

LOOKING AT AMERICA

April 23 – July 28, 2002

YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY

Chapel Street at York

Tuesday–Saturday 10–5

Thursday until 8 (through June)

Sunday 1–6

LOOKING AT AMERICA

The title of this exhibition, "Looking at America," is the subtitle of an anthology of John Brinkerhoff Jackson's (1909–1996) collected essays, edited by Helen Horowitz and published by the Yale University Press in 1997. Jackson was the founding editor of *Landscape*, and its publisher from 1951 to 1968. In its pages, his voice reflected the incisive scholarship of a cultural historian as well as the musings of a tourist's travelogue. As early as the 1950s, he recognized somewhat prophetically that the development of shopping malls as well as subdivisions and highway systems was rapidly becoming the hallmark of what he called the vernacular American landscape.

While Jackson's essays did not inspire the choice of artists for this exhibition, his influential voice, quoted on the walls of the Gallery and in this brochure, anticipated the disjunction that exists between the places many contemporary artists and viewers inhabit and the landscapes they have been taught to see and value in art. The disparity of these experiences is the legacy of work laid out on the drafting tables of the urban and rural planners and art studio editors in Jackson's day, whose vision for the future he had hoped to inform through his writing.

The works presented in this exhibition reveal that it is the inhabited landscape that seems most relevant to the interest and experience of many artists looking at America today. The works also indicate that although human, the physical and conceptual vantage point from which this landscape is viewed is decidedly unconventional.

The epic vistas of the American West or the sublime Hudson River scenes idealized by painters in the 19th century, and the agricultural and industrial landscapes recorded by the early 20th century realists and modernists, have been succeeded by self-conscious, artifi-

cial representations of nature and landscape. Edward Ruscha's *Highland, Franklin, Yucca*, Tony Tasset's budding *Cherry Tree*, Adam Cvjianovic's Hudson River valley painting which expands the genre of recreation room wallpaper murals that brought America's national parks into the homes of thousands of American homes in the 1970s, and Gregory Crewdson's theatrically staged suspenseful incidents lurking in suburban housing complexes all attest to the artists' awareness that an image is not only an opportunity to record or decipher place and experience but to engage the artifice that is art.

Yvonne Jacquette renders with fine detail an aerial view of the New York City skyline, thereby emphasizing the observer's acute, overwhelmed perception of the wonder that is a metropolitan nightscape once viewed from the former World Trade Center. Uta Barth's photographs reveal the improbability of capturing the essence of a landscape as a single scene. The window, which is both in and about the photograph, frames and re-frames the view that is out of focus and beyond reach.

In his serial studies of a particular landscape, Rackstraw Downes undertakes a similar project. His paintings emulate a cinematic progression to create a composite image of an American landscape many would consider undeserving of such exacting study: a desolate roadside, an abandoned industrial complex, the unoccupied floor of a skyscraper. Burt Barr utilizes the impartial eye of the camera's lens to enable, direct, and record the processes of human observation. The unflinching yet transforming voyeuristic gaze of the camera records beauty as embodied in the automobile, the landscape, and death—epic themes in American culture. The camera's ability to elide the incongruous meanings and values in these images is simultaneously sobering and enthralling.

Other artists engage secondary visual resources to note that making art is an integral process of perception useful for understanding systems of valuation. Heide Fasnacht's *Forest Fire*, a painstakingly rendered graphic replication of a catastrophic natural phenomenon, is derived from the study of a photograph in a periodical. Patricia Cronin's paintings of luxury real estate listings flatly state the bottom dollar value assigned to art, the picturesque, and the ownership they represent.

