



SUSAN WIDES

THE HUDSON VALLEY

From Mannahatta to Kaaterskill



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HUDSON RIVER MUSEUM

This catalogue is being published in conjunction with the exhibition
SUSAN WIDES: THE HUDSON VALLEY, FROM MANNAHATTA TO KAATERSKILL
organized by the Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, May 28 to September 11, 2011.

This is the second exhibition in the Hudson River Museum series
The Visitor in the Landscape.

All images are courtesy of Susan Wides and Kim Foster Gallery,
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HUDSON RIVER MUSEUM

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DIRECTOR'S FOREWORD

For over 75 years, the Hudson River Museum has been one of the most vital cultural institutions in the Hudson Valley Region. Its strong commitment to the display and interpretation of regional landscape art is supported by a wide-ranging collection of key landscapes by Samuel Colman, Jasper Cropsey, Asher B. Durand, John Bunyon Bristol, James Renwick Brevoort, Frank Anderson, Gifford Beal, Elihu Vedder, George Inness, and, more recently Don Nice and Bill Sullivan.

In the fall of 2010 the Museum began to explore the relationship between people and their environments, planning a series of exhibitions collectively called *The Visitor in the Landscape* with the express purpose of exploring nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first century scenic views in the many ways artists expressed themselves. The first in this series was *Paintbox Leaves: Autumnal Inspiration from Cole to Wyeth* (2010). We continue, now, to explore with photographs from *Susan Wides: The Hudson Valley, From Mannahatta to Kaaterskill*.

What we look to answer are very basic questions about landscape art. What inspires artists to immerse themselves in nature for their subject? Some seek out and depict characteristics of the landscape—its beauty, randomness, or natural order. Some focus on nearby scenes, others travel great distances to observe particular locales. Many artists meditate on the sublimity of nature, whether gazing at the Palisades or embarking on a world tour. And, just as many have explored the contrast between the manmade and the natural in the landscape. As “visitors in the landscape,” they depict nature from wild to urban.

Susan Wides' photographs tend to inhabit the latter approach. What is compelling about her work is the visual vocabulary she creates. She allows us to see the ways in which she mines a century of American landscape painting to create a context for her own work. Using photography, that most accessible of media, she teases us with images — familiar and solid. Almost too late do we notice the brilliance of her composition, the subtlety of her framing, and the changeability of her focal planes. Again and again, when confronted with her work, our first reaction is to see it as real, and only later do we wonder if it is artificial. It is her mastery of all the elements of the image that forces us to see her work as new.

We are, first and foremost, indebted to Susan Wides for this show. For more than two years she has worked to create photographs that stand between city and country, delving into the continuum of landscape. We are grateful to her for allowing us to view landscape afresh. Bartholomew Bland, the Museum's Director of Curatorial Affairs, has worked with Susan to create a cogent exhibition that gives us real insight into her work. His essay and entries in this catalogue, along with the essay by Roger Panetta, the Museum's Adjunct Curator of History, are significant contributions to the multi-year conversation that is *The Visitor in the Landscape*.

We are grateful to Takako Hara, Registrar, for handling the many details of this exhibition, and to Jason Weller, Senior Art Technician, for a wonderful installation. Linda Locke, Director of Public Relations, has once again given us a catalogue that is equal to the ambition of the show.

Over the next several years, we will continue to explore, through *The Visitor in the Landscape*, scenic views of the Hudson River Valley in a variety of media. In fall 2011, we will showcase the drawings of Elihu Vedder in *Voyage on the Nile*. Soon to follow will be an exhibition dedicated to the great popularity of the panoramic landscape in the nineteenth century, and another exploring how early twentieth century industrialization shaped the vistas of New York's working waterways. We hope you will continue to join us at the Museum for this project that explores new ways of seeing.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I sincerely thank Bartholomew Bland for inspiring and enabling this exhibition and catalog, and for his and Roger Panetta's insightful essays. My continued gratitude goes to my gallerist, Kim Foster, for her wise counsel, support and belief. I send special thanks to Kristin Costello for her creative talents, insights and dedication in my studio. There are many friends, colleagues and family who provided support, expertise, wisdom and inspiration whom I would like to thank: Bob Shamis, Steven Holl, Hannah Wides, Gail Wides, Leaf, Reva Wolf, Julia Ballerini, Marietta Abrams Brill, David Leigh, Stephanie Aaron, Bonnie Marranca, Ariel Shanberg, Antonio Petracca, Ann Stoddard, Jed Cohen, Jamie Curtis, Tom & Louise Wides, Barry Wides, Sarah Wides, Ellen Lieberman. Virginia Rutledge, David van der Leer, Julia van den Hout, Brian Wallace, Thomas Love, Prudence Katze, Joseph Tripi, Paul Smart, Elizabeth Jacks, Associates of the Thomas Cole National Historic Site, Barbara Novak, Linda Ferber, Idis, May & Lucille Lazar, and I'd like particularly to thank the staff of the museum for their efforts on behalf of this show. My deepest gratitude goes to Jim Holl, my husband and creative collaborator, for art, illuminations, patience and humor.

SUSAN WIDES

It is my good fortune that my job entails finding artists I admire and asking if they would be interested in presenting their work at the Museum. I've been a fan of Susan Wides' photographs since I saw *Near Catskill Creek [October 15, 2004]*, and was gratified when she agreed to bring so many more of her photographs to the Museum and to the public eye.

Every exhibition is teamwork and I am most grateful to Takako Hara and Jason Weller for their continued excellent work pulling together a hundred disparate details as we mount our projects. My thanks go to Roger Panetta for his illuminating essay in this catalog, and to Linda Locke for her sharp editorial eye, which allows the Museum to excel in its publications. Several individuals graciously permitted access to their property so that Susan could photograph, and we extend thanks to Susan and Gary Testa and Paul and Regina Reilly. Finally, my deepest thanks to my sounding boards: Penelope Fritzer, Joseph Bland, and A.J. Minogue for all their love and support.

BARTHOLOMEW F. BLAND



MANNAHATTA

PREVIOUS PAGE

Liberty Island [December 2, 2005]

Chromogenic print, 40 x 50 inches

The focal plane traces the tips of Lower Manhattan's skyscrapers, reshaping the horizon line into a zig-zag. When printed large, the photograph invites close inspection and reveals the process of seeing. The eye cannot capture every moment, but composes the image by picking out details. Below a few sharp rooftops, the city appears fluid, like a memory unhinged from matter and time.

SW

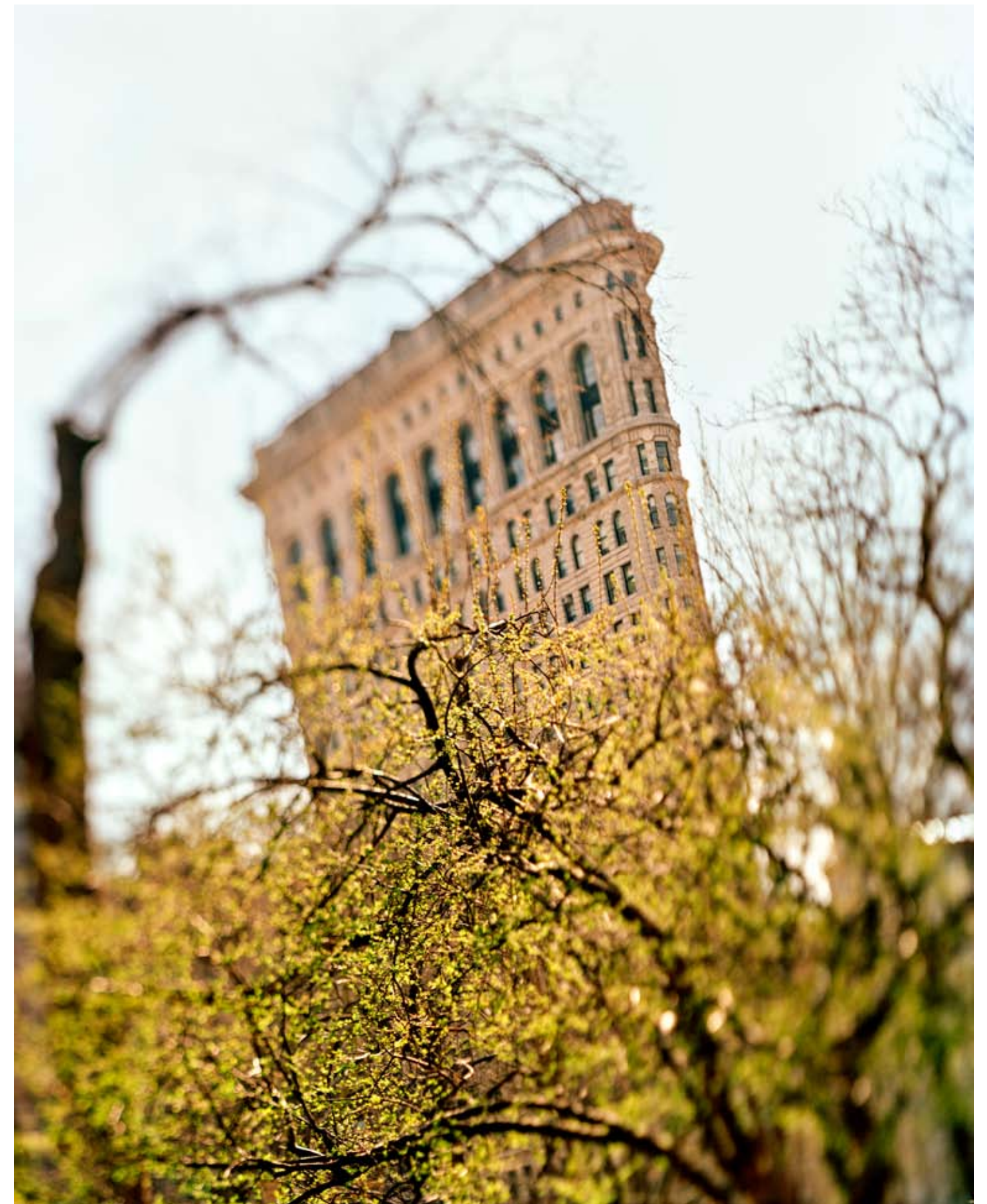
Flatiron [April 14, 1999]

Chromogenic print, 30 x 40 inches

Collection David Leigh New York

At the close of the twentieth century, I reconsidered the Flatiron which had been associated with photography and modernity by Edward Steichen and others. In contrast to the clean, linear trees in their photographs, I depicted a formless field of buds and branches consuming the building. In dialogue with its history, my portrait of the Flatiron quivers as if invoked by collective memory.

SW





Union Square [July 26, 2005]

Chromogenic print, 30 x 50 inches

Photographing Union Square from above, I impersonated the stare of a security camera. Against the diagrammatic background, each person's specific pose and gesture seems to set them on another plane, eluding the totalizing gaze of the camera.

SW



Bryant Park [March 30, 2009]

Chromogenic print, 26.5 x 40 inches

The particularities within a community are emphasized on different scales, from the individual needles of an evergreen to the uniqueness of each person in the city and to the character of the park within the urban fabric. The park's chairs propose a social space but through daily disorganization and rearrangement New Yorkers leave their individual traces.

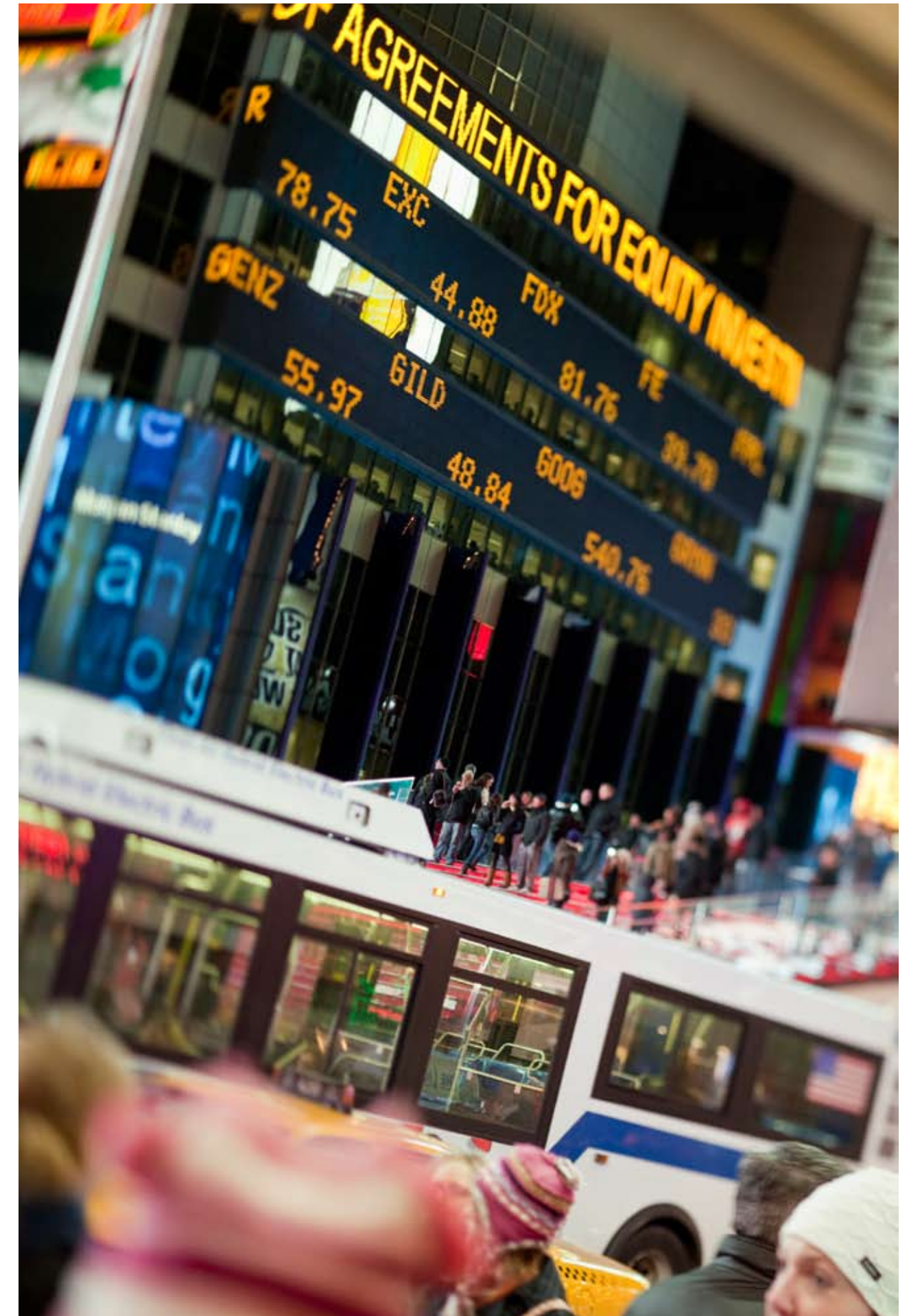
SW

Times Square [February 22, 2010]

Pigmented ink print, 52 x 35 inches

Made inside a McDonald's stairway overflowing with people, this photo of Times Square reproduces its contorted sense of space. Appearing to stand on a bus and dwarfed by the glowing words, pedestrians attend a theme park version of New York City. The square looks like a cramped interior and only refers to the world outside its walls with the impassive record of the stock market collapse. It is an enclave of suburban concoction at the heart of a metropolis.

