

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

Exhibition Finds Darkness in the Sublime

By NICOLA SMITH
Valley News Staff Writer

WHEN THE 19TH CENTURY ENGLISH art critic John Ruskin described his theory of the sublime in art, he was in the midst of vigorously championing the work of his countryman, the painter J.M.W. Turner.

Turner had upended conventions of orderly, pastoral landscapes organized along classical lines of perspective. In the place of such neoclassical subject matter as Greek and Roman history and mythology, or familiar, rural landscapes, Turner painted towering storms, raging conflagrations and torrential deluges with gusts and cascades of color.

He depicted ships and buildings — and, implicitly, the humans in them — being sucked into great vortices of waves and wind, and fire and ice. To his detractors, his paintings were nothing more than “tinted steam.” To his admirers, his work was so

visceral it was as if viewers were there.

In Turner’s paintings nature is overwhelming and often terrifying; it’s rarely just pretty.

Far ahead of its time in its use of abstraction, Turner’s work evoked feelings of awe and insignificance, which was in keeping with Ruskin’s dictum that “many things are sublime in the highest degree, which are not in the highest degree beautiful, and vice versa.”

Ruskin’s definition of the sublime was powerfully influential, and made its way not only into the art of the period, but also into the art of the Impressionists and post-Impressionists that came later. There are probably very few artists working today who haven’t grappled with the idea of the sublime at some point in their careers.

It’s also at the root of the exhibition “Landscapes After Ruskin: Redefining the Sublime” at the Hall Art Foundation in Reading, Vt. through Nov. 27.

The show was curated by the photogra-

pher (and Dartmouth College graduate) Joel Sternfeld, who’s perhaps best known for his landmark 1987 book *American Prospects*, which combines both the sublime vistas of the big American landscape with the weird vacuousness of its mass-produced public architecture.

Sternfeld has selected 68 works by 52 artists from both the Hall, and the Hall Foundation, collections, which take their names from collectors Andrew and Christine Hall, who also have endowed large collections at MassMOCA in North Adams, Mass., the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, England and Schloss Derneburg Museum in Germany. The Halls are known, in particular, for having amassed holdings of con-

SEE ART NOTES — C2

COURTESY IMAGE

Peripheral View, a 2008 oil painting by Serban Savu, is part of the Hall Art Foundation exhibition “Landscapes After Ruskin: Redefining the Sublime.”



Lebanon High Graduate Returns to Northern Stage



VALLEY NEWS PHOTOGRAPHS — JAMES M. PATTERSON

The three witches, from left, Virginia Ogden, Rigel Harris, and Carene Rose Mekertichyan, encounter Macbeth and Banquo during Tuesday evening’s dress rehearsal of the play at the Barrette Center for the Arts in White River Junction. The season opening production brings the Shakespearean tragedy into the context of modern warfare.

The Horrors of War

By NICOLA SMITH
Valley News Staff Writer

THE STAGE AT THE BARRETTE Center for the Arts in White River Junction looks like a war zone, sand-blasted and awash in rubble, while a tower of TV sets stands to one side. It’s part of the set design for Northern Stage’s production of *Macbeth*.

Rigel Harris, a 23-year-old who plays both the First Witch and Lady Macbeth’s servant, looks over the set that’s going to be home for the next month while technicians work on various aspects of the production and director Stephen Brown-Fried wanders in from the lobby in preparation for that morning’s rehearsal.

“They’re capable of doing so much in this space,” Harris said, marveling at both the size of the set, and the sophistication of the lighting and sound equip-

ment, a big step up from the company’s previous space in the Briggs Opera House.

Macbeth previews begin this evening, opening night is Saturday, and the production runs through Oct. 28.

This is an audacious interpretation of the classic, set in the aftermath of a 21st century war, rather than in medieval Scotland. Brown-Fried’s conception of the play involves the fog of modern warfare and the technologies that, to some extent, direct how war is carried out.

