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# Visions of Liberty, Rooms With Views. Squaring The Circle: Harriet Hale Woolley, Past & Present

Art Exhibition at the Fondation des États-Unis, (June 6 - July 31, 2018)

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Views are really crowds - crowds of trees and houses and hills - and are bound to resemble each other like human crowds - and that the power they have over us is sometimes supernatural, for the same reason.

E. M. Forster, A Room with A View (1908)

Lucy Kirkman's *The Process of Painting* (2010)**HARRIET HALE WOOLLEY 2009-2010**

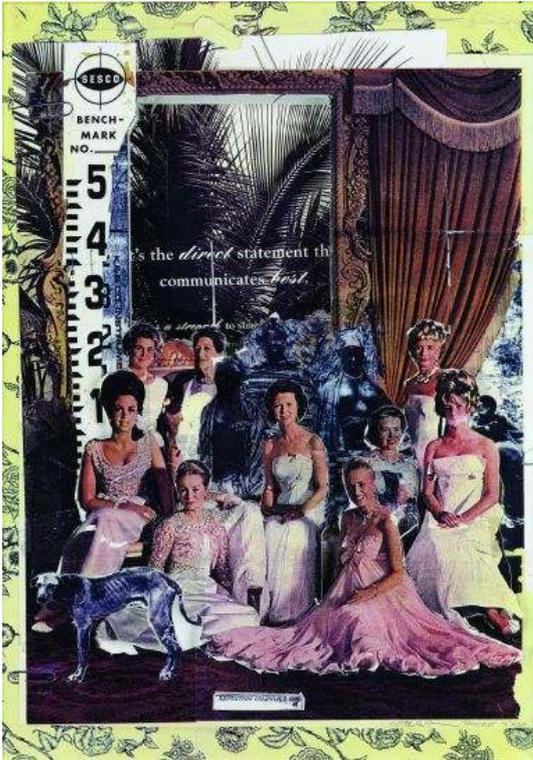
- 1 Since 1933, hundreds of visual artists, and a smaller number of psychiatrists, have had the chance to travel to Paris to live for one year in the the Fondation des États-Unis where they are offered a room of their own and a stipend, and perhaps just as important, a view. And by this I do not just mean the view of the Parc Montsouris that the painters look out on, or the park of the Cité Universitaire that the musicians observe from the other side of the hall, but a view, and viewpoint, that opens up during this year. And just as important as the room and the view is the stipend. If as Virginia Woolf stated, “A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction,” no less can be said for painting and painters (1929). Very little is known about Harriet Hale Woolley, who endowed the grant, but a recent exhibition that gathered together fourteen past recipients of the grant in the main gallery (Edward Bernstein, Sharon Beckman, Ronald Bowman, Tali Gai, Guy Livingston, Edward Lazansky, Maureen O’Leary, Kelly Reedy, Jennifer May Reiland, Taylors Smith, Victor Sparrow, Judy Thomas, Murray Zimiles, and Elizabeth Ward) and offered a glimpse of what her legacy has offered to the artists that have made the Fondation their home, their home in the world.
- 2 This spirit, and the quality of this legacy was present from the beginning of the exhibition even before you enter the main gallery and see Lucy Kirkman’s *The Process of Painting* (2010), which is part of the Fondation’s permanent collection of work bequeathed by artists after their residency. The viewer observes a studio empty save for a chair in the background facing the wall. The upper left hand corner of the canvas is dominated by a black skylight, and on the right-hand side, the outlines of a balcony and the rest of the studio flicker in blue and yellow. Here, the world is the studio. Ms. Kirkman explains “I showed these pieces in the exhibition *A Room of One’s Own With a View*, the name borrowed

from the writings of Virginia Woolf and E.M. Forster about women finding independence and growth in her own space or through travel...In *The Process of Painting* (2010), I studied the large wall of my studio at the Fondation— where I spent many hours sitting in that wooden chair, thinking, and looking at both the wall's qualities and my paintings in progress" (47). This liberty to contemplate is essential in the development of any artist, and if this exhibition had merely gathered past recipients of grants from any residency to trace the influence of their time there, and across generations, it would have offered a reflection on the transformative legacy on the career of the artists. Because of the particular nature of the Harriet Hale Woolley, the exhibition considers not only the history of these artists but their collective history as American artists studying in Paris, and how this tradition has evolved. What does it mean to be an American artist living and working abroad, and what does American art become when the artists are dislocated from the frontiers that define the genre?

