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## Back to the Land

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### An innovative show at the Katonah Museum of Art juxtaposes modernist and contemporary landscape art.

There are specific moments in art history at which new ideas seem to spring into life, creativity blossoms, and traditional ideas about representation recede into the background.

“LandEscape: New Visions of the American Landscape,” which opens at the Katonah Museum of Art in Katonah, N.Y., on March 17, examines the work of two of those moments: the Fauvist- and Expressionist-inspired landscape paintings of early 20th-century American modernists and paintings by contemporary artists who are reinventing the genre. By juxtaposing works from these two time periods, the exhibition spotlights the unique treatment that these very different artists have given what was, according to the Academies of Fine Art, one of the lower-ranked and more unexceptional genres of painting.

Associate Curator Michele Wijegoonaratna, who assumed curation of the show after the original curator, Olga Dekalo, left the Katonah Museum, says that “LandEscape” highlights these two moments in time when artists “returned to the landscape.” And while the reasons behind that return may differ from artist to artist and time period to time period, they resulted in similarly creative—in some cases, revolutionary—approaches to a time-honored genre.

“LandEscape” includes works by some of the most influential American modernists: Marsden Hartley, Alfred Maurer, Helen Torr, and John Marin, among others. These artists were all heavily influenced by the revolutionary works that toured the U.S. as the International Exhibition of Modern Art of 1913, which became commonly known as the Armory Show. Featuring pieces by some of Europe’s most avant-garde artists, like Marcel Duchamp, Wassily Kandinsky, and Henri Matisse, the



Vera Iliatova, *The Land of Plenty*, 2017, oil on canvas, 60 x 78 in.

#### Featured Images:(Click to Enlarge)



Armory Show gave Americans an entirely new view of what was possible. “These American artists saw how European modernists had treated the landscape, in terms of use of color, of expressive, emotional content, and they were very much influenced by that,” Wijegoonaratna says.



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While Hartley, Maurer, and their contemporaries took much from the Europeans’ approach to form, attitude toward light and color, and intensity of expression, they were hardly copyists. As Wijegoonaratna writes in her exhibition essay, “They also internalized their experience of European art, finding inspiration in the distinctive vernacular of the American geography and topography.” Hence pieces like Marguerite Thompson Zorach’s *Man Among the Redwoods* (1912). In this influential painting, Zorach uses the bold visual language of expressive line and heightened color, which she absorbed in her travels through France, to depict one of the most iconic American landscapes—the redwood forest.

Similarly, Hartley’s *Dogtown* (1934) and *Give Us This Day* (1938) mingle a deep rootedness in a real American landscape with an expressive and—in the case of the latter painting—religious significance. *Dogtown* depicts the barren, inhospitable landscape of the abandoned colonial settlement of the same name, near Gloucester, Mass. The use of intense color and line plainly show the influence of Fauvism. *Give Us This Day*, which shows seagulls gathered together over three fish, uses a much more subdued color palette; however, the intensity of expression and significance is conveyed through the bold lines and arresting position of the center seagull, which is spreading its wings in an almost angelic manner. This was one of a series of paintings by Hartley that depicted elements of the ocean as religious symbols.

Hartley’s and Maurer’s paintings might, at first glance, seem to have little to do with contemporary pieces like Vera Iliatova’s *Land of Plenty* (2018). Iliatova’s style, for example, appears more realist and classical—and yet her approach to landscape painting is no less unusual than that of the modernists. “Iliatova creates these fictional landscapes,” Wijegoonaratna says. “She goes out and gets flowers, then brings them back to her studio and lets them decay over time. She’ll create these landscapes with flowers that couldn’t exist together in nature, creating this kind of surreal world.”

This idea of a fictional landscape, or a mindscape, creates an interesting bridge between the modernists of the early 20th century and contemporary landscape painters. While many of the modernists were painting their landscapes from life, either en plein air or by doing sketches that they then brought back to their studios, there was still that highly imaginative element to their works. Landscapes were not depicted literally but were imbued with a greater emotional resonance through the use of various stylistic choices.

Many of the contemporary artists in “LandEscape” have taken that a step further. As Wijegoonaratna writes, “For most of the contemporary artists included in this exhibition, plein air painting is no longer a motivating factor or strong consideration in their work. Many take inspiration from an actual location, but transform their memories into works of art that cite the landscape but are not a faithful portrayal of it.”

Richard Mayhew, an African-American and Native American 21st-century artist whose 2014 painting *Pescadero* is featured in the Katonah show, is one of these. Born in 1924, Mayhew lived and painted in New York during the 1950s, during the height of Abstract Expressionism. This period, as well as his studies of Impressionism in Europe, were highly influential on

the artist, and helped develop the color-saturated, impressionistic landscapes he’s known for. These paintings are inspired by specific landscapes, but convey more the spirit of the place rather than its reality.

Lois Dodd, a contemporary artist with a career as long as Mayhew’s, is another artist who bridges the time span between the modernists and 21st-century landscape painting. “Dodd paints recognizable landscapes, but she paints them in a very abstracted way,” Wijegoonaratna says. “She ends up being this wonderful bridge between the 20th- and 21st-century artists.”

Dodd’s painting Water Gap, Last Snowfall, March 2003 (2003) is one of the standout pieces of the show. The focal point of the piece isn’t the visual depiction of the winter landscape but the silence that pervades it. The muted palette of pinks, blues, and whites is applied thinly and with precision, while stark trees with crooked branches add to the sense of spareness and quiet.

The collection of landscape paintings in “LandEscape” may well inspire viewers to reevaluate their thoughts on the genre—that, at least, is what Wijegoonaratna would hope. “I’d want viewers to be able to look at these places and locales and see how they’ve been transformed.”

By Elizabeth Pandolfi

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