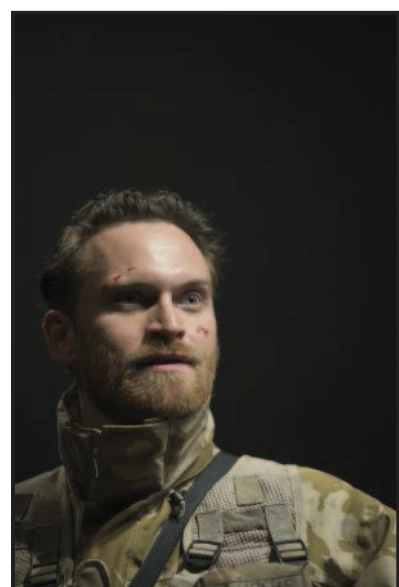
But the battles-to-the-death for political and military dominance, and the personalities at the heart of those struggles, are still very much at the center of the production. More than 400 years since *Macbeth* was first produced, it has lost none of its pertinence, or dark power.

“We’re so lucky to be able to do this production now: It’s emotionally and intellectually smart,” said Harris, who has red hair, blue eyes and an open expression.

Raised and schooled in Lebanon, Harris graduated from Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., with a degree in theater and dance. She also studied at the British Academy of Dramatic Arts in London during a junior year abroad and at the Accademia dell’Arte in Italy.

She is not the only local talent appearing in the production: Robert David Grant, who grew up in Ver-shire, has been cast as Macbeth and George Colligan, who grew up in Hanover, plays both Donalbaine and Seyton.

Dartmouth College graduates Carene Meker-
SEE HORRORS OF WAR — C6



Left: Macbeth, played by Robert David Grant, contemplates the predictions of the three witches. Right: Grant, as Macbeth, center, shares a scene with Hollis McCarthy, left, as Rosse, and Bradley Anderson, as Lennox.

“We’re so lucky to be able to do this production now: It’s emotionally and intellectually smart.”

Rigel Harris, actor



Pianist Plays And Talks Beethoven

ENTERTAINMENT HIGHLIGHTS

By DAVID CORRIVEAU
Valley News Staff Writer

WHILE PERFORMING BEETHOVEN’S *Piano Sonata No. 17 in D minor, Opus 31, No. 2*, in Norwich on Wednesday night, Michael Arnowitt won’t be using sheet music.

For one thing, the Montpelier-based pianist long ago committed the iconic German composer’s sonatas, including this one, popularly known as the “Tempest,” to memory.

Then there’s the matter of Arnowitt being legally blind for most of his adult life, thanks to a condition known as retinitis pigmentosis.

“Classical pianists tend to play from memory, anyway,” Arnowitt, now in his early 50s, said last week during a telephone interview. “In my case, I had no choice. And besides, music is all about your sense of hearing and your sense of touch.”

Which makes it all the more remarkable to Arnowitt that Beethoven wrote many of his greatest works after losing his hearing — remarkable enough that at the Norwich Congregational Church next week, Arnowitt will supplement his recital with a lecture on the “sketchbooks” from which Beethoven built “Tempest” and other works.

“I have always been extremely intrigued by composers and how they make their music,” said Arnowitt, whose presentation is part of the Vermont Humanities Council’s First Wednesday series. “Of course, Beethoven is particularly fascinating, not only to musicians but to the general public. ... People seem to appreciate learning more about the person and the composer’s process: ‘How do they take their sketch and decide what to keep and what to leave out?’ ‘How different was the final version from the original sketch?’ In this case, the sketches are extremely simple and, frankly, don’t sound all that interesting. I learned how he transformed this humble material.”

Arnowitt, who grew up in Greater Boston, estimates that he first heard recordings of Beethoven’s finished products on his father’s turntable around age 5. By 8, he was performing simpler pieces and looking forward to the more complex ones.

“Leonard Bernstein phrased it nicely,” Arnowitt said. “There’s a rightness to Beethoven’s music. You feel it when you listen to him. He was really the first composer who really demanded that music not be background music.”

SEE HIGHLIGHTS — C3



COURTESY PHOTOGRAPH

Michael Arnowitt performs and talks about Beethoven’s piano sonatas in Norwich on Wednesday night.

Art Notes: Hall Art Foundation Show Finds the Darkness in the Contemporary Sublime

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temporary German art.

Some of the better-known artists whose works are on view in the Reading show include Chinese dissident Ai Wei Wei, Fluxus artist Joseph Beuys, Americans Eric Fischl and Neil Jenney, and Germans Anselm Kiefer and Georg Baselitz. Only 11 of the artists in the show are women, which is an unfortunate imbalance.

While Turner painted raw, untrammelled nature that could still overwhelm anything humans threw at it, the artists selected by Sternfeld are operating in an environment of increased human population, rapid-fire technological advances and climate change.

