

Angela Miller

Nature's History

The Changing Cultural Image of Nature, from Romantic Nationalism to Land Art

As the world faces a profound environmental crisis in the twenty-first century, scholars have entered a new phase of environmental history, expanding our understanding of how earlier generations grappled with the meaning of nature in their national lives. Such an understanding of our historically complex and ambivalent relationship to the nature around us confronts today an ever more mediated and technologized relationship to nature, from global positioning devices to genetic engineering. Our sensuous experience of nature is increasingly screened by proliferating media; many of us have lost the ability to saunter through nature in the manner of Henry David Thoreau, who freed his imagination by engaging intimately with his own small region of the earth. Yet, over the past thirty years, crowds of Americans and Europeans in New York, London, Paris, Hamburg, Brescia, and elsewhere have flocked to blockbuster exhibitions of gorgeous nineteenth century images of American nature in search of a time when the 'New World' seemed still young, searching to recover a simpler, less complicated relationship to the natural world¹.

I would like to argue — somewhat counterintuitively — that landscape painting, far from embodying this more direct and innocent relationship to nature, was part of this long modernizing process of increasingly mediated relations to the natural world. The aestheticization of nature, as well as its translation into comfortably familiar cultural forms and increasingly codified representational languages, is situated with a longer history of modernization. Within this longer history, the quotidian presence of nature was more and more displaced, ritualized, and schematically reduced within an increasingly urbanized culture². In this context, landscape painting was less an expression of the greater intimacy our nineteenth century ancestors enjoyed with nature, than an episode within a broader pattern of growing alienation from nature in its world-renewing other-

ness. In the following five episodes I would like to situate landscape painting within a wider spectrum of environmental attitudes that emerged alongside the growth of the nation-state over the course of the nineteenth century. This spectrum of attitudes about nature spans from the celebratory to the critical.

First Encounters: Hello Columbus

In the mid-1990s, the American artist Catherine Chalmers dressed cockroaches up as conquistadors and set them to work on a tomato. *Hello, Columbus* (1994–96) is her mordant comment on the Columbian exchange following 1492, which brought cockroaches, along with syphilis, to the New World, and tomatoes — along with potatoes, corn and chocolate — to the Old. The Columbian encounter of 1492 set in motion a vast ecological transformation driven by an effort, in the words of historian Alfred Crosby “to transform as much of the New World as possible into the Old World”³. With the rise of environmental history and studies, we have increasingly come to understand the colonization of the New World as a hugely destructive process waged not only by gunpowder but by germ warfare and species invasion. Pigs and other large quadrupeds, along with European methods of intensive ploughing and monocultural cultivation, trampled delicate indigenous grasses and laid waste to soil nutrients, causing massive erosion, and producing a prophetic awareness of climate change. Looking back at the Old World in 1494, Columbus himself noted that “in the Canary, Madeira, and Azore Islands, [...] since the removal of forests that once covered [them], they do not have so much mist and rain as before”⁴. The process continues apace, in the rain forests of the Amazon and elsewhere throughout the Americas.

Yet, in the midst of this unprecedented environmental transformation, Columbus persisted in thinking of the New World as a Paradise, complete with nightingales, palm trees, and people with tails. The

sheer weight of fantasy Columbus brought to his encounter with the New World left little room for empirical observation⁵. This new world of wonders that took shape in the imaginations of European conquerors registered little about the 'actual' environment. Here, at the very opening moments of the 500 year-long European conquest of the Americas, we find a longing to return to the biblical Eden side by side with drastic environmental change.

Continental Expansion and Environmental Change

Some 350 years later the decades from the 1820s through the 1860s witnessed the same conjunction between aesthetic idealization and rapacious westward expansion. These were the decades when landscape art developed its most characteristic visual forms, and when it proudly expressed the cultural ideals of the new nation, centered in New York City. Yet, at the heart of the landscape genre was a central paradox, for at one and the same moment the subject of landscape nature was both a national resource and a private property. Hundreds of landscape paintings documented the conversion of raw wilderness into freehold farms.

Republican values were tied to property ownership. To own land gave one a stake in the future of the republic. The American freehold farmer was the republican answer to the oppressed serfs of the Old World. But to create these freehold farms involved clearing the forest cover that spread across much of the Northeast and to the Mississippi. Thomas Jefferson's vision of a republic of self-sufficient independent farmers reaching across the continent was grounded on the availability of massive amounts of free land. To these rapacious hordes of settlers who flocked into the West, the American forest was an obstacle to economic gain. In short order, they transformed forest into arable land and pasture, and converted water, wood, and coal mined from the earth into industrial power.

