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MAY 2018 - "THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"

Landscapes Get Wonderfully Complicated at NYU's Grey Art Gallery



*Naoya Hatakeyama, Atmos (#07909), 2003. Lambda print mounted to DiBond, 37 x 45 in. (96 x 116 cm).
Hall Collection. Courtesy Taka Ishii Gallery*

Landscapes After Ruskin: Redefining the Sublime (<https://greyartgallery.nyu.edu/>)

April 17–July 7, 2018

Grey Art Gallery, New York University

100 Washington Square East, New York, NY 10003

By **DEBORAH KRIEGER**, MAY 2018

Monet's paintings of wealthy Parisians frolicking in the French suburb of Argenteuil became interesting to me as something more than very pretty objects when I learned about their ideological underpinnings—how Monet carefully excised the visible effects of rapid industrialization from his compositions, presenting his own version of the kind of idyllic landscape that no longer existed. *Landscapes After Ruskin: Redefining the Sublime*, the current exhibition at NYU's Grey Art Gallery, pulls a similar trick by reminding us that while depicting landscapes may seem straightforward, even quaint at times, they are subject to the same manipulation and subjectivity as any kind of art, even if they're painted *en plein air*. The show combines a wide variety of media, including painting, collage, sculpture, installation, video, photography, and drawings, of landscapes and settings both artificial and natural—in the sense that they take place in nature, not that they are necessarily true-to-life depictions of anything—from the urbanized to the rural and everything in between.

While the wall text of *Landscapes After Ruskin* nods to the idea of our living in the Anthropocene era, in which the world around us is now largely shaped by human events and actions, the idea of the depiction of a landscape to be seen by others is in and of itself a bit Anthropocene. Even in a photograph, even in the most faithful painting or drawing recreation of anything in the field of vision, there's always going to be the human impact of the artist's intent that shapes not only *what* we see, but the mere fact of *how* we see it in the first place. On the whole, we as viewers don't receive these landscapes directly, because we aren't experiencing them in person: we receive them only after other humans (artists) have done with them what they will, in order to make them into something they want to show us.



Florian Maier-Aichen, Untitled (Mount Wilson), 2002. Digital print, 64 x 81 1/2 in. (162 x 207 cm). Hall Collection

Several works in the show address the idea of human impact on the landscape in a more traditional manner, by showing us actual people within the composition or self-evidence of human intervention. Katherine Bradford paints several nude figures urinating into a small body of water in *Beautiful Lake*, while Florian Maier-Aichen shows us the city of Los Angeles as a form of landscape that has been so severely altered by humans that from on high, in the dark of night, its mass of grid-set twinkling lights could be anywhere. Matthias Weischer's painting *Bulgarisches Haus* depicts a house in a bright orange-and-green setting whose mishmash of tree species (none of which coexist in the wild) and neatly-trimmed hedges that, frankly, seems right out of a Floridian suburban nightmare, but actually, per the title, depicts a house in Bulgaria. Ai Wei Wei's oil spill installation gets the point across directly

and unsubtly, while Naoya Hatakeyama's photograph *Atmos* (#07909) shows the smoke emitting from a French steel manufacturer as cotton-candy pink against a vivid blue sky.



(<https://greyartgallery.nyu.edu/>)Katherine Bradford, *Beautiful Lake*, 2009. Oil on canvas, 57 x 48 in. (145 x 122 cm). Hall Collection. Photo: Jeffrey Nintzel

Most significantly, *Landscapes After Ruskin* expands on the idea of what a “landscape” can be, and how it can be experienced, be it literal or imagined, private or public, mental or physical, present or past or future. Two standout works by Christoph Draeger take the form of massive jigsaw puzzles printed with photographs of disaster sites—the destruction wrought by a hurricane, and the remains of a plane crash—which mean that, as the wall ext points out, in order to construct the images themselves, the puzzle-doer literally has to put together puzzle pieces that, when combined, show us devastation and ravage. *Atmosphere* by Neil Jenney is almost laugh-out-loud funny because of the way it consciously commodifies the idea of atmosphere. The work itself is a painting of a gentle misty haze, wrapped in a frame that evokes a mantelpiece that has “ATMOSPHERE” written on it in big, bold letters below the image; it’s as if Jenney is presenting “atmosphere”—something inherent to a place—as something you can pull off a shelf and buy, as something that you can experience and enjoy without ever having to leave the comforts of your own house.

Joel Sternfeld’s video *London Bridge*, located on the lower level of the gallery, is far and away the most striking work in *Landscapes After Ruskin*, because it perfectly exemplifies the kind of mental (and physical) gymnastics and effort required to create a landscape in a place where, by all natural accounts, it shouldn’t be. The video depicts the particularly idiosyncratic landscape of Lake Havasu, Arizona, where an equally idiosyncratic billionaire imported and installed the 1830s London Bridge; Lake Havasu’s London Bridge is now Arizona’s second-most popular tourist site. *London Bridge* follows a single, gloriously sunny day on Lake Havasu, where the bridge, a singing gondolier, and people partying and/or relaxing on boats coalesce, and inevitably clash (albeit only stylistically) against one another. The overarching story of *London Bridge* is the outrageousness of the Lake Havasu London Bridge’s existence—a comically artificial landscape—but Sternfeld’s film follows that single gondolier, clad in a traditional outfit, paddling his boat and singing ballads in Italian, who is doing his utmost to create the landscape of a true gondola ride in a Venetian canal. Even when there are no customers in his boat, he

still sings—for himself, to remove himself from the decidedly not-Venetian setting of Arizona desert and college students blasting music on the shore, to create some version of his desired landscape. And when there are passengers in his covered boat, the gondolier can exert control over their landscape, allowing them to pretend, even for a moment, that they are experiencing the real thing.



Joel Sternfeld, London Bridge, 2016. HD film transferred to digital video, color, sound, 16 min. 44 sec. Hall Collection. Courtesy the artist

Sternfeld's video is perhaps more ambitious than many of the works in *Landscapes After Ruskin*; Simon Aldridge's oil painting *Bridge*, while eye-catching, is more about capturing a fleeting impression than it is about unpacking how we construct landscapes. David Wojnarowicz's collage sculptures *Head* and *Untitled (Globe Head)* are visually jarring, but more successful in deepening the themes of the show. By literally pasting maps of the world onto human heads, Wojnarowicz creates a physical embodiment of how experiences map themselves into our brains, providing

a literal interpretation, funnily enough, of interpreting itself. The creases and hollows and broad expanses of map as they affix themselves to different parts of the skull—bone, flesh, cartilage—is an apt representation of the way we stretch and pull apart and contort our own landscapes of memory—why multiple people can remember the same event in different ways.



David Wojnarowicz, Untitled (Globe Head), 1984. Acrylic and printed paper collage on concrete with iron stand, 11 x 8 1/2 x 8 in. (27 x 22 x 20 cm). Hall Collection, Photo: Mark-Woods.com

Perhaps the acknowledgement of the effects of recent technology on our own landscapes of memory was a step too far for *Landscapes After Ruskin* to take. After all, Facebook reminds us of anniversaries, birthdays, where we've been, who we were there with, what we wore, even after the events and places themselves have faded from our memories. Yet on the whole, *Landscapes After Ruskin* does precisely what a show on a topic as commonplace as "landscapes" should do—remind us how complex the idea of a landscape truly can be. **WM**



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