Basic Detail Report

Title: Analogical Emblem Landscape
Date: 1933
Primary Maker: com.gallerysystems.emuseum.core.entities.RecordXPerson@3e188
Medium: Oil on composition board
Description: "The new is a Recovery not a discovery," Stuart Davis, master of pithy one-liners, wrote in his notebook. (1) Yet Davis's catchy phrase describes an important aspect of his artistic practice throughout his long career; his thrifty recycling of images that struck him as particularly resonant or provocative, which he referred to as the "amazing continuity" of his work. "Analogical Emblem Landscape",

a rather severe landscape that at first glance seems to be slightly atypical of an artist known for his uninhibited improvisations on urban themes, proves to be part of that continuity. Painted in 1933, it is loosely based on a tree motif that first appears about 1922 and recurs periodically, with modifications, until Davis's last painting, left on his easel when he died in 1964. The image probably had its origins in a drawing done from observation. Davis believed that the artist could achieve inventive "configurations," as he called them, only by confronting the irregularities and unexpectedness of actuality and distilling his responses into the medium of line. The resulting linear structure became the skeleton of a composition; color, which established the spatial relationships of the basic image, could vary. A good drawing encapsulated all the artist's feelings about his motif and translated them into an "objective" language of formal relations. A telling configuration was not only self-sufficient but could also serve as a substitute for the motif itself. "I can work from Nature, from old sketches and paintings of my own, from photographs, and from other works of art," Davis wrote. "In each case the process consists of a transposition of the forms of the subject into a coherent, objective color-space continuum, which evokes a direct sensate response to structure." (2) The most reverberant images were not exhausted by a single use. As if imitating the jazz musicians he admired, Davis treated his configurations like a repertory of familiar tunes, recognizable every time he played them but varied through new harmonies, new rhythms, new colors. The original theme could be endlessly transformed until it was all but unrecognizable, or "corrected," according to whatever formal issues currently absorbed the artist. Davis's main themes were established early. As a teenager, he began to explore the images of city life that would preoccupy him for the next half century; his paintings are full of shapes and colors derived from elevated train stations, bridges, barbershop poles, taxis, billboards, and the rest of the visual cacophony of modern urban life. Sound was a component as well, from street noise to his beloved jazz. Yet this quintessential city dweller found a New England waterfront town equally stimulating. Davis was so enthusiastic after first visiting Gloucester, Massachusetts, in the summer of 1915, that he returned almost every year until 1934; by the mid-1920s Davis's family had acquired a house in the town. Gloucester motifs compete for dominance with shapes deduced from urban imagery in much of Davis's work, but, not surprisingly, it was the random, the complex, and the modern that interested him most. Davis's Gloucester is full of gas pumps and garage signs; when he turns his attention to the waterfront, his drawings record his enthusiasm for piled lobster pots, boat rigging, hoists, bollards, nets, and davots, elements that serve as equivalents of the visual anarchy of the cityscape. "Analogical Emblem Landscape" is essentially a Gloucester image, translated into what Davis called his "coherent, objective color-space continuum." He painted it when he was forty, in full command of a homemade version of Cubism forged out of a self-imposed apprenticeship to the French modernists he most admired and an unquenchable appetite for the traces of an American vernacular. At times it is

