

Rush Baker IV, An American Panoramic

Rush Baker IV has reached an inflection point: a reframing of his long examination of the American experiment. For his latest exhibition, *The Structure of Ruins*, Baker turns to the American landscape as a site of political geography. The shift is meaningful because it moves his work away from abstract depictions of the past and toward a harder question: *how does American ideology become material?* Political geography, in Baker's hands, is the study of how power settles into terrain: how conflict, reconstruction, labor, migration, and spectacle reorganize space over time, and how those spatial conditions continue to shape perception long after the originating events have passed. It is the framework through which his new paintings should be read.

The histories Baker draws on are not the subject so much as the evidence, the specific cases through which a larger argument about land and power becomes visible. The paintings make a statement through atmosphere before they make it through image. Architectural masses surface and dissolve inside fields of smoke, stain, and vapor; grids and ramparts assert themselves briefly, then give way to washes that behave more like weather than like structure. Baker's materiality does the work of history, allowing these places to emerge from the surface as pressure and residue rather than be illustrated as scenes, so that abstraction becomes the condition under which the past can appear at all.

The Civil War offers Baker his most sustained example of this process, and it remains a potent source of inspiration, but he is careful to distinguish inspiration from literal subject matter. Rather than depicting the war's events, he unpacks its consequences. Fort Sumter, Atlanta, Stone Mountain, Savannah, Charleston: these places function not merely as destinations but as overlapping fields of historical pressure. Sherman's March to the Sea holds particular force for Baker because it transformed the southern landscape through movement, infrastructure, and the deliberate restructuring of space itself. The Civil War, in Baker's account, was not just a series of battles but a rearrangement of the land, one whose effects can still be seen today.

The painting, *Gettysburg, 1863* reflects this emotional geography. Almost entirely red, its swirling field of crimson, ember orange, and bruised violet turns in on itself like weather or smoke, with no architecture left to anchor it. The painting presents a landscape so consumed by rupture that place itself has burned away into pure atmosphere. Baker's latest body of work treats ruins not as romantic objects but as systems that continue to organize our lives. These paintings ask how a landscape can carry the residue of violence, resistance, and political mythology simultaneously. Baker does not sort these forces into a hierarchy, he holds them together in a single field, where they press against one another without any obvious resolution.

The Atlanta Cyclorama (1886) offers Baker a case study in exactly this kind of layered pressure, and a demonstration of how thoroughly the political organization of space extends to its representation. A 360-degree painting the length of a football field, it was created to depict the 1864 Battle of Atlanta as a Union victory, then altered in 1892 to recast the same scene as a Confederate triumph, with fleeing soldiers repainted and captured prisoners reassigned to suit Southern audiences, before a 1930s campaign reversed those changes to restore the original design. A single canvas thus carries at least two contradictory accounts of one event, each painted over the last. That palimpsest of revision is a portrait of America's constant negotiation with its own past, its willingness to repaint history to match the story it wishes to tell. Baker is confronting this directly. His layered surfaces and buried references enact the same accretion the Cyclorama underwent, but he refuses the fantasy of a final,

corrected version. Where the Cyclorama was repeatedly overpainted in pursuit of a single authoritative narrative, Baker leaves the competing layers visible, insisting that the contradictions are the subject.

Baker also presents temperature as a conceptual device. The exhibition is dominated by cooler blue paintings, spaces of distance, water, and memory, with moments of heat and rupture introduced through reds and warmer passages. The result is what he describes as an emotional geography. Cool becomes the register of distance and remembrance; heat marks the points where the past breaks through into feeling. The viewer moves through the show as through a terrain of shifting climates, and that movement becomes part of the meaning. *The Structure of Ruins*, the exhibition's titular work, exemplifies this logic. A gutted fortification rises out of a wash of cobalt and pale smoke, its casemates and parapet dissolving at the edges into vapor, while a single small figure sits within the wreckage. The building is rendered as a residue, a structure the land still carries; distance and memory saturate the scene in blue, so that the ruin reads as an aftermath that has not finished organizing the ground around it.

Underlying all of this is Baker's response to the present moment. As the United States marks its 250th anniversary, he asks what it means to live in a nation whose foundational contradictions remain unresolved, and how those contradictions continue to shape the landscapes we move through every day. Baker is asking whether abstraction can carry an investigation that neither historical narrative nor patriotic ritual is equipped to hold. His belief is that it can, that a painting built from atmosphere and sediment and shifting space can register the simultaneity of a national history that refuses to resolve. The American landscape, in Baker's hands, becomes something that will not stabilize, a panorama that keeps turning, holding conflict and preservation, violence and memory, in the same unfinished frame.

-Dexter Wimberly, 2026