



BEHIND THE SCENES

BY MILÈNE J. FERNÁNDEZ

THE HUDSON RIVER FELLOWSHIP CONNECTING WITH NATURE AND EACH OTHER

Few artistic subjects are as universal or deeply felt as nature. During the mid-19th century, the highest aspiration of the Hudson River School painters — who formed America's first original art movement — was to convey the transcendent quality of nature; together they depicted their country's landscape with a nod to the divine hand they believed had shaped it. Today their paintings still inspire many viewers to live in harmony with nature, yet some of us might consider the beliefs underlying them as strictly of the past. In fact, the desire to depict nature's beauty as a way of nourishing the souls of both artists and viewers is timeless.

The idea of artists painting outdoors together — every day, rain or shine, sunrise to sunset, basking in nature's grandeur, encouraging each other — may also conjure an idyllic, bygone era. But this tradition is developing in fresh ways through the Hudson River Fellowship (HRF), a three-week-long summer program administered by New York City's Grand Central Atelier (GCA). In their call for applicants, its organizers declare:

By bringing back the skills and spirit of the pre-Impressionist landscape painters, the program will give much-needed direction to the new generation of painters. As they learn to study carefully and reflect on the trees and clouds and blades of grass and



cliffs, their paintings will become beautiful. Ideally, these artists and their beautiful representations of nature will help to lead the culture back to a stronger connection with the landscape. The fellowship seeks to make a contribution to both the art world and the conservation movement.

EARLY DAYS

HRF was created in 2007 by GCA's founder, the artist Jacob Collins, with his artist colleagues Edward Minoff and Travis Schlaht. That first summer, approximately 20 artists stayed on a property in Hunter, New York, near the former site of the Catskill Mountain House, a resort hotel revered by the Hudson River School's more than 70 artist members.

As if retracing the footprints of such fore-runners as Thomas Cole (1801–1848), Asher B. Durand (1796–1886), and Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), those inaugural HRF participants painted such now-familiar vistas as Kaaterskill Clove, Kaaterskill Falls, Catskill Creek, North Lake, and Sunset Rock. Minoff recalls, “We actually found a rock on which [Sanford R.] Gifford had carved his name. That was cool.”

Jacob Collins at Wethersfield, June 2021; photo: Milène J. Fernández



Two fellows at Wethersfield, June 2021: Kevin Müller Cisneros (left) and Kate Donovan (right); photos: Milène J. Fernández

HRF emerged from a specific, urgent need. Minoff explains, “In the mid-2000s, there was a big appetite for trying to understand how the Hudson River School painters worked. That was great [because] if you have a team of people trying to solve a problem, you get a lot further. We were all making studies in plein air, but when we got back to our studios to create bigger paintings, we realized that we didn’t have enough information about what we had seen on site. So we were having to disguise what we didn’t know by making brushy paintings.”

During HRF’s early years, its participants — Lauren Sansariq and Eric Koeppel especially come to mind — focused very much on trying to figure out their forerunners’ techniques, style, and spirit. After their Catskill Mountains property was damaged by Hurricane Irene in 2011, the HRF team headed northeast to the area around Jackson Falls in New Hampshire’s scenic White Mountains. By then, their own style

had started to change: the focus shifted from emulating the Hudson River School to expanding upon what they had learned in the process.

Eventually New Hampshire became too long a trip, especially for New York City-based artists with families, so HRF considered relocating to a Connecticut boarding school, but those plans fell through and then were delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic. In June 2021, the program relaunched at the Wethersfield Estate and Gardens, 95 miles north of Manhattan. This 1,200-acre property was developed atop Dutchess County’s highest hill as the country home of the investor, philanthropist, and conservationist Chauncey D. Stillman (1907–1989). According to the chair of its board of trustees, Tara Shafer, Wethersfield “was built upon a reverence for the land and practices of good land stewardship. The partnership between Wethersfield and the Grand Central Atelier aligns perfectly.”

ERIKA DEMETRIOU (b. 1990), *Pond Rim*, 2021, oil on mounted panel, 6 x 10 in., available through the artist





(ABOVE) JACOB ISAAC GABRIEL (b. 1996), *Sunrise over Wethersfield*, 2021, oil on aluminum panel, 6 x 8 in., available through the artist ■ (RIGHT) LORENZO TORRES NARCISO (b. 1996), *Wethersfield Trails*, 2021, oil on linen panel, 11 x 14 in., available through the artist

This spring HRF received more applications than ever before (nearly 100), and soon 17 talented artists from a range of backgrounds — not all of them associated with GCA — will be painting together at Wethersfield. Last summer its scenery inspired a lively mix of up-and-coming and established participants. From the classically inspired garden they enjoyed panoramic views of the Catskills to the west and the Berkshires to the north. At closer range, they painted terraced gardens — framed by clipped hedge allées, topiary, weeping beeches, and statuary — with accents of rhododendron, lilac, and mountain laurel. They also meandered the estate's 20 miles of trails and unmanicured wilderness to draw and paint foliage, ponds, and wetlands. In the evenings they drew further inspiration inside the 1930s-era mansion, with its Palladian windows and colorful frescoes by the Italian master Pietro Annigoni (1910–1988). One of the 2021 fellows, Tyler Moore, is right in recalling that “Wethersfield is a place of timeless beauty and also a safe haven for artists.”

