

THE ART OF NATURE: "Green's the Thing"

The Hudson Valley is brimming with artists, and art-related events. There's an explosion of actors, choreographers, dancers, directors, musicians, novelists, poets, painters, performers, sculptors, videographers, writers and every other kind

In general there's a lot of concern with hyper-commercial, multinational corporate plunder and the disregard for human rights and environmental protection that seem rampant right now. Our planet is being stripped of natural resources and

But in my opinion, some of the most provocative art I've seen combines or opposes the harsh exploitative reality of corporate pillage with a romantic landscape or Arcadian view—think Bambi in the nuclear reactor. Another image was Breugesque, a pastoral scene of hay harvest superimposed on a cybernetic matrix. This type of work has tension, or volatility, the result of a conflict between two oppositional tendencies that creates explosive ideas. Otherwise, in the broadest sense, the only consistent trend I can identify is the trend of *no trend*, and that may reflect a larger, global, cognitive and ideological tectonic shift.

To have artists in the Hudson Valley is a time-honored tradition—old as the hills. Our region is, of course, the birthplace of the Hudson River School of painting, and the residences of two of that school's greatest figures, artists Thomas Cole and Frederic Church, stand like sentinels on either side of the river at the Rip Van Winkle Bridge.

Although there are some artists in the region still working within a traditional landscape vernacular—using materials and methods like oil paint on canvas in a picturesque style—other, less anachronistic forms of painting and different fine arts media are emerging.

As stated earlier, it's impossible not to recognize a certain consistency in that many contemporary artists acknowledge the seemingly incompatible problem, or the hard-edge/soft-edge, between the deeper rhythms of earth, nature, four sea-

sons, and the elements, versus the hyper-accelerated, multinational marketplace of the 21st century.

But the singular, most recurrent theme is probably 'Green.' While procrastinating one day, I came across a brochure I had picked up from the Whitney Biennial 2008 titled "Family Guide," by artist Matthew Brannon. "These days everyone talks about being "green," writes Brannon in an introductory statement, and I thought, *Eureka! That's it. Being green's the thing.*

Suddenly everything seemed to come together, and I realized that the Hudson Valley today may be a redux of the energy and spirit that brought art world notables to this region last century, *to be green*. The pendulum swing that occurred then, away from cities and back to nature—a reaction to the dehumanizing conditions of our decreasingly democratic society—and redevelopment of human-scale communities within a rural context, is occurring once again.

It's interesting to speculate why this happens, why certain people gravitate to certain regions at certain times. And sometimes a "scene" starts because of something as simple as basic economics—a lot of great properties are available for very little money. Practical matters always influence the migratory patterns of artists and other unconventional people who usually don't have much money. But a move to the country can also signal a return to nature, a green awareness and an embracing of traditional agricultural, and agrarian values. It's a response to some-



BY PHILIP ALVARÉ

of creative creature imaginable in our hills and dales. When I first started researching this article for the ART issue, I tried to develop a theme for it by identifying trends that encompassed various artists working in different media in the Hudson Valley today.

irrevocable damage has been done to the earth. Awareness of this abuse has engendered a back to nature, or "green" trend, and many artists are working with materials and forms which include subjects that celebrate the earth, natural beauty and resources as well as the need to preserve and revere our planet.



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thing, a reaction against something that has gone too far in the opposite direction.

There are dire times when escape is the only solution. For as long as anybody can remember, people head for the hills when society becomes a sewer. It's one of life's cycles, like the change of the seasons, or turning of the tides. This perennial return to nature might signal a search for truth and beauty—maybe even a yearning for an ineffable spiritual presence.

In the early 18th century, French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78), architect of the Enlightenment, advocated the notion of the "Natural Man." That may be one of the first identifiable "go green" initiatives in the annals of environmentalism. Later, English painter, poet, and philosopher John Ruskin (1820-1900) reacted sharply against the proliferation of cities, their increasingly dense populations, and the gathering storm clouds of the Industrial Revolution, and pushed for a return to nature. Ruskin's theories influenced Thomas Cole, who was in truth an Englishman who imported British notions of his day when he came here, and started what many consider the only true school of American painting.

