



Published by The Bee Publishing Company, Newtown, Connecticut

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"Small Bird with Flowering Ironwood" by Fidelia Bridges, circa 1870, oil on canvas, 10 by 29 inches, 16 by 26 inches framed, Allan E. Bulley Collection.

"Portrait of Susie M. Barstow," Rawson 255 & 257 Fulton Street, Brooklyn, circa 1870, tintype, 5½ by 4 inches. Private Collection, Photograph: Dennis DeHart.

Women Reframe American Landscape

Susie Barstow & Her Circle / Contemporary Practices

By JESSICA SKWIRE ROUTHIER
CATSKILL, N.Y. & NEW
BRITAIN, CONN. — Con-
sciously or not, when we think
of the so-called Hudson River
School — the Nineteenth Cen-
tury painters who created
majestic American landscape
views — we think of an essen-

tially male phenomenon.
Indeed, the Thomas Cole
National Historic Site is more
or less grounded in the concept
of Cole as the "founding father"
of the movement, taken up by
(male) students and acolytes
like Frederic Edwin Church
and others after Cole's prema-

ture death in 1842. This hierar-
chical leader-follower framing,
however, effectively leaves out
other participants, including
what scholar Nancy Siegel has
described as some of the
"founding mothers" of the
American landscape tradition.
The two-part exhibition,
"Women Reframe American
Landscape: Susie Barstow &
Her Circle / Contemporary
Practices," offers a broader
vantage point. It is on view at
the Thomas Cole National His-
toric Site through October 29,
when it will then travel to the
New Britain Museum of Ameri-
can Art November 16 through
March 31.

A touchstone for the exhibi-
tion, as Siegel and her co-cura-
tors Kate Menconeri and
Amanda Malmstrom acknowl-
edge in the exhibition's accom-
panying catalog, is Linda Noch-
lin's influential essay from
1971, "Why Have There Been
No Great Women Artists?" It's
a layered question, one that is

at least partially complicated
by how we define "great," a
label often applied after an ar-
tist's death, when their career
has fully played out (though
Cole, to be fair, was recognized
as great in his own lifetime).
Since Nochlin's essay, much
feminist art history has
involved demonstrating that
there were, in fact, professional
women artists who were recog-
nized and acclaimed in their
time but whom, for a variety of
reasons, art history has failed
to canonize. A central argu-
ment of the present show is
that Susie Barstow (1836-
1923) was one of those artists
— and, importantly, that she
does not stand alone, then or
now, as a solitary genius but as
part of a broad community of
women artists participating in
what we now term the Hudson
River School.

The publicity for the exhibi-
tion, echoed by Siegel in a
recent gallery tour, has hailed
it as the "first solo show ever of

a Nineteenth Century woman
landscape painter," which is a
bit unfair to one of Barstow's
contemporaries, Fidelia Bridg-
es (1834-1923), currently the
subject of a solo show at the
Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art
Museum in Wausau, Wis. But
Bridges is given her due here,
to be sure, with an oil, "Small
Bird with Flowering Ironwood,"
and a small watercolor of barn
swallows.

Representative
works are also on view by Julie
Hart Beers, Charlotte Buell
Coman, Eliza Pratt Greatorex,
Mary Josephine Walters and
Laura Woodward, many of
whom were also featured in a
2010 exhibition at the Cole
House, also curated by Siegel,
called "Remember the Ladies:
Women of the Hudson River
School," for which "Women
Reframe American Landscape"
was conceived as a kind of
sequel. "To have this opportu-
nity to focus on one particular
artist and really give her a ret-
rospective that she's never had
is the next important step in
terms of curating," says Siegel.

