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Speculative Landscapes: American Art and Real Estate in the Nineteenth Century

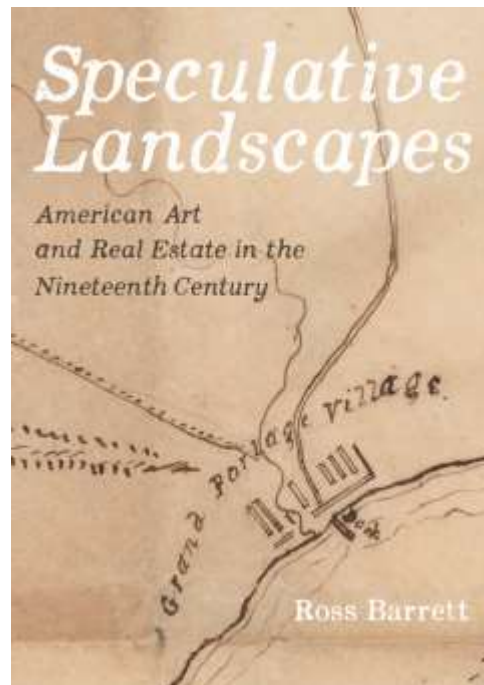
By Ross Barrett

Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022. 241 pp.; 85 color illus. Hardcover \$65.00 (ISBN: 9780520343917)

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Ross Barrett's *Speculative Landscapes: American Art and Real Estate in the Nineteenth Century* is grounded in a powerfully simple idea: that the surge in landscape painting of these years was entangled with—and, in many instances, motivated by—the contemporary explosion in land speculation.¹ In combination with the key insights of Maggie Cao's work on Bierstadt and Margaretta Lovell's on Fitz Henry Lane, among others, there is reason to identify this project as part of a rich scholarly turn to the financial dealings of American landscape artists of the nineteenth century. This is salutary for the genre within the art history of the United States that has been most freighted by isolationist mythmaking for which the messy reality of how artists paid their bills was inconvenient at best.² While there is much that is productive in Barrett's book, which offers a new way of thinking about a body of work that has often risked being loved to death by its acolytes, eyebrows may be raised by the leaps the author requires us to take in order for the culture of real-estate speculation to be not just a relevant peripheral context but the fundamental driver and subtext of all the artworks presented in the volume.

Speculative Landscapes is divided into five chapters, each focused on a single artist's dalliances with real-estate speculation based upon a great deal of rich original and important archival research. Specific artworks by each artist are then read through the lens of these financial insights. The revelatory accounts of artists' real-estate ventures are an unmitigated success. Through these fascinating case studies of artists engaged in the land business, spanning a wide swath of regions and years, Barrett provides a preponderance of evidence that the messy land development practices of a young country are important to understanding the art that depicts that land. The free interpretations he offers of paintings juxtaposed with the provided context would be entirely intriguing and thought-



provoking if they were presented in the same spirit of speculation and fancy that lies beneath the historical boosterism and risk-taking that are his focus. Barrett's blunt application of these interpretations, however, as final statements of fact, which do not allow for other simpler and more logical explanations, is a struggle in many instances.

Chapter 1 centers on the promotional paintings Daniel Huntington made for a firm that hoped to create a real-estate development at Verplanck on the Hudson River, north of New York City. Because the paintings in question have been lost, Barrett is at a disadvantage in discussing the sacrifices an artist makes on the altar of commerce and in contrasting their likely appearance with the surviving work that followed, but he makes a valuable contribution in resurfacing this little-known episode through an accumulation of visual and documentary evidence. The discussion of Huntington's later works is less convincing. *Rondout Kill, Afternoon* (1837; Baltimore Museum of Art), we are told, "reject[s] booster imaginings of the region and imaginatively delimit[s] the land business' infiltration of the valley" (14). The author premises this assertion largely upon the wildness of the composition in contrast to topographical views, its inclusion of "alternative forms of settlement," and Huntington's own words distinguishing the "hints and dreams of situation and effects" that characterize his work from the values of Thomas Cole, Asher B. Durand, and Thomas Doughty. A simpler explanation of this unexceptional and derivative canvas—other than as an antidevelopment practice born of the pain of working with the failed Verplanck Point Association—is that the maturing Huntington took some useful ideas from the English pastoralists, especially Thomas Gainsborough, whose work has inspired important scholarship on the iconography of the rustic cottage that could have helped here.³ Indeed, Huntington's canvas hews closely to the composition of Gainsborough's *The Watering Place* (1777; National Gallery, London), which itself was a response to Peter Paul Rubens's *The Watering Place* (c. 1615–22; National Gallery, London).⁴ A reader is ready to accept that Huntington's early mercenary work was an important context for what would follow; it is harder to follow the author's assertions about the specific painting practice in question.

