

ARTS | WESTCHESTER

Perspectives Along the Urban-Rural Spectrum

By SUSAN HODARA

FOUR golfers stand on the fluorescent putting green of the Dunwoodie Golf Course in one of the 42 large-scale photographs in the Hudson River Museum's current show, "Susan Wides: The Hudson Valley, From Mannahatta to Kaaterskill." Clubs in hand, two men are in sharp focus, the other two blurred. Beyond them, the setting unfolds in horizontal layers that shift between crisp and soft: a cluster of suburban homes, the Cross County Parkway and, on the horizon, the spires of St. Joseph's Seminary next to a communications tower, all nestled among autumn-tinged trees.

The juxtapositions in "Dunwoodie, Yonkers (October 21, 2009)" — of disparate aspects of the built environment and the natural landscape — can be found throughout this exhibition. On a recent afternoon at the museum, and in subsequent e-mails, Ms. Wides (pronounced WHY-dess) discussed the works on view, all of them images of locations along the urban-rural spectrum from Manhattan through Westchester County to the Catskills.

For Ms. Wides, who divides her time between Manhattan and Catskill, the images are amalgams of personal and cultural histories. "Place is not as concrete as landscape," she said. "The camera lens calls the viewer to experience the perception of place — to soak up its light, its spaces, its history, its potential — and to see it anew."

"From Mannahatta to Kaaterskill" is the second offering in the museum's "Visitor in the Landscape" series, which began in September with "Paintbox Leaves: Autumnal Inspiration from Cole to Wyeth" and will continue this September with "Elihu Vedder: Voyage on the Nile." The Wides show fills three adjoining galleries, organized predominantly by region. Among the Manhattan photographs are views of iconic buildings, often askew in the frame. In "Flatiron (April 14, 1999)" the building is shot from below, its arched facade thrusting toward a faded sky. Ms. Wides sets the building behind branching trees, recalling, she said, the Flatiron photographs of Edward J. Steichen and Alfred Stieglitz. In the wall text accompanying the work, she has written, "In dialogue with its history, my portrait of the Flatiron quivers as if invoked by collective memory."

Other Manhattan images take the long view of city dwellers. In photographs like "Union Square (July 26, 2005)," "Sheep's Meadow (July 2, 2007)" and "Bryant Park (July 18, 2007)," tiny people frozen in the midst of activity seem dwarfed by their panoramic surroundings.

The visual impact of these and many of the works in "From Mannahatta to Kaaterskill" was achieved through the use of selective focus, a technique that Ms. Wides, 55, has been adapting since 1997 in a body of work titled "Mobile Views," which encompasses all of the photographs in the show. Using a 4-by-5 camera, she strategically adjusts the lens and image planes in relation to each other.

"The swinging and tilting of the lens board and film back of the view camera, which its twisting bellows allows, enable me to precisely control the plane of focus," she explained. "The way I use it, it's not merely a line of focus, but a plane that can go back through the space of the picture, keeping certain objects sharp and others defocused, reflecting a plane in the three-dimensional



LAYERS The photographs by Susan Wides on display include, clockwise from above: "Sunset Rock (October 8, 2007)," "White Plains Sprawl (January 10, 2011)" and "Dunwoodie, Yonkers (October 21, 2009)."



PHOTOGRAPHS PROVIDED BY SUSAN WIDES AND THE KIM FOSTER GALLERY

scene."

Manipulating the focal plane, she said, is a way of simulating contemporary perception. "I replicate the way the eye darts from place to place across a landscape, focusing on certain details while ignoring others," she said. "The photographs of 'Mobile Views' embrace the fluid, changeable view through the lens, so central to our way of seeing today."

But Ms. Wides's work also mirrors past ways of seeing. Many of the photographs in her "Kaaterskill" series are of landscapes romanticized during the 19th century by the Hudson River School artists, some of whose work is on display in the newly opened permanent collections gallery at the museum. "My upstate home has a seasonal view of the

entrance to Kaaterskill Clove — ground zero, so to speak, of the birthplace of the Hudson River School," she said. "I went to the spots that they painted then to try to say something about how those places are today."

Painters like Thomas Cole and Frederic Edwin Church idealized their depictions of the region, which was, in fact, being deforested and polluted by developing industry. Ms. Wides tackles the marks of industry head-on in works like "Near Catskill Creek (November 1, 2004)" and "Kaaterskill Clove (February 15, 2005)," landscapes in which dilapidated automobiles and heaps of junk are nearly camouflaged by forests of turning leaves.

Ms. Wides compared Church's paintings of the view from Olana, his home in

Hudson, N.Y., to her "Olana (January 9, 1998)," a similar vista with a spewing smokestack in the distance. "The smokestack is important," she said. "Church painted out the industry that was dotting the river at the time. My photograph includes both the beauty of nature and man's hand on it."

Farther south, Ms. Wides observes the infiltration of the city into the suburbs in "White Plains Sprawl (January 10, 2011)," one of the few pieces in the show that does not use selective focus. Instead, a wavy reflection of downtown White Plains appears in the huge glass-and-steel edifice that is one of the Ritz-Carlton towers. "You can see the Hudson Highlands in the background, and the sun is setting," Ms. Wides said. "It's nature being distorted by the city."

Viewpoints

YONKERS "Susan Wides: The Hudson Valley, From Mannahatta to Kaaterskill" runs through Sept. 11 at the Hudson River Museum, 511 Warburton Avenue, Yonkers. Open Wednesday through Sunday, noon to 5 p.m. hrm.org or (914) 963-4550.

SCARSDALE "Susan Wides: Selected Works" runs through July 30 at Madelyn Jordon Fine Art, 14 Chase Road, Scarsdale. Open Tuesday through Saturday, 10:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. (914) 723-8738 or madelynjordonfineart.com.

ATHENS "Constant Gardeners: Susan Wides and Jim Holl" is on view July 30 through Aug. 13 at the Athens Cultural Center, 24 Second Street, Athens, N.Y. Open Saturdays and Sundays, 1 to 4 p.m. athensculturalcenter.org or (518) 945-2136.

Ms. Wides has been represented by the Kim Foster Gallery in New York since 1996. Her photographs have been exhibited internationally, and are in collections at institutions including the International Center of Photography, the Brooklyn Museum and the Museum of the City of New York. "Susan Wides: Selected Works" opened at the Madelyn Jordon Fine Art gallery in Scarsdale in early June and will run through the end of this month. "Constant Gardeners: Susan Wides and Jim Holl," an exhibition of Ms. Wides's photographs alongside her husband's paintings, will open on July 30 at the Athens Cultural Center upstate.

One of the Westchester images in "From Mannahatta to Kaaterskill" that particularly intrigued Bartholomew F. Bland, the director of curatorial affairs at the Hudson River Museum, was "Steinhardt Gardens (November 1, 2009)." In the shot, a flock of coral-colored flamingos blends into a backdrop of fall foliage.

"At first it seemed so unlike what Susan usually shoots — the industrial sites, the effects of man on nature," Mr. Bland said. "But when you start thinking about it, flamingos here are as artificial as so many things you see in her photographs. Like the golf course, their very existence is a constructed reality."