

The Highlights - Psychopathia Pastoralis

Marc Handelman, *Our Banner in the Sky*, 2005. Oil on canvas, 89×135 in. Courtesy of the Saatchi Collection.

In mid- to late-nineteenth-century New York, the studio building at 51 West Tenth Street in the West Village was the city's center of artistic activity. Inside, Hudson River School artists like Albert Bierstadt, Frederic Edwin Church, and Asher B. Durand hunkered down during the colder months to paint their signature views of primeval America. In the summertime they took sketching trips to make studies for studio paintings, occasionally venturing to the far reaches of the continent but more often taking gentler trips to the Catskills and the Adirondacks upstate. Back in New York City, they bought painting supplies from vendors then referred to as colormen, who opportunistically set up shop on Tenth Street. They visited each other's studios and generally lived as urbane professional artists. Their main reason for being geographically removed from their subject matter was likely the same careerism that attracts artists to New York to this day, in search of shows, camaraderie, and sales. The nineteenth-century romantic ideal of the artist in isolation was nowhere to be found among these nature loving city dwellers. Indeed, so socially integrated were the artists inside the Tenth Street building that Holland Cotter described not only as a place to paint but a "think-tank, exhibition space and fraternity house" (*New York Times*, July 13, 1997).

Peter Allen Hoffmann, *Sort*, 2005. Oil on canvas, 12×9 in. Courtesy of Freight + Volume Gallery.

By the time the Hudson River School peaked in recognition and popularity in the 1850s, the swaths of forest that Durand and Cole had painted with a spirit of veridicality were already crisscrossed with fences, pocked by towns, and sometimes leveled to make way for agriculture and industry. Conflicting desires to preserve and exploit the American landscape treated it both as an available tract of raw material and as an example of God's immense power, perfect and complete in itself. Without a doubt, the most successful Hudson River School painters felt this conflict keenly. They saw their subject matter fundamentally changed by development, all the while accepting sales and commissions from an emerging group of American patrons made rich by expanding mercantile and industrial activity across the country. Unlike their European counterparts, who had three or four centuries of translating quality, pre-industrial land into distinctive, empirically sound styles of landscape painting, Cole, Durand, and company had a few decades, at best. As painters went further

afield in search of the primeval (Church went as far as the Arctic Circle and Ecuador), they tended to stray from the realism that Cole and Durand originally espoused, sensationalizing the western United States with unearthly light and improbable compositions as geographical distance increased between the landscape and the studio. By the time Thomas Moran painted his signature work, *Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone*, in 1872, viewers in the large eastern cities no longer took such a painting as an accurate image of the landscape, deferring instead to photography.

Eva Struble, *Pulaski Bridge*, 2007. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 63×83 in.

The resulting romantic pseudo-realism is the main form that landscape painting has taken in the United States, constructing a myth of unfettered nature that negotiates fantasy, belief, and empirical observation. It is a virtual landscape of American consciousness that connects disparate artists, from Church to Georgia O'Keefe to Clyfford Still to Jules de Balincourt. As Robert Rosenblum has pointed out in his essay *The Primal American Scene*, there is continuity in American painting from the Hudson River School through the Abstract Expressionists and beyond, contrary to the common assumption that the New York School is the legacy of European Modernism and its attendant avant-garde. For current artists - particularly in New York - situating their work in one historical continuum or another, the decision to look closely at the legacy of nineteenth-century American painting aligns them in ways that are often unnoticed. What follows is a discussion of artists in New York whose work joins the continuum of American landscape painting from afar, looking beyond the Hudson River into the hypothetical landscape of the United States that is more consciousness than geography.

In an age of telecommunications and discount airfare, there really isn't such a thing as a distant American place. Some combination of air travel, driving, and the Internet can, of course, take people virtually or physically almost anywhere in the country in less than a day. Still, there is lots of open space in the United States, albeit mostly tinged by human presence. For artists in New York, the fantasy of the other landscape, that nineteenth-century myth, collides with a critical need to address the reality of their urban situations and the realities of development, toxic industry, and suburban sprawl. If a contradiction between pastoral subject matter and urban lifestyle defined Durand and Bierstadt in the 1850s, a corollary tension between faithfully depicting landscape and mythologizing it defines New York artists such as Anna Conway, Marc Handelman, Peter Allen Hoffmann, Cameron Martin, Tom McGrath, and Eva Struble.

