Carving out a Space in Time: Sandra Swan and her Block Island Oeuvre

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Carving out a Space in Time: Sandra Swan and her Block Island Oeuvre

by

Kylie Sheahan Knee

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Art History, Hunter College
The City University of New York

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Thesis Sponsor:

Susanna Cole

Date 5/8/2019

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Howard Michael Singerman

Date 5/8/2019

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my beloved friend Andi Nicole Wallick (7/7/1994-5/20/2018). Your wisdom and strength allowed me to continue on when I felt I could not. Until we meet again.

-Love always, Kylie
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Introduction

The object of nostalgia must be beyond the present space of experience, somewhere in the twilight of the past or on the island of utopia where time has happily stopped, as on an antique clock.¹
Svetlana Boym

Nostalgia is an emotion that every person at one point in their life experiences. This feeling can be generated by different stimulants, one being artwork. The artwork artists produce can convey a sense of nostalgia, whether it be a place from the past, someone’s homeland, or even a land which has never existed. Svetlana Boym believes that “the nostalgic feels stifled within the conventional confines of time and space,” and this interplay of time and space is essential to the emotions that arise in people.² There are geographical locations where nostalgia can be stirred up, places that appear to be lost in time. One of these places is Block Island, RI, (Fig. 1) an island which was “founded” by the Dutch sailor Adrian Block in 1614. To many current visitors of Block Island, it seems as though the “clock runs a good hundred years slow.”³ Sandra Swan, a Block Island artist, has captured through her woodblock prints this sense of nostalgia that overwhelms the island, and how this identity is not in truth what it appears to be.

When looking at Swan’s work, which she began creating during the 1960’s, one does not immediately think she is a contemporary artist. This is due to the appearance of her works, which mostly resemble traditional nineteenth-century lithographs and wood block prints. During the

nineteenth-century, American companies such as Currier and Ives created hundreds of lithographic prints which would depict flat images of ships and buildings, as well as New England rural scenes. Many of their maritime prints depict a profile view of ships and boats, and they have a catalogued quality to them because they are so detailed and flat in their appearance.

Currier and Ives was a printmaking firm based in New York City that was in business from 1835-1907. Currier and Ives was coming up at a time when printmaking was really taking off in the United States, and at their peak of production they were creating 90% of the country’s prints. They were looking to appeal to a wide audience with their prints, and had standardized their prints into two sizes, the smaller size being more affordable to the working class. Currier and Ives chose their subject matters based on what would appeal to their audiences, and one of those recurring subjects were current events. At this time many newspapers did not have accompanying images, so this gave people a chance to truly see the action. Currier and Ives also created more peaceful images for people to collect, such as New England rural scenes, city scenes, and maritime imagery. The connection between Swan’s work and Currier and Ives prints is essential because the tradition of simple form still remains from the nineteenth-century within Swan’s works, and in turn provides her work with a catalogued quality that she uses to formulate the Block Island narrative. Yet, there is something which grounds Swan’s work partly in the

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8 Ibid.
Contemporary art world as well. Part of Swan’s process is that she scavenged Block Island for planks of wood to repurpose and use to carve her woodcuts. This technique of re-appropriating resources is something that had become popular during the 1960’s and 1970’s, right around the time Swan began her artistic career.

Swan started creating her woodcuts at a time when the art world was experiencing many new movements. Artists, such as Andy Goldsworthy, were creating works during the 60’s and 70’s which involved using the landscape and natural materials from the earth to create sculptures and structures within nature. Goldsworthy was part of this post-minimal movement, and he focused on connections with land through materiality. Goldsworthy was known to stress the idea that in order to create an artwork of nature, one needs to take inspiration and materials directly from the source. Goldsworthy would rather use natural materials instead of man-made objects in order to create a true connection with his subjects. Many of his works also depict the passing of time and decay in the natural world. His work *Sycamore Leaves edging the roots of the Sycamore Tree, Hampshire, 1 November, 2013*, (Fig. 2) is just one example of how Goldsworthy took beauty from nature and incorporated it into his ephemeral work. There is a directness to this approach, and a message of the power of nature. There are several parallels between Swan’s and Goldsworthy’s works. Swan chooses found wood from the island to directly connect to the place and time she was working in as well. Both Goldsworthy and Swan’s works demonstrate the cycle of life through their choices of medium, and stress the importance land holds within our


11 Ibid.
world. Through this, Swan’s work resembles tradition, yet reflects the time she began her work in through her direct choice of medium. The scavenged wood makes Swan’s work stand out because she is literally weaving a piece of the island into each of her artworks, connecting the past history of these wood pieces with her contemporary woodcuts.

