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Coatesville, evocatively viewed John Moore's landscapes profoundly, nostalgically capture "13 Miles From Paradise."

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Contributing Art Critic

A painted landscape can speak in a variety of voices, the least interesting of which is unadulterated transcription of nature.

Photographs can more effectively convey what we can see with our own eyes, but a painting can be inflected to reveal truths that aren't visible and dimensions of experience that exist mainly in memory and imagination.

In his exhibition at the Arthur Ross Gallery, "Thirteen Miles From Paradise," John Moore emerges as a master of the landscape that, while essentially faithful to what you or I might observe, surpasses reality in its ability to communicate deeply embedded, often overlapping, layers of meaning.

As Moore explains, while the paintings aren't always topographically accurate, "Everything is true, or could be true, or has been true." This is the kind of painting one can savor, that speaks to a convergence of admirable technical proficiency and acute conceptual intelligence.

The paintings in "Thirteen Miles" mostly involve Coatesville, a once-bustling steel town in Chester County a few miles west of the last stop on SEPTA's R-5 line. In its heyday, industry supported 10,000 factory jobs; today that workforce has shrunk to about 1,000.

The exhibition title is literal; Coatesville is about 13 miles east of the village of Paradise, near Lancaster.

When steel was king, Coatesville might have been paradise for working-class families. As Moore's paintings reveal, today the workers' paradise is mainly a memory that he evokes through a skeletal building in the painting *Winter Light* and the smokeless stacks of *Sunday Evening: Summer*.

"Thirteen Miles" is a compact, elegiac show of only 16 paintings built around four large pictures that Moore completed last year and early this year.



"A Fine Fall Day" (2008) is the most effusively colored of the four seasons suite - with three peacocks.

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These four, themed to the seasons, summarize his response to Coatesville then and now, both as a picturesque industrial motif and as a prime example of how economic evolution has transformed the American landscape.

The artist's affinity for such landscapes dates to his childhood in St. Louis, where he lived near similar environments. He discovered Coatesville in 1986, when he visited a retrospective exhibition for the precisionist painter Ralston Crawford at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Moore, then teaching at Tyler School of Art, was taken by a Crawford painting called *Steel Foundry*, Coatesville, Pa., made in 1936-37. It was a typical subject for Crawford who, like other precisionists, focused on industrial buildings, transportation infrastructure, and any other subject that expressed American modernity and economic power.

Yet unlike contemporaries such as Charles Sheeler and Charles Demuth (who lived in Lancaster), Crawford reduced his subjects to arrangements of bold shapes. His painting of the then-Lukens steel plant depicts a dark silhouette of the main building looming over three horizontal colored bands, two of which are fences.

Moore decided to visit Coatesville to see what the motif looked like 50 years after Crawford. The trip inspired several views of the complex made from an elevation. The show includes two of these, *Coatesville* and *Coatesville West Side*, made in the mid-1980s, and several smaller studies for them.

These early views of the steel complex are panoramic, full-face, and essentially deadpan precisionism, full of crisply delineated details and shadows. The documentary tone is neutral; the mill might be active, partially open, or it might be shut down. The town/city itself is secondary, only a few houses are seen.

After his first encounter with Coatesville, which lasted three to four years, Moore went off to teach at Boston University. He returned to Philadelphia in 1999 as chairman of the department of fine arts at the University of Pennsylvania. (He will retire from the faculty at the end of this academic year.)

Inevitably, he went back to Coatesville to see how his earlier impressions compared with contemporary reality. Not surprisingly, the Coatesville of the four seasons suite looks like a different place, not only because the city has changed but also because Moore shifted his perspective.

In these imposing canvases, his views are more selective and, in a way, more restrictive; his colors richer, his light less harsh and more poetic, and his mood decidedly more elegiac. The four pictures are suffused with a romantic aura that recalls the roseate luminist effusions of the mid-19th century.

Except for *Sunday Evening: Summer*, the steel complex is not prominent. Instead, Moore has taken oblique, marginal views, and fiddled with those a bit for maximum visual impact.

Winter Light is set under the roof of a huge, shedlike structure, the dawn sky, visible though open walls, just started to shift from ebony to purple.

In *Sunday Evening*, he pushes the complex into the background under a striated sky. We look along a truncated bridge that seems to end in midair. In *Stillwater: Spring* the complex is similarly subordinate, seen through the arches of a railroad viaduct, with most of the painting taken up by a still body of water littered with debris and reflecting a pinkish sky.

The most optimistic and fanciful of the quartet is *A Fine Fall Day*, a view from a ridge down a sloping field to houses in the middleground and the steel mill way, way beyond, barely visible. Punctuating this view, the most effusively colored of the four and the purest landscape, are three peacocks, including one perched on a tree limb in the foreground.

Who could have imagined peacocks in Coatesville? Certainly not Sheeler, or Crawford, who only had eyes for the rigorous geometry of industrial architecture. Moore's interpretation is more personal and more humanistic, more nostalgic (in the positive sense), and more profound.

The paintings deserve a better exhibition situation, though. The Ross gallery is less than ideal for large canvases and especially for these four, which should be hung in a way that gives them equivalent prominence and that allows for more natural dialogue among them.

Still, it's better that they hang together than separately. At least the show illuminates the contrast between the more or less conventional realism that resulted from Moore's first visit to Coatesville and the lush, more nuanced images that represent reconsideration of a familiar, historically resonant subject.

"Thirteen Miles From Paradise" continues at the Arthur Ross Gallery of the University of Pennsylvania, 220 S. 34th St., through June 14. Hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Fridays and noon to 5 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays. Free admission. Information: 215-898-2083 or www.upenn.edu/ARG.