- 3 Rather than seeking to respond directly to this question, "Squaring The Circle" attempts to open up a dialogue between artists who share and address a common experience through their work, and to gather together disparate members of a community in the gallery space. The exhibition was conceived when the painter Maureen O'Leary discovered at an opening of Josephine Halverson's new work that she was a fellow Woolley recipient. Ms. O'Leary reached out to Noëmi Haire-Sievers, in charge of cultural programming at the Fondation des Etats-Unis, and together with Paris based artist Tali Gai (and another former Woolley recipient) who curated the exhibition, they worked to weave these threads (lives) together. Maureen O'Leary compared this initiative to Judy Chicago's installation *The Dinner Party* (1974-1979) that creates a potential space for dialogue among women who never had the chance to meet but would have a great deal to say to one another. You can hear this conversation in the gallery where the different works (and artists) speak to one another, and the visitor can eavesdrop on their conversation.
- 4 And perhaps what is so striking about this polyphony is that even given the highly varied nature of the pieces presented, one gets a sense that these artists form a community, even a family. The power of this chorus, each voice resounding in harmony with the others, is also a tribute to Tali Gai's curatorial vision, which opened up dialogue among the pieces and found relationships between them. – Alteronce Gumbay's abstract *Cité Blues* (2017), a study in mood indigo, converses fluently with Edward Lazansky's more figurative landscape, *Edge of The Tonto, Grand Canyon* (1994). Each of these artists work to layer and structure color. Or in the case of Victor Sparrow's and Sharon Beckman's work, they each experiment with collage, a practice that grew out of their residencies in Paris. In *Desmoiselles* (2010), Mr. Sparrow satirizes commercialization of all human activity. He explains: "Back in 1993 [the year of his residency] I was preoccupied with making collages and objects that crossed Edward Steichen's *The Family of Man* and *Sears* catalogues. It seemed to me that museums like the Musée des Arts Africains et Océaniens and "Grands Magasins" like Printemps and Harrod's existed to commodify everything and future anthropologists might have trouble distinguishing between the museums and the shopping centers" (35). For Ms. Beckman, it was not only the experiences that formed her practice, but the found objects and ephemera that she collected during her residency and brought back with her to the States that continue to nourish and guide it. She began her Paris series after the attacks in November 2001, using imagery that evokes her time in New York City during the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. But if Beckman reflects on a

transatlantic climate of fear, her more recent work such as *La Gioconda* (2017), which was presented as part of the exhibition, speaks to the construction of our personal narratives through art. In the case of Beckman, this narrative grows out of objects that have been reappropriated from her past, and represent how her time in France shaped her identity as an artist and as an American.

Victor Sparrow, *Desmoiselles* (2010)



**HARRIET HALE WOOLLEY 1993-1994**

- 5 As American artists who share a common point of narrative convergence, their reflections and the questions they ask one another center less around a national identity than a consideration of the world around them. This meditation is rooted in everyday life – from Ronald Bowen’s almost abstract figurative representation of furniture, *Table Antique* (1998) to Guy Livingston’s *Dichotomy Box 4* (2018) that reunites found objects in a diorama – and grows a desire to navigate and trace our place in the world, as in Judy Thomas’s *Mapping series* that illustrates this impulse by charting the world in color and lines or in Kelly Reedy’s video installation that traces a “golden thread” in the relationship between a mother and daughter (29). The exhibition, rather than framing the work or the artists – boxing them in – finds its center of gravity in different forms of relations.

