

*Labor and Landscape:
100 Paintings of the Allegheny Mountain Region by Ron Donoughe*

Introduction

When one considers the careers of great American artists, it is not uncommon to find that quite a few of them arrived at their most memorable works by focusing on the subjects and themes with which they were most intimately acquainted. Take, for example, Mary Cassatt, whose iconic images of motherhood were drawn from the day-to-day lives of her closest family members. Or Andrew Wyeth, whose arresting portraits center on the ordinary people of his immediate neighborhood. Many others who might be named in addition —I mention these two because they are not only famous artists, but Pennsylvania natives as well.

There is another Pennsylvanian who is currently forging his own legacy from the everyday world of which he finds himself a part. A native of the tiny village of Loretto, located in Cambria County, Ron Donoughe has spent many years recording the often unassuming and occasionally magnificent landscape of the Allegheny Mountain region. Approaching this landscape with the eyes of one who knows it like a brother, Donoughe renders it ineffably compelling. The affection of his gaze catches our attention, and through his brush, even the most mundane subjects become eminently worthy. This is the power of a great artist, and it is one that Donoughe clearly knows how to wield.

Labor and Landscape represents a summation of Donoughe's long and intimate acquaintance with the Allegheny Mountains and Cambria County in particular. The works gathered here are at once a survey of life in northern Appalachia and a personal

journey through the artist's memories and recollections. Each work testifies to the fact that Donoughe and the space that he inhabits are inseparable. The boundary between art and life is very thin here, and for one who travels the same roads, it is hard not to see Donoughe's paintings at every turn.

Indeed, there are few spots in Cambria County that Donoughe has left unconsidered. One of the most remarkable things about *Labor and Landscape* is the breadth of the artist's vision. From the fathomless skies over St. Michael's basilica to the dark infernos of the steel mills, Donoughe has wandered between the heavens and hells of his world, recording everything with equal passion. There is the shiny new service station on the interstate and the crumbling ruin in the woods. There are stacks of brightly colored canning jars at the county fair and stacks of chipped concrete barriers in a weedy lot. There are noisy factories bringing new machines into the world and ancient cemeteries where the silent dead rest in peace. All of it coheres in Donoughe's sincerity and the earnestness with which he views every subject.

This sense of strong engagement arises from the artist's awareness that his own experience is inextricably woven into the fabric of his native land. Many, if not all of Donoughe's paintings attest to a personal encounter with his subjects that goes beyond the mere painting of them. Some of these subjects are as repetitiously mundane as the daily commute along Route 22, while others recall isolated incidents that occurred decades before. Some, such as an old muskrat trap, spark dear memories of family and friends. Others, like the sad hulk of the Syberton House, are faintly disturbing in their evocation of old wrongs that cannot be undone. In every case, Donoughe has invested

more than just his time and paint. There is a piece of his heart in these paintings that gives each of them its peculiar resonance.

Labor and Landscape is a testament to the powerful impact of a particular region on one of its native sons. Yet the human element in these paintings is universal, for we all know what it is like to experience the deep attachment to the place we call home. Under the spell of Donoughe's art, the Alleghenies become our home as well, and Cambria County our world. If the Paris of Cassatt and the Chadd's Ford of Wyeth are already familiar ground to connoisseurs, the time is not far off when the Alleghenies of Ron Donoughe will take their own place among the cherished landscapes of art lovers' affections.

V. Scott Dimond

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