

Mara Hoberman, « Alain Bublex Galerie Georges-Philippe & Nathalie Vallois »
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Alain Bublex

GALERIE GEORGES-PHILIPPE & NATHALIE VALLOIS

The unexpected inspiration for Alain Bublex's recent homage to American landscape painting is *First Blood* (1982), the original John Rambo movie, a film cowritten by, and famously starring, Sylvester Stallone. For the French artist—whose interest in Americana previously inspired works such as the *Ryder Project*, 1999, a caravan of moving trucks that crossed the United States, and “Buy Steel,” 2006—, a series of photographs documenting depressed industrial landscapes in the Ohio Valley—the movie's provincial setting of Hope, Washington (though the film was actually shot in Canada), recalled the work of American regionalist painters such as Charles Burchfield, Edward Hopper, and Grant Wood. To explore this comparison, Bublex used Adobe Illustrator to redraw all of the landscapes

that appear in the initial ten minutes of *First Blood*. These drawings, with their cartoonish smooth surfaces, rounded edges, and muted palette, recall Japanese anime, and became the basis for *An American Landscape* (all works 2018), a digital animation. Re-creating the original movie's camera movements and edits, but eliminating all human presence, the animation is an action movie without action; the protagonist is not a hunky Vietnam vet, but humble small-town America.

An American Landscape opens with a sweeping pan over a lakeside community where laundry lines, chopped firewood, and pickup trucks decorate the lawns of modest waterfront homes. The only sign of life is the occasional overhead bird. Subsequent establishing shots follow empty cars along a highway as they pass under a poignant WELCOME TO HOPE sign and into a sleepy downtown whose drugstore, gas station, and other lifeless commercial enterprises are dwarfed by the surrounding snowcapped mountains. Nostalgic though they may be, Bublex's depopulated scenes are unsettling rather than comforting. Indeed, this ghost town evokes a mix of paranoia and alienation similar to the atmosphere found in Hopper's emptied cityscapes or Burchfield's spooky pastorals. By preserving the jerky movements of the handheld camera that originally conveyed Rambo's point of view, *An American Landscape* offers the viewer the out-of-body experience of floating through eerily calm uninhabited scenes.



Alain Bublex,
*An American
 Landscape—May Be
 Icy*, 2018, ink-jet print,
 20½ × 37¾".

Accompanying the video, which played simultaneously on two small monitors, fifteen prints of its animation cells decorated the walls of the gallery. These large, face-mounted ink-jet prints were stylistically closer to comic-book depictions of Americana by Daniel Clowes or Chris Ware than to twentieth-century American landscape painting. The drawings' subjects and compositions, however, strongly resembled Burchfield's gouaches showing predawn views of ramshackle towns or snowy Ohio woods. By focusing on small vignettes that appear as part of much larger animated scenes in *An American Landscape—May Be Icy*, a wooden cottage nestled along a gently curved dirt lane in *An American Landscape—Dead Leaves*, and the thicket of snow-banked trees in *An American Landscape—The Edge of Darkness*) Bublex evokes academic landscape painting compositions. Further underscoring this connection, Bublex has treated these cropped landscapes to trompe l'oeil wooden frames, also drawn in Illustrator. Through the ensemble of these and similarly serene—sometimes hauntingly so—scenes, Bublex make a convincing case for landscape as the unsung hero of a 1980s action thriller.

—Mara Hoberman