

Ecocritical Art History

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- Secret* (2008–9), organized by the Yale Center for British Art. Key works on artists' materials include Rutherford J. Gettens and George L. Stout, *Painting Materials: A Short Encyclopedia* (1942; New York: Dover Publications, 1966); and Robert L. Feller, ed., *Artists' Pigments: A Handbook of Their History and Characteristics* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1986). For the material trade in New York and Boston, see Alexander W. Katlan, *American Artists' Materials Suppliers Directory: Nineteenth-Century* (Park Ridge, N.J.: Noyes Press, 1987). On binary terms of science and art, see Caroline A. Jones and Peter Galison, eds., *Picturing Science, Producing Art* (New York: Routledge, 1998).
- 2 For a sampling of such articles, see "Mr. Grace Calvert's Lecture on Colors," *Anglo American, a Journal of Literature, News, Politics, the Drama, Fine Arts, etc.* 8, no. 16 (February 6, 1847): 375; "Color in Carpets," *Journal of the Franklin Institute, of the State of Pennsylvania, for the Promotion of the Mechanical Arts* 9, no. 5 (May 1, 1845); "The Philosophy of Colours," *Knickerbocker; or New York Monthly Magazine* 3, no. 3 (March 1834): 218; "The Effect of Color upon Health," *Scientific American* 11, no. 47 (August 2, 1856); and "On the Harmony of Colors in its Application to Ladies' Dress. By Mrs. Merrifield," *Peterson's Magazine* 22, no. 2 (August 1852): 55, 106.
  - 3 West's system was also illustrated in Mary Gartside's treatise, *An Essay on Light and Shade, on Colours and on Composition in General* (London: printed by J. Davison, 1805). On West's color system, see Martin Kemp, *The Science of Art: Optical Themes in Western Art from Brunelleschi to Seurat* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1990), 292–93; and Grose Evans, *Benjamin West and the Taste of His Times* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1959), 105–7. On Lawrence's portrait, see Carrie Rebor, "Sir Thomas Lawrence's Benjamin West for the American Academy of the Fine Arts," *American Art Journal* 21, no. 3 (1989): 18–47.
  - 4 For quote, see Thomas Young, "On the Theory of Light and Colors," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* 92 (1802): 18. Young's lectures were first published as *A Course of Lectures on Natural Philosophy and the Mechanical Arts* (London: printed for J. Johnson, 1807). On the evolution of Young's theories, see Paul D. Sherman, *Colour Vision in the Nineteenth Century: The Young-Helmholtz-Maxwell Theory* (Bristol, U.K.: Adam Hilger, 1981). On the experiments of Goethe and Purkinje, see Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Theory of Colors*, trans. Charles Lock Eastlake (1840; Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1970); and Jan Evangelista Purkinje, *Contributions to the Knowledge of Vision in Its Subjective Aspect*, reprinted in Nicholas J. Wade and Josef Brozek, in collaboration with Jiri Hosokovec, *Purkinje's Vision: The Dawning of Neuroscience* (Mahway, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001). For the quote, see Sir David Brewster, *Letters on Natural Magic* (1830; New York: Harper & Brothers, 1843), 20–21.
  - 5 On Field's influence in the United States, see David Bjelajac's extensive writings on Allston as well as his "William Sidney Mount and the Hermetic Tradition in American Art," in *The Visual Culture of American Religions*, ed. Sally Promey and David Morgan (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2001), 176–90; and "Thomas Cole's *Oxbow* and the American Zion Divided," *American Art* 20, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 60–83. Homer's engagement with Chevreul was multifaceted and of long standing; see Kristin Hoermann, "A Hand Formed to Use the Brush," in Marc Simpson et al., *Winslow Homer: Paintings of the Civil War* (San Francisco: Bedford Arts for the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1996), 102–19; and Judith Walsh, "Winslow Homer and the Color Theories of Michel-Eugène Chevreul," in Martha Tedeschi with Kristi Dahm, *Watercolors by Winslow Homer: The Color of Light* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press for the Art Institute of Chicago, 2008), 195–205. On La Farge's use of Chevreul's theories, see Helene Barbara Weinberg, "John La Farge: The Relation of His Illustrations to His Ideal Art," *American Art Journal* 5, no. 1 (May 1973): 58–60. For the quotes, see "The Perception of Color in Pictures," *Spirit of the Times: A Chronicle of the Turf, Agriculture, Field Sports, Literature and the Stage* 26, no. 5 (March 15, 1856): 55.
  - 6 For the quotes, see Hermann von Helmholtz, "On the Relation of Optics to Painting," *Humboldt Library of Popular Science Literature* 24 (1878; New York: J. Fitzgerald, 1882), 616.

