

GREY ART NYU GALLERY

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GREY ART GALLERY EXHIBITION INTERROGATES CONTEMPORARY VISIONS OF NATURE

Landscapes after Ruskin: Redefining the Sublime Curated by artist Joel Sternfeld

On view at New York University
April 17–July 7, 2018



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

In the current global environment—with nature threatened now more than ever—how is our contemporary landscape reimagined by artists? ***Landscapes after Ruskin: Redefining the Sublime*** explores this intriguing question through artworks that confront an increasingly sinister notion of the sublime. Curated by renowned photographer **Joel Sternfeld**, the exhibition features approximately 60 works by over 45 artists, including paintings, photographs, sculpture, installation, film, and video. *Landscapes after Ruskin* was organized by the Hall Art Foundation and will be on view at **New York University's Grey Art Gallery** from **April 17 through July 7, 2018**.

Works in the show span many styles—from realism to expressionism, abstraction to figuration—revealing the multiple ways that contemporary artists are addressing current environmental concerns. While early landscapists such as J. M. W. Turner, depicted the power of raw, unrestricted nature to overwhelm humanity, the artists featured in *Landscapes after Ruskin* are working in a climate of heightened anxiety, technological advancement, frequent natural disasters, and increasing human populations. The show includes works by established figures Joseph Beuys,

Mary Corse, Eric Fischl, Anselm Kiefer, Bruce Nauman, Gerhard Richter, Ai Weiwei, Jane and Louise Wilson, and David Wojnarowicz alongside works by others who deserve to be better known, such as Naoya Hatakeyama, Dodo Jin Ming, Dora Longo Bahia, and Serban Savu.

Landscapes after Ruskin debuted at the Hall Art Foundation's space in Reading, Vermont, in spring 2016 and was curated by artist Joel Sternfeld. As Sternfeld observes, "For a few short years in the 19th century, it was possible to experience what we can now with hindsight regard as an innocent sublime. Now that the landscape has become a place of fear and danger, we have only a calamitous sublime to behold. This show poses an exciting challenge as we hope to bring attention to the global issues that face humanity and the environment today." Grey Art Gallery director Lynn Gumpert comments, "We are very pleased that *Landscapes after Ruskin* will travel to the Grey Art Gallery. As a university museum, we experiment with different exhibition formats, and we're thrilled to present one curated by such a thoughtful and knowledgeable artist as Joel."

Exhibition

John Ruskin—an influential English art critic and social activist of the Victorian era—argued that the artist's principal goal should be "truth to nature." For Ruskin, this "truth" was more than just a technical representation of the natural world on canvas. Rather, he believed that all great art should depict the natural world as humanity experiences it. For example, the 19th-century artist J. M. W. Turner, whose work Ruskin championed, depicted the trees, mountains, sky, and water in his landscapes as ethereal and majestic—but also as overwhelming and, at times, threatening. Ruskin believed that Turner, in depicting landscape in a manner that elicited sensations of both beauty and terror, was able to render an authentic representation of the sublime, evoking feelings of awe and human insignificance.

At the same time that Ruskin was playing a crucial role in introducing the upper classes of the English-speaking world to the appreciation and collecting of art, he was also promoting his broader concerns about the planet, speaking out against industrial pollution and effectively becoming one of Europe's first environmentalists. Similarly, Sternfeld transcends boundaries between art and nature, revealing both the humorous and the tragic effects that humanity has inflicted on the world. Well-known for his landmark 1987 book *American Prospects*—one of his many publications—Sternfeld combines both the sublime vistas of the vast American landscape with the strange emptiness of its mass-produced public architecture. Selecting works by other artists in the Hall and Hall Art Foundation collections, he discloses a complex contemporary landscape, one that is filled with competing dangers.

Landscapes after Ruskin begins with **Gustave Courbet's** *La vague* (The Wave; c. 1869), a turbulent seascape painted in Étretat, Normandy, where the artist spent the summer of 1869 depicting the savage power of natural forces. Late 19th-century perspectives on the natural world such as this one understood humanity to be under the dominion of nature—the placating of which was considered necessary for continued human survival. During the 20th century, human activity came to be viewed as intricately linked to the forces of nature around us.

That humanity has established a new and complex relationship to nature is clear in Sternfeld's selection of artworks in *Landscape after Ruskin*. For example, **Naoya Hatakeyama**, one of Japan's most distinguished photographers, captures the technological forces used to control the natural world in his *Atmos (#07909)* (2003), in which clouds of pink-colored steam hover above a foundry in Camargue, France. An effect of the steelmaking process, the steam assumes a cloud-like, organic appearance that complicates the distinction between nature and industry.

