

PAINTINGS FROM ECUADOR by ROBERT JOHNSON

S E P T E M B E R 1 8 — N O V E M B E R 7 , 1 9 9 8

Guandera Preserve, Ecuador, acrylic and oil on wood and canvas, 67 1/4" H x 39 1/4" W



My painting is concerned with Nature and for years I have longed to explore Ecuador, a country with a greater diversity of flora and fauna than any other place on earth. It is the size of the British Isles, rising from sea level to 23,000 feet at the top of Mt. Chimborazo, the farthest point from the center of the earth. The land descends again into the Amazon River Basin, creating geographical diversity that provides an incredible variety of ecosystems for plants and animals. This small country boasts 20,000 different species of plants compared to 17,000 in all of North America and 1,500 different species of birds compared with only half that many in North America. For many years, I have wanted to paint in this country of such great natural wealth.

Another motivating factor was the work of Frederic Church, especially a group of exotic paintings he did from two trips he took to Ecuador, one in 1853 and one in 1857. Though stylistically my paintings differ from his, I feel a strong connection with his work and others in the Hudson River School that flourished in the mid-1800's. They are the visual counterparts of the Transcendentalists that tended toward a pantheistic view of the natural environment. They were painting at a time when Nature, especially in the New World, was opening up. Grand vistas of great expanses of wild Nature were being explored and painted for the first time by Western artists. Today, I am painting at a time when Nature is being closed down, partitioned into areas, either for development or for preservation.

My interest in Frederic Church led me to Alexander von Humboldt, the leading scientist of the early 19th century. It was his encyclopedic work, *Cosmos*, which inspired Church to go to Ecuador. Humboldt embraced a Romantic outlook on the natural environment that saw Nature as a harmonious whole reflecting the divine. By the late 19th century, this view was replaced by Charles Darwin, who saw Nature as a place of struggle and strife and believed that what we see in Nature has come about by accident, not by some divine plan. This view is the dominant one in our modern culture. There are some thinkers today that are searching for a post-Darwinian view that resonates with a more Romantic pre-Darwinian view. These thinkers do not negate Darwin, but incorporate him within their body of thought. These new ideas are explored in the work of Deep Ecologists such as Arne Naess, Devall, Dolores LaChapell and Sessions, et al. They take an ecocentric



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38 Biltmore Avenue
Asheville, NC 28801
828.251.0202



Jatun Sacha Preserve, Ecuador, acrylic and oil on wood and canvas, 30 7/8" H x 78 3/4" W

view of Nature. It is also found in the work of E.O. Wilson and his theory of Biophilia, in the Gaia Hypothesis, and in the whole field of eco-psychology. These are efforts to examine the human connection with Nature from an inner as well as an outer perspective. This body of thought has had a great influence on my outlook on the natural environment and has helped determine the kind of work I do.

In 1997, I received a grant from the North Carolina Arts Council to follow Frederic Church's 1857 trek in Ecuador. In preparation for the trip, I went to New York and read all of Church's correspondence and journals from his travels through Ecuador. After looking at his sketches and studying maps from that period, I decided to spend the same three months of the year he had spent there.

As my journey began, I discovered that Church had traveled mainly on what is

when Church came through in 1857, could only be observed in the Nature preserves. After some investigation, I decided to travel to five preserves representing different ecosystems. Staying at biological stations, I spent approximately two weeks in each preserve. Every day, I would hike to another area to draw and take notes. Back in my studio, I developed these sketches into paintings and completed one major painting from each preserve, trying to capture the essence of my experience there.

The preserves are islands of Nature surrounded by development. By employing painted frames, a traditional element in Ecuadorian folk painting, I alluded to this. The images on the frames depict the development I witnessed surrounding the preserves.

Notebook Page, Guandera Preserve, Ecuador, Mountain Tanagers, mixed media, 11 1/4" H x 7 1/2" W



now the Pan American Highway. All that I saw along that route was a patchwork of fields and groves of non-native pines or eucalyptus. Closer to the coast, the forests he roamed have been cut down in order to cultivate bananas, sugar cane and African palm oil. That is not what I had come to paint.

It became evident that the natural environment, as it existed



Notebook Page, Guandera Preserve, Ecuador, Elfin Forest Details, mixed media, 11 1/4" H x 7 1/2" W

The five preserves Robert Johnson visited and painted are:

GUANDERA An elfin forest and paramo, above the tree line – 12,000 ft.

MAQUIPUCUNA A cloud forest – 6,000 ft.

BILSA A pre-montane humid forest, Pacific slope – 600 ft.

JATUN SACHA Amazon River Basin, rainforest – 600 ft.

MACHALILLA Pacific coast and Islands – 0 ft.