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Coney Island: Visions of an American Dreamland, 1861–2008

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Curated by: Robin Jaffee Frank

Exhibition schedule: Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut, January 31–May 31, 2015; San Diego Museum of Art, California, July 11–October 13, 2015; Brooklyn Museum, New York, November 20, 2015–March 13, 2016; and McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, Texas, May 11–September 11, 2016

Exhibition catalogue: Robin Jaffee Frank, ed., *Coney Island: Visions of an American Dreamland, 1861–2008*, Exh. Cat. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015. 304 pp.; 228 color ills.; 77 b/w illus. Paper over Board \$50.00 (ISBN: 9780300189902)

Before Disneyland or Las Vegas, there was Coney Island. This mecca for amusement on the far south end of Brooklyn emerged as a sleepy seaside resort in the 1820s and after the Civil War gradually developed into the flashy playground people typically think of today. *Coney Island: Visions of an American Dreamland, 1861–2008*, organized by Wadsworth Atheneum curator Robin Jaffee Frank, looks closely and thoughtfully at the various ways in which artists—painters, photographers, and filmmakers especially—derived inspiration from, and took part in, this transformation until the shuttering of its space-age park Astroland in the opening decade of the twenty-first century. At the heart of the exhibition are two recurrent ideas. First, that Coney Island was a center for innovation in mass visual entertainment, particularly cinema, the advent of which coincided with its rise as a site for modern spectacle. Second, that conventional social strictures were loosened and inhibitions shed at Coney Island in terms of mixing across class and racial lines, the flaunting of physical affection, and the baring of skin. After all, in addition to the nicknames America's Playground and the People's Paradise, Coney Island was known as Sodom by the Sea.

One of the accomplishments of the exhibition—and one of its pleasures—is the inclusion of a wide assortment of media. The impressive array of some one hundred and fifty objects includes paintings, photographs, drawings, prints, banners, architectural artifacts, carousel animals, film clips, and ephemera, from periodicals pages to postcards. This eclecticism is in keeping with the colorfulness of the actual Coney Island, but it never feels gimmicky or forced here. The fine and popular arts co-exist with seamless continuity and are reciprocally revealing. This makes for galleries that are both visually and sonically brimming. Yet even as they evoke the luminosity and clamor of Coney Island at its peak, they generally do so without being jarring or off-putting. At certain points, however, the audio from different film segments competes for the visitor's attention or a short looped

track becomes gratingly repetitive when spending much time within earshot. Though the exhibition could have become unwieldy or tangential, particularly because of the number and range of objects, it remains balanced and tightly focused throughout—no small feat.

Its chronological organization contributes to this cohesion. The titles for the five sections, which correspond to the core chapters of the catalogue, nod to popular period songs, poems, and movies and provide each with a broad theme. They tell discrete yet interlocking stories that keep an overarching 150-year history in view. The first, “Down at Coney Isle, 1861–1894,” is the smallest, comprising a room of nine paintings accompanied by sheet music and illustrations from magazines such as *Harper’s*. Postbellum advances in transportation increased the accessibility of Coney Island, expanding its clientele beyond the elite. Over 100,000 Sunday visitors flocked to Coney Island from New York City by 1880. Early diversions such as puppet shows, donkey rides, tintype portrait photography, and acrobats appear in two beach scenes painted by Samuel Carr around 1879. Commercial pursuits displaced the quiet—and supposedly more morally uplifting—experience of communing with the seashore. William Merritt Chase’s *Landscape, near Coney Island* (c. 1886; The Hyde Collection) encapsulates this tension by juxtaposing placid grasslands, where two genteel women pick flowers in the middle ground, with the Elephant Hotel, a well-known den of prostitution, on the distant horizon.

Risqué pastimes become more explicit in the second section, “The World’s Greatest Playground, 1895–1929.” In the catalogue, Frank parses the “sexual promiscuousness” of Coney Island, as one critic remarked, in relation to a 1908 canvas by George Bellows that is not part of the exhibition (64). In a 1928 photograph that is displayed, a man and woman share an intimate moment, seemingly unaware of Walker Evans’s camera behind them. Only decades later did the man’s daughter identify the woman as his secretary. “More people fall in love at Coney Island than at any other spot in the world,” reported the *New York Times* that same year, a quotation that adorns the gallery wall.

Coney Island as socially and sexually liberating—a place to indulge taboos—is just one of several threads of the section, which also chronicles the formation of discrete parks charging their own admission fees and touting their exclusive offerings. These parks were like dime museums, circuses, and world’s fair pavilions—and more!—all rolled together. Nowhere, however, is there mention of P. T. Barnum, the progenitor of this kind of American showmanship. Joseph Stella’s large and dazzling *Battle of Lights, Coney Island, Mardi Gras* (1913–14; Yale University Art Gallery), one of the exhibition’s few forays into experiments with abstraction, opens the section and references Luna Park, dubbed the Electric Eden. The drama of motion, vertiginous heights, and nocturnal illumination uniquely on offer at Coney Island also plays out in a snippet from Edwin S. Porter’s silent 35mm film *Coney Island at Night* (1905) on a flat-screen television nearby.

