

**Nina Amstutz, *Caspar David Friedrich: Nature and the Self*,  
New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020, 280 pp. 82 color and  
36 b/w illustrations, \$ 65 US (hardcover) ISBN 9780300246162**

**Mitchell B. Frank**

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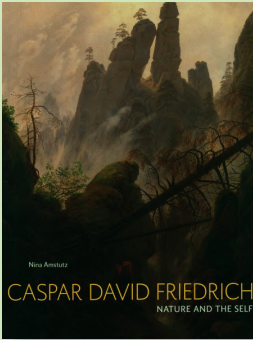
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the second monograph dedicated to the artist since the 1994 publication of *The Life and Art of Lois Mailou Jones* by Tritobia Hayes Benjamin, a publication that does not offer in-depth biographical information nor critical analysis of the works. There remains a paucity of research-based literature about pioneering



Black artists of the twentieth century like Jones. Recent publications on African American artists have been weighted toward contemporary art and/or emanate from exhibitions that are necessarily limited. Important historical figures like Jones whose work is not considered vanguard have not had the benefit of recent critical advancements in the theorizing of contemporary Black diasporan art practice. VanDiver employs many of these analytical tools in her fresh reconsideration of Jones' life and work while also sourcing the abundant archival materials Jones left behind. Archival material about African American art and artists available to researchers at repositories such as Howard University's Moorland Spingarn Research Center and The David C. Driskell Center Archives hold treasure troves of material about twentieth century African American artists in need of exploration. VanDiver's use of the archive is a model for further research. In the end, *Designing a New Tradition* achieves VanDiver's goal of teasing out the international,

multi-dimensional, and complex project that representing blackness was and remains for artists of the African diaspora. ¶

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Nina Amstutz  
**Caspar David Friedrich: Nature  
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The critical fortunes of Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840) rose dramatically at the turn of the twentieth century. During the nineteenth, he was known mostly as a local landscape painter from Dresden, where he settled in 1798. In his *History of Modern German Art (Geschichte der Neueren deutschen Kunst, 1884)*, Franz von Reber, in the few lines devoted to Friedrich's work, described him as the founder of *Stimmungslandschaft*. In using this term, Reber stressed the atmospheric effects of Friedrich's landscapes, which provoked moods or feelings in the viewer, what Reber called "the spiritual rapport between nature and the observer." The German term *Stimmung* is, as linguist and literary critic Leo Spitzer observed, untranslatable. When it comes to Friedrich's paintings, art historians have reflected on how to use language to capture meaning, especially when his landscapes are considered in the light of *Erlebniskunst*, what Joseph Leo Koerner (*Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape, 1990*), described as "art that comes from, and is an

expression of, experience." Nina Amstutz's new book addresses the challenges of translating Friedrich's visual language into words in her treatment of his late landscapes in the context of Romantic science and search for self.

In reading Friedrich's paintings as laying the groundwork for an artistic lineage concerned with "vitalism in the life sciences" (209), Amstutz addresses current ecological concerns, which she discusses in her conclusion. Many earlier writers similarly related contemporary issues to Friedrich's paintings. At the turn of the twentieth century, champions of modernism praised his landscapes for their luminous effects and their affinities with Impressionism. Nazi art historians, like Kurt Karl Eberlein, considered his art as part of "the historical, spiritual elevation of the new clan of northern Germany." In the 1970s, when formalist narratives were being questioned, Robert Rosenblum (*Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition, 1975*) read Friedrich's landscapes along spiritual lines, as playing a seminal role in the northern Romantic tradition. Helmut Börsch-Supan, meanwhile, proposed religious-iconographical readings of Friedrich's paintings in the 1973 catalogue raisonnée of the artist's work, a project which had been started by Wilhelm Jähnig. With postmodern questioning of both the stability of meaning and the possibility of metanarratives, new questions were raised. If a fundamental principal of the Romantic (and postmodern) understanding of symbolism is that it "can never be reduced to words," as Henri Zerner and Charles Rosen (*Romanticism and Realism, 1984*) argued, then Börsch-Supan's attempt to treat Friedrich "as an enemy whose code must be cracked" was foolhardy. In his study of Friedrich, Koerner similarly took into account the Romantic inseparability of meaning and its symbolic representation. In his text, Koerner's own voice, his self-conscious use of

language, is a dominant theme in his detailed readings of Friedrich's landscapes as meditations on subjectivity. More recently, Johannes Grave (*Caspar David Friedrich*, 2012) has explored the perspectival ambiguities in Friedrich's paintings. This Romantic concern with the very nature of representation, what Grave deems a change from a process of perception to a self-conscious aesthetic act, also positions Friedrich's work as an important node for questions of modern subjectivity.

