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Nature’s Nation: American Art and Environment

Curated by: Karl Kusserow and Alan Braddock (organizing curators); Austen Barron Bailly and Karen Kramer (coordinating curators at Peabody Essex Museum)

Exhibition schedule: Princeton University Art Museum, October 13, 2018–January 6, 2019; Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts, February 2– May 5, 2019; and Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas, May 25–September 9, 2019

Exhibition catalogue: Karl Kusserow and Alan C. Braddock, *Nature’s Nation: American Art and Environment*, exh. cat. Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum in association with Yale University Press, 2018. 448 pp.; 326 color and b/w illus. Hardcover \$65.00 (ISBN: 9780300237009)

Reviewed by: Emily Gephart, Lecturer, Visual and Critical Studies, School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts University

Revisiting Relationships at the Princeton University Art Museum and the Peabody Essex Museum

Visitors who come to the exhibition *Nature’s Nation: American Art and Environment* at the



Fig. 1. Postcommodity, *Repellent Fence/ Valla Repelente*, 2015. Installation view at US/Mexico Border, Douglas, Arizona/Agua Pieta, Sonora, 2015. © Postcommodity. Photography by Michael Lundgren; courtesy of Postcommodity and Bockley Gallery

Peabody Essex Museum (PEM) with the expectation of seeing soothing paintings of landscapes may be initially startled by a looming object at its entrance: a conspicuous yellow balloon emblazoned with a stark, staring scare eye, commonly used to frighten farm and garden pests. As part of an installation staged by the arts collective Postcommodity in 2015, entitled *Repellent Fence/Valla Repelente* (fig. 1), this was one of an array of twenty-six similar airborne balloons that rose one hundred feet above a two-mile long perpendicular line crossing the US-Mexico border. The temporary land-art monument was also a community engagement project that sparked dialogue about geopolitical

systems, permeable national boundaries, and the surveillance apparatus of the modern nation-state. Yet the motif of the spiritually powerful all-seeing eye, common to many Indigenous cultures, also acts as a reminder that arbitrary demarcations cannot contain the power of shared ideas, especially ones arising with urgency in the midst of a transnational environmental crisis.

The Postcommodity project invited beholders to adopt a changed perspective and to see the world anew; so does *Nature's Nation: American Art and Environment*. Leading off with the multilayered, critical, and interdisciplinary work of Postcommodity sets an important tone: it affirms a curatorial framework that responds to our present, perilous planetary circumstances. All of the objects on view at the PEM presentation work together to reframe a history of American art and environmentalism. Plenty of paintings will satisfy the desire of visitors to see canonical American landscapes—works by Thomas Cole, Asher Durand, Thomas Moran, and Frederic Edwin Church that celebrated natural wonders—but throughout, the traditional ideals they exemplify are subject to revisionist reevaluation. Presenting such historical landscapes alongside contemporary art, and in dialogue with work by both historical and contemporary Native American artists, the show weaves a story about the complex, conflicted dialectic of nation-building and reflects upon its repercussions in a time of pivotal climactic change.

Nature's Nation is organized by the Princeton University Art Museum, and the exhibition and accompanying catalogue borrow the title from Perry Miller's 1967 study of American literature, placing comingled ideas about nature and selfhood in the United States under new scrutiny.¹ It was cocurated by Karl Kusserow, John Wilmerding Curator of American Art, and Alan C. Braddock, Associate Professor of Art History and American Studies at the College of William & Mary. At the PEM, curators Austen Barron Bailly and Karen Kramer spearheaded a modest revision of the show, with the valuable addition of more than a dozen works from the Salem museum's collection of Native American art. Altogether, well over 100 works are on view, spanning 300 years of creative enterprise, by artists such as Charles Willson Peale, John James Audubon, Asher Durand, Robert S. Duncanson, Georgia O'Keeffe, Aaron Douglas, Ansel Adams, Eliot Porter, Ana Mendieta, Robert Smithson, Mateo Romero, Alan Michelson, Alexis Rockman, and Theaster Gates, to name only a few (fig. 2). The arrangement of paintings, illustrations, sculpture, decorative arts, and inter-medial installations explores how artists, as well as scientists and activists, have regarded the ecologies within which we live alongside other entities: organic and inorganic, fellow humans and nonhuman animals alike.



