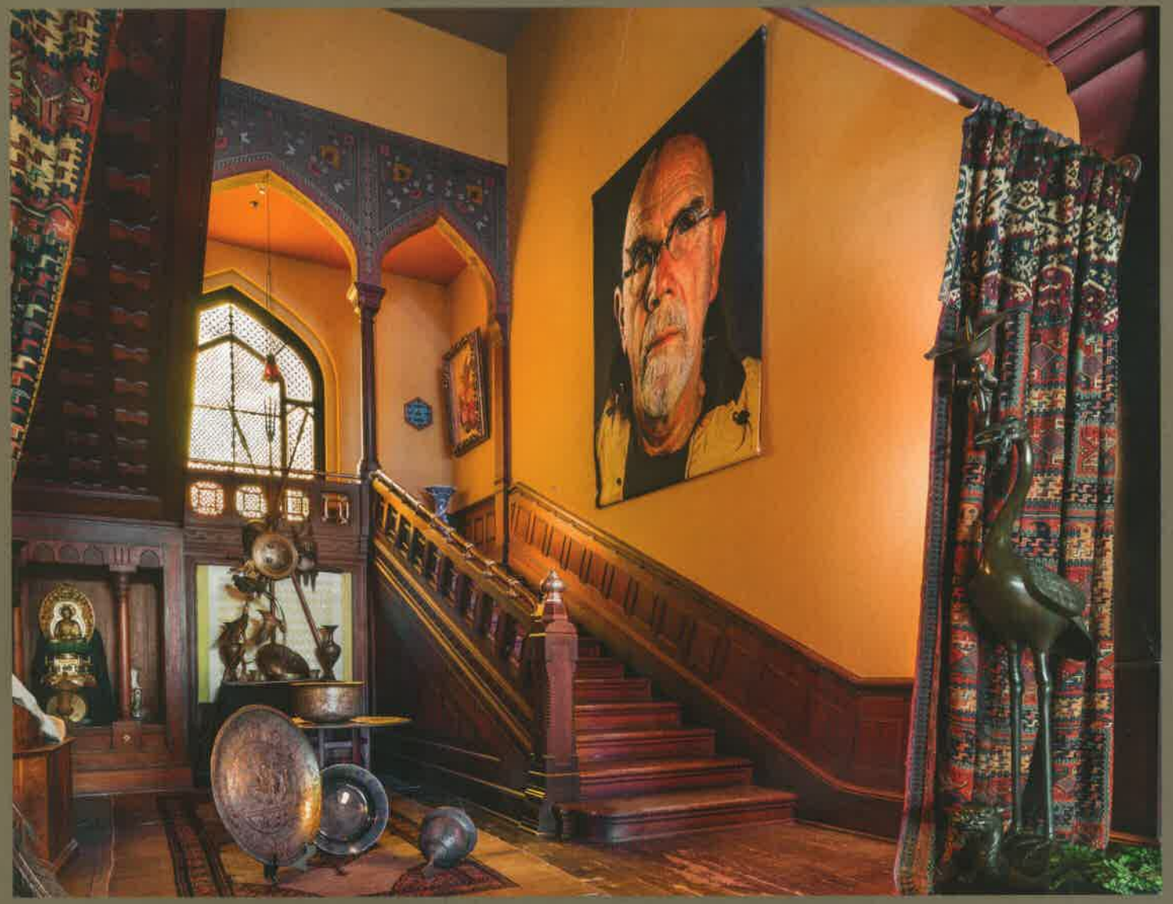
CROSSING THE HUDSON, & ERAS

BY JASON ROSENFELD

Editor's Note: On view through November 1, the exhibition *River Crossings: Contemporary Art Comes Home* is being presented in two halves at a pair of remarkable venues approximately 115 miles north of New York City. Cedar Grove was home to the Hudson River School landscapist Thomas Cole (1801–1848); two miles across the river is Olana, the neo-Persian villa built from the 1860s by Cole's greatest student, Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900). The period atmosphere of these properties has been enhanced temporarily with 52 works by 28 artists connected to this scenic region in various ways. They include such contemporary masters as Chuck Close, Martin Puryear, and Cindy Sherman, as well as emerging talents like Angie Keefer, Rashaad Newsome, and Letha Wilson. We invited one of the exhibition's co-curators, Jason Rosenfeld, to tell us how he got involved.

STEPHEN HANNOCK (b. 1951), *The Oxbow, Flooded, for Frank Moore and Dan Hodermarsky (Mass MoCA #196)*, 2013, polished mixed media on canvas, 48 x 72 in., collection Caroline and Tiger Williams, photo courtesy Yale University Art Gallery



All photos © 2015 Peter Aaron/OTTO

In 1995, when I was a Ph.D. student at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts, I was also working part-time at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, just across Fifth Avenue, delivering public gallery talks to hone my presentation skills. To encourage attendance, I assigned catchy titles to my one-hour thematic talks — for example, "The Rockets' Red Glare: War in American Art." I also offered 30-minute *Closer Looks* at a single artwork. Since the honorarium I earned was the same for both formats, I generally chose the shorter one so as to feel I was being compensated more generously. This rationale proved irrelevant, however: for various reasons, I would go on for at least an hour in either format.

