Visual Arts Review: Albert Pinkham Ryder’s “A Wild Note of Longing” — Mysterious to the Point of Holy

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By Franklin Einspruch

The painter Albert Pinkham Ryder points a way towards materials, not just as a means or a substrate, but as a phenomenology, as a basis for a reflective life.

Possibly the most important art exhibition of 2021 in the Commonwealth is taking place right now at the New Bedford Whaling Museum. This is notwithstanding the upcoming Titian show at the Gardner. (Nothing at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston this year remotely compares, which tells you something about its leadership.) Said exhibition in New Bedford (through October, 2021) is “A Wild Note of Longing: Albert Pinkham Ryder and a Century of American Art.” It presents a rare opportunity to study a major grouping of the American master’s work without having to schlep to the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C. It furthermore makes the case that Ryder’s work decisively shaped American art henceforth, and exerts influence that continues to be felt.

Ryder was born in New Bedford and he spent formative years there, until the family decamped to Manhattan. He never returned whilst alive. His remains are buried in Rural Cemetery, as are those of Albert Bierstadt, with whom the catalogue contrasts Ryder as typifying the German penchant (and subsequently the American one, at least for a time) for landscapes with minute details, sweeping vistas, and crisp rendering.
Nevertheless, images of the tumultuous, whale-filled sea remained a lifelong preoccupation for Ryder. "Wild Note" includes what is generally regarded as his masterpiece, *Jonah* (ca. 1885-95), on loan from the Smithsonian. Old Jonah has been discarded into the foam, with which his hoary hair and beard merge. The great fish prepared by the Lord (as it is put in the King James Version) has spotted him with wild eyes. The sea churns fearfully, pointing the prow of the boat from which Jonah was cast at the sky. Jonah flails with pitiful arms. God, a luminous presence in the clouds overhead, holds an orb of the cosmos in one hand and offers a benediction with the other. The painter contrasts His peace and design with our mortal terror and bewilderment.

The style of painting is soft and subfusc, wholly unlike that of contemporaries like Bierstadt and Frederic Church. The permanent collection of the Whaling Museum is filled with period seascapes executed in the documentary manner that characterized American taste until Ryder showed up. As is recalled in the catalogue by renowned art historian William Agee, Clement Greenberg observed that Ryder "had to cut his art out of the whole cloth and search in isolation for a means to convey the surprisingly new
things he had to say." While Cézanne could at least refer to Impressionism, Ryder “was on his own from start to finish.”

Moreover, he was on his own technically. The late 19th century saw a lot of interest in the supposed lost secrets of the Old Masters, resulting in disastrous formulations like *megilp*. Ryder seems to have been especially prone to such notions, and may not have appreciated how drastically industrial turpentine and linseed oil differed from their hand-refined predecessors. He is known to have mixed alcohol and varnishes into his paint, which result in the watery spatters that one can see on his easel. (The easel is in the collection of the museum and is on display.) Every such addition is a potential point of failure, and certain Ryders are as brown and cracked as tree bark. The surface of a painting stored on its side would sometimes slide in that direction as if melting. Oil paint becomes more transparent with age under normal circumstances; whole figures have all but disappeared from some Ryders, prompting one restorer to outline the subjects of *Dancing Dryads* (1879 or earlier), though even he could make no sense of their forms where the sky has literally fallen on their heads.

*Dryads* remains a beautiful painting anyway. The curators try to present Ryder as a proto-process artist. That is, to a point, arguable. Painter and critic Roger Fry, in 1908, wondered "by what unconscionable processes, by snatching at what felicitous accidents, by obedience to what half-guessed principles, he has wrought the slimy clay of oil pigment to this gem-like resilience and translucency." Agee goes as far as to claim that Ryder might have been pleased with the current state of some of his paintings, even though some look as if they had been caught in a house fire. I'm not at all sure about that. Volumes of serious art historical analysis were lavished upon the Sistine Ceiling’s dark tones, which turned out to be nothing more than a few century’s worth of accreted incense smoke. It was subsequently cleaned over the objections of scholars and their massacred self-esteem. But it’s undeniable that, in Ryder’s case, where the surfaces didn’t blow themselves up, and even some places where they did, they are luscious. I disagree with Agee about whether Ryder knew what he was doing, but I
concede that Ryder knew why he was doing it — the standard methods were insufficient to attain his vision. This is of a piece with the decade or more that he labored to complete a picture only a foot or two across.