Fig. 2. *Nature's Nation* installation view. Salem, MA. Courtesy Peabody Essex Museum; photography by Ken Sawyer

The time is ripe, even overdue, for art museums to engage with climate science, just as many contemporary artists have been doing for decades.² On March 15, 2019, young activists mounted a global protest of inadequate governmental and corporate response to impending

climate catastrophe, dramatizing the terrifying and bluntly pessimistic warnings that have rung out every few weeks over the past several years. In May, the 500 scientists comprising the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) released a report detailing rapidly expanding regions of uninhabitability; in their survey, devastating evidence far exceeds any good news. Yet, the timeliness of this exhibition and the stand it takes bring attention to the environmental interrelationships that art shares with all other human occupations: it draws attention to its historical complicity, its internal contradictions, and also, more optimistically, its capacity to intervene in a planetary crisis which may seem too overwhelming to comprehend.

Nature's Nation invites an interactive visiting experience, addressing school-age visitors and families as well as viewers more familiar with the conventional narratives of American art. At its entrance, and throughout its galleries, prominent questions assert the prevailing concern of the curators: "What are the environmental implications of a work of art?" The works assembled in the first half of the exhibition space show how art shaped public understanding of humanity's place within the natural world. Images have sanctioned behaviors, affirmed beliefs, or confirmed biases that took hold in the early colonial period and coalesced in the nineteenth century. Whether intentionally or otherwise, artists reflected the imperialist premises of American exceptionalism. When the United States took possession of North American land and resources, its reifying attitudes toward nature supplanted Indigenous practices of habitation and reciprocity. Therefore, the exhibition revisits the centrality of landscape in American art, not only as a pictorial genre but also in terms of the conceptual terrain on which the nation forged its self-identity. As scholars such as William Cronon have demonstrated, cherished representations of pristine wilderness staked an aesthetic claim to the land and showed beholders how to think about nature as a treasure to which only some were granted entitled access, while other people and animals were contained, managed, or forcibly removed.³



Fig. 3. Thomas Cole (1801–1848), *A View of the Mountain Pass Called the Notch of the White Mountains (Crawford Notch)*, 1839. Oil on canvas, 40 1/8 x 61 1/4 in. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Andrew W. Mellon Fund

In place of standard summaries or soothing myths, the exhibition solicits active engagement between beholders and works of art and provokes recognition of the often troublesome attitudes to which they grant visual form. Some of these works openly celebrate profligate natural exploitation, such as James Hamilton's eerie *Burning Oil Well at Night, near Rouseville, Pennsylvania* (c. 1861; Smithsonian American Art Museum); others, such as Thomas Cole's 1839 *A View of the Mountain Pass Called the Notch of the White Mountains (Crawford Notch)* (fig. 3), are more ambivalently assimilationist, treating wilderness as a

resource equally worthy of respect and utilization. Still others are uncompromisingly critical: in the second half of the exhibition, modern and contemporary artists show a more self-consciously environmentalist perspective that emerged slowly in the mid-twentieth century, especially after the groundbreaking and revelatory 1962 book *Silent Spring* by

Rachel Carson.⁴ The condemnation of destructive farming in *Crucified Land* (1939) by Alexandre Hogue (fig. 4) matches the grim reproach of the photograph *CF00068* (2009) by Christopher Jordan from the series *Midway: Message from the Gyre*, showing a dead albatross, its decaying carcass revealing a pile of ingested plastic debris.

