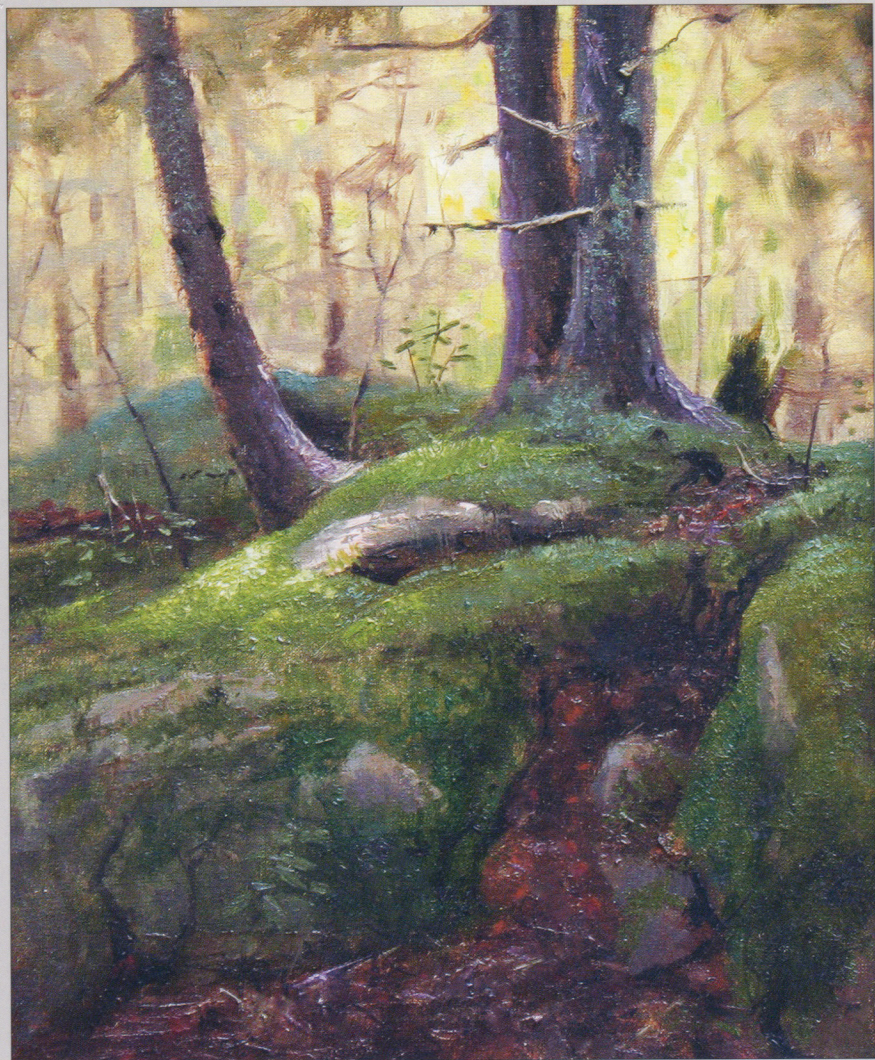


American Arts

QUARTERLY

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German Realism between the Great Wars

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William Oberst: Enigmatic Realist

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Mihály Munkácsy: Painter-Prince

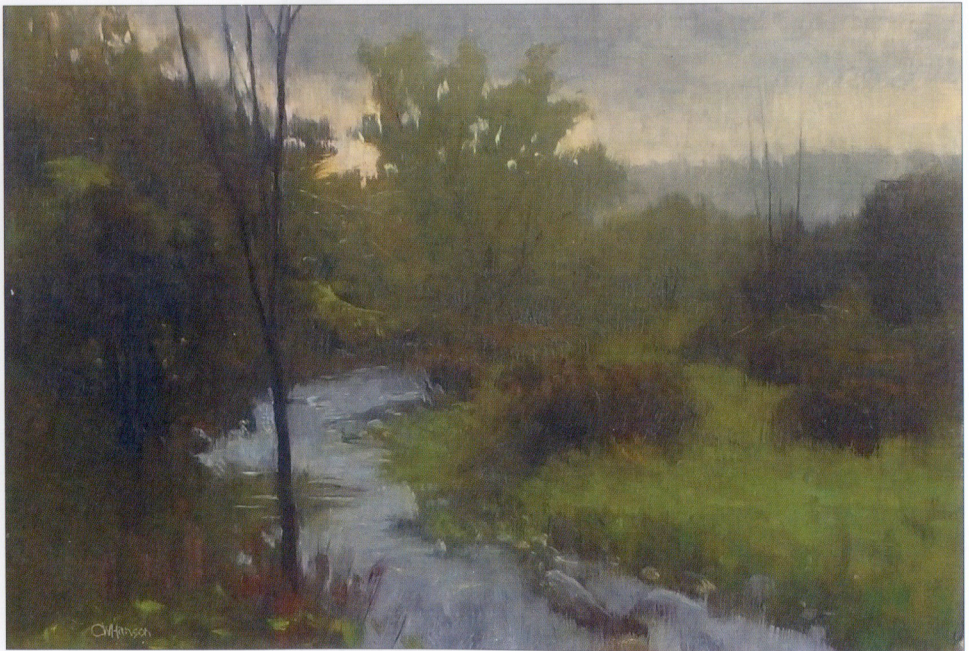
Romanticism and American Landscape Painting Now

