

# The New Criterion

## Art

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### Gallery chronicle

by [James Panero](#)

On "Catherine Murphy: New Work" at Knoedler & Company, New York, "Walton Ford" at Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York, and "Jacob Collins—Rediscovering the American Landscape: The Eastholm Project" at Hirschl & Adler, New York.

Realism could have been a casualty of the twentieth century. It certainly made its way onto the endangered species list, hunted to near extinction by an effort to tame the wilderness of art. It was only in the 1970s that the extent of the devastation became known. At that time, artists who began to take a renewed interest in realist art discovered that they had lost the means of survival. One after the other, art schools had purged their curricula of traditional draftsmanship (and those teachers who practiced it) in favor of more modernist and postmodernist agendas. The knowledge base of realism had nearly been wiped out. A few generations of artists have now worked to bring realism back from the brink. Three exhibitions this month speak to this recovery.

Catherine Murphy, born in 1946, is a member of the first generation of painters to return to realism after Abstract Expressionism. Her latest work is now on display at Knoedler & Company. [\[1\]](#) *Comforter* (2007), a large oil on canvas that is the first painting in the show, is Murphy at her most arresting. In her rendering of a green and blue striped comforter, Murphy follows the creases and wrinkles so that we can read the figure beneath—legs folded, twisting to her left.

Murphy's "method of painting on canvas is something that she was compelled to make up," John Yau writes in his introduction to the exhibition catalogue, "and in that regard continues the legacy of Jackson Pollock." Yau ties Murphy's development as a painter to the modernist instinct for innovation. In fact, Murphy works within the modernist tradition in more ways than one. *Comforter* is a realist update of hard-edged abstraction, and she radiates a modernist sensibility for color and line. Leave off the upper left corner of the canvas, where Murphy shows us some pillow and hair, and we would be looking at an abstract painting.

That play between abstraction and specificity, surface treatment and depth, is what defines Murphy's paintings. *Blankets* (2006) works in much the same way as *Comforter*. Here, two red blankets hang side by side on a clothesline. In the narrow gap between them, we can make out two figures, one male, one female, sitting on a yellow picnic blanket in a grassy meadow. Murphy reduces the scene to a minimum of information. The blankets are legible because we can see their hems. But otherwise these objects operate as lush, abstract fields of color. The dappled light shining through them brings to mind the mottled tones of Clyfford Still and Mark Rothko.

Murphy is at her best with still life. *Spill* (2007), a graphite on paper, depicts milk spreading out over a wooden table. Through her rendering of wood grain and light, Murphy displays amazing technical control. Her method is to paint from life, rather than from a photograph or through other technical

means, and she uses props to preserve each scene in a way that can be observed day after day. I am told Murphy used glue to make the mock-up for *Spill*. The cake in *Oven Light* (2008) shows a real cake in a real open oven (Murphy froze the cake after each session). But what works for still life does not always translate to the figure. The position of the hair in *Comforter* is not quite right. Nor is her modeling of skin in other work, which can be corpse-like.

Murphy's work can sometimes flirt with the theatrical. Her staginess is most apparent in her treatment of the figure and her manipulation of viewpoint. Those blankets act as curtains parting on a scene. The two figures peeking out are arranged so that we can make out their legs—one wears a blue dress, the other wears slacks and black shoes. The vantage point is clearly meant to be voyeuristic and tantalizing, but I just find it banal. Some things are better left unsaid, but the veiled sexual tension here is so pinched, the prudery seems old-fashioned. (*Pendant* [2005], an extreme close-up of a gold crucifix hanging between two veiny, saggy breasts, is Murphy at her most histrionic.)

It is telling that John Yau uses the word “subvert” twice in his catalogue essay. Catherine Murphy has led the way in the restoration of realism, but she is still bound up in the dictates of a tired avant-garde. In the end, her affinity for subversion and gender politics is more outmoded than her affinity for realism.

In the last century, one of the refuges for realism was illustration. Second-class citizenship was the trade-off that illustrators made so that the art establishment would leave their craft alone. Walton Ford, born in 1960, takes up where they left off. An exhibition of his monumental watercolors of animals is now on view at Paul Kasmin.[\[2\]](#)

Ford's work is instantly likeable. His illustrations are technical marvels, and he has a knack for capturing a storyline through a single image and an evocative title. In *Loss of the Lisbon Rhinoceros* (2008), Ford has painted a bug-eyed rhino on a sinking galleon and does not miss a single fold on the rhino's hide. We see the rhino's legs chained down as the water splashes against his hooves. We can even make out the shore in the background—an indication that this animal is about to drown in sight of land.