Given this historical context, we need to ask how much did the nineteenth century landscape painters who idealized nature in these decades actually know of the long-term consequences of farming and deforestation? What was the nature and extent of their

environmental awareness, their knowledge that natural resources were not inexhaustible? Did they recognize the natural environment as something finite, fragile, and requiring stewardship? Eastern landscape artists generally avoided painting the raw gashed landscapes of the first phase of settlement, but when they did, as in Asher B. Durand's 1855 *First Harvest in the Wilderness*, the process was bathed in a sanctifying light that softened the raw environmental impact of deforestation and its related effects of soil erosion, loss of topsoil, and silting up of rivers.

As early as the 1820s and 30s, a few farsighted commentators noted the havoc created by continental settlement. As one American writer put it, "In our zeal to clear up, we generally carry the matter to an unwarrantable extreme; everything is cut away — the whole surface is denuded — stripped of its natural growth"⁶. English travelers such as Charles Dickens and Basil Hall recoiled at the ravaged nature left in the wake of American expansion. The settlement of the continent was deeply 'unsettling' to nature. The landscape painter Thomas Cole — another Englishman — grasped on a more profound level the unintended ironies of such terms as 'settlement' and 'improvement'. In 1835 he wrote,

I cannot but express my sorrow that the beauty of such landscapes [referring to 'uncultivated' nature] [is] quickly passing away — the ravages of the axe are daily increasing — the most noble scenes are made desolate, and oftentimes with a wantonness and barbarism scarcely credible in a civilized nation. The way-side is becoming shadeless, and another generation will behold spots, now rife with beauty, desecrated by what is called improvement; which — generally destroys Nature's beauty without substituting that of Art⁷.

For most Americans, however, the word 'improvement' referred to the clearing of forests to make way for agriculture; the investment of labor added surplus value to nature.

Those people who left the lightest human footprint upon the natural environment were squatters (fig. 1), a demeaning term for those who lived too close to nature, like Indians and poor whites. Squatters were vilified by an emerging bourgeois class of landed proprietors because they occupied lands they did not



Fig. 1: George Caleb Bingham, *The Squatters*, 1850, oil on canvas, 59.37 x 71.75 cm, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts Boston.

own, hunting instead of farming. They were unbound by the laws of property, nomadic people who moved from place to place instead of 'improving' nature, by investing labor in it. These poor and propertyless families also often practiced 'swidden' cultivation, using fire to burn off underbrush and forest, which recycled nutrients back into the soil for cultivation, and allowed the forest to grow back, not unlike the native cultures who had lived on the continent for thousands of years. American Indians had — to be sure — altered the natural environment, but with considerably less damage to nature than that brought about by most phases of European settlement.

In contrast to the propertyless squatter class who lived like Indians was the heroic pioneer, a type of stalwart American that would emerge into iconic status in such images as George Caleb Bingham's *Emigration of Boone across the Cumberland Gap* (1851–52). Daniel Boone was part of an emerging pantheon of national heroes who established property rights in the West as well as introducing the nuclear family into the disordered realm of wilderness. Boone and his family were — according to legend — the first white family to enter the Trans-Alleghany West. Yet, this process of domestication, mythologized by Boone's emigration, produced its own nostalgia for the very wilderness that was being destroyed. The axe-felled tree, with its splintered heartwood would become an emblem for mid-century New Yorkers of what had been gained — but also what had been lost — by wilderness clearance. By the 1850s, the pioneer

phase of national formation had become a 'lieu de memoire' — a site of collective memory formed around that which was already gone or fast disappearing⁸.

Between 1833 and 1836, Thomas Cole produced a five-part series which told in baldly allegorical terms the tale of a nation's triumph over nature, and its dire results. Though Cole displaced his subject onto the Old World, its moral was very much directed at his fellow citizens. He called his series *The Course of Empire*, and it tells a prophetic tale of environmental destruction. The five scenes that Cole staged in this series occupy a day-long cycle that begins in early morning wilderness, moving to the arcadian balance and calm of mid-morning, then to the imperial overreach of high noon (fig. 2), followed by war and destruction in the waning day, and the final ruinous twilight decline in which culture is reabsorbed back into nature.



Fig. 2: Thomas Cole, *The Course of Empire: The Consummation of Empire*, 1835–36, oil on canvas, 130.2 x 193 cm, New York, The New-York Historical Society.

Thomas Cole's *Home in the Woods* (1846) displaces the mountain peak of the *Course of Empire* onto an upper New York state locale. This transposition then allows him to link the early stages of American wilderness clearance to the second pastoral canvas of his series. In doing so, Cole created a fairy tale of sorts, a fable of family life in the bosom of nature, but a view that minimized the destructiveness of this first stage of clearance. The tilled field in the back is balanced by hunting and fishing, the axe-felled tree is set within the larger natural cycles of life and death. In this idealized landscape, humans are still in balance with nature. Balanced between the extremes of wilderness

and full-blown urban industrial civilization, such images offered an imaginative refuge from disruptive environmental change. This so-called middle landscape offered stability and permanence in the midst of social change; a form of wishful thinking that expressed a desire to stop the forward movement of history toward imperial overkill, destruction, and decline⁹.