Nature still rules, and we are subject to its forces, but the interrelationship between humans and nature is more complex than it was during Turner's and Ruskin's lifetimes, and often detrimental to both.

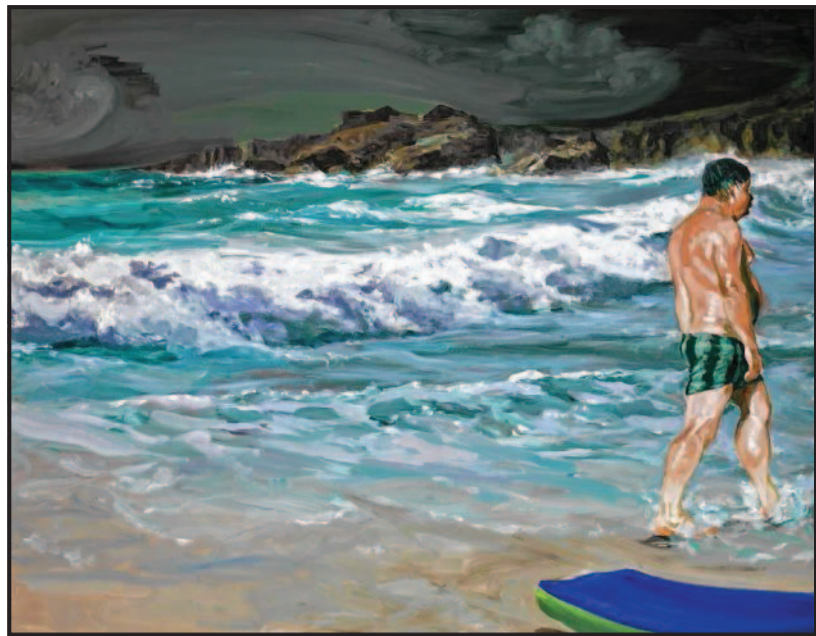
So what, and where, is the sublime in the modern age? The work that Sternfeld chose for the exhibition suggests some places to look, and they're not always what you would expect.

Industrial landscapes have their own ghostly beauty. Seen at night, an incandescent electric grid lights up the Los Angeles basin in Florian Maier-Aichen's digital photographic print *Untitled (Mount Wilson)*. Thomas Ruff uses a night vision device, typically used by the military in combat, in his photograph *Nacht 10 III* to shed an otherworldly, menacing green glow on construction cranes.

Romanian painter Serban Savu, whose work is a real find, paints people who are barely visible in dingy post-industrial landscapes, but even in the midst of such dreariness his handling of paint, and the way he sets his scenes, suggest the nocturnes of James A.M. Whistler.

In Eric Fischl's massive painting *Scenes from Late Paradise: Stupidity*, painted from 2006 to 2007, a paunchy middle-aged man trudges on a beach, apparently oblivious to the black clouds on the horizon and the heavy surf pounding the beach.

Christoph Draeger has two works in the show: *Hurricane Andrew (2000)* and *Pan Am 103 (2003)*. Draeger takes images from two disasters, the first the hurricane that



Scenes from Late Paradise: Stupidity, an oil painting by Eric Fischl from 2006-7, is on view at the Hall Art Foundation in Reading, Vt.



Oil Spills, an installation in porcelain by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, is among the works on view in the Hall Art Foundation's exhibition "Landscapes After Ruskin: Redefining the Sublime."

demolished South Florida in 1992, and the second the bombing of Pan Am flight 103, which brought the 747 down over Lockerbie, Scotland in 1988.

When you step closer to them you realize that Draeger has turned the images into jigsaw puzzles, so that you can conduct a forensic, piece-by-piece examination of the two scenes. Are these "beautiful" scenes? No. But they elicit pity, horror and awe.

Chinese photographer DoDo Jin Ming seems to quote Turner in her gelatin silver print of an angry sea in *Free Element Plate XXIX*. Dutch artist Carla Klein contributes one of the show's standout paintings, *Untitled 2009*, a nearly cinematic view, in black, white, gray and some blue, of a highway seen through a car window, with rain clouds hovering overhead.

