

GAGOSIAN

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A Modern Take on the Hudson River School Tradition

In his first show at Gagosian, opening Thursday, the painter Cy Gavin explores the land that has both empowered and inspired him.

Robin Pogrebin



Cy Gavin at Gagosian in Chelsea with “Untitled (Paths, crossing -- blue),” at left, a nocturnal scene, and “Untitled (Baldecypress).” The painter sees himself as a steward of the land in New York’s Hudson Valley. Credit...Victor Llorente for The New York Times

Cy Gavin didn’t initially see moving into his upstate New York farmhouse as an act of defiance. In 2020, the artist simply wanted more space in which to live and to paint his dynamic, vibrant landscapes.

But when people drove by, calling him names or throwing garbage; when he spotted racist signs in backyards, such as “Cold Beer Matters” (as opposed to Black Lives), Gavin realized he had no choice but to — literally — dig in.

So he started planting — holly and rhododendron, native evergreens — in the ground that

surrounds his home in Northern Dutchess County. Rather than pack up and leave for more hospitable environs (as friends urged him to do) or build a high privacy fence that would make him feel “caged in,” Gavin leaned into his relationship to the land, providing food and shelter for birds, creating pretty things to look at, welcoming animals.

“I refused to be intimidated,” he said in a recent interview. “I had to figure out how I was going to relate to the space, the land, which meant also confronting the energy outside of the house.”

He also focused on painting the nature around him — the meadows, paths and trees that give him a sense of calm, connection and comfort. Now about a dozen of those works are on view in a solo show that opens at Gagosian in Chelsea on Thursday.



Cy Gavin, “Untitled (Grass growing on a weir),” 2022. Adrienne Edwards, the Whitney Biennial co-curator, said the “fragility and vulnerability” of the places where Gavin works comes through in the art itself. Credit...via Gagosian; Photo by Rob McKeever



Cy Gavin, “Untitled (Paths in a meadow),” 2022. Credit...via Gagosian; Photo by Rob McKeever

At a time when Black figuration is all the rage and the art market has largely relegated landscape painting to a stodgy past, Gavin is something of a counterintuitive combination: a contemporary artist putting his own spin on a classical form; taking on current issues of history, race and territory but painting in the tradition of the Hudson River School — Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Cole. “To remove the figure from the landscape — with all of the market demands or cultural demands that exist around the representation of the Black body,” said Antwaun Sargent, the Gagosian director who organized the show, “that was extraordinarily brave.”

Gavin, for his part, said he did not set out to buck any trend. But he is also uncomfortable with the degree to which Black figuration has become fashionable.

“I realized there were enormous market interests in collecting images of Black bodies by many non-Black people and I have found that profoundly disturbing,” he said, “alongside artists who are making work with the apparent express purpose of profiteering off Black trauma, making work for a presumed white gaze.”

Gavin does not conceive of himself as painting in the Hudson River tradition; that is a frame others put around him. “I see that work as an apology for nature, one that exalts humankind over nature, rather than the other way around.”

Such strong words can be hard to reconcile with Gavin’s soft-spoken presence. Elegantly handsome with a salt-and-pepper beard, Gavin, 37, comes across as solitary and single-minded, the kind of artist who eschews the art world scene and would rather be in his studio than anywhere else.

He lives alone with his Calico cat Sister George and starts working before daybreak. Much of his work he never shows, or he destroys. He declined the de rigueur gallery opening party, opting instead for a small dinner of family and friends.



Cy Gavin, “Untitled (Moon),” 2022. Credit...via Gagolian; Photo by Rob McKeever

Yet as Gavin’s profile rises, the art world is pulling him in. Here he is, after all, taking up an expansive space at Gagolian, the largest gallery in the world. His work was featured at the Whitney in its biennial last year and in its [2018 group show](#) of artists responding to the perilous state of the environment. Zwirner gallery gave him [a show in London](#) in 2021.

“Gavin uses the natural world as a metaphor to describe love, chaos, inevitability,” wrote the critic Hilton Als in an essay for the Zwirner show, “the overwhelming feelings and actions that are part of being alive.”

He is something of a wunderkind, having had his first solo New York show at Sargent's Daughters gallery in 2015 before graduating from Columbia's M.F.A. program. He was an artist-in-residence at the Rubell Family Collection in Miami in 2016.

Owners of Gavin's work include the likes of the hip-hop producer Swizz Beatz and the collector Bernard Lumpkin, who serves on the board of the Studio Museum in Harlem.

"He's showing us in the natural world our own inner landscape," said Lumpkin, who owns four Gavin canvases. "When you're inhabiting a painting by Cy, you're inhabiting a world which is simultaneously strange and familiar; real and surreal; local and foreign."

Gavin's work is also now in the collections of Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris, the Baltimore Museum of Art and the Whitney.

"Craggy and sculpted, they conjure the terrain of the islands, but also canvases by Francis Bacon, Gauguin and Cézanne," wrote Martha Schwendener in a 2015 New York Times review, "whose landscapes look as if they were chiseled onto the canvas."



Cy Gavin, "Untitled (Crossroads/meadow)," 2022. Credit...via Gagosian; Photo by Rob McKeever

While Gavin's work is not overtly political, the artist uses painting to puzzle through questions he feels better able to explore in the peace and quiet of New York's Hudson Valley.

"It started making me think about boundaries and borders and how arbitrary they are," he said. "It's unavoidable to think about property in a place like that, which was historically inhabited by Mohican people."

Admirers of Gavin's work call out his use of vibrant color, the visible hand in his brush strokes, how his personal voice comes through. David Breslin, one of the Biennial's two curators — who recently left the Whitney for the Met — said he was drawn to Gavin's exploration of "how tied we are to the places that we're from and the landscapes that make us who we are."

Adrienne Edwards, the other Biennial curator, said the "fragility and vulnerability" of the places where Gavin works comes through in the art itself.

“There is something very off, which means kind of honest, about the way he’s approaching things — whether it’s a body or a landscape or where those two things come together,” Edwards said. “There is a lot in Cy’s work that resists expectations. There is a lot in Cy that resists expectations.”



Cy Gavin, "Untitled (Rhododendron border)," 2022. Credit...via Gagosian; Photo by Rob McKeever

Born in 1985 and raised in the Pennsylvania Rust Belt town of Donora, near Pittsburgh, Gavin is the child of Jehovah’s Witnesses. His parents both worked in glass factories; his father was also a minister. The artist is clearly pained when he talks about how confining it was growing up with them, and says that while his parents provided for his material needs, they were “incredibly controlling people, who did not necessarily need to have kids.”

The public library was his refuge. He also drew constantly, sometimes copying paintings by Rembrandt, Velázquez, Goya. A teacher took an interest in Gavin and gave him paints; he wound up earning a scholarship to Carnegie Mellon University.

“I liked doing something I couldn’t do well,” he said, “and seeing if I could get better at it.” Given his propensity for hermit tendencies, Gavin is likely to be conflicted by the spotlight that is bound to shine more brightly on him now. But his main concern these days is how not to be completely consumed by the work that takes everything he has to give.

“The act of painting is very dissociative for me,” he said. “It feels like being put under anesthesia or something. I lose track of time. I miss meals. It makes any kind of romantic life almost impossible. It makes real friendships very difficult.

“How to paint and not completely lose my life,” he added. “That is very difficult to do.”

Cy Gavin

Feb. 2 through March 18, [Gagosian](https://www.gagosian.com), 522 West 21st Street, (212) 741-1717; [gagosian.com](https://www.gagosian.com).

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