

British Art Studies

Issue 10, published 29 November 2018

Landscape Now

Cover image: David Alesworth, *Unter den Linden*, 2010, horticultural intervention, public art project, terminalia arjuna seeds (sterilized) yellow paint.. Digital image courtesy of David Alesworth.

PDF generated on 17 December 2018

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Published by:

Paul Mellon Centre

16 Bedford Square

London, WC1B 3JA

<http://www.paul-mellon-centre.ac.uk>

In partnership with:

Yale Center for British Art

1080 Chapel Street

New Haven, Connecticut

<http://britishart.yale.edu>

ISSN: 2058-5462

DOI: 10.17658/issn.2058-5462

URL: <http://www.britishartstudies.ac.uk>

Editorial team: <http://www.britishartstudies.ac.uk/about/editorial-team>

Advisory board: <http://www.britishartstudies.ac.uk/about/advisory-board>

Produced in the United Kingdom.

A joint publication by



PAUL MELLON
CENTRE

YALE CENTER FOR BRITISH ART

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Cite as

Mark Hallett, "Introduction", British Art Studies, Issue 10, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-10/intro>

This special issue of *British Art Studies* emerges out of the third of a series of international scholarly conferences that the Paul Mellon Centre has developed in collaboration with the Yale Center for British Art and the Huntington Library and Art Gallery. In devising these events, we have always endeavoured to choose topics that are not only capacious and significant, but also timely. For our first two conferences held in 2015 and 2016, those topics were portraiture—or rather the interactive capacities of portraiture—and the relationship between photography and notions of Britishness.¹ For the most recent of these conferences, which was called *Landscape Now*, and which was held in December 2017, we focused instead on landscape imagery, feeling that this, too, was an area that was not only ripe for reassessment, but already attracting new kinds of art-historical attention.

As was noted in our conference call for *Landscape Now*, the pictorial representation of the British landscape was the subject of sustained scholarly investigation in the 1980s and 1990s. This was a period—let us call it Landscape Then—that saw the emergence both of a social history of art as a vital methodological mode and of an especially brilliant generation of scholars, from a range of disciplinary backgrounds, who focused on the landscape imagery of the Georgian period. Writers such as John Barrell and Anne Bermingham produced powerful and provocative thematic studies on the subject, while scholars such as David Solkin and Michael Rosenthal published seminal texts on individual landscape artists—in their case, the canonical figures of Richard Wilson and John Constable.² These writers' work not only helped transform interpretations of British landscape painting, but also made the study of such imagery seem essential to a proper understanding of British art itself.

Even as the attention of historians of British art has shifted over the last two decades—to the study of, amongst other things, empire, print culture, exhibitions, the iconography of urban life, and the imagery of the Victorian and Modern period—the study of the landscape in adjacent disciplines has continued apace, driven in part by political and environmental imperatives. Cultural geographers such as Stephen Daniels and David Matless have long been offering nuanced investigations of the British landscape in their publications, asking us to think afresh about its relationship to national identity, memory, and post-imperial decline.³ In recent years, furthermore, newly energised categories of “nature writing” and cultural histories that deal engagingly with the British landscape, have gained widespread currency beyond the purely academic arena.⁴ And while many scholars in the humanities, in an age of globalization and deepening ecological concern, have felt compelled to think about landscape on a vastly expanded basis, others have been driven to offer a new and suggestive focus on the local.⁵

The moment thus seemed ripe for a major art-historical reassessment of the imagery of the British landscape—one that took account of these and other emergent concerns; one that drew upon the insights offered by colleagues from a range of other strands in the humanities; and one that looked across periods and media, so that it might just as happily interrogate recent work in film as it might the details of a medieval manuscript. I am pleased to say that the resultant conference did all of these things, and more—so much so, that all those of us involved in organizing the event unanimously agreed that the research and arguments it showcased deserved publication. This special issue of *British Art Studies*, which has been edited by Sarah Turner and Martina Droth, is the result, and we hope you will agree that it offers a fresh, diverse, and stimulating set of approaches to the topic.

This publication forms part of a wider push on our and our fellow organizers' part to promote new scholarship in this and related areas. Thus, following the publication of our online catalogues on the landscape artists Richard Wilson and Francis Towne, we at the PMC have recently commissioned Greg Smith to produce an online catalogue of the works of the great landscape watercolourist Thomas Girtin.⁶ Our recent books include studies of gardens and gardening in early modern England, and a catalogue devoted to the contemporary landscape paintings of George Shaw, published to accompany a major exhibition of the artist's work at the Yale Center for British Art.⁷ Furthermore, we are delighted that Tim Barringer, who delivered a keynote lecture to the *Landscape Now* conference, and who makes a major contribution to this issue, is also going to be giving the Paul Mellon Lectures in London and at Yale in 2019, on the topic of *Global Landscape in the Age of Empire*.⁸

These ventures are only some of the elements of what we envisage as a far broader exploration of landscape imagery at the PMC, at Yale, and no doubt at the Huntington too, over the next few years. We hope that this range of activities will contribute to a new and transformative era of scholarship in the field of British landscape studies—one, indeed, that we can continue to enjoy as *Landscape Now*, even as we look back with fondness and appreciation at the era of *Landscape Then*.

Footnotes

- 1 For which, see <https://www.paul-mellon-centre.ac.uk/whats-on/past/portraiture-interaction> and <https://www.britishartstudies.ac.uk/issues/issue-index/issue-4/yca-conference/>.
- 2 See John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting 1730–1849* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Anne Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740–1860* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987); Michael Rosenthal, *Constable: The Painter and his Landscape* (London: Yale University Press, 1983); David Solkin, *Richard Wilson: The Landscape of Reaction* (London: The Tate Gallery, 1982).
- 3 See Stephen Daniels, *Fields of Vision: Landscape Imagery and National Identity in England and the United States*, (Oxford: Polity Press, 1993); David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, 2nd edn (London: Reaktion Books, 2016 [1998]).

- 4 Distinguished examples of such works are Robert Macfarlane, *Landmarks* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2015); Alexandra Harris, *Weatherland: Writers and Artists under English Skies* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2015); and Helen Macdonald, *H is for Hawk* (London: Grove Press, 2014).
- 5 For a fascinating example of the latter approach, see John Barrell, *Edward Pugh of Ruthin, 1763-1813: "A Native Artist"* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013).
- 6 For the Wilson catalogue, see www.richardwilsononline.ac.uk/; for the Towne catalogue, see <http://francistowne.ac.uk/>.
- 7 David Jacques, *Gardens of Court and Country: English Design, 1630-1730* (London: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 2017); Jill Francis, *Gardens and Gardening in Early Modern England and Wales* (London: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 2018); Mark Hallett (ed.), *George Shaw: A Corner of a Foreign Field* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press in association with Yale Center for British Art; Holburne Museum; Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2018).
- 8 For details, see www.nationalgallery.org.uk/whats-on/paul-mellon-lectures.

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