In his essay "Nature," Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-82) said, "Every natural fact is a

symbol of some spiritual fact." This suggests something like a numinous thumbprint, or signature, written in nature. Henry David Thoreau (1816-72) echoed that sentiment with his idea that "Nature is full of genius, full of divinity; so that not a snowflake escapes its fashioning hand." So even at that relatively nascent stage in our country's history, there was a trend among artists and thinking, reflective people searching for truth and beauty to go back to nature—to go green.

But escaping to nature is not as easy as it used to be and it's almost impossible to go exclusively green. We've got to strike a balance between the barnyard and the World Wide Web. And some of the most innovative and pertinent work I've seen does just that. It explores junctures or interstices between seemingly oppositional tendencies—nature and technology—but at the same time achieves a kind of reconciliation or synthesis of those opposites. Maybe a new form of transcendentalism.

Is there possibly a dynamic symmetry that exists in both the complex mathematical problems of cyber technology and the morphology of an oak tree? Simply heading for the hills may not be a viable artistic response, or a solution to the problems that confront us in this era.

It could be the responsibility of artists not only to lead the way—to honor, reflect and preserve our inheritance of earth and nature—but also to use technologically advanced knowledge—in truth, an extension of our own natures—to heal ourselves and our planet.

Maybe the absence of a single art movement or specific school of painting suggests generative chaos and an evolution toward new forms—something transformed. The tendency to question, define and redefine categories and contexts, be they painting, sculpture, performing or media arts, et al., signifies this. It's time to critically evaluate our received information.

Art that crosses boundaries and challenges conventional distinctions between fine and decorative arts is prevalent. Utilitarian and functional objects, and not just "art for art's sake," are being reframed and reconsidered as art. The relationships between architecture and sculpture, habitat and installation, as well as different modes of performative and electronic media, are being explored and seen everywhere.

These art currents within the Hudson Valley reflect larger national and international concerns regarding location, cultural

context, different developmental time and geographic zones. And if there is a unifying, or universal principal being addressed in all of these art forms right now, it's the concept of green.

There's nothing new in this, but it's refreshing, heartening that we've come back, are coming back to our senses, and that there's a groundswell of creative, like-minded artistic souls making their homes in our valley. The impulse to return to nature and the desire to "Simplify, simplify," as Thoreau advocated—to go green—has been a perennial theme among artists and intellectuals as an antidote to the corruption of power.

But all of us need sunlight, fresh air, and clean water as well as the benefits that the surrounding natural beauty—the mountains and the river—gives us. We can learn from our past and directly apply historically accumulated knowledge and information to our contemporary problems. Avoiding this risks the perils of an eternal return to a fouled nest. As the writer and philosopher George Santayana tells us, "Those who ignore history are destined to repeat it." We must all heed his warning.

A turning century seems to mark or foment civil unrest or disobedience, and sets the great wheels of social change and

reaction against established and controlling powers into motion. There's probably no direct cause-and-effect-relationship that the century's rotation magically kicks into gear. But it provides a benchmark and allows us to assess what's happening here. I believe our need and reverence for nature are constant for the wellbeing of our spirit and health. Our quest for art, truth, beauty and humanitarian social values is profound and indomitable. We must preserve and cherish these things, precious resources, the only ones we have, or we'll perish. I think maintaining the planet and life on earth is a worthwhile pursuit, don't you? ❖



Philip Alvaré specializes in writing about decorative, fine arts and design. For 10 years he distinguished himself as owner of BOTANICVS Antiques & Fine Arts in Hudson, N.Y., a gallery of late-18th and 19th-century antiques

and decorative elements for the garden. His background includes film, television and print production, where he earned various credits including PBS, ABC, NBC and MGM-FOX.



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