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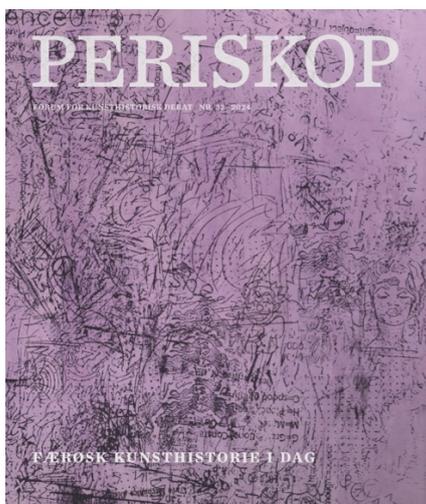
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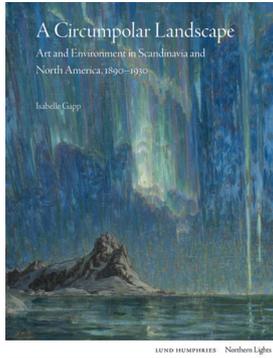
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A Circumpolar Landscape: Art and Environment in Scandinavia and North America 1890-1930

By Isabelle Gapp

Lund Humphries, London, 2024, 208 pp.



In 1994, W.J.T. Mitchell (1994, 20) announced that “the classical and romantic genres of landscape painting evolved during the great age of European imperialism now seem exhausted, at least for the purposes of serious painting.” However, artists in the 21st century have continued to redefine, transform and reanimate landscape as a genre, even for the purposes of addressing its imbrication in imperialist worldmaking. The discipline of art history’s interest in the genre of landscape has also been renewed by the Ecological and New Materialist Turns, not to speak of the proliferation of post- and decolonial perspectives beyond the Francophone and Anglophone geographical spheres. Returning to the land – and its representation – appears to be a cyclical motif that accompanies ecological crisis and change. Isabelle Gapp’s *A Circumpolar Landscape* takes up this renewed interest in representations of place with a comparative focus on modernist landscape painting in North America and Scandinavia. Rather than organizing these depictions in traditional modes of style, school, or chronology, Gapp conducts her comparison around biotopes (forest, lakes), landscape topographies (mountains, ice) and environmental phenomena (northern lights). She demonstrates her ecocritical position through her attention to changing environmental conditions and extractive practices in the Sub-Arctic and Arctic. Serving this aim,

she argues, “landscape painting might act as interlocutor between past and present environments” (Gapp 2024, 10).

European landscape painting has helped formulate foundational Western ideological conceptions of the relationship between human and environment. Artists working in the picturesque and Romantic modes drew on long-developed techniques of framing, perspective, and zoning to distinguish “wilderness” from the human-made or pastoral. Intimately bound up with colonial capitalist enterprise, this construction of “wilderness” as that which is beyond human culture has rendered Indigenous communities as part of the natural world and therefore often without legal claim to land (Fletcher, Hamilton, Dressler and Palmer, 2021). Bringing this lens to Scandinavian landscape imaginaries is as politically urgent as ever. In 2010, the Norwegian Water Resources and Energy Directorate ignored the centuries-old practice of Sámi reindeer herding by granting permission to construct two large wind power farms in Fosen, Trøndelag (Roan and Storheia). Even after the Supreme Court ruled that the projects were in breach of the UN’s charter for civil and political rights in 2021, the state remained silent and refused to concede the rights of the reindeer herding families. Sámi youth responded with mass civil disobedience in the Government headquarters in the autumn of 2022 and winter of 2023, sparking a legal case that is still ongoing at the time of this writing.