Fig. 3: Asher Brown Durand, *Progress (The Advance of Civilization)*, 1853, oil on canvas, 121.9 x 182.7 cm, Private Collection.

The National Landscape and the “Recovery Narrative”

Progress, or, *The Advance of Civilization* (fig. 3), by Asher B. Durand, clearly maps the nation’s cultural ambitions at mid-century. Nature here is little more than a stage for human actions; the real subject of Durand’s painting is the colossal project of nation-building. *Progress* is organized around a narrative in which the *space* of American nature is harnessed to a drama that unfolds in time, that has a beginning, a middle, and an end which parallels the foreground, middle ground, and distance of the landscape itself.

Durand’s painting — which appears at first glance to be a beautiful and harmonious vision of nature — indeed celebrates the nation’s triumph over nature, and the establishment of an urban industrial and transportation infrastructure. The wilderness he idealizes, on the left side of the painting, serves as little more than a shrine-like opening into the main stage of action. The stupefied Indians who gaze out across the prospect in wonder simply remind audiences of the state of nature that had to be overcome in order to establish culture. Yet, the symbolic program of Durand’s painting is self-contradictory, for those Indians nestled in nature also recall for Durand’s

urban audiences a sense of lost intimacy with the natural world, an intimacy they themselves probably never knew. The painting celebrates the triumph over nature while recalling a time of child-like submersion in the natural world, a phase of Wordsworthian wonder and magical awareness that preceded the movement into adulthood, and the great upheaval of nation-building.

Indeed, by mid-century, most middle-class Americans experienced nature at several removes from the real thing, in the form of landscape paintings, prints, and photographs. Even when they went to nature, their experience was filtered through carefully staged middle-class rituals set against the sublime backdrop of the natural world. Beautifully framed images of nature were like votive offerings to the household gods of commerce and comfort (fig. 4).

The scenario revealed by Durand’s *Progress* was identified by environmental historian Carolyn Merchant as the “recovery narrative”, a parable that has shaped the Judeo-Christian relationship to the natural world for over two millennia¹⁰. The recovery narrative begins with the expulsion from some originary paradise — the Eden of the Old Testament or its various later historical versions — characterized by nakedness, sexual innocence, and harmony with



Fig. 4: Seymour Joseph Guy, *The Contest for the Bouquet. The Family of Robert Gordon in their New York Dining Room*, 1866, oil on canvas, 62.5 x 74.9 cm, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

nature. Following this fall from grace, humanity, in the grip of a masculine arrogance to dominate and cultivate nature, ‘recovers’ Eden through the labor of cultivation and the colonization of nature. The

recovery narrative emerged as a central trope of mid-century landscape; it informs the middle landscape midway between raw nature and industry, which we see in Durand's *Progress*.

Thomas Cole's romantic and unworldly pessimism produced a very different scenario: a dramatic and irrecoverable fall into history. His *Garden of Eden* (1827–1828) is a static arcadia beyond historical time which recalls the palms and swans of Columbus's descriptions 350 years earlier. In his pendant, *The Expulsion* (1828), Cole's first couple is violently expelled from the garden into a tumultuous world, defined around natural cycles that end only in death. The fallen world of Cole's *Expulsion* resembles nothing so much as the violent energies of the industrial revolution that originated in Lancashire England, Cole's own birthplace and home for his first 18 years. Cole's *Expulsion* conflates the fallen world of the Bible with the raging furnaces of industry, betraying his anxieties about historical change itself. But Cole's post-Edenic landscape also represents a fall into moral knowledge: a far more compelling scenario to modern eyes than the bland cloudless serenity of Eden, in either its original or its recovered state. In his later years, Cole increasingly preferred the landscape of the beautiful to that of the sublime, in such paintings as *The Pic-Nic* (1846), a fantasy of perfect family bliss somewhere in the Catskills near Cole's home. These later landscapes however notably lack the productive tensions of wilderness, and its associations with the 'fortunate fall' into moral complexity and knowledge. Cole's middle-aged retreat into a domesticated, humanized nature staged a familiar and comforting fable close to the recovery narrative that dominated the aesthetic of the mid-century a few years later. The moral and physical challenges of wilderness proved to be too challenging for the bland sensibilities of the urban middle-class, who came to prefer a touristic landscape of scenic retreats which served as a therapeutic if temporary alternative to their own crowded and dirty urban environments. In cultivated gardenesque rural or suburban landscapes, they recovered a fully domesticated nature as a stage for middle-class life.

