

THE HOWLING INFINITE

MOBY DICK, ART, & LANDSCAPE



SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM

Whaling, New England, and Moby Dick

Offshore American whaling began in the mid- 17th century by colonists hunting right whales from oared boats off Long Island's south shore. The industry grew exponentially after the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. Large ports were established in New Bedford, Massachusetts and especially on the island of Nantucket where right whales in the hundreds wintered in the nutrient rich waters off the island's south shore.

As coastal hunting depleted populations, larger square-rigged ships outfitted with all the equipment necessary to kill and process blubber into oil at sea enabled multi-year voyages spanning the world's oceans. Sperm whales were now the more lucrative prize. Their oil burned cleaner and the spermaceti found in the large head cavity was valued for its unparalleled quality in making candles. The occasional discovery of dense ambergris in the whale's bowels was worth its weight in gold as a perfume fixative.

And so, the whaleship *Essex* found itself in the mid Pacific Ocean in November 1820 hunting whales after a long, difficult voyage from Nantucket. On November 20th, a pod was spotted, boats lowered, and three whales harpooned. One whale's tail fluke damaged

a boat forcing it to cut the line and return to the ship for repairs. The other two were taken on "Nantucket Sleighrides" where whaleboats could be dragged by the harpooned whale at speeds exceeding 20 miles per hour. Back onboard *Essex*, the crew noticed a large bull whale laying quietly on the surface at a distance from the ship. He began swimming towards the ship's port (left) side, ramming it and diving under to reappear to starboard. He swam off several hundred yards ahead, turned and, as recounted by First Mate Owen Chase, "*I turneound and saw him... coming down with twice his ordinary speed of around 24 knots ... The surflew in all directions about him with the continual violent thrashing of his tail. His head about half out of the water, and in that way he came upon us, and again struck the ship.*"

The collision sank the ship, forcing the 20-man crew into three whaleboats and a 2200-mile excursion east to South America (they feared tribal cannibalism on the closest islands). Eventually five survived including First Mate Owen Chase whose written account inspired Herman Melville's climactic scene in *Moby Dick*.

THE HOWLING INFINITE

Herman Melville brought his epic narrative to its climax by having the white whale ram and sink the whaling ship *Pequod*. Far from being a flight of fancy, the scene was based on an event in 1820 when the Nantucket whaleship *Essex* was struck and sunk by a sperm whale in the Pacific Ocean. The crew of 20 set out in three modified whaleboats on a 2200-mile journey east towards South America well aware they did not have enough provisions. Eighty-nine days after the sinking, with great privation and consensual cannibalism, the first boat was spotted, and three sailors rescued by the British vessel *Indian*. Four days later the second boat with two survivors, including the captain, was rescued within sight of South America by the Nantucket whaleship *Dauphin*.



Robert Swain Gifford, *The Loss of the Essex by a Sperm Whale*, circa 1895. Gouache on wove paper on illustration board, 13 1/8 x 14 1/2 inches. Gift of the American Book Company, 1985.133

Winslow Homer was a largely self-taught artist who began his career apprenticed to a commercial Boston lithography company. After completing his 7-year apprenticeship he vowed to never again work for another person and became a freelance graphic artist. Moving to New York, he was hired by *Harper's Weekly*, a weekly illustrated magazine where he gained national recognition and, just as importantly, a steady income.

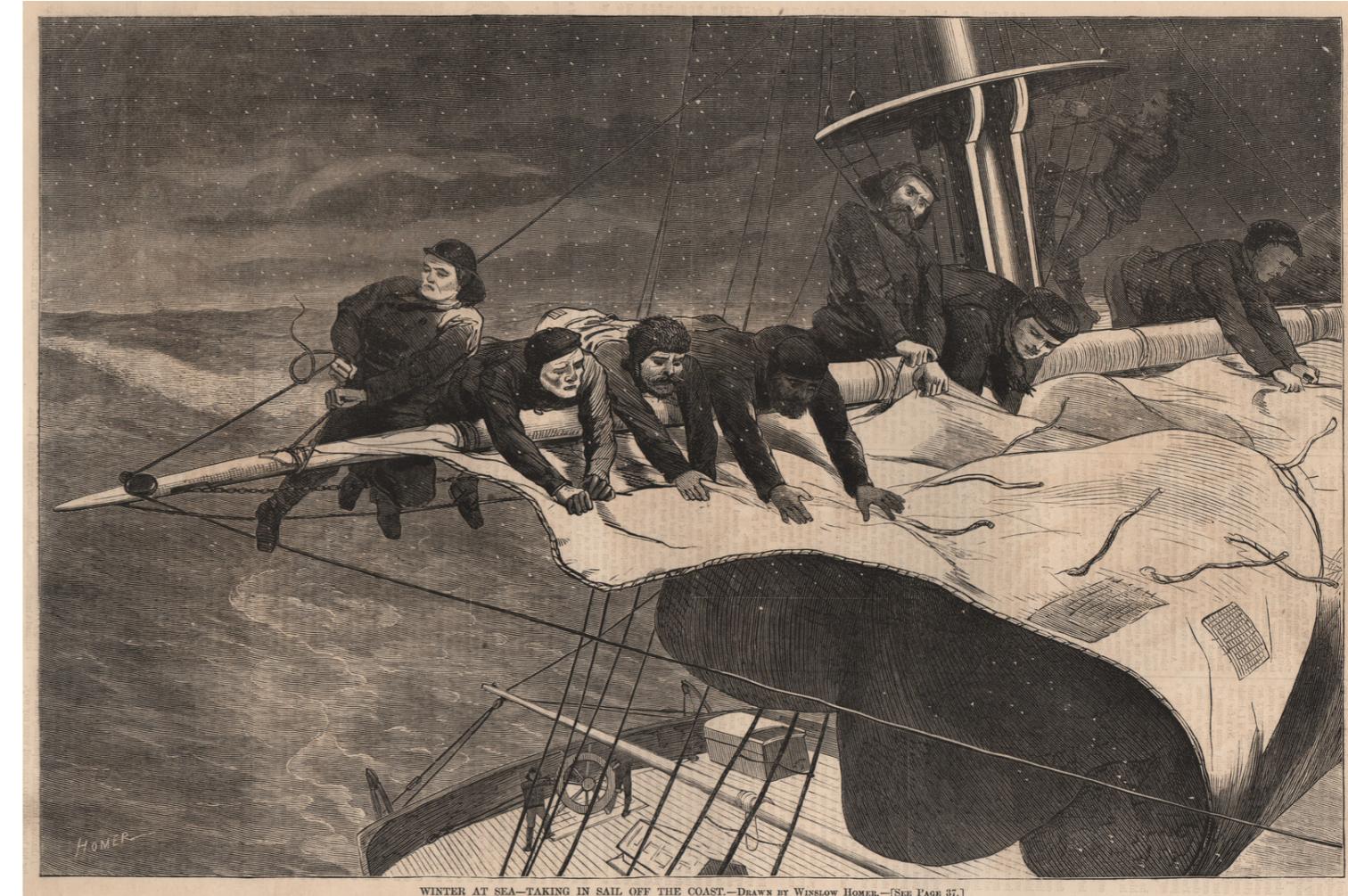
On April 1, 1873, the British White Star Line ship *Atlantic* was on her 19th trans-Atlantic voyage from Liverpool, England to New York City. A severe storm depleted their coal stocks and the captain decided to put into Halifax, Nova Scotia to resupply. Unfamiliar with the treacherous coastline and 12 miles off course, the ship ran aground and quickly sank killing 535 of the ship's 952 passengers including all the women and all but one child. Homer captured the tragedy's grisly outcome and (unknowingly) illustrated Melville's potent chapter 23 sentence, "But in that gale, the port, the land, is that ship's direst jeopardy; she must fly all hospitality; one touch of land, though it but graze the keel, would make her shudder through and through."