A Circumpolar Landscape’s first chapter, *Taming the Wilderness*, is therefore key in setting up the book’s critique of settler colonial narratives of place. Reading Norwegian painter Peder Balke’s paintings of Northern Norway alongside Frederick Turner’s *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (1893), Gapp argues they both contributed to the creation of a discursive threshold along latitudinal axes between the wild, uninhabitable north and the civilizing power of the south. The artists could thus mobilize the concept of “nature” in order to tame these landscapes and serve the pur-

poses of national identity construction and historical commemoration (Gapp 2024, 28). Some more nuanced discussion of Norwegian romantic nationalism in the nineteenth century may have been helpful here, as it is largely in the post-war era that *national* significance has been attached to Balke's landscapes. Another technology of image making was more immediately instrumental in nationalizing the landscape in its own time, however, as Gapp points out. Working with geologists, national parks and transport authorities, photographers such as Anders Beer Wilse in Norway, W.G. McFarlane in Canada and geographer Axel Hamberg in Sweden helped make land traversable and exploitable for mineral resources at the expense of Indigenous Sámi and Inuit communities.

In Chapter 2, *Into the Woods*, Gapp draws attention to the way in which forests represented an environment for modernist exploration of pattern, texture and theosophic mysticism. In the work of Canadian artist Emily Carr in British Columbia and Swedish artist Gustaf Fjæstad in Värmland, forests function as near-anthropomorphic presences on the canvas. In *Totem Walk at Sitka* (1907), Carr renders a clearing path lined by First Nations Tlingit and Haida totem poles – fictionally grouped together to integrate with the canopy of repetitious trees filling the entirety of the composition. Gapp compares Carr with the contemporaneous Emilie Demant Hatt's work with the Sámi author and reindeer herder Johan Turi on the Swedish side of Sápmi (also discussed in Chapter 3), emphasizing the political complexities of the female ethnographic gaze.

In Chapter 3, focused on depictions of lakes, Gapp (2024, 179) seeks to “reconcile the aquatic shift in visual culture with the Scandinavian art historical framing of atmospheric painting or *stämningmåleri*”. Seen from a North American perspective, Kirk Varnedoe's influential 1982 exhibition *Northern Light* shown in Washington, Brooklyn, Minneapolis and Göteborg (Sweden) brought together a range of artists, including Akseli Gallen-Kallela, Vilhelm Hammershøi, Harriet Backer and Peder Severin Krøyer, under the seductive idea that

there is a particular Nordic psychology produced by the environmental play between climate, light and topography as expressed through the medium of modernist painting. This view, extended to North America itself, was also promoted by Roald Nasgaard in his *The Mystic North* (1984). Gapp shifts away from these anthropocentric accounts by instead reading the work of Kitty Kielland, Helmer Osslund, Franklin Carmichael, and Tom Thomsons in conversation with John Gillis' (2013, 10-13) notion of the “hybridity of land and sea” as an ecological continuum. As an example of how this “aquatic shift” might be undertaken in art history, Gapp (2024, 92) skillfully interweaves painting and environment in her reading of Carmichael's *Grace Lake* (1931):

Grace Lake is set into the granite and syanite of the Shield, painted in shades of gray, brown, yellow and orange. Interspersed among the cliffs and rocky foreground, where a great abundance of metamorphic rock composes this never-ending coastal precipice, are patches of lichen, moss and other vegetation. The translucent blue might indicate ecological damage, notably acidification, caused by industrial mining, a prevalent industry in the region during the 20th century.

This chapter also attends to connections between geology and modernist color techniques, which is picked up again in Chapter 4 (*Moving Mountains*). Gapp's account of the visual culture of Kiruna's iron mining industry is particularly worth highlighting here. At *Göteborgsutställningen* (the *Gothenburg Exhibition*) of 1923, Axel Sjöberg's large-scale painting *Kirunavaara* towered over a mining display dedicated to Trafik Aktiebolaget Grängesberg-Oxelsund, a railway company which owned a major share of the Kiruna mining company (LKAB). Here, Gapp argues, the atmospheric genre of *stämningmåleri* was inserted ideologically to soften the industrial realities seen through the engineering drawings and mapping technologies that made Kiruna

exploitable. This perspective arguably has even more generative potential. There is undoubtedly more work to be done to reveal connections between the visual culture of mining and modernist “geological” experimentation.