Abandoning the realm of representation altogether, Sven Pålsson and Jeremy Blake explore the language of digital technology to confect locales drawn from a conception of the American landscape rather than an actual place. The cinematic narrative offered by Pålsson's *Crash Course* moves through a desolate place that is comparable to the vast highway systems that have defined modern humanity's spatial and temporal relationships to geography. Blake's *New Haven*, a digital C-print still from a DVD series entitled *Station to Station* is informed by the artist's study of the development of New England's rail systems and the New York City urban planning schemes of Robert Moses. It is a fragment of what the artist calls a time-based painting, a visual narrative that unfolds in sequence on a plasma board or in projection much as a landscape would unfold from a train window. It is a cool and beautiful simulation of the aesthetic experience once thought to be the preserve of nature and landscape painting.

Today, America looks much like Jackson thought it would. Not as beautiful as it could be by design, not as picturesque as we imagine, but remarkable in terms of the creative and individualistic vision it offers to those who live its landscape.

—Jennifer Gross

Seymour H. Knox, Jr., Curator of
European and Contemporary Art

RELATED PROGRAMMING

Thursday May 9, 6:00 pm

New York based video artist Burt Barr will respond to questions following a screening of a selection of his videos. This year Barr has held one-person exhibitions at the Whitney Museum and the Reina Sofia in Madrid. His work has been presented at the Whitney Biennial in 1997 as well as numerous other institutions including the National Gallery of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Centre Georges Pompidou.

Thursday May 16, 12:00 pm

Sculptor Heide Fasnacht will give a slide presentation about the relationship between her detailed renderings of phenomena, such as constellations, atomic explosions, and sneezes with her exacting scale replication of the same subjects in media ranging from polymer clay to bronze. An instructor at the Parsons School of Design in New York, Fasnacht's work has been widely exhibited throughout the United States and Europe. Her work is in the collections of the Brooklyn Museum of Art, High Museum of Art, Detroit Institute of Arts, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Wednesday May 22, 12:00 pm

Tuesday, June 25, 2:00 pm

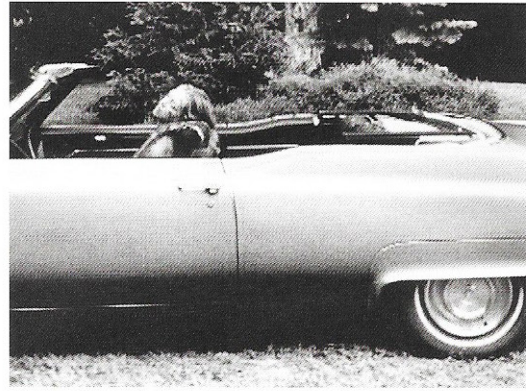
Jennifer Gross, Seymour H. Knox, Jr., Curator of European and Contemporary Art and organizer of "Looking at America" will host walk-through tours of the exhibition.

This exhibition and publication are supported by an endowment made possible by a challenge grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and by the Janet and Simeon Braguin Fund.

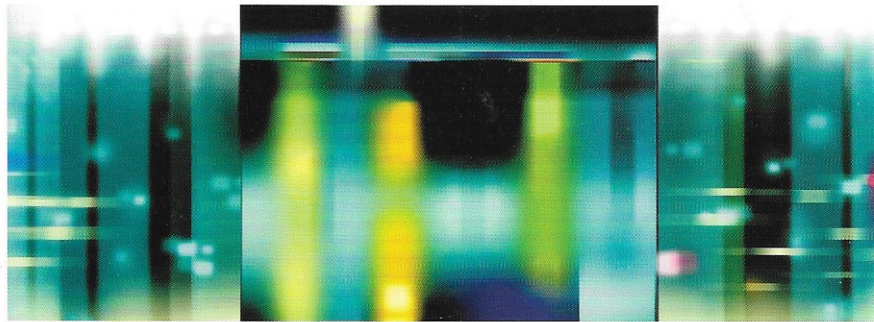
We have got to find new criteria for the worth of a human landscape, existing or projected.