Winslow Homer, *The Wreck of the "Atlantic"—Cast up by the Sea.*, 1873, published in *Harper's Weekly*, April 26, 1873, p. 345.
Wood engraving on wove paper, 9 3/16 x 13 13/16 inches. Museum purchase, 1988.353

Homer was nationally recognized for his drawings illustrating daily life of New Yorkers, farming's rural activities, and notable seasonal events like corn husking and military balls. This unusual image described the dangers sailors faced working aloft to take in sail in severe conditions. Seven men wrangle a heavy, patched canvas, trying to furl it into the yardarm on which they are perched while an eighth climbs a ratline to the lookout platform above.

Whaling ship crews, often made up of first-time sailors, were notoriously untrained and unaccustomed to the dangers of working at sea. Leaving Nantucket harbor was especially challenging as the "green" crew had to learn their roles aloft while the ship navigated through the constantly shifting shoals and treacherous currents of Nantucket Sound. All of this happened as hundreds of watchful eyes ashore studied every ship's departure and the officers' ship and crew handling skills.



Winslow Homer, *Winter at Sea—Taking in Sail Off the Coast*, 1869, published in *Harper's Weekly*, January 16, 1869, p. 40. Wood engraving on wove paper, 9 × 13 ¾ inches. Museum purchase, 1997.0066

For many, Winslow Homer's portrayal of two trappers evoked the rugged individualism of the wilderness. The artist described them canoeing in the northern Adirondacks with the bow paddler holding aloft a mink, a species notoriously difficult to catch. The stern paddler steadies the canoe, his flintlock rifle laying across the thwarts at the ready. The two exude a quiet comfort coming from much practice, they are clearly both experienced and not in a situation where it is a guide leads an urban visitor. This strengthens the picture's romantic vision but begs the question—why mink? The answer—mink pelts were highly prized for making fur coats, stoles and fabric trimming. This establishes an alternate narrative of professionals extracting resources serving the changing vagaries of urban fashion.

Whales were considered in the same manner. In addition to their oil, each species offered several products. Baleen from right whales, and other filter-feeding species, was used to make hoops for skirts and dresses. As mentioned earlier, in addition to their cleaner burning oil, sperm whales supplied spermaceti that was unparalleled for making candles, and rarely found ambergris, highly prized as a perfume fixative.



Winslow Homer, *Trapping in the Adirondacks*, 1870, published in *Every Saturday*, December 24, 1870, p. 849. Wood engraving on wove paper, 8 ¾ × 11 ¾ inches. Museum purchase, 2003.0019

America: A Landscape Apart

The sinking of the *Essex* occurred five years before American artist Thomas Cole took his first extensive sketching tour in the summer of 1825 up the Hudson River and into the Catskill Mountains. Returning in October, three of his landscapes were purchased by noted artists John Trumbull, William Dunlap, and Asher B. Durand. In January 1826, Cole was elected a founding member of the National Academy of Design. He would influence a generation of artists who, in turn, would influence another generation of landscape painters. Cole's special talent was composing scenes of nature that revealed its inherent sublimity or, as art historian Barbara Novak termed it, "...that wilder image."

In so doing, Cole differentiated the American wilderness from Europe's cultivated countryside and established the Hudson River School, the country's first painting style of international note. His success encouraged other painters to trek into uninhabited areas seeking to find evidence of the almighty's hand at work. The further reaches of the Hudson River, the Adirondacks, and New Hampshire's White Mountains were explored

and recreated in paint, not always faithfully, but always asserting the land's primacy of place. As the east coast became settled, artists journeyed west and, like Thomas Moran, discovered the grandeur of the western Rocky Mountains and the unknown wonder of the Southwest's canyonlands.



Thomas Moran, *View into a canyon*, circa 1895. Ink wash on wove paper, 10 1/8 × 16 inches. Gift of the American Book Company, 1985.153

Killer whales (*Orcinus orcas*) are one of the most highly respected creatures for Kwakwaka'wakw people, featuring prominently in their lives and stories. Called max'inuxw, the mammals are considered powerful hunters and ancestors who symbolize social cohesion, transformation, and harmony. They can heal and guide one to safety. One of the many legends about the mammal, as told by Chief 'Maxwayalis Charlie Matilpi, explains that a long time ago, killer whales and humans did not live in harmony, killing each other. One boy, who treated killer whales kindly and could speak to them, wanted peace and helped facilitate a treaty. From then on, the boy's people and killer whales agreed to help and honor each other. Kwakwaka'wakw people abide by this treaty today. They do not hunt killer whales and credit killer whales with helping them in many ways. Henry Hunt was woodcarver from the Kwakwaka'wakw fishing community of Fort Rupert on the northeast coast of Vancouver Island, British Columbia. In 1954, he went to Victoria, on the island's southern tip to help his father-in-law Mungo Martin who was the chief carver at the British Columbia Provincial Museum. Hunt apprenticed under Martin until Martin's retirement in 1962 when Hunt became chief carver. This fine carving of an animal with its deep incisions typifies Kwakwaka'wakw carving.



Henry Hunt, *Killer Whale Carving*, after 1942. Wood, 11 x 4 x 17 1/2 inches. Gift of Karen Bakke, 1967.339

From Sea to Shining Sea

By the mid-19th century, America's landscape had changed dramatically. The Louisiana Purchase in 1803 expanded the nation west of the Mississippi River by 827,000 square miles, doubling the country's size. President Jefferson immediately sent Meriwether Lewis and William Clark on a mission to, "*explore the Missouri River, & such principle (sic.) stream[s] of it, as, by its course and communication with the waters of the Pacific Ocean...for the purpose of commerce.*" Jefferson also wanted to establish an American presence in the territory, conduct trade with Native Americans and conduct scientific research and experiments. The expedition returned to St. Louis in 1806 having reached the Pacific Ocean, mapping the territory for a legal claim, and collecting examples of local flora, fauna, along with seeds and mineral samples.

The conclusion of the Mexican-American War in 1848 completed the country's continental expansion with the addition of California, Arizona, and New Mexico territories. The discovery of gold in 1848 in California induced 300,000 people to move west and stake a claim. Two years later, in 1850, California became a

state, and one could now truly see from sea to shining sea and everything in between.

That same year, Melville started writing *Moby Dick* in February at Arrowhead, his farm in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. His narrative vision was equally great, capturing whaling's pathos in dramatic encounters between Ahab and the white whale.



William Crothers Fitler, *A Sierra Mountain Range*, circa 1890. Gouache and ink wash on illustration board, 7 3/8 x 13 1/4 inches. Gift of the American Book Company, 1991.018

