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book review of

The End of Landscape in Nineteenth-Century America by Maggie M. Cao

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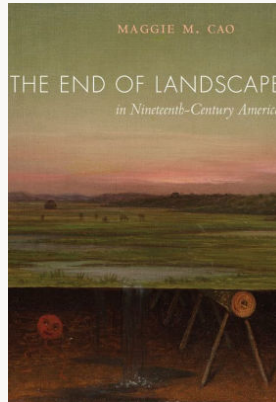
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Maggie M. Cao,
The End of Landscape in Nineteenth-Century America.
Oakland: University of California Press, 2018.
280 pp.; 105 color illus.; index.
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In the preface to this insightful and deeply researched study, Maggie Cao maintains that by the 1870s the Hudson River School and the vision of landscape associated with it were

slowly crumbling under the weight of revised conceptions of nature, property, and wilderness—revisions still very much with us today. Landscape increasingly lost its ability to sustain its earlier cultural functions as the spatial, economic, and environmental conditions of American land became increasingly incompatible with existing modes of representation (4).

Cao observes that this “particularly revealing” moment in the history of American landscape painting can be quantified in terms of declining sales of the work of Hudson River School artists, diminishing and often-negative press coverage, and faltering careers. However, as she notes, that moment is not so readily characterized. How, Cao asks, “can we *qualify* aesthetic decline when it has been so little theorized in the humanities?” (5). She responds by concentrating her analysis on “aesthetic peripheries.” Arguing that “a study of decline cannot be justly told by medians and averages, which will likely reveal themselves as uninteresting, even passé, in the face of the new” (6), she elides social-historical explanations for the decline of the Hudson River School. Instead, she focuses on what she terms “*limit events* or instances of deep thinking and engagement . . . visual and material experiments [that] inhabit landscape’s breaking points, where the genre’s inadequacy is identified and its potential for making sense of the modern world is tested” (6).^[1] Cao is thus concerned with artistic failure, not artistic invention or success. Indeed, the works she studies rely, in her words, on “*failure as method*” (6). “The end of landscape . . . is filled with artists resorting to futility and sabotage as pictorial strategies, deploying absurdist humor and exuberant excess to address the fears and anxieties underlying the end of a ‘terrestrial’ era” (6–7). That “era,” as Cao reminds us, extends from the late 1830s to the 1870s—the heyday of the Hudson River School. Its “end,” as she asserts later in the book, served as the prelude to modernist efforts to reconceptualize landscape.

The End of Landscape in Nineteenth-Century America comprises a preface, an introduction, four chapters, each primarily a study of the work of an individual artist—Albert Bierstadt, Martin Johnson Heade, Ralph Blakelock, and Abbott Handerson Thayer—and a brief afterword. Cao’s choice of the first two artists might seem counterintuitive. Scholars have usually associated Heade with the Hudson River School and “luminism,” often considered the school’s major offshoot. Bierstadt, who from the 1860s through the 1880s produced vast canvases depicting the American West, is one of three painters—the other two would be Frederic Church and Thomas Moran—whose landscape extravaganzas defined the school from the late 1850s through the 1870s. Still, as we shall see, Cao makes the case that in their work Bierstadt as well as Heade registered the failure of landscape, or, to put the matter in somewhat different terms, the breakdown of the belief systems that had inspired and justified the Hudson River School.