Amstutz situates her work in relation to earlier writings on Friedrich in the very first painting she discusses, Friedrich's *Trees and Shrubs in the Snow* (1828), the same painting with which Koerner had begun his book. Koerner reads the work as a meditation on subjectivity, Friedrich's and the viewer's: "Somehow the painting places you. Somehow it singles you out to stand before a thicket." Amstutz is more concerned with Friedrich's attempt to recover "an essential oneness between self and nature" (16) by revealing commonalities between the two. She takes this oneness quite literally in arguing compellingly for parallels between Friedrich's depiction of branches in the painting and scientific illustrations of pulmonary veins and arteries. She draws attention more tentatively to the "organic structure and elasticity" of the branches, "as if they were held erect by a thick circulating fluid rather than rigid wood." Moreover, the patches of red paint in the foreground "resemble gouts of blood, perhaps alluding to a common pattern of circulation between nature's vessels and those of sentient beings" (16). Amstutz's study is full of such visual analogies between Friedrich's depictions of nature and the human body. Her study is also full of tentative language—"as if," "perhaps," "arguably," "conceivably"—a rhetoric of caution that, whether persuading or not, highlights the challenges of using language to capture meaning in Friedrich's landscapes.

While Friedrich's paintings have been related to early nineteenth-century science (for example, Timothy Mitchell's discussion of Friedrich's landscapes and geology), Amstutz's book is the first to assert that Friedrich's paintings are conceptually interrelated to contemporary concerns of Romantic science, more specifically *Naturphilosophie*, a recent topic of interest to historians of science. Robert J. Richards (*The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe*, 2002) has demonstrated how early nineteenth-century proponents of *Naturphilosophie*, like Schelling and Novalis, argued against a mechanical understanding of nature and for a notion of living nature, which exhibits "fundamental organic types, often called 'archetypes,'" found in plant life and the human body. According to Richards, "Nature became for Romantic adventurers the principal resource for the creation of self—a self that hovered just on the horizon of their biological science." For Amstutz, Friedrich was one of these Romantic adventurers, that is, a seeker of self-knowledge through an attempt to see the interconnections between humans and nature. She asserts that Friedrich's interest in trees, for example, "was motivated by the broad cultural understanding of dendrites as an Ur-form, one that points to the essential oneness, both physical and spiritual, between nature and self" (125).

Amstutz's book is organized in five chapters devoted to parallels between Friedrich's works and Romantic science. In the first, she begins with a reading of Friedrich's famous chalk self-portrait in Berlin (ca. 1810) in terms of contemporary phrenology, which postulated that external features are indicative of inner character. She then relates this idea to the physiognomy of landscape, specifically to Friedrich's late work, which she describes as his "search for the deeper meaning behind nature's forms" (47). The

next four chapters elaborate on the relation between morphology and meaning in Friedrich's paintings. Chapter two explores Friedrich's depictions of human forms in nature. In works like the *Chalk Cliffs on Rügen*—not the painting (ca. 1818), but the later watercolour (1825 or later)—and the graphite and sepia drawing *Harz Cave* (after 1811), "anthropomorphic trees, shrubs, rocks, and other natural motifs stand in for the human body" (61). In Chapter three, Amstutz likens Friedrich's complex depictions of branches to skeletons and vascular systems, and his *Hut in the Snow* (1827), a painting of a shack surrounded by trees, to a heart with blood vessels and arteries. In chapter four, these bold analogies continue. In *Willow Bushes with Low Sun* (ca. 1830–35), the sun becomes an eye and the surrounding branches, optical nerves. In *Rocky Ravine with Elbe Sandstone Mountains* (1822–23), the rock formation, which Friedrich altered from earlier more topographical drawings, takes on the appearance of a hand. In the final chapter, Amstutz turns to ideas of mortality through a discussion of Friedrich's cycle of the seasons and depictions of cemeteries. She relates the formal elements in his paintings (the directional flow of water, the depiction of earth) to concerns of *Naturphilosophie*, specifically the physical circumstances of death (decomposition of the body, rot, and decay).

