Gallery chronicle

by James Panero

For a short time in the 1850s, the center of the New York art world was located in North Conway, New Hampshire. Yes, before there was SoHo, there was NoCo.

The rage for all things Conway can be traced to 1839. In that year, Thomas Cole, dean of the Hudson River School, traveled to the region to create what is most likely our first painting of Mount Washington: *A View of the Mountain Pass Called the Notch of the White Mountains.* But it was not until 1853, when a painter named Benjamin Champney, a New Hampshire native, bought a home in North Conway that interest in the area took off. Many landscape artists at the time lived in the same complex of studio apartments off Washington Square in New York, and they often traveled together. Champney wrote to one such artist in 1854: "we have a very pleasant congregation of artists here at present and they are all anxious you should be added to our number. Huntington, Hubbard, Gifford, Colman, Etc., are still here and Colyer is expected. . . . Now do come and leave those old rocks and water scapes and try us here for a while."

Champney's letter was addressed to John F. Kensett, but its sentiment caught the attention of Kensett's friend James Suydam, a patron of the arts who was encouraged to take up painting in this wide valley extending south from Mount Washington. Over the next decade, Suydam developed his own quiet vocabulary of space, until disease overcame him in 1865 while again painting at this crossroads of nineteenth-century American art. A small retrospective of Suydam's little-known landscapes is now on view at the National Academy, which was both Suydam's cause in life and a beneficiary at his death.[1] It is a beautiful little show—one that highlights Suydam's talents as a landscape painter with a gift for the miniature, and as a collector. In his art, even Suydam's largest paintings invite close inspection. In *Paradise Rocks, Newport* (1860), Suydam's best known work, the manipulation of select detail—people and livestock, painted at a scale much smaller than the surrounding landscape would seem to dictate—creates a heightened illusion of depth. Upon his death, Suydam's art collection—not only his own body of work but also some eighty paintings from a wide range of artists—became the foundation for the Academy Museum. Many are now on view on the Academy's second floor.

The Conway moment can be spotted in just about every college museum in New England. There is the arable valley, sometimes with a river down the middle. There in the distance is the Presidential Range: Jefferson, Madison, Adams—each great peak representing a Founding Father. There is

1 "Luminist Horizons: The Art and Collection of James A. Suydam" opened at the National Academy Museum, New York, on September 14 and remains on view through December 31, 2006. For "Italia!," also on view at the Academy, see Karen Wilkin's review elsewhere in this issue.

Mount Washington itself, rising highest in the center, the tallest peak in the Northeast—the first among citizens. Indeed, Suydam's *Conway Meadows* (*c.* 1857), and *View of Mt. Washington from the Conway Meadows* (*c.* 1860) are not altogether distinct from the hundreds of similar images to come out of the Conway circle. These early paintings in fact share similarities with work by Champney and Aaron Draper Shattuck and other examples in Suydam's own collection.

The Conway setting provided the layers of iconography that American landscape artists sought to build into their work: a patriotic feeling towards a national geography, anchored by a Founding Father; a faith in Providence; a meditation on the emerging philosophies of nature and the Divine (Emerson's "Nature" was published in 1836); and a particular American tendency in landscape art to combine the picturesque with the sublime, the wild with the tamed. As the country entered the crisis of the Civil War, the Presidential Range also served as a reminder of the Union cause.

As with all one-time artistic centers, it wasn't long after Suydam's first visit to Conway that real-estate development followed suit. In 1850 the magazine *Crayon* declared North Conway to be the "pet valley of our landscape painters." Painters including Suydam sent their images of Mount Washington home to New York and Boston, where they were reproduced in serial publications. Soon, North Conway experienced a tourist boom. Railway lines reached up from Boston. Clapboard hotels went up. There was even a hotel built on the top of Mount Washington, which by the 1870s was serviced by a cog railroad, still in operation.

It was not long before *Crayon* set its artistic sights elsewhere, writing in 1859: "A great change has taken place in the migratory habits of our landscape painters during the past few summers. They resort more and more to the sea-side and less to the mountains for their studies than was their wont, and there is a prospect of there being 'water, water everywhere' by-and-by in our exhibitions." Before it became a Gilded Age theme park, Newport, Rhode Island was the next stopover and, for Suydam, an equally significant one. Freed from the iconography of Conway, where the mountains "are too near which on a clear day makes them very hard to paint," as he complained, Suydam found a new geometry in the lowlands and seascapes of the Rhode Island coastline. He also found new iconography in the spirit of George Berkeley (1685–1753), one of America's early philosophers. Over one hundred years before, en route to Bermuda, Berkeley took an extended furlough in Newport and in 1732 he penned his "Alciphron, or, The Minute Philosopher," a refinement of his "Essay toward a New Theory of Vision." He wrote this dialogue while sitting on the same crag—often referred to as "Berkeley's Seat"—that forms the focus of Suydam's *Paradise Rocks.*

Mark D. Mitchell, a curator at the museum, writes in the exhibition catalogue, "The primary attention to shape and color, rather than texture, expanded considerably in Suydam's paintings of the 1860s." Mitchell compares Suydam's paintings with photographs he took on site. This close visual analysis is the most illuminating scholarship in the catalogue.