Many of the works in *Landscapes after Ruskin* confront the disasters that humanity has inflicted on the earth. In 1972, **Joseph Beuys** executed *Save the Woods*, an action he undertook with fellow citizens to protest the removal of forests around Düsseldorf. Photographic documentation of the event evokes a sense of nostalgia for the early phases of the environmental movement,

reminding us of a time when there were still large areas of nature *to save*. More recent projects, such as **Ai Weiwei**'s gleaming black ceramic *Oil Spills* (2006), allude to the sort of human-inflicted disasters that early conservationists were trying to prevent, but that ultimately have become all too common. Like Ai's New York City-wide exhibition *Good Fences Make Good Neighbors*, on view this past fall and winter, *Oil Spills* emphasizes his longstanding interest in representing global crises, especially those that affect the most underprivileged communities.

Exploring various interpretations of the sublime, the exhibition presents several works proposing that, in the post-industrial era, terrorism may be the sublime's most spectacular form—a new landscape riven by destruction and filled with constant surveillance. For example, **Carlos Motta** made his series of grainy photographs entitled *Public Domain* (2004) while in residence across the street from Ground Zero. Monitoring visitors who once may have visited the site for its impressive structures but now come to pay homage to a landscape of wreckage, Motta frames the culture of surveillance as central to the contemporary landscape.

Landscapes after Ruskin also presents **Joel Sternfeld**'s first film, *London Bridge* (2016). The piece was filmed at Lake Havasu in Arizona, where a real-estate developer purchased the early 19th-century bridge, transported it from London, and reassembled it at the lake. Now a major tourist destination, the bridge stars in Sternfeld's film, where a gondolier dressed in traditional Venetian clothing sings arias in Italian as he maneuvers around the bridge, steering his craft past motorboats filled with bikini-clad partyers gyrating to thumping disco music. Eventually, Sternfeld reveals that the gondolier is an American who realized an opportunity to cash in by providing a taste of Venice in Arizona. Spanning a day on the lake, the film includes a Porta Potti toilet break and a siesta. Crumpled beer cans and laser-disco effects clash with Sternfeld's evocation of Italian *vedute* of the Grand Canal.

By focusing on the modern seascape of Lake Havasu, Sternfeld's film provides an appropriate coda to the exhibition, demonstrating how our perception of the landscape has significantly changed since Courbet painted the all-powerful ocean at Normandy. Working in an era that scholars have dubbed the Anthropocene—in which humanity itself is a significant geological force—the artists exhibited in *Landscapes after Ruskin* have re-envisioned the contemporary landscape as intricately connected with our daily lives. In a world overwhelmed by human industry and development, Sternfeld demonstrates how artists can discover unexpected beauties associated with nature, and in so doing, are able to invoke a new sense of the sublime.

Exhibition Catalogue

Landscapes after Ruskin will be accompanied by a four-color, richly illustrated 160-page catalogue. Contributors include **Dale Jamieson**, Professor of Environmental Studies and Philosophy, New York University; **Chis Wiley**, artist, writer, and independent curator; **Joel Sternfeld**, artist and Noble Foundation Chair in Art and Cultural History, Sarah Lawrence College; and **Lynn Gumpert**, Director of the Grey Art Gallery, New York University. Issued by Hirmer Publishers, the catalogue presents exciting new scholarship that examines the concept of the sublime from the 19th century to the present, and includes full-color reproductions of all 68 works exhibited at the Hall Art Foundation's facility in Reading, Vermont, in addition to several installation views.

Sponsorship

Landscapes after Ruskin: Redefining the Sublime is made possible by the Hall Art Foundation. Additional support is provided by the Grey Art Gallery's Director's Circle, Inter/National Council, and Friends; and the Abby Weed Grey Trust.

About the Grey Art Gallery

The Grey Art Gallery is New York University's fine arts museum, located on historic Washington Square Park in New York City's Greenwich Village. It offers the NYU community and the general public a dynamic roster of engaging and thought-provoking exhibitions, all of them enriched by public programs. With its emphasis on experimentation and interpretation, and its focus on studying art in its historical, cultural, and social contexts, the Grey serves as a museum-laboratory for the exploration of art's environments.

Exhibitions organized by the Grey have encompassed all the visual arts: painting, sculpture, drawing and printmaking, photography, architecture and decorative arts, video, film, and performance. In addition to producing its own exhibitions, which often travel to other venues in the United States and abroad, the Gallery hosts traveling shows that might otherwise not be seen in New York and produces scholarly publications that are distributed worldwide.

General Information

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Hours

Tuesday, Thursday, Friday: 11 am–6 pm
OPEN LATE Wednesday: 11 am–8 pm
Saturday: 11 am–5 pm
Sunday, Monday, and major holidays: Closed

Admission

Suggested donation: \$5; NYU students, faculty, and staff: free of charge