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Review of *Looking Close and Seeing Far: Samuel Seymour, Titian Ramsay Peale, and the Art of the Long Expedition, 1818-1823* By Kenneth Haltman

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Looking Close and Seeing Far: Samuel Seymour, Titian Ramsay Peale, and the Art of the Long Expedition, 1818-1823. By Kenneth Haltman. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008. xxv + 278 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$60.00.

While the inescapable subjectivism of historical writing has become something of a given in the age of postmodern theory, the objectivity of visual documents, especially in scientific

and technical realms such as topography and natural history, has remained less examined and analyzed. In his challenging and imaginative study of the numerous sketches produced by Samuel Seymour and Titian Ramsey Peale during the survey expedition following the Platte River led by Major Stephen Long (considered to be the first western expedition to include professional artists), Kenneth Haltman skillfully demonstrates not only the complexity of these ostensibly slight and impartial images, but their willful artifice, how they repeatedly acknowledge their status as representation and in turn operated within the larger historical factors governing the exploration and promotion of the American West in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Through careful visual analyses of the work of both Seymour and Peale, Haltman uncovers the formal and conceptual structures motivating their artistic practice. Foremost among these tropes is what Haltman calls “blockage,” which entails the way in which both artists simultaneously stimulate and frustrate the viewer’s desire to see the represented subject with total dominion over it. Trees that impede imaginary entry into the depicted space, rivers intersecting the middle ground, and distant mountains that prevent the eye from traveling beyond them represent some of the most characteristic instances of blockage in the work of Seymour and Peale. As a means of “managing distance,” such examples of blockage could acknowledge the artifice and inevitable mediation in their ostensibly objective images, and in particular the inherent foreignness and fundamental inaccessibility and incomprehension of the subjects they depicted.

Herein lies the essence of Haltman’s title. According to him the artists were engaged in a productively paradoxical practice in which scientific detail (looking close) was in tension with a “visionary poetics” (seeing far) that continuously invested their images with a semantic remainder, something beyond mere scientific transcription. Such a mode of vision was well suited both for the vast sublimity of the Plains and the protracted geological processes that

the survey sought to study and illustrate, as well as for subjects—whether they be Native Americans or vast stretches of Plains or exotic flora and fauna—whose “otherness” could not be easily reconciled within the existing pictorial conventions.

Haltman’s writing represents a deconstructive approach at its best, demonstrating the interrelatedness between texts and images from a variety of discourses both “high” and “low,” while concurrently offering the sort of close reading of these examples that suggests the sort of complexity that typically denotes the presence of “art.” As such, *Looking Close and Seeing Far* offers an important contribution not only to the understanding of the ideological and cultural factors that shaped the settlement of the American West, but, equally important, expands the definition of what should be considered pertinent documents for such analyses.

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