Through Mitchell's co-writer, Katherine E. Manthorne, a professor at the City University of New York, we encounter a different landscape entirely: the landscape of the contemporary university. The catalogue's first effort to define the title of the show doesn't appear until somewhere around page 132. "Luminism" was a term devised by John I. H. Baur in the 1940s, which Manthorne explains through a "reliance on gendered language: the former (we call Luminists) were sweet, tranquil, and feminine; the latter (our Hudson River School) were forceful, dynamic, and manly." She continues: "Suydam's situation was further complicated by being labeled an 'amateur.' Since nineteenth-century men 'took their social identity from their success or failure at work' he must have suffered from attendant anxieties that were tied to identity construction." And finally: "Even in the homosocial world of mid-nine-

teenth-century New York, this artist and the members of his immediate circle stood out."

Note to National Academy: A close reading of Emerson or a study of light as rendered in paint would have facilitated our understanding of the past. Ms. Manthorne's rhetoric illuminates only the hack politicized theories of the present moment.

Is landscape set for a comeback? Is it possible landscape can survive Bob Ross's paint-by-numbers and "happy little trees"?

Landscape has something going for it. It excites the visual faculties with its infinite illusion of depth rendered on the two-dimmentional plane. But the greater themes of the American landscape also still hold sway over us. Gifford, Inness: no matter what landscape exhibition comes along, the effect is always rewarding. One current exhibition seeks to draw a connection between early cinema and William Morris Hunt's *Niagara Falls* (1878), a grand machine of a painting that has you gazing over the lip without a foothold in sight.[2] Granted, the relationship comes off as one-sided, with cinema generally taking its cues from landscape, but the exhibition makes a good case for artists like Eakins using film in the study of athletic form.

At James Graham, John Funt turns the dynamics of landscape around.[3] Here rather than abstracted nature we get natured abstraction. Funt's mossy hills and dales are the figments of imagination. By pressing his brush against laminated board, he has developed a quick style that clearly flirts with the Bob Ross kitsch-scape. As an intellectual exercise, Funt's facility at generating space through a few swipes calls into question the verities of more "realistic" landscape art. Interesting, but I find it regrettable that Funt never taps into the rich iconography of landscape tradition. His painting is all surface, his depth mere illusion.

One of the most interesting American landscape painters today is, like Thomas Cole, English-born. John Walker's "Seal Point Series," now at Knoedler in New York and Nielsen Gallery in Boston, can seem like a gimmick until you view the work in person.[4] This master of huge abstractions has traded in his canvas for a stack of old Bingo cards, on which he contemplates the familiar landscape of coastal Maine where he summers. In 2005, Walker painted hundreds of these cards, writing of his coastal setting: "The structure's there, but the weather, the light—everything's changing all the time." John Walker's approach calls to mind another must-see show: Giorgio Morandi at Paul Thiebaud Gallery. Morandi, like Walker, finds infinite variety in familiar surroundings.[5] In Walker's little cards, we also find references to American landscape art and even Renaissance practice. As with Alberti's geometries of single-point perspective, Walker's Bingo grids create the basic structure for his depth of field, which in each card is rendered with strict modernist economy. Indeed, the structure is there. To it, Walker assigns changes in weather and light. Like the layers of significance packed into nineteenth-century landscape, the cards signal their own themes. There's the "Bingo!" of the winning gamble, and the faded memory of the bygone age of summer recreation, which here carries an extra whiff of fun: Legend has it that after Bingo was outlawed in Maine, the game cards were taped over with the word "Beano." Well, whatever name it takes, these landscapes constitute a Bingo moment.

2 "Moving Pictures: American Art and Early Film, 1880–1910" opened at the Grey Art Gallery, New York, on September 13 and remains on view through December 9, 2006.

3 "John Funt: Recent Paintings" opened at James Graham & Sons, New York, on September 14 and remains on view through October 14, 2006.

4 "John Walker: Seal Point Series" opened at Knoedler & Company, New York, on September 9 and remains on view through October 28, 2006.

5 "Giorgio Morandi" opened at Paul Thiebaud Gallery, New York, on September 12 and remains on view through October 28, 2006.