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# Abstract canvases hold glimpses of endless highways

**By Fredric Koepfel**

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"You just go," says Marlon Brando's character Johnny in "The Wild One," epitomizing America's restless need to hit the open road and be elsewhere. The destination doesn't matter; it's movement that is sacred, the highway that is real. The fact that we usually only meet ourselves beyond the endless asphalt and concrete is an existential conundrum that countless films, books, television programs and songs can neither answer nor avoid.

In "Traffic Land," a small but exquisite exhibition at Material through April 10, Susan Maakestad pares the forward urge to its most essential *mise en scene*: the highway interchanges that occupy vast acres of the American landscape. Maakestad's principle, as always, is reduction and abstraction. These compact oil-on-canvas paintings, several almost miniatures (all from 2009), encapsulate epic scope in haiku space; we might be looking at geography through the wrong end of a spyglass.

By abstracting her subjects, rather than rendering them in glaring detail, Maakestad lends them elemental universality while grasping their fundamental uselessness and mystery. Puzzled archeologists of the future could regard these colossal, lonely artifacts, these infinities of long flattened ribbons, as remnants of a vanished, frivolous, spent civilization.

Oddly, though the exhibition is titled "Traffic Land" and eight of the nine pieces are from the

## REVIEW

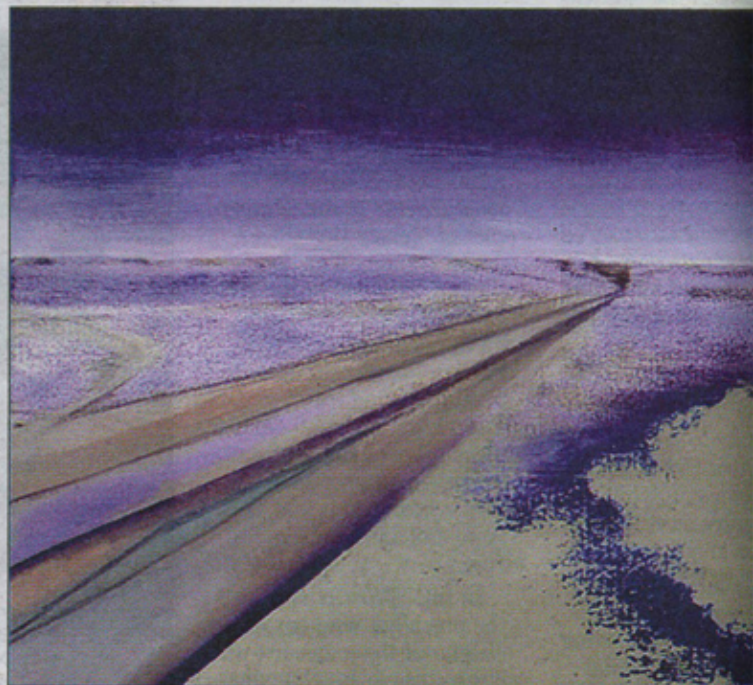
### Susan Maakestad: "Traffic Land"

At Material, 2553 Broad, through April 10.  
Call Hamlett Dobbins at 219-1943.

"Mile Marker" series, neither automobiles nor trucks appear in the paintings, which are also devoid of the filling stations, convenience stores and motels that congregate around highway interchanges. Nothing mars the ominous emptiness or the horizons that promise nothing but more endless, desolate miles. These are the nowhere highways of dreams and nightmares, abstracted into anonymous swaths of stasis and speed.

Maakestad's colors are purposeful and hallucinatory. "Mile Marker 4" features a sort of sickly pink sky and sandy landscape against a battleship gray overpass. "Mile Marker 6" offers a khaki-colored river flowing by a mustard-yellow embankment and under a mustard-yellow bridge. The deep lavender sky and unsettling dusky blues of "Mile Marker 3" seem steeped in glowing radioactive fallout, or perhaps they simply radiate an inescapable twilight state of mind on the way to elsewhere.

Though she works on a small scale — these pieces range from 9 by 11 inches to 16 by 22 — the artist employs the panoply of abstract techniques: layering and scraping, blurring, a variety of brush-strokes, exposing the weave of the canvas, varying the thickness of the pigment. The



Susan Maakestad: "Mile Marker 3," oil on canvas.



Susan Maakestad: "Mile Marker 4," oil on canvas.

result is a visual feast that rewards prolonged looking and takes the viewer deep into the heart of abstract (or

semi-abstract) painting where subject and structure occupy the same plane and the medium is truly the message.