The last two chapters consider representations of the northern lights (5, *Kaleidoscopic Horizons*) and glacial ice (6, *Icy Imaginaries*). Chapter 5 diverts attention from the coloristic effects of the aurora borealis to the way artists have played with its monochromatic potential between light and dark in graphic media. Gapp also distinguishes between travel depictions and those made by Sámi artists; in Nils Andersson Valkeapää’s¹ copper print *Northern Lights* (*Guovssahasat*, or *Lovers*, 1929), the phenomenon is rendered in two jagged abstracted lines, secondary to – or perhaps a part of – the two human characters’ narrative below. In contrast, Gapp argues in Chapter 6, icescapes particularly enabled modernist preoccupation with colorism and tonalism to unfold. Due to a phenomenon known as Rayleigh scattering, the dense molecules of glacier ice scatter light and make it appear in blues and greens (Gapp 2024, 171). Gapp’s emphasis on the nuanced color usage of Anna Boberg in Lofoten and Lawren Stewart Harris in the Canadian Rockies therefore challenges pervasive perceptions of polar icescapes as white – both literally and ideologically. Opening her final chapter with the double entendre of the “white male exploration narrative,” Gapp combines a feminist and ecocritical reading to acknowledge (white) women’s ethically ambivalent role in picturing glaciers under recession. Art, as ice, is seen to archive and mediate environmental change.

Although Gapp’s book is a timely study of landscape painting that transcends national frameworks, the sheer amount of material and contexts inevitably means that some nuances and close readings will be missed. Her treatment of Canadian and Swedish image culture is the most nuanced and arguably holds the most flow in her analysis. There could be more historical analysis of Scandinavia’s internal geopolitical relationships, which is certainly relevant for a critical reading of its landscape

and extractive policies. Some inaccuracies, especially regarding the Norwegian context, occasionally weaken Gapp’s analysis predicated on ecological precision. It is not entirely clear what Gapp (2024, 169) refers to when describing the indigenous territory of Sápmi extending to Narvik. While it has no formal boundaries, Sápmi is commonly acknowledged to stretch from Davvinjárga/Nordkáhppa (Norwegian: Nordkapp) in the north to Trööndelag in the south (Norwegian: Trøndelag), much further south than Narvik. In her description of Peder Balke’s journey to Northern Norway, she states: “In the 1830s he travelled to the Svalbard archipelago and on to Telemark in the Norwegian Arctic, before venturing further south to the city of Bergen [...]” (Gapp 2024, 27). This is both historically and geographically misleading; his journey to Northern Norway in 1832 went as far as Nordkapp, but Balke stayed on the mainland. Balke had earlier made a separate trip through Telemark and to Bergen (both in Southern Norway). Many of Balke’s depictions of the north are geographically unspecified in their titles, however, and he likely saw François-Auguste Biard’s paintings of Svalbard from the French “La Recherche” expedition between 1838-1840 during his stay in Paris (Ljøgodt 2021, 86). That Balke’s views represent a romantic and homogenizing “vision” of the north is undeniable.

Overall, *A Circumpolar Landscape* offers a welcome rereading of Northern landscape painting in the way that it re-connects artistic practice to environmental change and extractive industries. With her interdisciplinary “toolbox,” Gapp roots her analysis in the art historical through evocative visual groupings of geographically disparate motifs and ekphrastic descriptions of composition, color and texture. More than an aesthetic argument, however, it challenges often taken for granted settler colonial myths about nation-bound “wilder-ness” that still dominate discourses about the North, and which obfuscate the continued and multiple use of these spaces. Especially in the Scandinavian context, Indigenous land use is still virtually absent from tradi-

tional art historical scholarship. Gapp's mobilization of Indigenous perspectives to deconstruct and historicize the rhetoric of these artworks presents a welcome counterweight to the still deep-seated nationalist narratives which center a seemingly timeless depopulated landscape as their origin.

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NOTES

- 1 Should not be confused with the later Sámi multi-artist Nils-Aslak Valkeapää (1943-2001).

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