If you are not aware of this particular story, the image works on its own, but Ford also paints with a purpose. The curious might go to the encyclopedia, where they would discover that this particular rhinoceros arrived in Lisbon in 1515, became a sensation through a woodcut created by Albrecht Dürer, and drowned at sea on route to Rome. The animal, chained to the deck, was unable to swim to shore.

Okay, so people are rotten to animals. Rather than draw from life, Ford makes a pastiche of the history of realism to make this point. His paintings are send-ups of older illustrations of the observed world. Just in case we missed it, Ford paints a foxed edge around each of his drawings. It's like that colonial parchment you baked in the oven and stained with tea for history class—this is meant to look old, an artificially aged, contemporary object that is a commentary on the art and habits of the past.

And just like so many commentaries in art, this one gets tedious. In a profile in *New York* magazine in 2002, Ford demonstrated just how tedious he could be. Take, for example, his description of Carl Akeley, the great naturalist and conservationist who created the first habitat dioramas at the American Museum of Natural History: “Akeley was the museum's great white hunter . . . he decides he wants to be a good nonviolent guy, returns to the scene of the crime so to speak, and dies of the shits.” This is not the most sympathetic way to describe a man who died of dysentery on an expedition to Africa while creating a national park that would save gorillas from extinction.

Ford was forty-two when he appeared in *New York*, but he managed to sound like a bratty

adolescent—appropriate, maybe, to the childlike idiom of his work. “He was a mean-spirited liar,” he said, for example, of John James Audubon. “He shot more birds than he ever painted ... a total dick and not even that good of an artist.”

It takes one to know one, Walton. PBS recently made a documentary of Ford and described his work as satirizing “the continuing impact of slavery and other forms of political oppression on today’s social and environmental landscape ... a scathing indictment of the wrongs committed by nineteenth-century industrialists or, locating the work in the present, contemporary American consumer society.”

Ford is an accomplished realist, but it is regrettable that he feels compelled to insulate his work in the politics of the 1980s and 1990s. I only hope that future generations will judge Ford’s smug self-regard with more sympathy than he shows his artistic forebears. We are, after all, products of our times.

Jacob Collins, born in 1964, represents the youngest generation of realist painters. Only a few years younger than Ford, Collins embodies a sensibility that is not modernist or postmodernist but instead looks to restore the premodern legacy of realism on its own terms. While critics (and some admirers) regard his attitude as an attack on modernism itself, I see it as a meaningful and far more benign act of cultural recovery. Collins is one of several leading painters working along similar lines across the United States and Europe known as classical realists.

In September 2006 in these pages, I wrote about the opening of Collins’s new art school in midtown Manhattan called the Grand Central Academy of Art, which was dedicated to teaching (and also rediscovering) traditional draftsmanship in rendering still life and the nude. Grand Central will soon enter its third year of operation and join Collins’s other institution, the Water Street Atelier, which opened in 1997, in producing a new generation of artists working in traditional technique.

Last year, Collins set his sights on the history of American landscape painting and established a third institution, the Hudson River School for Art, as a summer residency in the Catskills. Collins’s current show at Hirschl & Adler, “Rediscovering the American Landscape: The Eastholm Project,” forms the other half of this story. A commission to paint a scene of Vinalhaven, Maine encouraged this teacher to make his own investigations into the lost art of landscape. [\[3\]](#)

On its way to presenting the commission, the monumental *Hen Islands from Eastholm* (2008), this exhibition features the many cloud, wave, plant, and rock studies that Collins made in preparation for the final work. The structure of the show speaks to Collins’s disposition as a teacher willing to share his own discoveries, as well as the general pedagogical mandate behind classical realism. It also lays bare an evolutionary process that is a beautiful story in itself, with small grisaille studies that are among the most affecting images of the show.

Collins’s final painting of the Hen Islands is as an awesome achievement, with all the lessons learned from these studies and the years in the studio put in play. The overall result, however, does not reach the level of great nineteenth-century landscape. The parts do not come together as a whole. The selection of scene, a jumble of trees and peninsulas, confuses the overall sense of space and mass. Where exactly are the Hen Islands here? The painting demonstrates tremendous skill, but whether intimate or overwhelming, it lacks a dominant mood. The shortcomings are lessons in themselves. We are in the first moments of a renaissance. Anyone who sees “The Eastholm Project” will recognize that they are witnessing the founding of something vital, and the early years of a great talent at work.

## Notes

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1. “Catherine Murphy: New Work” opened at Knoedler & Company, New York, on May 1 and remains on view through August 1, 2008. [Go back to the text.](#)
2. “Walton Ford” opened at Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York, on May 8 and remains on view through July 3, 2008. [Go back to the text.](#)
3. “Jacob Collins—Rediscovering the American Landscape: The Eastholm Project” opened at Hirschl & Adler, New York, on May 8 and remains on view through June 13, 2008. [Go back to the text.](#)

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