That earlier show furnished
something of a revelation that
so many women were partici-
pants in this defining Ameri-
can landscape tradition, par-
ticularly given the obstacles
they had to overcome. In this
pre-suffrage, pre-women's
rights era, women faced signifi-
cant legal limitations, includ-
ing their ability to govern their
finances, own property and run
businesses, coupled with the
obligations of childbearing and
family life that, with rare
exceptions, were exclusive to
women. Perhaps it is not sur-
prising, then, that many of the
women to succeed as landscape
painters (which necessarily
involved large periods of time
outside the home) were thus
unencumbered. Neither Bar-
stow nor Bridges ever married
and instead developed a net-



"She, Her, Hers Map" by Jaune Quick-To-See-Smith, 2021, beads, 8¼ by 12 inches. Courtesy the artist and Garth Greenan Gallery, New York City.



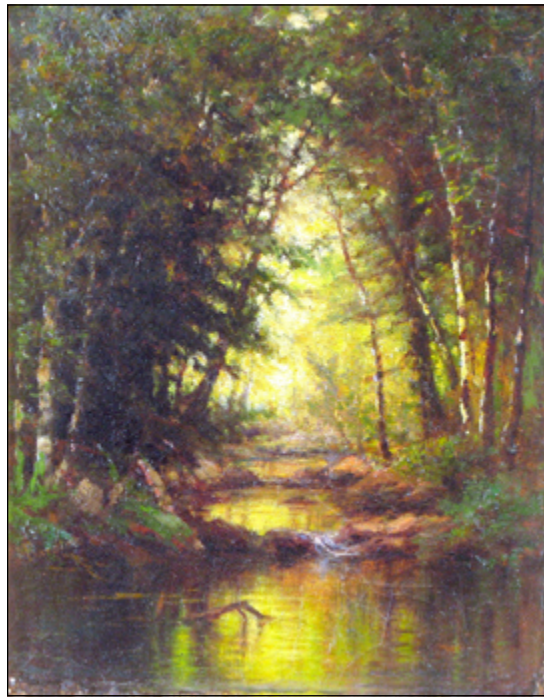
"Amerika Map" by Jaune Quick-To-See-Smith, 2021, beads, 8¼ by 12 inches. Courtesy the artist and Garth Greenan Gallery, New York City.



Susie M. Barstow's paint box, circa 1860, wood and assorted
artist's supplies, 5¼ by 11 by 9¼ inches. Private Collection,
Photograph: Dennis DeHart.



“Pool in the Woods” by Susie Barstow, 1885, oil on canvas, 9½ by 7 inches, 16 by 13½ inches framed, Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, Hartford, Conn., Photograph: John Groo.

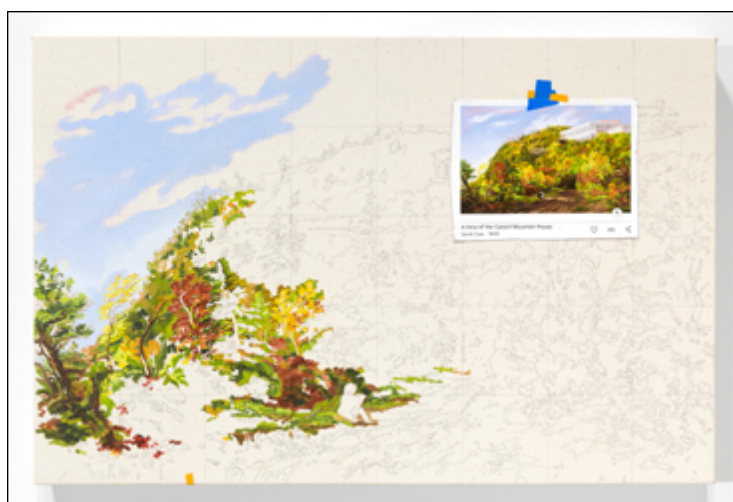


“Sunshine in the Woods” by Susie Barstow, 1886, oil on canvas, 9½ by 7½ inches, 20 by 18 inches framed, Paul Stuka Collection, Photograph: Hawthorne Fine Art, New York City.

work of female friends, traveling companions and “partners” (the term is left for readers and viewers to interpret as they will). Such arrangements enabled them to travel in pairs or groups rather than alone or with a male companion — which would have been unthinkable — and fostered networks of influence and knowledge sharing that were somewhat independent of the more formal teacher-student relationships from which they were largely excluded.

