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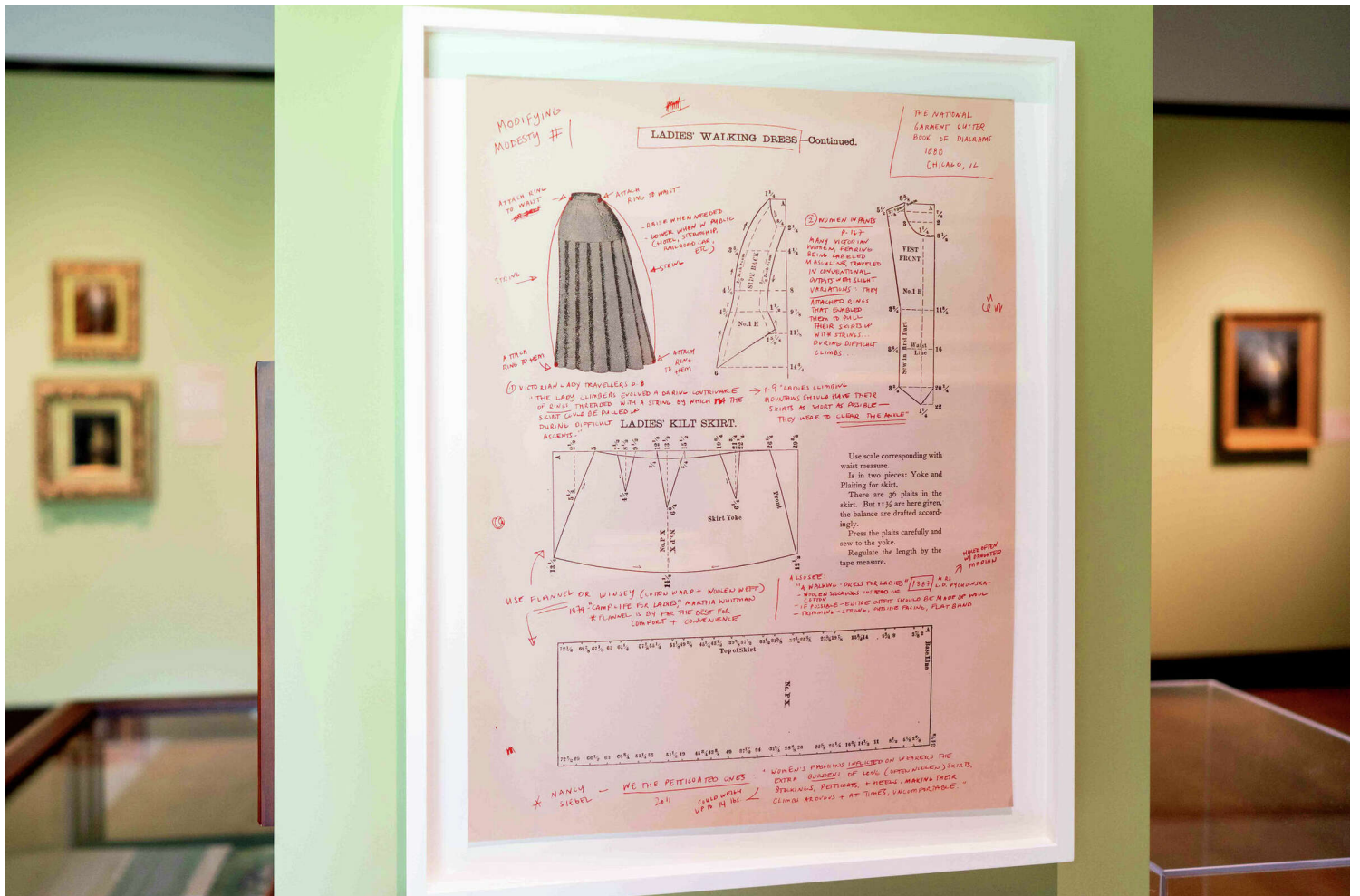
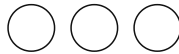
# Women rule the landscape – then and now – in Cole exhibits



William Jaeger

June 28, 2023

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Anna Plesset's "Modifying Modesty" (2022) at the "Women Reframe American Landscape" show at the Thomas Cole House in Catskill.

