Knowing Nature Through Art

R: A couple months ago, I anxiously highlighted September 22, making note that I had to wake up extra early for the typical boring museum tour. You know, the ones with the occasional interesting piece that almost has you interested in it.

A: You’re referring to the trip to Storm King Art Center?

R: Yes, and that open air museum in the Hudson River Valley changed my perceptions of art for the better.

A: “Was it the red bridge that people walk out on and spread their arms like Rose from Titanic?”

R: Not exactly, although I teared up a little bit when Joe walked out with the wind blowing through his hair. No, the piece I’m referring to was The Wall by Andy Goldsworthy.

A: I know, I was there when you jumped out of the tram and touched it.

R: Well the funniest thing is I can’t really explain it. I don’t have this concise definition as to why I loved it more than anything else. It made me think of my childhood and simple times.

A: So was it nostalgia or something greater?

R: I think it was the combination of the overwhelming beauty and the fact that I appreciated the wall for what it was. To think that this wall, with all its dips and curves, is not supported by anything and it’s been standing there for more than twenty years. It’s astounding!

A: Wait, did you tell your roommate about it?

R: I did, he didn’t get it, and that’s probably because he’s from Bulgaria, but needless to say I told him all about it. It’s my bedtime story to him every night.

A: So does he get it?

R: I just keep reminding him that it’s important to remember that art serves to interpret nature, not copy it. You don’t suppose Monet or Cole wanted to exactly replicate every landscape they painted. That wouldn’t make sense. Rather, each piece of art offers an interpretation of nature.

A: So artists create art based on nature to confirm their beliefs and opinions or form new perspectives on a specific landscape. In essence, art exists to exemplify a point.
• **Country Road** James Taylor

A: So let’s think way back to what we learned in class her Rick, landscape art used to be pastoral, like Thomas Cole’s scenes of America.

R: Right, but then as America became more industrialized, art’s relationship to nature changed. Now, natural artists’ show how art can exist in nature or describe human’s effect on nature.

A: Now hold on a minute, we’ll get there. Let’s just start with other pastoral images. What was the one you were going to describe to me the other day?

R: Away from industrialized London, a countryman drives his horse and wagon through a shallow pond. He pauses for a moment to listen to the robin’s chirp, and laughs at his dog running away from the chilly water. Unknown to them, John Constable, a local artist sits just out of sight watching the sky. Every day he leaves his house in the village and walks into the surrounding countryside to paint the clouds. Like many British Romantic painters, Constable painted the nature that he grew up in: one that he understood. He watched that man drive his cart through the pond everyday for years, and that scene became the inspiration for *The Hay Wagon*.

A: Hey, I went on a hay ride, once!

R: That’s great Al, okay…moving on. Stay with me here, alright? Constable’s picturesque scenes give us the image of a serene pastoral time. No tree blows erratically, and the mountains are specifically, yet unrealistically placed to enhance the flow of the painting. Constable’s view of nature, while rooted in his connection to his home village, remains idealized because artistic quality matters more to him than realistic depictions of landscape. He picks and chooses elements of his landscapes and paints them into one cohesive and comforting scene.

A: Oh yeah, like Thomas Cole.

R: Yeah, the artist in the early 19th century. Cole and his followers sought in nature a metaphor for the self-unburdened of history.

A: If I remember correctly, they focused on sounds as much as visual surroundings to capture the natural element of what they were drawing.

• **Simbiosis Danza Con los Toledos** Manuel Obregon

R: It’s a relatively simple concept but Cole said there was a monumental difference from seeing nature and hearing it. Heck, I can see nature by looking from a plane 20,000 feet in the air. But hearing it requires a symbiotic intimacy, where humans and nature live as one.

