



Anna Plesset, *A View of the Catskill Mountain House / Copied from a picture by S. Cole copied from a picture by T. Cole / 1848*, 2020. Oil and graphite on canvas, 15 3/8 x 23 7/16 inches. Courtesy of the artist and PATRON Gallery, Chicago. Photo: Jason Mandella.



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Anna Plesset is an interdisciplinary installation artist who uses painting, sculpture, and drawing to reframe historical narratives and examine how history, memory, and knowledge are constructed. Plesset's work is driven by her deeply rooted interest in overlooked or lesser-known details of the past and by an interest in what narratives and objects are given significance, value, and visibility—and who has the authority to grant it. While grounded in traditional artistic techniques, Plesset's conceptually driven work uses multiple lenses to focus on particular themes that have classically been ignored, particularly the absence of women from the canon and the relationship between trauma and everyday life.

Lisa Panzera: *When visiting your studio we had the opportunity to discuss many aspects of your work in which you employ various mediums, including painting, drawing, video, and large-scale installation, to examine the physical and psychological relationships between history, visibility, and everyday life. Would you characterize your works as investigating or working against traditional power structures?*

Anna Plesset: Absolutely. I think in some work this is more overt, but all of my work reframes dominant or familiar accounts of the past—a past that has been largely documented, authorized, and written by white men. I'm interested in what narratives and objects are given significance, value and visibility; and who has the authority to grant it. My current project, *American Paradise*, reframes the history of the Hudson River School to give visibility to the many women affiliated with this iconic movement historically associated with men. The history of the Hudson River School is flawed in many ways, not just for this exclusion, but also for its mythologization and misrepresentation of America, Indigenous Peoples, and the environment which was already being industrialized at that time. The title of this project—invoked critically—takes its name from *American Paradise: The World of the Hudson River School*, an exhibition catalog published in 1987 by the Metropolitan Museum of Art that perpetuates the mythology of the Hudson River School as being founded by, and exclusively comprised of, men. In fact, as early as 1818—seven years before its ostensible founding in 1825—women were painting scenes of the Catskills and beyond in styles ascribed to the movement's "founding fathers," Asher Durand and Thomas Cole. The only true corrective to this false history and the Met's 345-page tome is *Remember the Ladies*, an exhibition booklet published in 2010 by the Thomas Cole National Historic Site, stapled instead of bound, and 33 pages in total.

One part of *American Paradise* is a series of works that refer to paintings created by Sarah Cole, Louisa Davis Minot, and several other women who hiked and painted alongside—and

often apart from—the men affiliated with this movement. Executed in the tradition of copying exemplary paintings, my paintings, in the form of "unfinished" copies, seek to give value and visibility to works created by these women that have been undervalued, under-recognized, and in many cases, lost.

The piece in this show references *A View of the Catskill Mountain House*, an 1848 painting by Sarah Cole that was copied from a painting by Thomas Cole, her brother. Only a handful of works by Sarah Cole have survived and two of those are copies of paintings by Thomas. Like his original painting on canvas, Sarah Cole's painting is around 15 x 23 inches. In keeping with this and the tradition of copying, my painting is a similar size and facture as its two precedents. However, in my version, the copy is in process and is being painted from what looks like a clipped image of the original taped to the upper right corner of the canvas. In fact, this "source material"—the ostensible reference for the "unfinished" painting—is painted in trompe l'oeil, making it the "true copy" of Sarah Cole's original painting. Together, the two approaches in the painting simultaneously point to invisibility, and call into question the tradition of copying, which historically functioned as both a learning process and a process of homage. Both attribute an inherent value to the original as worthy of being copied and disseminated and more significant than the hand and voice of the artist-copier. Ultimately, this painting and the other works in the series make visible the act of historical recovery and acknowledge that act as one that is always in-progress and never finished.

LP: *Your work is conceptual in nature but also interestingly employs a highly accomplished "traditional" painting technique. The use of trompe l'oeil painting, in particular, is central in your practice. Historically trompe l'oeil is used to depict banal objects. What does your depiction of everyday objects reveal? What specific issues do they raise for you?*

AP: Since my work is focused on a reframing of history to bring light to less familiar narratives, using trompe l'oeil is a way for me to create a perceptual experience for the viewer that prompts them to see familiar-looking things in a new light. The illusion in trompe l'oeil is important to me also because of its relationship to history. History is an illusion of fact and truth. It is not a comprehensive record by any means at all and because of history's blind spots, countless lives and events have remained invisible by not being recorded.

