

Stephen Maine on Carriage Trade's *Another Green World*

Archival Material (painting & letter) (2010)
Installation from *Another Green World*

How does the recent re-emergence and seemingly inexorable mainstreaming of environmentally responsible values espoused by the “green” movement affect our awareness and reception of art that deals with the landscape? With a light, nondidactic touch, an undertone of sly humor, and a taste for irony, artist and curator Peter Scott examines this question in *Another Green World*, on view at [Carriage Trade](#) through November 28. Though clearly skeptical of institutions and power, Scott posits not an agenda so much as the elements of a meditation on our fraught relationship with nature and the imagery to which that tussle gives rise.

Setting the contrarian tone of the exhibition is a reproduction of [a letter to the editors of *The New York Times*](#) from Morley Safer, dated May 20, 2005. The journalist castigates the newspaper of record for neglecting to mention, in its coverage of [Alice Walton’s](#) acquisition of [Asher Durand’s](#) 1849 *Kindred Spirits* for \$35 million, the “grand inherent irony” that the Walmart heiress’s fortune came at the cost of widespread destruction to the American landscape that such a painting celebrates. Hanging alongside a cheap reproduction of the masterpiece, Safer’s curt missive is one of several “archival materials” punctuating the show.



Betty Beaumont
Camouflaged Cells, Irvington, CA (faux palm), 2004
 Chromogenic print
 Betty Beaumont is a NYFA Fiscally Sponsored Artist

Though his turf was the White Mountains of New Hampshire, Durand typified the artist/explorer in league with the early nineteenth-century belief in “[manifest destiny](#),” the doctrine that the westward expansion of our young nation’s frontier (read: white men stealing land) was ongoing and inevitable. The tradition lives on in the work of photographer [Mathias Kessler](#), whose 40-by-66-inch portrait of a snow-white iceberg seen against an ink-black sky, *Ilulissat 011Y, Greenland* (2007), echoes the tumescent forms of the Durand canvas and the artifice of its technique. According to gallery information, Kessler illuminates his subjects with enormous, boat-borne floodlights. Thus his naturalism is highly contrived, and utterly dependant on modern technology.

Closer to home and considerably more mundane is *Swamp* (1971) a six-minute video by [Robert Smithson](#) and [Nancy Holt](#) in which the two, with some difficulty and for no apparent reason, make their way through a dense stand of reeds somewhere in what would appear to be the New Jersey Meadowlands. Neither artist appears on camera, but the soundtrack records an alternately testy and tender Smithson directing Holt’s camera work: “Shoot into the density of it... Watch out, the reeds can cut a little.” A subtext elsewhere in the show, the issue of control here is explicit and interpersonal.

Betty Beaumont draws the biggest laugh with *Camouflaged Cells, Irvington, CA (faux palm)* (2004). It is a C-print of a roadside construction site next to which a cell tower has been erected, badly disguised as a palm tree. The edifice looms over a distinctly testicular pair of the genuine article. The phallic implications are as subtle as a sledgehammer. This work, indebted to Bernd and Hilla Becher and the rest of the “New Topographics” group, grounds the exhibition in the documentary tradition.

George Orwell said of Europe, “Every step you take you’re probably treading on ten dead people.” Scott’s deft inclusion of Gerhard Richter’s *11.2.08 Grauwald* and *14.2.08 Grauwald*, small photographs of dense forest overpainted with spectral scrimms of gray enamel, economically brings an Old World attitude to landscape into play. Richter’s “graywood” is claustrophobic, full of ghosts, while Barbara Ess’s *photographs*, also hazily gray, imply a human presence quite differently. Depicting a remote location at the U.S./Mexico border, they are derived from a website established to facilitate the civilian surveillance of illegal immigration. Grainy, indistinct shots of an elevated roadbed and the river beneath it, *Bridge and Water Under the Bridge* (both from 2010) are memorable for the paranoia and xenophobia they convey.



Nancy Holt and Robert Smithson
Still from Swamp (1971)

Video

Nancy Holt is a NYFA Fiscally Sponsored Artist

That bunker mentality reappears in Neil Jenney’s oil-on-wood *North America Depicted (Canadian #2)* (2003-07). Roughly two feet high and over nine feet wide, we view the scene through a heavy black frame, as if from within a military fortification. In the foreground are a couple of trees; we see only a small segment of their trunks, washed by brilliant sunshine against an azure sky. In the distance drift two bizarrely rectangular clouds, reprising the painting’s format. The painting is ominous, portending environmental disaster (though it is unclear whether the calamity is natural or man-made).

In this context, Vija Celmins’s *Untitled* 2000 wood etching of a wavy expanse of sparkling water assumes a narrative dimension. Ordinarily the image wouldn’t provoke a bit of anxiety, but the company it keeps in *Another Green World* endows it with references to rising flood waters, melting ice caps, and illegals drowning in the Rio Grande. Including it is a daring move, but Scott’s curatorial instincts are spot on.

Stephen Maine is a painter, critic, and curator. A regular contributor to *Art in America* and *artcritical.com*, he has also written for *The New York Sun*, *Art on Paper*, *artnet.com magazine*, *artecontexto*, *The Art Book*, and *The Brooklyn Rail*. Maine teaches in the Graduate Fine Arts program at the *School of Visual Arts* in Manhattan.



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Banner image:
Asher Durand
Kindred Spirits (1849), detail
Oil on canvas

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