SW



Wall Street [July 12, 2007]
Chromogenic print, 43 x 40 inches

Sometimes the areas in the photograph that are not in focus are among the most important, for instance where the flag melds with the façade of the New York Stock Exchange. The pedestrians are frozen for close inspection but the flag becomes a mask, its meaning absorbed by the economy's silence. The unnaturally clean street seems to be a movie set. In this space of dissemblance, tourists with cameras and a policeman with a machine gun perform without direction.

SW





Great South Bay [February 13, 2000]
Chromogenic print, 27 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 50 inches

Before the 53-year-old, 2,200-acre Fresh Kills landfill closed in 2001, I photographed it to reveal the complicated interaction between humans, land, and technology. From the landfill mass to the ship graveyard to the frantic gulls, different tempos of decay overlap in counterpoint. When Fresh Kills reopened to take the wreckage from 9/11, the mingling of life and waste became particularly poignant.

SW



Empire, Chrysler [December 6, 2005]

Chromogenic print, 30 x 40 inches

Wides' regimented rows of skyscrapers impose order on the seeming chaos of New York City. The architectural grid system New York adopted in 1811 represented the desire to impose order over the landscape of the rapidly developing city. In Wides' photograph the natural world is subordinated to the manmade. The heavy snows of winter are reduced to a tiny dusting, harmless white highlights that appear inconsequential among glass, stone, and steel.

BB



Empire, UN [December 6, 2005]

Chromogenic print, 30 x 40 inches

In five canvases from 1836, Thomas Cole depicted The Course of Empire. In contrast to this grandiose narrative, I wanted to show the smallness of New York. The city is a place for individual lives. Personal experience does not follow a dramatic arc, but changes slowly, recouping loss bit by bit. For each person, a moment of contemplation will bend and distort the city, as he or she absorbs the space.

SW

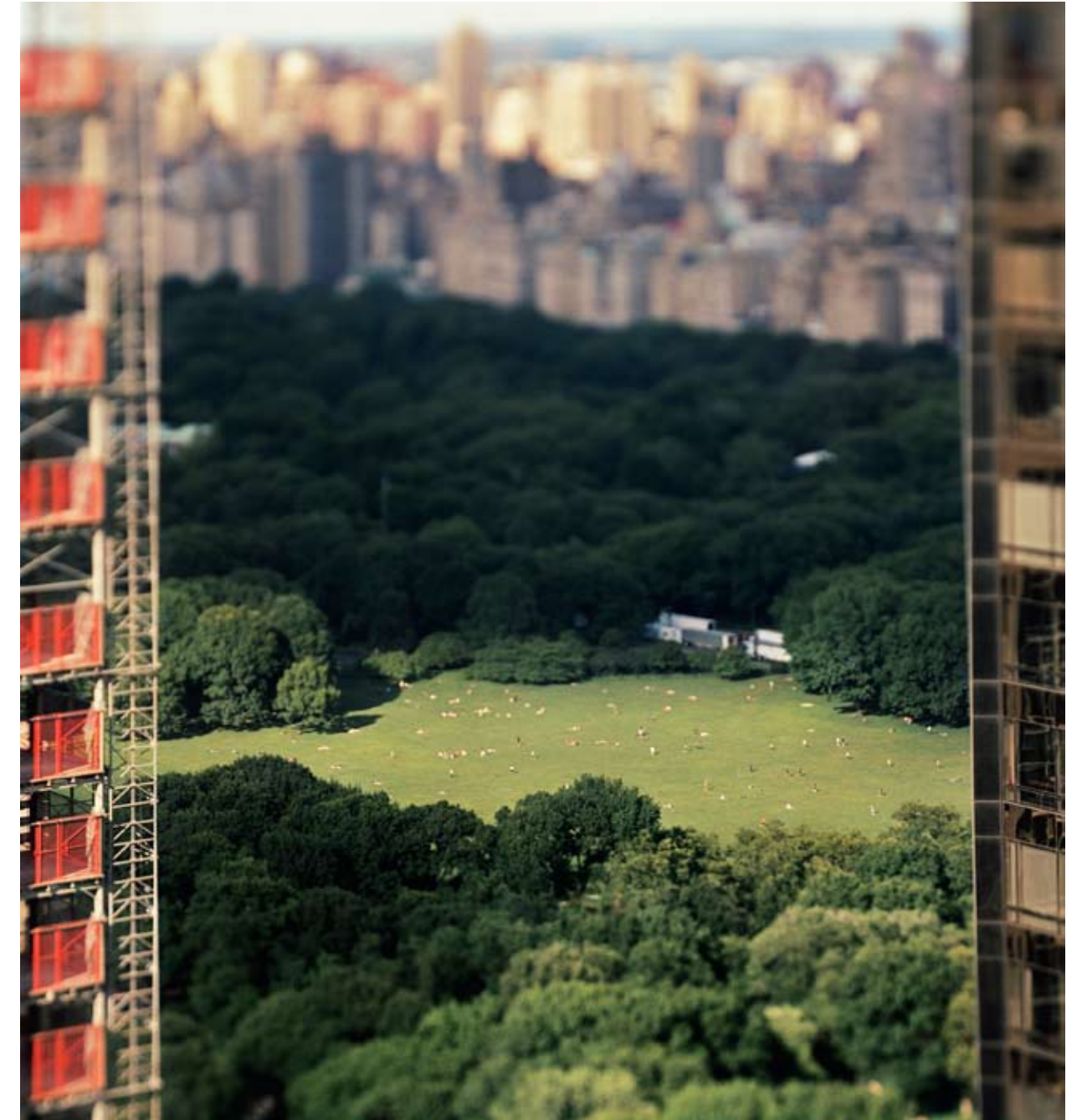


West Side Pier 'D' [November 19, 1997]

Chromogenic print, 29 x 40 inches

The wreckage of collapsing post-industrial structures along the West Side of Manhattan remain poignant visual indicators of New York City's decades-long declining industrial base interspersed among the many waterfront reclamation projects underway. Wides captures the sense of wreckage and the fallen infrastructure, which some have nicknamed "spaghetti carbonara." A sobriquet that brings to mind the wreckage of another icon of the early industrial era—the famed dirigible the Hindenburg.

BB



Sheep's Meadow [July 2, 2007]

Chromogenic print, 43 x 40 inches

With this photograph's quilt-like composition, I contemplate the city's mutability. A fragment of New York is transformed into a green stage with figures like a Giacometti town square. The compression between the two 'borders' of the quilt highlights the spatial ambiguity of the city and emphasizes the controlled artifice of Central Park's landscape.

SW

Bryant Park [July 18, 2007]

Chromogenic print, 30 x 40 inches

Poet William Cullen Bryant's friendship with the painter Thomas Cole is the subject of Asher Durand's painting Kindred Spirits. Inspired by their visits to the Catskills and their conversations about nature, their ideas laid the groundwork for the environmental movement. At Bryant Park one can sense the visible and invisible threads that continue to bind the Hudson Valley region together.

SW

Central Park [February 12-13, 2010]

Pigmented ink print, 35 x 52 inches

This winter scene reminded me of a painting by the Flemish Renaissance artist Pieter Bruegel. Like his villagers, these New Yorkers are varied iterations of bodies performing a makeshift scenario. They are complicit in their own abstraction, each with brightly colored sleds, like animated brushstrokes on the freshly gessoed snow.

SW



Madison Square [January 17, 2007]
Chromogenic print, 31 x 40 inches

With its moody sky, this is Gotham. You half expect to see the Batman symbol flashing across its rooftops. Set among those rooftops, the metaphorical and actual gilded skyscrapers of Manhattan, Wides takes us above the clouds for a bird's-eye view of some of New York's magnificent buildings. From left are the buildings of New York Life Insurance, the New York Merchandise Mart, and MetLife, together demonstrating the change in urban architecture over the decades.

BB



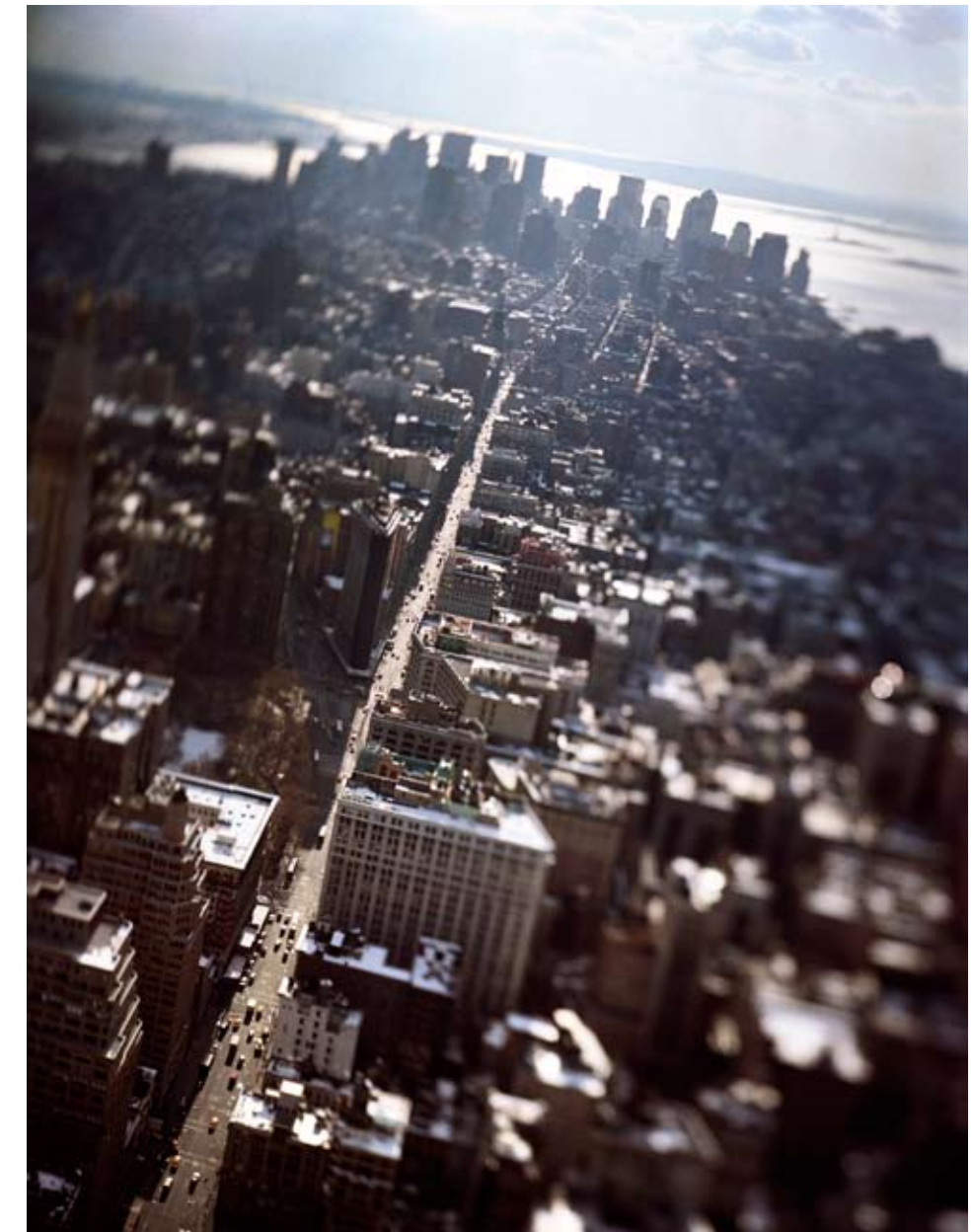


WTC Site, Halal Cart [February 26, 2010]

Pigmented ink print, 35 x 52 inches

Even in the dead of winter there is rebirth. Wides' photograph of the World Trade Center site under redevelopment blurs the details of the laborious construction process. The rising tower and angled cranes suggest heavy labor hidden from sight. Life goes on. The fast food truck parked in the snow is an ironic reminder that even when the momentous occurs, life's parade of small daily events continues. There is poetry in this photograph. Common city pigeons take on the appearance of black crows, omens for good or ill.

BB



Empire, Looking Down Fifth [December 6, 2005]

Chromogenic print, 50 x 40 inches

From the private collection of Steven Holl

The diagonal strip of Fifth Avenue is like a cut in the urban fabric, leading to a hole in Lower Manhattan's skyline where the World Trade Center once stood. The hyper reality of cars and pedestrians is a testament to resilience within the dissolving mass of buildings. When New York Magazine commissioned a project on historical views of the city, I was able to photograph from the tops of skyscrapers with my 4 x 5 camera, where, for security, access is very limited. I reflected on the difference between this view of New York in 2005 and Berenice Abbott's view in her 1935 photograph Seventh Avenue Looking South.