The didactic texts in the PEM galleries echo the exhibition catalogue in stressing dynamic interchange amid what Donna Haraway has termed natureculture.⁵ Small tables and chairs in the galleries offer relevant books for visitors to peruse and discuss, such as Carson's *Silent Spring*, alongside the exhibition catalogue. This publication expands well beyond the limits of the exhibition, serving as a long-awaited follow-up to Alan Braddock and Christoph Irmscher's 2009 anthology of ecocritical essays, *A Keener Perception*.⁶ Beyond the valuable summary essays it includes by Kusserow and Braddock, it also features topical contributions by scholars in a variety of fields, including Rachael Z. DeLue, Robin Kelsey, Miranda Berlarde-Lewis, Laura Turner Igoe, Kimia Shahi, Jeffrey Richmond-Moll, and Anne McClintock, as well as essays by artists Mark Dion and Jaune Quick-to-See Smith and environmental theorists Timothy Morton and Rob Nixon, among others.

The versions of the exhibition at Princeton and Salem share a common mission, although their emphasis and organization differ. In the former, the first room assembled diverse objects in a "cabinet of curiosities," highlighting ecocritical connections among materials, across widely differing mediums, and, most importantly, between cultures and species. At the doorway, such dynamic interchange was established by the arrangement of a Tlingit



Fig. 5. Tlingit artist, *Naaxein* (Chilkat Robe), before 1832. Mountain goat wool and cedar bark, 53 x 63 3/4 in. Peabody Essex Museum; Gift of Captain Robert Bennet Forbes, 1832 © 2010 Peabody Essex Museum. Photography by Walter Silver



Fig. 4. Alexandre Hogue (1898–1994), *Crucified Land*, 1939. Oil on canvas, 41 3/4 x 59 7/8 in. Gift of Thomas Gilcrease Foundation, 1955 Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa Oklahoma © Estate of Alexandre Hogue

Naaxein (Chilkat Robe), made in the early nineteenth century of mountain goat wool, cedar bark, and leather (fig. 5), next to a photograph by Subhankar Bannerjee, *Caribou Migration I (Oil and the Caribou, Coleen River Valley)* (2002; Collection Lannan Foundation), tracking annual migration patterns in the threatened Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Both faced Thomas Moran's grandiose tribute to American wilderness, *Lower Falls, Yellowstone Park* (1893; Gilcrease Museum), an embodiment of the period celebration of seemingly unoccupied nature. Nearby, contemporary artist Valerie Hegarty's *Fallen Bierstadt* (2007; fig. 6) hung next to the original painting that inspired it, Albert Bierstadt's *Bridal Veil Falls, Yosemite* (c. 1871–73; North Carolina Museum of Art), showing

dialogue between a cherished nineteenth-century painter and his twenty-first-century interlocutor; the pairing was all the more poignant in light of the recent devastating California wildfires. On an adjacent wall, the modernity of Morris Louis's painting *Intrigue* (1954; Princeton University Art Museum) contrasted with the ornate elegance of a eighteenth-century mahogany highboy, an unconventional comparison that illustrated how the materials of both fine and decorative arts are bound up in global networks of unsustainable mining, logging, and agriculture; in forced labor; and in toxic pollution. One of the great pleasures of the exhibition came in seeing familiar works take on new, reinvigorated relevance in such comparative arrangements.



Fig. 6. Valerie Hegarty (b. 1967), *Fallen Bierstadt*, 2007. Foamcore, paint, paper, glue, gel medium, canvas, wire, and wood, 70 x 50 x 16 3/4 in. Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Campari, USA 2008 © Valerie Hegarty

In place of Princeton's eclectic introductory gallery, the PEM installation opens by contrasting Native American symbiotic human and natural relations with the extractive logics of Eurocentric worldviews. Indigenous art forms that illustrate a cosmological and material connection to place, such as the Tlingit robe and a video installation of traditional and contemporary Tlingit dancing by Nicholas Galanin (Tlingit/Unganax), are displayed adjacent to Euro-American books, paintings, and scientific illustrations reflecting Enlightenment-era taxonomic systems. The works of contemporary artists Walton Ford and Mark Dion hang near the historical objects that inspired them, offering comment on the nineteenth-century preoccupations with collecting and categorizing that underwrote the colonizing mission of the nation. As Galanin's thrumming soundtrack echoes across the exhibition spaces, these very different ways of thinking and knowing demonstrate tragic cultural and environmental consequences, lingering in memory as viewers next encounter familiar vistas of nature's sublime grandeur.

