

# ART

---

## NEW ENGLAND

Zoe Gallery/Boston  
Myths of Progress: Paintings by  
Mary Sherwood

In her paintings, Mary Sherwood claims and re-presents art historical images, casting them against a background of American romantic mythology. Sherwood's style, in fact, recalls that of nineteenth-century painters of the American landscape, such as the Hudson River School. Although not overwhelming in size, the paintings are sweeping, mythic, and exactly painted. Stormy, ominous skies often dominate the usually sparsely populated landscape. Irony is always implicit in her work. Appropriating the technique and images of painters who presented the prowess of the Republic and the promise of a glorious future, Sherwood challenges the very idea of progress.

In the paintings grouped under the title *The New World*, details of Masaccio's Brancacci Chapel murals are presented against a Romantic American scene. In each, Sherwood has set into the center of the landscape a small, masonite square, reproducing a small but powerful element from the murals. The detail serves as a foil to the idyll, underlining its innocence and optimism while questioning it.

*The Tribute Money*, the strongest of this series, juxtaposes a reworking of the Luminist Rossiter's *The Opening of the American West* with a close-up of one hand slipping coins to another. By focusing on this detail from Masaccio, the expansive scene is challenged. The Rossiter painting is about hope and progress and the self-assurance inherent in Manifest Destiny, but the addition of the depiction of this morally questionable act signals another attitude. The scene is cast in a different light. Sherwood tells us that we are witnessing a scene about profit, not progress.

The paintings of the series *Myths of Progress* function in a different way. Titles like *Deluge*, *The Fountain and the Well*, and *Baptism* resonate with mythic associations, as do the paintings. In the context of the show, these works with their seemingly timeless themes block the notion of forward linear movement. They are images of cyclical change.

Less successful are the paintings *A Brief History: Parts I, II, and III*. In these larger works, planes and a train are introduced into the pastoral scene. Perhaps, these are meant to be seen as violent intrusions, but Sherwood's technique is not strong enough to create the necessary tension. The idea is simplistic, and the execution vague.

As a complete work, however, Mary Sherwood's *Myths of Progress* calls into question the view, not long ago taken for granted, that humankind is moving forward.

Lauren Lepanto

February 1987  
Volume 8 Number 2