CHANGE & CONTINUITY

While the look and feel of the fellows' paintings now differ somewhat from those of the early years — and even more so from the Hudson River School



— the dedication to slowing down and studying scenery over a long period of time endures. Today's fellows use a similar, if not the same, approach to composing, taking liberties to invent and edit the landscape, while observing, drawing, and painting numerous studies. By carefully observing the parts that make up the whole — e.g., breaking down elements of form, value, and color into individual steps — the artists create various



studies before incorporating them all into the (sometimes much) larger paintings they make back in the studio. Their numerous studies from life form an arsenal of materials with which to interpret and invent their final pictures, sometimes in consultation with the clients who commission them.

Moving beyond technique, the fellows' humility and respect for their predecessors is noticeable. Although the Hudson River School's championing of Transcendentalism — the belief that everything in nature is an expression of the divine — is not explicitly discussed during the program, "It is," according to Jacob Collins, "kind of in the background — an underlying expectation."

On HRF's final day in June 2021, the artists revealed the paintings they had just created in an outdoor exhibition. During its celebratory reception, Lauren Sansariq observed, "Any time artists have the ability to focus only on their work and nature without disturbances, it can really take their art to the next level. How much time you spend with nature is like being in a relationship with a person: the longer you spend time together,



(ABOVE) DAN BUNN (b. 1991), *Foliage Study*, 2021, oil on wood panel, 12 x 16 in., available through the artist

■ (LEFT) MARY JANE WARD (b. 1983), *Archway through the Hedge*, 2021, charcoal and graphite on paper, 12 x 9 in., available through the artist

the deeper it becomes." (Happily, Sansariq could not finish her thought because she was interrupted by an enthusiastic collector asking to buy one of her new paintings.)

HRF 2021 fellow Kevin Müller Cisneros, who teaches at GCA, felt humbled by the connections across time with the Hudson River School, especially "the tradition of going into the landscape and having the discipline to observe nature." He said, "There is something so special about allowing yourself to go to the same place at the same time every day. I could tell you a story about every one of my paintings: I can remember how that day was, the conversations I was having, my thoughts and feelings." Fellow Kate Donovan added, "I honor what the Hudson

PATRICK OKRASINSKI (b. 1996), *Wethersfield Twilight*, 2021, oil on linen, 20 x 30 in., private collection



River School painters did because their skill is so evident. I know it was only through hours of dedication that they could make such wonderful paintings. I want to continue that, so here I am.”

Erika Demetriou, another 2021 fellow who usually paints figures, explained what inspired her at Wethersfield: “In the context of the climate crisis and especially the pandemic, what I wanted to explore is humanity rediscovering the earth, what surrounds us, and how wonderful this home is. I’m in absolute reverence of landscape painting, in a way I hadn’t even considered before. I want to see people outside in nature.”

Transcendental idealism recognizes the limits of human knowledge while trying to reach beyond them. By observing and wanting to see beyond what is immediately present in the landscape, artists find a place within it and within their hearts. This is how their paintings, however small or humble, communicate that the world has a meaning greater than what we usually notice. It is clear that the camaraderie at HRF facilitates these revelations. The program itself offers no instruction or formal critiques, only plenty of support, friendly competition, and encouragement. 2021 fellow Landon Clay noted, “HRF is not structured as you might expect, but that doesn’t make it any less intense. Everyone is doing their own thing, yet feeding off of everyone else’s enthusiasm and passion.”

Pointing to his colleague Jacob Isaac Gabriel’s paintings at the 2021 exhibition, fellow Dan Bunn expanded upon the idea of seeing beyond: “Jacob’s landscapes are special. In some ways they feel surreal because the scenery is recognizable but almost dreamlike. In some ways, they are really from his mind, rather than from painting the specificity of an actual place. You can juxtapose all of these [studies] and turn them into something more grandiose, or something simpler.”

MOVING FORWARD

Jacob Collins considered HRF 2021 a complete success, with its “beautiful property, talented artists working hard, riffing off each other. You

could just see them being influenced by each other, including myself, becoming better.” He continued, “There’s so much historical precedent for this; working very intensely together produces something different from what an individual [can create].”

Now Tara Shafer and her Wethersfield colleagues are looking forward to HRF 2022: “To see the hills come alive at sunset with young painters determined not to waste one moment of light was a thrill,” she recalls. “Equally, to watch the creative magic lift everything and everyone up was unforgettable. In addition, the opportunity to have the artists exhibit their work for members of the community was deeply rewarding. Wethersfield envisions continuing to support rising young talent who are eager to capture landscape painting in the tradition of the Old Masters, but with a 21st-century interpretation.”

This year’s edition of the Hudson River Fellowship will take place in Wethersfield June 3–24. Although the public cannot participate, the program will again conclude with a public selling exhibition of the paintings produced there. For details on that show, please check the Grand Central Atelier website closer to the time. ●

Information: grandcentralatelier.org/opportunities/hudson-river-fellowship, wethersfield.org

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