

New exhibit at Montclair Art Museum combines traditional works with Native American artifacts

By Star-Ledger Staff

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Courtesy of Montclair Art Museum

Works included in the Montclair Art Museum's new exhibit are, above, Charles Warren Eaton's "The Strip of Pines" (1908), an oil on canvas; and, below, Philip Pearlstein's "Mummy Cave, Canyon de Chelly, Arizona," (1978), a sepia wash on paper.

By Dan Bischoff

The Montclair Art Museum combines two natures: It is a conventional art museum, particularly rich in tonalist landscapes dating to the town's early existence as a 19th-century art colony surrounding the best-selling George Inness, and it holds a truly world-class collection of Native American artifacts.

This week, the museum for the first time is mounting a combined exhibition — crossing the streams, as it were — of its collections, with a show called "Engaging With Nature: American and Native American Artists (A.D. 1200-2004)."

The twinning of its themes doesn't end there, either, since the show itself neatly splits between its opening galleries, devoted to the green and water-rich East, with pictures like "The Strip of Pines" (1908) by Charles Warren Eaton, a student of Inness's, and "Snowball Shadows" (2001) by G. Peter Jemison, a color lithograph by the Cattaraugus Seneca artist. Turn the corner into the last galleries and you are in the American Southwest, from where many of the eagle-feather headresses and horsehair-knotted hide warshirts in the Native American collection

hail. This is a place of rock, with a wholly sedimentary aesthetic, like that of a recently acquired miniature cliff dwelling by Charles Simonds ("Abandoned Ritual Place," 2001) — just like his toy-scaled Native American villages permanently installed in the stairwell of the Whitney Museum in Manhattan.

The goal of the exhibition is to contrast the aesthetics of European-styled artists with those of Native Americans, according to Gail Stavitsky, who curated the show with the head of Montclair's Indian collections, Twig Johnson, particularly in the ways in which they depict nature. So you can compare the delicate yellow and black mallard, meadowlark and quail feathers lining a hundred-year-old Pomo Indian basket with the smudgy sfumato of the sun behind Eaton's pine trees, or more simply smirk at Louise Lawler's 1985 photo of one of Andy Warhol's paint-by-numbers landscapes, which insists on the vestigial and commercialized Western approach to nature.

Oddly, the show grips hardest when it isn't rummaging through the history of Native American designs (as do Harry Fonseca's petroglyph-inspired paintings, for example,) but merely tries to evoke the strange mysteries of the places we all live now. "Pelagia" (2003), a small charcoal/watercolor of an empty country road at night beneath sensuous clouds backlit by a full moon in a velvet sky, has no overt connection to Native American design at all — its title is a made-up word borrowed from Italian, and the artist, Steven Graber, is a pilot who retired from the Navy at the age of 32 to pursue his artistic career. But the heavy-lidded sleepiness of the image, with its near-hallucinogenic soft darks and sudden bright highlights, hints somehow at a loss beyond imagining, an American landscape ghosted by the natives who are no longer there.

It's the ghost dancing that catches the imagination, the displaced but still vaguely recognizable outlines of Native American traditions and cultures that shape the contours of our country, like the undulating consonants of Indian place names on a map. The best evocation of that is the sepia-wash drawing by Philip Pearlstein of "Mummy Cave, Canyon de Chelly, Arizona," painted in 1978, and donated by the artist to the museum after his retrospective there a year ago. The beetling sandstone slab punctuated by cliff dwellings is a famous tourist trap, of course, and Pearlstein has climbed the opposite wall of the canyon to paint the view a million Leicas have captured (there's a very nice dude motel buried in the sands nearby, built around passive solar heating and other Native American-friendly, green concepts).

It's a wonderful drawing, harking back to the rockscapes Pearlstein used to paint with his buddy Warhol when they were grinding their way through the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts together. But what strikes the viewer in person is not so much the tight control over the wash tones and the difficult perspective, but the way those elements create a smiling face in the center of the picture — a smiling face, you understand, that isn't really there.

Engaging With Nature: American and Native American Artists (A.D. 1200-2004)

Where: Montclair Art Museum, 3 South Mountain Ave., Montclair

When: Through Sept. 24. Open Wednesdays to Sundays, noon-5 p.m.

How much: Adults \$12, seniors and students \$10, children younger than 12 free. Also free the first Friday of every month. Call (973) 746-5555 or visit **montclair-art.com**.

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