Tom McGrath, *The Dry Strip*, 2006. Oil on panel, 61.5×80.5 in. Courtesy of Zach Feuer Gallery.

Suburban sprawl and industry have created a new sort of hybrid between urban and rural terrain that complicates - and maybe even eliminates - the distinction between them. Serious American artists didn't address the industrialized landscape until the so-called Ashcan School, including George Bellows, did so beginning in the early 1900s. Even Pop artists mostly avoided showing the suburbs cropping up around American cities, and no painter seriously engaged them as a subject until Eric Fischl did in the late 1970s, four decades after the first major planned suburbs were built in Connecticut and New Jersey. For many artists who have grown up in the suburbs and now live in New York, their home terrain can take on surreal, dream-like qualities. Like Thomas Moran distorting and mystifying the Grand Canyon and Yellowstone, artists like Conway and McGrath allow the distance between suburban and semi-rural subjects and the artists' urban surroundings to have a mythologizing effect. An implied but inaccessible narrative in Conway's eerie landscapes suggests some human activity that modifies the landscape while charging it with an odd potential. The locations - quarries, pools, and fields in the style of Grant Wood - all show the effects of industry without any clear reference to productive use, instead suggesting an uncanny world where a quarry is no longer a place to find large rocks but a desolate place for people on the fringe to explore and work cryptically. If the total clarity of Conway's paintings is what makes them so strange, McGrath paints suburbs and highways with a disorienting sense of movement and incomplete perception. The resulting abstraction transforms the places he paints into alien landscapes, where architecture and foliage are at times indiscernible, and artificial light mixes with daylight to cast an otherworldly tinge. While very different stylistically from the embellished, grand sunsets of Church, McGrath seems to be pursuing the same other American landscape 150 years later.

Of course, painters don't have to look beyond their urban environments to find strange landscapes, and perhaps they shouldn't at all, as Bellows thought in the early 1900s. Eva Struble has recently painted a number of abstracted views of Newtown Creek, the body of water that divides northern Brooklyn and Queens as well as the site of the worst oil spill in U.S. history. Like Bellows's painting of the Penn Station renovation in 1907, Struble shows the toxicity around the waterway as a figurative intoxicant, adding psychological intensity to a dismal place.

Cameron Martin, *Remission*, 2006. Acrylic on canvas, 80×132 in. Courtesy of Greenberg Van Doren Gallery.

The impulse to paint landscapes must certainly come from the lack of nature in urban artists'

environments to some degree, hence the other-ness of so many of their practices. Cameron Martin's large-scale, reductive paintings of rocks and mountains are suspended in hazy voids, like disembodied memories. Rendered with smooth painterly techniques, they make tangible what seems to have the shape of memory, not nature as it is directly experienced. As landscape becomes rooted in memory, it is built more on human emotion than empirical observation, shifting from a sense of the sublime in nature towards the sublime of consciousness. Put another way, if the Hudson River School is concerned with nature reflecting emotion, Cameron allows nature to take the shape of emotion. Taking his cues from Milton Avery, Peter Allen Hoffmann builds landscapes that appear to be made from memories and fragmented patterns that often approach the threshold of complete abstraction. More truly representational passages about pure geometric patterns, making questions of a real or invented landscape complicated and possibly irrelevant. Still closer towards a landscape of consciousness is Marc Handelman, whose landscape paintings often combine the most otherworldly aspects of the Hudson River School with an acidic palette taken from television, computer graphics, and artificial light. His painting *Our Banner in the Sky* (2005) saturates and inverts the sky (which takes the form of the Stars and Stripes) in the Church painting of the same name, transforming the image from a comprehensible but unbelievable sunset to something more caustic and menacing.

Certainly landscape painting isn't the only story of how artists have dealt with landscape in the United States, as anyone interested in Robert Smithson knows. My purpose in this article is not to prioritize that history, but to see it as a rich reference point for many current artists. As the New York art world falls deeper into a lazy nostalgia for the European avant-garde of the twentieth century, artists instead looking to nineteenth-century America often make the few pieces of art that I can see critically without losing a my sense of humanity and feeling in the work.