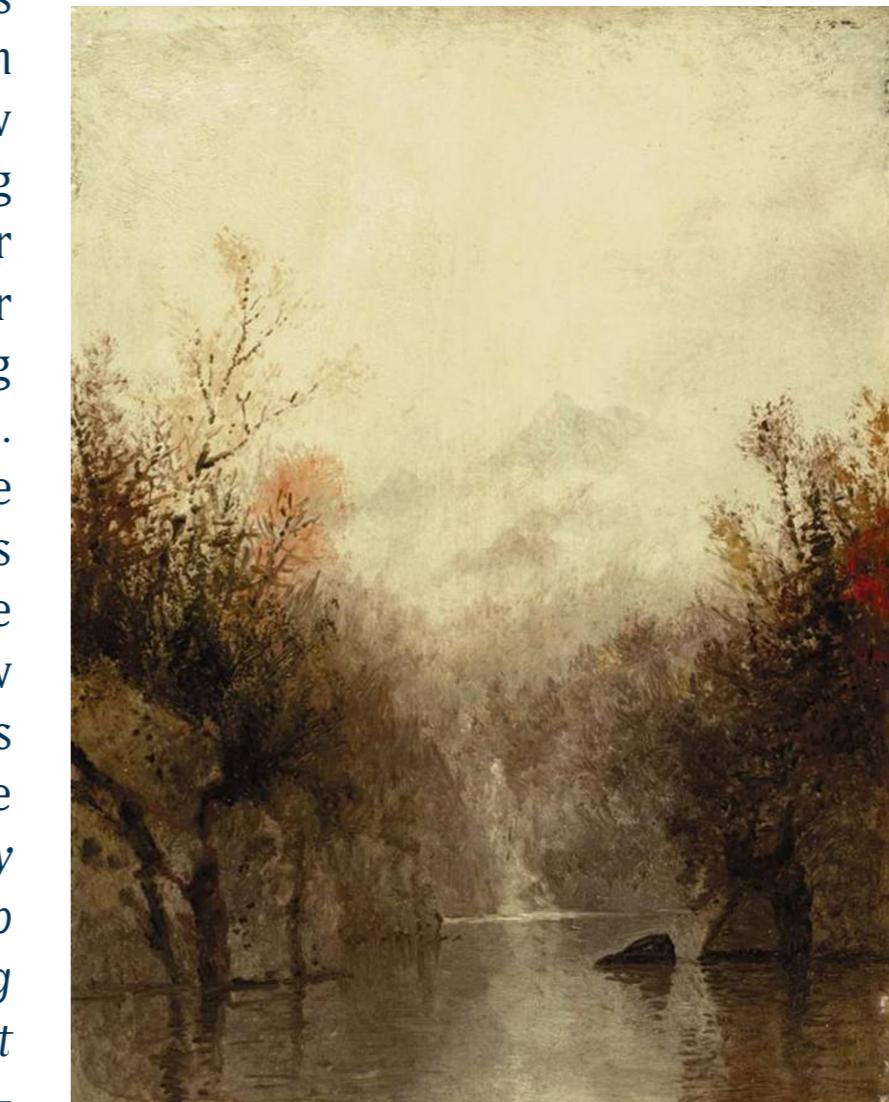
From Sublime to Luminous

At about the same time, John Frederick Kensett, a second-generation Hudson River painter, was also considering landscapes. In 1849, he was elected as a full Academician of the National Academy of Design for his views of the Hudson, Niagara Falls, and the Catskill and Adirondack mountains. Kensett, however, was less interested in majesty, preferring scenes offering quieter contemplation of nature. In this, he followed principals established by English landscapists like John Constable whose work he saw during a 10-year stay in Europe.

In 1850, Kensett travelled to the southwest corner of Massachusetts to sketch Bash Bish Falls. *The Crayon* magazine, at the time one of America's most important art periodicals called it, “*one of the wildest and most beautiful cascades in the country.*” Kensett had been commissioned to paint the falls by James Suydam, an important New York collector of American and Dutch paintings. This small (8 5/8 x 6 5/8 inches) oil on paper titled, *The Fall in the Hills*, might have been painted on site to remind the artist of the area's geological formations, an interest he and Suydam shared. Kensett eventually painted five views of the falls, each providing a different view or seasonal sense of the location.

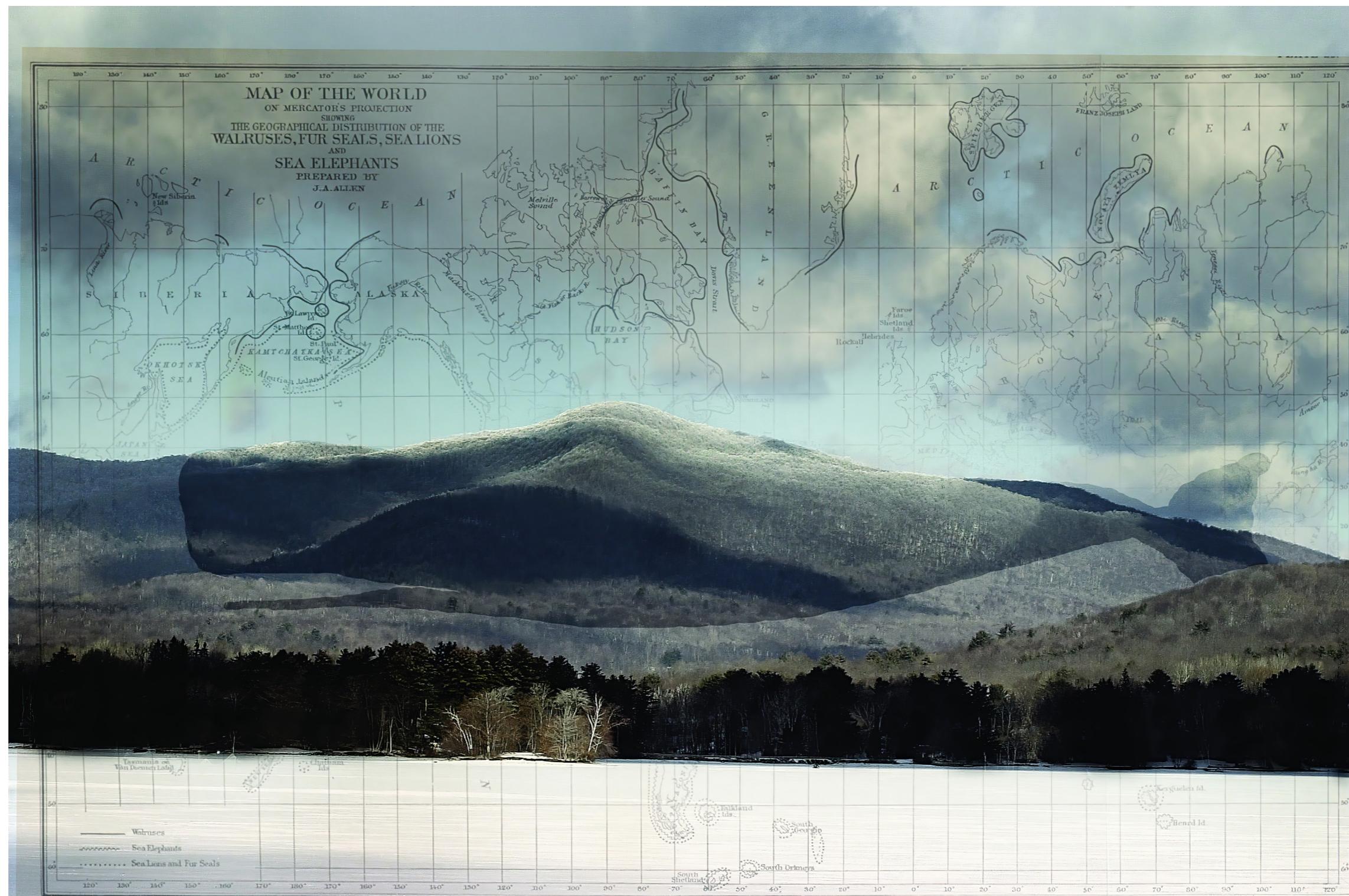
Thirty miles to the north, Herman Melville was hard at work writing *Moby Dick*. From his window he looked

north to Mount Greylock, the state's tallest mountain. Seeing its peak in profile reminded him of sperm whales he'd seen at sea and, when dusted in winter snow, inspired him to make his story's central character a white whale. Melville's experience as a whaler gave him a perspective on the animal few other writers had. Understanding their broader habits, the author described Leviathan's gentler disposition between or during the Pequod's hunt for whales. Ishmael relates an experience in the Malacca Strait where his whaleboat was dragged into the middle of a vast pod where he saw mothers nursing their newborns and young ones came up to the boat, “...like household dogs they came snuffling round us, right up to our gunwales, and touching them; till it almost seemed that some spell had suddenly domesticated them.”