In the book’s introduction, subtitled “Inventions and Failures,” Cao develops the historical and theoretical framework for her argument. She begins with a summary history of the Hudson River School: how by ca. 1840, Thomas Cole and Asher B. Durand “had established lasting conventions for a specifically American landscape painting—a naturalistic combination of dramatic, extended vistas and topographical and botanical details,” how the next generation of Hudson River School artists “institutionalized a mode of landscape representation that profoundly transformed the American art world,” and how Hudson River School landscape painting was “ultimately political,” the embodiment of “the American self and the country’s broader [expansionist] goals” (9–10). Cao also notes that “the end of landscape was in many ways written into its rise” (14): how, for example, Thomas Cole’s observation in 1836 of the destruction of nature for the sake of what the artist and his contemporaries called “improvement” signaled his awareness that “land was always under threat by the very progress his artistic practice helped to foster” (24–25). In addition, Cao cites contemporary criticisms that in effect condemned the work of the Hudson River School artists for being too commercial (put forward by among others the influential critic James Jackson Jarves), “pandering to the masses,” and “delivering hollow spectacles” (16).^[2] Cao is critical of histories of the Hudson River School that discover continuities between the school’s precipitous decline in the 1870s and later forms of American landscape painting—Barbizon, Impressionism, and Tonalism. She also claims that the school’s decline deeply affected two generations of artists—members of the Hudson River School (e.g., Bierstadt and Heade) and those who came immediately after them (e.g., Blakelock and Thayer). This brings Cao to the book’s underlying premise: “The following chapters suggest that landscape’s precarious condition at this moment of stylistic transition was a central preoccupation of American painters of both [Bierstadt’s and Blakelock’s] generations” (17). Indeed, Cao insists that “the artists and artworks at the heart of this book push us to understand the decline of landscape in terms of dynamic engagements with modernity rather than slow shifts in taste or style” (26). Finally, she argues that the end of landscape in the nineteenth century cleared the way for landscape’s rediscovery by the modernist vanguard of the 1910s and 1920s, in her example Marsden Hartley and other members of the Stieglitz circle.

Cao’s introduction leaves the reader with a series of questions: how do works by Bierstadt, Heade, Thayer, and Blakelock represent “*limit events* or instances of deep thinking and engagement”? How did they produce “visual and material experiments that inhabit landscape’s breaking points”? How did failure become method? The answers Cao furnishes

to these questions turn primarily on evidence of obsession and pathology: Bierstadt's fascination with "souvenir" butterflies; Heade's fixation on marshland and small paintings featuring hummingbirds and orchids; Blakelock's equation between landscape and currency; and Thayer's preoccupation with camouflage. For Cao, eccentricity and obsession can be taken as indicators of the artists' gnawing awareness of the gap between traditional concepts of landscape and the realities of modernization.

In Chapter 1, which she calls "Closure: Albert Bierstadt's Last Pictures," Cao links the closing of the frontier, which was made official in the census of 1890, with the artist's engaging in three seemingly unrelated pursuits: "souvenir" butterflies, which he began painting in the 1870s; expeditions to the Canadian Rockies and Alaska (which failed); and the invention during the 1890s of an expandable railway car in which the car's sides were designed to fold outward to create additional space. Bierstadt enjoyed a spectacular rise to fame during the 1860s with epic landscapes of the Rocky Mountains and Yosemite. However, by the early 1870s his reputation had gone into steep decline. In 1895 he was bankrupt. When he died in 1902 at the age of seventy-two, the art world had all but forgotten him. Cao argues that Bierstadt's interest in painting "souvenir" butterflies, making expeditions to Alaska and the Canadian Rockies, and patenting an expandable railway car were pursuits that engaged "the mechanics of literal closure" (33). Thus, according to Cao, "for Bierstadt, folds often served as a resolution for spatial limits and their aesthetic consequences. But more importantly (although the artist was not necessarily so self-aware), folding was a means of representation whose operation mimicked the geography of modernity, and as such became a source of both anxiety and pleasure" (33). As Cao acknowledges, in all likelihood Bierstadt was unaware of links between his various preoccupations. It is therefore left to the critic to discern these links as well as the larger cultural implications of Bierstadt's projects. For example, Cao offers an extended analysis of Bierstadt's "souvenir" butterflies. A society columnist, visiting the artist's studio in 1892, described his procedure:

[Bierstadt] took out a palette, a knife and some large slips of cartridge paper. Two or three daubs of pigment on the paper, a quick fold, and holding it still folded against a pane of glass, he made two or three strokes of that wizard-like palette knife on the outside, and hey, presto! A wonderful Brazilian butterfly or moth (cited on 31).

