

# Terra Recognita

## The World as Seen by Foote



*Nathaniel Foote Terra Recognita, 36 x 60 oil on canvas*

This latest body of work forms part of an ongoing series representing Foote's pursuit of beauty in overlooked places. Along the waterways of New England, the artist finds hypnotic rhythms in both the natural landscape and its man-made echoes - the interplay of tide, weather, and time alongside the enduring grace of docks, bridges, and facades. Today, Foote's focus has evolved toward subjects shaped purely by the elemental forces of wind, water, gravity, tides, and time.

"While painting along the water's edge," he reflects, "you become sensitive to how and when the tide moves in and out — unless you don't care about getting wet or stranded. As that awareness sharpens

itself against the tide charts, there's also the realization that we exist on a blue sphere tethered to a rock. It spins around us in perpetual motion, never making a mistake. It's inspiring and humbling to know we live here strictly at the pleasure of a giant stone clock, four and a half billion years old. The pull is so strong that it lifts the Earth's crust a few feet each time it swings around. That's not something you stay tuned into while riding a horse, skiing, sailing, or commuting to work. The moon's position matters to seaside painters. Sailors follow the stars."

Foote describes this period of his life as a happy stage of creative freedom, one unburdened by the need to align his vision with public expectation. His instincts

now lead the way. "I paint the surroundings — whether in nature or in the city — wherever life is happening, whatever the thing is that is pulling on my visual curiosity. It's a long conversation with what is making an impact," he says. "I took the writer's approach: write the book you would want to read. I paint the pieces I would want to see but haven't found yet, the ones that I'd want on my own walls. If your eye is interested, there's someone out there who loves it too."

For Foote, the beach and estuary remain a constant feast for the senses — vast in scale yet endlessly rich in intimate detail. His paintings unfold like "stories within stories," where every ripple, reflection, and fragment of debris tells its own tale. "Every day the water's edge is different," he muses. "Each day something new appears — and something else vanishes forever."

#### The Return of Realism

Foote has been sensing for a few years how certain anxieties around artificial intelligence parallel those that likely arose with the mass distribution of the camera, the notion that representational painting could never rival the precision and speed of a machine. "As I understand it, the fear of being replaced by a

machine partly contributed to a creative drive to expand modernism's visual language and even the definition of art itself." Yet, over time, he and others came to see the fallacy in that fear. "Restoring realism to the conversation," he explains, "bridges a gap between abstraction and representation. Artists can combine the principles of both. As for the camera, it's a cyclops: one eye, no depth perception, only the illusion of depth, and that's a fun distinction, too."

He smiles as he describes the limitations of the lens. "We humans — birds of prey, for that matter — can perceive depth at 240 miles per hour. A cyclops cannot. It's a topic I'm still learning about but there probably aren't enough CPUs in the universe to replicate what the human mind can do. We're apex predators with binocular vision, capable of perceiving space and distance in four dimensions, some will say five. Even a stereo optic viewer offers only a double illusion - two

layers of two-dimensional images pretending to be three. A camera presents the world through a two-dimensional lens; its depth exists only in your mind. Painting, one of humanity's oldest mediums, remains so relevant partly because of how we visualize. I think art lovers feel that instinctively when they experience a work rendered by the naked eye."

Foote likens the act of painting to a form of hypnosis— a shared trance between artist and viewer. "All artists, musicians, and storytellers are hypnotists to a degree," he says. "And it's not only the audience who are transported; the creators are, too."

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When asked about the hypnotic quality of his new work, *Terra Recognita*, Foote attributes it partly to his understanding of Josef Albers' color theory - knowledge he first absorbed under Irwin Rubin, one of Albers' protégés, during his studies at Cooper Union. "Hypnosis is contagious," he says. "I'm merely amplifying my own, and if it becomes an extension of your vision, then we are meeting minds."

The title *Terra Recognita* carries its own resonance.

Foote picked up the phrase from military historian Michael Vlahos, who later told him that the expression plays on *terra incognita*, or "unknown land." Vlahos explained, "There is a common understanding of unknown territory, which we actively seek out. Yet we often ignore the territory we already know —failing to see the familiar truth itself. *Terra recognita* signifies the rediscovery of what we know so well, yet have let slip away, out of sight."

Foote's paintings, in their meditative quiet, echo that rediscovery. Each brushstroke feels like an act of remembering — not of invention, but of recognition.

By Aster Holland, a writer, poet, and mathematician.

When not in London, she spends most of her time in Leicestershire's Hidden Cotswolds.