Alan C. Braddock

## Ecocritical Art History

In 1876–77 Thomas Eakins painted *William Rush Carving His Allegorical Figure of the Schuylkill River* (fig. 1), commemorating an important Philadelphia artisan-sculptor and civic leader of the early national period. Steeped in Centennial-era historicism and academic realism, the painting represents Rush at work in his studio carving the 1809 wooden statue *Water Nymph with Bittern*, personifying Philadelphia's defining



1 Thomas Eakins, *William Rush Carving His Allegorical Figure of the Schuylkill River*, 1876–77. Oil on canvas on fiber board, 20 1/8 x 26 1/8 in. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Thomas Eakins and Miss Mary Adeline Williams

profession, including assorted designs, wooden fragments, and other sculptures. A nude female model stands on a pedestal in the foreground, steadying a large book on her shoulder to simulate the anatomical effects of holding a heavy bittern. Her chaperone sits at right, quietly knitting. The model's bright clothing, draped over a chair, cascades toward us like foamy water from the personified river.

Eakins marshaled many resources in producing *William Rush*, including extensive preparatory designs and historical research. To demonstrate his knowledge, he wrote an exhibition label for the painting, explaining the iconography of Rush's allegory. One passage reads, "The woman holds aloft a bittern, a bird loving and much frequenting the quiet dark wooded river of those days." As a native Philadelphian who loved to row, swim, and hunt on the Schuylkill, Eakins knew the river's wildfowl well. His written statement discloses a striking fact about local natural history: the bittern, Rush's emblematic bird, apparently no longer was "loving and much frequenting" the river by the 1870s. The bittern belonged to Philadelphia's past. Eakins also tacitly acknowledged that the Schuylkill had lost its "quiet dark wooded" aspect of old.<sup>2</sup>

Eakins expressed no clear value judgment, but his research evidently gave him an inkling of environmental change in Philadelphia over time as a fact of modernity. His painting even encoded that change by locating Rush and the allegorical figure with bittern in the background shadows, creating a complex visual metaphor for the word "Schuylkill," meaning "hidden river" in Dutch. Occupying a "quiet dark wooded" place at the rear of the studio, they seem to recede into Philadelphia history, replaced by cultural surrogates (the nude, the book) in the foreground. What had produced the environmental change noticed by Eakins and subtly articulated by his picture?

To answer that question—a question that historians of American art have never explored in connection with Eakins's *William Rush*—requires critical reconsideration of the picture within the context of Philadelphia's environmental history. During the late nineteenth century, newspapers and public health reports repeatedly rang alarm

river and public water supply. Rush had produced that sculpture for a fountain at the city's Centre Square pumping station, the heart of a new steam-powered waterworks system designed by architect Benjamin Latrobe. The statue and the waterworks together provided a source of civic pride, symbolizing the city's modern progress in alleviating urban water shortages and yellow fever epidemics. As indicated in the background of Eakins's picture, Rush's female figure holds a river bird (the bittern) on her shoulder, signifying the Schuylkill's role as a resource sustaining all forms of life.<sup>1</sup>

Looking closely at Eakins's picture, we see Rush in the shadows at left, with mallet and chisel, carving the allegory. Around him appear various signs of his



bells about the effects of industry and population growth on the purity and sanitary condition of Philadelphia's water, especially the Schuylkill River. Natural histories of the period also noted the disappearance of wildlife, including birds, from that riparian zone. Despite Philadelphia's historic reputation for good government, scientific progress, and clean water, by the time Eakins painted *William Rush* the city had become infamous for pollution.<sup>3</sup>