What makes Swan’s art stand out from the rest during the 1960’s and 1970’s is the meshing of nineteenth-century tradition with the new movements and artistic methods of the time. This allows Swan to retain the feeling of tradition that floods her work, yet also helps her contemporary audience connect to it and make it relevant during that time period. Swan incorporates the scavenged wood reflecting post-minimal artists like Andy Goldsworthy, while also looking at nineteenth-century woodblock prints used for book and newspaper illustration, as well as traditional lithography works of ships and architecture from Currier and Ives. Swan’s work is at a middle ground, a place between the Contemporary world she lives in and the nineteenth-century artistic tradition so many artists learn about. This liminal space allows her works to float between the creation and destruction of myths, as well as helps her place one foot in the past and one in the present. Nostalgia and myth have a place within the contemporary works of Swan due to this meshing of tradition and the contemporary moment. This nostalgia presented about Block Island however can be dissected and unhinged, and this is something Swan’s work uncovers.

**Nostalgia and Myth**

Swan navigates the narrative of Block Island through her woodcuts, neither outwardly supporting nor breaking it apart. This story of Block Island can be expanded and applied to many other New England shore towns as a whole. When these communities were first growing during
the nineteenth-century, it was a time that depended greatly on the land and what it had to offer. Fishing communities such as Block Island relied heavily on the catch of the day and how the fishing season was doing to sustain the community financially. This fishing practice has in our world today become a tourist attraction rather than a necessity. What was once a commercial venture is now a dock-side attraction, where a tourist can pay a certain amount of money and say they had the experience of “catching” fresh fish on Block Island.

This change in original purpose has become a theme rampant in these shore town areas. Horses that were once used for farming and transportation are now used to sell pony rides to island vacationers. The beautiful stone walls that once represented property lines have now become an advertisement, simply for aesthetics rather than purpose. Block Island has lost the true working elements that once represented the island, and replaced them with a nostalgic veneer to attract tourists. The privileged people of the U.S. have turned sustenance into a leisure activity. This immersion into a constructed eighteenth/nineteenth-century world has provided Block Island with the title the “land time forgot.” The truth is Block Island and other New England shore towns have become illusions that reflect a time from the past. An amusement park of sorts, portraying a version of eighteenth and nineteenth-century resort towns.

Swan’s woodcuts touch on the different elements Block Island promotes that make up its identity. Block Island is presented as a shore town, with an abundant landscape, that is populated with Victorian architecture. Swan’s works catalogue these topics without denying or advertising them. Her prints are not propaganda for Block Island, but rather a cataloguing of what the island looks like today. Swan’s work documents what she saw without attaching the nostalgic mask Block Island has created for itself. Her work reveals that in today’s world everything is for sale, even invented common historical memories, which are part of the fiction of the collective
unconsciousness.

In order to better understand how Block Island has created the idea of itself as a place that defies change and outside stimuli, it is important to understand the word nostalgia and look back at the history of where it originated. By digging into this definition, we can see how Swan’s works navigate this Block Island story.

The term nostalgia was first coined by the Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer in 1688, and it was believed to be an ailment of the mind, and in turn of the body. Hofer wrote his *Dissertatio Medica de Nostalgia, oder Heimweh* in 1688, and he focused his work on the lust for home that soldiers, students and servants had at this time. Hofer began his dissertation with questions about language, and how he chose the word Nostalgia, instead of just using the word homesickness. He wrote that the Swiss word “*Heimweh* is a word which the gifted Helvetians have introduced not long since into their vernacular language, chosen from the grief for the lost charm of the Native Land.” Hofer explains that he preferred the word nostalgia for his purposes, because there was no particular name for this emotion in medicine at the time. This word nostalgia for Hofer is “composed of two sounds, the one of which is *Nostos*, return to the native land; the other, *Algos* signifies suffering or grief; so that thus far it is possible from the force of the sound nostalgia to define the sad mood originating from the desire to return to one’s native land.”

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15 Ibid.

Nostalgia is a scientific computation of longing, rather than the simple phrase for missing home that most people associate it with.

