

## Paradise, Re-imagined

Essay by Tom McGlynn

"From the desperate city you go to the desperate country, and have to console yourself with the bravery of minks and muskrats" 1

Henry David Thoreau

"I had withdrawn in forest, and my song was swallowed up in leaves that blew away." 2

Robert Frost

"The earth's surface and figments of the mind have a way of disintegrating into discrete regions of art" 3

Robert Smithson

The potential reconciliation of human with animal, vegetable, and mineral nature is like an underground spring watering multiple art and societal notions of a more perfect worldly existence. From Genesis to The Origin of the Species, our collective self-image employs metaphors of wild nature lined up, and often in contest, with human reason at a shared starting point. The loss of this original parity can be alternately mourned or celebrated depending upon how we choose to implement the origin myth. Art is one place apart where we can witness, perhaps as a traveler takes in a picturesque landscape, the dynamic contest (or temporary arbitration) between man and nature. The Arcadian myth figures foremost among those ingenious devices with which we re- imagine the naturalized arena where this drama unfolds.

An important art historical precedent examining the artistic pastorate can be found in Erwin Panofsky's essay "Et In Arcadia Ego: Poussin and The Elegiac Tradition" He examines a 1647 painting by the French neo-classical painter Nicholas Poussin, *The Arcadian Shepherds*, oil on canvas, 1647, Louvre Museum, with an inscription on a depicted tomb with young shepherds gathered round it. The Latin phrase "Et in Arcadia Ego", or, "I too lived in Arcady" injects a counterpoised intimation of mortality into the scene of youthful vigor. Panofsky pinpoints the classical roots of the allegory by noting, " it is in the imagination of Virgil, and of Virgil alone, that the concept of Arcady, as we know it, was born...a bleak and chilly district of Greece came to be transfigured into an imaginary realm of perfect bliss. But no sooner had this new, Utopian Arcady come into being than a discrepancy was felt between the supernatural perfection of an imaginary environment and the natural limitations of human life as it is." 4

But how do we "see" the country? Is "Nature" a primal force in our consciousness or a residual romantic narrative, obsolete in its sentimental longing toward a site of original virtue? How is this virtue defined? Is it a bestial energy that recuperates the spirit or is it a highly refined and civilized notion of ideal human relation to the world as it was- or should return to being? The Arcadian myth swings between the rough and the smooth concept of its permutations, between the savagery of half- goat, half-man and the diffusion of the spirit in an enlightened, sun-drenched atmospheric perspective, between the Dionysian and Apollonian spheres, between the phenomenally felt and the ideologically known.

Wildly ranging attempts to rationalize these two notions of real and ideal natures have blazed many paths in our "New World". Beginning with Puritan theology, through present day eco- ideology, the revelation of a pre-lapsed Eden (or the mourning of its loss) reflects those who would seek its refuge. The Puritans' reconciliation with the wilderness took the form of a covenant with the Creator whose works in nature stood as redeemable tokens of his grace. This naturalized redemption of one's spiritual "estate", via a contractual obligation with God, would have less exalted goals and outcomes in their unslakeable thirst for land acquisition and their subsequent broken covenants with Native Americans, whose own pantheist relation to nature they most often abhorred.

In Nineteenth Century America the Hudson and Connecticut River Valleys became idealized as sites of both Arcadian idyll and artful contemplation of a type of Neo- platonist pastoral. A grand tour of the new Eden and its foot- hills gorges and falls served as a verdant panorama of the "New Republic". Asher B. Durand's painting "Kindred Spirits" captures the spirit of the time. In the painting he depicts the recently deceased leader of the Hudson River School painters, Thomas Cole, in spiritual communion with poet William Cullen Bryant on a cliff overlooking an artfully hybrid scene of the Kaaterskill Falls and Clove.

The genius of art and friendship inhabits this hallowed site: an elegiac homage to a fellow traveler's naturalist affinities. The amity of mankind is invoked in a setting conducive to such reconciliations. Here is phenomenal nature as a fraternal, spiritually redemptive environment.

Ralph Waldo Emerson would pick up the theme of a civil Eden in his 1836 essay "Nature". In his reaction against what he deemed a dry Unitarian rationalization of spiritual experience, Emerson proffered the transcendent will diffused in natural harmony. In a sense he was reviving the animist nature of his Puritan forbearers. He was an early magpie of multi-cultural metaphysics, decorating his nest on a branch of a tree rooted in supernatural soil. His elegantly cobbled philosophy helped to codify a uniquely American relationship to nature. Perry Miller describes this heady combination well:

"If the inherent mysticism, the ingrained pantheism, of certain Yankees could not be stated in the old (Puritan, Calvinist) terms, it could be couched in the new terms of transcendental idealism, of Platonism, of Swedenborg, of "Tintern Abbey" and the Bhagavad-Gita, in the eclectic and polyglot speech of the Over-Soul, in "Brahma," in "Self Reliance," in Nature 5

The civil society versus individual self-realization comes into play in the different uses of Arcadian myth. When Emerson envisioned himself as a "transparent eyeball" he positioned the self in such a way as to be un-locatable, to remain invisible, to resist overdetermination. Transcendentalism was a reaction against a rationalized spirituality but also against the rationalization of civil propriety and the encroaching mechanization of industrial society.

