Joseph Jones (American, 1909–1963)
*Landscape*, 1932
Oil on canvas, 40 x 32 1/8"
Gift of the Estate of Mrs. Ernest W. Stix, 1970

Depicted in stark, complementary colors, primarily reds and greens, but in a visual vocabulary more reminiscent of body parts than nature, Joseph Jones’s 1932 *Landscape* produces an uncomfortable and disquieting effect. Amidst a sullen forest of barren trees lies an undulating path; its soft pink bulges suggest snow, but also cloth or folds of flesh. This path dematerializes behind an entanglement of attenuated branches on the right side of the canvas that are barren save for a few green leaves undermining any specificity of season. On the left, more virile trunks thrust upward from the billowing shapes of dull bluish-green earth. These trees fight for attention not only with their weaker companions in the right foreground, but also with the slits of negative space between them that appear to swell outward. It is a scene comprised of abstract shapes and voids—a scene more evocative than descriptive. Although this painting has been previously interpreted as a study in form, this essay will consider the political and social engagement underlying Jones’s *Landscape*. Painted during the Great Depression, a moment that directly preceded the St. Louis artist’s public embrace of the radical politics of the left, *Landscape* can be seen as a critique of the social conditions of the period.
*Landscape* is part of a series of paintings from 1931-33 that stands apart from Jones’s well-known body of midwestern farm landscapes and urban labor scenes.¹ Painted when the artist was living on Lindell Boulevard in St. Louis, the setting for *Landscape* is likely the nearby Forest Park, though specific references to locality are missing.² A shared quality of “tension and dynamic energy,” as a *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* journalist phrased it in 1933, characterizes Jones’s early works, each of innocuous subjects activated through the suggestive arrangement of simplified forms and painted in a limited palette.³ These paintings have received little critical attention in a body of scholarship largely devoted to Jones’s career after he publicly declared his Communist sympathies in 1933; they have been instead primarily viewed as early explorations by the artist in the modernist idiom.⁴ Several factors, however, point to an earlier political consciousness than scholars have generally acknowledged. For instance, Jones fashioned himself as an artist-laborer very early in his career. We can also find rebellious and anticapitalist

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¹ Due to his Missouri upbringing and his large body of work depicting farmers and rural landscapes, scholars often consider Jones a Regionalist artist devoted to promoting American ideals through localized subject matter, in the vein of populist artists such as Thomas Hart Benton. However, beginning in 1933, Jones was a member of the Communist Party, and consequently a significant portion of his oeuvre is devoted to issues of racial injustice, urban plight, and labor inequalities. His contemporaries’ understanding of his rural work also complicates categorizing him as a Regionalist. In a review of Jones’s work from the leftist journal *New Masses*, for example, Stephen Alexander drew sharp distinctions between the “straightforward, honest observation” in Jones’s landscapes and the “chaos” of Benton’s work, who was widely critiqued by the left for what they perceived as conservative political views. See Stephen Alexander, “Joe Jones,” *New Masses*, May 28, 1935, 30. For a summary of Jones’s biography, see Karal Ann Marling, “Joe Jones: Regionalist, Communist, Capitalist,” *Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 4 (Spring 1987): 46-59, and Louisa Iarocci, “The Changing American Landscape: The Art and Politics of Joe Jones,” *Gateway Heritage* (Fall 1991), 68-71. For his political work, see Karal Ann Marling, “Heartland Dreaming: Utopias, Dystopias, and the Wonderful Kingdom of Oz,” in Robert Stearns, ed., *Illusions of Eden: Visions of the American Heartland* (Minneapolis: Arts Midwest, 2000), 36-75, and Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-56* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 34-39.

² Jones was living at 4490 Lindell Boulevard during this period, and painted at least one explicitly local landscape, *Lindell Towers*, around the same time he created *Landscape*, c. 1931. See Guy Forshey, “From House Painting to Portrait Painting,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch Sunday Magazine*, June 14, 1931.

³ “What Young Man Thinks about Life Put on Canvas,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, January 29, 1933.

posturing on the part of the artist as early as 1931. Jones’s political awareness has significant implications for these early works, of which *Landscape* is exemplary.

Like many of his Social Realist contemporaries, such as Ben Shahn and Philip Evergood, who began taking up politically radical subjects around this time, Jones wished to break with the academic traditions that he associated with the upper classes. With works like *Landscape*, however, it was the conventions of form more than subject matter that he sought to undermine in an effort to critique the capitalist system of art patronage.