Symptoms of nostalgia included persistent thoughts about home, melancholy, insomnia, anorexia, weakness, anxiety, lack of breath, and palpitations of the heart. Hofer also believed that nostalgia was a disease of the imagination, in that those who suffered from it fantasized about home, “leaving no psychological space for thoughts about the present world.” It was said that the best cure for the “disease” was for one to return to their homeland, supporting a strong sense of nationalism. Nostalgia today can be seen as an emotion, a “wistful longing for the past.” These emotions can be sold to anyone who may desire them. In today’s world attractions can be created to mimic the effects of nostalgia, whether those emotions are genuine or manufactured. Block Island immerses visitors in this fake world of the past in order to produce these emotions.

Swan’s work references the nostalgic identity Block Island and other New England shore towns have created, and she does this through her careful choices of subject matter as well as her contemporary technique. Boym talks about nostalgia as a creation of a certain myth or fantasy that has been spun about a place in time, and this is true of Block Island today. The myth of Block Island as a place stuck in the past is still perpetuated, yet in reality the island has become modernized in many areas. The original, more scientific definition of nostalgia stresses the two


18 Ibid.


key components that Hofer notes which are the return to one’s native land and grief. These two components are still present in Boym’s definition, however she focuses on the idea of myth. Hofer’s definition of nostalgia focuses on the longing for a home that still existed for people, while Boym turns it into a home that was created in our minds, or a home from a different time all together. For Swan’s work, home fits in more with Boym’s idea, because Block Island has a created an identity centered around this “created sense of home,” a constructed identity of a place stuck in time.

Nostalgia in an art historical context became prevalent during the nineteenth-century in American art, particularly after the Civil War. After the war, Americans gained a strong sense of nationalism and wanted to push the myth of the “American Dream.” During this time “purchasers wanted to view their rapidly expanding country through rose-colored glasses; they welcomed a new mythology for a new democratic nation.”21 Companies such as Currier and Ives used this sudden resurgence of nostalgia within many of their prints. During the nineteenth-century, New England was portrayed as “Old New England,” which was observed through travel books and advertisements.22 This “Old New England” provided a sense of longing for the past and promoted “virtuous simplicity, rural independence, and class harmony.”23 Currier and Ives’ prints glorified “Old New England’s” rural past that was rapidly disappearing.24 They would

21 Ibid.

https://scholarworks.umass.edu/dissertations_1/1/1148

https://scholarworks.umass.edu/dissertations_1/1/1148

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portray values such as love of freedom, self-reliance, piety and warm community traditions. This was in stark contrast to what New England was really like during this time. New England was extremely industrialized, and manufacturing had increased by sixty percent. People wanted to escape the cities and go back to the agrarian rural towns. These towns, which were becoming less populated, took advantage of this nostalgia in the air, and they would turn historic buildings into hotels. Currier and Ives *New England Scenery* (1865) by Fannie Farmer is a perfect example of this reminiscence in art work (Fig. 3). The scene is agrarian, white, protestant, and native born, with no immigrant workers in sight. Children can roam freely in this “Old New England” world and everything appears perfect. The myth of the “American Dream” is no doubt present and appealed to nineteenth-century people of the time. The “American Dream” was a rags to riches story, which implied that anyone could “make it” in the U.S. through hard work. The vision of a white picket fence that surrounds a yard with a dog on the porch was so attractive to nineteenth-century Americans because of the stability it represented. Of course, in reality the “American Dream” was only geared towards certain races, ethnicities and genders, and this dream was not a democratic one. The “American Dream” is also part of the story of Block Island in that Block Island was supposed to be a place of tradition and stability, yet in reality it is a vacation area geared towards the middle and wealthy classes, and in particular the Caucasian ethnicity. The “American Dream” and the story Block Island demonstrate that when you scratch the surface, several cracks in these concepts seem to reveal themselves.

Swan’s choices of subject matter are also shrouded in pretense. Swan chose subjects such

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25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.
as famous historical ferry boats, or the largest hotel to ever sit on Block Island, and these symbols represent the history that has been created about Block Island, the “tourist destination.” Swan demonstrates both decay and preservation through her choices of scavenged wood, and the ghostly qualities she provides her work through shading and black and white coloring links to the nineteenth-century printmaking style. Swan’s works straddle the line between history and contemporary society in order to document the true appearance of Block Island as a contemporary place shrouded in a veil of tradition. Her work is not meant to support nor challenge this idea, but rather note its presence and catalogue its images.
Chapter 1: Block Island: History of the Myth

It is important to review the creation of Block Island’s history briefly before discussing Swan’s work because the construction of Block Island’s history lays out the aura created around the island. Block Island has maintained the reputation for many decades as a place that has not been touched by the hands of time. It is a location viewed as trapped in a time capsule from the early days of the island, placed in our contemporary and progressive world. This depiction of Block Island is in truth inaccurate, and Swan’s work chronicles this reality without outwardly critiquing it by depicting flaws within the identity Block Island has shaped for itself. The historical context of the island is important when looking at Swan’s work so one can do so through a critical lens rather than a rose colored one.

