

Philip Koch: Experiencing Nature, Inside and Out

By MATTHIAS ANDERSON



ASCENSION

2008, OIL ON MASONITE, 40 x 32 IN.

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Although the art of Philip Koch (b. 1948) is always worth admiring, the launch of his national touring retrospective offers an ideal opportunity to focus more closely. *Unbroken Thread: Nature Paintings and the American Imagination: The Art of Philip Koch* opens on May 4 at the University of Maryland, featuring 35 paintings and drawings created since 1998.

In her eloquent catalogue essay, organizing curator Eva J. Allen, Ph.D., provides compelling evidence that Koch's oeuvre constitutes "a contemporary re-imagining of the romantic panoramas of the great 19th-century American landscape painters," including Frederic Church, Thomas Cole, and George Inness. Koch himself believes that "Nature is older than us, and if we open up to it, it offers a great deal of emotional power." Indeed, his landscapes are composed and drawn so realistically that we recognize them as of this world, yet their expressive, anti-naturalistic coloring and lighting trigger emotions, and even mystical reflections, that mere realism cannot. Most show no sign of human habitation, as if we are the first people to glimpse these primeval places. In our own era of environmental change, this timelessness surely packs an added punch.

AT HOME IN THE WILD, AND IN THE MUSEUM

Koch's fascination with nature is truly lifelong, as he grew up in Webster, New York, 12 miles from Rochester. Lake Ontario delivers heavy snowfalls to this region, and even today its pine forests and rocky outcroppings are relatively unspoiled.

STONE CITY BARN

1991, OIL ON CANVAS, 24 x 48 IN.





INLAND
2007, OIL ON CANVAS, 45 x 60 IN.

Koch enjoyed skiing and sailing with his father, and he realizes now that his paintings “have led me to circle back and focus on the feeling those woods and shores had for me. You can’t go home again, but it is amazing the clarity and emotion a remembered image can hold.”

Another factor in Koch’s aesthetic formation was the art in his family home: His Scottish great-grandfather, John Wallace, painted brooding landscapes of his homeland, and his maternal grandfather, John Capstaff, invented the Kodachrome color film process. Koch’s own father worked as an optical physicist for Eastman Kodak, so it is not surprising that the

young man felt his own individuality depended on rejecting photography altogether, a stance he has never abandoned.

In 1966 he headed to Ohio’s Oberlin College, where he studied studio art and art history. Like most art departments in that era of minimalism and conceptualism, Oberlin’s “did not encourage observational drawing and painting,” so Koch admired such contemporary heroes as Milton Avery, Morris Louis, and Mark Rothko for their expressive use of color. In Oberlin’s well-stocked library, however, he found a monograph on Edward Hopper and developed an interest in drawing from life. Just as dangerously, he discovered the college’s superb collection of Dutch Old Master paintings, falling particularly hard for the large, turbulent skies of van Ruisdael and Hobbema. “I grew restless,” Koch recalls, “with my simple abstract paintings as they came to seem more clever than insightful. I wanted something deeper, and began scratching about another path.”

This curiosity led Koch to spend the summers of 1968 and 1969 at New York’s Art Students League, where he drew the figure and grew interested in 1930s regionalism, especially the rigorously drawn but emotionally charged scenes of Thomas Hart Benton, Grant Wood, and Charles Burchfield. (His appreciation survived well into



OUT TO SEA OGUNQUIT
2007, OIL ON MASONITE, 5 x 10 IN.



OCTOBER
2007, OIL ON MASONITE, 28 x 42 IN.

A UNIQUE PATH

From his IU graduation in 1972 right through 1997, Koch developed his own distinctive strategy, drawing and painting outdoors, remaining fairly faithful to the scenes before him. In 1973, he arrived in Baltimore to teach at Maryland Institute College of Art, where he is now a full professor, and in 1975 he began frequenting Cape Cod, the wind-whipped trees and thick woods of which he finds “magical.”

