



***Agony in the Garden***  
An exhibition of works by  
**Robert Zehnder**  
CLEARING, Los Angeles  
June 7 - July 8, 2023

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church —  
I keep it, staying at Home —  
With a Bobolink for a Chorister  
And an Orchard, for a Dome —  
Emily Dickinson, (236)

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Mountains of rock crease like folds of flesh; a bloody teardrop rests on distended branches. Robert Zehnder transforms landscapes into sites of existential reckoning, forming expressive topographies that emote alongside—or in place of—the human. Inspired by a viewing of Giovanni Bellini's *Agony in the Garden* (c. 1459-1465), which depicts Jesus' visit to Gethsemane prior to his crucifixion, Zehnder's newest paintings evoke the physical and affective scope of his source material. These canvases, however, inflect Christ's desert and Bellini's renaissance technique with the complexity of contemporary spiritual encounter: Jerusalem appears mutable, the terrain swollen with conflicting, untraceable feelings.

The works on view transmute the events at Gethsemane into a new context, one that imbues spiritual meaning into the earth itself. In the Synoptic Gospels, Luke describes Jesus sweating blood, undergoing hematohidrosis: a rare medical condition that occurs only under intense duress. In Zehnder's landscapes, olive trees hang heavy with red, round droplets. Here, the uncommon physical expression separates from its Biblical telling, planted anew in an agonized, anthropomorphic earth. Zehnder's terrains recall human and animal bodies, but remain distinct from them: the curves of hills and dunes resemble ears or mouths, disjointed from their human owners. In the absence of traditional Christian characters, the emotional intensity of religious confrontation enters the natural world.

Devotional art typically serves an instructional purpose, directing believers to feel compassion for Christ in the moments before his death. The fervor in Zehnder's paintings is both alienating and revelatory, resulting in landscapes that resist categorization. Our eye wanders undirected, skating the distorted, bulbous lines of sandy hills until they dive into blackened abysses. These flat, star-shaped caverns dot each vista: their dark, abstract crevasses destabilize Zehnder's gardens, removing part of the scenery from view. In Bellini's *Agony in the Garden*, Jesus turns away from the viewer to pray, and his disciples slouch against rocks, asleep. Zehnder's paintings concoct a similarly foreclosed emotional structure: the anguish and exhaustion of the original story appear scattered throughout the work, fragmented and disembodied. An unease lurks within each scene, its emotive source inaccessible.

On view in Los Angeles, Zehnder turns the gallery into a site for contemplation. Two long, black pews, both shadowy replicas of their Christian predecessors, anchor the exhibition, allowing visitors to consider the artwork as though in a cathedral—or in a garden. Gardens, both in Gethsemane and elsewhere, offer an enclosed, private site separate from institutional constraint, a constructed space filled with artistic alterations of nature. At CLEARING, a new landscape emerges across the gallery walls, one that adheres to natural structures—trees, rocks, sky—and departs from them, forming a surreal, uncanny vision that is all Zehnder's own.

- Claudia Ross

**Robert Zehnder** (born 1992 in New Jersey, USA) lives and works in Brooklyn.  
He received his BFA from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2015.

His work has been exhibited at Mrs, Queens.

His work has been included in group exhibitions at C L E A R I N G New York and Beverly Hills; Rachel Uffner Gallery, New York; Mrs., Queens; Laura, Chicago; Jacket Contemporary, Chicago; Spider Gallery, Wichita; and the Ox-Bow School of Art, Saugatuck.