If Coney Island was one of America’s technological and cultural capitals in the early twentieth century, it was not immune from accusations of vulgarity and exploitation. The journalist Djuna Barnes, for example, condemned the parade of so-called freaks and human oddities in the sideshow, which encouraged the visitor to “look down upon these people as though they are at the bottom of despair and of life” (71). Yet, as the exhibition notes in connection with a photograph by Edward J. Kelty and a lithograph by Mabel Dwight from the 1920s, such stage acts were double-edged. Sideshow performers often took pride in their talents, achieved a measure of financial stability, and felt camaraderie with other entertainers. Issues around voyeuristic discomfort and the permissible gawking at people different from us pervaded the experience of the visitor as well: “It is the crowd that puts on the show,” declared *Fortune* in 1938. A forty-six-second excerpt from director King

Vidor’s *The Crowd* (1928) serves as one example: the heckles and laughs from a group of onlookers surprise amorous riders at the end of the Tunnel of Love.

The artist Reginald Marsh judged the wooden animals of the merry-go-round the greatest sculptures of his day, and the exhibition cleverly transitions to the third section, “The Nickel Empire, 1930–1939,” with two trotting horses. Eastern European Jewish woodcarvers—Solomon Stein, Harry Goldstein, and Charles Carmel—were steeped in the tradition of symbolic animal ornamentation for synagogues, finding new occupations in New York as émigrés. By treating the industrial manufacture of carousel animals on par with more conventional sculptural forms, the exhibition productively complicates boundaries between art and design in the Machine Age. With six key paintings from six different institutions, Marsh is both the centerpiece of the section and the midpoint of the exhibition. His frenetic temperas—full of whirling, jostling, sweating bodies—convey the sense of exhilaration mingled with titillation that was the carnival spirit. Some depict rides such as the merry-go-round and Human Roulette Wheel that, writes Frank, “throw bodies into intimate contact, creating chance romantic encounters, intense disorientation, physical entanglement, and voyeuristic thrills for spectators” (83). The exhibition pairs a seventh work by Marsh with a compositionally similar painting by his friend Paul Cadmus. Both 1934 beach scenes teem with overlapping, half-naked bodies and foreground Hitler’s troubling grip on power, but Cadmus’ also candidly portrays same-sex attraction.

Befitting Depression-era hardship, the bleaker fringes of Coney Island come across in a 1953 gouache by Mort Künstler that guides the visitor to the next section, “A Coney Island of the Mind, 1940–1961.” Amid stereotypically weary and destitute figures, an unkempt woman dives into a trashcan on the ironically named Mermaid Avenue—the street sign hovers overhead. The fourth section explores Coney Island as a metaphor for “the collective soul of a nation” (117). Opening with a focus on the World War II home front, the section brings together photographs by Weegee, Morris Engel, Sid Grossman, and Homer Page, many of which emphasize the sheer volume of beachgoers occupying the sands in remarkably close proximity. Overrun in the summer months, Coney Island sunbathers literally rub elbows. This was not simply a matter of Coney Island’s record attendance, but it as a place where class divisions could “be masked, satirized, and eradicated,” according to one wall label. This jumble of bodies might find factory worker and corporate executive getting sunburned side by side. But I was left wondering whether the assurance of strangers “transcending social boundaries” is too rosy an assessment. That is, when did the mixing of people from divergent economic, racial, or cultural backgrounds fail at Coney Island? What were the limits of this transcendence? Was it achieved through physical nearness alone or was something else required for, say, harmony, dialogue, or sensitivity? And were these boundaries superficially transgressed at Coney Island only to be reinforced in the wider world?

Even if Coney Island did not always live up to its imagined egalitarian ethos, the exhibition indirectly calls attention to the contrast with our contemporary situation. As political philosopher Michael J. Sandel discusses in *What Money Can’t Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2012), this kind of social interaction happens less and less frequently in the United States today with the widening stratification between rich and poor. Market values rule our everyday lives as never before, argues Sandel, and the result is the “disappearance of the class-mixing experience” previously encountered at the ballpark or amusement park (203). The pernicious triumph of market thinking to every corridor of society has transformed public spaces such as these to insulate “the affluent and the privileged from the common folk” (173). The case of Coney

Island suggests a lesson for our own times, one that the exhibition's fourth section subtly provokes.