It's place on the evolutionary ladder won't do, either will its esthetic qualities or its capacity for making money.... We can get nearer to an answer [to the question of what is worth preserving] by abandon-

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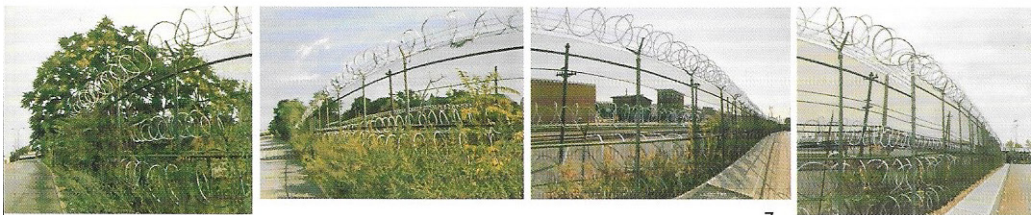


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ing the spectator stance and seeking to identify ourselves and our desires with the landscape by asking ourselves how any man would fare who had to live in it.²

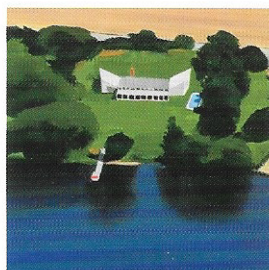
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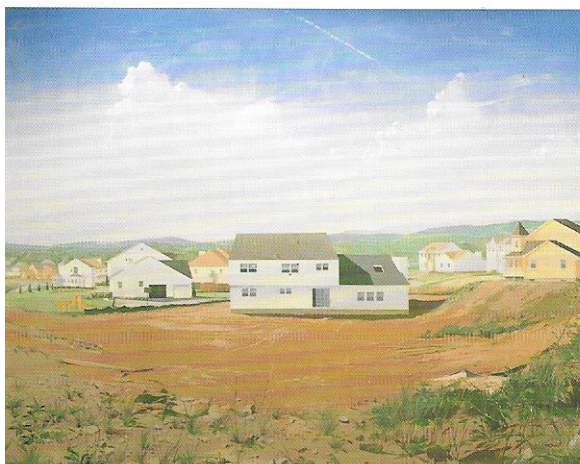
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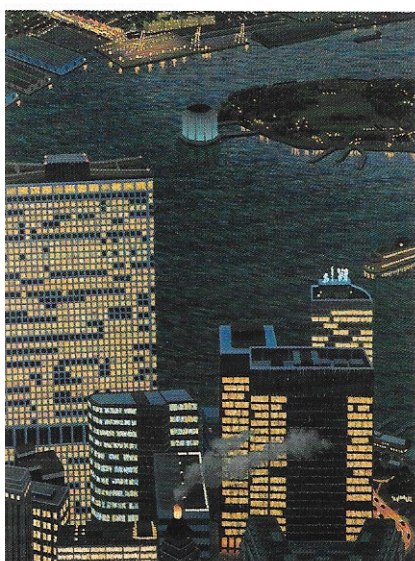


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I suspect no landscape, vernacular or otherwise, can be comprehended unless we perceive it as an organization of space; unless we ask ourselves who owns or uses the spaces, how they were created and how they change.¹



9

We are, to be sure, not likely to adopt these standards as long as we prefer simply to think of the landscape as something to look at, a spectacle conducive to day-dreaming. And, if it were really nothing but that, it would be right for us to preserve it, design it, transform it to a popular taste for the picturesque. If we did that, America would be a far more beautiful country than it is. But we are not spectators; the human landscape is not a work of art. It is the temporary product of much sweat and hard-ship and earnest thought; we should never look at it without remembering that and we should never tinker with the landscape without thinking of those who live in the midst of it—whether in a trailer, in an old field or in a city tenement.³

It is finally, I suppose, a question of which force proves the stronger: the demand for an efficient and expensive highway system designed primarily to serve the working economy of the country, or a new and happy concept of leisure with its own economic structure, its own art forms, and its own claim on a share of the highway.