SW



SUSAN WIDES: THE WORLD BETWEEN

BARTHOLOMEW F. BLAND

Do you own your view? Not your point of view, but the view from your window, your office, your backyard — can you possess it? Can you ever truly disown the mark of other people's impact on what you see? The landscape, in art, in the garden, or abused in the march of progress, is always our own “unnatural” creation that we visually absorb, sometimes enjoy or regret, and, other times, willfully ignore.

Susan Wides, using camera focus and scale, shows us how fallible our perceptions can be. Our seeing can distort but may also define the environments that we make and in which we live. Some of her works carry the message of environmental stewardship across the Hudson Valley where man and nature are juxtaposed, their apposition acknowledged, if not always accepted.

“The world between” is an apt phrase to describe Westchester County, a green area fringing New York City on its northern border. The suburbs have been ridiculed, criticized, and parodied by dozens of artists and writers. From John Cheever to Eric Fischl, fascination with the suburbs is a cultural trope. While Wides has long been interested in the drama of Manhattan and the scenic magnificence of the Catskills, her most recent work, shown in *The Hudson Valley, From Mannahatta to Kaaterskill* examines the hidden subtleties of suburban life and landscape. Wides' work doesn't scream from a billboard or leap from a magazine cover. Instead, her photographs insinuate themselves into your consciousness and invite you to draw near and take a close look at how we live and the world around us. Not too near, though. Everything in life is context and Wides can embrace flash and grandeur when the moment demands. Her photographs of monumental scenes of nature in the Catskills, such as *Sunset Rock [October 8, 2007]* are where one expects to encounter the sublime and pay homage at nature's temple.

Wides largely eschews the stormy skies and windswept mountains favored by Hudson River School painter Thomas Cole, although in photographs like *Haines Falls [October 19, 2004]*, she captures Cole's drama by deliberately blurring sections of the scene and keeping your eye moving through the sharp contours of Kaaterskill Clove, one of the best known landmarks of the Catskill area. Wides leads you through the mountains, her 4 x 5 camera

simulating the distortions of the eye as it constantly pulls objects of interest in and out of focus. In selective concentration Wides captures a truth missing in many American nineteenth-century paintings, where elements of panoramas are given a crystalline clarity. The panoramic vista has been called the “magisterial gaze” by Albert Boime for its omniscient point of view.¹ Avoiding the documentary “all-seeing” view that aerial photography and surveillance cameras have made commonplace in the modern world, Wides reinserts a more specific and earthly view, focusing us on the specifics of a vast natural creation, and altering our perceptions.

The wide vistas of painter Frederic Edwin Church's estate Olana are perfections of the magisterial gaze, part and parcel of nineteenth-century painting. Panoramic painters impelled their viewers to look down on a spreading and beautiful land, and so conferred an omniscient vision that carried with it the comforting sense of control and domination. Omniscience represented turn-of-the-century society's belief in this country's Manifest Destiny. Church sums up this sense of domination, writing proudly of Olana, “About an hour this side of Albany is the Center of the World—I own it.”² Wides has successfully adapted the notion of a godhead perspective to the urban view in both *Union Square [July 26, 2005]*, which uses distance to reduce humans to minuscule creatures scattered across a geometric landscape, and in the glassy landscape *White Plains Sprawl [January 10, 2011]*, a magisterial view for the new millennium. One does not have to be Frederic Church to feel an intense sense of home ownership and a desire to “possess” the view. *Palmer Road [October 2, 2009]* demonstrates the contemporary middle-class equivalent of the modest home with a grand view. The view is shared by other small houses along a suburban block, but the degree of “sharing” conflicts with the homeowner's desire to assert individual ownership. Perhaps good fences really do make good neighbors.

The nationalistic and triumphal aspects of the Hudson River School contained impulses that, a generation later, revealed themselves as grandiose Manifest Destiny in the great Western scenes of the Rocky Mountain School. Artists like Frederic Church, Albert Bierstadt, and Thomas Moran, products of their time, painted idealized scenes of untamed wilderness,



Alexis Rockman (b. 1962). *Manifest Destiny*, 2004
Oil on wood, 96 x 288 inches
© 2011 Alexis Rockman/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

an impulse that dated back to Cole's depiction of Kaaterskill Clove in the 1820s, where he suggests a long gone primitiveness by including Native American figures.

As the Hudson River School artists reflect their time, Wides reflects hers. Her images contain doubt and inhabit an age of anxiety. Her photographs recognize that open land is a precious commodity, rapidly disappearing. Though it seems our concern for today, Thomas Cole recognized this fact 180 years ago. His canvases deliberately suggest an earlier, “untamed” era, which was receding as the Catskills transitioned into a popular tourist destination. Wides' photographs, though, still celebrate the sublime monumentality of the region, however compromised.

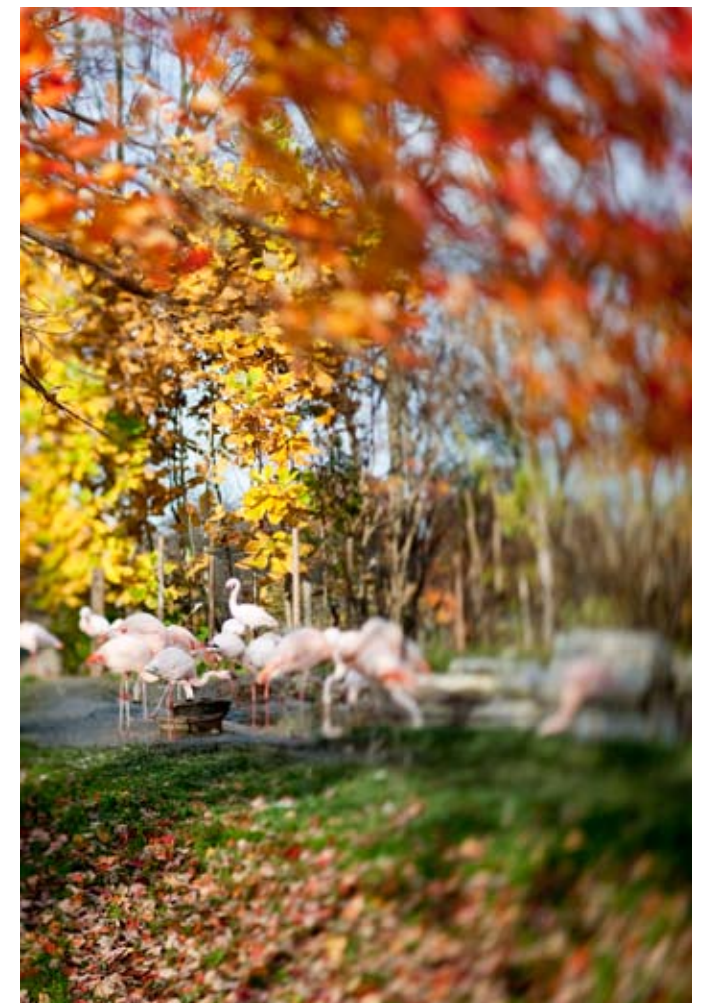
Wides' images are not visions of cataclysmic dystopia in the style of contemporary artists, such as Alexis Rockman, who harnesses the doom of Cole's *Destruction (Course of Empire)* for maximum effect, a thread of the lurid in Cole's work that Wides rejects. She clearly condemns the ongoing damage to the region's natural landscape but she is more nuanced and subtle. Flailing accusation is theatrical but ultimately less satisfying than the scorching indignation Wides achieves in her strongest works. Images like *Near Catskill Creek [October 15, 2004]* and *Kaaterskill Clove [February 15, 2005]* are imbued with her steady, clear-eyed view of what is happening to our natural environment. Wides creates a kind of mordant deadpan effect that results in a greater impact than hysterical condemnation. The wrecked cars in these photographs rest easily in their lot, and although the fact of them is distressing, their compositional forms on the landscape are not.

It is easy to imagine that Wides could have composed far uglier visions of environmental degradation for beautiful sites in the Catskills, but she lets the old cars quietly convey their own dilemmas. The colors of the automobiles harmonize with nature, accentuating the vivid foliage framing the car dump. In *Kaaterskill Clove* [February 15, 2005], Wides allows the accumulated snow to provide a discreet fig leaf to the car lot, which, if not exactly a concealment of ugliness, at least provides a softening element to the wrought destruction. Even at a distance from Manhattan, what to do with the refuse of urban and suburban locales, and how it can spill into the most cherished and pristine areas fills Wides' lens. Far from the Catskills, Wides finds, in New York Harbor, a matter-of-fact beauty in the sordid grandeur at *Great South Bay* [February 13, 2000]. The eventual closure of the nearby Fresh Kills landfill in the face of intense opposition from Staten Island residents demonstrates that policy shifts can occur, although society's unwanted refuse does not disappear. It merely shifts to regions either less populated or less politically or economically able to find protection, as in the polluted bay offshore.

Compare the dappled snow that covers the cars in Wides' Catskills with the snow-covered shopping malls of exurbia in her *Bear Mountain, Central Valley* [January 28, 2011] and the apotheosis of urbanization *WTC Site, Halal Cart* [February 26, 2010]. In each, Wides uses snow to suggest the blanketing, mitigating effect of nature on a compromised landscape, although snow may be only a temporary bandage on the scarred land. While the Kaaterskill Clove car lot lies dormant, quiet under its layers of unused automobiles, the convulsive energy of the World Trade Center site and its rising buildings bursting through the winter snow suggest that nature dominates the landscape in suburban and rural areas but cannot in a metropolis. In works like *Empire* [December 6, 2005], nature's snowfall is reduced to Mother Nature's carefully placed highlights. The skyscrapers are the mountains of the rural scene, not blanketed, but merely dusted with snow, that illustrates their gargantuan scale. Only in the controlled "natural" areas of the metropolis, such as *Central Park* [February 12-13, 2010] is snowfall allowed to blanket the land, becoming the compositional neutral background for Wides' plastic sleds, as gaudy as gumdrops. Her sleds dotting the landscape pose the question — are they

any more or less artificial than the colored cars strewn about the Catskills? Wides uses snow's "naturalness" to demonstrate nature and man's contentious interconnectedness.

Wides shows how living creatures can seem artificial when out of their "natural" context. The out-of-place flamingos in *Steinhardt Gardens* [November 1, 2009] serve as the same manmade decoration of the landscape that Wides' plastic sleds do. The idea that a living creature is a man's aesthetic plaything is deeply unsettling. Ironically, society has come to expect, even applaud, breeding for selective aesthetic traits in insect-resistant corn or Westminster-winning poodles. In 2000 much media controversy was ignited when contemporary artist Eduardo Kac hired a genetics company to produce *GFP Bunny*, a rabbit that fluoresced green under certain light, the result of a jellyfish gene inserted into the rabbit's DNA code. While the manipulation of the building blocks of life for purely aesthetic purposes can be discomfiting, the sense of what is manmade is just a question of degree. A flamingo has no more natural place in the Hudson Valley, far outside of its own tropical natural habitats, than does a fluo-



Eduardo Kac
GFP Bunny, 2000
Transgenic artwork, "Alba, the fluorescent rabbit"
Image courtesy of the artist

Susan Wides
Steinhardt Gardens [November 1, 2009]



Photographer Unknown
View of Yonkers from Top of City Hall, 1913
 Black-and-white photograph
 3 ½ x 5 ½ inches
 Collection of the Hudson River
 Museum, 75.0.40



Susan Wides
Yonkers [February 4, 2011]

rescent rabbit, stripped of its
 “natural” dull camouflage.

Even native species can
 seem unnatural. If deer are
 “natural” to the Hudson Val-

ley landscape, the plethora crowding about in *Game Farm*, *Heart's Content Valley [August 24, 2003]* show a fierce overpopulation that suggests nature is out of balance. The deer, though charming, could quickly become a furrier version of Hitchcock's attacking birds

Questions of scale are essential when considering Wides' photographs. The details of her work only fully emerge in larger formats. Like a grandly scaled painting when seen in a small reproduction, her detailed filigree is lost in small size. Reproducing Wides' work in this catalogue is its own form of miniaturization, a reduction in scale that is interwoven with the shifting sense of proportion found within her images. Wides' work method and style has gradually evolved. Over the last 14 years, she built up her vocabulary of technique. Early on Wides pioneered the swing-tilt method. Her 4 x 5 camera gives the effect of distortion to passages in her work and we see a subtle shift in scale, an implication that the landscape has become a stage set. In its artificiality, her view represents a pointed reflection on much “constructed nature,” from the controlled lawns of Central Park to the meticulously cultivated

procession of views at Frederic Church's Olana. The effect of Wides' distortion, which in less capable hands could skirt cliché, results in her images coming alive, the simultaneous detail and abstraction within each picture carefully balanced to evoke an immersive moment of contemplation. How can one successfully frame the panoramic? Wides' shifting sense of scale within her Hudson Valley images read as a metaphor for the expansiveness of the American landscape, once vast, and yet strangely shrunk in the modern era.

Wides' urban works, such as *Flatiron [April 14, 1999]*, *Times Square [February 22, 2010]*, and *Empire, Looking Down Fifth [December 6, 2005]*, frequently favor a tilted angle, an apt visual metaphor for city life's ability to throw its inhabitants off balance. By contrast, in her recent exploration of the suburban landscape, her images are grounded and formally centered, reflecting her view of the more sedate pace in the suburbs. Calmer and classically framed, a notable exception is *Yonkers [February 4, 2011]*, a busy suburban city filled with heterogeneous buildings and people, presented in the same dizzying off-kilter fashion as in Wides' busy New York City pictures.