John Frederick Kensett, *The Fall in the Hills*, circa 1850. Oil on paper mounted on canvas, 8 5/8 x 6 5/8 inches. Annie Walter Arents Collection, Gift of George Arents, 0040.035.

THE HOWLING INFINITE



Kevin Sprague, *Mount Greylock Leviathan*, 2001

New Paradigms Create New Paradoxes

The wonder of the American wilderness was slowly but surely supplanted by the realization of tremendous economic opportunity. For example, virgin forests offered vast quantities of the finest wood for shipbuilding. The *USS Constitution's* white oak hull was so stout that during the War of 1812 British cannon-balls bounced off her causing a British sailor to exclaim, “*Huzza, her sides are made of iron!*” Waterways like the Hudson River became important transportation routes enabling speedy transit of goods between New York City and the interior and eventual connection with the Erie Canal. The commercialization of the country’s natural resources had a real and dramatic impact on the landscape but interestingly, for decades American art overlooked the consequences of human development. Instead, artists incorporated “progress” at a space removed from or positively included in the scene. Distant locomotives chuffed across the horizon, steam-boats plied their way up or down river against a largely pristine shoreline, and hunters and trappers were portrayed as rugged individuals completely acclimated to their surroundings. This romanticization continued the growing fallacy of an American wilderness as the frontier had been long lost to European settlers’ encroachment. As Robin Kelsey said in his 2014 article,

Ecology, Sustainability, and Historical Interpretation, “Landscape, for example, has traditionally been a way to make nature beautiful as an unchanging image, viewed at a certain distance. It has been a way, in other words, of making nature over into precisely what an ecosystem is not. The basic appeal of landscape has been to take ownership over, but avoid responsibility for, nature as a value.”



William Crothers Fitler, *Riverboat Scene along the Hudson River*, circa 1890. Ink, wash and gouache on illustration board, 8 ½ x 13 inches. Gift of the American Book Company, 1991.017.

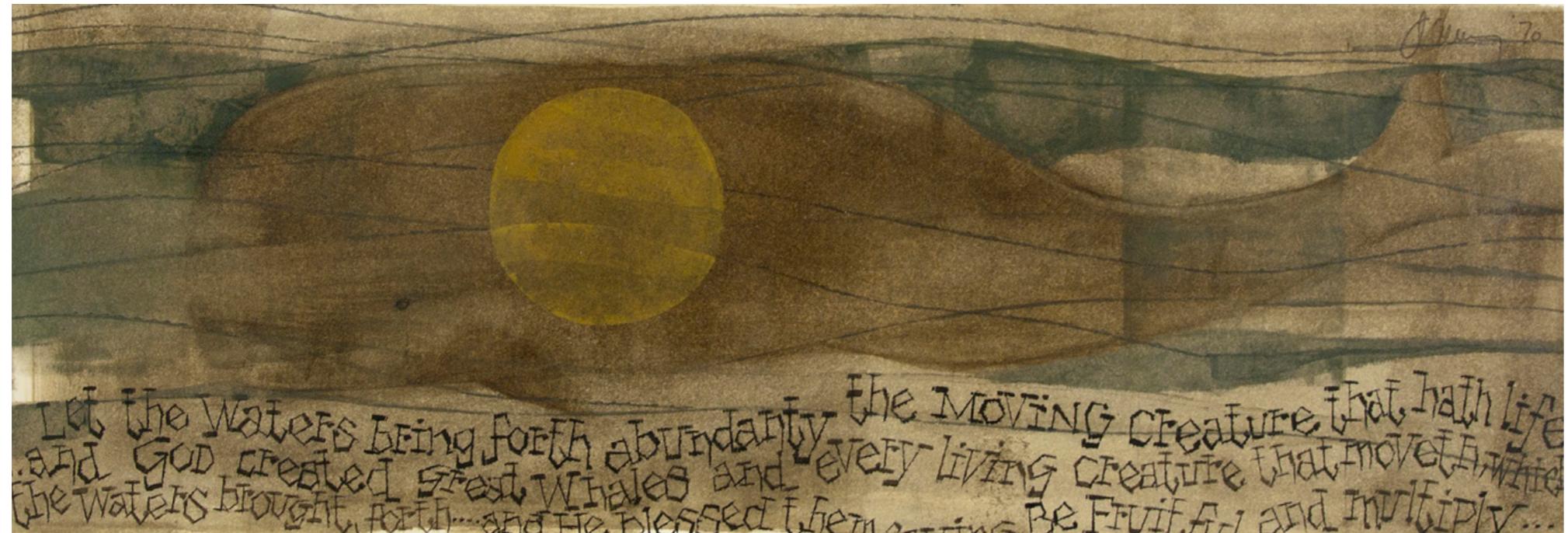
THE HOWLING INFINITE



LeRoy Neiman, *The Blue Whale*, 1978, from *The Moby Dick Suite*. Screenprint on wove paper, 19 x 30 $\frac{9}{16}$ inches. Gift of Mr. Ben Wunsch, 1985.232

LeRoy Neiman is most famously associated with painting sporting and leisure activities. He titled this print *The Blue Whale*, but there is little doubt about the principal figure's true identity. Neiman combined water, wind, waves, and a spouting Moby Dick into a froth of dynamic tension. The artist effectively captured the whale's anger in his malevolent eye as he retaliates against his tormentors.

THE HOWLING INFINITE



Phyllis Demong, *Let the Waters Bring Forth...*, 1970. Screenprint on wove paper, 11 ¾ × 29 ¾ inches. Gift of Mrs. Bertha Ann Muck G'56, 1995.0038

Demong received a BFA from Syracuse University in 1940. A noted regional artist she was a member of the Provincetown Art Association, Associated Artists Syracuse (Gordon Steele Memorial medal), Cooperstown Art Association, and the Northern and Southern Vermont Artists. Best known as a painter (she won Artist of New York Purchase award, Munson Williams Proctor Institute, 1966) Demong was also an experienced printmaker.

Into this placid image Demong added lines from Genesis describing the fifth day when God created great sea creatures and, "...every living thing that moves, with which the waters teemed according to their kinds..." Throughout his narrative, Melville echoed the grandeur Genesis ascribed to whales.

Oceans: From Coast to Bluewater

Oceans presented different opportunities and challenges for development. For generations, saltwater fishing was a coastal activity. Small boats put to sea returned each night with a day's catch to be sold in local markets. Seine nets or erected tidal fishing weirs caught smaller fish swimming close to shore. These endeavors were on a scale that (unknowingly) maintained healthy global fish populations.

19th-century advances in ship construction and navigation established offshore fishing and enabled longer periods at sea and whaling was at the forefront of these endeavors. What had once been Atlantic Ocean voyages of a year or less had extended into

multi-year efforts spanning the world's oceans. The aforementioned *Essex*, for example, reprovisioned on the Galapagos islands in the Pacific where they captured over 100 large sea turtles to feed the crew (sadly, one sailor set a small fire as a prank, it quickly grew out of control and ravaged the entire island). Whalers' had little regard for the animals they hunted. Their financial success hinged on filling the ship's hold as quickly as possible. Any emotions they might have had for the whale were blunted by the real dangers of hunting from small, rowed boats and numbed by the difficult and laborious process of rendering blubber into oil.

THE HOWLING INFINITE



Top Left: Berenice Abbott, *Lobster traps on Mantinicus Island, Maine*, 1965. Gelatin silver print, 10 x 9 3/4 inches. Gift of Marvin A. Sackner, 1981.2436.