The artists who came of age following Cole's death in 1849 — among them Jasper Cropsey, Asher B.

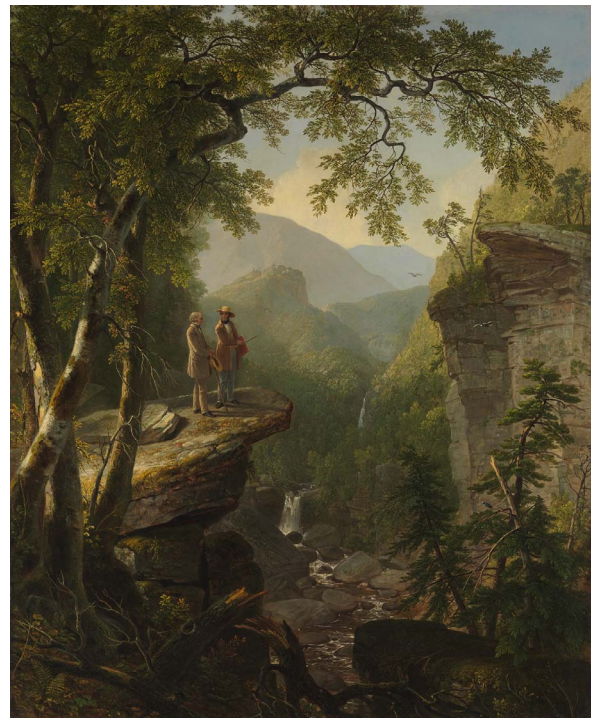


Fig. 5: Asher Brown Durand, *Kindred Spirits*, 1849, oil on canvas, 111.8 x 91.4 cm, Bentonville, Arkansas, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art.

Durand, and George Inness — painted a nature from which the energies of growth, change, and the cycles of decay and regeneration are burnished away, and miniaturized. Durand's iconic *Kindred Spirits* (1849) commemorates the recent death of Thomas Cole, shown standing alongside his friend the poet William Cullen Bryant, in a shrine-like space in the Catskill Mountains (fig. 5). But the paint surface no longer carries the rough expressive quality found in Cole's early Romantic wilderness views; instead it is now polished and smooth. Durand leaves nothing to the imagination. His forms are fully delineated, rather than suggestively vague. His middle-class urban audiences wanted their encounter with nature made easy. Durand gives us nature as 'vignette': the trees arc neatly over the tunneled space of the Catskill Clove. Nature perfectly reproduces the social and cultural order: instead of the physical and spiritual rigors of Cole's Romantic wilderness, we have aesthetic symmetry and metaphysical closure. *Kindred Spirits* speaks powerfully to the role of the sister arts of painting and poetry in the creation of a national culture centered in New York. Here once again is a nature whose sheer resistance to human endeavors

has been smoothed away, a nature which mirrors human desires. The recovery narrative of the mid-nineteenth-century placed borders and hedges around the natural world.

Innocence Lost: The Civil War and the Crisis of the Nation-State

In reality, nature never offered the easy answers Americans looked for when they pondered the moral dilemmas of nationhood. For one, the existence of slavery rendered the meanings of nature dangerously ambiguous. Northern artists and writers had long associated slavery with moral decrepitude, symbolized by a nature that was untended and unkempt. But Southerners worked equally hard to pastoralize and disguise the taint of slavery, as in plantation paintings such as the anonymous view of Bellevue, *The Lewis Homestead in Salem, Virginia* (1855). The agricultural workers who appear in the foreground tending the neatly planted fields seem part of a benign and harmonious world.

The Civil War brought the moral evasions of slavery out of the shadows and into plain view. It exposed the extent to which the meanings of nature were relative to the viewer's own moral assumptions. In the process, the war also revealed other protective fictions that sustained the nation-state. Pre-eminent among these was a vision of nature as fully adapted to human needs and understandings, a comforting illusion that was already being deconstructed in the great mid-century works of Herman Melville, who explored a profoundly different vision of nature from the aesthetic of the middle landscape and of the recovery narrative that characterized mainstream culture before the Civil War. Melville looked askance at the aesthetic of the middle landscape that so well served the emotional needs of a new urban bourgeoisie; his often caustic vision blocked his emergence as a major writer until the early twentieth century. Such delayed recognition was true as well for his equally great and eccentric contemporary Thoreau. Both these writers dissented from the dominant ideologies of their own era. Their work instead bore witness to the nature beneath the cultural fictions, the arrogance, and the insensibility of those who spoke on behalf of the nation-state as the