William Jaeger

The problem begins if you think women don't usually paint landscapes. OK, you admit, they do now — women do everything now — but what about in the 1800s?

“Women Reframe American Landscape” at the Thomas Cole House gives proof that women did everything then, too. And women are growing our understanding of the landscape into the 21st century.

## If you go

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What: “Women Reframe American Landscape”

Where: Thomas Cole House, 218 Spring Street, Catskill

When: through Oct. 29

Hours: 9:45 a.m.-5 p.m. Wednesday-Sunday

[www.thomascole.org/visit](http://www.thomascole.org/visit) for details

Admission: \$18 for adults; \$16 for those 62 and older, students, military; \$10 for K-12 teachers; free for members and those 15 and younger. Prices shift in October, <https://thomascole.org/tickets/> for details

Info: 518-943-7465

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There are two coordinated exhibitions at hand. In the New Studio, “Susie Barstow and Her Circle” opens up the expansive career of Barstow, along with many other 19th-century female landscape painters. And in the original Cole House and Old Studio, “Contemporary Practices” takes the somber historic interiors and spikes them with inventive, politically imbued and often physically lush artworks by more than a dozen women artists working today.

Barstow rightfully basks in the limelight. Her landscapes were fully a part of the Hudson River School universe begun by Thomas Cole in the 1820s, though she worked decades later, after the Civil War. Her scenes, whether densely wooded seclusions or broad views with plays of light over pristine waters, are as gorgeous as they are conventional. All her works here are detailed and nuanced, showing the compositions and coloristic flourishes of truly excellent oil painting — she taught as well as practiced — exploring many small dramas and welcoming airs without compromise.

An early example is “Wooded Interior,” with dark shadows and heavy growth supporting a more luminous stand of birches, the far away sky poking through high branches. You can almost smell the rich soil and hear the bare murmur of a small stream just out of sight. Or so I imagine the buyers of these small landscapes feeling when they put them — and Barstow made many of them — in their parlors in 1865 (in this case). Likewise, the romantic “Night in the Wood” from 1890 is not describing the effect of moonlight on a small stream below a stark tree but is letting the viewer feel their own way through it.

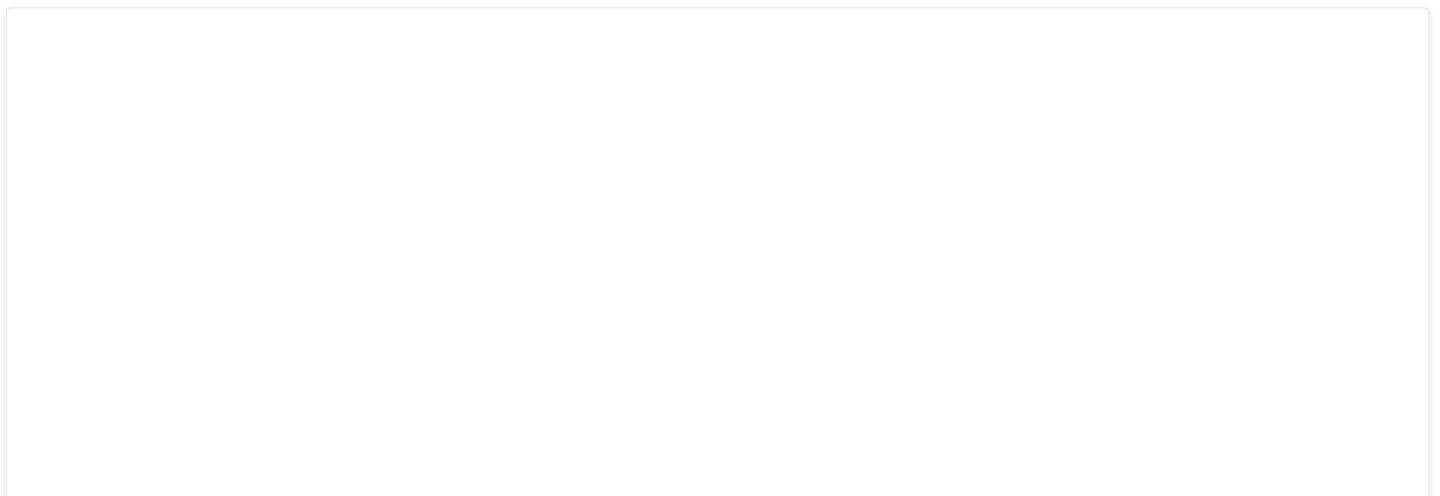
Barstow’s contemporaries form a kind of circle, I suppose, but more to the point is that there were many women with careers in the arts who embraced the landscape at the time. Some of these come from the same “school” of painting as Barstow, with a dramatic sense of woods, water and sky, exploring the small mountains and deep recesses of the Catskills, Adirondacks and New England. Others stretch out a bit, taking on hints of Impressionism (as in Charlotte Buell Coman’s “Landscape” with its softened details and pastel shadows) or a Barbizon style (think Corot when you see the crepuscular verticality of Eliza Greatorex’s “Rock Enon Springs”).

