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Whitney Bedford: *Sunsetting*
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by Jody Zellen



Since the early 2000s, Whitney Bedford has painted windows on the world. By this, I mean she sets a stage through which landscapes are viewed. At first, she depicted colorful, abstracted trees in the foreground, vertical and horizontal lines that delineated a room, dividing interior and exterior spaces. Through this frame, Bedford then created a more expansive landscape, sometimes imagined, other times appropriated from art history.

In her 2020 exhibition, *Reflections on the Anthropocene*, she presented a series of paintings entitled *Veduta*. In these works, she reinterpreted landscapes by artists such as Caspar David Friedrich, John Constable and John Singer Sargent. In her current exhibition *Sunsetting*, she continues the *Veduta* paintings, this time taking her point of departure from turn of the century sunset and moonlight paintings by Edvard Munch and Felix Vallotton. According to Wikipedia, a veduta is a detailed, largely factual painting, drawing, or etching depicting a city, town, or other place. Bedford's places however, are both factual and make believe while tinged with an awareness of the fragile nature of our planet.

For the eight by twelve-foot canvas *Veduta (Vallotton High Sunset)* (all works 2025), Bedford borrows from a sunset painting by Vallotton from the early 1900s — a shimmering sun glowing over the water. She positions this landscape as the background of the painting seen through a stage or empty room with a black floor and dark blue trim. This work, like most of her paintings, is comprised of three layers. In the foreground are bright orange palm trees depicted in silhouette as if stenciled to the canvas slightly offset from their deeper red-hued shadows. These trees are located in front of the plinth or stage. The background is divided into sections as if seen through three large glass window panes. Here, Bedford's skills as a painter and master of myriad styles becomes evident as she paints her version of Vallotton's sunset with impastoed bands of orange and purple brushstrokes surrounding the yellow-orange reflection of sun that is in the center of the painting.

Veduta (Munch Fruit Trees in Blossom in the Wind) Triptych is based on Munch's 1917-19 painting of the same name. Munch's expressionist image of a tree-filled

landscape has been described as an exploration of the relationship between nature and human emotions— specifically a study of the lyrical power of wind. In Bedford's rendition, she breaks apart and fragments Munch's original by extending the composition across three panels. In the foreground are Bedford's signature silhouettes — a bright red weeping willow, and a light pink tree without leaves. Overall, Bedford's painting is more fluid and gestural, though still reminiscent of Munch's original. She adds a bright pink and magenta sun centered among the billowing trees and undulating clouds which becomes the focal point of the triptych.

It is hard to view *Veduta (Vallotton Yellow Green Sunset)* and *Veduta (Vallotton Sunset Beached Boat)* without thinking about the devastating fires that raged throughout the Los Angeles environs in January. Bedford, who had to evacuate during the Palisades fire, transforms the yellow-greens in Vallotton's 1911 *Yellow Green Sunset* into vibrant hues of red and orange. In this modest-sized painting, Bedford again positions the landscape in the background framed by a bright pink structure. In the foreground are yellow trees with black shadows made of disparate textured fragments. The landscape itself, a riff on Vallotton's sublime, yellow-green composition of a sunset against distant mountains and walkers on a beach. While Bedford retains Vallotton's band of green sky above her mountains, the melancholy of his image has been transformed into something at once beautiful, as well as haunting and threatening

images of sunsets and moons glowing on water are traditionally uplifting signifiers of not only the passage of time but also the cyclical nature of life. Though alluring and evocative, Vallotton and Munch's sunsets also reflected the anxiety of their times and the changes brought on by the Industrial Revolution and World War I. Bedford's paintings also subsume beauty with anxiety. Her uncanny works attempt to inject the issue of climate change into images of the sublime. She combines different styles and genres of painting while alluding to the ways the past informs the present, and how one must be mindful, as well as wary of the future.

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