Whether wilderness is seen as an unimproved "tabula rasa" or an enveloping bower is touched upon in this quote from Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden*, "In the words of George Perkins Marsh, speaking to the Rutland County Agricultural Society in 1847, America is the "first example of the struggle between civilized man and barbarous uncultivated nature, Elsewhere the earth has been subdued slowly, but here for the first time "the full energies of advanced European civilization, stimulated by its artificial wants and by its accumulated intelligence, were brought to bear at once on a desert continent".<sup>6</sup> What a contrast this statement is to the hippies' communion at Woodstock, over a century later, intent as they were upon getting themselves "back to the garden" in a muddy upstate New York pasture. These polarities revive more presently in the heated debate over oil and natural gas exploration in the wilderness (above and below) that yet remains. The debate on climate change could be interpreted as a warning of the apocalyptic return of a repressed phenomenal nature. The divinely inspired imperative to remake the New World as the New Jerusalem, in blind conjunction with its base and worldly counterpart of real estate speculation and environmental despoliation. is a fundamental paradox in American mythology. It still resonates in much contemporary ideology and political posturing, both on the conservative Right and on the Left. What if one was to contrast Ronald Reagan's inaugural speech conjuring of a "Shining City on a Hill" with Al Gore's "Inconvenient Truth". Consider the differing political reactions to the disastrous natural and man-made bookends of Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil well rupture in the Gulf of Mexico.

Though often appropriated as a progenitor of the environmental movement, Henry David Thoreau did not spend two years in the woods at Walden Pond to simply apotheosize nature but more accurately to use his hermitage, like Rousseau before him, as a strategic locale from which he could critique the civil nature of man. In a related contemporary literary

allegory, Melville's whale in *Moby Dick* represents the brute force of unreconstructed nature literally "taking down" (what was at the time) a "factory ship". A more recent literary allusion of this sort is found in John Krakauer's recapitulation of the tragic circumstances of Christopher McCandless' idealized pilgrimage in his 1996 book *Into the Wild*. Again, Perry Miller accurately pinpoints this tendency:

"the American, or at least the American artist, cherishes in his innermost being the impulse to reject the gospel of civilization, in order to guard with resolution the savagery of his (or her) heart" 7

The transgressive or transformative act of nature disassembling modern culture and its related industries would later inform artists as diverse (and with such divergent ends) as Robert Smithson and Ana Mendieta. Smithson pitted the large and entropic grind of empirical, mineral, nature against his modern art world's vain aesthetic empiricism, while Mendieta, with her body/earth performances, side-stepped art formalist arguments by reviving a direct feminist correspondence with the earth. More recently "civilized" artists such as Mark Dion and Andy Goldsworthy continue this tendency to use natural history and its forms to obliquely comment upon culture at large. Dion often acts as a pseudo-scientist/sleuth uncovering latent evidence of the still beating heart of darkness in world museological archives, while Goldsworthy's more literal sculptures of organic material evoke Wordsworth's pastoral ramblings in the Lake District of Romantic England. The Arcadian impulse of some contemporary artists toward a retreat from civilization is often attended by a protracted guerilla war for ideological immanence within that same society.

#### Arcadia Now

"Arcadia Now" invokes the idea of the mythic pastorate, and combines art in an ensemble vision of what that pastoral idea, an idyllic place of remove, might look like in the present. Combining photography, painting, sculpture and video, the exhibition addresses issues of nature and human consequence on nature, beauty and banality, and the ideal and the real in both abstract and figurative terms. The supernatural perfection or utopian vision of Arcadia can serve as an ideological base camp from which to explore newer visions of "the country". In a post-modern (or elegiac) sense, these contemporary artists might cede to the modernist narrative more utopian regions, to which return seems implausible, while retaining a visual wanderlust that compels them to remake ideal "worlds apart" in the present. How this impulse plays out depends upon literal locale, (where the work is made), different mediums, (how the work is made, and its phenomenal transmission of sensation), and, of course, the varied individual intents and temperaments of the artists.

Kiki Smith is almost unique among contemporary artists in her unabashed atavistic impulses toward the reconciliation of human with animal nature. Her work freely plays with multiple myths, fairy tales and personal memories of cosmic dimension.