The use of trompe l'oeil has persisted throughout art history beginning in ancient Greece. This technique, used to push beyond the flat picture plane so much that the objects



and spaces depicted were thought to be real, presents an altered version of reality. The perceptual and psychological experience of trompe l'oeil implicates the viewer in a heightened way and it's this strength that has enabled it to persist across thousands of years. In my opinion, knowing that you

are looking at a painting creates a distance between the viewer and the work. For me, using trompe l'oeil to the degree that I do closes that gap and brings the subject of the work into the same psychological and perceptual space that the viewer occupies.

Like the 19th century American trompe l'oeil painters, I paint 1:1 so that the viewer encounters the painted objects and ephemera the same way they might encounter them in their natural environments. For the American trompe l'oeil painters, because the objects and ephemera depicted were directly linked to the people who possessed them, their paintings could be seen as oblique portraits, not only of people, but of the events and society at the time. My work directly draws on this tradition. So much of what fills our knowledge and memory is shaped by the objects that surround us and often outlive us. I think that's where my interest in everyday objects lies. They are vehicles for talking about the people and times to which they are linked. By using trompe l'oeil, I am able to not just talk about the translation of information and knowledge, but also create a reality in which these objects exist together in a way they may not have otherwise.

LP: *You embrace a broad range of mediums to delve not only into aspects of art history, as well as social histories, but also into personal history. In particular, I am thinking of your*

Anna Plesset, *A View of the Catskill Mountain House / Copied from a picture by S. Cole copied from a picture by T. Cole / 1848, 2020 (detail).* Oil and graphite on canvas, 15 3/8 x 23 7/16 inches. Courtesy of the artist and PATRON Gallery, Chicago. Photo: Etienne Frossard.

work Travelogue (21st Century Room), which creates a partial replica of your studio and reproduces ephemera from your journey in which you followed the footsteps of your grandfather, who traveled through Europe during and after WWII. How do these issues all interact in your work?

AP: Throughout my work, I am drawn to examine narratives that once discovered, come to life in a way that gives existence and visibility to something that otherwise would remain overlooked. Because my work requires a fair amount of research, I'm always thinking about the different ways we acquire information and knowledge. My use of varied approaches and mediums speaks to this and the way that knowledge accumulates over time—the installations that result capture my research process and my quest for knowledge. I see my traditional and conceptual approaches as symbiotic and linked to my shifts between different media. Material choices are really important in my work and I make those decisions at the same time that I am determining how my work operates conceptually. I've always been interested in what's going on in the studio around the work while it's being made. When I began working on *Travelogue (21st Century Room)* I reread *Studio and Cube: On the Relationship Between Where Art Is Made and Where Art Is Displayed* by Brian O'Doherty in which he discusses the life of an artwork after it leaves the studio, how it can retain the imprint of the artist as it travels from place to place, and how artists have dealt with this throughout art history. I decided to treat the walls of the room as I do the walls of my studio. I don't work at an easel, I always work on the wall and because I work very close, there are always scuff marks and shoe prints at the base of the wall near the floor. If I'm sitting in a chair, my knees rub against the wall making an imprint. There are paint smudges, tape, and reference material all around the work. I wanted to keep all of this, and not have it left behind as the work leaves the studio. No matter where the room is displayed, the room maintains its relationship to the studio, its making, its original context, and therefore, me.

Plesset has exhibited widely; her work was featured in New York in group exhibitions at Jack Barrett and JDJ | The Ice House; and in solo exhibitions at PATRON in Chicago; Hunter Harrison Gallery in London; and The Armory Show 2020 with Jack Barrett in New York. In 2016, Plesset was awarded the Joan Mitchell Foundation Emerging Artist Grant. Additional awards and residencies include the Terra Foundation for American Art Summer Residency Fellowship in Giverny, France and the AIRspace residency program at Abrons Arts Center in New York City. She lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.