

The greening of Evanston

Exhibit blends various forms to explore the nature of art

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Art review

At the center of a new installation by Janet Pihlblad stands a pedestal on which is a hand mirror. In place of the glass is what appears to be a living plant.

The implication is that in attempting to look at ourselves, we confront how we interact with nature.

This theme informs both Pihlblad's installation at the Evanston Art Center and the three-person show of landscape paintings in adjacent spaces; but for the painting show, it's turned around, with the artists looking at nature and confronting themselves.

The context for Pihlblad's mirror is a room hung with leaves, many of which bear words — idyllic, pastoral, sylvan — that humankind imposes on nature. The painting exhibition, on the other hand, has had its context imposed by guest curator John Brunetti, who has brought together works by Ben Whitehouse, Brian Ritchard and Dan Gamble under the title "The Memory of Place."

Pihlblad's theme and installation are inextricably bound, for her process of creation — the cutting of the words into the leaves and their display in an unnatural environment — clearly illustrates the work's central idea. Words are here one of the ways we assert ourselves over nature, clarifying while at the same time often defiling it.

The artist calls her piece "A History of Verdure." But verdure is the greenness of flourishing vegetation, and Pihlblad's is in decay because of how she has exercised our need to be comfortable through classification. What did ancient philosophers say? Give a thing a name and you *own* it. Here such "ownership" kills, and Pihlblad's mirror presents an alternative to human vanity, the only component of the piece that is other-than-human and apparently living.

The embedded premise of "The Memory of Place" is that landscape painters, unlike documentarians, cartographers and surveyors, construct fictions that are as much the

result of different kinds of memory — personal, artistic, historic — as observation. This should not be a surprise to anyone, but at a time when painting is pursued outside the spotlight of the contemporary art world, viewers presumably need to be reminded.

Whitehouse is the least interventionist, appearing to transcribe where Ritchard compares and Gamble invents. But in the context of the show, they are all up to the same thing, for however much the painters direct their gaze outward at nature, they still create out of memory to a greater or lesser degree.

The virtue of making much over a point so apparent is that it gives three accomplished artists from the Chicago area what are essentially three small solo exhibitions that progress from readily accessible (Whitehouse) to more conceptual (Ritchard) to visionary (Gamble), with the installation by the New Yorker Pihlblad as a provocative still point.

The exhibitions continue at the Evanston Art Center, 2603 Sheridan Rd., Evanston, through Feb. 28.