It is told that the island was created out of a glacier from thousands of years ago, which left rolling hills and ponds, thus creating Block Island. The story of the island that we are familiar with today begins when the island was explored in 1614 by the Dutch sailor Adrian Block, and was settled in 1661, beginning the documented history of the island. The island was sold to 16 settlers from the Massachusetts Bay Colony for $25 each, and many of these families are still on the island today.

When the French navigator Verrazano explored the island, he described it as “full of hills, covered with trees [and] well-peopled.” When Verrazano described the island as “well-peopled,” he was referring to the indigenous peoples that populated the island at that time in

27 “Block Island History,” Block Island Historical Society, https://blockislandhistorical.org/history/


29 Ibid.
1514. At this point in the story, most authors skip forward to the European settlers of the island and how they fared after they landed. This is where another element of falsehood or erasure comes into the history of Block Island. Most historical information leaves out the first individuals who inhabited the island, the Niantic and Naragansett tribes, and the plight they endured at the hands of the settlers. This is a problem that also exists within the history of the United States and its relationship to the indigenous peoples that were first inhabiting these lands. This ignored history is important to Swan’s works because it is the foundation of what the Block Island story is built on. The island’s settlers rewrote the history of Block Island from the start by destroying the indigenous population and then writing them out of its history.

Block Island was first inhabited by the Niantic and Naragansett tribes, and they are said to have lived on the island from as far back as 1300 BC. These tribes called the island the Manisses, which translates to “Island of the Little God.” The tribes lived largely by hunting deer, catching fish and shellfish, and growing corn, beans and squash.30 They had migrated from the forest to coastal areas in order to take advantage of seasonal resources.

The trouble between the indigenous people and the European settlers began over a fight fabricated by the Europeans. This particular point in the island’s history is vital because once again we see how the Europeans used a lie in order to formulate a new origin history for the island. It was written that the Manisseans murdered a trader from Boston by the name of Captain John Oldham for his goods.31 When Oldman’s body was discovered, it was disfigured, which was not customary for indigenous people to perform on a dead body. The Manisseans were

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30 “Year Round Manissean Village Site,” Block Island Historical Society, https://blockislandhistorical.org/history/

31 Reverend S.T. Livermore, A History of Block Island: from its discovery, in 1514, to the present time, 1876, Hartford, CT: Lockwood & Brainard, Co., 1877, 70.
blamed nevertheless, and revenge was on the minds of the people of Massachusetts. As a retaliation, Massachusetts sent Colonel John Endicott and his crew to “punish” the indigenous people, and further explore the island.\textsuperscript{32} The crew killed all of the warriors from the tribe, and took the women and children as captives. They also destroyed the tribe’s year’s harvest of corn, and burned their mats and wigwams. The indigenous people did not retaliate and fight back with the Americans because they believed in self-preservation, and knew that the Americans had stronger and more dangerous weapons.

This type of European interaction with indigenous peoples happened not just in Block Island, but all-over New England. Jean M. Obrien discusses in his book \textit{Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians Out of Existence in New England}, several different stories that New England colonies created in order to justify their taking over someone else’s land. Settlers would form what Obrien terms as “replacement narratives” as a way to briefly explain the existence of the indigenous people and their sudden departure.\textsuperscript{33} There is a selective telling by New England colonies of their relationship to the indigenous population, which includes a simple acknowledgement of the people’s existence in order to begin their own master narrative of New England.

