

# Art in America

March 2003

## James McGarrell at George Adams

Departing from his recent, large, multipanel pieces, James McGarrell showed new works that were strikingly small: all about 10 inches high for single works, or 10 by 20 inches for diptychs. His subject matter remains similar, however, to that of his larger paintings. McGarrell often reaches back to Greek myth—for instance, in *Erigone*, he portrays the hapless daughter of the inventor of wine, stumbling upon her father, who is in a decidedly inebriated state.

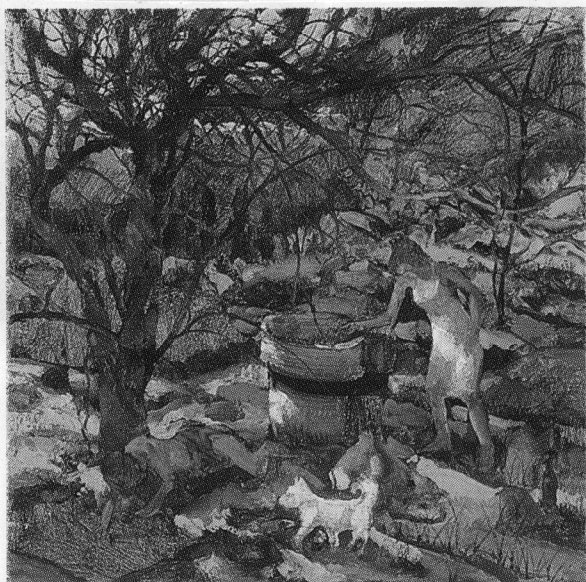
His rural land- and seascapes often have

something mythic to them as well. Certainly the diptych *Farm Fire* has an epic quality. Through an arcade to the right, intense yellow skies and scraggly trees can be seen along with a horse feeding at a trough; this horse seems unaware of the danger visible through an arcade on the left—leaping flames and figures rushing in with buckets of water. A piglet stands calmly by in the forefront. *Farm Fire* is reminiscent of the darker side of Thomas Hart Benton, with the idyllic or pastoral elements of the painting under threat from a more romantic holocaust.

Given the diminutive size of these oils, there are limitations to where McGarrell can go with his dire—and melancholic—imaginings; still, his chosen imagery packs quite a wallop. *Twisters*, (2002, 10 inches square) is cataclysmic, and even if viewed from afar, the painterly ferociousness leaves little doubt as to the storm's free-form malice.

There are quieter moments, of course, but these, too, tend to be hyperkinetic in effect. Witness *Beached Boat*, with two children playing on the beach. The setting is peaceful enough, but the colors—a bright orange for the beach, choppy, near-black waters for the ocean and high-toned, pink and yellow skies—are primal, even savage. This is not to say that McGarrell is a no-holds-barred expressionist; he is, rather, a painterly realist with a rather bloodthirsty turn of mind—and a spellbinder at any scale.

—Gerrit Henry



James McGarrell: *Erigone*, 2002, oil on linen, 10 inches square; at George Adams.