Viewing art production as experimentation in the "composition of forms and color in rhythm," Jones, like his contemporary Stuart Davis, considered modernist abstraction a tool for social engagement in a world gone awry under a capitalist economic system. Abstraction, he believed, was a stimulating force that could activate class-consciousness, especially, as in works like *Landscape*, through an active viewing experience. Jones’s goal in this period was to "paint things that knock holes in the walls," as he explained in a *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* interview in January 1933, by using a pictorial language that breaks down traditional modes of viewing and emphasizes underlying tensions in the existing social order.

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5 Jones was raised in a working class family as the son of a house painter, a fact that he capitalized on to distinguish himself from the “students from richer families” who were academically trained. See Forshey, “From House Painting to Portrait Painting.” His earlier posturing, before he officially announced his Communist sympathies, is also raised, but not discussed in relation to his early work, in Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, 35-36.


7 Jones, as quoted in “What Young Man Thinks about Life Put on Canvas.”
Unlike Davis’s painterly practice, in which the artist wove together disparate elements in his paintings to create a visual montage that ruptured the representational plane, Jones never fully challenged the autonomy of the subject in *Landscape*. Nor did he incorporate any objects of everyday life, a salient feature used by Davis to explicitly engage with issues of modernity. Rather, working within an established genre that has its own symbolic logic, the artist employed a distinctly sensuous language to disarm his viewers. This bodily language becomes almost sexual in *Landscape*, as the trees take on the quality of various appendages.

Within this conceit, Jones capitalized on visual elements that manifest dialectical tensions, all of which were evocative at the time of underlying political conflicts and class struggle. While not readily evident today, this language would likely have been apparent to viewers in the period.\(^8\) A tension exists between the language of the body and that of nature, but also between mass and void, and between the complementary colors of red and green that dominate the scene. This oppositional language is most literally depicted in the two sets of trees on the left and right sides of the canvas: one set strong and thick, one thin and weak; one set light, and one dark. That the sturdier thicker trees are the darker ones is particularly suggestive; Jones would later employ this vocabulary of organic expression in his more explicitly political antilynching and proletarian paintings to subtly highlight racial injustice in formal ways.\(^9\)

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\(^8\) See Alexander, “Joe Jones.” For a larger discussion of Communist art, see Hemingway, *Artists on the Left.*

\(^9\) This is particularly evident in Jones’s antilynching painting *American Justice* (1933), and in his *Roustabouts* (1934), a proletarian painting depicting men at work at Mississippi River boatyards. For a discussion of *American Justice* in this context, see Francis Pohl, *In the Eye of the Storm: An Art of Conscience, 1930-70* (Petaluma, Calif.: Pomegranate Publications: 1995), 50, and Dora Appel, *Imagery of*
Though *Landscape* is largely abstracted, Jones still grounds the painting in the romantic traditions of landscape painting. The attenuated branches, for example, hark back to a long tradition in which trees symbolize human loneliness. And while it is unclear if Jones had a specific intent in mind when he created this work, the familiar motif of the forest path recalls the journey of life, cynically portrayed in this instance as a barren scene that is particularly evocative of Depression era conditions. The symbolic implications of Jones’s works did not go unnoticed by his contemporaries. Describing a similar landscape with a “tree struggling to survive,” one writer saw the painting as “tinged. . . with the philosophy that inspired its creation.”10 To this journalist, the landscape was evocative of those negatively affected by capitalist conditions.

The landscape genre was repeatedly used in the nineteenth century to foster American nationalism and westward expansion through the use of symbolic content, and through compositions that emphasized the conditions of a new frontier nation, or one without a storied past.11 Jones replaces the familiar nationalistic motifs that would often include grand mountains, broad waterways, and picturesque hills with a stark and desolate scene. Stripped of the exuberant idealism that characterizes many of the nineteenth-century American landscapes, the painting expresses cynicism about the conditions of his time. Moreover, with his use of dialectical elements, Jones maps a politically leftist vocabulary upon this genre, implicitly questioning the nation’s capitalist foundations. In these ways,

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10 “What Young Man Thinks about Life Put on Canvas.”

*Landscape* may also be understood as subverting an American pictorial tradition for critical effect.