There is a common story within these New England areas about how the indigenous peoples disappeared. The settlers claimed more often than not that the indigenous people slowly began to die out because of their “uncivilized ways,” and the Europeans survived due to their

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.

modernity. The Europeans “overcame” the “savage foes” that inhabited these lands, and this explained why the Europeans survived and the indigenous people did not. Just like in all the other New England areas, the indigenous population of Block Island eventually was destroyed, and the true history of what happened to them goes against the history of Block Island that has perpetuated over the years. When the settlers won their battle against the indigenous people, they took them on as slaves, and many laws were created to restrict their freedom. In 1662, the tribes numbered around 12,000-15,000, then in 1700 they dropped to around 300, however by 1774 their numbers were down to 51. Samuel T. Livermore associates the disappearance of the natives with three things; the loss of their lands, their subjugation to slavery and their chief’s need of them on the main land. The Block Island tale paints the island as grounded in tradition and dedicated to the island’s history, yet omits the Manisseans and their destruction. This demonstrates another desire by the Europeans to control and write a favorable and profitable narrative for the new colony and eventually the nation. If the island were true to its history and traditions, they would have to have a different history, which in turn would make the traditions no longer be validated. The island also might have acknowledged the story of what really happened to the indigenous people, and teach why this was wrong and should be discouraged in the future. Block Island wants to ignore the harsh reality of their treatment of the indigenous people, and because of this their story fails to tell the truth.

This issue of the exclusion of the indigenous people within the art historical world does not start with Swan, but rather has a long and unfortunate history. Art historian Elizabeth Hutchinson addresses this issue in her book *The Indian Craze: Primitivism, Modernism, and Transculturation in American Art*, and she notes how even in the early twentieth-century Native

\[34\] Ibid.
American art, style and objects were present in mainstream art historical society, however they have been left out of the canon of Western Art History.\textsuperscript{35} People have not taken Native American art seriously as an artform, and in turn wrote them out of history. Most of their work have been categorized as “craft” rather than art, and this is strikingly similar to women’s “decorative” art work that was marginalized for years within the art community.

This issue of writing Native American art out of the Western canon can be viewed from an even larger scale, where Native American history has been marginalized and left out from mainstream history. This history is important to Swan’s work because the idea of myth is so strong within Block Island that this type of marginalization is accepted. The indigenous people of the island were written of through a negative light and then cast away without another thought for thousands of years. Their story is required in order to understand the dynamics of Block Island, and how the area developed into what it is today.

Swan’s work does not touch on the ugly truth of the creation of the island, but rather hovers in the liminal space between the idealized history of the island and the unwritten history of its indigenous people. Swan is not necessarily ignoring the obliteration of the indigenous people, but rather allowing it to remain a controversial topic for someone else. Swan was not looking to make any political statements with her artwork, and in many ways she uses the contemporary time period she is in to place herself and her work outside of the innerworkings of the myth. Swan’s work dives not only into the historical legend of Block Island, but also the subjects which are seen as main components to the island’s identity.

Chapter 2: Seafaring

The history of seafaring on Block Island is one of the key components to Block Island’s identity. Swan chose the subject matter of seafaring and maritime images due to the island’s extensive history with the sea, and the many legends that provide Block Island with an identity that still exists today. Her work touches on the maritime myth created by Block Island itself, the belief that the island’s economy still runs on fishing. The main occupations for year-round residents during the early years of settlement were farming and fishing. As discussed earlier, Block Island has turned fishing into a tourist attraction rather than something practiced for survival. There is an allure for people to be self-sufficient and live off of the land. “Old New England” comes to mind here, and visitors today still crave that experience of a “farm-to-table” existence. In reality, most of the fish served in the restaurants on Block Island have been imported from the main land or are flown in from a distance. The functions and purposes that each of the vessels Swan draws are no longer active, yet Block Island promotes seafaring as a major asset to their character. Formally, Swan’s works look back to traditional maritime works, and this allowed her to create a catalogued appearance of the so called essential elements to Block Island.

Swan’s work can be linked to traditional maritime artwork through several examples, one being the innovation of Scrimshaw which came about during the nineteenth-century. Scrimshaw was a type of carving done by deep water whaling vessels during the nineteenth-century.36 (Fig. 4) These works were typically created by sailors and whale-men, and the earliest example was created in 1817.37 Scrimshaw is connected to Swan’s artwork because of the materials used.

Sailors would take materials from the sea in order to create these Scrimshaw works, and they would use found whale bones mostly as their medium.\textsuperscript{38} This ties in directly with Swan’s scavenging approach when she would find planks of wood throughout Block Island to create her works. The actual technique of Scrimshaw can be compared to Swan’s woodcut process as well, because of the use of one’s hands. The sailors would carve the image into the whale bone with tiny instruments they crafted themselves, and the process was a long and painstaking one.

Swan’s woodcut process is similar in that she has to chip away at a single block of wood for months to create her detailed images. There is a certain nostalgia in the process of woodcuts and Scrimshaw because this was before the use of machines, and on these whaling vessels sailors had to rely on their eyes and dexterity in order to create these extremely detailed works.