Top Right: Berenice Abbott, *Lobster Fisherman in Maine*, 1954. Gelatin silver print, 10 1/8 x 10 1/8 inches. Gift of Marvin A. Sackner, 1981.244.

Right: Berenice Abbott, *Strip Fish*, circa 1965. Gelatin silver print, 10 3/8 x 10 3/8 inches. Gift of Marvin A. Sackner, 1981.2444.



Recognizing and developing marine resources evolved in much the same way as land-based reserves. Fishing, for example, was as old as humankind—peoples living by water readily included catchable species into their diets. Advances in technology enabled and grew commercial fisheries into international conglomerates whose fleets could spend long times at sea. This caused species depletion of several fish, like cod, that had been a dietary staple from northern America to Africa and Europe. Likewise, shellfish populations were threatened by larger commercial trawling operations.

Best known for her Modernist photographs documenting the ever-changing New York City, Berenice Abbott moved to Maine in 1966. Taken by their hardy independence and indefatigable work habits, Abbott's last major project, *A Portrait of Maine*, 1968, captured the state's residents and varying landscape from the vast potato fields of northern Aroostook County to its rocky shoreline and islands.

Melville was able to separate the business of whaling from his principal narrative through line, Ahab's animus for Moby Dick's crippling him. Whaling provided a backdrop, an essential one no doubt, but the reader soon realizes that the Pequod's voyage has less to do with filling the ship's hold with oil and is more about the captain's worldwide hunt for the Leviathan who took his leg.

Born in Syracuse, New York, Dillaye studied etching under Stephen Parrish and won silver medals for etching at the 1895 Atlanta Exposition and at the 1903 International Exposition in Lorient, France. A graduate of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, she was later, in 1897, a founder and first President of the Plastic Club, a Philadelphia-based volunteer-managed art gallery.

Dillaye was a central figure in America's late 19th-century etching revival when the medium was very popular. High demand encouraged shortcuts and lower quality editions. Dillaye refused to change her approach and maintained her high standards. *Fishing Weirs* is a prime example, describing a Canadian estuary on the Atlantic Ocean that, at 62 feet, experiences the largest tidal changes in the world. The dramatic changes in water depth made weirs especially effective in catching fish that swam close to shore at high tide.



Blanche Dillaye, *Fishing Weirs, Bay of Fundy*, circa 1889. Etching on wove paper, $6\frac{3}{8} \times 12\frac{7}{8}$ inches. Gift of Mr. Cloud Wampler, 1963.0717.

THE HOWLING INFINITE



Philip Kappel, *Fishing Fleet, Pascagoula, Mississippi*, 1948. Etching on laid paper, 9 ½ x 9 ½ inches. Gift of the artist, 1969.2005

Kappel was born in Hartford, Connecticut and studied and graduated from Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. His principal subject, maritime imagery, was nurtured by circumnavigating the world six times on sailing vessels. He was employed by several steamship lines and portrayed American maritime shipping at its peak.

Fishing Fleet stands apart from Kappel's typical pictures. Rather than freighters, the artist depicts a wharf crowded with boats and dories, presumably shrimpers as white and brown shrimp dominate the species caught in the Gulf of Mexico.

THE HOWLING INFINITE



W. Eugene Smith, *Distant View of the International Nickel Plant*, 1967. Gelatin silver print, 10 ¾ × 16 ½ inches. Gift of L. Bradley Camp, 1984.133.



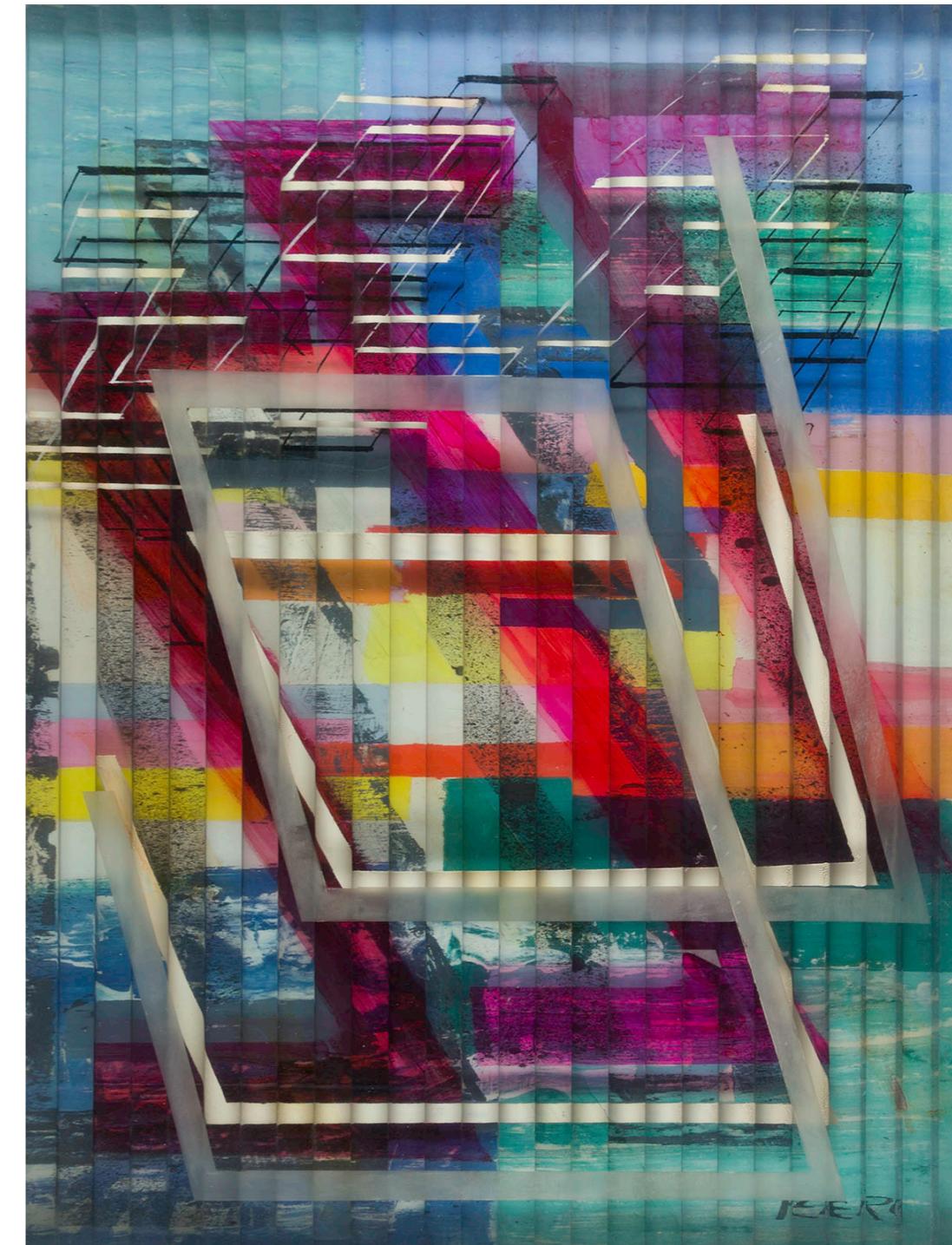
W. Eugene Smith, *Monsanto Chemical Tanks*, 1953. Gelatin silver print, 10 ½ × 13 ½ inches. Gift of L. Bradley Camp, 1984.127.

Throughout the first half of the 20th-century, a number of American artists continued to romanticize the continent's development. Manufacturing plants, factories and mining operations blended into their surroundings. For these artists, factories were the contemporary equivalent of the cathedral or, as American painter Charles Sheeler said, "*our substitute... for religious experience.*"

Clearly, industrial development was not a pristine, inconsequential enterprise. W. Eugene Smith explored industry in photographs commissioned by several companies wanting promotional images. Smith fulfilled his client's wishes, as evidenced in the 1953 Monsanto image but also captured manufacturing's collateral environmental impact as seen in the *Distant View of the International Nickel Plant*, 1967. The former was featured in company reports and led to more commissions but the latter, never published, more accurately represented the blight created by natural resource extraction.