Amstutz supports her readings of Friedrich's paintings through detailed discussions of scientific and philosophical treatises and, as importantly, through comparisons between Friedrich's paintings and other forms of visual culture, including anatomical and religious illustrations as well as prints and paintings by contemporary artists. The diverse nature of her source material—textual and visual—sustains her claim that Friedrich and many of his contemporaries considered science, art, philosophy, and religion not as discrete disciplines but as

parts of a more holistic search for knowledge. Her often novel comparisons between scientific illustrations and the details of Friedrich's paintings are compelling, because her analysis demonstrates a network of multi-directional relations. It is not only that Friedrich's portrayal of branches look like pulmonary veins depicted in scientific treatises, but also that anatomical illustrations of the eye and optical nerves, for example, have the appearance of a flower with petals. Human/nature analogies from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries abound in a way that support Amstutz's thesis that Friedrich's "landscape painting and the life sciences are both underpinned by a particular way of looking at nature, one that views each individual creation as part of an interconnected whole" (8).

The idea of an interconnected whole often leads Amstutz to treat Friedrich's paintings as unified narratives concerned with self-knowledge. The rock formation in *Rocky Ravine with Elbe Sandstone Mountains* is not just analogous to a human hand but becomes for Amstutz the artist's own hand, a "hand of stone," which "stands out as a dismembered relic of the artist's body, as a kind of premature funerary effigy" (174). *Cemetery in the Snow* (ca. 1827) not only alludes to *Naturphilosophie's* understanding of the physical circumstances of death, but is also an allegory. The airy abyss beyond the cemetery gate and the "chromatic continuity" between the grave and the gate tell a story of "the completion of the body's decomposition and return to the atmosphere—the macrocosmic body" (207). In these and other cases, what begins as an attempt to restore a way of looking at Friedrich's paintings becomes an interpretation that tries to unlock a larger meaning.

The strength of Amstutz's book lies in the development of what Michael Baxandall called "the period eye." Understanding the principles

of *Naturphilosophie*, in which forms in nature and the human body were often compared as micro-cosmic parallels to the macro-cosmic whole, forces the viewer to see Friedrich's paintings in a new light. Looking with "Romantic eyes" (15), as Amstutz describes it, is a way to recover how Friedrich intended his paintings to be seen and how his contemporaries (or at least those in his circle) would have seen them. In her introduction, Amstutz suggests that the historical evidence she garners for her readings of Friedrich's paintings may not convince her critics, but her interpretations "are self-consciously meant to approximate the tension between empiricism and speculation upon which *Naturphilosophie* as a method was based." Her book "seeks to recover a way of looking at nature that is almost unimaginable to us today" (17). Describing her method thus, Amstutz suggests that she is restoring what has been concealed by time. The challenge with period-eye arguments, as Baxandall recognized, is the impossibility of overcoming historical distance. As he so eloquently put it in his essay "The Language of Art History," "critical 'tact' and historical 'grasp' appear as very much the same thing." Amstutz's recognition of this methodological quandary emerges in how she frames her argument through uncertainty, Friedrich's and her own. She acknowledges "an element of doubt in Friedrich's project," which is realized through his "visual ambiguity, and the viewer's concomitant hesitation over whether the human form is really there" (87). Her tentative language, discussed above, highlights both her concern with narrow interpretations of Friedrich's paintings (à la Börsch-Supan) and the speculative nature of her enterprise. At the same time, Amstutz's study stays within the realm of art history's humanist tradition (Panofsky's "intuitive aesthetic recreation," for example), which assumes a bridgeable

distance between the historian and the object of study. At one point, Amstutz reflects upon whether Friedrich put hidden forms in his paintings or whether these forms are the result of her own projections. She concludes that Friedrich "re-presented" natural forms "to render legible nature's encrypted code," and, at the same time, it is up to the viewer to find "lingering signs of the hidden life beneath her [nature's] morphology" (86–87). As this passage suggests, Amstutz's dual project offers new insights into Friedrich's paintings by treating them as both documents of the past and as objects that exist in the present. ¶

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Irene Gammel and Suzanne Zelazo  
**Florine Stettheimer: New Directions in Multimodal Modernism**

Toronto: Book\*Hug Press, 2019

314 pp. 23 colour, 27 b/w/illus.

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Margaryta Golovchenko

In the publication that accompanied the first retrospective exhibition of Florine Stettheimer's work at the Museum of Modern Art in 1946, which was curated by her friend Marcel Duchamp, art critic Henry McBride remarked that "Fame is a most uncertain garment. Yet fame, apparently, is what the Museum of Modern Art now desires for the late Florine Stettheimer."<sup>1</sup> Stettheimer's (relative) obscurity at the time was frequently attributed to her personality, which her biographers and other writers describe as a combination of eccentric and stubborn. Exhibitions like the 1995