



Miraculous Detail

The Legacy of Fitz Henry Lane

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Left: Fitz Henry Lane, *The Western Shore with Norman's Woe*, 1862, oil on canvas, 22 x 36". Collection of the Cape Ann Museum. Gift of Isabel Babson Lane, 1946. Right: Fitz Henry Lane, *Babson and Ellery Houses, Gloucester*, 1863, oil on canvas, 22 x 36". Collection of the Cape Ann Museum. Gift of Roger W. Babson, 1937.

IN FEBRUARY, THE CAPE ANN

Museum in Gloucester, MA announced the launch of *Fitz Henry Lane Online*, an ambitious website organized around a catalog of over 300 paintings, drawings and lithographs by Fitz Henry Lane (1804–1865). Lane was a native and resident of Gloucester whose career begins the story of a nationally significant visual arts culture on Cape Ann, which has continued to the present day. Well respected in New England for his marine landscape paintings during his lifetime, Lane is now considered one of the most important American artists of the 19th century.

Project Director and Editor Sam Holdsworth suggests that what distinguishes Lane as a fine artist is the same quality that makes his work valuable as a document of his age and a gateway to the history of Gloucester: Lane's enduring love of the specific. Lane's unmatched accuracy at marine painting was extolled in his lifetime and was reflected in strong demand for his marine

portraits from ships' owners in Gloucester, Boston, and New York. Lane "knows the name and place of every rope on a vessel: he knows the construction, the anatomy, the expression—and to a seaman every thing that sails has expression and individuality—he knows how she will stand under this rig," wrote one critic in 1854. "We have never seen any paintings equal to his in perfect accuracy in all aspects of marine architecture and thought," concluded the notice of his death in a Boston newspaper.

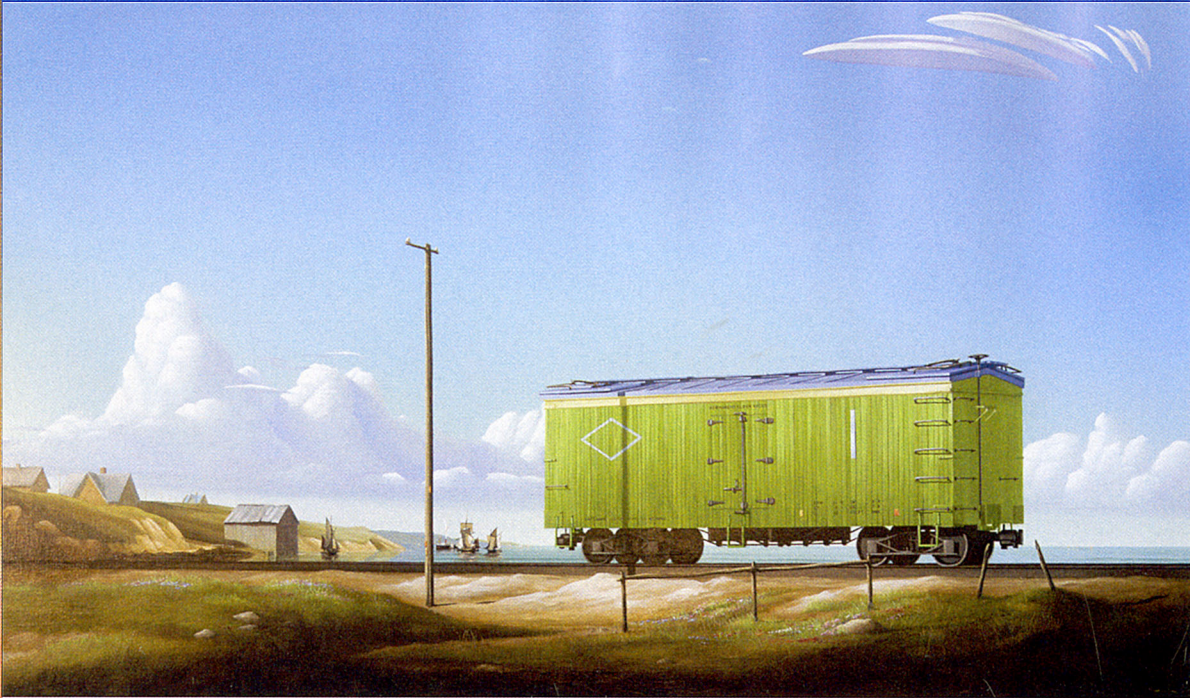
Lane's attention to detail and skill at rendering it encompassed more than marine subjects, extending to the weave of a basket, the pattern on a blanket and the architecture of a distant steeple, placed exactly on a skyline. His facility with detail was founded on a phenomenal memory, says Holdsworth, observing that Lane's field sketches record only land-forms and vessels: the sensitive and accurate depictions of atmosphere, clouds, light and sky, and of reflections in water, for which Lane's art is celebrated, were painted

in his studio from memory.

In Lane's time, the ideas of Emersonian Transcendentalism were in the Gloucester air. Drawing on a tradition recognizing God's immanence in his created world, Emerson had given it a uniquely American individualism, maintaining that divinity was accessible directly, without the intervention of the church, through contact with nature. Nature, he wrote, is the "expositor of the divine mind...every glimpse of which hath a grandeur, a face of him." "Every appearance in nature," furthermore, "corresponds to some state of the mind [describable only] by presenting that natural appearance as its picture."

Two opposing currents of public opinion swirled around these ideas in Gloucester.