Cao interprets Bierstadt's butterflies as "nonmimetic" paintings, "an extension, rather than a negation, of his landscape practice" (49). Her discussion takes into account such topics as nineteenth-century debates about actual butterflies, the history of the production of images by chance (including Alexander Cozens' *New Method of Assisting the Invention of Drawing Original Compositions in Landscape* of 1785), foldability and mid-nineteenth century parlor games, the relation between Bierstadt's butterflies and letter writing, Gilles Deleuze's concept of reading "mutually dependent ideas" across the fold (56–57), folding as a material procedure, geology, stereography, and more. Cao concludes the chapter with a summary of her argument:

Bierstadt's aesthetic anxieties surface most clearly in his objects that fold and unfold, open and close—material particularities that gesture to the end of a genre [landscape painting] built upon a linear, expansionist ideology. Bierstadt's art reveals a keen recognition of the fold as essential to reconceptualizing spatial relations in the late

nineteenth century. In its ability to rescale and recode the frontier, folding, Bierstadt recognized, was an operation of modernity (64).

Still, one wonders if Bierstadt was as conscious of the metaphors that could be associated with folding as Cao implies here.

Cao begins her second chapter, “Sabotage: Martin Johnson Heade and Frederic Church,” with a discussion of Heade’s *Gremlin in the Studio II*, which the artist painted towards the beginning of the 1870s. *Gremlin in the Studio II* shows one of the artist’s marsh paintings mounted on sawhorses and dripping water onto the studio floor while a gremlin looks on, perhaps in triumph. Cao characterizes *Gremlin in the Studio II* as “an act of artistic self-destruction,” one that “requires explanation” (68). Heade was a friend and admirer of Church and on occasion shared the artist’s studio. At the height of his fame in the late 1850s and 1860s Church was often described as the “national painter,” an artist whose hugely popular canvases, such as *Niagara* (1857), *Heart of the Andes* (1859), and *Cotopaxi* (1863), embodied the nation’s highest scientific and political ideals. Heade, by contrast, was “a skeptic.” His paintings, Cao argues, “are deeply troubled by doubts about landscape’s claims as a nationally meaningful genre” (69). Cao goes on to link Heade’s marsh panoramas with the tropical tableaux of orchids and hummingbirds the artist began painting after his return from a trip to Brazil in 1863:

These two painting types appear to have very different agendas—one showcasing exotic, fecund tangles punctuated with jewel-toned specimens, the other meditating on familiar spare, open vistas with very little to hold a viewer’s attention. Yet both, ultimately, comment upon the conventions of landscape, the genre that unites them (70).

Cao’s analysis turns upon the relationship between Heade and Church, whose work, as Cao notes, literally surrounded Heade when he stayed at his friend’s studio. According to Cao, the relationship can best be described with a theological term, *kenosis*, borrowed from Harold Bloom’s *Anxiety of Influence*, in which an artist seemingly humbles or, as it were, empties him- or herself out before a precursor, but in such a way “that the precursor is emptied out also.”^[3] Thus, deliberately or not, Heade created paintings that in effect underscored the formal conflicts in Church’s most celebrated canvases. Cao observes that “Church’s [compositions] attain their monumentality through the accumulation of parts and only realize their ideological ambitions through the precarious balancing of opposites: spatial magnitude and minute detail” (77). As Cao notes, Heade’s South American paintings, tiny by comparison with Church’s outsize canvases, “advance a new and distinct part-to-whole relation,” in which precisely painted foreground details—hummingbirds, orchids—underline “the conflict in Church’s painting between expansive space and minute detail and their respective viewing distances” (79, 80). Cao goes on to analyze how, unlike the work of the artists of the Hudson River School, Heade’s compositions “convey skepticism about the accessibility of illusory space” (83), how he deliberately omitted the middle ground in his humming bird-and-orchid compositions so that the background looks like a backdrop, and how in his off putting juxtaposition of large and small (orchid versus hummingbirds), he attacked conventional indicators of size, scale, and measure. Cao employs dramatic terms to describes these unconventional methods: “By ripping out that portion of landscape painting [the middle ground] that works the hardest to construct meaning, Heade performs an act of violence against landscape’s fundamental cultural function” (92).