## View of the exhibition



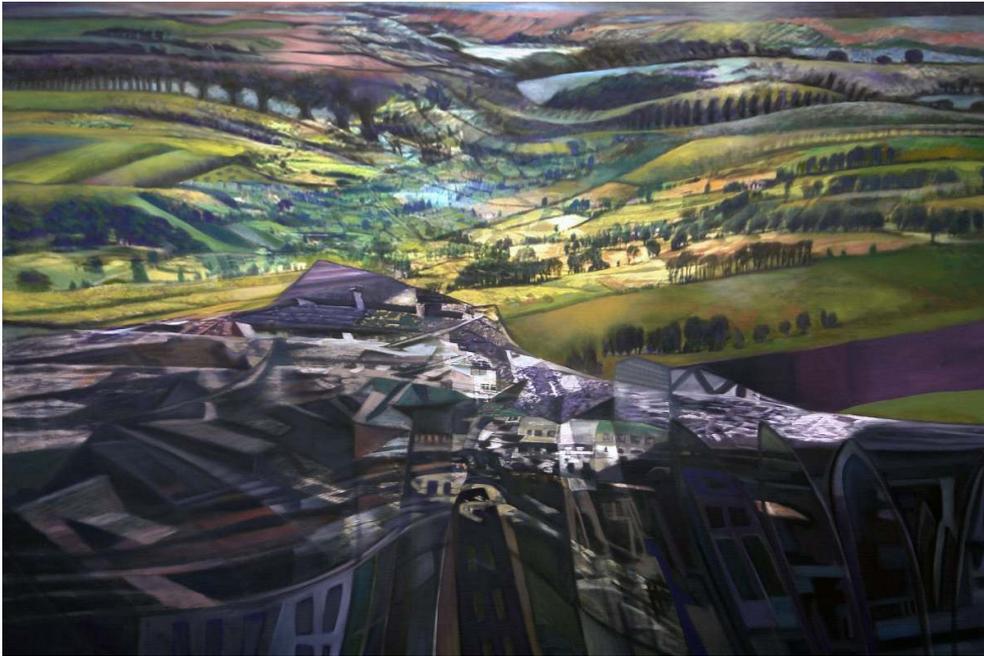
(From left to right) Maureen O’Leary, *Untitled* (2015) Harriet Hale Woolley 1989-1990; Edward Bernstein, *Aqua Alta* (2013) Harriet Hale Woolley 1968-1969; Tali Gai, *Les Oiseaux* (2012-2013) Harriet Hale Woolley 2011-2012; Taylor Smith, *Shiver and Float* (2017) Harriet Hale Woolley 2017-2018; Elizabeth Ward’s *Ice Core* (2012) Harriet Hale Woolley 1984-1985.

**PHOTO: MAUREEN O’LEARY**

- 6 Perhaps one of the most striking aspects of the exhibition is how the artist’s relationship with the natural world evolves over time to reflect its collapse. Works like Edward Lazansky’s vision of *Grand Canyon* or Maureen O’Leary’s portrait of a neighboring tree (*Untitled*, 2015) conjure the beauty of the natural world and reflect our bond with our surroundings. For O’Leary “Each bare tree has its mood and personality – anger, wisdom, inquisitiveness, reservation” (27). When we spoke, she returned to her belief that the vegetal world holds as vast an array of emotions as the human one and recalled how she was touched by the melancholy character (and geometric beauty) of Parisian plane trees in winter whose branches are shorn annually. Other works directly address the effects of climate change as in Edward Bernstein’s *Aqua Alta* (2013) where Venice is glimpsed through the lace curtain of a funeral parlor. In Taylor Smith’s *Shiver and Float* (2017), a cyanotype is used directly on the canvas to superimpose microscopic and macroscopic (aerial) views of ravaged landscapes while incorporating actual foliage. In Elizabeth Ward’s *Ice Core* (2012), she invites the viewer to reflect on the human and the geological in the interior of an ice sheet. Like trees, ice cores reflect climate conditions, and their memory reaches up to eight-hundred-thousand years in the past. Here, the strata of color and lines dissolve into one another and disappear, reminding of us the fleeting nature of our existence, as individuals, and as a species.

A visitor in front of Jennifer May Reiland's *The Fates* (2018)**HARRIET HALE WOOLLEY 2012-2013****PHOTO: JULI ESTRADA**

- 7 But if the natural world, and its fragile balance, is a recurrent preoccupation, human capacity for self-destruction and scars from the successive massacres and genocides of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Europe continue to haunt this family of artists. In Jennifer May Reiland's *The Fates* (2018) we are confronted not only with the violence we inflict on our environment, but that which we direct towards one another. Ms. May Reiland created the piece to commemorate the end of the First World War, and during her residency in 2012-2013 she produced a companion work to mark its beginning. Tali Gai's *Les Oiseaux* (2012-2013) considers the devastation of the Second World War. Her piece draws its inspiration from a passage from Jerzy Kosinkisi's *The Painted Bird*, in which a young boy must cross Europe alone. One day the boy meets a man with a vast aviary; each day the man releases his birds for several hours, but before he does he paints one of the flock in startling colors. When he releases the bird, the others, threatened by its difference, attack and kill it. In Ms. Gai's installation, the cruelty that humans inflict on the natural world and the violence inherent to the natural world meet in a somber dialogue. On the bottom of a square glass vitrine birds are drawn in wan greys, color hiding among the shades; a log surges from the mass of feathers to guard a nest and an egg. Renewal is possible, if uncertain.