The "gospel of nature"—and artists' special sensitivity to it—were the frequent topics of sermons and of public lectures at the Gloucester Lyceum, a center of intellectual life for Lane, his friends and his patrons. The Lyceum engaged Emerson to speak ten times while Lane lived



Top: Peter J. Lyons, *Altar*, 2010, oil on canvas, 36 x 60". Courtesy of Trident Gallery. Bottom: Peter J. Lyons, *Gloucester Harbor*, 2013, oil on canvas, 38 x 50". Opposite: Clifford Ross, *Hurricane LXVI*, 2009, photograph, archival pigment print, size variable. © Clifford Ross Studio. All rights reserved.

or three removed from the European influences and urban markets, which steered his most famous contemporaries, the Hudson River School stars Cole, Church and Bierstadt.

Within these opposing provincial and cosmopolitan influences, Lane found his way to making art, which has transcended his era. Andrew Wilton, Tate Curator of the 2002 exhibition *American Sublime*, wrote that Lane's "intensity, emerging as it does from a simple reportorial manner, is unique to its place and time: local and universal at once." His colleague Tim Barringer wrote of Lane's "brilliance in adapting [the] inherited formula" of marine painting "to unexpected, creative ends," and noted the contrast between Lane's "contemplative, reclusive artistic personality" and the "evangelical certainties and bravura technique of the younger Church." Holdsworth puts it more plainly: the Hudson River School painters were "drama merchants," and Lane, a rigorous ship's portraitist, intellectual and dour New Englander, "was having none of that."

Lane's legacy is part of the cultural texture of our time, influential on artists and viewers whether recalled self-consciously or not. Fewer of today's artists are concerned directly with the metaphysical implications of nature, landscape and religious feeling, which preoccupied several generations of American painters at the

in Gloucester, and the sermons of popular Universalist Reverend Amory Dwight Mayo adapted Emersonian ideas to the Christian pieties of his congregation.

Others excoriated Emerson's perceived atheism and mocked his academic obtuseness. He "packs the largest halls in [New York] with hearers almost as closely as we pack our mackerel," sneered a Gloucester newspaper in 1850. "The

Manhattanese are altogether wrong, undoubtedly, and deserve rather to be pitied than otherwise for being so dazzled by 'the great eyeball.'"

Lane lived in Boston for 16 years, exhibited in the major cities of the east coast, and regularly read accounts of the wider American and European art world, self-consciously pursuing a career as an artist. But as a Gloucesterman and a self-taught American painter, Lane was a degree

dawn of the nation, but for artists who do engage landscape in this way, Lane's body of work is an inescapable point of reference. The illumination it provides may be glimpsed in a brief look at two artists practicing in New England today, Clifford Ross (b. 1952 in New York City), and Peter Lyons (born 1960 in Dunedin, New Zealand).

A survey of Ross's work was the major exhibition of 2015 at Mass MoCA, and on May 18th



of this year, Ross gave the Photography Fund Lecture at the Portland Museum of Art. Lyons's oil paintings have been exhibited in the Boston area since 2002. Both artists are well educated in American art history and attribute seminal artistic influence to 19th-century American landscape traditions. Both are engaged specifically with the traditions of marine painting and anchor their recent practices in the painstaking transcription of realistic detail to construct a scene, in critic Barbara Novak's words, of "the stopped moment, the frozen continuum."

In Ross's *Hurricane Waves* series of photographs, taken in Long Island, NY, and in other recent large-scale work, Ross appears to be attempting to overcome the limitations of artistic communication with colossal quantities of data and Herculean effort. He has invented cameras and engineered new processes to make prints of a size and resolution unprecedented in fine art photography: *Hurricane LXVI* is printed at 6' x 10½", and the unique *Sopris Wall I*, a print on wood fabricated for the Mass MOCA exhibition, is 24' x 114'. He spends hundreds of hours manipulating his images digitally in an attempt to "up the reality quotient," an enterprise he cheerfully calls "a fool's errand" without any detectable sense of irony. Astonishingly, Ross's prints at this size still offer interest and detail viewed from mere inches away, a quality which regularly draws comparison to the large canvases of the Hudson River School painters.

The sensory and aesthetic power of Ross's wave prints, especially the largest ones, is profound. The artist's elaborate process fashions sculptures of water as if from marble and obsidian, extracts stillness from relentless motion and reveals delicacy in crushing power. The skies are leaden, or else midnight black; the emotional effects are both monumental and intimate. The serene perfection of the prints sits oddly but thrillingly with the violence they show. Here indeed is miraculous detail in the service of a vision of the Kantian sublime, a safe confrontation with overawing natural power and complexity.

Peter Lyons, on the other hand, emphasizes that the precision in his paintings is an attempt to communicate a state of awareness, not information about the scene, which inspired the artist to paint it, or even about the artist's emotional response to that scene. For Lyons, the material painting itself is an Emersonian talisman, through which shared truths are recognized, not communicated. A successful painting, he says, "acts as a lens focusing awareness of wonder, joy, and spiritual anticipation" in the viewer, who experiences not a shared material world but a shared holiness and shared humanity.

In Lyons's *Altar*, a motionless, minutely rendered boxcar basks in a light and reposes in a composition whose transient perfection—the unusual lenticular clouds just so and flowers blooming among the greening grasses—con-

crates the moment before it passes. The expansive view and surprising anachronisms of architecture and marine equipage push the frame of reference toward the universal. And as in Lane's late paintings, the human world of commerce is present but subdued, subordinate to the redeeming light above and the natural world below.

Lyons is a shaman, a spirit guide: the miraculous detail in his paintings is a prompt on a journey through personal associations toward a place of elevated perception, from which height the ladder of representation may be kicked away, just as the artist did previously in the act of elevating a scene into a painting. ■

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Fitz Henry Lane Online
fitzhenrylaneonline.org

Cape Ann Museum
Gloucester, MA
capeannmuseum.org

Clifford Ross
cliffordross.com

Peter J. Lyons
peterjlyons.com