In forcing the viewer to look closer, Wides' technique highlights the truth that there is no truly “pure” landscape in the Hudson Valley. For her, the human hand is everywhere — from the obvious towering buildings of Midtown Manhattan to the shopping malls of suburbia, from the working farms of Columbia County to its car dumps, no place is untouched. Marcel Proust reflected on this dichotomy of machine and nature:

*Nature, by virtue of all the feelings that it aroused in me, seemed to me the thing most diametrically opposed to the mechanical inventions of mankind. The less it bore their imprint, the more room it offered for the expansion of my heart.*³

But Wides' photographs say that although nature is “touched,” there is still great beauty — but it is ravished beauty, such as the Palisades thrown in sharp relief against the buildings that face them across the Hudson. We see rare vistas encased in a surround of degradation and so they take on special significance, in itself the influence of the hand of man. Wides shows the creeping spread of buildings along the Hudson River shoreline in

3 Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*: Vol. I, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), 417.



George Herbert McCord (1848-1909)
Hudson River View, c. 1870
 Oil on board, 7 ¼ x 12 inches
 Collection of the Hudson River Museum,
 Gift of Mrs. Grace Varian Stengel, 43.62

As suburban development has encroached over the past 150 years, farming has been pushed further north in the Hudson Valley. This nineteenth-century view of Yonkers shows that much of the area was still rural, even after the arrival of the railroads

Hudson River Developments [January 28, 2011], and she creates a pervading sense of unease as the buildings in the suburbs grow higher and higher. Wides' photographs a working farm deep in the Hudson Valley in *Columbia County* [December 18, 1997]. Compare that to George Herbert McCord's *View of Yonkers*, and you will be reminded of how the agrarian landscape and economy have largely disappeared from Westchester County, pushed further northward by development.

At times, Wides shows that wildly different degrees of development can co-exist comfortably, as in *Gatehouse, Cropsey Lane* [November 7, 2009]. Traces of the bucolic charm of views of the Westchester village Hastings-on-Hudson remain somehow intact in Wides' image, however compromised by a looming bridge and row of parking meters. The house still seems to fit a 1910 description of the picturesque locale in Hastings:

*The hamlet . . . lies snugly nestled in the depths of a beautiful glen, or spreads quietly away upon its verdant acclivities and lofty terraces, looking into the shades of old woods, and listening to the murmurs of running brooks below.*⁴

Proust, in 1919, debating photography's worth as an art form, said, "A photograph acquires something of the dignity which it ordinarily lacks when it ceases to be a reproduction of reality and shows us things that no longer exist."⁵ Of course no photograph is ever a true representation of reality, but is, instead, the result of the nuances of individual perception. There is truth, though, to Proust's belief that in the effort to document and illustrate, art evolves. Sharpened perception results from seeing change happen over time. Compare Wides' *Yonkers Contaminated Riverfront* [November 29, 2010] to a 40-year-old image of the same site taken to trumpet the City of Yonkers' business and industrial base. One of the buildings has disappeared in her image, and the intervening decades have highlighted the all too real dangers of contamination from industry up and down the Hudson River. Time has added a patina of significance to Wides' image. The destruction of one building has left the "Blue Cube" laboratory building of the Phelps Dodge site as a beautiful ode to minimalism. Outside of its utilitarian purpose, it has modernist beauty. It is also a literal reflection in the river and a metaphorical reflection: just as the unused power plant of the New York Central Railroad symbolizes the power of an earlier Industrial Age, the Phelps Dodge site represents the more recent decline of the industrial base along the river. The ongoing cleanup of this site signals another step in the important Hudson River reclamation over the last three decades.

There is a push-pull in photographs like *Yonkers Contaminated Riverfront*. The river has increasingly de-industrialized, shedding well-paying blue-collar jobs along the way, a national trend but bringing with less work more opportunity to clean up the river, so residents can enjoy nature. In this sense Wides' work points that out despite popular belief the human hand on the landscape does not always move in the direction of more development. De-industrialization, although bringing its own cost, does present us with opportunity to reinvigorate the landscape. In *Yonkers Contaminated Riverfront*, Wides draws upon aspects of nineteenth-

⁴ Ernest Ingersoll, *Illustrated Guide to the Hudson River and Catskill Mountains* (1910; repr., New York: J.C. & A.L. Fawcett, 1989), 44.
⁵ Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*: Vol. I, 821.

century Luminist painting. Although its tones are not “sunny” and the photograph was taken in late autumn, it glows, and the thickness and stillness of the air are palpable, similar to the distinctive Indian Summer “haze” that embodies much Luminist painting. Wides adopts a low position along the river’s edge, and brings you close to the opaque surface of the water. Her low perspective and composition are similar to many of the salt marsh paintings by the Luminist Martin Johnston Heade.



Roland Van Zandt
Piazza of The Catskill Mountain House, 1961,
 from *The Catskill Mountain House*:
Cradle of the Hudson River School
 © Black Dome Press Corp.

Oakland Cemetery, Yonkers [November 29, 2010] can be read as an ode to de-industrialization. Where *Yonkers Contaminated Riverfront* seems perfectly balanced between the pristine Palisades and unused industrial buildings, in *Oakland Cemetery, Yonkers* the forces of nature dominate the distanced smokestack of the now-defunct Alexander Smith Carpet factory. This graveyard is a commentary on the vanishing industrial base of many cities. The wilderness encroaches on the city as the rocky outcropping of vigorous trees with grasping roots represent a natural vigor lacking in the manmade landscape. It is important to point out that although Wides has a finely tuned appreciation of the poetical that can be seen in decaying structures, she assiduously

D.K. Peterson
Walt Disney World Main Street, 2010
 Courtesy Wikimedia and
 D.K. Peterson



avoids the much-banded “ruin porn” favored by a number of contemporary photographers, who shoot in rust-belt cities, such as Detroit, and who favor places of theatrical and queasy ruination that are reminiscent of Thomas Cole’s *Course of Empire (Destruction)*.

The decay of architecture is a powerful inducement to nostalgia. It is impossible to look at Roland Van Zandt’s 50-year-old images of the ruined and legendary Catskill Mountain House, frequent residence of tourists and Hudson River School artists during their painting trips, and not think of the grand landscapes by Cole and Jasper Cropsey that show the luxurious hotel in its heyday. Part of our nostalgia is for the classical architecture of the building. A fallen column is almost by definition “poetic” and it conjures the ruins of Greece and Rome as it leads us to compare society’s historically uneasy relationship with the idea of an “American Empire.” Wides demonstrates in *Atlas Cement Near Olana*, [December 18, 1997] that the same poignancy can be found in a shuttered industrial building, far from ruined but devoid of purpose. The Atlas Cement plant is a thing of beauty, whose shuttered turquoise windows stare blankly at the viewer like Juno’s watchful monster Argus. Although the building is dormant, its closed windows retain watchful power.

Scholar Svetlana Boym described two intertwining trends of nostalgia: the reflective and the restorative.⁶ Imbued with romanticism, “reflective” nostalgia tends to dwell on ruins, the poetry of decay and the poetic patina of days gone, evoked by Wides in works like *Atlas Cement Near Olana*. “Restorative” nostalgia is often not even thought as nostalgia but results in a strong emotional desire to create an “authentic” past where none may have existed, or a past that is irrevocably beyond our grasp. The same emotional impetus that lies behind the creation of the Americana-infused Main Street at Walt Disney World imbues the faux-historical “Brooklyn” townhouses in the Tarrytown locale of Wides’ *GM Site*, *Sleepy Hollow*

[November 6, 2009]. They are part of what has been termed “the architecture of reassurance.”

Wides alludes to the evolution of the Hudson Valley and the New York metropolitan region moving towards a service and a consumer economy. Even as older buildings like the Atlas Cement Plant inspire nostalgia for a fading industrial past, *Superstore, Kingston* [November 1, 2010] documents the new generation of structures that is rapidly replacing them. Superstores continue to multiply, even in an era of mall glut, an ongoing development that haunts Wides' photograph *Bear Mountain, Central Valley* [January 28, 2011].

Like much classic landscape painting of the nineteenth-century, there is a strong element of seasonality to Wides' work, as you trace the photos of the seasons through spring—*Flatiron* [April 14, 1999]; summer—*Bryant Park* [July 18, 2007]; autumn—*Gatehouse, Cropsey Lane* [November 7, 2009]; and winter—*Hudson River Developments* [January 28, 2011]. You recognize not just specific locations but also harbingers of the seasons: flower blossoms, green lawns, colored leaves, ice. These components give landscapes a narrative, since the seasons add the element of passing time to a single captured moment. This narrative infuses Wides' work even as her camera stops the clock. Her scene continues its cyclical progression without beginning and without end.

While Wides' uses seasonality to suggest the passing of time, she overtly engages the question of distance and the landscape horizon. As modern forms of transportation improved during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the world seemed to shrink. The railroad was developed, and the Hudson Valley was no exception to this contraction of distance. The rural countryside of Westchester County was now easy commuting distance from Manhattan and the once distant Catskills the ideal tourist weekend. Conversely, country dwellers could become more sophisticatedly cosmopolitan, as they enjoyed more frequent trips to the city. Transportation developments radically altered the experience of the entire Hudson Valley region.

Philosopher Martin Heidegger wrote persuasively that “The frank abolition of all distances brings no nearness . . . Everything gets lumped together into uniform distancelessness.”⁷ Heidegger's remark calls attention to the fact that technology's much celebrated victory over

William Guy Wall, artist (1792-1864)
John Hill, engraver (1770-1850)
New York from Governor's Island (#20
of the Hudson River Portfolio)
Engraving and watercolor on paper,
14 1/16 x 21 1/16 inches
Collection of the Hudson River
Museum
Gift of Miss Susan P. Bliss, 66.27.18

Susan Wides
Liberty Island [December 2, 2008]

The islands of New York Harbor, are
key for artists and photographers
seeking perspective on the city's
developing skyline.



distance fails to deliver everything it promises. While technology might be able to ease one's drawing “near” to things once considered “far,” much more than technology is required to bridge the existential gap between the knower and the known.⁸ This sense of estrangement takes its visual form in Wides' *Palmer Road* [October 2, 2009] in which the artist underlines the idea that the physical distance between city and suburb is not as great as is the psychological distance. City and suburb are literally and symbolically fenced off from one another. The house in the suburbs and the city beyond take turns being near and far to the suburban dweller. At one moment the less expensive home, at a distance from the city, is needed for its owner to work in the city. In the next moment, the city provides the work that supports the home and its owner. In *Liberty Island* [December 2, 2005] the skyline of Manhattan seems as far as Oz's Emerald City, stirring a sense of unfulfilled longing. Although photographed near Manhattan from the close proximity of Liberty Island, the psychological distance that Wides depicts is far.



The concepts of “near” and “far” are elastic. Even when you are confronted by the physical reality of visiting any famous “landscape” locale like Kaaterskill Clove, you are not fully within it but rather outside it, and framing its vista as Wides does through her view finder. By the necessary physical act of gaining the perspective to see a vista, you create the distance to remove yourself from the scene. You become a voyeur of the physical landscape in the same way as you look at a photograph. Wides understands that although her 4 x 5 camera captures different areas of emphasis on the picture plane, there is still the almost existential difficulty of capturing the three-dimensional on a two-dimensional surface. One has the physical sense in Wides’ work that the world is, in fact, round. Wides hints at the unreality of translating the three-dimensional world into a two-dimensional surface by darkening the edges in photographs like *Near Catskill Creek* [November 1, 2004] and *Sunset Rock* [October 8, 2007], where she creates the sense of the landscape viewed through a powerful telescope, pushing us towards the edges of perception.

The people in Wides’ photographs are dwarfed by their surroundings. In Manhattan settings, crowded hubs of human congregation, people serve not as individual psycho-

Guy Gillette (b. 1922)
Westchester Commuters to New York, 1952
 Black-and-white photograph, 11 x 14 inches
 Collection of the Hudson River Museum,
 2007.08.07

logical portraits but rather as explorations of group dynamic and interaction. In works like *Bryant Park* [March 30, 2009], Wides is interested in how people move through its landscape. People tend to disappear from her images as she moves north of Manhattan and focuses attention on the meaning and memory that can be gleaned from the topography. In much of Wides’ recent suburban work, she removes all humans from the equation. The implied presence of people on the landscape infuses each photograph but they remain largely unseen in her lens. When people do appear, Wides’ view of suburbia is a solitary one. Her *Dunwoodie, Yonkers* [October 21, 2009] shows four men companionably playing golf but they are widely spaced on the green, each alone in a communal but ultimately competitive activity. The lone commuter in her *Anaconda Site, Hastings* [November 13, 2010] shares the same sense of isolation as the crowded “*Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*-era” commuters we see in Guy Gillette’s *Westchester Commuters to New York*. In *GM Site, Sleepy Hollow* [November 6, 2009], Wides’ sole machine operator is poised to drive out of the picture frame, a trail of rubble in his wake. In the openness of the rural Catskills quiet solitude can take on a sense of adventure. Wides’ hiker in *Sunset Rock* [October 8, 2007] vigorously strides towards the open landscape that excludes opportunity and limitless boundaries. Of course pastimes bring their own pressures. Comparing the suburban landscape of *Dunwoodie, Yonkers* to the rural idyll of *Sunset Rock*, Wides demonstrates how quickly a walk in the country is thrown aside for golf on a manicured green, and how the wild is pushed away to make way for homes, travel, worship, work, and technology, layered one atop another in “natural” settings.

Susan Wides’ ability to find truth within the ordinary landscape is striking and her thoughtfulness on her subject matter rings true. Even her images that are filled with busy, rushing people convey stillness and reflection for a moment frozen in time. It is that stillness that allows the viewer to see and experience anew. Stillness is never the easiest trump suit with which an artist can lead, faced with the clamor of today’s art world and its constant desire for something attention grabbing. Our frenzied, digital, “plugged-in” environment moves people from one overscheduled activity to another, so they do not take time to really see. Look, though, at Wides’ work. Take time. Stop and breathe. Look again. The reward is great.



