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## Kay WalkingStick's Layered Landscapes and Critical Stewardship in American Art History

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Contemporary painter Kay WalkingStick's (Cherokee, b. 1935) artistic engagement with the Hudson River School offers historians of American art a meaningful framework for transforming iconic symbols of national identity into layered landscapes that enrich our understanding of the past by embracing multiple voices and viewpoints. Working across media, culture, and time, WalkingStick revisits sites made famous by nineteenth-century white male artists and reshapes them into original compositions that represent her individual perspective as a twenty-first-century Indigenous woman. She overlays waterways and topographies drawn from paintings by Thomas Cole or Asher B. Durand with motifs inspired by the creative practices of the Indigenous Peoples who were those landscapes' original stewards. By merging past, present, and future in a single image, WalkingStick's assertion of sovereignty affirms the continuation of ancestral presence in these American places, while demonstrating how acts of critical stewardship are necessary to a reflective, ethical approach to the history of American art.



Fig. 1. Kay WalkingStick, *Thom, Where are the Pocumtucks (The Oxbow)*, 2020. Courtesy the artist and Hales, London and New York. Photo by JSP Art Photography. Copyright Kay WalkingStick

WalkingStick's landscapes appeared at the New-York Historical Society in the exhibition *Kay WalkingStick/Hudson River School* (October 20, 2023–April 14, 2024). In conversation with the show's curator, Wendy Nālani E. Ikemoto, Walkingstick explained that it was impossible to be a contemporary landscape painter in the United States without keeping the Hudson River School in mind.<sup>1</sup> Yet she noted that it was equally impossible, as an

Indigenous artist, not to recognize how those iconic views of American landscape marketed a vision of uninhabited wilderness that promoted settler colonialism by purposely erasing the presence of Indigenous Peoples from their ancestral homelands.

In her own work, WalkingStick balances appreciation of this artistic legacy with forthright recognition of its failings. Her 2020 painting *Thom, Where Are the Pocumtucks* (fig. 1) retains the essential contours of the mountains, valley, and sweeping plain made famous by Cole’s canonical *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow* (1836; fig. 2). Yet WalkingStick’s titular query highlights Cole’s glaring representational omissions and the profound loss lying behind his celebration of a national landscape envisioned narrowly according to Euro-American cultural priorities.



Fig. 2. Thomas Cole, *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow*, 1836. Oil on canvas, 51 1/2 x 76 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

As a counterpoint, WalkingStick recenters Indigenous presence in the scene by overlaying a geometric design from the Nipmuc people, who inhabit the present-day Connecticut River Valley as their Algonquian kin, the Pocumtucks, once did.<sup>2</sup> Her approach to *The Oxbow* is thus dialogic and restorative rather than imperial in its claims. Most significant, WalkingStick demonstrates critical stewardship in grappling with Cole’s artistic vision and contribution to US placemaking by selectively amending and building on his work. Although notions of kinship are antithetical to Euro-American visualizations of Manifest Destiny, WalkingStick highlights her connection with those whose artwork was similarly inspired by love of American lands, while offering a pointed corrective to her fellow painters’ prejudicial exclusions.

When Ikemoto asked WalkingStick why she gravitated in this body of work especially toward waterscapes—coastal scenes, rivers, and cascades—the artist replied that it was because “water changes constantly and is the same constantly.”<sup>3</sup> Although water temporarily adopts forms described by other names—such as droplets, deluges, and downpours—it nonetheless remains the same in its essence. It is up to the observer to locate language capable of accommodating this literal and figurative fluidity.

Telling stories about art in the Americas represents a similar prospect. According to Jules Prown, artworks, like other objects of material culture, are “historical occurrences that

continue to exist in the present."<sup>4</sup> Their enduring presence offers generations of successive viewers an opportunity not only to glimpse the past but to step back into the waters of time and rearticulate meaning from a contemporary perspective.

Embracing the possibility of revisiting and revising US history through its artifacts is not simply sound methodological practice but also, in my view, an ethical responsibility of critical stewardship that is inherent to the ongoing work of American art.

The connection Prown draws between history's material and narrative legacies recalls the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Isabel Wilkerson's vivid metaphor for addressing the problems of US history: "America is an old house. We can never declare the work over." Though an old house's current inhabitants may not be directly responsible for its leaky roof or broken windows, they still must seek out and address any structural weaknesses caused by past neglect if they wish to improve on what they inherited. As Wilkerson concludes, "Ignorance is no protection from the consequences of inaction" when it comes to history and houses alike.<sup>5</sup>

No piece of scholarship can alter the hard truths of historic erasure, racialized violence, and systemic injustice that abound in US national history, but we can better honor our collective cultural heritage by equipping our students and publics with tools to recognize the subjective realities, complicated truths, and unfinished business represented in American art and cultural symbolism. WalkingStick's paintings demonstrate how it is possible to envision both sides of this problem at once.

What was most meaningful to me in Josh T. Franco's remarks at the 2024 College Art Association (CAA) Annual Conference, which inspired this Colloquium, was his suggestion that the work of American art could be an act of patriotism as well as critique. He recalled his dawning realization that his position at the Archives of American Art represented "a national identity project as well as a curatorial one."<sup>6</sup> By pointing out how artists like Félix González-Torres, a queer Latino immigrant working in the charged political atmosphere of the 1980s and 1990s, deliberately engaged with patriotic symbols, Franco illustrated the continuing value of national markers as a framework for individual and specific engagement with family memory, critique, and self-identification. In this context, signifiers such as flags, parades, and landscapes matter, not because their meaning is stable or monolithic but because they are inherently mutable, personal, and vexed.

Wanda Corn reminded those gathered in Chicago for the AHAA-sponsored panel that the term "Americanist" had been adopted in a similar spirit: as a deliberate provocation to a Eurocentric field designed to place American-made artworks on the academic map. Claiming the title of Americanist announced an intention to break with conventions, by charting a course toward a more inclusive mode of art-historical practice.

Now that our subfield is better established, we face a fresh challenge in maintaining that spirit of provocative innovation while holding onto the framing ideas, symbols, and locations that delineate a place for our field. Our continuing work as "Americanists" involves facing the contradictions of uncomfortable, unresolvable histories, not by limiting our vision to either the placid surface or the undertow but by taking inspiration from WalkingStick in describing both as part of the same changing, unchanging waters.

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<sup>1</sup> Wendy Nālani E. Ikemoto, *Kay WalkingStick/Hudson River School* (New York: New-York Historical Society, 2023), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Ikemoto, *Kay WalkingStick/Hudson River School*, 17.

<sup>3</sup> Ikemoto, *Kay WalkingStick/Hudson River School*, 13.

<sup>4</sup> Jules David Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," *Winterthur Portfolio* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1982), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (New York: Random House, 2020), 15.

<sup>6</sup> Josh T. Franco, "America is Work (Notes from a Tired Art Historian)," paper presented in *The Work of American Art*, panel chaired by Emily C. Casey and Juliet Sperling, College Art Association Annual Conference, February 16, 2024.