The show delves deeper into one specific limitation for women landscape painters: the challenge of how to hike in the restrictive women’s clothing of the late Nineteenth Century. A life-size enlargement of a tin-type showing Barlow in her hiking gear opens the exhibition, and right next to it is her paintbox, which along with many of the artworks on view has been carefully saved by the Barstow family in the century since her death. Together, the picture and the paintbox convey the difficulty of navigating the actual terrain of the Catskills, Adirondacks and White Mountains, along with the fraught social terrain of postbellum America. There were ways to go about it, it turns out: a contemporary work by Anna Plesset, on view nearby, takes the form of an annotated antique dress pattern, showing how systems of pulls and cords modified long skirts for the hiking trails.

Kitted out in this way, Barstow painted highly accomplished views of scenery from New York to California and beyond, including multiple trips to Europe. Some of the works on view, like “Mountain Lake in Autumn,” are fully realized exhibition pictures in the formal idiom of the Hudson River School — distant view, framing foliage, eye-catching foreground details — while others, like “Pool in the Woods,” are more understated views of the forest interior, evocative of later Nineteenth Century ideas about how art, nature and spirituality intertwine. Indeed, “In the Woods” belonged to famed clergyman and orator Henry



“Value Study 1: A View of the Catskill Mountain House / Copied from a picture by S. Cole copied from a picture by T. Cole / 1848” by Anna Plesset, 2020, oil and graphite on canvas, 15-3/8 by 23-7/16 inches, Sundee Mullangi and Trissa Babrowski Collection, Courtesy the artist and PATRON Gallery, Chicago. Photograph: Etienne Frossard.

Ward Beecher (it is today in the collection of the Harriet Beecher Stowe House in Hartford, Conn.), evidence that Barstow had very high-profile clients indeed. “Pool in the Woods” is also interesting in that its composition is echoed in several other works in the show, including “Night in the Woods” and “Sunlight in the Woods,” exploring different effects of light, mood and time of day in much the same way European modernists like Claude Monet were doing at the same time.

The exhibition, as suggested by its title, exists in two parts, with “Susie Barstow and Her Circle” in the Cole site’s modern gallery space (a reimagining of Cole’s “new studio”) and “Contemporary Views” in the historic house where Cole and his family lived, also known as Cedar Grove. There is a little blurring of the boundaries in each place, with Anna Plesset’s aforementioned piece enhancing the historical works on view in the new studio and an important work by Sarah Cole — Thomas’s sister, and an accomplished artist in her own right — among the contemporary works of art in Cedar Grove. Sarah’s painting, on loan from the Albany Institute of History & Art, is a copy of Thomas’ Catskill “Mountain House,” also on loan; the two

are seen together here for the first time since the Nineteenth Century. Notably, Plesset has a role in this liminal space as well as the one in the new studio; her “Value Study 1” copies Sarah’s copy after Thomas but leaves it unfinished — a reminder, says Menconeri, that “the labor of recovery, of recovering women’s voices in history, is never complete; it’s always being done.”

Left unfinished, with only the sky and a corner of foliage filled in at the upper left,



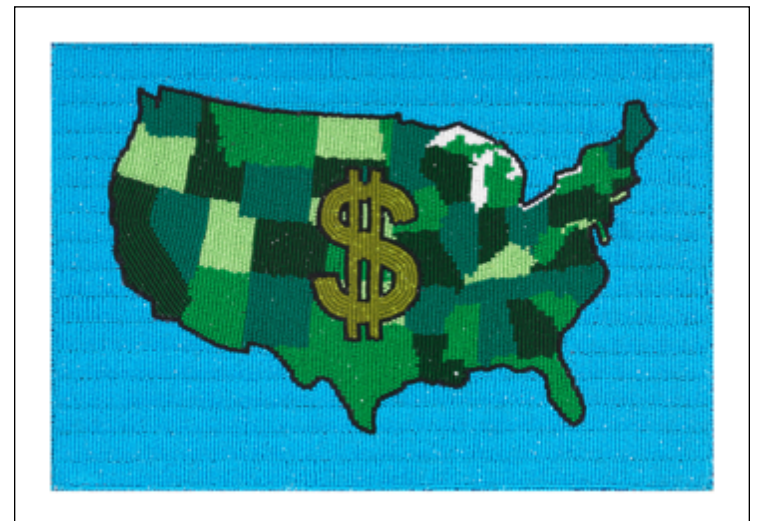
“Winter Passage” by Kay Walkingstick, 2017, oil on panel in two parts, 36 by 72-1/8 by 2 inches. Courtesy the artist and Hales Gallery, London and New York City.