WESTCHESTER

PREVIOUS PAGE

Anaconda Site, Hastings [November 13, 2010]
Chromogenic print, 24 x 36 inches

This photograph, which includes a building of the former Anaconda Wire and Cable Company, is a particularly fine juxtaposition of the built landscape layered onto the natural wonder of the Palisades. Adding to the photograph's industrial emphasis are the power lines and rail lines in the foreground, balanced by the water tower and the bulk of the cliffs in the center of the photograph. A commuter completes the relationship between man, constructed landscape, and the natural world.

BB

Dunwoodie, Yonkers [October 21, 2009]
Chromogenic print, 20 x 24 inches

Like many scenic landscapes by Hudson River School artists such as Thomas Cole, this photograph contains figures in the foreground, and focuses on the human nature of people dwarfed by their surroundings. The suburban houses, the distant expressway, and a communications tower juxtapose the manicured putting green, as it emphasizes the human modification of the landscape.

BB



Indian Point on Ramapo Fault [August 12, 2009]
Chromogenic print, 30 x 32 ½ inches

The red nose of this Peekskill inn's umbrella parallels the chimneys of the power plants. The focal plane emphasizes the chain-link fence's barbed ridge, calling attention to attempts at containment and protection. The chlorinated swimming pool is barely separated from the gray waters of the Hudson, notoriously polluted by PCBs. Underneath it all, the Ramapo Fault Line threatens to break any division.

SW

The Indian Point Nuclear Power Plant has long been a source of controversy for both Westchester County and the highly populated surrounding countryside of New York and New Jersey. Scholar Dolores Hayden has catalogued a number of colorful terms used by urban planners for these unwanted intrusions into the suburban idyll: LULUs (Locally Unwanted Land Use); NIMBY (Not In MY Backyard); BANANA (Build Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Near); and NOPE (Not On Planet Earth).

BB





GM Site, Sleepy Hollow [November 8, 2009]

Chromogenic print, 26 ½ x 40 inches

The metal stumps of the former GM factory and the deer that are passing before them are both by-products of development and industrialization. Lacking predators, deer have become a scourge in suburbia. At home in their new ecosystem, they disallow any attempt at defining a boundary between natural and artificial.

SW

The deer, hemmed as they are by an industrial-looking fence, emphasize nature's reclamation of the old General Motors site after the building was torn down. The unused lighthouse, which was literally a beacon to both river navigators and land travelers, was rendered obsolete by the building of the Tappan Zee Bridge, and remains a curiosity.

BB



GM Site, Sleepy Hollow [November 6, 2009]

Chromogenic print, 24 x 36 inches

A developer attempted to increase the appeal of these new houses by using historical vernaculars, combining "Brooklyn-style" row houses with old-timey farm implements and rustic fences. This fake past was erected to override the 100 years during which a GM car factory stood on the site. I was reminded of Gertrude Stein's observation in Everybody's Autobiography: "there is no there there." Referring to the development of Oakland, California, Stein lamented the disappearance of a remembered place. A fabricated past cannot create a place, only an awareness that the present results from the past can make a "there" there.

SW

Palmer Road [October 2, 2009]

Chromogenic print, 24 x 36 inches

Beyond the private universe of the suburban garden, the valley and the city skyline appear illusory. Mediated by "image culture," the city threatens to become a figment, if not experienced directly. To truly connect with a place we must walk outside, breathe its air, soak up its light, its spaces, and its history.

SW

The city in the distance is unattainable, leaving you in the position of Anton Chekov's sisters in *Three Sisters*, who yearn for Moscow. The fence cuts off what landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted called "the borrowed view," since many homeowners choose to delineate private property lines, instead of enjoying an unimpeded, magnificent Arcadian vista.

BB



Gatehouse, Cropsey Lane [November 7, 2009]

Chromogenic print, 30 x 40 inches

Despite their claustrophobic proximity, an overpass and the historic structure that has become the gatehouse of the Newington-Cropsey Foundation in Hastings coexist reassuringly. As if in conversation, the stanchion's steel lattice continues the delicate rhythm of the old house's gable decoration.

SW

In its gingerbread Victorian decoration, the gatehouse has a "Hansel-and-Gretel" feel, nestled as it is in vegetation. But its picturesque elements are thrown into relief by a bridge to the center of Hastings Village and a row of parking meters in the foreground, both contrasts to its woodsy charm. The photograph contains the picturesque elements that Hudson River School painter Jasper Cropsey admired and contrasted with the urbanization and industrialization planted somewhat tenuously within Westchester County's natural beauty. The strong horizontals of the roof lines and the bridge combine with deep shadows and autumnal leaves to emphasize a fading past.

BB



Steinhardt Gardens [November 1, 2009]

Chromogenic print, 30 x 20 inches

Plastic flamingos have a reputation for being hilariously downmarket. In such bad taste they are camp, appearing not only in tropical areas like southern Florida but around the country. The flamingos in this photograph, however, are the real thing and form a rainbow spectrum with the autumn leaves. The birds are astonishing through their juxtaposition with the Hudson Valley flora, which provides them surreal camouflage. Even though they look beautiful and “natural” in the Garden’s setting, there is deep discordance about tropical creatures existing in a northern environment. The foliage which so beautifully complements their plumage in fact eerily signals the bird’s demise, if humans do not keep them warm. Luxuriant examples of the wealthy suburbanite’s ability to manipulate nature for aesthetic pleasure, their natural almost unearthly beauty is ultimately manmade.

BB





Bear Mountain, Central Valley [January 28, 2011]

Chromogenic print, 24 x 36 inches

From the stark black and white of Bear Mountain's slopes in the foreground, a network of branches mimics the chaotic infrastructure beyond. One sees the shopping nexus "Woodbury Commons," a temple to consumerism passing as a quaint community, complete with small-town steeple. The massive grey rectangles of megastores interrupt the seemingly endless sprawl of identical houses and private companies.

SW



Hudson River Developments [January 28, 2011]

Chromogenic print, 26 ½ x 40 inches

As a cautionary tale, the housing projects along the banks of the Hudson forebode a continued concrete encrustation up the river. But the ice floes provide an allegory for the possible dissolution of the multiplying buildings.

SW

Yonkers Contaminated Riverfront [November 29, 2010]

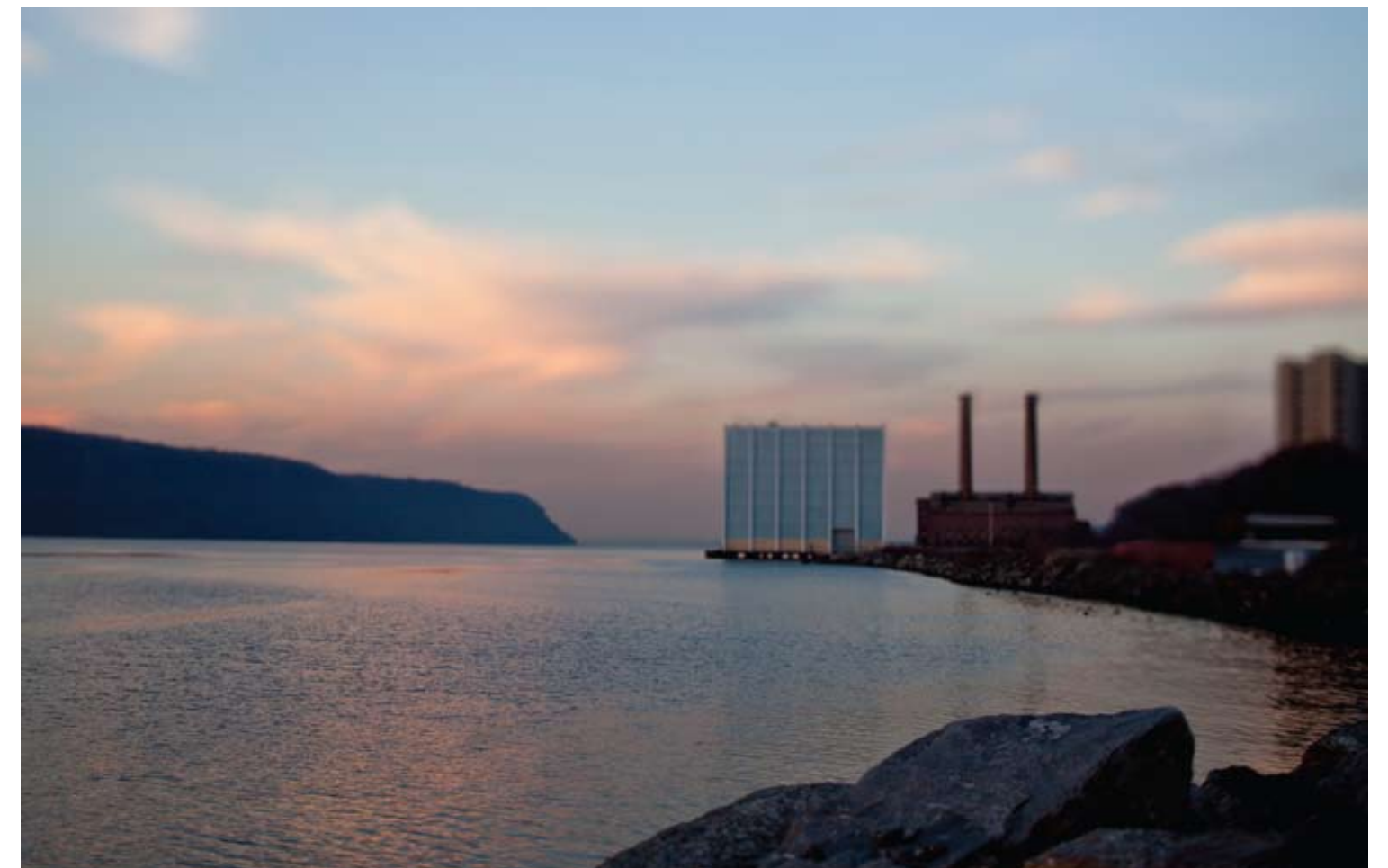
Chromogenic print, 30 x 47 inches

Though seductive, this photograph is full of negation. The rocks in the foreground were imported to shore up the eroding banks of the PCB-ridden river, and the square mass of the Phelps Dodge building usurps the center of the image. The factory squats at the horizon, where clouds echoing Frederick Church's paintings contrast with the polluted water's sharp clarity.

SW

Still and dreamy, the untouched Palisades on the photograph's left face the Phelps Dodge chemical laboratory and deserted New York Central power station. The panels of the Phelps Dodge building are themselves things of beauty, showing shifting light and constantly changing shades of blue against the skies and the waters of the Hudson. Can there be two gods?

BB





Oakland Cemetery, Yonkers [November 29, 2010]

Chromogenic print, 28 ¾ x 40 inches

On the outskirts of Downtown Yonkers, a stand of young trees perch atop ancient bedrock, echoing the smokestack of a former carpet factory and the cemetery's gravestones. A marred trunk and a random metal pole show the intricate relation between nature and human society.

SW

The root system of the tree on the right represents a stylistic device similar to the tree trunks found in nineteenth-century painter Asher Durand's canvases. Here, the verticals in nature, the bare trees, are echoed by the manmade vertical of the beautifully detailed smokestack of the former Alexander Smith Carpet Factory. Worker housing rises above the graveyard, which acts as a *memento mori* for past workers and as a reminder of the traces of architectural elegance that can be found in old industrial sites.

BB



Yonkers [February 4, 2011]
Chromogenic print, 24 x 36 inches

This jumble of buildings and streets preserves a common vitality. In contrast to the expanding swath of identical private plots and McMansions that isolate each family from its neighbor, the densely packed community of Yonkers offers a residential model that doesn't require the ever increasing destruction of natural resources. In the face of globalization, every site's particular sense of place must be unearthed.

SW

Wides presents the old part of Yonkers and its changes, including nineteenth-century buildings, modern structures, refurbished warehouses, factories, and two smokestacks from the historic power system for the New York Central Railroad. All of these changes to the environment are backdropped dramatically by the Palisades, which remain magnificently untouched. The photograph suggests that they may eventually be subsumed by greater urbanization, just as they are being crowded out of this photograph.

