

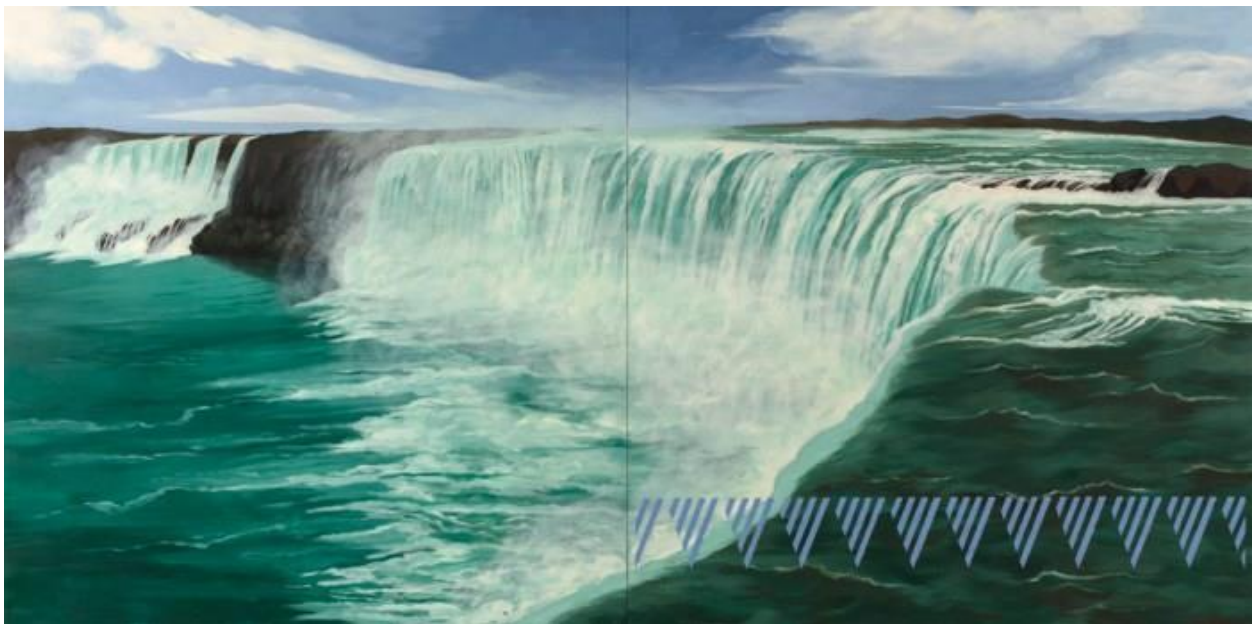
Art in America

Reframed



by Alex Greenberger

Kay WalkingStick's Art Powerfully Asserts an Indigenous Presence in the American Landscape



Kay WalkingStick's paintings are everywhere—as they should be. The Cherokee octogenarian's vibrantly hued painting of shifting feet was [one of the stars of “Indian Theater,”](#) currently on view at Bard College's Hessel Museum of Art in Upstate New York. Meanwhile, a gorgeous mountainscape by WalkingStick is among the finest works in “The Land Carries Our Ancestors,” a survey of Native contemporary art curated by painter Jaune Quick-to-See Smith for the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Two more WalkingStick works that look totally

unlike these pieces are also now on view in the Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection galleries; one is a print that features a self-portrait, along with text that reads, "YOU'RE AN INDIAN? I THOUGHT YOU WERE A JEWISH GIRL FROM QUEENS WHO CHANGED HER NAME."

Amid all this, WalkingStick also just opened an exhibition at the New-York Historical Society. It's her biggest New York show to date, and the first show ever staged by an Indigenous artist at the Manhattan museum. Curator Wendy Nalani E. Ikemoto invited WalkingStick to mine the museum's trove of 19th-century canvases by the Hudson River School, then show her work alongside them. WalkingStick has long responded to paintings by the likes of Thomas Cole, Frederick A. Butman, and Louisa Davis Minot, such works as inspirational, but also troubling: they "were selling the American landscape as empty and of course it was not empty," she told the *New York Times*. At first glance, the old and new paintings have a lot in common. They depict American landscapes: sun-splashed vistas, rushing waterfalls, burbling streams, and hulking mountains. But it doesn't take long to notice her interventions.

Her 2020 painting *Thom, Where are the Pocumtucks (The Oxbow)*, for example, lifts its U-shaped Massachusetts river and snapped tree on a cliff from an 1836 Cole landscape (which is owned by the Met and not on view). WalkingStick added a row of stenciled forms that runs across one of the painting's two panels, then abruptly cut off its edge. The designs are borrowed from crafts of the Nipmuc, the largest nation in New England, and they assert an Indigenous presence that Cole wiped clean from many of his landscapes.

WalkingStick's work diverges from the Hudson River School's in terms of message and perspective, but also style. Where Minot's 1818 vision of Niagara Falls contained a near-photographic attention to detail, WalkingStick's 2022 image of the cascade is much looser, with translucent white strokes to denote mist and flecks. Other landscapes move even further from representation—one, from 1973, shows the surface of the Hudson River by way of an array of camouflage-like oranges, blues, and greens. It's as though, in showing the artist's hand, she's insisting that views of the land are never neutral, even if they look realistic.

This exhibition's showstopper is a landscape that sits at the interstice of WalkingStick's various modes of working. The two-panel *Farewell to the Smokies (Trail of Tears)*, from 2007, shows a yawning valley that is painted in shades of brown on one side and hunter green on the other. At its bottom, a procession of men, women, and children treks through the valley. The painting refers to the violent displacement and ethnic cleansing of WalkingStick's own Cherokee people from their homelands, which took place from the 1830s to the 1850s. The figures are wrapped up in brushy swoops of paint. Some come close to fading into the darkness as the line proceeds from left to right, but ultimately, they refuse to disappear.

Image: Kay WalkingStick, Niagara, 2022. ©KayWalkingStick/New-York Historical Society.

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