In Chapter 3, “Insolvency: Ralph Blakelock’s Economic Accretion,” Cao maintains that the artist “is an exceptionally apt figure through which to understand the complex relationship between landscape and economics in late nineteenth-century America” (116). Taking inspiration from what Cao considers “the theoretical parallels between financial and aesthetic enterprises, [her] approach assumes a greater permeability between aesthetic goals and economic discourses” (117). Key for Cao’s analysis of Blakelock’s early shanty town and squatter landscapes, nocturnes, and banknote-shaped landscapes, which the artist produced after he was institutionalized for insanity, was monetization of land in the East and the West during the 1870s, a time when the value of money itself was in doubt. In an age of intense real estate speculation and with the country divided between advocates of currency in the form of greenback dollars (or cheap money) and those who insisted on a return to hard money, i.e., money backed by precious metals, Blakelock focused on the tangible and material. Cao writes: “as development and property markets envisioned land in increasingly anti-material ways, Blakelock fixated on actual terrain and its stubborn topography” (129). She continues:

In his paintings, thick layers of paint and rough brushstrokes reproduced the visual disarray of shantytowns, which period accounts tended to describe viscerally as disorderly spaces where residents collected the refuse of the city for reuse and sale—a form of base, material accumulation in direct opposition to the clean and abstract aesthetics of land speculation (129).

Cao takes a similar approach to Blakelock’s nocturnes, works in which “the artist’s surprising investment in materiality resonated with economic concerns about value and substance in practice and theorization” (132). Treating the artist’s meticulous paintings of evening scenes as examples of what Karl Marx called “congealed labor,” Cao emphasizes their “stubborn bulk,” seeing a parallel between their “thingness” (141) and the “zeal for monetary hoarding” during the 1880s and 1890s that, in her words, “evokes Blakelock’s insistence on materiality” (142–43). She thus concludes that the “nocturnes, in their emphatic materiality, betrayed anxieties about landscape’s ‘economization’ while their painterly reenactment of the logic of hoarding testified to the artist’s discomfort with the increasing abstraction of a paper-money economy” (146).

Yet if Blakelock’s nocturnes turned him into a hoarder, the banknote-shaped landscapes he produced after his institutionalization and gave away to visitors cast him as a squanderer—the dialectical opposite, as Georg Simmel observed, of a hoarder (cited on 147). Blakelock was institutionalized in 1899 after he ripped up or burned banknotes he had acquired from the sale of a painting—an act that in a capitalist society could only be understood as madness. Cao maintains that “it is ultimately Blakelock’s banknote landscapes that most directly address his attitudes towards the problematic entanglement of landscape with the vagaries of the paper-money economy, insofar as they literally draw together these spheres into single artworks” (148). She thus concludes that at a time when American landscape and economy

shared a common theoretical vocabulary intrinsic to their mutual status as complex systems of representation, Blakelock’s paintings were not merely subject to the economic systems acting upon them, but agents struggling to use one form to

understand the other. That struggle is at its most poignant in his banknote landscapes, where the metamorphosis of landscape from art into currency helps to reveal the entropic threat that haunted Blakelock in every shadow of his paintings of night (151).

In “Camouflage, Abbott Handerson Thayer and John Singer Sargent,” the book’s longest and, in my view, most compelling chapter, Cao argues that Thayer’s paintings of camouflaged animals “radically transformed definitions of the body and landscape” (154). For Cao, “Thayer’s camouflage artworks are situated between scientific illustration and modern art.” Consequently, “it is precisely their ambivalence that makes them ideal objects for grappling with the impact of Darwinian theory on the construction of landscape” (157).