BB



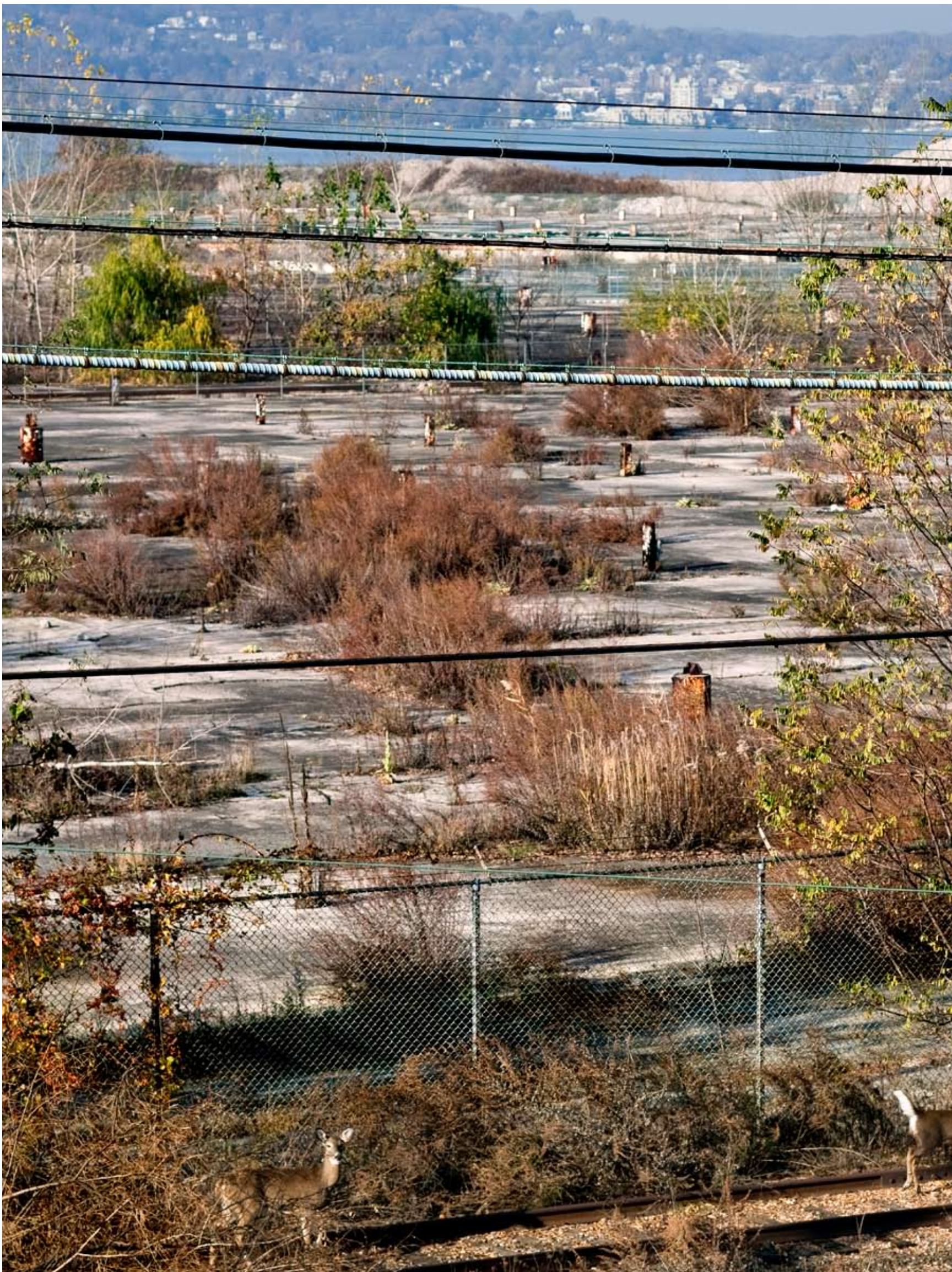
White Plains Sprawl [January 10, 2011]
Chromogenic print, 30 x 45 inches

Two bland, 50-story towers in White Plains distort both the surrounding sprawl and the landscape it obscures. Rather than generic "object buildings," we need to develop an architecture that can integrate the social and the natural.

SW

One of the Ritz-Carlton Towers, photographed from the other, reflects the setting sun and the suburban city, so that the Hudson Valley landscape is embedded in glass and steel, a kind of mirage. The building is overwhelming but monumental mass is leavened by the lightness of its glass. The overall feeling is almost akin to a spaceship looming over the landscape. The primarily low-rise White Plains, capital of Westchester County is becoming an "Edge City," with large buildings of its own.

BB



CLIO WITH CAMERA

ROGER PANETTA

During the cultural revolution of the 1960s, Clio, the Greek muse of history, came under attack. Historians were challenged to rethink their discipline and the ways they organized knowledge, the character of the story they told, and their notions about who made history. Cliometricians, historians who use mathematical models, along with a phalanx of social historians studying women, African Americans, immigrants, and workers, challenged the methods and the intellectual consensus of the 1950s. Our orthodox faith in the inevitability of progress, an American secular creed deeply embedded in our national story, was called into question. The very idea of a single unified story was now under attack.

Cut adrift from the anchor of the narrative, scholars were compelled to imagine new ways of thinking and to explore new visions, requiring them to live with uncertainty and to explore time and space with a new vocabulary. Photographer Susan Wides, an artist with a deep understanding of our historical roots, addresses the central intellectual challenge of the post-modern era. She disputes the old narratives and provides new ways for us to see. We are invited to look closely, to meditate and reflect, to see beyond the first sensate response to an image, and resist our cultural reflexes that for so long assured us of the accuracy of our interpretation. Wides provokes us in the best sense of the word, pressing us to look anew at the places and images we thought we had mastered

Susan Wides: The Hudson Valley, from Mannahatta to Kaaterskill encompasses three crucially linked places—New York City, Westchester, and the Catskills. Mention of these placenames evokes a collection of images and a set of cues, which seduce and convince us that we know them well. Here we are reassured by the old narrative. Wides' photographs, though, require us to look more carefully and recast our vision of city, suburb, and countryside. She works out of a country house in the Catskills and a studio in Manhattan, creating a remarkable synergy between place, work, and history. This physical integration of life's rhythms is reflected in her work, which moves between past and present, between reality and memory. Indeed it this "in-between" space—the interstitial—Wides occupies and uses to guide the viewers and help them see in new ways.

In weekend journeys to her Catskill home, Wides reprises many early nineteenth- cen-



Thomas Cole (1801-1848)
Falls of Kaaterskill, 1826
 Oil on canvas, 43 x 36 inches
 Warner Collection, Tuscaloosa, Alabama



Susan Wides
Kaaterskill Falls [October 12, 2005]

tury New Yorkers who in the 1820s took a regularly scheduled steamboat up the Hudson, connecting at the Catskill Landing with rail and horse as they made their way to the famous hotel known as the Mountain House. They were enticed not only by the emerging tourist industry but also by the paintings of Thomas Cole and his colleagues of the Hudson River School. City patrons and storefront museums aided and abetted by cheaper and faster steamboat service helped link valley and city. Kaaterskill Falls and the Kaaterskill Clove, and the surrounding landscape captured the imagination of artists and writers. The new middle class, flush with money and leisure time, were curious too. Together, the artists who birthed American landscape painting and the travelers who consumed it forged a tight bond between nature and national identity, one that evolved into an essential tenet in the emerging American narrative—a statement of our uniqueness and specialness.¹

Wides uses her Catskill location and her 4 x 5-view camera to revisit this landscape, the northernmost point shown in this exhibition. She peels away the veil of sanctification that prevents us from fully seeing not only these places but also the paintings of the Hudson River School, whose works have defined the Valley's geography. Images we easily recognize, we no longer

see, and Wides recharges in fresh ways. She compels you to look more closely and to unravel the history behind her photographs and the ensuing tension between past and present.

Wides' *Kaaterskill Falls [October 12, 2005]* is a view so familiar it calls up from our own visual archive Thomas Cole's 1826 painting *Falls of Kaaterskill*. On closer examination, though, we notice Wides has captured the Falls in a moment of modesty and simplicity, without the grandeur of Cole's depiction. Indeed this reminds me of my first sighting of the Falls with a group of students primed to expect the spectacular and then confronted by something much less. I searched for language to soothe their sense of collective disappointment.

Wides' work is like a rhizome—the horizontal stem of a plant that is usually found underground—often sending out roots and shoots from its nodes. *Kaaterskill Falls [October 12, 2005]*, like much of her work, extends roots and shoots through time into the history of our relationship to the American landscape. Wides' *Kaaterskill Falls* compels me to ask about what Cole the painter saw at this place, and how the cultural context of his day shaped his painting. Over time it appears that the layering of iconic significance had burdened Cole's original work with meanings that stretched beyond his first encounter.

Without question the Valley today is under siege. In *Kaaterskill Clove [February 15, 2005]*, *Near Catskill Creek [October 15, 2004]*, and *Near Catskill Creek [November 1, 2004]*, Wides documents these incursions. The automobile that brought so many, some say too many, twentieth-century New Yorkers to the Catskills in search of respite did not have the good grace to die and be buried someplace else. Her photographs of fields of exhausted cars memorialize thousand of journeys many took on the Valley's own autobahn—the New York State Thruway, which promised swift, safe, and inexpensive access to this recreational area so imbued with history.

Thomas Cole's prophetic concerns about the onslaught of city folk, of course partially instigated by his Catskill paintings, have been realized on an unimagined scale. Wides' automobile graveyards are organically integrated into a landscape entangled with trees, covered by local vegetation, and formed into hills that trace the outline of the distant horizon. We can not separate the natural from the manmade. They coexist in the world and



refuse to be brushed out of our line of sight. Wides' Hudson Valley is a continuum of both domains—nature and culture. No matter how much we might wish, it is a place that cannot be romanticized or sanitized or even bifurcated into two warring camps.

The detritus of modern civilization hangs over our contemporary landscape.

Recycling, transporting, and even landfill have not removed it from our vision, which is especially true for the more durable structures of the Industrial Age that Wides explores in *Atlas Cement Plant Near Olana* [December 18, 1997]; *Yonkers Contaminated Riverfront* [November 29, 2010]; *Anaconda Site, Hastings* [November 13, 2010]; *West Side Pier 'D'* [November 19, 1997],

George Daniell (1911-2002)
The Ben Franklin Sinking on the Hudson in Yonkers, 1938
 Black-and-white photograph, 10 1/8 x 13 3/8 inches
 Collection of the Hudson River Museum, 2008.08.2

The gritty decline of Hudson River working waterfronts captured in Wides' photographs have historical parallels. Here Yonkers photographer George Daniell atmospherically captures life on the docks of Yonkers, the industrial center of the Hudson Valley.

and the *GM Site, Sleepy Hollow* [November 8, 2009]. While you may be tempted to classify these images as studies in ruins and link them to the nineteenth-century romantic sensibility and its special appreciation for remnants of the past, the dimension of time is far more complex.

Wides' images are not only markers of a passing era but also signposts of the transition to the post-Industrial Age. The decay they show calls for a gritty analysis and one which respects her determination to uncover layers of history. *Anaconda Site, Hastings* captures key pieces of life in a Westchester community. The station provides a hint of the railroad origins of this commuter suburb, while the remnant factory structure outlines an industrial waterfront. The station and the factory once shaped this village's life. The loss of industry radically transformed the local economy, the demography, and ultimately the very the culture of Hastings-on-Hudson, a working-class community disappeared, leaving in its place a more homogenous suburban village that will justifiably celebrate the opening of the Palisades vista hinted at in *Anaconda Site, Hastings*. How will blue-collar and ethnic history be preserved? Should it? Wides' photograph brings us to a tipping point just as the industrial memory is about to slip away.²

The Hudson River was a favorite transportation corridor for industrial sites, especially among power companies. In *Yonkers Contaminated Riverfront* [November 29, 2010] Wides' captures the scale of these structures and their intrusion into the river. The Yonkers power plant has become a favorite subject for photographers but Wides provides a fresh look at these cathedrals of industry, challenging us to rethink the simple dichotomies that govern so much of the river's discourse. The long view north, upriver, juxtaposes the industrial landscape of the eastern shore with the protected Palisades, a monument of nature to the west. The Palisades, saved from the quarrymen in 1909, is a centerpiece in the environmental history of the Hudson, seeming to stare down the Phelps and Anaconda industrial sites. In each picture, Wides brings antithetical views together into one image that represents two dimensions of a highly differentiated river valley history.

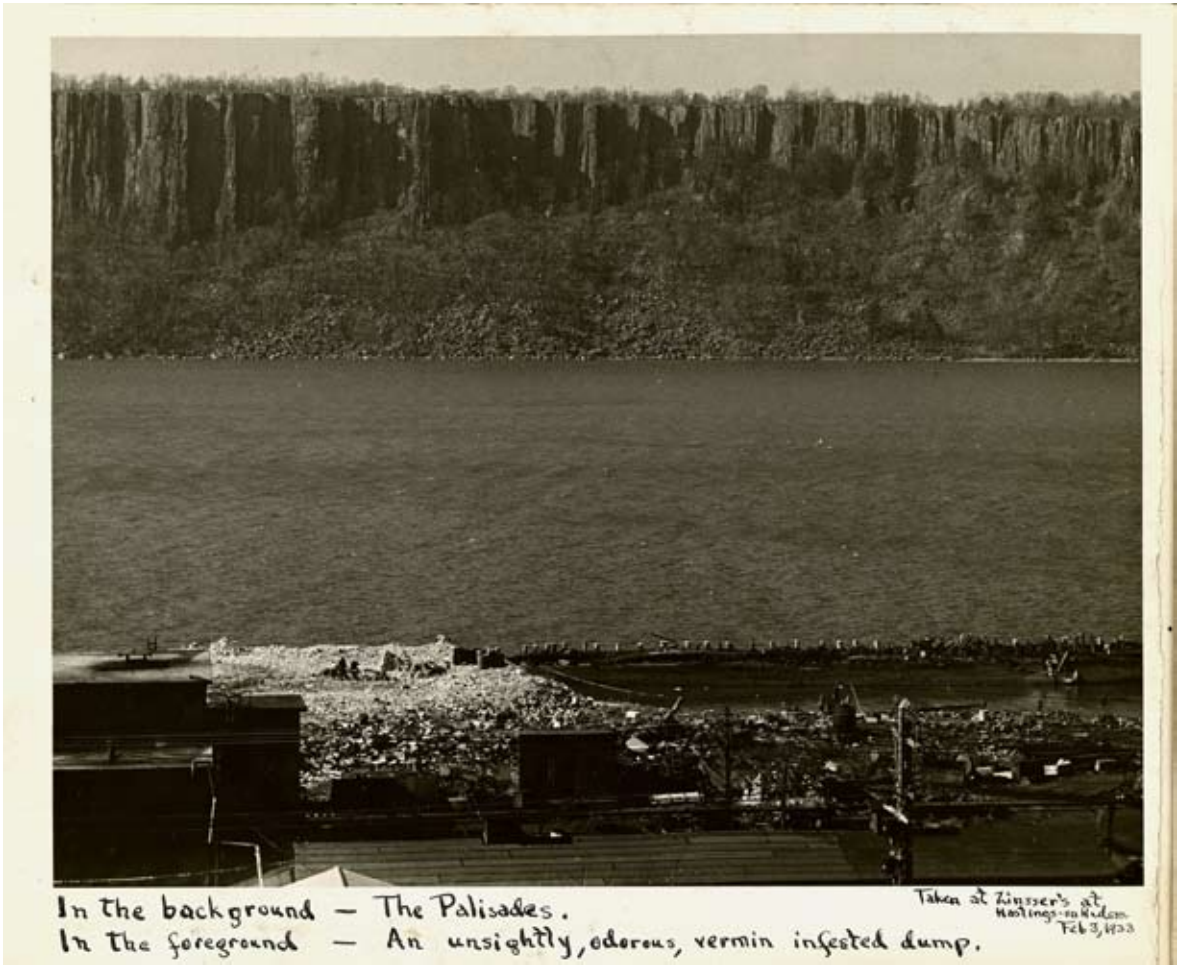
The General Motors site in Sleepy Hollow is a study of the stages of deindustrialization. In *GM Site, Sleepy Hollow* [November 8, 2009], Wides' northwest view documents the way the river edge has been filled in. The capped pilings, resembling tree trunks, carry us from the railroad tracks, the original natural shoreline, to the lighthouse now connected to land by a

footbridge. There is a great sweep of history here. The distant lighthouse reminds us that not only the landfill but also commercial and recreational ships were protected by this warning beacon as they moved up and down the river. The Tarrytown beacon connects us to all the neglected and decaying lighthouses that guided travelers from New York Harbor to the state capital in Albany. The landfill and the construction of the GM plant re-channeled the Pocantico River and filled the small bay that opened out to the Hudson.