Three broad, roughly chronological sections provide the thematic structure of the exhibition, but these seep into and traverse one another as well: The Order of Things examines models of ecological interconnectivity alongside humanistic hierarchies; Visualizing Human Impacts summarizes attitudes toward aestheticized utilitarian nature; and Vital Forms encompasses responses to more acutely realized environmental threats. Subsections devoted to New Views and Ethics emphasize ecological inter-permeation, although some of the categories reflect as much compartmentalization as interchange. While a section devoted to Cities is a useful reminder that urban spaces are also environments, the separate sections devoted to Portraits, Landscape, Cities, and Animals function in some contradiction to the spirit of ecocriticism. The mahogany highboy is similarly sequestered in its own niche, although it partners with other sections devoted to substances and extractive processes, such as sugar, silver, and turpentine, which shed important light on exploitative human and material entanglements alongside aesthetic design.

The exhibition offers equal opportunity for retrospective regret and hope. Most of the contemporary work appears in the final galleries, demonstrating alternately dire, analytical, and wryly optimistic visions of America's history and future. *The Browning of America* (2000; Crocker Art Museum) by Jaune Quick-to-See Smith (Salish member, Confederated Salish-Kootenai nation) is a mixed-media assemblage of newspaper clippings upon which a map of the contiguous United States has been traced, topped by painted pictograms of human and animal forms. As leaky drips of boundary-defying fluid rise counterintuitively upward across the surface, the map seemingly cannot contain either the seeping brown matter or the Indigenous presence to which it corresponds. Yet, if the image reflects upon the inexorable spread of pollution, or laments lost Native American communities, it also draws upon current census forecasts to suggest a decolonized future in which the browning of the American population unseats its presumptive white majority.

Correspondingly complex, transnational forces emerge in the visually striking photographs of Bannerjee, Jordan, and Canadian artist Edward Burtynsky. If these works aestheticize the crisis, other more activist projects provide an important complement: the mirror shields made for the 2016 community performance and video piece by Cannupa Hanska Luger (Mandan/Hidatsa/Arikara/Lakota). which engaged with the Standing Rock pipeline protest, remind visitors that responding to ecological crisis involves more than consciousness raising and pictorial gestures.

Nature's Nation is not art-historical business as usual, and it may strike some as reductive in its strong and indeed politicized point of view. To me, this is a welcome change: the direct and purposeful simplification of a long, complicated, and often contradictory story serves a greater purpose. The exhibition delivers an imperative message—artists and museums must find ways to engage viewers and to foster a sense of collective stewardship in which promotion of ecologically sound ways of life will complement social, racial, and environmental justice. At the end, as visitors listen to the audio track of dancing water protectors in Luger's protest action, they are offered cards and wall space on which to articulate their biggest concerns or voice their commitments. By providing a forum for both personal and collective action to take shape, the presentation leaves viewers with a sense of hope amid calamity.

Notes

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- ¹ Perry Miller, *Nature's Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967).
- ² While numerous valuable assessments of contemporary art and environmental engagement have appeared in the past few years, much less attention has been devoted to nineteenth-century art and ecology. Among the former, see Linda Weintraub, *To Life! Eco Art in Pursuit of a Sustainable Planet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Emily Eliza Scott and Kristin Swenson, eds., *Critical Landscapes: Art, Space, Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015); Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin, eds., *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015); and T. J. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016).
- ³ William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness, or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995): 69–90.
- ⁴ Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962).
- ⁵ Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003).
- ⁶ Alan Braddock and Christoph Irmscher, eds. *A Keener Perception: Ecocritical Studies in American Art History* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009).