

Westchester

Section 14

Hudson River School Just Keeps on Rolling

Artists Over the Years Have Taken Up the Mantle of the Founders of an American Genre, Landscape Painting

By WILLIAM ZIMMER

THE Hudson River School was never just about scenery. The artists who initiated and cultivated what has become the American genre — landscape painting — were on a kind of mission roughly between 1825 and 1875. They perpetuated and reflected the idea that America was a new Eden where mankind could make a fresh start. The art also embodied nationalistic sentiments. The invention of the cotton gin and the opening of the Erie Canal pointed to a boundless prosperity.

The expansiveness and optimism associated with the Hudson River School began to fade after the Civil War. Paintings set in autumnal wildernesses with a locomotive cutting through the scene are strong statements that the paradisiacal ideal was over. Land-

scape painting never ceased, but the essential accomplishments and meaning of the Hudson River School were not tackled by scholars until the middle of this century.

Whether the Hudson River School has influence today is a complex question. Because the Hudson River School traditionally rests on the pillars of spirituality and material wealth, the essence of it cannot simply be added as another ingredient to a painting. Even though few people today literally see a deity in nature, it would seem that an aspirant to the style must have a command of light and atmosphere. Also necessary is a sense of the sublime, a goal of the Romantic movement in Europe as well as America. At their grandest, Hudson River School paintings induce a sense of awe and reverence.

Although the Hudson River School is strongly associated with specific geography, the Hudson River Valley — 350 miles long,

stretching from Lake Tear of the Clouds in the Adirondack Mountains through the Catskills down to the Battery at the tip of Manhattan — its canon was also very portable: Albert Bierstadt took it to the West, Frederick Church to South America. The branch of the style known as Luminism was practiced chiefly on the New England coast. Because the principles of the school's style could stay intact over a wide spatial territory, they may be able to endure over time, like new wine poured into new bottles.

A brochure for an exhibition this past summer at Union College in Schenectady, titled "Enduring Visions," sparked this inquiry, for it unabashedly links a group of 17 contemporary landscape painters to the past. Its text recounts in scholarly detail the history of the Hudson River School, and its principal founder, Thomas Cole, while the

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artists in the show are cited only by reproductions of their work. In the absence of the paintings themselves the importance of the exhibition seems to be its emphasis on continuity from the rich 19th-century heritage. The small reproductions of light-filled images are like beacons that prove its survival.

Right now, closer to home in the Lower Hudson Valley, is further intriguing evidence that the Hudson River School idiom is still a vital way of expressing an attitude toward nature and contemporary civilization. Its legacy is more versatile than might be expected. At the Hudson River Gallery in Dobbs Ferry, Don

Nice is exhibiting his "Earthscapes" while at Lehman College in the Bronx, Jaime Davidovich shows what he calls "video paintings." At the Hudson River Museum there is the opportunity to touch base through a selection of venerable Hudson River School landscapes from the Albany Institute of Art and History.

Don Nice lives in Garrison, in an 18th-century house on the banks of the Hudson across from West Point. "We put in a lot of trees," he said, pointing to the expanse of grass that leads from his house to the water. "You get tired of looking at the river all the time." But Mr. Nice got to view the river constantly, in 1985, when he made a watercolor painting trip down the entire river, first by

raft and then by boat. The results are composed and balanced like all of his work. That journey continues to influence his art.

One of his major devices is to take natural elements — a pine tree, a squirrel or a trout, say — and make them emblems separate from the landscape. Those emblems have been compared to the subordinate panels on Renaissance altarpieces. As such, they are a spiritual reference. In the past Mr. Nice's arsenal of imagery included Pop items meant to trigger associations. They might, like a chocolate bar and a pair of aviator sunglasses, represent the senses. But lately the earth, present through images of the venerable landscape, is his central content. These images are often bordered by stylized forms representing air,

earth, fire and water, which encapsulate the sublime.

Mr. Nice's 20 monotypes and lithographs at the Hudson River Gallery are striking in their simplicity. A major influence is the underappreciated landscapes of Marsden Hartley from the the 1930's in which landscape features, remarkable for their bold contours, seem to have been filtered through Hudson River School aspirations. Mr. Nice also agrees with some commentators that the large paintings of many of the Abstract Expressionists, including Barnett Newman and Clyfford Still, have some of the "felt terror," as he calls it, found in many of the most ambitious Hudson River School paintings.

"Like the Hudson River School painters, light is a major concern of mine," he said, holding up a sheet of

metal. "I'm convinced that anodized aluminum is the material of the future. Jackson Pollock said that each new age demands a new material." Tilting the aluminum square, Mr. Nice said, "The best thing about it is the way it catches light, and it glows best in a lower light source. It's like the way the earth is at its most sublime — in the light of early morning."