Irene Rice Pereira grew up in Massachusetts before relocating with her family to Brooklyn. In 1927, she enrolled in the Art Students league and studied with Jan Matulka. Visiting Europe, North Africa, and a summer vacation in Provincetown, Massachusetts proved critical in her initial stylistic development. A transformative event for Pereira's art was her association with the Work Progress Administration/Federal Art Project supported Design Laboratory founded in 1936, which blended Bauhaus philosophies and John Dewey's beliefs in functional psychology. The experience strongly affected her art, which evolved into a new socially relevant style synthesized between avant-garde aesthetic theories and functionalism.

Night Sea epitomizes Pereira's mature aesthetic. Abstraction is clearly seen in the strong, colorful geometric design. Her two panes of fluted glass "functioned" perfectly, their combined thicknesses heightened visual depth while the scalloped surfaces were reminiscent of gentle, lapping waves. One feels as if they are gazing down onto a healthy, active Caribbean coral reef.



Irene Rice Pereira, *Night Sea*, 1951. Glass and acrylic, 36 1/4 × 28 1/4 inches. Museum purchase, 1960.029

THE HOWLING INFINITE

Karl Schrag, former director of New York's Atelier 17, an avant-garde print studio, and a master printmaker, summered on Maine's Deer Isle in Penobscot Bay. He felt a deep connection to nature and continually experimented with visualizing his experiences. This four-color intaglio draws attention to the Atlantic waves rolling onto a tree lined shore. Deer Isle's rocky beaches caused the receding waves to audibly hiss as the tide pulled them back to sea.



Karl Schrag, *Sound of the Sea*, 1958. 4 color etching, aquatint, and stencil on wove paper, $19 \frac{3}{4} \times 27 \frac{3}{4}$ inches. Gift of the artist, 1970.687

THE HOWLING INFINITE



Leopold Hugo, [Ocean horizon at sunset]. Gelatin silver print, $12\frac{7}{8} \times 9\frac{15}{16}$ inches. Gift of John Vanco, 1982.170

Immigrating to America in 1891, Hugo married in Texas in 1892 before relocating to southern California in 1908. His early photographs focused on coastal imagery, often with windblown Cypress or Torrey Pine trees shrouded in fog evoking a Pictorialist aesthetic. Pictorialism was an early photographic style embracing labor intensive processes to distance aesthetic photography from the increasing number of snapshots made by handheld cameras. Later works like this lost the style's softer focus but through composition and lighting retain a romantic atmospheric effect.

Melville's experiences aboard the Nantucket whaleship *Acushnet* gave him deep personal experience about the ocean's continually changing conditions. He witnessed everything from the wroth of an Atlantic storm to the placid conditions characterizing the Pacific as illustrated by this sunset Hugo took near Monterey Bay.

After living in Europe in the mid-1920's and being heavily affected by Man Ray's and László Moholy-Nagy's photographs, Wynn Bullock believed photography could be a visual portal through which he could creatively engage with the world. Meeting Edward Weston in 1948 was another seminal moment and Weston's imagery compelled Bullock to further develop his style through direct connections with nature. An avid lifelong learner, Bullock's wide readings influenced his stylistic development leading him to say, "*Searching is everything—going beyond what you know. And the test of the search is really in the things themselves, the things you seek to understand. What is important is not what you think about them, but how they enlarge you.*"

Point Lobos Wave exemplifies Bullock's photographic aesthetic at the time. A mixture of straight and time lapse photography, the image deftly captures the ocean's power. Bullock made an interesting and effective choice, printing the image to the edge of the paper thus heightening the picture's drama and tension and leaving the viewer no marginal relief.



Wynn Bullock, *Point Lobos Wave*, 1958. Gelatin silver print, 20 × 16 inches. Gift of Robert B. Menschel, '51, H '91, 2018.0217.

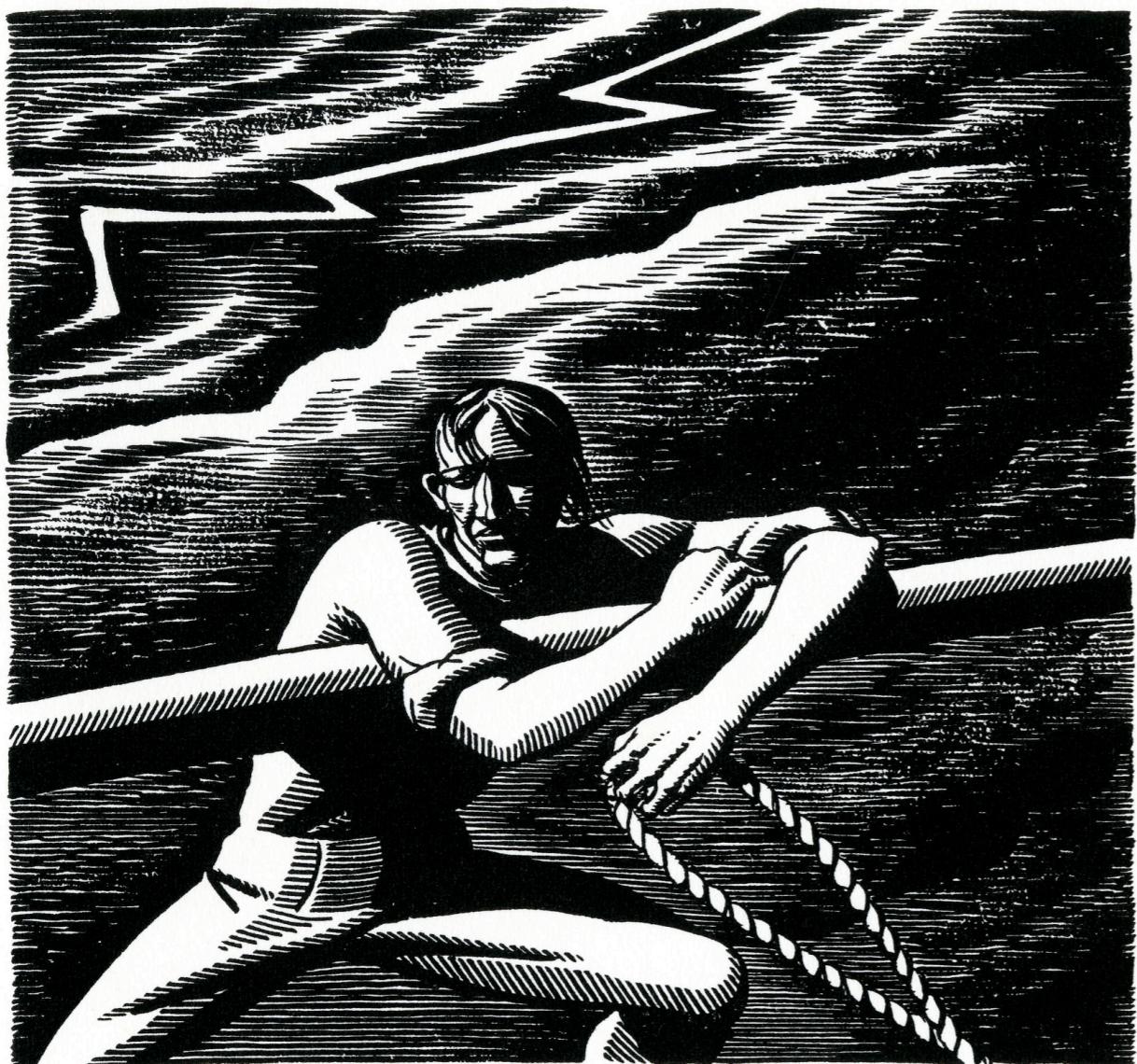
Rockwell Kent Sees Herman Melville

Rockwell Kent was a noted artist by the time R. R. Donnelley and Sons, a large Chicago printing firm and the parent company of The Lakeside Press, decided to publish a limited edition illustrated *Moby Dick*. The company thought broadening into literary publishing would effectively complement their primary work producing Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward shopping catalogs. Kent was brought onto the project and immediately insisted on illustrating *Moby Dick* rather than the originally planned Richard Henry Dana Jr's *Two Years Before the Mast*. Kent thought Melville's story was the far superior tale. He spent five years researching a visual agenda for the book that, when completed, contained nearly 300 illustrations whose dense black coloration reminded strongly of the artist's woodcuts. In fact, they were pen and ink drawings