difficult to decide whether an image is an architectural motif or an artifact from a café table, but there is no doubt about a forked tree trunk that slices across the streaked and dotted planes of the setting. This Y-shaped, nearly sculptural vertical element is reprised in the pair of striped tree forms in "Analogical Emblem Landscape". It is not immediately apparent in the Cubist landscapes that these stylized trunks refer to the spreading elms that lined the streets of Gloucester, before the ravages of Dutch elm disease, but it is made explicit by later permutations of the motif. The sturdy wide-reaching tree trunks appear next in "Early American Landscape" and in "Myopic Vista" (both 1925; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York), a more casual, more naturalistic related gouache. The volumetric forms, crisp planes, and even-handed paint application probably reflect Davis's awareness of Picasso's firmly modeled paintings of the late teens and early 1920s, as well as his interest in Juan Gris and, more significantly, in Fernand Léger. But whatever "Early American Landscape" suggests about Davis's chosen ancestors, it obviously raised formal and expressive issues that remained challenging to him, since he returned to them in 1933 in two closely related pictures, "Analogical Emblem Landscape" and "Cigarette Papers" (private collection). The compositional elements of all three pictures are almost identical: a view across water with architecture on the far shore, screened and framed by sinuous trunks. A diagonal plane of foliage, or is it a cloud? floats above the left tree, with the various zones of the setting differentiated by contrasting patterns. In "Analogical Emblem Landscape" and "Cigarette Papers", the schooner that occupies the center of "Early American Landscape" has sailed out of view, but its memory survives, perhaps in the clean vertical lines that indicate buildings on the far shore in both later pictures or in the roughly triangular, patterned rock form at the left. In all three pictures, near and distant elements of landscape are compressed into a tight, clearly bounded structure that floats in the center of the support in a kind of emblematic vignette. The forked tree recurs throughout Davis's work, sometimes counterbalanced by a gas pump. Both tree and pump are oddly anthropomorphic, like surrogate figures in a stage set. A highly simplified version of the forked branched trunk moves to the center of the canvas in a series of closely related paintings of 1963, "On Location" and "Punch Card Flutter" (both private collection). It makes its final appearance, rotated ninety degrees so that the top of the landscape becomes the right edge of the canvas, in Davis's last painting, "Fin" (1964; private collection). Davis was attached to his double-tree motif, but regarded it as merely a point of departure. The evidence of the pictures derived from the image is persuasive, but Davis also offers verbal proof in the title "Analogical Emblem Landscape". The words, letters, and signs that play such an important role in the artist's mature works are meaningful, usually as abridged coinages for the principles of Davis's home-brewed art theory. "Any," which appears often, seems to refer to a notion that "any subject" could be the basis of a work of art. The concept extended to the handling of subject matter that was "not imitative or realistic but analogical . . . a memorandum in visual shorthand." (3) The analogy of Analogical Emblem

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Landscape points, at its simplest level, to the translation of landscape into the medium of painting, but it may also serve to alert us to the role of "Cigarette Papers" as further intermediary. The title of "Cigarette Papers" may itself be an analogy, suggested by the picture's strong graphic patterns that recall the lettering and decorative patterns Davis incorporated into the "Tobacco" still lifes in 1921, which are among the earliest examples of his use of such elements. While "Analogical Emblem Landscape" obviously has to do with a place that had special significance for Davis, the picture has more to do with modernist pictorial language, in general, than with a particular location. Painted in the Depression era, when American art was dominated by the sentimental social realism of the enormously popular American Scene painters whose work Davis dismissed as "corn-fed art", "Analogical Emblem Landscape" represented his counteroffering: a tough Yankee Cubism deeply informed by French modernism but wholly rooted in American soil. KW
Bibliography: James Johnson Sweeney, "Stuart Davis', exhib. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1945); Diane Kelder, "Stuart Davis: A Documentary Monograph" (New York: Praeger, 1971); John R. Lane, "Stuart Davis: Art and Art Theory", exhib. cat. (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum, 1978); Karen Wilkin, "Stuart Davis" (New York: Abbeville Press, 1987); Lowery Stokes Sims, ed., "Stuart Davis: American Painter", exhib. cat. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1991); Patricia Hills, "Stuart Davis" (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996). NOTES: 1. Stuart Davis Papers, Harvard University Art Museums, on deposit at Houghton Rare Book Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., June 30, 1956, microfilm, reel 14. 2. Ibid., November 21, 1942, reel 4. 3. Ibid., ca. 1933, reel 1; also quoted in Lane, "Stuart Davis", p. 30.
Dimensions: Frame: 20 1/4 × 21 × 1 3/4 in. (51.4 × 53.3 × 4.4 cm) Image: 13 7/8 × 14 3/4 in. (35.2 × 37.5 cm)