Jaime Davidovich of Argentina has lived in the United States for 35 years and had a studio in the Catskills for 10 years. His "Paintings in Real Time" at the Lehman College Gallery, which rely on video projectors in a darkened space, are presented as contemporary versions of the theatrics frequently employed by the Hudson River School painters.

Susan Hoeltzel, the gallery director, has researched this underappreciated tendency. She observes that in 1863 Bierstadt exhibited his painting "The Rocky Mountains" as a tableau vivant with actual Indians camped in front of it. Gas jets illuminated Frederick Church's "Heart of the Andes," and he surrounded it with tropical foliage when he exhibited it in his New York Studio in 1859.

Compared with those precedents, Mr. Davidovich's presentation is forceful because of its starkness. On a black wooden support, he has delineated six compact rectangles with iridescent pigment. The paint is applied roughly, leaving distinct brush marks. Those areas become canvases onto which he projects scenes

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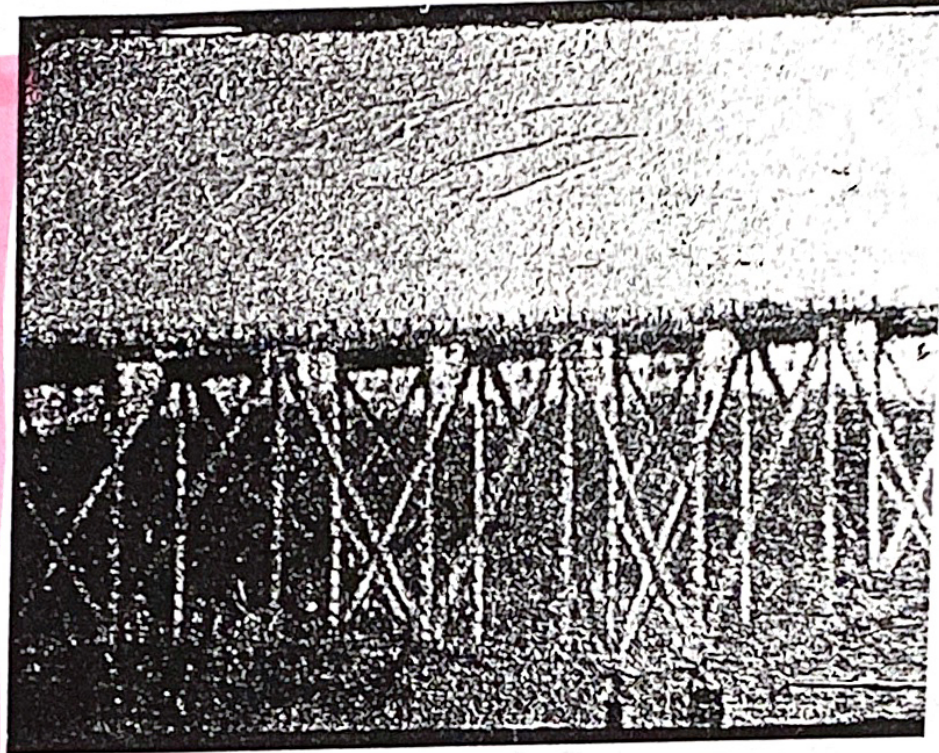
of the Hudson River Valley. Among the six scenes are three views of Manhattan, which might seem errant at first. But the epitome of civilization was at one end of the Hudson in the 19th century, too, which can contribute to the poignancy of the wilderness scenery. One image is of the New Jersey Pine Barrens, a reminder that George Inness, who is regarded as the last of the major Hudson River School painters, lived and worked in New Jersey. The other scenes are an upstate trestle bridge and High Falls in the Catskills.

The content that Mr. Davidovich projects onto the iridescent rectangles moves very slowly, and it is easy to forget that these are not conventional paintings. The tapes are loops, meaning that the scene plays continually for six hours. No traffic passes over the trestle bridge for long stretches, and it is a major event when a boat sails across the river between Manhattan and New Jersey.

The iridescence that is fundamental to Mr. Davidovich's art relates it strongly to Turner and Corot but especially to Luminism, which for the most part was paintings of still water.

Light also figures prominently in the related show at the Lehman College Gallery. "In View of Nature" features nine artists, most of whom are sculptors. In what seems like a Hudson River School vein, Nade Haley makes installations that are dependent on light, reflection and shadows, while Beth Galston encases natural material like seed pods and ginkgo leaves in a clear resin, which captures light. Those works — plus Thom Thulen's color photographs of sublime, even apocalyptic landscapes, which were actually sculptured forms made in a large fish tank, are reminders that the prevailing view of nature today is, in one respect at least, fundamentally different from that which propelled the Hudson River School. Nature is now seen as something fragile and ephemeral.