Murray Zimiles's *Last Enchantment* (2014)

HARRIET HALE WOOLLEY 1965-1966

- 8 But despite the difficult themes addressed, their ‘treatment’ by the artists, and the possibility to eavesdrop on a conversation on the nature of existence, in all the lights and shadows, it is the lightness of joy – rather than the weight of despair – that radiates from the work. This possibility to take part in the dialogue with the artists and to confront hard realities without being engulfed in them offers the visitor a palpable sense of release, and liberty. We are able to confront the world in its aporias with a sense of ease and fortitude. We are offered the possibility to envision the world differently, and through this change in our perception to alter our relationship with it. In Murray Zimiles’s *Last Enchantment* (2014), we are presented with countryside composed of overlapping images, fracturing our singular point of view and offering us alternate views of our world. The view becomes a refuge, a room we carry with us in our mind’s eye. But this ‘vision’ is not merely a way to filter the world (as we might on Instagram), it allows us freedom of movement we might not otherwise have. Alteronce Gumby’s *Cité Blues* is not only a study in pure color, but revolves around the political implications of color in American culture, and particularly how people of ‘color’ are historically marginalized and exploited; Gumby’s use of color works to reverse the persistent effects of racism, as in his solo exhibition as part of his residency at the Fondation in Spring 2017, “Blackness is Beautiful”.

Alteronce Gumby, *Cité Blues* (2017)



**HARRIET HALE WOOLLEY 2016-2017**

- 9 Each of the artists reunited endows the viewer with a different vision, a different room to carry with them when they return to the world outside the walls of the gallery. It is a breathtaking liberty, and an enormous gift. Perhaps the generosity of the artists is also a testament to the liberty they were offered during their residencies. Each of the artists who took part in the exhibition spoke to how the Harriet Hale Woolley fellowship fundamentally altered their lives and changed their paths. This exhibition was not only a way to gather together a community, but to consider its roots and imagine its growth and radiance *-rayonnement-* in the years ahead.

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## BIBLIOGRAPHY

A full catalog of the exhibition may be found online at: <http://www.feusa.org/squaring-the-circle/>

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## ABSTRACTS

This article is a critical response to an exhibition held at the Fondation des États-Unis (Cité internationale Universitaire) from June 6<sup>th</sup> to July 31<sup>st</sup> 2018 entitled “Squaring The Circle: Harriet Hale Woolley, Past & Present”, which gathered together fourteen past recipients of the Harriet Hale Woolley scholarships in the visual arts. The exhibition focused on the history of the grant and its importance to American artists studying in Paris, as well as what it means to be an American artist living abroad in France. This article takes the pulse of a particular community of artists who are reunited through their work in the exhibition and reflects on their common experience and the dialogue that emerges from their work, and joins them together.

Cet article est un compte rendu analytique d'une exposition qui a eu lieu à la Fondation des États-Unis du 6 juin au 31 juillet 2018 intitulée « Squaring The Circle: Harriet Hale Woolley, Past & Present » et qui a rassemblé quatorze lauréats en arts plastiques de la bourse Harriet Hale Woolley. L'exposition interroge à la fois l'histoire de la bourse et son importance pour les artistes états-unien.nne.s qui ont étudié à Paris, et ce que cela signifie d'être un.e artiste expatrié.e en France. L'article prend le pouls d'une communauté singulière réunie par ses œuvres et s'interroge sur l'expérience commune et le dialogue qui surgit du travail de chacun.e, et qui les lie.

## INDEX

**Subjects:** Trans'Arts

**Mots-clés:** art, bourses, Les États-Unis, exhibitions, expatrié.e.s, France, La Fondation des États-Unis, Paris, résidences

**Keywords:** art, expatriates, Fondation des États-Unis, France, Paris, residencies, scholarships, United States

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