by James F. Cooper

Today, an explosion of contemporary landscape painting—plein-air, Arcadian and classical—is making a significant contribution to American art. The specific artists I will discuss in this essay find beauty in the natural world, a beauty with deep spiritual roots, and they acknowledge the influence of nineteenth-century American landscapists.

For millennia, from the cave dwellers to the ancient Greeks and Romans, into the Christian era, art and religion were closely associated. With the Enlightenment, that connection grew tenuous, but the nineteenth-century Romantics renewed the bond, not through traditional iconography, but through a reverent attitude toward nature.

Romanticism was a complex, international movement. I will focus here on the Hudson River School and the Luminists, the German Romantic School, some contemporary Americans and one German artist carrying forward this legacy. At the start of the nineteenth century, Romanticism replaced the well-worn genre of academic history painting with a new kind of landscape



Curt Hanson, *Green River Autumn*, 2015

COURTESY HARRISON GALLERY, WILLIAMSTOWN, MASSACHUSETTS

painting. Surprisingly, it was initiated by the northern peoples of Europe, the Germans, and not by the French intellectuals and artists who were the fiercest challengers to the anemic mythology and historical iconography favored by the academy.

By 1800, Germany, not yet a unified country, consisted of some eleven hundred states and regions, whereas France had already been a nation for hundreds of years. The French Academy, however, was still committed to the old myths and traditional iconology. After the violent overthrow of the monarchy, French culture—architecture, art, fashion, furniture, social values—abandoned the florid Rococo style promoted by Versailles and adopted the spartan, Neoclassical militancy created by Jacques-Louis David (*Oath of the Horatii*, 1784) and embraced by Napoleon.

From 1825 to 1865 and the end of the Civil War, artists of the Hudson River School painted the American wilderness illuminated by a celestial light. For the Hudson River School artists, the unity of nature bespoke the unity of God. Thomas Cole wrote: “There are spots on this earth, where the sublime and the beautiful are united...where the lips are sealed in reverence, but the soul feels unutterably.”¹

Some of this spirit lingers in the work of contemporary artists. Thomas Kegler (b. 1940), a self-taught plein-air landscape painter, who currently resides in western New York, often adds references to the Biblical Psalms to his paintings’ titles. Kegler finds spiritual solace in his 2014 forest interior *Hemlock Forest, Proverbs 4:1* (cover). A member of the Hudson River Fellowship, kindred spirit to those religious, nineteenth-century American artists devoted to the benign, bountiful wilderness of the New World, he writes: “I strive to bring an awareness and respect for God’s creations. ...Something new is revealed each time I visit the canvas. I paint daily—it is as necessary to my life as breathing. There is as much beauty in a dead tree as in a live one. The thing that inspires me can just be the shape of the tree or a log on the ground.”²

Kegler has created a ten-part DVD instructional album on plein-air painting from nature. “I want my work,” he explains on his website, “to pay homage to that specific tree—not to all the maples in general. I explore the unique shapes, the light, its surroundings, the weather, the environment. I need to investigate what I am seeing in order to understand what I am painting.”³ *Plein Air*, an excellent magazine edited by Stephen Doherty, has published several reviews of Kegler’s handsome works.

The classical, stately landscapes by Anita Mazzucca (b. 1945), exhibited September 3–October 31, 2015, at the Fischbach Gallery in New York City, are excellent attempts by a contemporary American painter to restore beauty and formal composition to landscape painting. Here, spirituality is more pantheistic, showing particular reverence for trees. *Trimmed Trees* (2009) is a handsome Arcadian scene of majestic, blooming trees and surrounding woods, framed against a vast cool blue sky. In *Deep Cut Park* (2013), she depicts luxurious sum-

mer foliage under a clear blue sky with lucid realism. Mazzucca's apparently straightforward realism builds on craft, formal intelligence and respect for nature.