“Mountain Lake in Autumn” by Susie Barstow, 1873, oil on canvas, 20 by 30 inches, Private Collection, Photograph: Hawthorne Fine Art, New York City.



“Stolen Map” by Jaune Quick-To-See-Smith, 2021, beads, 8¼ by 12 inches. Courtesy the artist and Garth Greenan Gallery, New York City.



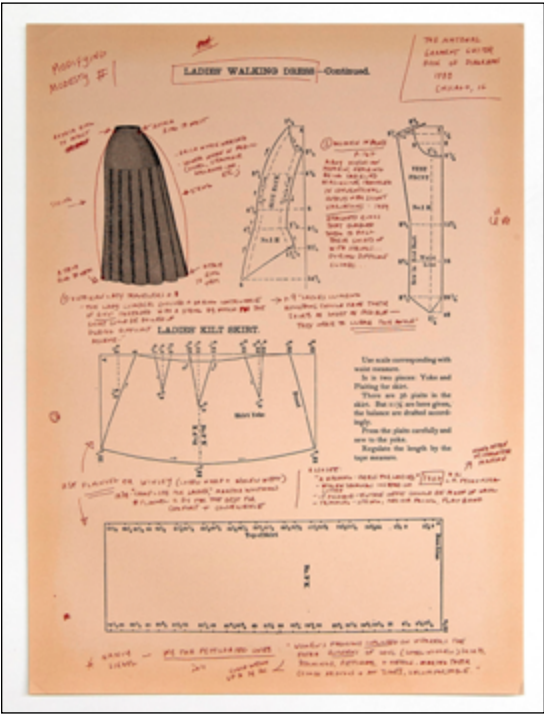
“\$ Map” by Jaune Quick-To-See-Smith, 2021, beads, 8¼ by 12 inches. Courtesy the artist and Garth Greenan Gallery, New York City.



“A View of the Catskill Mountain House” by Sarah Cole, 1848, oil on canvas, 15-1/3 by 23-3/8 inches, 22 1/4 by 29 3/4 inches, framed, Albany Institute of History and Art, Albany, N.Y., Albany Institute of History & Art Purchase, 1964.



“...the wailing...ushers us home...and there is a bellying on the land...” by Ebony G. Patterson, 2021, mixed media on jacquard woven photo tapestry and custom vinyl wallpaper, approximately 96 by 104 inches. Courtesy the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.



“Modifying Modesty” by Anna Plesset, 2022, letterpress, silkscreen, and handwork on Stonehenge, 20 by 15 inches, edition of 20, 5 AP, 2 PP, Courtesy the artist.



“Night in the Woods” by Susie Barstow, 1890, oil on canvas, 20 by 14 inches, Georgia B. Gosnell Collection, Photograph: Hawthorne Fine Art, New York City.

