

KAY WALKINGSTICK

Hilarie M. Sheets, *Reframing the American Landscape*, The New York Times, 19 October 2023



The artist Kay WalkingStick at home in Easton, Pa. Above her is *New Hampshire Coast* (2020). Credit: Hannah Yoon for The New York Times

As a painter of the natural world for more than five decades, Kay WalkingStick says it is impossible not to be influenced by the 19th-century Hudson River School's majestic depictions of the American landscape. But she finds these sublime, monumental scenes of pristine wilderness by artists like Thomas Cole, Albert Bierstadt and Asher B. Durand to be as problematic as they are inspirational.

"They were selling the American landscape as empty and of course it was not empty; it was populated," said Ms. WalkingStick, who in her bold, pared-down painting style revisits similar vistas on which she overlays geometric patterns used by the Native tribe connected to that specific land. "I think of it as a reminder that we're all living on Indian Territory."

The exhibition *Kay WalkingStick/Hudson River School* opens Friday at the New-York Historical Society. It is the 88-year-old Cherokee artist's largest museum show so far in New York City, where she received her M.F.A. at Pratt Institute in 1975 and has shown consistently in group and gallery exhibitions while neglected by its

powerhouse institutions until recently. With about 40 works, the exhibition puts contemporary paintings from across Ms. WalkingStick's career in direct and lively conversation with the museum's signature landscapes by Cole, Bierstadt, Durand, Frederick A. Butman, John Frederick Kensett and Jesse Talbot, among others.

"I wanted to see our Hudson River School collection through Kay's eyes and how her work helps us to reinterpret the history of landscape painting in North America," said Wendy Nalani E. Ikemoto, the museum's senior curator of American art and a Native Hawaiian.

In early 2022, she invited Ms. WalkingStick to browse the museum's trove of 19th-century landscapes at its storage facility where the artist was almost immediately drawn to several paintings of Niagara Falls, including two rare 1818 works by Louisa Davis Minot. "Kay started thinking out loud about how she would approach a subject like this because it is so all encompassing," Ms. Ikemoto said.

That conversation precipitated the artist's visit to the falls, where she made sketches and photographs that inform her

vertiginous perspective of the thundering, sparkly water in her 40-by-80-inch canvas *Niagara*, marked across the bottom right with a Haudenosaunee design motif. This painting — acquired by the New-York Historical Society, its first ever by an Indigenous artist — is now the centerpiece of the exhibition where it debuts, flanked by the Minot canvases and others of Niagara Falls by Thomas Davies.

In her studio at the back of her Victorian home in Easton, Pa., where she lives with her husband, Dirk Bach, an artist and retired art historian, Ms. WalkingStick contemplated the challenges presented by a vast canvas in progress of the north rim of the Grand Canyon. “Canyon pieces are so hard but they’re really interesting,” said the artist, who draws on her complex memory of being in a place as well as her on-site drawings and photographs as she’s painting.

“For a lot of years, I didn’t get very much recognition so I wasn’t painting for clients, God knows,” she continued. “I was painting to keep myself excited about painting. I still am.”

Born in Syracuse, N.Y., during the Depression, Ms. WalkingStick was raised by her mother and aunt of Scottish-Irish descent and four older siblings. “My mother left my Indian father when she was pregnant with me,” said the artist, who was 8 before she first met her father, a geologist who went to Dartmouth but spiraled into alcoholism, according to Ms. WalkingStick. Her mother, who often worked menial jobs but created a stable, happy family life, instilled in her children a pride in their Cherokee heritage.

Ms. WalkingStick worked as a Bell telephone operator while studying art at Beaver College (now Arcadia University) in Glenside, Pa., and married her first husband, Robert Michael Echols, in 1959 right out of school. Living in Englewood, N.J., she raised their two children while painting often nude self-portraits, and following what was happening in New York galleries, where she had her first show in 1969 at Cannabis Gallery.

In 1973, at age 38, she started commuting to graduate school at Pratt in Brooklyn, where she shifted to painting abstractly and also began to reconcile her biracial identity. “I had to come to terms with this idea that I am as much my father’s daughter as my mother’s,” she said.

Her minimalist series *Chief Joseph* (1974-76) is painted with repeated straight and curved lines that form a procession of bow shapes, across 36 vertical canvases layered thickly with ink, acrylic and wax. It was named after the Nez Perce chief who led his people across the Rocky Mountains in 1877 and was someone her father admired. “A lot of those paintings are about history and my acceptance of myself as an Indian woman,” she said. In the 1980s, she found meaning in using the diptych format, juxtaposing textured abstractions evocative of geologic strata directly with more representational paintings of the land. Such duality and symbiosis persists in her canvases of the last two decades that superimpose abstract Native patterns on illusionistic scenes.

Ms. WalkingStick remembers a dealer advising her early in her career not to show with Native artists. “I’d be pigeonholed and wouldn’t be able to show broadly,” she said of the advice, which she disregarded. “Maybe that happened.”

The game changed in her eighth decade, with the opening of her career retrospective in 2015 at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C., organized by Kathleen Ash-Milby and David W. Penney. (The exhibition traveled through 2018 to Phoenix; Dayton, Ohio; Kalamazoo, Mich.; Tulsa, Okla.; and Montclair, N.J.)

“Kay is really an icon in the field and recognized as someone important among Native American contemporary artists since the ’80s,” said Ms. Ash-Milby, now curator of Native American art at the Portland Art Museum in Oregon and a commissioner of the 2024 American pavilion at the Venice Biennale, where Jeffrey Gibson will be the first Indigenous artist to represent the country since a group show in 1932.

“When I started as a graduate student,” she added, “we couldn’t get people to pay attention to what Native artists were doing. We were banging on the door and no one wanted to even look.”

Institutions and collectors are now playing catch-up. Crystal Bridges in Arkansas recently acquired two major works by Ms. WalkingStick, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York bought seven of her pieces from across multiple periods. “It was a very significant thing for an artist like Kay who’s been working all this time to enter MoMA’s collection,” said Stuart Morrison, Managing Director of Hales Gallery, which had its first solo show of Ms. WalkingStick’s work in 2022 (the artist previously had been represented by June Kelly for more than two decades).

Ms. WalkingStick is also being championed by influential private collectors. The artist’s *Red Painting/Red Person* from 1976 is included in an exhibition highlighting Komal Shah’s collection of female artists opening Nov. 2 at 548 West 22nd in Chelsea, a gallery that is the former space of the Dia Center. Agnes Hsu-Tang, who leads the board of the New-York Historical Society, was the one to suggest that Ms. WalkingStick be invited to peruse the museum’s Hudson River School collection and is loaning several of the artist’s works from her personal collection with Oscar Tang to the new exhibition.

For Ms. Ikemoto, the show’s curator, it’s an opportunity to bring new voices into the way the institution presents history. “The tendency still today is to assume that when somebody says American art, they’re thinking about the art produced by European American settlers,” she said. “To insert Kay’s work into that discussion and actually have it be the frame through which we look at the older works, it lets Native art stand on its own but also addresses its absolute vitality to the story of American art.”