voice of moral and political authority, despite its many self-deceptions and contradictions. Melville repeatedly criticized the hypocrisy of his contemporaries, nowhere more so than in his short story *The Piazza* (1856), in which a cheerfully obtuse first person narrator reveals the moral hollowness at the center of the impulse to turn nature into a picture¹¹. Penetrating into the picturesque landscape which he had long enjoyed from the safe remove of his porch, the narrator discovers that the cottage he had admired in the distance was the stifling and cramped quarters of a poor seamstress. Melville saw a deep-seated moral blindness at work in the desire of his contemporaries to force nature into conformity with an aesthetic order that had no relation to real life. The narrator's moral obtuseness is both reflected in, and abetted by, the banal conventions of the picturesque landscape at mid-century, perpetuated in a range of giftbooks, sentimental fiction, popular prints, and landscape paintings for the middle class. *Moby Dick* (1851) — his greatest work — is steeped in a sense of nature's profound unknowability, its defiance of all human systems of knowledge, measurement, and categorizing.

The Indecipherability of Nature

Moby Dick is in some sense a sustained attack on the self-absorption of a nation that — gazing into nature — saw only itself. His novel most memorably evokes a sense of the mysterious forces of life unfolding all around the human, and to which — Melville would insist — we are mostly blinded by our own egotism. In one of the most lyrically beautiful passages of the book, Melville conjures an image of whales nursing their young, a phantasmal world of weightless silence and awesome mystery:

[...] as human infants while suckling will calmly and fixedly gaze away from the breast, as if leading two different lives at the time; and while yet drawing mortal nourishment, be still spiritually feasting upon some unearthly reminiscence; — even so did the young of these whales seem looking up towards us, but not at us, as if we were but a bit of Gulf-weed in their new-born sight¹².

In this passage, the small whaling craft in which the men are perched in their relentless commercial

pursuit of whale oil, suddenly finds itself trapped and becalmed within a circle of whales. Their predicament however, transports them to a realm of “dalliance and delight”¹³. The whaling industry made these magnificent creatures into market commodities. Stopping it — even for a moment — opened a glimpse of a different life form. Melville’s image suggests a common bond between mammalian life forms, drawing us beyond the species arrogance of his contemporaries and into another form of understanding.

Melville’s vision of nature, however, went beyond the lyricism of such passages. *The Encantadas, or Enchanted Isles* (1854), a series of short sketches Melville wrote about the Galapagos Islands off the coast of Ecuador, evokes a world utterly resistant to all aestheticizing efforts or human frames of understanding. This is the very antithesis of the genial picturesque world that so dominated mid-nineteenth-century ideals of nature: the Galapagos was a world of cinder and ashes, devoid of color, consumed by fire, as if after a “penal conflagration”¹⁴. For years after his Pacific journey, the narrator of Melville’s tale is haunted by the specter of the Galapagos disrupting the illusion of a human-centered world:

*[...] often in scenes of social merriment, and especially at revels held by candle-light in old-fashioned mansions, so that shadows are thrown into the further recesses of an angular and spacious room [...]. I have drawn the attention of my comrades by my fixed gaze and sudden change of air, as I have seemed to see, slowly emerging from these imagined solitudes, and heavily crawling along the floor, the ghost of a gigantic tortoise [...]*¹⁵.

This singular passage radically defamiliarizes everyday assumptions about nature, embodied in landscape prints and paintings. In place of the sunny open vistas and unfolding narratives around which middle-class culture organized its representations of nature, Melville offers a vision of primordial life, awakening in his narrator a sense of deep time and a world beyond human measures of meaning. And by doing so, it suggests further that the commonplace realities of life — our assumption that nature is tame, and humanly centered — is what, in the end, is phantasmal, unreal. In doing so, Melville inverts the

received wisdom which serves to protect most of us from the sheer strangeness of the nature unfolding around us.

The division between a nature we think we know and understand, and a nature that fundamentally exists beyond human associations, desires, and meanings remains — up to the present — a fundamental rift in how most of us relate to the natural world. Take for instance the simultaneous 2005 release of Werner Herzog’s *Grizzly Man*, and the French saga, *March of the Penguins (Le marche de l'empereur)*, directed by Luc Jacquet. *Grizzly Man* followed the tale of Timothy Treadwell, who devoted thirteen years to living with, talking to, and developing an understanding — he thought — of the grizzly bears of Alaska, only to be eaten by one of them, along with his companion. The entire horrifying episode was recorded in sound, but not released — in deference to Treadwell’s violent death — as part of the film. *Grizzly Man* has been read as an inverted mirror of Herzog’s own obsession with human folly, in this case a fascination with a man — not coincidentally an American man — who maintained to the end his naive belief in a nature perfectly attuned to the human desire for cross-species communication.