The adjacent gallery moves further into the second half of the twentieth century. Bruce Davidson's 1950s photographs of teenage rebellion and angst around the boardwalk, among other works, precede a surrealist strain prompted by the potentially nightmarish funhouse and a skeptical postwar mood. Paintings from George Tooker, Henry Koerner, and Leonard Everett Fisher as well as photographs from Diane Arbus, for example, excavate the repressed violent, libidinal, and abject impulses of Coney Island (and America at large). To draw out this association between Coney Island and the entire nation, Frank convincingly reads the flat stripes and floating rectangle in Frank Stella's abstract painting *Coney Island* (1958; Yale University Art Gallery) as a reworking of the American flag, one that also internalizes the fragmentary optical sensations of this particular beachfront. A strength of the exhibition is its intrepid bridging of the still persistent, if mostly outmoded, midcentury divide in curatorial approaches to American art.

The boom years gave way to something else in the postwar period. Coney Island's sordid underside—always more actively informing its glitz and allure than the term adequately captures—predominated. The fifth and final section, "Requiem for a Dream, 1962–2008," surveys the faded glory of Coney Island, the reigning desperation and nostalgia. Despite the techno-scientific optimism epitomized by Astroland Park, a product of the Kennedy-era space race, a new grittiness and air of lost innocence permeated Coney Island by the 1970s. In the title track to his 1976 album *Coney Island Baby*, Lou Reed's line "the city is a funny place / Something like a circus or a sewer" hints at a parallel between Coney Island and New York as a whole. Three photographs of posturing gang members by Jerry L. Thompson from the early 1970s and one by Harvey Stein of the crumbling roller coaster the Thunderbolt from 1997 stress this sense of roughness and decline. The same ride features in Woody Allen's film *Annie Hall* (1977), a clip from which plays alongside, and there, observes Frank, it "becomes a metaphor for the pain and pleasure of growing up, for coping with the ups and downs of life and emerging triumphant" (169).

Few personal triumphs transpire in Coney Island-born director Darren Aronofsky's *Requiem for a Dream* (2000), a focal point of the last gallery. The film presents the false promises of the American dream as a descent into hell and Coney Island as a place where nightmares come true. In downward spirals toward mental and physical deterioration, the main characters' dashed fantasies and powerlessness over their own compulsions are aptly summarized in the recurring motif of the Coney Island pier. If the pier underscores the symbolic dead-end situation in which they find themselves in the film, it takes on more hopeful dimensions in two other works in the exhibition. In a 1995 painting by the graffiti artist Daze and a 2007 black-and-white photograph by Stein, teenagers jump from pier to ocean in quasi-riffs on Yves Klein's famous 1960 photomontage *Leap into the Void*. While the plunge can be deadly, it also produces intense feelings of release, relief, and possibility.

The exhibition's mostly daring oscillation between different media terminates in the somewhat staid recourse to the two-dimensional. The exception here is *Coney, Early Evening* (2005; Brooklyn Museum) by Swoon, another graffiti artist. Her assemblage of linoleum, Mylar, and wood planks reflects on the fragility of Coney Island while also extolling its resilience. The unprecedented devastation wrought by Hurricane Sandy at Coney Island in 2012 might have occasioned ecological comment (and served as a link back to the landscape paintings of the first section), prompting us to think about the site's past and future in a different light. For environmental degradation is closely tied to the cycles of consumer consumption that we witness in microcosm on the litter-strewn beaches of Coney

Island. The exhibition does, however, broach another topical subject: the abuse of circus animals. (This past March, Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey announced the phase out of elephant acts.) Porter's *Electrifying an Elephant* (1903) shows the cringe-inducing death of the elephant Topsy. The exhibition joins the film of her smoldering electrocution with Lucy Dyson's *Persist*, an animated video from 2008 that recreates Topsy's story in circus-poster inspired graphics. Other rewarding comparisons that cut across temporal boundaries would have been welcome.

A danger of art exhibitions oriented around a particular place is that they tend to dwell disproportionately on information concerning that place independent of the art referring to it—thus works of art become subservient to geography. Such exhibitions often end up being facile, in my view, regarding creative products as mere documents of the place. They can, in other words, be too preoccupied with the place in and of itself and easily lose sight of the myriad ramifications of and questions raised by the visual material. *Coney Island: Visions of an American Dreamland* largely overcomes this obstacle by rigorously analyzing the formal properties of artworks, by not reducing art to the by-product of the important locale, and by crucially interweaving text and context. Frank's exhibition makes both the art and the place matter in a way that is rarely attained. The fluctuating "visions" of Coney Island remain central, not ceding ground to Coney Island the physical destination. As a result, the insightful catalogue, which also contains essays by cultural historian John F. Kasson and film historians Charles Musser and Josh Glick, will surely remain the definitive account of the visual culture of Coney Island for years to come.