Contemporary landscapists understand that reverence for natural beauty does not require overt religious iconography. In this way, they echo nineteenth-century artists such as Asher B. Durand. In Durand's *Early Morning at Cold Spring* (1850), a small foreground figure under a towering tree gazes across the wilderness along the bank of the Hudson River at a church steeple rising above a cluster of trees in the distance. Durand's intent was to depict Nature itself as a great cathedral. The painting was originally called *Sabbath Bells*, referring to lines from a poem by William Cullen Bryant. Durand wrote: "I do not attend the church service, the better to indulge in reflection unrestrained under the high canopy of heaven."⁴ "The function of art," wrote William J. Stillman, editor of *The Crayon*, "is not as an adjunct to Religion... [rather] art assists religion by pursuing beauty."⁵

Dennis Sheehan's (b. 1950) work recalls the subtle, introspective art of the Tonalists and Luminists. Incredibly, as his website demonstrates, he uses only a two-inch-wide brush and paper towels to create some of the most remarkable plein-air paintings today.⁶ He begins his landscapes by toweling in a thin coat over the entire canvas. It resembles an abstraction by Franz Kline, until Sheehan begins to apply color with his brush and pull out from the tonal mist objects like trees, forests and mountains. Sheehan's subtle work is not to be confused with the faux Christian kitsch of Thomas Kinkade (1958–2012), the self-styled "painter of light." Sheehan's goal is to have his paintings emanate light during transitional moments, before or after storms, dusk or dawn. In nature, like the nineteenth-century American Swedenborgian George Inness (whom he acknowledges as an influence) and the German Romantics, Sheehan finds his connection with the sacred. Sheehan's skies roil with passion. Dark forests are silhouetted against smoldering sunsets. Religious piety and spiritual illumination are not marked by churches or large crucifixes impaled upon mountain tops. And yet there is a deeply reverential feeling about nature conveyed in paintings such as *Evening on the Marsh* (2009).⁷ His work was on view November 7–28, 2015, at the Guild of Boston Artists.

The studio of artist Curt Hanson (b. 1945) is housed within a mid-nineteenth-century Greek Revival church, set in the pastoral countryside of north-west Connecticut. One of the biggest influences in his life were the landscape paintings of George Inness. "His [Inness's] paintings and writings about nature stirred something inside of me that set me on the course I am still on today, almost forty years later," he explains.⁸ Hanson captures the meditative quiet of water and trees in paintings such as *Green River Autumn* (2015). Hanson also studied at the workshop of the late R.H. Ives Gammell in Boston. Gammell was the teacher of Richard Lack, the founder of the School of Classical Realism. Work by Hanson and Sheehan was on view October 2–31, 2015, in the exhibi-

tion "Poetic Landscapes," at Susan Powell Fine Art, Madison, Connecticut.

Now, after a hundred years of modernism and the disappointing decline into twentieth-century kitsch and irony, increasing numbers of American artists are returning to the study of nature, humanism and the human figure, with the intent to restore excellence and high purpose to the arts. The separation between postmodernist shallowness and contemporary realism is immense. While irony and kitsch remain *au courant* with today's cultural establishment, realists are offering gravitas and beauty. The Romantic impulse in realism, still rare, is never ironic, trivial, camp or ugly. It seeks the awesome, spiritual and beautiful.

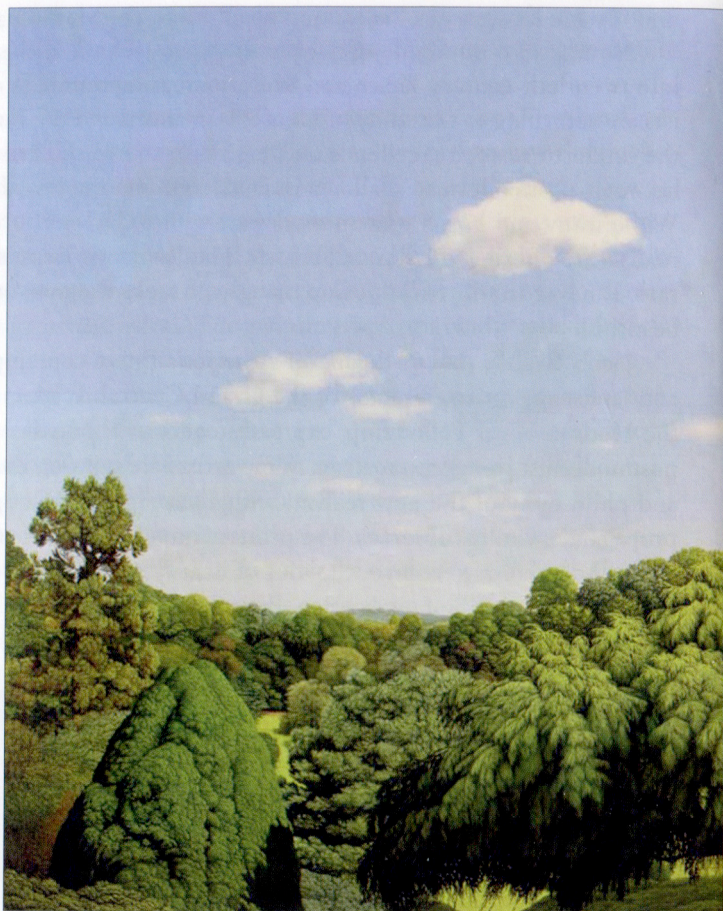
Jacob Collins (b. 1964), one of America's finest contemporary figurative and landscape artists, director of the Grand Central Academy and founder of the Hudson River Fellowship, expresses concern about the encroachment of postmodernist irony into realism. Some artists are tainting the aesthetic values and philosophy of the new realism with camp, irony and superficial political propaganda, Collins observes. The primary impetus of artists returning to realism is the attempt to recover the idea of beauty and reverence, the foundation of art since the birth of civilization. Postmodernity's objective is to deconstruct and trivialize what was once sacred. Camp and ridicule are their main vehi-



