continually strives to be “not just a visitor in the woods, but also a participant.” So it was no surprise when her initial attraction to Lennox Woods evolved into a large-scale art exhibition, as well as an opportunity for Paris to bring to light an aberrational and oft-forgotten part of the Texas landscape. *Lennox Woods ~ The Ancient Forest* represents the culmination of the artist’s eighteen-month “residency” in the 375-acre Lennox Woods Preserve. Sponsored by Fort Worth’s Galerie Kornye West, the exhibition will be on display from March 29 through April 26, 2014.

Deborah Paris first discovered Lennox Woods in 2011 after her husband visited the preserve with some friends. She explored the forest—only ten miles from her home—at his behest, and felt an instant connection to it. “When I stepped into Lennox Woods I knew I had come to a place that is unique and special,” she remembers. Paris immediately recognized the centuries-old yet still vibrant energy of the woods. She then remained drawn to it as a place that could not only provide a wealth of inspiration, but also act as a teaching tool for ecological preservation. Since

its inception, the Lennox Woods Project has blossomed from a singular exploration into a multidisciplinary endeavor involving visual art, science, and education. The overall project will comprise Paris' paintings and drawings, a full-color catalogue, a documentary directed by Texas filmmaker Allen Phillips, a series of artist talks at Galerie Kornye West, and additional lectures and educational events hosted by Fort Worth's Botanical Research Institute of Texas (BRIT).

Of the project, Paula Kornye Tillman, art historian and owner of Galerie Kornye West, remarks:

In our current culture, all too often, we think that everything that needs exploration and examination in nature has been discovered. It is true that our natural areas in the United States have been mapped and explored, but that should really be the first chapter in our book of appreciating, understanding, and preserving our natural surroundings. That is why Deborah Paris' Lennox Woods project is so worthy of our attention. Deborah is continuing the nineteenth-century tradition of artist/explorer that was so essential in bringing to the attention of the American public the value of nature in our own back yards.

Located in Red River County, the pristinely preserved Lennox Woods allows visitors a glimpse into the past. Thick with virgin timber and rare and endangered plant and animal species, the preserve is fed by the waters of the Pecan Bayou, the largest undammed watershed in the region. Its rich ecosystem is a bastion of biodiversity in an area where such environments have often suffered at the hands of human interference. In fact, Lennox Woods exists as tangible history, an example of how the land looked before the settlers arrived.

The Lennox family first acquired the woods in 1863, and over the years resolutely protected it from the logging and development that became popular throughout the region. Martha, David, and Bagby Lennox donated 170 acres of their land to the Nature Conservancy in 1987, and three years later Martha and the Lennox Foundation deeded an additional 206 acres to the nonprofit organization. The area was officially dedicated as the Lennox Woods Preserve in 1990.

Lennox Woods marks the western edge of an ecological region that spans east to the Atlantic and south to the Gulf of Mexico. Hardwoods predominate, and include water oak, sweet gum, willow oak, shagbark hickory, and shellbark hickory, among others. Below the canopy rests a sub-canopy of ironwood, hornbeam, winged elm, and red maple. Noteworthy discoveries in Lennox Woods include several trees more than three feet in circumference, a loblolly pine dating back nearly 150 years, and a 300-year-old post oak. Among the remarkable species in the woods are the Arkansas meadow-rue, a rare wildflower; hooked buttercup, Wildenovi's sedge, and Southern Lady's Slipper orchid, equally rare and endangered in Texas; and the federally endangered American burying beetle.

When I first went to Lennox Woods, although I was entranced with the beauty of the place, I could not have then anticipated its effect on me. After all, I spend a lot of time in woods and fields, outdoors, looking. It's my job. But, within the forest there is something new to learn.

– Deborah Paris

Paris spent her time in Lennox Woods immersed in its multifarious flora and fauna. She looked, listened, sketched, and photographed in every light in all four seasons, intent on building a body of work indicative of the forest's life cycle and unique verve. Of paramount importance to Paris was re-creating the Lennox Woods experience within gallery walls—transforming an interior space to reflect the forest's visual majesty and physical allure. The resulting exhibition at Galerie Kornye West will include more than fifty paintings and drawings inspired by the artist's remarkable journey through the ancient place she terms a "living museum." The collection will present a cohesive picture of Lennox Woods throughout the year in varying media, from large-scale oil paintings showcasing the forest's quiet light and terrestrial energy to smaller drawings focusing on singular elements within the eclectic environment.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, the American landscape has served as a revered and popular subject for artists seeking to celebrate nature's bounty, to bring the beauty of the outdoors inside, and to connect with the earth on a spiritual level. Deborah Paris explores all these aspects of landscape painting, honing in on the cerebral as well as the transcendental. Kindred spirits with the likes of Hudson River School painters Thomas Cole, Asher Durand, and Albert Bierstadt, Paris relies on intense observation and field sketches to reveal nature's grandeur. Just as the Hudson River School valued America's inherent bounty as the epitome of her worth, so does Paris' work realize the importance of that bounty and its ever-decreasing importance in the face of modern commercialism. She channels a contemporary version of Manifest Destiny, seeking to make viewers aware of our natural resources as she celebrates the sanctity of the undisturbed landscape.

Also taking up the mantle of such Tonalist painters as George Inness, Charles Warren Eaton, and James Abbott McNeill Whistler, Paris produces a sense of the ethereal, utilizing both subtle and overt light effects to harness the mystical qualities of the wilderness. Like Paris, American Tonalists sought a close, spiritual relationship with the landscape, focusing on its intangible qualities and often relying on imagination to materialize the scene. Paintings became explorations of philosophy and methodology rather than a strict celebration of the actual subject matter. As Charles Caffin wrote in his 1907 book *the Story of American Painting*, the Tonalists "through communing with nature...acquired so strong a sympathy with their subject that the mood of their own spirit became reflected in nature; their works interpreted their own souls in terms of nature; they were nature poets."

Paris achieves both the lifelike effects of the Hudson River School and the transcendental qualities of the Tonalists, in part, by employing certain "indirect" painting techniques dating back to the Renaissance. These old-world methods—glazing, scumbling, and velaturas—allow her to more fully describe the optical effects of the forest's incandescent glow. They coalesce to create layer upon layer of mysterious ambience, at once dreamlike and naturalistic. The finished works then impart Paris' signature glinting light, moody atmosphere, and rich luminosity.

Deborah Paris visually translates how Lennox Woods looks *and* how it feels, re-creating its live, three-dimensional environment on the two-dimensional picture plane. Through a convergence of literal observation and soulfulness, the artist-naturalist conveys the true essence of her subject matter to evoke the sublime.