During the 1870s the Schuylkill River was so badly tainted by untreated industrial waste and domestic sewage that disease reached scandalous proportions, with hundreds of residents dying annually from typhoid. According to official reports, the human death toll from typhoid for the decade of the 1860s was 4,357. That figure rose to 6,394 for the 1880s. In December 1882 Eakins's beloved sister Margaret was among those who died of the disease.<sup>4</sup>

Eakins did not "represent" Philadelphia's worsening environmental conditions in *William Rush* or any of his celebrated outdoor pictures of the period set on the Schuylkill. Nor have subsequent art historians examined his work in relation to such conditions. Knowing something about Philadelphia's environmental history, though, lets us see Eakins's art anew for what it was: a celebratory civic vision, neither strictly empirical nor overtly critical in its realism. Scholars have interrogated Eakins's realism before, but rarely in connection with his pictures of rowing and other outdoor activities, which retain an aura of heroic truth for most viewers today. In light of pertinent environmental history, Eakins's realism performed a kind of aesthetic filtration.<sup>5</sup>

The abbreviated case study above provides one example of how "ecocritical" considerations can broaden art-historical inquiry and illuminate even the most seemingly familiar works. Briefly defined, ecocriticism emphasizes issues of environmental interconnectedness, sustainability, and justice in cultural interpretation. When historically oriented, ecocriticism may bring attention to neglected evidence of past ecological and proto-ecological sensibility or it may cast canonical works and figures in a new light by revealing previously unnoticed complexity regarding environmental concerns.

Ecocriticism borrows from existing interpretative modes and expands on them. It may adapt aspects of phenomenology or postcolonial theory, for example, but give them an environmental focus. What distinguishes ecocriticism is an effort to reorient and widen the scope of cultural studies by emphasizing the ways in which human creativity—regardless of form (visual, verbal, aural) or time period (ancient, modern, contemporary)—unfolds within a specific environment or set of environments, whether urban, rural, or suburban. Far from confining its purview to "landscape" or other received aesthetic categories of environmental perception, ecocriticism knows no such limiting frames of reference.<sup>6</sup>

2 Subhankar Banerjee, *Exposed Coffin/Oil and the Caribou/Barter Island*, 2006. Ultrachrome print, 59 x 74 in. Photo, courtesy of the artist



Outside the discipline of art history, where it remains largely unknown, ecocriticism has sparked a flurry of activities since the early 1990s, including new academic programs, professional organizations, and publications. In 1992, for example, scholars founded the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE), which sponsors a wide-ranging program of conferences, discussion lists, and publications, including the journal *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment (ISLE)*. In 1999 Harvard literature professor Lawrence Buell described these and other related scholarly developments as an “ecocritical insurgency.”<sup>7</sup>

The most notable example of ecocritical art history to date is Greg Thomas’s *Art and Ecology in Nineteenth-Century France: The Landscapes of Théodore Rousseau* (2000), focusing on one French Barbizon painter. Recently some Americanists have joined the insurgency, believing that ecocriticism promises to make art history more sustainable by raising new questions and fostering greater awareness about the visual background to one of the most pressing concerns of our day. A forthcoming book of essays that I have co-edited with Christoph Irmscher, titled *A Keener Perception: Ecocritical Studies in American Art History*, uses such a perspective in exploring a wide range of topics from the sixteenth century to the present.<sup>8</sup>

For art historians, ecocriticism entails a more probing and pointedly ethical integration of visual analysis, cultural interpretation, and environmental history—including aspects of the history of science—than has prevailed in the field. Although Americanists have long explored issues of landscape and development, their inquiries have tended to focus on humanistic frameworks or the idea of “nature” as a cultural-aesthetic construction. Recent ecocritics generally embrace aspects of that constructionist perspective, but they also pay close attention to the embeddedness of culture within a world that is stubbornly real, infinitely vulnerable, and helpfully illuminated by both environmental science and environmental history. Such an approach recognizes that the world we inhabit is not exclusively or presumptively the province of human beings. Ecocriticism, therefore, questions the entrenched anthropocentrism of art history and other humanistic disciplines. While an irreducible humanism obviously informs all scholarly inquiry, ecocriticism envisions a more self-critical approach marked by subtler awareness of the environments in which art has unfolded.

