

VAN DOREN WAXTER

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Driving Realism, Wistful Scenes

Gallery exhibitions of Robert Bechtle, Emil Nolde and Mark Fox

By Peter Plagens January 31, 2014

Emil Nolde: Expressions in Watercolor

Van Doren Waxter
23 E. 73rd St. (212) 445-0444
Through Feb. 28

Emil Nolde (b. 1867 in Denmark, d. 1956 in Germany) started out as an illustrator and woodcarver, and was already 31 by the time he decided to be a painter. Early on in his painting career, he was a member of the edgily modernist artists' groups Berlin Secession and Die Brücke, and showed with Vasily Kandinsky's Blue Rider cohort. But Mr. Nolde never quite fit in any of them. Perhaps it was his love of watercolor as a primary, and not an ancillary, medium that set him apart.

He worked small, frequently on "Japanese paper" that he thoroughly wetted before he began painting. Mr. Nolde favored the traditional watercolorist's genres of still-life, landscapes and flowers, but he painted them with an easy musicality in which the colors seem simply to appear spontaneously, as if growing upward from within the paper, and remain deliciously liquid even after they are dry. In "Tulips" (c. 1940), the pigment bleeds from the flowers' stems up into the petals. Here, Mr. Nolde is as much a gardener as a painter. He can also capture a larger mood—for example, the nominally bleak landscape in the undated "Gehöft in der Marsch" that turns bluishly wistful under his hand.

It's impossible to talk about Mr. Nolde's art without at least mentioning his unfortunate politics. He was an early and unrepentant Nazi supporter. Ironically, his own art was condemned by Hitler (Mr. Nolde was included in the infamous 1937 "Degenerate Art" exhibition in Munich, Germany), and he was officially enjoined from painting. He continued to work in secret, however, mostly on watercolors he could hide. Since Mr. Nolde's paintings are as apolitical as art can get, it's up to the viewer to weigh—or not—his political morality against his art.