I especially like how this show is purely about women painters. They create their own context, without the men peering down. It’s all beautiful and quite convincing.

A single contemporary entry by Anna Plesset lets us pivot from the 19th to the 21st century. Plesset’s 2022 screen print, “Modifying Modesty,” invents, with aching humor, a schematic for one of the well-known garments Barstow created for hiking, as a woman, in the mountains (something she did avidly).

Across the lawn in the Cole House, Plesset’s oil and graphite work, “Value Study 1,” is a deliberately incomplete copy of an 1848 painting by Sarah Cole, which is a copy of an earlier version by her more famous brother. In miniature, Plesset also incorporates a completed version of the scene, presented as if an ink-jet image taped to the surface.

The full experience of “Contemporary Practices” is rewarding in its many layers. Just finding the artwork in the house makes for a nice treasure hunt, and discovering them next to Thomas Cole’s paintings and artifacts is both clashing and oddly simpatico. The older works are now made to engage and provoke equally with the newer ones.



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Digging into the land as “subject” in an artwork in the 21 century means something different from the romanticized observation and allegorical commentary of the 19th. For starters, in North America, there lurks the cold fact that the land was inhabited for millennia by others — natives to the landscape who experienced it with radical dissimilitude. Kay Walkingstick, a citizen of the Cherokee nation, makes it simple: “We’re living on Indian land.” And her painting of mountains — the Sierras in this case — is literally layered with designs used by the native tribe there, the Paiute.

Jaune Quick-to-See, a member of the Crow tribe, vigorously paints a map of a disjointed North America and spins it upside down, a telling maneuver. Jamaican artist Ebony G. Patterson fills an entire wall with a glittering, almost glowing mixed-media tapestry garden with a beheaded figure in the center, creating what the

artist calls “a metaphor for death, burial, renewal, but also a space for love and care.” And the patterned landscape geometries of mixed-media artist Saya Woolfalk are rooted in fictional and fantastical notions of a futurist feminism, where women and the land find ways to merge.

These and many other works — repurposed shipping containers that address the waste inherent in mounting exhibitions, a video about indigenous practice and environmental malpractice in Chile, sculptures made of detritus gathered by an artist who explores the waterways around New York City — all take issue with our assumptions one way or another. Assumptions of our own relationship to the land and the landscape.

The show becomes a complex, fascinating web of new ideas against old ones, and taken whole, including work from very different centuries, it is unavoidably striking and powerful. And necessary to see for yourself.

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Written By  
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