Cao’s argument revolves around the problem of “the figure in the landscape” or, in a somewhat different formulation, the relationship between bodies and space. Cao treats these terms (figure and landscape, bodies and space) as dialectical pairs. In conformity with the tradition of dialectical reasoning (thesis, antithesis, synthesis), she shows how Thayer’s paintings depict the breakdown of boundaries between seeming opposites. Thus, for Thayer, figure and landscape represented “fluid and transgressive categories” (169). Yet, as Cao argues, for Thayer, the synthesis between these opposing terms could never be complete: “[Thayer’s] theories, in effect, portrayed the natural world as a series of flat, two-dimensional representations—environments as landscape paintings and rounded bodies as fragments within them” (159). Thus, as Cao writes, for camouflage to work, rounded bodies had to appear flat:

to represent camouflage, Thayer had to employ painting’s material substances and additive methods to enact forms of erasure. As a result, his theories were structured through painterly analogy yet were absolutely antithetical to painterly convention. What the artist came to recognize, in attempts to visually represent his interpretation of Darwinism—to turn camouflage into an image-making procedure—was the extent to which the conventions of painting proved discordant with his view of the natural world. Picturing invisibility was, paradoxically, an endeavor in anti-painting (159–60).

Or as Cao puts the matter later on in the chapter in relation to the artist’s paintings of Mount Monadnock, for Thayer “the impossibility of painting invisible figures and the impossibility of painting a perspectival view without depth came together as parallel conundrums” (181).

Cao asserts that “both Sargent and Thayer were intent on painting a material reality that contradicted painterly conventions” (188). Still, Thayer, with his dogmatic approach to Darwinian theory and his struggle with antithetical modes of representation, seems the antithesis of Sargent, who took his cues from his friend Monet. Nonetheless, the result bears out Cao’s contention that “it is camouflaging that defines figures at the end of landscape” (158). In Sargent’s *The Hermit* (1908), the viewer must search to discover the deer and the solitary human figure in the foreground, two more sun-dappled forms in a welter of trees, rocks, and foliage. Cao argues that in the *Hermit* and in other late works such as *Simplon Pass* (1911), *Princess Nouronihar* (1910), and *Master and his Pupils* (1914), Sargent paints the landscape as “figure”—as a series of animate and inanimate forms “that stand apart from, as in front of, the landscape as a view” (185).

In this review, I've attempted to summarize Cao's principal arguments. Still, what I have written hardly begins to cover the range of Cao's concerns, the remarkable wealth of materials she has brought to bear in support of her arguments, the subtlety of her formal analyses, or the precision, not to say eloquence, with which she sets forth her ideas. *The End of Landscape in Nineteenth-Century America* is an extraordinarily ambitious book. Perhaps as a consequence, it's no easy read. Nonetheless, it represents a highly original contribution to scholarly discussions of the history of American landscape painting.

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Notes

[1] Italics in the original here and in all subsequent quotations. In an endnote (207n6), Cao asserts that T. J. Clark's term "limit case," which Clark used to describe modernist experiments pushed to their breaking point, inspired her choice of "limit event" for the unusual and unexpected works and artistic procedures she studies.

[2] Because her concerns lie elsewhere, Cao does not elaborate on this important point. Although she takes into account the work of scholars who have studied the sociological and broadly historical aspects of the Hudson River School, Cao is more interested in how the school's demise affected artistic practice.

[3] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 14–15, cited in Cao, p. 72. Later on, Cao suggests that when it comes to the Church-Heade relationship, Bloom's concepts require modification and that Michel Serre's theory of parasitism "is a useful way of revising Bloomian emulation, a model that while evocative assumes that works of art maintain a stable autonomy" (96–97).