Bill Doherty constructs paintings in which the human pathological tendency to either simply recognize or gracefully modify substantial reality becomes idealized in pictures of that process. His video projection, "Pilgrimage to Falling Water" views a ride to Frank Lloyd Wright's classic modernist country estate through the rainy rearview mirror of the seeker's rented transport. Nathaniel Leib's sculpture shares with Doherty a certain paradoxical take on the idealization of nature and

its more everyday human manipulation and use. In his work "Sentinel", Lieb chain-sawed a stack of white pine into ideal Platonic cubes in a deadpan comparison of the real with the ideal. Alisa Dworsky's sculptural installations may be seen in a similar way. She will often use man-made materials to draw attention to the organic evolution of abstract form in a gallery space, or alternatively set grids of reflective lenses in meadows along the highway. Her overlay of logical structures on natural forms acknowledges the coincidence of reason with phenomenal sensation. Sally Apfelbaum's photographs layer multiple exposures of specific natural settings, significantly often in settings designed as natural like Monet's carefully crafted gardens at Giverny, or the estate turned artist's retreat of Yaddo in upstate New York. By re-appropriating these human 'conceits of country' Apfelbaum seems to comment on the artificiality of sentimental human projection into the landscape while simultaneously, and lushly, replanting her own artistic garden.

James Welling is a close observer of an insistent presence in the sculptural forms he photographs. Many of his images carefully orchestrate phenomenal light with obdurate materiality. His work represented in the exhibition deploys a photo-realized ideal of empirical, sensate cognition using the "vegetable matter" of flowers. These particular photographs also point to the immateriality of matter as processed in light.

Justine Kurland is perhaps the most literal in her evocation of the Arcadian pastoral in her various photographic series. Using the lyrical form of the classical precedent, she updates the myth in contemporary scenes depicting communities of men, women, and children naked and integrated within their chosen natural environments.

The painters Rebecca Purdum and Mary McDonnell are "kindred spirits" of sorts who both maintain studios in very natural environments, on the edge of the Bread Loaf wilderness in Vermont and in the upper Delaware watershed in New York respectively. Both artists have mentioned that their affinity for nature informs their work, not necessarily in a direct way, but more in a mode of approach toward art and life in general. Purdum's exquisitely wrought surfaces: tactile accretions of gesture and pigment, infuse painterly processes with an uncanny natural inevitability. McDonnell's works evolve from multiple material manipulations toward momentous, yet humble "frozen moments" of abstract gesture. Both artists strive toward a certain inevitable, yet open-ended goal of physically and poetically "felt" paintings which recalls William Carlos Williams' observation that touch is the most appropriate sense for a fully realized, native, American art.

Aaron Williams manipulates his images with a variety of phenomenal interventions. By cutting, spray painting, and erasing found imagery he is localizing and humanizing the machinic fluidity with which the current means of photo-manipulation inform our contemporary consciousness. It is not inconsequential that his background for this type of naturalized image processing is often a natural landscape itself, or sometimes the volatile inner landscape of unreconstructed human nature in adolescent society.

There are thematic elements running through the work of Tim Daly that could be said to share the elegiac qualities of the picturesque landscape tradition. He has painted the intrusion of sometimes-abandoned industrial hardware like radio towers or power lines into fetid (yet fecund) natural settings like the brackish Hackensack Meadowlands estuary in NJ. Daly's tendency to formulate allegories of human and natural decay is shared by the photographer Scott Walden. In his "Re-Settled" series, Walden documents the poignant transience of rural communities in Newfoundland. This series documents the aftermath of the enactment of social re-location programs by the Canadian government in small coastal fishing villages, apposing the government's idealistic intention to recreate better civil societies with the ruins of more rudimentary communities integrally connected to nature. Interestingly enough, in an earlier series Walden, like Daly, also chooses the NJ Meadowlands as his subject. In a few images of this series (shot in the 1990's) the World Trade Center looms to be like on the horizon, a contemporary take on Poussin's Arcadian allegory. Tenesh Webber has chosen, in her contribution to the exhibition, to project an image of a local scene of an ice-fishing house. The pathos of the minimalist version of a domestic shelter in relation to the wide frozen lake points to a human penchant for containment within nature.

The two artists in the show originally not from the North American continent, Fredrik Strid from Sweden and Ken Ikeda from Japan, work out versions of nature that may be viewed through the lens of their respective cultural backgrounds. Strid has mentioned themes of death and rebirth in

nature as important to his work, reminiscent of the Northern Romantic tradition of the spiritualized landscape. In a related sense the sound artist Ken Ikeda draws the raw material for his electronic pieces from phenomenal nature, an approach that might be compared with the highly formalized reverence of nature in traditional Japanese culture. Both of these artists, however, are working in a mode that updates their cultural tendencies in a way that becomes relevant to contemporary society. Strid is also interested in bringing museological tropes into nature, and vice versa. A comparison could be made here with how Ikeda industrializes nature, and naturalizes technology, in his electronic morphology of natural sounds.

Notes :

1. Henry David Thoreau, p. 4 in *Walden, or a Life in the Woods*, Dover, NY, 1995
2. Robert Frost, from "A Dream Pang", in *A Boy's Will*, first published in 1913
3. Robert Smithson, from "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects" p. 82 in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, New York University Press, New York, 1979
4. Erwin Panofsky, from "Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition" p.300 in *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, Doubleday, Garden City, NY, NY
5. Perry Miller, from *Errand Into the Wilderness*, p.197, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.1984
6. Leo Marx, pp. 203-204 *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, Oxford University Press, London, New York, 1964
7. Perry Miller, *Ibid*, p. 216

Essay copyright Tom McGlynn 2011