Dennis Sheehan, *Evening on the Marsh*, 2009

COURTESY SUSAN POWELL FINE ART, MADISON, CONNECTICUT

Anita Mazzucca
Deep Cut Park, 2013
COURTESY
FISCHBACH GALLERY,
NEW YORK CITY



cles. Jeff Koons's ten-foot-high balloon dog typifies their attitude toward the natural world.

The revival of the Romantic sensibility extends outside the United States, especially in Germany, the birthplace of a deep-rooted Romanticism, both philosophical and aesthetic. From 1800 on, German artists yearned (*seben*) for political unification and a new mythology. Led by Caspar David Friedrich, German artists embraced a form of landscape painting as a metaphor for a fierce, feral Nature, which captured their determination to unite disparate Nordic entities into one powerful nation. Scenes of towering mountains, untamed forests, wind-swept plains and Artic ice floes, thunderous skies and oceans captured the fervor of their heroic fantasies.

Another new nation, America, similarly used the metaphor of a majestic landscape to express their collective yearning for "manifest destiny." Beyond political concerns, however, was a spiritual yearning for something deeper. American artists and poets saw trees, mountains and rivers as expressions of God's presence in a second Garden of Eden. Proudly nationalistic but not

militantly isolationist, Thomas Cole, Asher B. Durand, Jasper Francis Cropsey and Frederic Church traveled to Germany and Italy, part of a movement that included German landscape artists such as Friedrich. The twentieth century failed to progress beyond the old myths. The West still dreams of the past. World War I was shaped by the old beliefs and the antiquated academies. America may be the last hope to reshape a vision for Western civilization. I believe the current generation of Romantic realists may be ready to venture into deeper subject matter, to reconnect nature with history and myth.

During the last year of her life, the gifted American artist Martha Mayer Erlebacher (1937–2013) departed from her characteristic neoclassical mythological themes, to invent a fierce, dark, eulogist landscape, inspired by the German Neo-expressionist Anselm Kiefer (b. 1945) and the Norwegian artist Odd Nerdrum (b. 1944). Kiefer's paintings challenge the legacy evoked by proud, heroic landscapes once envisioned by the German Romantics of the nineteenth century. For the last thirty years, Kiefer has explored the charred ruins of Valhalla and the great German forests that once inspired the primal Nordic mythology. Kiefer's sulphuric visions are Romantic in the artistic sense that they represent a powerful traumatized vision of the past.

Romanticism, or high narrative art, is today's frontier art-space, which only the boldest attempt to enter. Who will soar high enough to shake art loose from the gravitational pull of kitsch, irony, celebrity and monetary success?

There is hope. In Kiefer's latest paintings, one notes the first tentative appearance of delicate, budding plants sprouting from the mire of tortured, blackened soil. They indicate some kind of re-awakening for the artist, and perhaps the collective German spirit. This new growth reveals something that has been long absent from Kiefer's compositions, a return to beauty.

NOTES

1. Thomas Cole, quoted by John Dillenberger, *The Visual Arts and Christianity in America* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 98.
2. Interview, *Drawing Magazine*, 2013.
3. thomaskegler.com
4. Asher B. Durand, "Letters on Landscape Painting," *The Crayon*, 1855. The full text is reprinted in Linda S. Ferber, *Kindred Spirits: Asher B. Durand and the American Landscape* (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum, 2007).
5. William J. Stillman, "The Revelation of Art," *The Crayon* (Nov. 28, 1855), 335.
6. sheehanacademy.com
7. Sheehan is represented by several galleries, including Alpers Fine Arts, in Andover, Massachusetts, and Susan Powell Fine Art, in Madison, Connecticut.
8. Carol Sims, "A Visit to Cornubia Hall," curtishansonpaintings.com

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Correction: The photograph of John Singer Sargent's painting *Judith Gautier: A Gust of Wind* was flopped in Adrienne Baxter Bell's article in the Fall 2015 issue (page 23). We regret any confusion that this error might have caused.