Plesset’s work looks oddly map-like, with the sky reading as water and the foliage as land. Intentional or not, this creates a fascinating parallel to additional works on view in the same space (the second story sitting room of Cedar Grove) by the Indigenous artist Jaune Quick-To-See-Smith. In the painting “Unhinged (Map),” the outline of the continental United States is flipped on its head, with cartoon-like brackets around it suggesting motion and destabilization. More maps above the fireplace are smaller but no less striking; here the familiar US silhouette is rendered in careful beadwork, with each map bearing a beaded message: “She/Her/Hers,” “Stolen,” “\$” and “Amerika.” These works and others deal forthrightly with topics that Barstow and her circle, as affluent Anglo-Americans, would likely never have considered including, as Malmstrom put it, “Who has the power to name the land, and who owns it?” as well as “Who is included in the stories we tell about it?” It may feel jarring to some visitors to have the work of



“Barn Swallows” by Fidelia Bridges, 1875, watercolor on paper, 10 by 15 inches. Mr and Mrs Max N. Berry Collection, Washington DC, Photograph: Hawthorne Fine Art, New York City.

contemporary women of color take up so much space in a historic house otherwise dedicated to a Nineteenth Century English/American painter. But the curators point out that Cedar Grove is, in fact, a very woman-centered space. Although Thomas Cole lived there, he never owned it; it was the property of his wife, Maria’s, family, and much of the unseen labor involved in running it as a semi-public artist’s space, before and after Cole’s death, was done by women. Then, too, the art that was displayed here during Thomas’s lifetime — his own work as well as Sarah’s and that of their friends and colleagues — was contemporary for its time. So perhaps it is not so much of a stretch to see Teresita Fernández’s series of “Small American Fires” paintings line the perimeter of the room the Coles used as a gallery space, or Ebony G. Patterson’s monumental baroque wallpaper installation taking primacy of place in the parlor.

The question of who we include in our histories — and art histories — is the subject of yet another work by Plesset, which on first appearance seems to be simply a copy of the catalog for the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s 1987 Hudson River School exhibition, “American Paradise” laid open to the page featuring Susie Barstow. But wait — Barstow was never in that exhibition, nor in the catalog. Instead, this is a clever intervention, a literal reinsertion of women landscape painters into a canon-forming event and publication. Further, the work on view is not a book at all but a trompe l’oeil sculpture; visitors cannot leaf through it to see who else it may discuss (to be clear, it’s not okay to touch it at all); instead, Malmstrom says, it “leaves the labor to us as the viewer [as to] what would fill these pages; who would these women be.” Similarly, a newly commissioned work by the Guerilla Girls, “Hudson River School Reality Check,” exposes the lacunae and challenges the myths of American landscape painting and art-historical canon formation. The Guerilla Girls piece rep-

resents the continuity of a kind of second-wave feminist art history that is now canonical in its own way, but this is further teased open by the intersectional work of a new generation, including the ethnic and ecocritical perspectives represented by Marie Lorenz, Tanya Marcuse, Mary Mattingly, Wendy Red Star, Jean Shin, Cecilia Vicuña and Saya Woolfalk. The shared message that human beings do not exist separately from nature but are wholly part of it is also evident in Kay Walkingstick’s monumental painting “Winter Passage,” a mountainous landscape not dissimilar in composition to those of the Hudson River School. Unique to Walkingstick’s rendition, though, is the Indigenous basketry pattern overlaid on the painting’s surface, hovering over the picture plane both to remind us that it is a picture and not reality, and to make the Native’s presence in the pictured landscape unignorable. Visually speaking, at least, you cannot get to those alluring mountains without encountering the heritage of those who lived, and still live, among them.

By weaving contemporary art in and among the historical pieces, the curators of “Women Reframe American Landscape” have adopted a similar strategy to Walkingstick’s: they have made it unignorable. At the same time, the visual appeal of the works draws you in and creates a space where you can begin to question why you have never seen some of them before, or why you respond as you do to seeing them in this place — or even to reconsider or reframe your perceptions of the Hudson River School itself. Engaging serious issues through beauty is something that Cole, an ardent and vocal environmentalist, understood out of the gate, and it is therefore only natural that his home furnishes a place to continue that lauded American tradition. The Thomas Cole National Historic Site is at 218 Spring Street. The New Britain Museum of American Art is at 56 Lexington Street. For information, www.thomascole.org or www.nbmaa.org.