Also in 2005, *The March of the Penguins* tracked the arctic Penguin struggling for survival in a hostile and alien environment in a kind of unintended allegory of the beleaguered nuclear family. *March of the Penguins* worked its magic on audiences by sequence after sequence of penguin families behaving in strikingly human ways, as they faced the adversities of their annual migration, manifesting romantic love followed by on-screen sex, maternal devotion, filial affection, and loss. This anthropomorphizing of the natural world has a perennial appeal to audiences. These two films reveal just how polarized are our most vivid imaginings of nature’s inner life. Over one hundred and fifty years ago, Melville explored these two incompatible visions of nature. As Americans made their way across the continent and beyond, he questioned their imperial and colonizing claims on a nature forever unknowable, and he gave his readers a glimpse into the mysterious depths of the Pacific world.

Melville’s closest counterpart in the art of painting nature was Martin Johnson Heade. In a striking and

aesthetically radical series of orchid, passion flowers, and hummingbird paintings, Heade jolted his audiences out of their familiar frame of reference, disturbing a comfortable sense of scale and relation by audaciously projecting his exotic South American life forms into our space (fig. 6). The passion flowers loom out at us. Heade makes the tiny appear enormous, and the surrounding landscape appear comparatively small. These images of the natural world work synaesthetically: that is, we experience them visually in a manner that activates our sense of touch and smell. We feel the dense atmosphere of the rain jungle; heightened colors evoke the immersive world of rain forest sounds into which we are plunged, and veils of mist emanating from the floor of the forest suggest the moisture-laden air of the environment itself. We sense the palpitations of small wings. This image of tropical life unsettles our bodily sensation of occupying a human-centered space, a space that is measured by our sense of scale and physical proportions. Heade shifts the ground from our own routine and humanly centered spatial and sensory framework to the universe of the hummingbird and its flowery home. These disturbingly animate forms writhe and arc toward us, threatening to draw us in. We are plunged into their worlds, where the measure of things is no longer human, but insect-like; we see bugs and birds at a size far beyond that at which we normally see them. We see interior pistons and petals with new acuity. Insistently present to our senses, Heade's work resists the objectification that is inherent in acts of representation: the re-presentation of nature as something framed, something experienced through measured distances and pictorial formulas. Inserted into the nineteenth century parlor, Heade's hummingbirds and orchids must have seemed uncanny emanations from another world¹⁶.

Nature as Entropy

Over a century after Melville evoked his alien world of cinder and ash, the land artist Robert Smithson spoke of his own fascination with pure matter: nature inorganic, inert, resistant to human values and scales of meaning. The world of volcanic cinders which Smithson encountered at Mono Lake in the Sierra Nevada of California bore an eerie resemblance to



Fig. 6: Martin Johnson Heade, *Orchids and Hummingbird*, ca. 1875–83, oil on canvas, 35.88 x 56.2 cm, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts Boston, M. and M. Karolik Collection of American Paintings, 1815–1865.

Melville's. Smithson designated it a 'non-site', created by infinitesimal increments of geological time. Cooled cinders — the product of geological cataclysm millennia earlier — offered Smithson all the evidence he needed to believe in entropy, the slowing down of the universe through the dissipation of energy. For Smithson, this perception of inexorable decline far exceeded the scope of science. Entropy drew upon a profound sense of how the natural world defied the human system-making impulse, the impulse that drove the pursuit of knowledge and science¹⁷.

The tradition of landscape painting I have traced here substituted a cultural program in place of the disordered chaotic buzzing confusion of nature itself. The earthworks and land art of the 1970s and 1980s were the work of artists who had witnessed the frightening new power of human energies over nature. The revolution in physics that produced nuclear weapons left a deep suspicion of Big Science among critical intellectuals after World War II, a fascination with entropy, or what Smithson, in a moment of cultural parody, called *The End of the World. Mass Carnage. Falling Empires*. Smithson, Michael Heizer, and other earth artists repudiated anthropocentrism; they are the true inheritors of Melville. Like their two predecessors, land artists mostly rejected the isolated object with its human scale and aesthetic frame of reference. If they sought to reorganize nature, they did so with fundamentally different ends in mind than earlier generations of American landscape artists. Their myths were not organized around the nation-state, but rather around a much longer time span, looking back to the legendary pre-Columbian cultures

of the New World, and as far back as the Tower of Babel — that monument to human pride and hubris. In land art, nature cast off its human scale, asserting its most elemental materiality: a nature in continuous process, resistant to any form of collective meaning¹⁸.