In a debate that is the preamble to these photographs, the Village of North Tarrytown, in 1996, renamed itself Sleepy Hollow. While the expressed intention of this action was to harvest tourist dollars by connecting the village to nineteenth-century author Washington Irving and his famed story “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” equally important was the desire to erase the town’s industrial and working-class history. The open space at the center of Wides’ *GM Site, Sleepy Hollow* documents this transition and also forces us to reflect on what came before. Even if one looks closely through the underbrush, it is difficult to guess what time it is, what era, what age. Anonymity is disorienting and disturbing.

GM Site, Sleepy Hollow [November 6, 2009] looks south with the Tappan Zee Bridge as the backdrop for the first wave of new post-industrial structures—a collection of pseudo-historical townhouses. The open field, which serves as an apron fanning out from the new structures with their white fences, bails of hay, farm machinery, and faux-antique lampposts creates an ersatz history—a packaging which obliterates the recent past just as the name change erased a century of industrial life. The pathway and the street clearly serve as an historical dividing line, separating the industrial rubble from a new landscape. The young tree to the left and the sign for Orchard Street seem freshly revealed, as if they were recovered from the long dark night of the demolished GM plant.

This complex photograph encapsulates layers of history and compactly reiterates the grand themes of Cole’s *The Course of Empire*, (1833-36) paintings. While Cole celebrated the Valley landscape as a signifier of American culture, he became increasingly apprehensive about the rate of its physical transformation. Cole provided a visual text as a metaphor for the changing valley, through a cycle of five allegorical paintings, progressing from *The Savage State* to *The Arcadian*, then reaching its peak in *The Consummation*, until it slides into decline with



In the background — The Palisades.
In the foreground — An unsightly, odorous, vermin infested dump.
Taken at Wides' at Hastings-on-Hudson Feb 3, 1933

Photographer Unkown
Hudson River at Hastings, 1933
Black-and-white photograph, 8 x 10 inches
Collection of the Hudson River Museum, 75.0.10B

Destruction and Desolation. Cole propgates a widely held nineteenth-century view that empires rose and fell according to some irresistible force of nature. The Hudson River School painters also subscribed to the notion of the transmission of earlier imperial

legacies to succeeding civilizations. For many New Yorkers, the Hudson River Valley represented the seat of a new empire. One of the key elements in this landscape was the presence of ruins, which were discernible markers of the evolutionary process. But this notion created an intellectual problem given the scarcity of such ruins and their short American half-life. The French visitor Alexis de Tocqueville noted during his 1831 visit to the United States that these

Although many of Wides’ photographs document a regrettable disregard for the environment, some areas have shown significant improvement and reflect, over time, shifts in perception. Now a pleasant commuting location, downtown Hastings-on-Hudson is no longer filled with open trash dumps, as shown, above, in 1933.

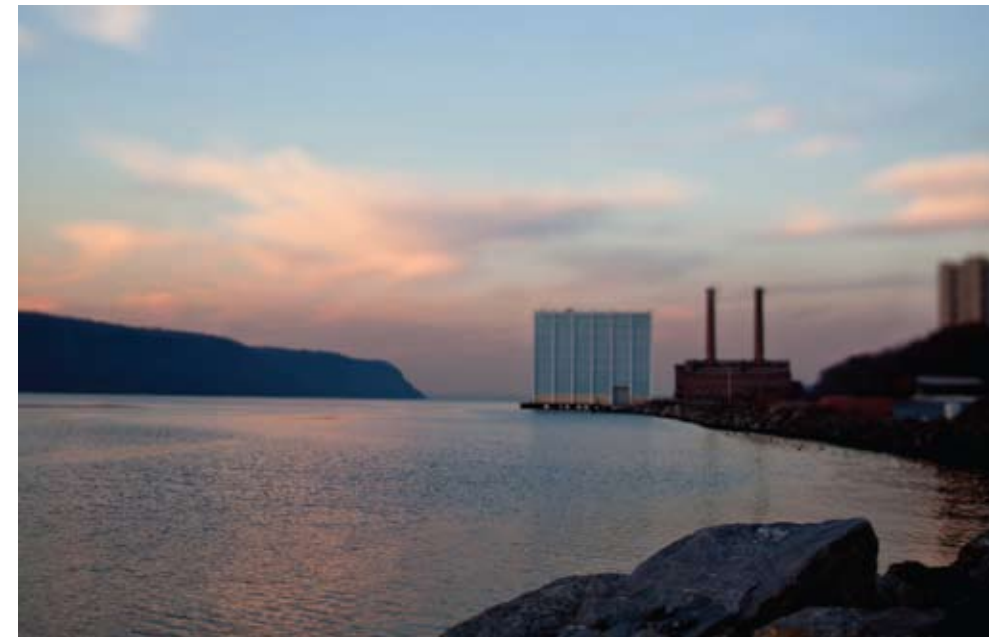
Thomas Cole
*The Course of Empire:
 Desolation*, (5th in series)
 1836. Oil on canvas
 39 ¼ x 63 inches
 The New-York
 Historical Society



“modern ruins” were different. They appear so rapidly in an abbreviated timetable, leaving us not with durable gothic memorials to the past but markers of fast-paced physical change in which the old and the new are uneasy neighbors.³

Few photographers have captured this subtle but crucial distinction as successively as Wides. Many of her images, like the Sleepy Hollow pictures, document the confluence of past and present where the historical and contemporary merge into one image and we see them, not sequentially, but with a new simultaneity.

Westchester is encoded with the history of the American suburb, enjoying a privileged status inspired by its intimate connection to New York City. *Palmer Road* [October 2, 2009], located on a crest in Yonkers, shows this connection with its distant view of the New York skyline sandwiched between post-World War II houses. The city appears a paper cutout—a shadow puppet—domesticated by its suburban community and is in keeping with the traditional view of Westchester County, 20 or so minutes north by rail, as a safety valve for the pressures of urban excesses. This “safety valve” reappears, too, in *Dunwoodie, Yonkers* [October 21, 2009], its four golfers encircled by the intensely manicured putting green on the Dunwoodie Golf Course that opened in 1903. As they stand within the green’s ring of protection, the outside world held at arm’s length, they follow their nineteenth-century urban predecessors, whose search for recreation generated many of the country clubs and large estates in this leafy suburban county. Looking closely, though, as Wides wants us to, something is off center in this landscape that defines Westchester today. We perceive a difference.⁴ *Palmer Road* presents only a sliver view



Susan Wides
*Yonkers Contaminated
 Riverfront* [November 29, 2010]

of the city between two post-war structures that are tightly packed together. One feels almost claustrophobic. The fence of the yard and the house’s deck closely mark the hard boundaries embraced in this suburban landscape with its dense homestead development, idolization of private property, and the promise of affordability and accessibility—the American dream, albeit a scaled-down version.

From the cramped individual housing tracts that sprang up across Westchester after World War II, nothing better illustrates the evolving suburban landscape than *White Plains Sprawl* [January 10, 2011]. The skyscraper, the quintessential symbol of the city, if not New York itself, leaps up from the modest skyline of Westchester’s county seat. One feels it ingesting the surrounding buildings as it thrusts upwards into the sky. The new skyscrapers signal the increasing metropolitanization of the American suburb. White Plains has morphed into a car-loving edge city, drawing business, shopping, and entertainment from traditional urban areas and grafting them onto the landscape of a former pre-war residential suburb. While it would be easy to dismiss this change as the handiwork of developers and local boosters, the suburban skyscraper is, for some, an antidote to the land-consuming practice of sprawl. White Plains, which had welcomed the expansive corporate campus in the 1950s and 60s, is changing once again.

Wides’ *White Plains Sprawl* captures a moment of transition as the city introduces a gargantuan new scale to the suburbs in the looming Ritz-Carlton Tower. She captures the natural horizon line on its glassy surface, integrating the skyscraper and the landscape. She

³ Nick Yablon, *Untimely Ruins: An Archaeology of American Urban Modernity, 1819-1919* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2009), 1-63.

⁴ Roger Panetta, ed. *Westchester: The American Suburb* (New York, Fordham University Press, 2006) 5-76.

Edward Steichen, 1879-1973
Empire State Building
(from the suite TWENTY-FIVE), 1932 negative
Black-and-white photograph, 12 15/16 x 10 7/16 inches
Collection of the Hudson River Museum
Gift of Mr. Sidney Singer, 86.19.2.4

Classic modernist imagery of Manhattan's skyscrapers by photographers such as Edward Steichen, Paul Strand, and Berenice Abbott have inspired Wides to capture the contemporary skyline in all its architectural magnificence.

Susan Wides
Empire, UN [December 6, 2005]
Chromogenic print, 30 x 40 inches



suggests that even in the face of very differently sized structures, we see a connection to nature. Did the White Plains of recent decades embody the seeds of this change when it turned its back on its role as a quaint but provincial county capital to reach for something new, for progress? Wides' image forces us to ask about these historical patterns.



Near the mouth of the Hudson River two photographs—*West Side Pier 'D'* [November 19, 1997] and *Liberty Island* [December 2, 2005]—remind us that New York is a water city. With a dense network of bridges and tunnels, we often overlook our "islandness." A relic of a West Side pier designated by locals years ago as "spaghetti carbonara" because of its wrecked, tangled mass of steel, waits in vain for the arrival of a barge, a railroad ferry, or a lighter, all part of a fleet that once frantically crossed the Hudson loaded with cargo from the interior of the United States via the Erie Canal. A technological marvel that soon transformed New York into the

"Empire City." From this pier and many others along the West Side of Manhattan, New York City extended its commercial tentacles to the country and the world. *West Side Pier 'D'* is a memorial to maritime New York, and its passing not only reshaped the waterfront but also subsequently attracted a new generation to the city's shore. A wall of highrises now separates us from the water, while a century and a half of working-class history is vanishing. Wides' images guard against such forgetfulness.

Views of the harbor have been mainstays of the graphic depiction of New York City since the seventeenth-century renderings of Dutch printmakers. The clustered skyscrapers at the southern tip of Manhattan in *Liberty Island* stand guard against the sea. No vessel navigates in front of our view, so we stand at a shipless harbor. This concrete-and-steel palisade seems to have coalesced into a single structure—"The Skyline." Yet a closer look again yields clues to the historic composition of this disparate set of buildings. Size, shape, and color suggest different stories and moments in time.

Wides' views of New York's skyscrapers, such as *Empire, UN [December 6, 2005]* show a tightly compacted midtown seen from above. These birds-eye perspectives harken back to the nineteenth-century, which struggled to embrace the scale of the emerging metropolis. The eclectic mix of skyscraper designs bears witness to the efforts of architects to assert distinctiveness and individuality, a theme Wides more fully developed in works like *Madison Square [January 17, 2007]*.

The intersection of Broadway and its grid of streets creates many of New York's squares, including Wides' *Union Square [July 26, 2005]*. The city's squares provide an open viewing space to see urbanites at play. Drawn to the air and light which fills these spaces, they take respite in a horizontal space from the imposing verticality of the city.

Susan Wides' photographs link time, place, and history. She invites us to look more carefully, indeed to meditate on images that are layered with meaning. The old narrative cannot hold and in its place Wides offers us a new account—one which eschews certainty for a more indeterminate view. She wants us to work harder and in a way that engages the realms of experience of seeing and listening in a complex and dynamic interaction. Her challenge—to herself and to us—is to begin again, this time telling a different story.



KAATERSKILL

PREVIOUS PAGE

Olana [January 9, 1998]

Chromogenic print, 40 x 50 inches

Frederic Church's paintings from his estate, Olana, often had magnificent skies, a focus offsetting his omission of the smokestacks on the Hudson's banks. The artists of the Hudson River School would paint tree-covered hillsides in place of the deforestation brought by nineteenth-century industry. These illusions helped to form the mandate of Manifest Destiny and are still propagated as city dwellers escape to the woods upstate, industries ship materials down river, and land is cleared to sustain the market for quaint rural homes. In my photograph, this complex loop is marked by a smokestack's plume at the center of the view.

SW

The iconic views of the Hudson River and the Catskill Mountains seen from painter Frederic Church's 250-acre estate, Olana, have inspired artists for more than a century. Church chose his home's location after a three-year search, moved by the magnificent composition and variety of its views, which he enhanced with a house constructed as an ornate exotic folly cresting a hillside. Although Wides' photograph captures the picturesque of the site, her choice to make her photograph in the dead of winter keeps our focus on a sequence of structural trees, river, mountains, rather than the luxuriant, perhaps more obvious foliage seen at other times of the year

BB

Kaaterskill Clove [February 15, 2005]

Chromogenic print, 40 x 50 inches

Rising out of the dilapidated cars, the trees defocus. This transition reflects other opposites in my work — document/artifice, nature/culture, individual/social. In attempting to navigate this in-between place, the viewer also becomes a participant, as if in a waking dream.

SW





Columbia County [December 18, 1997]

Chromogenic print, 20 x 24 inches

The silos on this farm remind the viewer that farming has been an essential occupation, an interest that has been revived in this era of organic, locally grown food. A dairy cow, representing domestication in this rural landscape, is in the distance, the traditional symbol of man's hand on the landscape.