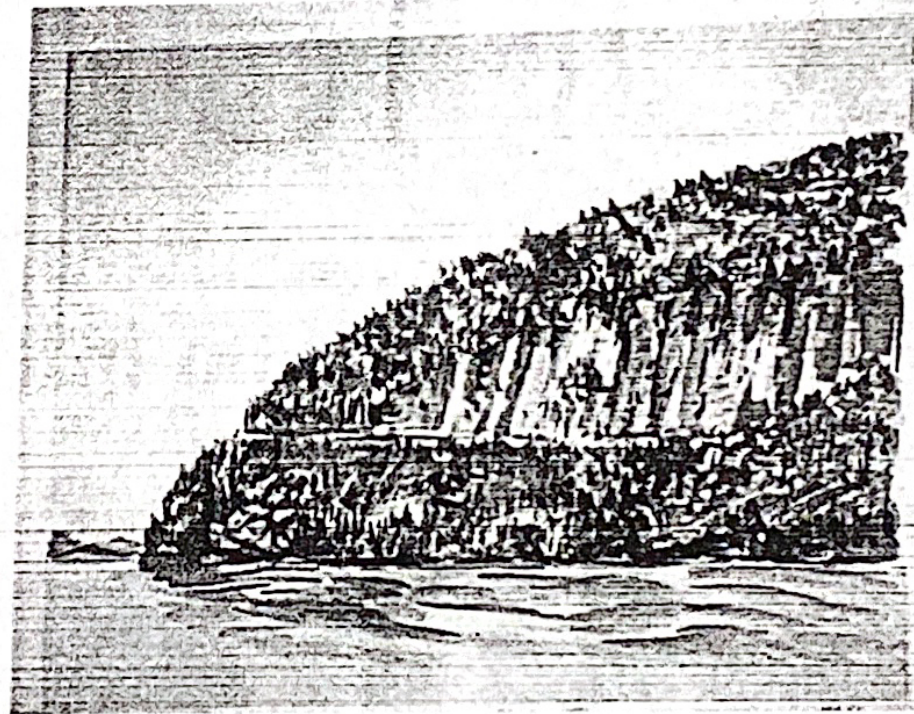
Two kinds of reality checks are



Three exhibitions call attention to enduring beauty of 350 miles of river.

provided by the just opened, "Art and Nature" exhibition at the Hudson River Museum. The first is a yardstick: viewers can compare recent manifestations of the Hudson River School idiom with 27 paintings by the major artists associated with the development of American landscape painting. "The only thing I regret is that there's no Bierstadt," Philip Verre, the museum's director, said in an interview. "But then Bierstadt wandered pretty far, and the emphasis of this show is local — upstate New York." The paintings are from the collection of the Albany Institute of History and Art.

The renovated Glenview Mansion gallery, which is being reopened in conjunction with this show, provides the other reality check. Tall windows hang with diaphanous shades punc-



uate the walls, affording river views. The museum realizes that its location is a major asset. Mr. Verre observed that the varying light afforded by the gallery windows collaborates in the presentation of the paintings. And viewers can refresh themselves by occasionally glancing

at what Mr. Verre calls "a simple view of the river."

Hanging in Mr. Verre's office are paintings by George Kelly. Kelly was known as a colorist and came late to landscape when the views from the windows of his home in Croton-on-Hudson began to beckon him in the



"Hudson Fall," an oil on canvas by George Kelly, above, "Storm King II," a monotype by Don Nice, left, and "Trestle Bridge," a video painting by Jaime Davidovich, are three examples of the new Hudson River School.

mid-1970's. The bright intensity of Kelly's colors provides the requisite luminosity of these paintings.

But Mr. Verre is reluctant to say that Kelly's work, or that of Mr. Nice about whom Mr. Verre has written, are part of anything that can be called a Hudson River School Revival. He sees the fortunes of the Hudson River School in historical terms: "There was a big revival of interest after World War I, but that probably had a lot to do with jingoism," he said. "Then there was a severe decline until the 1960's, and it has been strong ever since."

"Around here a lot of interest in this kind of painting has a lot to do with the resurgence of the Lower Hudson Valley. The art goes hand in hand with interest in the environment. That's the big difference between the heyday of the Hudson River School and today. Then nature was something to be either revered or to be conquered. Today, nature is in the corner."

Mr. Verre's unwillingness to call

this recent enthusiasm for the hallowed place a revival of the Hudson River School does not stem from any notion that the 19th century's achievements are exclusive. Rather, the idea of revival is not a burning one for the opposite reason. "Not all Hudson River School paintings are about grandeur and the sublime," he said. "Many are just what you see out your window."

Mr. Nice's "Earthscapes" exhibition is at the Hudson River Gallery in Dobbs Ferry through Nov. 6. The number to call for information is (914) 693-1991.

"Paintings in Real Time" by Mr. Davidovich and the group show "In View of Nature" are at the Lehman College Art Gallery through Jan. 12. That — information number — is (718) 960-8731.

"Art and Nature: The Hudson River School" is at the Hudson River Museum in Yonkers through Dec. 19. For information, call (914) 963-4550.