A: It almost seems religious. You’re getting pretty deep on me here.
R: Well I apologize but you’re absolutely right, Cole even stated there were religious undertones to this style of drawing. While painting landscapes from visions in his head, he recalled his pastor’s sermons. One of his paintings shows an angel coming out of the famous Kaaterskill Falls, a scene Cole came back to over the course of his career. All in all, the bigger picture for Cole was this emergence in religion to attempt to recreate essence of the sublime. Nature led him to a greater understanding of the world, and he used art to attempt to communicate these deeper thoughts.

A: So to know nature through art means to understand the artists’ role in the landscape. Cole had a spiritual connection to these falls, and that’s why he kept coming back to them.

R: Right, his art served to inform other people about his relationship with nature.

R: Art today has changed in some monumental ways. True, you still have the traditional paintings and sculptures but a demand for something new and innovative is what has led to an artistic movement towards modern, original art. One classification of this modern art is Earthwork. And of course, you can’t think of Earthwork without thinking of Robert Smithson.

A: For those of you unfamiliar with Smithson’s work, he designed enormous structures using the elements around him. One of his most famous works, Spiral Jetty, a 1500 foot long spiral extending out into the northeastern shore of the Great Salt Lake, is composed of mud, rock, sand, crystals, and water.

R: So it’s literally Earth work. What most people don’t know is that Smithson got the idea for Spiral Jetty from the Dallas-Fort Worth airport. He examined the enormous size and open location and set out to create a scene that would promote nature’s dominance over humanity. Smithson also expressed an admiration for entropy therefore allowing his artwork to decay naturally and let nature take the reins.

- *Country Road* James Taylor

A: So the art exists to help us see changes in nature. We don’t think about the tides every day, but they exist. Smithson’s art serves to increase our awareness of the simplicities of nature.

A: It’s amazing how many different ways you can understand nature through art.
R: I know! It’s because each artist looked at the world so differently. Remember Edward Burtynsky’s manufactured landscapes?
A: Uh, how couldn’t I!… with his camera recording every single row of factory workers.
R: Yeah, crazy how that went on and on for literally five minutes. You remember Franz Kline? I’d say he’s a pretty good example of industrial art, it shows, you know, society’s separation from nature.
A: Yeah, I went to his show at the Allentown Art Museum a couple weeks ago. His paintings are all based off of Pennsylvania coal mines.
R: He sounds a lot like the guy you referenced earlier in the show, what was his name, John Constable. Both portray the nature that they grew up in.
A: Except we’ve really come a long way since pastoral landscapes.
R: We have, but some things remain the same.
A: It’s still hard to come up with a definitive answer as to what art means. Art’s really up to the artists’ intention and how the audience sees it.
R: At least in my opinion art serves to question my prior beliefs. Interpreting what I’m looking at and how it makes me feel is where I get the most excitement out of it.
A: So nothing’s really set in stone…?
R: Except that wall…
A: You’re still not over that are you?
R: I will never be over that. It just shows me how art combines the artists’ imagination and the environment it’s in, but the perspective of the audience matters most. It’s like asking yourself the five questions; you know, the who, what, where, when, and how. These questions matter because your answers determine how you see not only the art, but ultimately, the nature that creates it.
A: You have to be an active viewer to look at art.
R: So we can make the assumption that active engagement is the basis of understanding nature through any lens. So you look at a picture and the nature you see is different than what somebody else’s sees looking at the exact same picture. It’s not quantum physics but it’s difficult to comprehend.
A: For me, understanding the nature in the art depends on prior knowledge. I can look at a painting and see my hometown hills and feel the same connection the artist did, but you would feel totally different looking at that painting.
R: Right, because I don’t have the same experience you have with that landscape. I haven’t been there before, you know? I haven’t seen your hometown hills from different vantage points, it just doesn’t mean the same thing and that’s alright because I still appreciate the aesthetic value of the art.
A: And of course, seeing the art in person connects you to it on a whole n’other level. I think that’s why you had such a great experience at Storm King. To really understand nature through art, you have to see the nature and art together.
R: It’s because art can only offer an interpretation of nature, not the reality.