Art OF OUR TIME
SELECTIONS FROM THE ULRICH MUSEUM OF ART
WICHITA STATE UNIVERSITY

Patricia McDonnell AND Emily Stamey

With contributions by
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AND Robert Silberman

Photo-essay by Larry Schwarm

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Barncled Rocks is a fine example of early-twentieth-century Connecticut impressionism as realized by the Danish American artist Emil Carlsen. Beginning in the late 1880s, Connecticut’s rural charms and rugged seacoast attracted New York artists, who established colonies in Old Lyme and in the Cos Cob neighborhood of Greenwich. They appreciated the proximity of those communities to Manhattan, site of their urban studios. The art historian Susan Larkin has compared the Cos Cob artists to their French counterparts who had summered in Argenteuil a few decades earlier: Impressionists in both these semirural places were seeking more contemplative subjects in nature and the camaraderie of like-minded artists. Carlsen joined Childe Hassam, Willard Metcalf, John Twachtman, J. Alden Weir, and others who supported a culture of artistic innovation inspired by the Connecticut countryside.

Carlsen was born in Copenhagen, where he studied architecture, painting, and sculpture at the Royal Academy. He immigrated to America in 1872 and settled in Chicago, working as an assistant first to an architect and then to the Danish painter Lauritz B. Holst. He took a teaching position at the then recently founded Chicago Academy of Design (now the School of the Art Institute of Chicago). In 1875 Carlsen spent several productive months in Paris, where he briefly attended classes at the Académie Julian. He returned to the United States later that year and took a studio in New York. Back in Paris from 1884 to 1886, he concentrated on still-life painting before moving to San Francisco, where for two years he directed the school of the San Francisco Art Association and, subsequently, had a studio and taught. In 1890 the peripatetic artist accepted an invitation to teach at the National Academy of Design in New York; he remained an instructor there until 1918.

Carlsen married in 1896 and purchased property in Falls River, Connecticut, in 1905. His distinctive talents and growing friendships with artists such as Twachtman and Weir helped him establish a secure place among the Connecticut impressionists. Barncled Rocks vividly demonstrates the nature of Carlsen’s impressionism. To capture the churning waves dashing against rocks, he relied on aggressive brushwork, while creating the tranquil blue of the distant sea and sky with a more controlled application of paint. In addition, the composition reflects Carlsen’s appreciation for Japanese aesthetics, a penchant he shared with many American and French impressionists. Claude Monet and John Twachtman, for example, treasured their Japanese woodblock prints. Later, modernists would admire the flat zones of unmolded color, asymmetrical designs, and compositional foreshortening characteristic of this genre. In the Ulrich Museum’s canvas, a few simple zones of near monochromes comprise the image. The viewer’s heightened vantage point, elevated from the rocky shoreline in the foreground, disrupts recession and contributes to a two-dimensional effect. The asymmetry of the view Carlsen selected energizes the composition and illustrates the artist’s embrace of japonisme. The combined impact of these formal characteristics demonstrates the strong modernism of this painting.

Patricia McDonnell

Toby Kamps is senior curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston. He has organized exhibitions on the work of Vanessa Beecroft, Ellsworth Kelly, and Claes Oldenburg as well as such themed exhibitions as Small World: Dioramas in Contemporary Art (2000), Lateral Thinking: The Art of the 1990s (2002), and The Old, Weird America (2008).

Patricia McDonnell is director of the Ulrich Museum of Art. Her scholarly focus is upon European and American modernism, and she is a leading specialist on the painter Marsden Hartley. Her publications include Marsden Hartley: American Modern (1997), On the Edge of Your Seat: Popular Theater and Film in Early Twentieth-Century American Art (2002), and Painting Berlin Stories (2003).

Laura Moriarty is the author of three novels and the recipient of several literary awards. Before becoming a full-time writer, she was a social worker. Moriarty lives in Lawrence, Kansas, where she teaches creative writing at the University of Kansas.

Antonya Nelson has written three novels and published six short-story collections. She contributes often to the New Yorker and the New York Times Book Review. Nelson holds the Cullen Chair in Creative Writing at the University of Houston. Her award-winning novel, Living to Tell (2000), takes place in her hometown of Wichita, and her forthcoming novel, Bound, is set there as well.

Timothy R. Rodgers is director of the Scottsdale (Arizona) Museum of Contemporary Art. Formerly chief curator at the New Mexico Museum of Art, Santa Fe, he is involved in a range of writing and curatorial projects. His scholarly concentration is on American early modernism.

Robert Silberman is an associate professor of art history at the University of Minnesota’s Twin Cities campus. His chief scholarly interests have been photography, film, and contemporary art. Silberman collaborated with former New York Times photography critic Vivien Goldberg on the companion volume for the 1999 PBS series American Photography: A Century of Images.

Larry Schwartz is a professor of art at Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas, and a nationally regarded photographer whose work has been shown at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. His 2003 book, On Fire: Larry Schwartz, won the Honickman Book Award and Prize.


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