Landscape painting — indeed all forms of three-dimensional representation on the flat surface of the canvas — comes out of an impulse to objectify nature, to see it as a thing apart from the perceiving self. If we learn any lesson from the histories of landscape representation, it is of the danger of instrumentalizing nature, of hollowing it out to serve purposes other than a better understanding of its own laws. Our love for these paintings as cultural artifacts, even our visual delight in them, must reckon with their central role in constructing and justifying the nation-state, with all this implies about lost histories and possible futures. In the meantime, irreconcilable attitudes toward nature persist side by side up to the present. On the one hand, formulaic narratives continue to circulate in family films, advertising, and over-the-sofa art, of a humanly centered world mirroring the familiar and comforting perspectives of a culture bent on productivity and on avoiding disruptive encounters with the unknown. On the other, artists allowing natural processes to enter their art, and a broader shift in the past century toward chance aesthetics and materiality, each offers an opening into a different vision of nature. This vision recognizes the incommensurability of the human in measuring the vastness of nature, and encourages an attitude of deep humility and agnosticism toward all human contrivances. It is such a perspective that, in the end, may hold us back from the brink.

Notes

1. *American Paradise. The World of the Hudson River School*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1987. *American Sublime. Landscape Painting in the United States, 1820–1880*, Tate Britain, 2002. *New World. Creating an American Art*, Bucerius Kunst Forum, Hamburg, 2007. *America! Stories of Painting from the New World*, Museo di Santa Giulia, Brescia, 2007.
2. Kenneth Myers, *On the Cultural Construction of Landscape Experience. Contact to 1830*, in: *American Iconology. New Approaches to Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature*, ed. by David C. Miller, New Haven (Conn.) 1993, pp. 58-79; Angela Miller, *The Image of Nature in American Landscape Art. The Dilemmas of 'Nature's Nation' and the Art of Landscape*, in: *American Wilderness*, ed. by Michael Lewis, New York 2007, pp. 91-112. See also the essays in: *A Keener Perception. Ecocritical Studies in American Art History*, ed. by Alan Braddock, Alabama 2009.
3. Quoted in Kirkpatrick Sale, *The Conquest of Paradise. Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy*, New York 1990, p. 162.
4. Quoted in Sale 1990, *The Conquest of Paradise*, p. 165.
5. For more on the theme of encounter as a driving force in American cultural history, see Angela Miller et al., *American Encounters, Art, History, and Cultural Identity*, Upper Saddle River (NJ) 2008, especially pp. xii-xiii. Alfred W. Crosby's important *Columbian Exchange. Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*, Westport 1975, brilliantly demonstrates the two-way nature of the exchange between Europe and the New World.
6. Quoted in Steven Stoll, *Farm against Forest, in: American Wilderness. A New History*, ed. by Michael Lewis, Oxford 2007, pp. 55-72, p. 63.
7. Thomas Cole, *Essay on American Scenery* [1836], in: Thomas Cole, *The Collected Essays and Prose Sketches*, ed. by Marshall Tynn, St. Paul (Minn.) 1980, pp. 3-19, p. 17.
8. The term is of course Pierre Nora's, from *Les Lieux de Memoire. Sous la Direction de Pierre Nora*, Paris 1997.
9. The term "middle landscape" comes from Leo Marx's still indispensable *Machine in the Garden. Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, New York 1964.
10. Carolyn Merchant, *Reinventing Eden. The Fate of Nature in Western Culture*, New York/London 2004. She uses this term throughout the book, in many contexts.
11. Herman Melville, *The Piazza* [1856], in: Herman Melville, *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839–1860*, ed. by Harrison Hayford, Evanston (Ill.) 1996, pp. 1-12.
12. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, ed. by Harrison Hayford, New York 1967 [1851], p. 325.
13. Melville 1967 [1851], *Moby Dick*, p. 326.
14. Herman Melville, *The Encantadas, or Enchanted Isles* [1854], in: Herman Melville, *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839–1860*, ed. by Harrison Hayford, Evanston (Ill.) 1996, pp. 125-173, p. 126.
15. Melville 1996 [1854], *The Encantadas, or Enchanted Isles*, p. 129.
16. On these paintings, see Maggie M. Cao, *Heade's Hummingbirds and the Ungrounding of Landscape*, in: *American Art*, 25, 3, 2011, pp. 48-75. Also David Miller, *Dark Eden. The Swamp in Nineteenth-Century American Culture*, Cambridge/New York 1989.
17. Michael Heizer et al., *Discussions with Heizer, Oppenheim, Smithson* [1970], in: *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. by Nancy Holt, New York 1979, pp. 171-178, p. 177.
18. For general surveys of land art, see Suzaan Boettger, *Earthworks. Art and the Landscape of the Sixties*, Berkeley (Cal.) 2002; and *Land and Environmental Art*, ed. by Jeffrey Kastner, London 2005.