Recent reports by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and other scientific organizations indicate that Earth is at, or near, a “tipping point,” beyond which the problems of global warming will become irreversible. Glimpses of climate change increasingly appear in contemporary art, as in Subhankar Banerjee’s 2006 photograph of a coffin, once buried in Arctic “permafrost” but now uncannily exposed due to polar melting (fig. 2). Banerjee, a former physicist, first attracted national attention in 2003 when his images of teeming wildlife and Native American culture at the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) were drawn into congressional debate over oil drilling. Ironically, all sides in that debate misread Banerjee’s images as documents of either a pristine frontier wilderness or a vast wasteland needing development.<sup>9</sup>

As historian Finis Dunaway has demonstrated, Banerjee’s photographs instead reveal ANWR to be a kind of global village, inhabited by multiple species, including humans and a host of international migratory birds, all relying on the refuge for survival. Through an insightful ecocritical interpretation, Dunaway reminds us about the interconnectedness of all environments and species. Art history could benefit by taking more cues from such scholarship. The magnitude of our environmental crisis threatens to make scholarly business-as-usual increasingly irrelevant, if not counterproductive, so the time for ecocritical art history has come.<sup>10</sup>

## Notes

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- 1 See Darrel Sewell, ed., *Thomas Eakins* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2002), 35–38, 59–68; and Michael McMahon, “Makeshift Technology: Water and Politics in 19th-Century Philadelphia,” *Environmental Review* 12, no. 2 (1988): 21–37.
- 2 Thomas Eakins, unpublished exhibition label, Philadelphia Museum of Art, quoted in Sewell, *Eakins*, 35–36; and William P. Turnbull, *The Birds of East Pennsylvania and New Jersey* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1869), 60–62.
- 3 For newspaper references to Schuylkill River pollution and questions of purity, see, for example, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 12, 1862, 3; February 6, 1865, 3; March 4, 1870, 2; November 16, 1871, 4; October 26, 1875, 2; February 2, 1877, 3; December 29, 1879, 2; January 23, 1880, 3; December 28, 1881, 2; July 6, 1882, 2; May 2, 1883, 2; and September 5, 1884, 2.
- 4 Sam Alewitz, “*Filthy Dirty*”: *A Social History of Unsanitary Philadelphia in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New York: Garland, 1989); John F. Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania, in the Olden Time* (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1845), 1:257; Michael P. McCarthy, *Typhoid and the Politics of Public Health in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1989), 7; and Sewell, *Eakins*, x.
- 5 For details, see Alan C. Braddock, “Bodies of Water: Thomas Eakins, Racial Ecology, and the Limits of Civic Realism,” in *A Keener Perception: Ecocritical Studies in American Art History*, ed. Braddock and Christoph Irmscher (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, forthcoming 2009).
- 6 Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005).
- 7 Lawrence Buell, “The Ecocritical Insurgency,” *New Literary History* 30, no. 3 (Summer 1999): 699–712.
- 8 Braddock and Irmscher, *A Keener Perception*; Peter John Brownlee, *Manifest Destiny / Manifest Responsibility: Environmentalism and the Art of the American Landscape* (Chicago: Loyola Univ. Museum of Art, 2008); and Finis Dunaway, *Natural Visions: The Power of Images in American Environmental Reform* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2005).
- 9 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), *Climate Change 2007 . . . Fourth Assessment Report, Summary for Policymakers* (Geneva: IPCC Secretariat, 2007).
- 10 Finis Dunaway, “Reframing the Last Frontier: Subhankar Banerjee and the Visual Politics of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge,” in Braddock and Irmscher, *A Keener Perception*.

## Digitization, Genetics, and the Defacement of Portraiture

Anne Collins Goodyear

Implicitly concerned with capturing the “real,” portraiture has long reflected the impact of scientific and technological advances on perceptions of human identity. With the recent proliferation of digital media and the deciphering of the human genome, this historic link has reasserted itself, challenging long-standing assumptions about the relationship of identity to appearance.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, theories of physiognomy affected the depiction of human features, and the face appeared to map intelligence and character, as evidenced in the work of Gilbert Stuart and others.<sup>1</sup> Early-twentieth-century developments in physics, mathematics, and psychology suggested that much of “reality” was hidden beneath the surface and prompted artists such as Marius de Zayas, Francis Picabia, and Charles Demuth to abandon verisimilitude in favor of abstraction. Each