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ArtSeen

Artists Choose Artists

DEC 19-JAN 20

By *Joyce Beckenstein*



Alexis Rockman, *The Cuyahoga River*, 2019. Oil on wood, 72 x 192 inches. Courtesy the artist.

On View

Parrish Museum of Art

November 10, 2019 – February 23, 2020

Water Mill, NY

Every three years, the Parrish Art Museum curators relinquish their decision-making powers to a team of well-established artists who judge a competition. *Artists Choose Artists* is an exhibition of works by seven jurors and 21 selectees. For this fourth iteration the jurors—Lillian Ball, Ralph Gibson, Valerie Jaudon, Jill Moser, Alexis Rockman, Lucien Smith, and Allan Wexler—sorted through 300 online portfolios and visited selected studios of artists residing within local zip codes.

In prior years this arduous exercise raised the question, “how do artists who are not curators choose?” This year, jurors tended to pick artists whose work resonates with their own styles, their choices and juxtapositions uncannily and unexpectedly raising intriguing and urgent issues.

Given the lack of curatorial collusion, the 71 works surprisingly coalesce around the maturation of landscape and abstraction traditions that, from the late 19th through mid-20th century, located the American modernist soul within a tiny stretch of the Hamptons on Long Island’s East End. If you begin your *Artists* visit with a detour to the museum’s permanent collection you can view William Merritt Chase’s *Shinnecock Landscape* (1896). This sun-drenched strand of unspoiled Southampton dunes is confronted by a stark reality check when you return to the museum’s reception hall to view Alexis Rockman’s *The Cuyahoga River* (2019). Rockman, who lived and worked in the Hamptons, recreates the East End’s breathtaking light to set aglow a darker story about a vital river feeding into Lake Erie. In the epic panoramic style of the Hudson River School he chronicles the river’s history, from its glacial beginnings to the 1969 pollution-fueled fire that devastated Cleveland’s industrialized landscape.



Janet Culbertson, *Galapagos Tortoise*, 1975. Ink and pastel on rag paper, 90 x 72 inches. Photo: Gary Mamay.

Other artists suggest we can reclaim Chase's idyllic world. Eco-artist and activist Lillian Ball, for example, wades thigh-deep into muddy swamps and then stomps into boardrooms to promote green agendas. She makes her irrefutable case with *Seasons in a Wetland* (2016), a video series of animated stills chronicling WATERWASH, a reclamation project that restored vital wetlands to a decaying strip of land along the Bronx River.

Ball selected two artists, generations apart, whose works are remarkably similar. 45 years ago, Janet Culbertson belted a primal scream with her huge drawing, *Galapagos Tortoise* (1975), a heroic but tragic creature as a writ-large symbol of endangered species. In Scott Bluedorn's large drawing, *Genesis Flux* (2019), a blue whale skeleton sprouting newborn trees from its bony spine hovers above a primordial landscape—a young artist's hopeful call for a new beginning. Another environmentally conscious artist, Mark William Wilson, returns to Chase's landscapes. Replicating the master's color palette, and appropriating his compositions, his *Shinnecock redux* (2019) provides a remembrance of unspoiled nature under an explosive cloud of abstract color and expressionist drips.



Allan Wexler, *Bicycle For Picnicking*, 2019. Mixed media, 70 x 50 x 41 inches. Courtesy the artist.

Corinne Erni, Senior Curator of ArtsReach and Special Projects, who installed the works of jurors and the artists they chose, devotes a large gallery to the abstract works dominating this exhibition. Her splendid installation pays homage to the generations who followed American modern titans—Pollock, de Kooning, and Motherwell among them—who in the mid-twentieth century lived and worked on the East End. The evolution of their signature styles in the works of these exhibiting artists provides us with a concise synopsis of mid-century abstraction reinvented. Jill Moser's scribbly gestural *Cinnabar* (2019) nods to *Red Work* (1990), one of a series of Mary Boochever's Zen-like hand-brushed, color field abstractions. Paint appears to be similarly applied in Lucien Smith's series "Flood Paintings" (2019), but his aggressive colors are in fact air-brushed, their hues derived from digital RGB technologies. Juror Valerie Jaudon's *Cassation* (2015), its arresting design reflecting her ties to the Pattern and Decoration movement, contrasts with the minimal refrains of Bastienne Schmidt's stitched and woven series, "Colored Grids" (2019).

Allan Wexler's works are show-stoppers, and the exhibition's only free-standing sculptures. His *Bicycle for Picnicking* (2019), equipped with closed "constructivist" black boxes on one side, and open containers filled with picnic supplies, including bug spray and wine glasses on the other, humorously combines "high" conceptual art with banalities that connect human need with absurdly pragmatic problem solving. In this case, Wexler invents a way to equip his humble two-wheeler as transport for an elegant picnic. Margaret Garrett, one of Wexler's chosen artists, creates imaginative constructs with *In My World 2* (2019), a video portraying the artist dancing, her moving body a "paintbrush" fragmenting her form into abstract shapes that in turn inform her painting, *Rhythm at Dusk* (2019).

Many other fine pieces in this exhibition—paintings and wall sculptures by Irina Alimanestianu, Janet Goleas, Priscilla Heine, Ronald Reed, and Anne Seelbach; photographs by Ralph Gibson, Tria Givoan, Thomas Hoepker; and etchings by Dan Weldon—recall artistic genres that designate the East End as an art destination. But while this impressive exhibition percolates a rich art-historical brew, it does not entirely sizzle with the vitality of newness. Only two participating artists are under age 50; only one is a person of color. Other than environmental themes, few artists engage hot-button issues such as gender and identity. Nor are their practices immersed in new media.



Mark William Wilson, *Shinecock Redux*, 2019. Oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches. Courtesy the artist.

Still, *Artists Choose Artists* fulfills two important artistic missions: to create context and provoke thought. The unwitting contexts being aging demographics, income inequality, and a lack of ethnic diversity draining creative juices. As museum director Terrie Sultan told me, "Income disparity presents challenges for younger artists seeking to settle here. The artistic community's continued vibrancy depends on a new generation, and Hampton's cultural institutions are keen on cultivating a new garden." And the museum does a motherlode of due diligence through school programs and artist residency collaborations with the Watermill Center for Platform and the Parrish Road Show, both focusing on underrepresented regional and international artists. So too are there collaborations with Organización Latino-Americana and with New Hour and Suffolk County Corrections to serve incarcerated women in the Riverhead facility. But for these efforts to stimulate new young artists on the East End requires those who see beneath the surface of *Artists Choose Artists* to do what this show's activists do: wade into town boardrooms and advocate for change through affordable housing and programs that encourage diversity.

Contributor

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