reproduced using an antiquated and laborious process called photomechanical etch downs that preserved the ink's deep black opacity. This quality was critical to Kent's schema of accurately representing Melville's dark narrative atmosphere.

Also, on Kent's mind was forging a visual program reflecting his personal interpretation of the book. As Matthew Jeffrey Abrams wrote in 2017, "*Kent's illustrations mark a complex intervention that was explicitly designed to critique Melville's own visuality...*" Rather than only illustrating the book's memorable passages, Kent's extensive research enabled him to become an active participant by designing illustrations that magnified, reversed, collapsed, or ironized Melville's narrative.

THE HOWLING INFINITE



Rockwell Kent, *Midnight Aloft—Thunder and Lightning*,

Like Melville, Rockwell Kent's own extensive maritime experiences gave him first-hand knowledge of the pleasures and perils of blue-water sailing.

Tashtego is one of three harpooners on the *Pequod*. A Native American from Martha's Vineyard's Gay Head, he was well-known for his fondness for rum. Melville, in the book's shortest chapter, describes him aloft during a cyclone working to repair the topsail yardarm 45 feet above the deck. Unafraid, Tashtego rails instead against the continual thunder saying, "*What's the use of thunder? ... we want rum; give us a glass of rum. Um, um, um!*" Kent magnifies the miserable conditions by adding a coruscating lightning bolt erupt against the inky black sky. Tashtego hangs over the yardarm, a lashing end in his right hand wearing an expression as foul and bleak as the weather. Ultimately, Melville's authorial skill lay not in trumpeting the business of whaling, which was a brutal practice, but rather in revealing the dangers sailors faced working aboard a square-rigged ship in varying conditions and seasons.

Moby Dick, or, *The Whale*, is so much more than a story about whaling. Whaling's merely the underpinning for broader explorations of race, religion, philosophy, and economics to name a few subjects. Atmospherically, the chronicle is weighted by Ahab's grim depression and his determination to exact revenge on the white whale that took his right leg. Melville described this in chapter 28, “*There was an infinity of firmest fortitude, a determinate, unsurrenderable wilfulness, in the fixed and fearless, forward dedication of that glance. Not a word he spoke; nor did his officers say aught to him; though by all their minutest gestures and expressions, they plainly showed the uneasy, if not painful, consciousness of being under a troubled master-eye.* And not only that, but moody stricken Ahab stood before them with a crucifixion in his face; in all the nameless regal overbearing dignity of some mighty woe.”

This foreboding clings to the story like barnacles to a hull. Once the officers and crew learn the captain's true goal, the gloom grows as the voyage lengthens and Ahab's monomaniacal zeal reveals itself. Anne Ryan captures a similar feeling in her color woodcut. In a master stroke, she prints the image on black paper and uses the wood grain to develop an emotional vibration reminiscent of Edvard Munch's, *The Scream*, 1893



Anne Ryan, *Now, Ever Awake, My Master Dear, I Fear a Deadly Storm*, 1947. Color woodcut on black wove paper. Gift to the museum 1963.0186B

Leonard Baskin's Moby Dick: It's Personal

Forty years after Rockwell Kent's monumental project, Leonard Baskin conceived his response to what he called, "America's greatest book". *The Moby Dick Suite*, 1970, contained eight lithographs, some in color. Unlike Kent, Baskin's images stood alone, bereft of Melville's text. Without text or context, they plumbed the principal character's psychoses. Perhaps the most affecting is his portrayal of Captain Ahab, pictured frontally without clothing. Without his clothes, the captain's authority vanishes, revealing a tortured, disfigured physique echoing Ahab's mental turmoil. The artist deftly captured Melville's searing chapter 28 description,

"His whole high, broad form seemed made of solid bronze, and shaped in an unalterable mould, like Cellini's cast Perseus. Threading its way out from among his grey hairs, and continuing right down one side of his tawny scorched face and neck, till it disappeared in his clothing, you saw a slender rod-like mark, lividly whitish. It resembled that perpendicular seam sometimes made in the straight, lofty trunk of a great tree, when the upper lightning tearingly darts down it, and without wrenching a single twig, peels and grooves out the bark from top to bottom, ere running off into the soil, leaving the tree still greenly alive, but branded."



Leonard Baskin, *Captain Ahab Torso*, 1970, from *The Moby Dick Suite*.
Lithograph on wove paper, 17 x 11 ½ inches. Private Collection

Melville and the 21st Century

Nine short years after *Moby Dick* was published, Edwin L. Drake successfully drilled the first large-scale commercial oil well in Titusville, PA leading to a boom eerily similar to California's gold rush ten years earlier. Eight oil refineries were constructed and in five years the local population surged from 250 residents to over 10,000. Initially, to lower overland transport costs, skiffs holding up to 800 barrels were floated down the Allegheny River to Pittsburgh. Built of wood, only three in five reached their destination, their cargo spilled into the river. By 1869, 4,000,000 barrels were extracted annually from the region and four years later, 10,000,000 barrels with shipping now handled by railroads. Driving this development was Europe's industrial revolution and, at its peak, Pennsylvania provided one third of the world's oil.

Herman Melville, nor any of his contemporaries, could have foreseen the expansion of drilling operations to large, offshore platforms and the vast transportation system using the world's oceans to move product, now largely centered in the Middle East. A successful three-year whaling voyage in Melville's time netted over 1900 barrels of oil. Today's largest tanker can transport over 2 million barrels at a cost of pennies per gallon.

Propelling the industry's expansion into ocean drilling and larger capacity tankers was the continual desire to find new reserves and drive down shipping costs, a goal having disastrous maritime consequences. In 1989, the tanker *Exxon Valdez* ran aground in Alaska's Prince William Sound spilling over 257,000 barrels of oil into the water. The site's remote location, accessible only by helicopter, plane, or boat, made government and industry response efforts difficult and severely taxed existing response plans. The spill affected 1300 miles of coastline and severely impacted habitats for salmon, herring, sea otters, seals, seabirds and two local orca whale pods.

