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Thomas Cole and Brice Marden in the Hudson Valley.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL



Remnants of wilderness in Cole's "Catskill Creek, New York," from 1845.

Two sublime small shows that will last the summer in towns along the Hudson River remind me of something that art is good for: consolation. I speak of "Thomas Cole's Refrain: The Paintings of Catskill Creek," at the Thomas Cole Historic Site, in Catskill, and "Brice Marden's Cold Mountain Studies," which will open to the public on June 9th at "T" Space, in the wooded outskirts of Rhinebeck. Roughly a century and a half apart in history, the artists touched me with a sense of timelessness that, today, couldn't be timelier. They happen to represent the first great American landscape painter, in Cole, and arguably the last great American abstract painter—the last, certainly, to have achieved an influential late style—in Marden.

Cole was an English immigrant and a largely self-taught painter who initiated what came to be called the Hudson River School. Marden, eighty years old, has been an art-world luminary since the mid-nineteen-sixties, when

he emerged from the Yale School of Art with a style at once rigorous and seductive, adapting painting to the anti-pictorial aesthetics of Minimalism in monochrome canvases, tenderly surfaced with mixtures of oils and wax in hauntingly subtle colors. After subsequent years of uncertain focus, he developed, in the eighties, a mode of spontaneous drawing and brushing of linear networks—random-looking at first glance, profoundly disciplined upon sustained attention—that was influenced by Asian calligraphy, triumphing with a series of drawings and paintings collectively titled "Cold Mountain" (1988–91).

All differences aside, I absorbed from works by both artists a poetic affirmation of reconciliation with nature, including the human kind, and a recoil from the wastage of nature's gifts. The shows hint at long spiritual rhythms that are not lost, though they may be occluded, in the staccato frenzies of our day.

Cole tracked the vanishing of forest, between 1825 and 1848, in his depictions of the water, trees, and mountains surrounding what, in the eighteen-thirties, became his home, a hundred and twenty miles north of Manhattan. As it happens, the site is directly across the river from Olana, the castle-like mansion that his star pupil and the Hudson River School's chief virtuoso, Frederic Church, built some years later. Cole's humbler environs were to him rather as Walden Pond was to his younger contemporary Thoreau. (Cole died at the age of forty-seven, in 1848; Thoreau at forty-four, in 1862.) Cole was born in Lancashire, England, in an industrial town. He immigrated with his family, when he was seventeen, to Philadelphia, where he worked as a wood engraver and later began copying plaster casts and paintings at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. In 1832, after three years of travel in Europe, he moved to New York and soon took U.S. citizenship. He had discovered Catskill on a sketching trip up the Hudson. The views there enraptured him, especially one to the west of his home that took in a range of the Catskill Mountains with an oddly nose-shaped peak that suggests to many people the proboscis of a sleeping giant. (You can step outside the show and see for yourself, from the porch of Cole's house.)

There's a variable, persistent awkwardness to Cole's art, particularly when compared with the professionally consummate manners of the painters whom he directly inspired, notably Church and Asher B. Durand. You see him combining truthful observation and lyrical color and light with painterly effects, often in the rendering of foliage, that seem cribbed from European precedents without being quite understood technically. This put Cole a bit in the shade of a popular, commercially successful movement in American landscape painting in the mid-nineteenth century—a time of national surrender to what Robert Frost, in "The Gift Outright," characterized with the idea of land that "was ours before we were the land's." Americans who had taken possession became possessed.

Today, Cole's sometimes labored efforts bespeak a sincerity that stands

up well against the slickness of his followers. There's a Cole revival under way. A show last year at the Metropolitan Museum exalted his five-painting allegorical suite, "The Course of Empire" (1833-36), which narrates the rise of a seaside landscape from Edenic innocence to metropolitan majesty and then its descent into abandoned ruins. (When the show travelled to London's National Gallery, the work was paired with recent paintings, bearing the same title, by the Pop master Ed Ruscha, which depict stupefyingly banal small-industrial buildings against lovely skies, wittily suggesting that progress and decline amount to much the same thing.) I find it difficult to remember when Cole's moralizing epic seemed corny to me. Now, besides being beautiful, it strikes me as emotionally authentic in the way of William Blake, and it envisages an arc of history that has left off, at least for a while, seeming quaint.

The works in the Brice Marden show—thirty-five small drawings, from 1988-91, exquisitely installed in a space designed by the architect Steven Holl—were triggered by the ancient poems of Han Shan, whose name means, literally, "cold mountain." Han wrote hundreds of them, many reputedly on stones in the wild, during his happily reclusive life at an uncertain point in the Tang dynasty, which lasted from the seventh century to the tenth. Marden discovered Han in translations that Gary Snyder, the California Buddhist poet, had made. (Snyder figures as the character Japhy Ryder in Jack Kerouac's 1958 novel "The Dharma Bums.") Here's one of Snyder's versions:

Clambering up the Cold Mountain path,
The Cold Mountain trail goes on and on:
The long gorge choked with scree and
boulders,
The wide creek, the mist-blurred grass.
The moss is slippery, though there's been
no rain.
The pine sings, but there's no wind.
Who can leap the world's ties
And sit with me among the white clouds?

Marden had become interested in Asian orthography in 1984, when he visited an exhibition, "Masters of Japanese Calligraphy: 8th-19th Century," at the Japan House and at the Asia Society, in New York. Marden had already

experimented with using twigs dipped in black ink to loosely mimic the looks of writing in Japanese and Chinese, languages that he didn't know. But he has told me that the "Cold Mountain" studies helped to give him confidence in the procedure.

The drawings vary restlessly. Some array glyphic marks in typically Chinese, parallel vertical columns, with blank spaces between them. In others, the marks skitter sideways, entangling the columns with one another. Then, there are hyperactive webs of line that sacrifice any graphic order to another kind: the allover force fields of New York School abstraction, with spiky decisiveness in each mark—as if the instrument in Marden's hand had ideas of its own, in a rushing sequence of Zen contradictions. The pictures never suggest design. They are phenomena. Nor are they quite expressive. Rather, they are like transits of impulse from somewhere beyond the artist to somewhere beyond the viewer. A formal discipline of picture-making presides, as prosodic sophistication does in Han Shan—governing a flow that recalls Jackson Pollock's response when a visitor remarked that he didn't work from nature. He said, "I am nature."

Nature is always there, when you take the time to notice. It is also always here (until it isn't) in us, when you think or, better, don't think about it but simply feel. The perception of what lives and dies—the incessantly recurring surprise of specific moments in a ceaseless cycle—can too easily be lost on overburdened minds. Nor can means of physical escape and enjoyment—camping trips, say—answer the greatest of our needs, which is for interpenetrating the consciousness of a nature that is tumultuous but fundamentally unchanging with a culture that is in constant flux but that only notionally exists. We have artists and poets to remedy the disconnection, if they can and will. Not many today even try, when culture is weaponized and nature is sentimentalized. You know that temporary relief has arrived when your heart stabilizes and your mind clears. With Cole, the catalyst is marvelling. With Marden, it's intuition. With both, art befriends life. Or so it seems to me, twice blessed. ♦

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