Like other works in the show Klein's painting suggests that, for

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 - **Arabella**, 65 Main St., Windsor, 802-674-5111
 - **ART Gallery**, 1389 Vt. Route 14, S. Royalton, joanhoffmann.com, 802-282-3991
 - **ArtisTree Community Art Center**, 2095 Pomfret Road, S. Pomfret, 802-457-3500
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 - **Center for Cartoon Studies**, 94 S. Main St., White River Junction, 802-295-3319
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 - **Cider Hill Gardens and Gallery**, 1747 Hunt Road, Windsor, 802-674-6825
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 - **League of N.H. Craftsmen**, 13 Lebanon St., Hanover, 603-643-3040
 - **Ledyard Gallery**, Howe Library, 13 South St., Hanover, 603-643-4120
 - **Long River Galleries and Gifts**, 1 Main St., Lyme, 603-795-4909
 - **Main Street Museum**, 58 Bridge St., White River Junction, 802-356-2776
 - **Marian Graves Mugar Art Gallery**, Colby-Sawyer College, 541 Main St., New London, 603-526-3759
 - **Montshire Museum of Science**, 1 Montshire Drive, Norwich, 802-649-2200
 - **Newport Library Arts Center**, 58 N. Main St., Newport, 603-863-5384
 - **Norwich Public Library**, 368 Main St., Norwich, 802-649-1184
 - **Royalton Memorial Library**, 23 Alexander Place, S. Royalton, 802-763-7094
 - **Saint Gaudens National Historic Site**, 139 Saint Gaudens Road, Cornish; nps.gov/saga/index.htm; 603-675-2175
 - **Scavenger Gallery**, 41 S. Main St., White River Junction, 802-295-0808
 - **Studio 47**, 47 Woodstock Road, Woodstock, 802-457-5180
 - **Taylor Gallery**, Kimball Union Academy, Meriden, 603-469-2135
 - **Two Rivers Printmaking Studio**, 85 N. Main St., White River Junction, 802-295-5901
 - **Tunbridge Public Library**, Route 110, Tunbridge, 802-889-9404
 - **Woodstock Gallery**, 6 Elm St. Woodstock, 802-457-2012
 - **Zollikofer Gallery**, Hotel Coolidge, 39 S. Main St., White River Junction, 802-295-3118

humans, nature is something encountered in transit, in passing; it's not a force with which most of us have to seriously contend, as do the puny creatures battling for survival in Turner's landscapes.

Sternfeld himself is represented by a 16-minute, essentially comical film, *London Bridge*, that comes at the end of the exhibition galleries, and is a welcome antidote to much of the heavier, more somber art that precedes it.

In it a gondolier plies his trade at Lake Havasu, Ariz., where an American entrepreneur rebuilt the original London Bridge after he bought it in 1968, had it dismantled and shipped to the U.S. The juxtaposition between the singing, good-natured gondolier, the elegant lines of the bridge, and the crasser elements of American life is, if you've seen Sternfeld's photos, a perennial theme.

Norbert Schwontkowski's *Hohe Tannen III*, (2005) is one of the most arresting works in the exhibi-

tion. Roughly translated as "tall fir trees," *Hohe Tannen* is, unusually, an oil in shades of grey, black and white, a kind of monochromatic study.

It's a nighttime scene; stars glow in the sky. In the foreground are fir trees, and just above them a strong beam of light cuts through the darkness. On closer look you see that the light is coming from the nose of a plane coming in over the trees.

Is the plane coming in to land? Is it in trouble? It's ambiguous. There's a melancholy as we contemplate the humans caught up in whatever drama's at play here.

Hohe Tannen seems to sum up our uneasy relationship with the sublime.

We crave the thrilling authenticity that the sublime offers, we want to experience that disjunction between the vastness of the sublime and our own insignificance, but we also want it on our terms — packaged in tours, chopped into discrete blocks of time, and shrunk to the

size of a smartphone camera. But Nature always has its own rules of engagement.

The Hall Art Foundation is open through November on weekends and Wednesdays, by appointment. This Friday the foundation is open to the public from 5 to 8 p.m.: no appointment is necessary to tour the galleries. For information and to book a tour go to hallartfoundation.org.

OPENINGS AND RECEPTIONS

Margaret Jacobs, who is exhibition coordinator at the AVA Gallery and Art Center in Lebanon, will exhibit some of her own sculpture in the show "Lost and Found" at **Scavenger Gallery** in White River Junction, which is holding an opening reception as part of First Friday. Jacobs works with steel, pewter and such natural materials as deer hair, porcupine quills, and leather. The reception is from 5:30 to 8 p.m.

An exhibition of colorful abstract work by Amy Fortier opens Friday

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