

DANIEL E. GREENE | GRAYDON PARRISH | NATIONAL SCULPTURE SOCIETY | HOUSTON'S ART | VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

Fine Art Connoisseur™

THE PREMIER MAGAZINE FOR INFORMED COLLECTORS



OCTOBER 2011

\$8.95 U.S. | \$9.95 CAN.

10



Volume 8, Issue 5

STREAMLINE

Andrew Jones

Painting in the Presence of the Past

BY PETER TRIPPI



In June 1882, the Impressionist painter J. Alden Weir (1852-1919) left New York City to spend his first summer on the modest farm he had bought near Branchville, Connecticut. Over time, Weir transformed this retreat into a creative refuge for his family and such visiting friends as John Singer Sargent and J.H. Twachtman. After Weir's death, the property was used by his artist-daughter Dorothy and her husband, the sculptor Mahonri Young, then by the painters Sperry and Doris Andrews. Today its 60 acres continue to inspire artists and tourists alike as the Weir Farm National Historic Site, operated by the National Park Service.

For 20 days last October, the New York City-based painter Andrew Jones (b. 1961) also lived at Weir Farm, one of a dozen artists invited annually to make new work independently in its modernized studio. Jones was an intriguing choice for this rural context, as he is best known for depicting Greenwich Village's elaborate iron stoop railings, usually in close-cropped images that show how daylight falls upon metal and stone to create ever-changing shadows and patterns. Moreover, Jones is the ultimate city-slicker, having spent more than 25 years in New York without a driver's license, and having earned his B.A. at Georgetown and his J.D. at Yale, university campuses better suited to pedestrians than drivers.

"Everyone warned me," Jones recalls, "that I wouldn't find any cast-iron stoop railings on a farm. Imagine, then, my surprise when my friend Claudia Seymour [the Connecticut artist and president of the Salmagundi Club, of which Jones is an active member] drove me up and we discovered — at the bottom of the steps leading to Weir's side porch — two large iron newel posts taken from a townhouse of the 1830s." These became the perfect first subject for Jones, truly a bridge between his stoops and his next phase of work.

Jones already knew that Weir had lived at 11 East 12th Street, a brownstone from which he often strolled to the Salmagundi, just as Jones does now from his house half a mile to the west. "I discovered how much Greenwich Village figured in Weir's life: he married in a church that still stands on lower Fifth Avenue, and his townhouse and studio also survive," says Jones. "This neighborhood is one that I have spent decades protecting as a member of the local preservation group and community board" — efforts that Weir would probably have appreciated.



THE OLD HEMLOCK TREE AT WEIR FARM
2010, OIL ON CANVAS, 12 X 12 IN.
GEORGE BILLIS GALLERY, NEW YORK CITY

WEST 12TH STREET SHADOWS
2009, OIL ON CANVAS, 30 x 40 IN.
GEORGE BILLIS GALLERY, NEW YORK CITY



BACK TO NATURE

Yet it was Weir's affection for the Connecticut countryside that really opened Jones's eyes last autumn. He explains, "Exploring the stone walls, rocky pastures, and dense woods that inspired Weir and his wide circle of artist friends in turn inspired me ... Every feature of the farm, from his house and studio to the pond he created, is infused with his energy and spirit."

Although Weir Farm does not require resident artists to depict the landscape, Jones felt that scenes of nature would be "the best way to pay my respects to the Weir legacy." He proceeded to create a dozen canvases, most quite different from his earlier forays in this genre. "Not having painted landscapes in a few years, it was hard at first to rediscover my palette for them," he says. "I had to return to a greater mix of greens and blues." Fortunately, the back of the studio building features a wall of windows overlooking a wooded ravine — a glorious view that inspired three of Jones's 12 paintings.

Although he regularly walks the streets of Greenwich Village watching for intriguing stoop railings, Jones says he is "not a fan of *plein air* painting," but adds, "Nonetheless, this residency underscored for me how important it is to paint on location. I recognize my need to be physically near my subjects at different times of the day until the

exact moment that the angle of the light makes the subject most compelling." Sure enough, Jones's recent landscapes offer clues about just when they were made, even as they sustain his virtuosic cropping and arranging of forms — be they trees or rocks — into complex patterns that lock together as if they had always been thus. Though Weir's art was naturally of interest to Jones during his stay in Connecticut, no one would mistake these pictures for 19th-century ones: they are simply too informed, rather than influenced, by abstraction and by Jones's modernist forerunners, who include Edward Hopper, Eugène Atget, and Berenice Abbott.

The critic Gail Leggio has rightly described Jones as "an architectural naturalist" who "responds to inevitable signs of corrosion with both melancholy and a painter's appreciation for ruined beauty." Though Leggio was referencing what Jones calls "the ruins of our aging city," her observation pertains equally to Jones's daily hikes on the Connecticut property. Several of his canvases depict Weir's stone fences — primitive forms of architecture that inevitably shift, discolor, and crumble. Still more pertinent is *Wagon Graveyard III*, where rusting metal looks right at home among dead leaves and pine needles. Like urban stoops and railings, these relics are "in the middle of a transformation," the artist says: "my paintings capture these structures before the metamorphosis is complete."

PAST/PRESENT

Jones says he thought often at Weir Farm about how its namesake and his



WAGON GRAVEYARD III
2010, OIL ON CANVAS, 24 x 30 IN.
GEORGE BILLIS GALLERY, NEW YORK CITY



FOREST WALL AT WEIR FARM
2010, OIL ON CANVAS, 30 x 30 IN.
GEORGE BILLIS GALLERY, NEW YORK CITY



STONE WALL AT WEIR FARM
2010, OIL ON CANVAS, 16 x 20 IN.
GEORGE BILLIS GALLERY, NEW YORK CITY



EVENING FOREST III AT WEIR FARM
2010, OIL ON CANVAS, 36 x 36 IN.
GEORGE BILLIS GALLERY, NEW YORK CITY

distinguished visitors — among them Sargent, Twachtman, Childe Hassam, and Albert Pinkham Ryder — might have felt and looked at everything there more than a century ago. “We live among the spirits of the past,” Jones has written of his urban scenes. “They meander with us down these sidewalks and ascend the stairs of these aged stoops. As the artist is a witness to his times, so are the ruins the witness to the past — thus these paintings capture multiple spirits of past and present.” Indeed, the trees on Weir’s property may be taller than they were in his day, yet surely they are no less connected to him now. And though there is no evidence of what — if anything — Sargent might have painted here, Jones feels intuitively that *The Old Chair* (now in a private collection) fits the bill, with its sun-dappled cane seat and bit of rock jutting out from the grass.

Whether they know it or not, many viewers now are eager for stillness, for decorative beauty, for a comforting hint that our ancestors had needs and delights not so different from ours. Like all his imagery, Jones’s serene views of Weir Farm are completely out of our time and completely of it. They bring together the best of past and present, offering something distinctive that could not have been made in any other era. ■

Information: All of Andrew Jones’s paintings from the Weir Farm residency will be on view at the Salmagundi Club October 1–29, and West 12th Street Shadows will appear in the club’s Audubon Artists show September 12–30; 47 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10003, 212.255.7740, salmagundi.org. The Weir House, Weir Studio, and Young Studio are currently undergoing restoration; if you would like to visit, please call ahead: 203.834.1896 or nps.gov/weifa. Jones is represented by George Billis Gallery in New York City.

PETER TRIPPI is editor of *Fine Art Connoisseur*.

AUTUMN TREETOPS AT WEIR FARM
2010, OIL ON CANVAS, 30 x 24 IN.
GEORGE BILLIS GALLERY, NEW YORK CITY