At present we are indifferent to this promise for our culture, and to the extinction which threatens it; is it not time that we included this new part of America in our concern? It is true that we can no longer enter our towns and cities on avenues leading among meadows and lawns and trees, and that we often enter them instead through roadside slums. But we can, if we choose, transform these approaches into avenues of gaiety and brilliance, as beautiful as any in the world; and it is not yet too late.⁴



11



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**All quotes by
John Brinkerhoff Jackson**

- 1 *Concluding with Landscapes, Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 150
- 2 "Goodbye to Evolution," *Landscape* 13, No. 2 (Winter 1963-64) 1-2
- 3 "Goodbye to Evolution," *Landscape* 13, No. 2 (Winter 1963-64) 1-2
- 4 "Other-directed Houses," *Landscape* 6, No. 2 (Winter 1956-57) 35
- 5 *The Word Itself, Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 3



10

Landscape is a space on the surface of the earth; intuitively we know that it is a space with a degree of permanence, with its own distinct character, either topographical or cultural, and above all a space shared by a group of people; and when we go beyond the dictionary definition of landscape and examine the word itself, we find that our intuition is correct.⁵

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EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

BURT BARR

- 1 *Dolly Shot Twice*
2000
single screen projection video installation
6:40 minute, looped for installation
Courtesy of the artist
and Brent Sikkema, NY

UTA BARTH

- 2 *Untitled* (nw 8)
1999
color photograph, ed. 4, AP 1
35 x 44 inches
Courtesy of the artist, ACME, LA
and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, NY

JEREMY BLAKE

- 3 *New Haven*
2001
digital c-print, ed. 1/6
41 1/2 x 104 1/4 inches
Leonard C. Hanna, Jr., B.A. 1913, Fund
2001.89.1

PATRICIA CRONIN

- \$10,000,000 (*Greenwich*)
8 x 11 inches
- \$15,000,000 (*Southampton*)
9 x 11 inches
- \$3,500,000 (*Figure Eight Island*)
9 x 11 inches
- 4 \$4,250,000 (*Sagaponack*)
10 x 10 inches
- \$8,500,000 (*Telluride*)
9 x 11 inches
- each, oil on linen, 2000
Courtesy of the artist

GREGORY CREWDSON

- 5 *Untitled* (sewer mystery)
1999
c-print, ed. of 10 with 2 APs
50 x 60 inches
Collection of Kathleen
and Roland Augustine, NY

ADAM CVIJANOVIC

- 6 *New City*
2002
flasche on Tyvex
dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and Bellwether, NY

RACKSTRAW DOWNES

- 7 *Four Spots along a Razor Wire Fence*,
August–November
1999
oil on canvas
4 parts, 1 & 4: 22 1/2 x 26 inches
and 2 & 3: 19 1/2 x 26 3/8 inches
Collection of William E. Ainsworth

HEIDE FASNACHT

- 8 *Forest Fire*
1999–2000
colored pencil on paper
40 x 60 inches
Collection of Evy and Paul Frankel, NY

YVONNE JACQUETTE

- 9 *Southwest View*
from the World Trade Center #2
2001
oil on linen
73 x 54 inches
Courtesy of the artist and DC Moore Gallery, NY

SVEN PÅHLSSON

- 10 *Crash Course*
2001
DVD
Courtesy of the artist
and Spencer Brownstone Gallery, NY

EDWARD RUSCHA

- 11 *Highland, Franklin, Yucca*
1999
oil on canvas
60 x 60 inches
Courtesy of the Fogg Art Museum
Harvard University Art Museums
Purchased through the generosity
of William Danoff, Fifth Floor Foundation
The Charles Engelhard Foundation
Catherine and Paul Bittenwieser
Foundation, Laura-Lee W. Woods
an anonymous donor, Bruce A. Beal
and the Broad Art Foundation

TONY TASSET

- 12 *Cherry Tree*, 1999
steel, wax and oil paint
120 x 144 x 144 inches
Courtesy of the artist
and Feigen Contemporary, NY

NUMBERED IMAGES APPEAR ON REVERSE