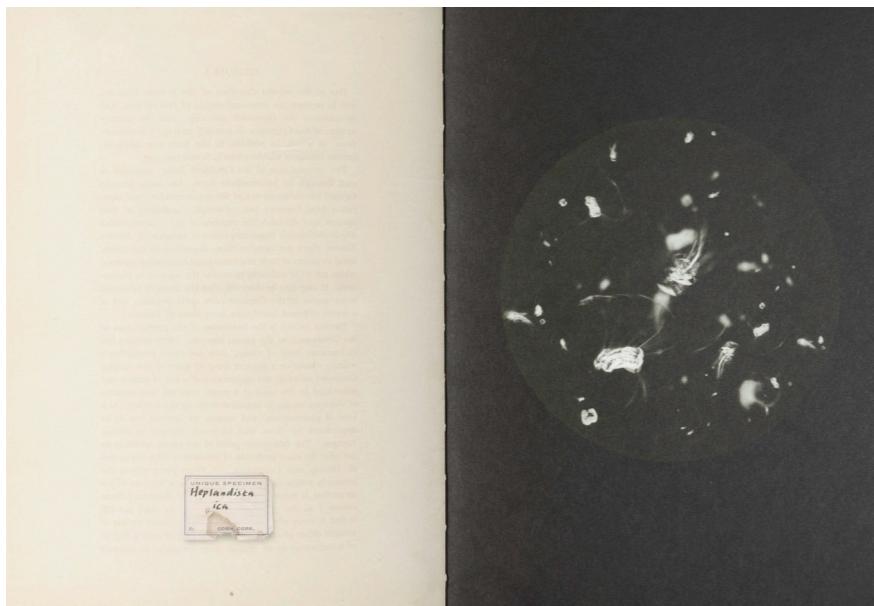
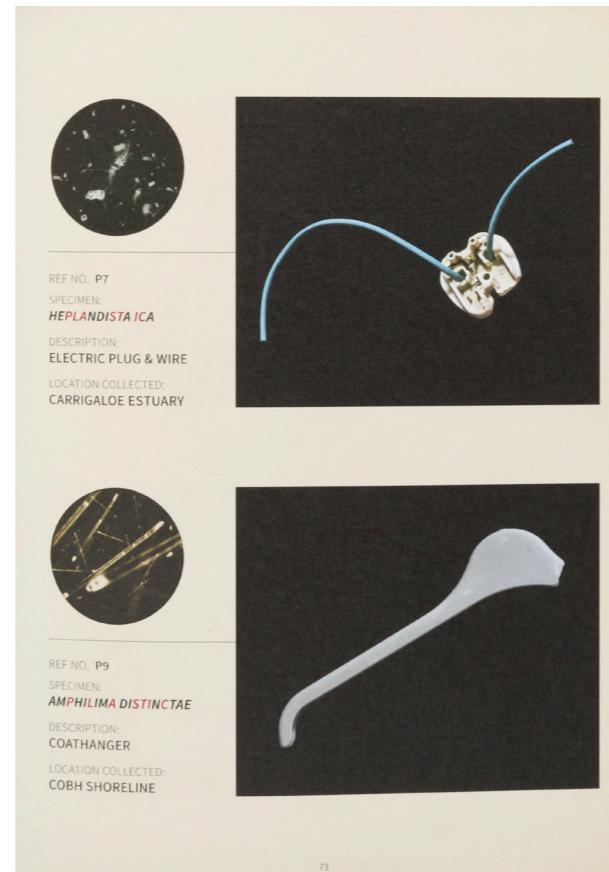
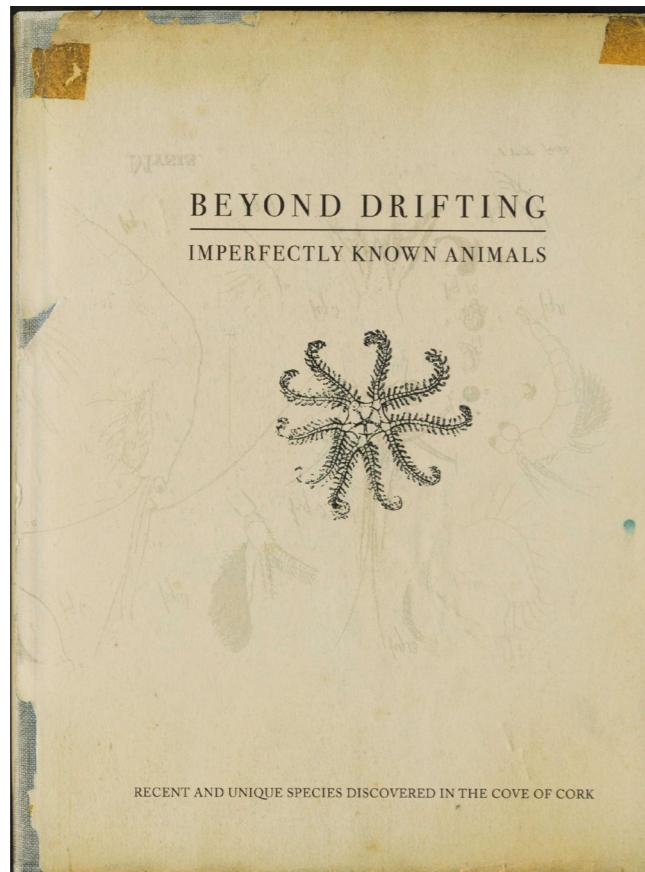
The *Exxon Valdez* grounding was the country's largest oil disaster until 2010 when the *Deepwater Horizon* drilling platform exploded in the Gulf of Mexico. Eleven workers died in the explosion and the remaining 94 were rescued by either helicopter or lifeboat. Two days later the platform sank, causing a massive leak. Oil flowed for 87 days. Located just 50 miles southeast off the Louisiana coast enabled extensive media coverage including a livecam of the underwater wellhead spewing oil into the sea. Ultimately, 4.9 million barrels leaked into the gulf making it the world's largest spill.

THE HOWLING INFINITE



Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill, May 24, 2010 (photo: NASA: Moderate-Resolution Imaging Spectroradiometer (MODIS) on NASA's Terra satellite)

THE HOWLING INFINITE



Mandy Barker, *Helandista Ica*, 2015, published in *Beyond Drifting: Imperfetly Known Animals*, 2017.
Chromogenic print, 5 1/8 inches diameter. Private Collection

In residence in 2015 with the Sirius Arts Centre in Cobh, Cork, Mandy Barker decided to research and document the accumulation of plastics in Cobh Harbor, an 18 mile long bay in southwestern Ireland. Learning of John Vaughn Thompson's pioneering discovery of plankton in the same waters in 1823, she decided to model her findings on Thompson's original hand written field notebooks. Going further, she abandoned her digital camera for several Canon EOS 500 35 millimeter models. Known for having "sticky shutter syndrome", they caused multiple images on the same frame of film, an aesthetic inspired by Thompson's use of "imperfect" in describing the newly discovered crustaceans.

Barker's blurred images appear to replicate Thompson's earlier work. Only at the end of the book does the reader realize the pictures actually represent petroleum based plastic particles found on the harbor's beaches and islands.

Conclusion

I couldn't imagine a better exhibition to conclude my Syracuse career. It combines my favorite book, *Moby Dick*, with American landscape art and examines the genre's accuracy in describing the country's changing terrain. Our original 18th century wilderness provided grand, Romantic views no longer possible in Europe and established an American presence on the international art stage. Paradoxically, for decades this visual advantage persuaded American artists to overlook the consequences of development and natural resource extraction. In fact, human pollution and climate change has dramatically altered the land and marine environments. Currently, there is in the North Pacific an accumulation of plastics called the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. While the surface of the patch spans an area double the size of Texas, this measurement doesn't necessarily paint an accurate or total picture of the problem. The true problem

lurks in the deep: 94 percent of the ocean's plastic can be found on the seafloor. The overall problem affects every living thing, from microscopic plankton to the largest whales. Additionally, climate change raises water and air temperatures, bleaching corals, melting glacial and sea ice causing rising ocean levels.

Two centuries have passed since the *Essex* was rammed by a whale and sank. While Melville could have never imagined how reliant developed societies became on oil or the appalling environmental consequences of that reliance, he was convinced of humanity's proneness to acting foolish. As he said in chapter 88, The Grand Armada, "*There is no folly of the beast of the earth which is not infinitely outdone by the madness of man.*"

—David L. Prince, Curator
SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM

