

New Britain museum's American Realism exhibit explodes with mystique, muscle

by Tracy O'Shaughnessy Republican-American October 15, 2022

Landscape art put America on the map. It was an assertion and a salvo, a valentine to the country's bewitching vistas and an assertion of divine providence.

Developed in the early 19th century by a British transplant, landscape art became not just the country's dominant art form, but a creed in itself, a declaration that the physical beauty of the land was not just bewitching but subduing. Beyond the arresting vistas of the Hudson River Valley and the White Mountains, American landscape art declared a national destiny that wasn't just holy; it was ferocious. Those hills and vales, the mountain ranges and desert plains held a vastness of riches that would propel the United States to an economic and political position that would be unrivaled in the Western World.

American Realism, which the New Britain Museum of American Art re-examines critically in its new exhibit, was as muscular as it was majestic. Painters like Frederic E. Church, Albert Bierstadt and Asher B. Durand may have been pushing a Romantic, even pietistic vision, but the jingoistic undercurrent was clear: The country was aesthetically gorgeous, and under all those mountains and soils, rich as blazes.

By the mid-19th century, beginning with the gold rush and accelerating with the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad, industrialists and financiers would begin to accumulate vast amounts of wealth gleaned largely from the profitability of those resources.

That's what makes "American Realism Today" such an urgent, explosive exhibit. The 21 artists, representing 50 works, have captured that same landscape as it has been butchered and exploited for its material worth. That does not mean this exhibit of paintings, sculptures and works on paper is ugly. On the contrary, much of it, all curated by Torrington's acclaimed Neil

Jenney, is blisteringly beautiful. But it is splendor in a minor key. This is a land still electrified and stirred by silvery lakes and eddying streams, pine forests wreathed with luminous moonlight and deserts of blinding grandeur.

And yet all of it seems to have an expiration date__

None of it is untouched.

Much of it is despoiled.

The exhibit announces its intent with four trademark images by Jenney, which begin with a singular, meticulously painted image of desert vegetation in all its stubbly stillness. Jenney frames the image with the thick black wood suggestive of 19th century signage. The unspoiled purity of the landscape and the manner in which one sliver of vegetation can exude such poignancy is in dramatic contradiction to Jenney's forebearers, like Thomas Cole and Church.

Jenney's follow-up images, all executed in the same black frames, are poetic cloud studies, pure and hyperealistic depictions of morning, afternoon and evening. Interspersed with Jenney's luminous cloud studies, curators have placed Robert Lobe's hammered aluminum encasements of natural formations – boulders, trees, rocks – accentuating Jenney's plea for close looking.

Jenney's final piece in the series, "North America 2," is the same vista he painted earlier, now bifurcated by a metal fence post, rusted oil drum and barbed wire, which ever-so-gently scars the sylvan landscape.

It's this brand of realism – lapidary, radiant, explicit – that hums through the exhibit .Joseph McNamara's fastidiously painted landscapes of desert scenes, like "Kern, CA," choked with elaborate oil rigs and anthropomorphic gas separators, are brilliantly articulated, colorful compositions of silver-bellied kegs, coppery pipes and chewed-up lemon-yellow steel tools. McNamara's handling of light, in particular, as it soaks the salmon desert and bounces off the donkey-like pump jacks is stellar.

But the style of execution is at odds with the subject. If early American landscape celebrated the country's resources as evidence of our distinctive bounty, McNamara's exposes the cost. Alison Elizabeth Taylor's ingenious use of marquetry uses the materiality of wood to express the woods itself. Her enormous work uses inlaid wood and collaged textures to "paint" with wood, so that what we see is a forest made from wood itself.

Other works, notably one by James Prosek, use earlier techniques – in Prosek's case, botany illustration – to expose vulnerability. His "Blue Marlin," part of his "Ocean Fishes" series, depicts the enormous fish full scale – 12 feet, 8 inches long – on tea-stained paper. His style emphasizes the proprietary elements inherent in the Linnean system of taxonomy to expose the proprietary, utilitarian approach to wildlife. Prosek used watercolor and gouache to create this 700-pound beauty, and includes with it several other flora and fauna found in the same geographic area.

His insistence on letting the work "float" on the wall, rather than framing it, underscores his determination to invert the traditional barriers between species. Prosek's gift is to generate these hyper-realistic works with their traditional morphological identification to question the whole idea of systematizing wildlife itself.

One of the refreshing reminders the exhibit exposes is the encouraging return of concepts like beauty and traditional approaches to painting in particular. Evocative landscapes, like Charles Yoder's shimmering, snow-covered nocturnal landscape, explores the effect of light as it spreads itself over the fresh snow like aqua frosting. Yoder's slender, black, denuded trees provide a visual counterpoint to the soft, swelling banks of snow.

After years in which Abstract Expressionism remained the dominant patois of the artworld, it is bracing to see Old Masters techniques in new objects. Few artists exemplify that as well as Kathleen Gilje, whose "Earth as a Martyr After Zurbarán Martyrdom of Saint Serapion" could serve as a talisman for this exhibition. Gilje, who did studio conservation in Italy and later returned to New York to open her own conservation business, reworks the celebrated Spanish painter's work so that the saint remains in his quasi-crucified pose,

tied to a tree. This time, however, Gilje yokes the saint with a heavy silver chain weighed down with an image of the earth.

If a martyr is one whose life offers sacrifice, death and redemption, Gilje suggests the earth, here depicted with a lava-like fire at its southern pole surely merits the appellation.

Her nearby "Self Portrait after Bouguereau's 'The Assault,'" in which she portrays herself as attacked by fleshy cherubs, is less inflammatory and no less breathtaking.

Jenney is not the only Torrington native represented in the exhibit. Notably, Victor Leger's "Unified Theory," an incandescent work of lyrical brilliance, is a standout. Here, Leger captures a single, lichen-scabbed tree as it arcs through the sky and drops its parched crimson leaves. Leger's captivating light-blue sky, which comprises almost a third of the images, is one in which to lose yourself. The blots of rusty red and carrot red leaves froth with the agile fluttering of birds.

Here is a landscape as it is viewed from a position of meditative stillness, worthy of attention, respect and wonderment.

IF YOU GO

What: "American Realism Today"

Where: New Britain Museum of American Art, 56 Lexington St., New Britain

When: Through Jan. 1

How: Visit: nbmaa.org or call (860) 229-0257