BB



Game Farm, Heart's Content Valley [August 24, 2003]

Chromogenic print, 30 x 37 ½ inches

When seeing, one's eye is never stationary; looking is a stuttering flight between discrete moments. Shifting the focal plane with the view camera scatters the points of focus through space. Red soil, a cocked ear, a shadow arching over a spotted spine become disembodied and reconnected. Before the camera, things lose definition, as in 'the wood where things have no names,' where Alice and a fawn meet as equals.

SW



Near Catskill Creek [October 15, 2004]

Chromogenic print, 50 x 60 inches

From the collection of Stephanie Aaron

I photographed this immense junkyard while getting parts for my old VW. I later learned that the yard is near a place Hudson River School artist Thomas Cole often painted. Cole struggled to integrate his outrage at the ravages of industry with his sublime vision, at times including a foreboding train or ax in his landscapes. The artifacts of industry are now so ubiquitous they blend into their surroundings. But the location's sense of place remains persistent despite the changes to the landscape. Similar afternoon light and fall colors appear in my photograph and his painting.

SW



Near Catskill Creek [November 1, 2004]

Chromogenic print, 40 x 50 inches

For Thomas Cole and his Hudson River School contemporaries, the views of Kaaterskill Falls and the areas around Catskill Creek represented the very promise of the growing country in the early nineteenth century: their paintings were filled with the sublime primitiveness of the untouched land. Wides' sobering views near Catskill Creek reveal a careless disregard for our natural and artistic inheritance that pains the soul.

BB

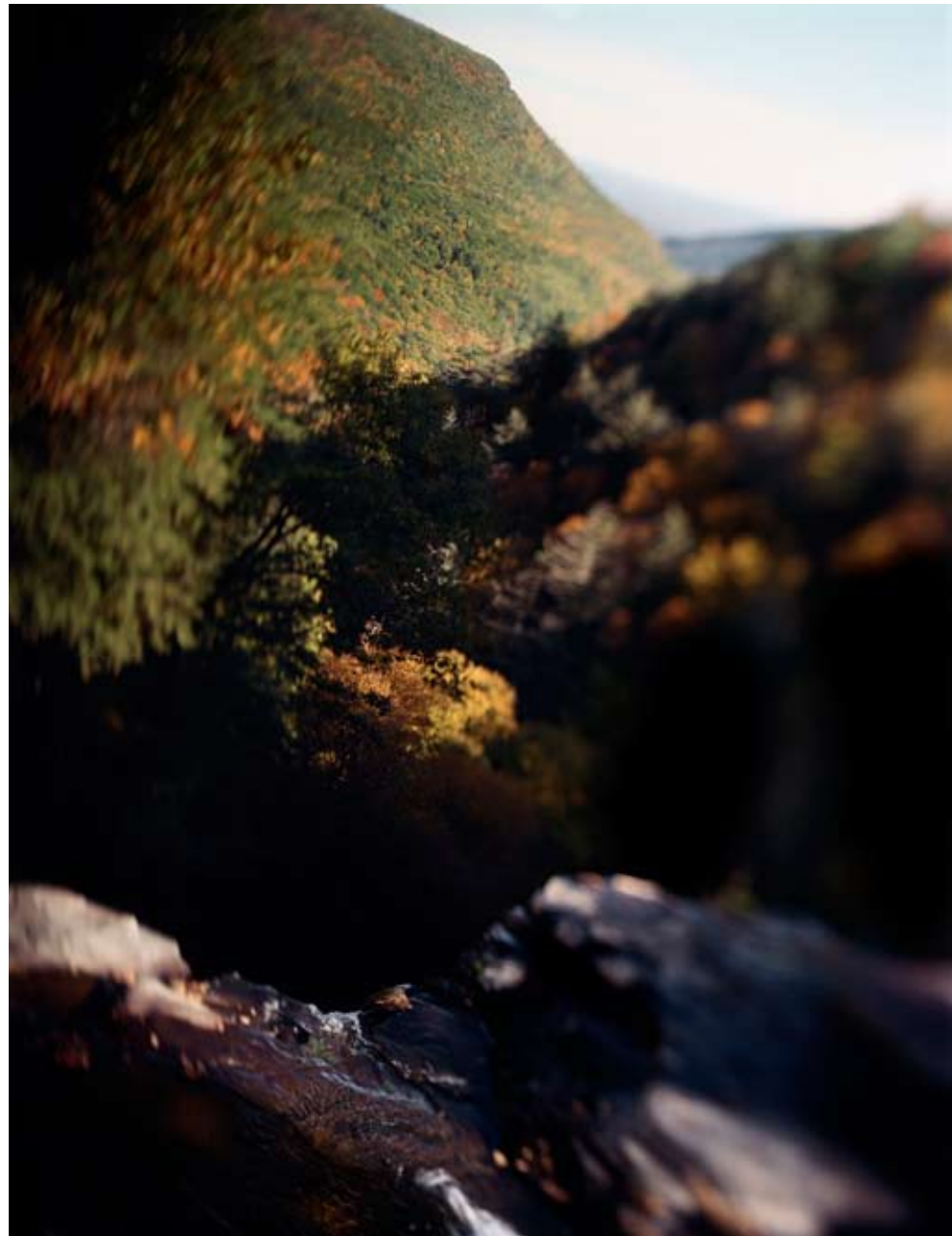
Sunset Rock [October 8, 2007]

Chromogenic print, 37 ½ x 30 inches

*Walking allows me to know the world through my body.
Place is not as solid as landscape; a sense filtered through
feeling, it is something interior and mutable. The direct
experience of a landscape often enables an engagement
beyond the delineation of things.*

SW





Haines Falls [October 19, 2004]

Chromogenic print, 50 x 40 inches

After Thomas Cole painted The Clove, Catskills in 1827, subsequent artists of the Hudson River School painted this site. I evoke some of Cole's atmosphere, and describe a similar sense of place. Contemplation expands the moment. The photograph's energy and blur reflects the constant movement of nature and time as moments dissolve into memory.

SW



Kaaterskill Falls [October 12, 2005]

Chromogenic print, 50 x 40 inches

When Thomas Cole painted Falls of Kaaterskill in 1826, he included a Native American at the center of the image as both the subject of the painting and its viewer. This is the position of the tourist today, implicated in the history of the site and a witness to it. The skewed focal plane connects the place where I stand photographing, the miniscule hikers, and the pool at the base of the falls, keeping all three elements sharp. This triangulation highlights the entanglement between spectatorship and responsibility in the natural world today.

SW



Superstore, Kingston
[November 1, 2010]
Chromogenic print, 24 x 36 inches

The photograph contains two divergent abstractions—the brilliant patches of unfocused leaves and the geometric superstores beyond. The store's bland expanses seem unyielding and excessive, like the useless red and yellow doors on the second story. On the other hand, the foreground leaves are permeable, their edges dissolve and they lose their definition.

SW

Strong colors, both manmade and natural, create the cheering nature of this photograph. The leaves in the foreground, which look like banners, are reinforced by the red and yellow stripes on the building's sides and bright white and green in its middle. In the background, verticality is added by both the water tower and the mountain range, another instance of nature and the built environment cohabitating in Wides' work. As in *Bear Mountain, Central Valley [January 28, 2011]* its huge discount mall in the distance, both huge retail outlets sit contentedly in their landscapes.

BB

Atlas Cement Near Olana [December 18, 1997]

Chromogenic print, 30 x 30 inches

This is all that's left of the Atlas Cement factory in Greenport, New York on Route 9. As I photographed this ruin, exchanging stares with its black portal, a strange harmony developed—the building seemed to become a part of the wispy grass.

SW



Kingston Bridge [October 18, 2009]

Chromogenic print, 24 x 36 inches

A mock-rustic fence in the foreground testifies to an agrarian past and its mandated space between neighbors. The Kingston Bridge in the distance exemplifies the next phase of development. Finally, the multiple-family dwellings suggest the limited space between property and, presumably, the new distance between home and work resulting from exurban sprawl.

BB



CONTRIBUTORS



Photo: Hilary Harvey

SUSAN WIDES' work has been exhibited widely throughout the United States and Europe. The artist's solo exhibitions include The Center for Creative Photography, Arizona; The Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art, New Paltz; and Urbi et Orbi Galerie, Paris. Group exhibitions include the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; The High Museum of Art, and The Municipal Art Society, New York. Work by Susan Wides is held in many public collections, including The International Center of Photography, New York; The Brooklyn Museum, New York; The Art Museum of Princeton University, New Jersey; La Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, France; The Center for Creative Photography, Arizona; The Norton Museum of Art, Florida; Frances Lehman Loeb Art Museum, New York, and the Museum of The City of New York. Her work appears in numerous anthologies including *New York in Color* and *A Photographer's City*. Wides' work has been featured in *Artforum*, *Art in America*, *Art News*, *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *The Village Voice*, *Le Monde*, *Harper's* and *New York*, among others. Her exhibition catalogs, *Art & Entertainment*, *Fresh Kills*, *The Name of the Rose*, and *World of Wax* are available through Kim Foster Gallery, who has represented the artist for over a decade.

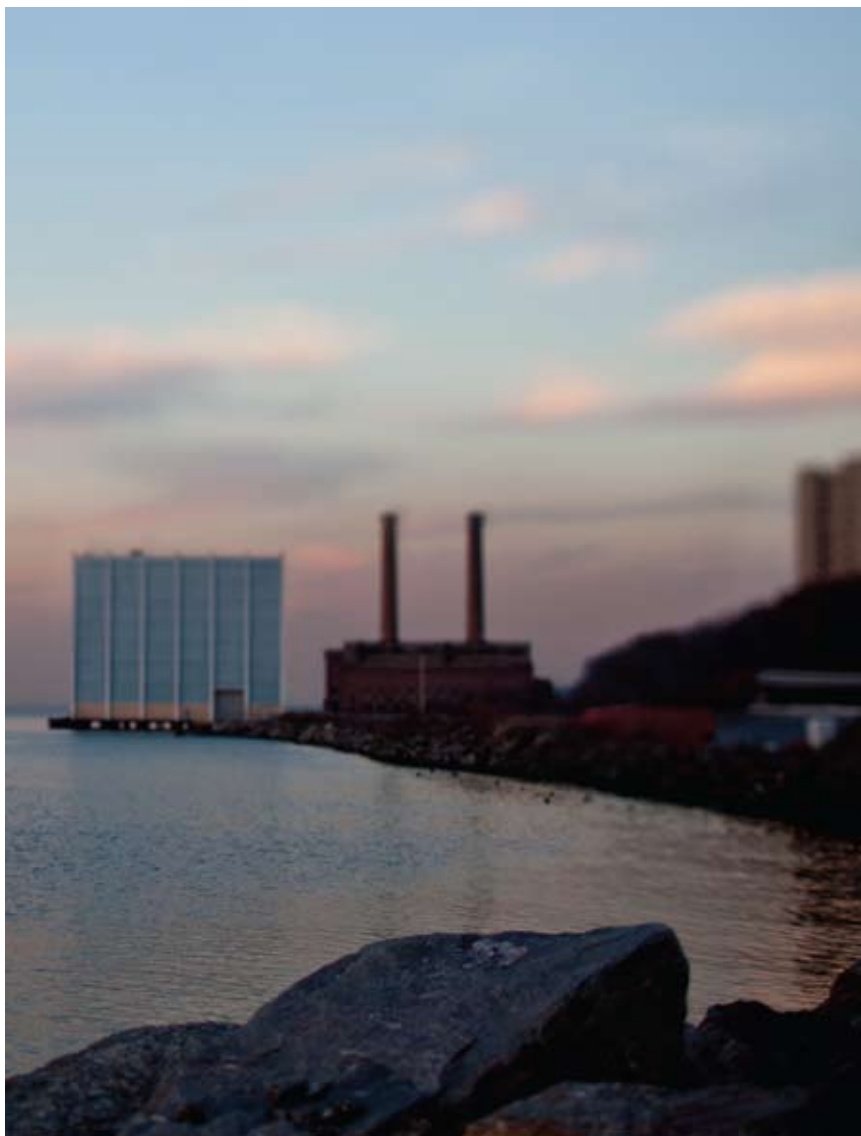


BARTHOLOMEW F. BLAND is Director of Curatorial Affairs at the Hudson River Museum, where he has organized a number of exhibitions related to the art and history of the Hudson Valley region, including, *Westchester: The American Suburb* and *Dutch New York: The Roots of Hudson Valley Culture*, which was mounted in 2009 for the New York Quadricentennial. He also curated *A Field Guide to Sprawl* for ArtsWestchester, which examines the impact of the suburban lifestyle on the physical environment. His exhibitions for the Museum related to the Hudson River School are *Paintbox Leaves: Autumnal Inspiration from Cole to Wyeth* and *Greener Pastures: Images of Arcadia*. He has written numerous essays and articles on contemporary art and social history and is

co-author of the book *Merry Wives and Others: A History of Domestic Humor Writing*, published by McFarland Press. In his former positions, he organized a wide range of interpretive projects for the Staten Island Museum at Snug Harbor Cultural Center and the Flagler Museum in Palm Beach.



ROGER PANETTA is a Visiting Professor of History at Fordham University and has authored numerous articles on the history of New York State and the region, particularly Sing Sing Prison. As Adjunct Curator for History at the Hudson River Museum, he most recently co-curated *Dutch New York: The Roots of Hudson Valley Culture*, in 2009 and *Westchester: The American Suburb* in 2006. He edited the catalogs for these exhibitions that were published by Fordham University Press. He co-authored *The Hudson: An Illustrated Guide to the Living River*, published by Rutgers University Press and, now, continues to pursue his interest in the Hudson River and its valley both as Curator of the Hudson River Collection at Fordham University and as Affiliated Faculty member of the Beacon Institute for the Study of Rivers and Estuaries. In 2006, he received the Cultural Heritage Award from the Lower Hudson Conference.



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