The job had some comedic challenges, too. Since the talks were scheduled and publicized far in advance, sometimes the paintings I had intended to discuss had been loaned out to other museums, or moved to curious locations. Once, the unexpected absence of Claude Monet's *La Grenouillère* forced me to improvise on the spot. Another time, Edward Burne-Jones's masterpiece *Le Chant d'Amour* had been unceremoniously relocated from European Paintings to the dark musical instruments gallery, where it was hung above a harpsichord — reflecting the Met's dim view of the Pre-Raphaelites two decades ago.

It was in this capacity that I once found myself speaking to a large crowd in the Met's American Wing before Thomas Cole's magisterial, panoramic oil painting of 1836, *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm*, commonly called *The Oxbow*. After fielding numerous questions, I was approached by a man carrying a backpack and wearing jeans and sneakers splattered with paint. He praised my presentation and asked for my contact details, explaining that he wanted to send me a present. Wary of this chromatic vagabond, I gave him my school address, where — soon after — a catalogue arrived along with a note handwritten in distinctive block capitals.

The gifter turned out to be the painter Stephen Hannock (b. 1951), who had attended my talk fresh off a plane from the opening of his solo exhibition at San Diego's Timken Museum of Art. He had come to commune with *The Oxbow*, the painting that has served as a lodestone over his career. Initially he was chagrined to find a crowd parked before it listening to my chattering graduate-school self, but apparently I said something right, as we have been collaborating productively ever since.

Years later, I curated two of Hannock's solo shows at the Marlborough Gallery in New York and London; some of the pictures had been inspired by masterworks he had admired in the *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde* exhibition I had recently co-organized. Soon afterward, we began co-curating a show that weds my expertise in 19th-century and contemporary art with Hannock's abiding passion for the Hudson River Valley and the landscapists who have worked there, an ardor he shares with many other artists now working in and near New York City.

Stephen Hannock, the artist Martin Puryear, and Jason Rosenfeld at Olana

BRIDGING OLD AND NEW

Cole lived in Catskill in an 1815 house with stirring views of the mountains from its porch. This is where he showed his still-wet pictures, and now we have filled it with contemporary art in all different media. Across the river near the town of Hudson, Olana is filled — from its cellar to its turrets — with items that Church amassed during his many voyages abroad, and with his art and that of his contemporaries. It stands on the peak of a hill in a 250-acre landscape that Church spent his last decades designing. Its 360-degree view of the valley is spectacular, and it is reassuring to know that the vistas he painted here are now largely protected from development.

Devising *River Crossings* has been a restorative experience for me. In many ways, dealing with living artists beats wrestling with dead Victorians. In their day, Cole and Church were in the vanguard when it came to escaping the metropolis to both pursue their nature subjects with more focus and to establish roots in new locales "upstate." Their ghosts have definitely informed the way that Stephen Hannock and I have tackled this exhibition. Yet the contemporary spirit of art and enterprise has also come to the fore, allowing us to energize historical spaces that might otherwise seem frozen in time.

Just north of Olana is the town of Hudson, which has become a hotbed for artists both established and new. All of them, like Cole and Church, sought a place to practice their craft within easy striking distance of New York City, the metropolis that sustains and supports their work. Cole came up by ferry, Church by railway, and now artists come by car, but this region has remained an incubator for the new in American art since 1833.

Somewhat unexpected was how enthusiastically the living artists collaborated with us, visited the houses to propose their most appropriate existing works, or were inspired to create site-specific installations. The most refreshing aspects of this project have been our vivid, jointly shared sense of connections to the past, the eagerness of a new generation of artists to celebrate these landmark sites of American art, and also their desire to participate in a continuity of expression that reaches back 160 years.

It was fortuitous for me, professionally and personally, that a jet-lagged Stephen Hannock stumbled into my Met talk two decades ago. Both of us hope that serendipity has also paid some much-deserved dividends for the legacies of Thomas Cole and Frederic Edwin Church. ●

Information: *rivercrossings.org; Thomas Cole National Historic Site, 218 Spring Street, Catskill, NY 12414, 518.943.7465, thomascole.org; Olana Partnership/Olana State Historic Site, 5720 State Route 9G, Hudson, NY 12534, 518.828.0135, olana.org. A shuttle service connects each site with the Amtrak train station in Hudson, and also with downtown Catskill on certain weekends. At Olana every Saturday, a different local artist leads a tour. The accompanying catalogue can be ordered via artistbook.org.*

Jason Rosenfeld *is distinguished chair and professor of Art History at Marymount Manhattan College. He was a co-curator of the Pre-Raphaelites exhibition seen by 1.1 million visitors in 2012–14 at Tate Britain (London), National Gallery of Art (Washington, D.C.), Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts (Moscow), Mori Arts Center Gallery (Tokyo), and Palazzo Chiablese (Turin).*

(OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP) On the staircase at Olana is **CHUCK CLOSE** (b. 1940), ***Self-Portrait (Yellow Raincoat)***, **2013**, jacquard tapestry, 93 x 76 in., private collection, © Chuck Close with Magnolia Editions, photo: Peter Aaron/OTTO ■ (OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM) On the wall in Olana's sitting room is **MAYA LIN** (b. 1959), ***Silver River — Hudson***, **2011**, recycled silver, 81 x 45 3/4 in., photo: Peter Aaron/OTTO