Chapter 2 hoes an even richer row with fascinating insights into the speculations of John Quidor in Illinois. It is a revelation to learn just how deeply involved this outlier artist was in buying and selling land, even profiting significantly from these deals on occasion, although the good times would not last. The author gathers a rich array of evidence of the toll of speculation in the region and the key role that visual culture played in the pursuit. The 1832 painting *The Money Diggers* (Brooklyn Museum) receives the lion's share of the attention through the book's combined method of archival and visual analysis, and again the latter is not as strong as the former. The date of the canvas is inconvenient for a narrative that requires it to become "a dark allegory of Jacksonian speculation" (44) and a "caustic pictorial allegory" (66), rather than one of many opportunistic artistic responses to the literary work of Washington Irving. Like Thomas Cole's works responding to James Fenimore Cooper in 1827, cashing in on a popular tale is a self-sufficient motive. Setting up a contrast between Quidor's dramatic scene from literature and the fundamentally distinct topographical views of Ralph Earl and Charles Willson Peale to create a problematic difference that can only be resolved by Quidor's participation in land speculation is not productive when ripe and ready comparisons that do not require real-estate entanglement stand at the ready, including not only Cole but also the widespread fascination with Salvator Rosa's dark dramas in the period. The fact that the author documents Quidor's

largely positive experiences of speculation by 1832 in advance of his great disappointments that began by 1844 further complicates the asserted explanation. While the engagement with Quidor's art leaves something to be desired, as a visual history of American real-estate speculation, the chapter again is compelling.

Chapter 3 brings us to the work of Eastman Johnson between Superior, Wisconsin, and Nantucket Island off Massachusetts, two places in which the author argues Johnson's paintings reflect his awareness of, and participation in, rapid changes unfolding in the local real-estate market. Johnson's purchase of sixteen potential house lots in the proposed town of Superior (where this reviewer's mother would be born and raised a century later) resulted in some intriguing minor works depicting the proposed town. His views of the Ojibwe reservation at Grand Portage, Minnesota, are read through the same lens of commodification and marketing of land, without comparison to the many widely studied, unspeculative artist encounters with the Indigenous Peoples of the upper Mississippi region in the period. It is intriguing to consider Johnson's much-admired Nantucket paintings in light of his speculation interests, although we are in need of evidence of creation or reception history beyond force of juxtaposition alone to prove that these works should be considered as "booster fictions that drove the island's surging real estate economy" (88).

Chapter 4 delves into Martin Johnson Heade's late chapter in north Florida. It is fascinating to learn of Heade's development of a major suburban tract on the outskirts of Saint Augustine, but the readings of works of art from the period leave questions unanswered. A fundamental one is why, for a lifelong painter of the changeable weather and fringe economy of Eastern saltwater marshes, does another such painting in Florida become a pessimistic speculator's vision of "risk, uncertainty, and failure" (106) that "speaks allusively to the financial dilemmas and shifting outlook of its maker" (129). As elsewhere, the author problematically conflates landscape art with the making of topographical views or "prospects" to claim Heade's *On the San Sebastian River* (c. 1886–88; Museum of Arts & Sciences, Daytona Beach, Florida) as a divergence from the work of supposed fellow travelers. Here, as before, a deep strain of kindred landscape art on both sides of the Atlantic, not least Heade's own earlier work before the speculative turn, provides logical company for this artwork.

Chapter 5 approaches what will be the best-known case study of American landscape art and land speculation to many: Winslow Homer's family project to profit from the same Prout's Neck, Maine, setting that was central to his work in oil and watercolor. The author convincingly articulates Homer's complex place in this rapidly changing ecosystem, in which he identified with the marine workers who depended on continued access to the waterfront commons, even as he was complicit in its privatization. The reading of *Bringing in the Nets* (1887; Portland Museum of Art, Maine) is the most convincing visual analysis in the book, fleshing out the specter of foreign threats to a precarious inshore fishery (154–55). Another highly suggestive section accumulates evidence for a reading of *Eastern Point* (1900; Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts) as an illustration of the resistance of tidal land to ownership.

A reader leaves *Speculative Landscapes* convinced that Barrett has amply proven the relevance of nineteenth-century real-estate speculation for the understanding of much of American landscape painting and grateful for a productive engagement with the money

and markets that make art possible, which remains outside the discipline's norm. While the book's forced readings of artworks to serve preconceived notions are problematic, a fresh perspective on an art form over which so much ink has been spilled is always welcome.

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Notes

¹ Editors' note: Ross Barrett is a founding editor of *Panorama*.

² Maggie Cao, *The End of Landscape in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018); Margaretta Markle Lovell, *Painting the Inhabited Landscape: Fitz H. Lane and the Global Reach of Antebellum America* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2023).

³ See, for example, Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740–1860* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

⁴ "The Watering Place, Thomas Gainsborough / Description / Overview," National Gallery, London, accessed April 15, 2024, <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/thomas-gainsborough-the-watering-place>.