Bibliography

- Boettger, Suzaan, *Earthworks. Art and the Landscape of the Sixties*, Berkeley (Cal.) 2002.
- Cao, Maggie M., *Heade's Hummingbirds and the Ungrounding of Landscape*, in: *American Art*, 25, 3, 2011, p. 48-75.
- Cole, Thomas, *Essay on American Scenery* [1836], in: Thomas Cole, *The Collected Essays and Prose Sketches*, ed. by Marshall Tynn, St. Paul (Minn.) 1980, pp. 3-19, p. 17.
- Crosby, Alfred W., *Columbian Exchange. Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*, Westport 1975.
- Heizer, Michael, et al., *Discussions with Heizer, Oppenheim, Smithsonian* [1970], in: *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. by Nancy Holt, New York 1979, pp. 171-178.
- Land and Environmental Art*, ed. by Jeffrey Kastner, London 2005.
- Marx, Leo, *The Machine in the Garden. Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, New York 1964.
- Melville, Herman, *Moby Dick*, ed. by Harrison Hayford, New York 1967 [1851].
- Melville, Herman, *The Encantadas, or Enchanted Isles* [1854], in: Herman Melville, *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839-1860*, ed. by Harrison Hayford, Evanston (Ill.) 1996, pp. 125-173.
- Melville, Herman, *The Piazza* [1856], in: Herman Melville, *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839-1860*, ed. by Harrison Hayford, Evanston (Ill.) 1996, pp. 1-12.
- Merchant, Carolyn, *Reinventing Eden. The Fate of Nature in Western Culture*, New York/London 2004.
- Miller, Angela, *The Image of Nature in American Landscape Art. The Dilemmas of 'Nature's Nation' and the Art of Landscape*, in: *American Wilderness. A New History*, ed. by Michael Lewis, New York 2007, pp. 91-112.
- Miller, Angela, et al., *American Encounters, Art, History, and Cultural Identity*, Upper Saddle River (NJ) 2008.
- Miller, David, *Dark Eden. The Swamp in Nineteenth-Century American Culture*, Cambridge/New York 1989.
- Myers, Kenneth, *On the Cultural Construction of Landscape Experience. Contact to 1830*, in: *American Iconology. New Approaches to Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature*, ed. by David C. Miller, New Haven (Conn.) 1993, pp. 58-79.
- Nora, Pierre, *Les Lieux de Memoire. Sous la Direction de Pierre Nora*, Paris 1997.
- Sale, Kirkpatrick, *The Conquest of Paradise. Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy*, New York 1990.
- Stoll, Steven, *Farm against Forest*, in: *American Wilderness. A New History*, ed. by Michael Lewis, Oxford 2007, pp. 55-72.

Picture Credits

- Fig. 1: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:George_Caleb_Bingham_-_The_Squatters.jpg, 16 March 2015.
- Fig. 2: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Course_of_Empire_Consummation_Thomas_Cole_1835_1836.jpeg, 16 March 2015.
- Fig. 3: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Durand_Progress.jpg, 16 March 2015.
- Fig. 4: <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/14472>, 16 March 2015.
- Fig. 5: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Asher_Durand_Kindred_Spirits.jpg, 16 March 2015.
- Fig. 6: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Martin_Johnson_Heade_-_Orchids_and_Hummingbird_ATC.jpg, 16 March 2015.

Abstract

Nature's History identifies a series of episodes in the history of American landscape representation, oriented around the question of evolving environmental attitudes toward nature. Beginning with the destructive impact of the European 'invasion' of the New World, the essay identifies the manner in which nature over the middle decades of the nineteenth century became a stage upon which to enact a range of cultural ambitions, ambitions that took narrative shape in emerging conventions of landscape representation. In contrast to such mainstream cultural tendencies to instrumentalize nature as a spiritual crutch for the nation-state and a means of material and national advancement, Herman Melville and artist Martin Johnson Heade heralded a new more phenomenologically complex and imbricated relationship of the human to the natural world, one that acknowledged the alterity of nature as a realm separate from the human. In the late twentieth century, Robert Smithson explored a nature fundamentally resistant to human motives in a manner that expanded upon the more radical voices of the nineteenth century.

Author

Angela Miller is Professor of Art History and American Studies at Washington University in St. Louis. She has lectured and published internationally in a range of areas spanning from the sixteenth to the mid-twentieth century. Her work has focused on constructions of cultural nationalism, and on the politics of form in the arts. Miller's publications include the award-winning *Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825–1875* (1993), *American Encounters: Art, History, and Cultural Identity* (2008), as well as essays on Herman Melville, Rockwell Kent, CLR James, and the US transatlantic avant garde between the wars. She was a Terra Visiting Professor at the JFK Institute in Berlin in 2012.

Title

Angela Miller, *Nature's History: The Changing Cultural Image of Nature, from Romantic Nationalism to Land Art*, in: *kunsttexte.de*, Nr. 1, 2015 (11 Seiten), www.kunsttexte.de.