

FORT GANSEVOORT

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The River's Meaning to Indians, Before and After Hudson

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Although our awareness of the voyages of Henry Hudson, Robert Fulton and Samuel Champlain may have vastly increased over the past year — courtesy of exhibitions, performances and publications celebrating 400 years of European settlement in the Hudson River Valley — most of us are still fairly ignorant when it comes to the native people who once inhabited the region.

Hence the importance of “The Muhheakantuck in Focus,” a new exhibition at Wave Hill in the Bronx that looks at the significance of the Hudson to indigenous people before and after the arrival of European settlers. Arranged by Jennifer McGregor, the curator at Wave Hill, it is a thoughtful, informative and entertaining show, bringing together about a dozen artists from Mexico, the United States and Canada, several of them American Indians.

The exhibition uses the Lenape word for the Hudson, “the river that flows both ways.” At the time of European settlement in the 16th and 17th centuries, the Lenape occupied an area encompassing what is today New Jersey, southern New York, eastern Pennsylvania, and parts of Delaware.

The bulk of the show is installed in the Glyndor Gallery, housed in an old mansion, with a handful of additional pieces around the grounds. I like this incorporation of the outdoor area, for one of the real joys of a visit to Wave Hill at this time of year is a stroll in the gardens, which become even more rewarding when you are wandering around looking for art.

Outdoors, visitors will discover that some of the works are hammocks installed in shady woods, conceived by Laura Anderson Barbata to offer an open-ended experience with nature, and a series of aluminum signs by Edgar Heap of Birds that juxtapose words relating to the ancient and modern uses of the river. The signs are more stimulating than the hammocks; in fact, it's easy to fall asleep in the hammocks.

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REMEMBRANCES From top, details of Anna Tsouhlarakis's video of the Thames and Hudson, "Crossing"; Mary Ann Barkhouse's installation, "Harvest" and Edgar Heap of Birds's "Please the Waters." Photographs by Stefan Hagen

Mr. Heap of Birds is one of America's most famous Indian artists and a good inclusion in the show, for much of his art has revolved around recovering forgotten or invisible histories of place. His signs at Wave Hill remind us of a vanished indigenous past, but also that the Hudson River is an ecosystem that requires constant stewardship and care.

Inside, the exhibition begins with a wall of drawings by Mr. Heap of Birds illustrating the process through which he determined the specific words incorporated into his outdoor signs, and a video by Anna Tsouhlarakis juxtaposing imagery of the Thames in London and the Hudson in New York to show how rivers have been a conduit for launching European expansion.

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The implications of European expansion are explored in another video, “The Two Row” (2009), by G. Peter Jemison, which looks at the consequences of the 1613 treaty made between the Haudenosaunee people and the Dutch. The film, part documentary, part polemic, includes a re-creation of the treaty exchange along with a discussion of the meaning of the terms.

The rest of the art in the show ranges significantly in quality and interest. Mary Ann Barkhouse’s “Harvest” (2009) is an earnest piece of politically minded installation art; the artist has inscribed the names of indigenous groups living in the lower Westchester area 400 years ago onto porcelain sculptures that suggest local foodstuffs. It is a symbolic feast, installed on a long table draped with blue taffeta, that recalls and celebrates a vanished way of life.

Environmental activism makes an appearance here and there, most notably in mixed-media paintings by Melanie Printup Hope that combine imagery appropriated from Hudson River School paintings and contemporary views with collaged newspaper stories about environmental damage done to the river. The pictures require more reading than looking.

Peter Edlund, a painter, has researched Indian languages to understand the origin of place names that are a part of our geography, but whose original meanings are long forgotten. His landscapes combine the geographical features that gave a place its name and the present day reality, as in “Hilly-Island-in-Wolf-Country (Manhattan)” (2009), which mixes a hilly landscape with modern skyscrapers. “Hilly-Island” was the Lenape name for Manhattan.

If the show has a flaw, it is that the selection of works moves between a tight and a wide focus on the theme, making it hard to see how it all hangs together. But no matter, for there is enough good artwork here to impress upon viewers that the quadricentennial is a time not just to celebrate, but to remember.