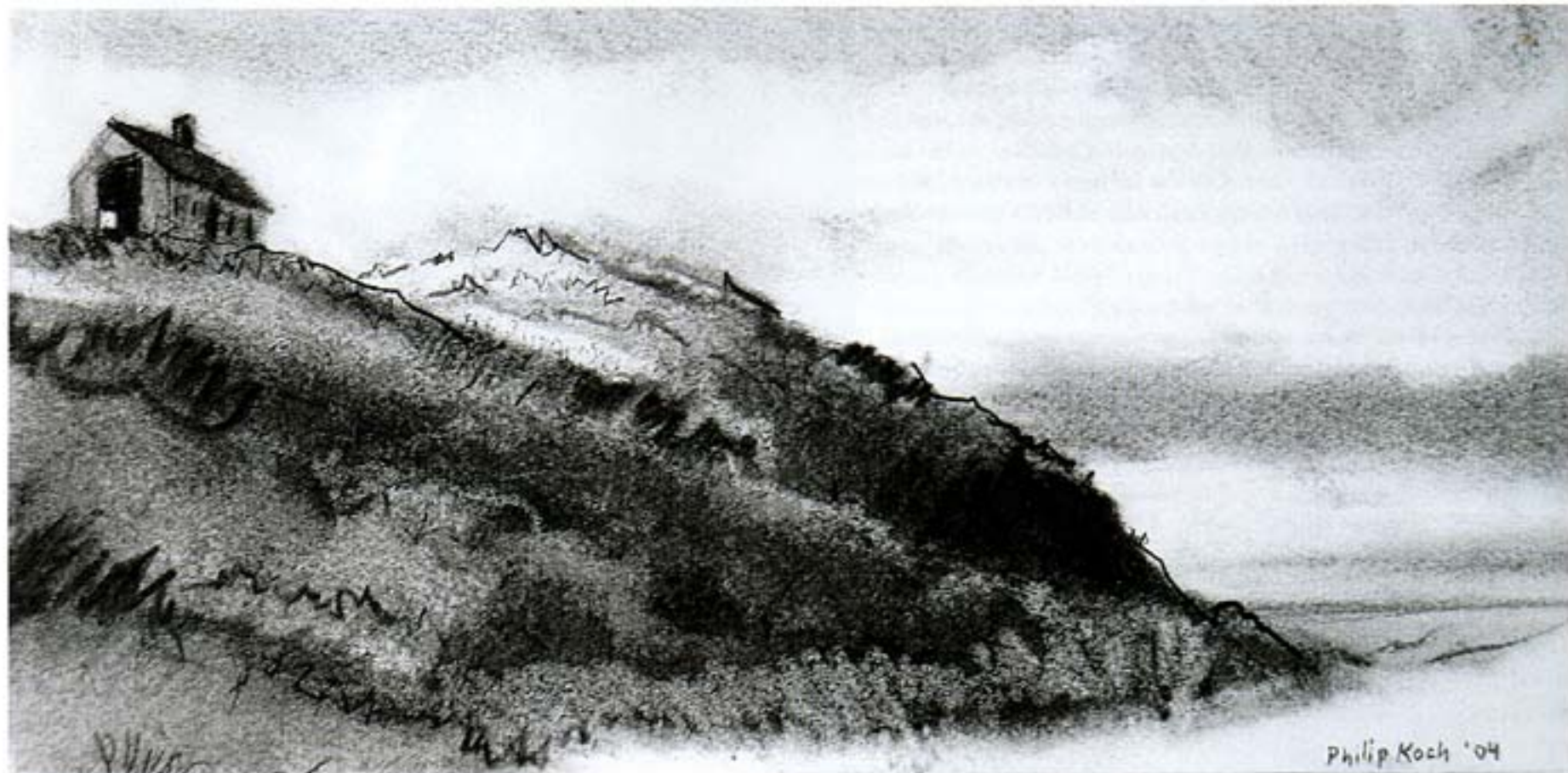
Since 1983 Koch has spent 12 summers as the resident artist in Hopper’s unpretentious studio at South Truro, the only person since the master

the early 1990s, as seen in *Stone City Barns* on page 43.) Regionalists’ colorful celebration of the Midwest’s rolling hills, endless fields, and farm buildings spurred Koch to pursue his MFA in painting at Indiana University in Bloomington, where — unusually — realism was still encouraged.

At IU, Koch says he “discovered the romance of 19th-century landscape painting,” thanks primarily to the artist Bonnie Sklarski and scholar Louis Hawes. He remains grateful that Hawes’s riveting teaching and publications reached him at the perfect moment, and he regrets that “sometimes art historians today forget how they can influence working artists of the next generation.” Koch learned from the Hudson River School to make detailed drawings outdoors and use them back in the studio, and also admired the expressive power of John Constable’s cloud studies. “I have always thought it made sense to study the work of artists who have gone down the path before us... It is a high compliment they deserve.”

himself to have worked there so often. [On May 15, 2004, exactly 37 years after Hopper’s death, Koch finally found an ideal vantage from which to sketch the studio on its remote hillside; the result appears below.] Koch loves the “Hopper landscape” passionately and is deeply involved in the ongoing campaign to protect this coastal heathland from overdevelopment. Alas, the encroachment of modernity on Cape Cod has driven Koch to make more frequent trips northward to Maine’s Mount Desert Island, which remains almost as pristine as when Church and other 19th-century landscapists worked there.

Over a two-year period (1997-99), Koch shifted, for no explainable reason, toward a more visionary mode of landscape painting. Although he still draws outdoors — most often in charcoal on a small scale — he composes primarily in the studio, from memories both witnessed and imagined. He experiments with colors by drawing on paper with pastels; once satisfied with his palette, he applies oils to a hard sheet of masonite, which endows the picture with



MAY 15, 1967
2004, VINE CHARCOAL ON PAPER, 7 x 14 IN.