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Ansel Adams and American Landscapes at LI Museum

March 5, 2015 by STEVE PARKS / steve.parks@newsday.com



We don't think of landscape artists as contentious. We associate their art with tranquillity. But as the pairing of new exhibits at the Long Island Museum suggests, some landscape artists have considered each other's testaments to nature either slavishly realistic or simplistically abstract.

We see the objects of these debates in "Ansel Adams: Early Works" and "American Horizon, East to West." Spanning 150 years and 115 images captured through the lens or by the brush stroke, the two shows stretch the limits of the main galleries of LIM's Art Museum and the side gallery usually reserved for selections from its William Sidney Mount collection.

As curator Joshua Ruff notes, Adams -- best known for black-and-white photographs of majestic American West scenes -- was often compared to the wildly successful 19th century painter Albert Bierstadt. "Adams disliked being referred to as painterly," Ruff says. "He thought painters manipulated nature. To him, photography was more truthful -- even though he manipulated in his own way through filters and printing techniques."

ENLIGHTENED

A light filter figured prominently in one of Adams' most iconic photographs, "Monolith, the Face of Half-Dome," 1927, separating the dark Yosemite sky from the black mountain face. Bierstadt is represented in "American Horizon" by a single fall foliage study, "Autumn Landscape." So the "debate" is a mismatch -- one small oil painting vs. 41 photographs from Michael Mattis and Judith Hochberg's collection. Compare the Bierstadt to Adams' 1927-28 "Poplars" or one of his final masterpieces, "Aspens," shot in New Mexico in 1958. There's also a rare image of a human figure, Alfred Stieglitz, Adams' mentor, who encouraged him to give up piano for the camera.

"American Horizon" ranges from pre-Civil War paintings, including Mount's "Crane Neck Across the Marsh," evoking a J.M.W. Turner seascape, to contemporary works, including Lloyd Harbor photographer-poet Barbara Roux's images of natural and human-influenced degradation and the provocative billboard series by Janet Culbertson of Shelter Island commenting on the intrusion of rampant consumption.

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GET REAL

The Hudson River School is well-represented in George Inness' "Pastoral Landscape at Sunset," "Autumn," by Frederic Edwin Church, protégé of Hudson River co-founder Thomas Cole, and "Saranac Lake" by John Jameson, who, in turn studied with Church. The latter two are loaned from the Long Island collection of David and Laura Grey. Winslow Homer's "Watching the Surf" watercolor exemplifies his departure from Hudson River realism.

Works by deceased Long Island artists go from the traditional -- Guild Hall's loaner "Glimpse of the Sea, Near Amagansett" by Thomas Moran -- to varying-degree abstracts, from the Heckscher Museum (Arthur Dove's "Sea Gulls"), Parrish Art Museum (Fairfield Porter's "Red Cables") and the Long Island Museum (Robert Dash's "Garden Path," Jane Freilicher's "Pink Horizon II" and Jane Wilson's "English Landscape.")

"We wanted to reach beyond Long Island and our own collection for wider name recognition," says Ruff. "We think we've done that with Ansel Adams and a show complementing his work."

And, at times, contesting it.

WHAT "Ansel Adams: Early Works," "American Horizon, East to West: Landscape Painting and Photography"

WHEN | WHERE Through Aug. 2, [Long Island Museum of American Art, History & Carriages](#),

1200 Rte. 25A, Stony Brook. Hours: 10-a.m.-5 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, noon-5 p.m. Sundays

ADMISSION \$10, \$7 seniors, \$5 students; 631-751-0066, longislandmuseum.org

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