It was via such devotion and dabbling in painterly alchemy that Ryder developed a reputation as a sort of mystic, or at least an icon of artistic seriousness. His vision came at a high price, an inability to navigate the world on its own terms. In contrast to William Merritt Chase, Ryder’s nearly exact contemporary who went around in a top hat drumming up clients and students, Ryder vandalized his great *Pegasus Departing* (1901 or earlier) rather than let it fall into the hands of the collector who had paid for it. Marks of a heated metal comb lie under its final layers. Ryder was, as we call it now, a hoarder. We know of a couple of ingenuous but ham-handed attempts to court women. This last item has prompted some historians to suggest — irresponsibly, in my opinion — that he was a homosexual. I propose instead that he was autistic, brilliant at his métier and sensitive to an extreme, but bewildered by the social realm and troubled by the problem of caring for himself.

Diagnoses aside, brilliant, complicated people are the ones that make anything new happen. Ryder’s work demonstrated, uniquely among Americans at the time, that meaning and feeling in art inhere not just to image, but to material. The dozens of nacreous strata of *Pegasus Departing* create its emotional effect, which is mysterious to the point of holy.

Artists of the mid-twentieth century could be disdainful of prior American painting, but they made an exception for Ryder. Jackson Pollock said that Ryder was the only American painter who interested him. (Franz Kline added Thomas Eakins and Hyman Bloom, but drew the line there.) “Wild Note” places an early Pollock, *T.P.’s Boat in Menemsha Pond* (ca. 1938) next to Ryder’s small but glorious undated landscape of Gay Head, with a little canvas of Thomas Hart Benton’s forming a Martha’s Vineyard trio. Writing as someone who has painted some works of his own on Aquinnah, this was quite a thrill. It also cements Agee’s contention that postwar abstraction’s concern for material effect as an end in itself owes its birth to Ryder. That’s not the whole extent of his influence, either chronologically or thematically. It’s impossible to look at Ryder’s preternaturally modern *Dead Bird* (1890s) and not think that Morris Graves saw it, or somehow divined its existence.
Artists continue to work in that material-driven mode, and “Wild Note” includes a sampling of modern and contemporary paintings that explores them. Some of these choices are ineffective, and the realities of the exhibition space necessitate small works and high hangings. It would have been lovely to include, for instance, the Walter Darby Bannard (*Kodiak*, 1977, at 55 inches too tall for the room) that Agee cites in the catalogue as analogously depicting “the forces of nature moving in and through the world around us.” But placing a burning yellow Wolf Kahn landscape (*Black Tree*, 2018) near Ryder’s *Pastoral Study* (1897) was inspired, as the glowing atmosphere silhouettes the trees in each in a dramatic pile-up of paint. Lois Dodd’s diminutive studies of moonlight and night scenes are sweet complements to Ryder’s. Bill Jensen’s *A Room Full of Ryders (Dedicated to Ronnie Bladen)* (1986-88) makes the inspiration from the master lovingly plain, though he has inherited the anxiety as well.

This is the first major treatment of Ryder in thirty years, and I find myself wondering whether any mystics of Ryder’s ilk walk among the artists born during that time. Lord knows we have no shortage of professionals, but mystics? I don’t see it, though I hardly know everyone. So I issue a challenge to anyone so inclined, to go to New Bedford and see if you’re called. Make art accordingly and show it to me, as I long to see such things. I will wait. As Ryder himself put it,

The artist must buckle himself with infinite patience. His ears must be deaf to the clamor of insistent friends who would quicken his pace. His eyes must see naught but the vision beyond. He must await the season of fruitage without haste, without worldly ambitions, without vexation of spirit. An inspiration is no more than a seed that must be
planted and nourished. It gives growth as it grows to the artist, only as he watches and waits with his highest effort.

Ryder points a way towards materials, not just as a means or a substrate, but as a phenomenology, as a basis for a reflective life. Thinking of Ryder as a mystic risks the danger of seeing his work at a psychological remove. On the contrary, he is a mystic of soil and soot, of roiled water and shaded trees under the golden sky. The reality he reveals is ours.

While maintaining a studio practice as an artist in Boston, Franklin Einspruch is also active in art criticism, comics, and alternative publishing. His art has appeared in 19 solo exhibitions and 41 group exhibitions. He has been a resident artist at programs in Italy, Greece, Taiwan, and around the United States, and was the Fulbright-Q21/MuseumsQuartier Wien Artist-In-Residence for 2019. He has authored 223 essays and art reviews for many publications including The New Criterion and Art in America. He produces one of the longest-running blogs about visual art, Artblog.net.