Out of Scrimshaw one can see a distinct scene type that emerged within New England seafaring painting and printmaking. This particular style that came about was focused on profile images of large ships at sea, many of which had other seafaring symbols and writing.\textsuperscript{39} Many of the later maritime Scrimshaw subjects became action scenes on the water, yet they still all had the same detailed ship depictions within.\textsuperscript{40} These elements went on to appear in other maritime works such as Currier and Ives prints of ships, as well as other paintings during the nineteenth-century that retained that traditional view of a ship at sea. Swan’s works reflect the formal style of Scrimshaw ships through the immense detail as well as the flat profile depictions of these vessels. Swan’s woodcut technique is also tied to the Scrimshaw technique because of the

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.


tradition and authenticity it evokes.

One type of vessel Swan emphasizes is the historical fishing boat. Swan focuses on three different types of boats in order to catalogue the running history of Block Island, and what ships have been important to them throughout their history. Swan’s work *Betty B.* (1985, Figs. 5-6) is a woodblock print that speaks to the island’s relationship with the sea. This print is 37 x 50 inches, and its subject matter is of the Betty B. boat, which was built in the 1940s for Linus Dodge of Block Island. This boat was part of the fishing fleet for a number of years, and the fishing fleet is a vital part of the island’s history and survival. We will later compare Swan’s work *Betty B.* visually to Scrimshaw, and the similarities in structure and composition.

The Betty B.’s primary history and purpose was being part of the fishing fleet on Block Island. When Swan encountered the Betty B. it was on Cape Cod, out of the water and under repair. The boat no longer possessed the purpose of a fishing fleet vessel, but was rather a fossil on land of what once was. Swan even chose to draw the boat while it was on land being repaired instead of placing it on the water and in action. This boat was no longer functioning as a simple sea vessel, and Swan’s depiction demonstrates this change. At first, Swan said that she was “disappointed the boat was out of the water,” however, while she “gazed upon the structure [she] saw the graphic interest the figures and objects possessed on land.” Within the print, Swan has drawn the owner of the boat working on the vessel towards the rear, and she also drew in Linus Dodge, who at the time was 92 years old and living on Block Island. Swan added Linus’ dog McGregor to the print as well so there could be three figures present. One can get a sense of the geometrical character this print possesses when first looking at it. The ropes included at the top

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41 Sandra Swan, Book of Prints, in the author’s possession.

42 Ibid.
of the mast, which then stretch out to the corners of the ship provide a sense of scale, as well as create triangular shapes that encompass the print, and lead the eye downwards to the front of the vessel. Swan decided to draw the boat on an angle going back into the distance of the print, which creates a sense of depth for the viewer. The inclusion of the figures in the print also allows the viewer to determine the size and scale of the boat. Swan decided in this print, as in many of her others, not to include a floor or ground surface beneath the figures. This decision emphasizes the shape of the vessel and does not assign a clear geographical location to the scene.

The inclusion of a historical figure ties this print in with the 1940s, as well as the history of the fishing fleet. The island relied on fishing as their main source of trade since at least the late seventeenth-century. In 1670, the first legislative act for constructing a harbor indicates only one reason for this which was “encouraging fishing designs.”

43 Fifty years after this was built, the fishing business was well established, and in 1723, a legislative act was created to build a new pier, and this reasoning was “for the want of a pier at said Island, for the encouragement of the navigation of this Colony, especially the fishery, which is begun to be carried on successfully, &c.”

44 This legislation demonstrates the importance fishing held to the Block Island community, and how heavily they relied upon it. Residents would go out during the spring and the fall for their principal fishing seasons, yet there was fishing year round. The boats that the island mainly used for fishing were very unique in that they had “keels, at an angle of 45 degrees with which rise the stern and stem posts, with ‘lapstreak’ sides of cedar, with bows and sterns nearly alike,

43 Ibid.

44 Livermore, A History of Block Island: from its discovery, in 1514, to the present time, 1876, Hartford, CT: Lockwood & Brainard, Co., 1877, 34.
open, with two masts, and narrow, tapering sails, of one to four tons burthen." These boats were said to be extremely safe, and of course ideal for fishing the island. Unfortunately, during the 1930s the island was hit by the Depression and the Hurricane of 1938. This put a serious strain on the fishing business, and what was even more destructive was that many young men left the island at this time during WWII.

The Betty B. can also be compared in style to different Scrimshaw works. One such work is titled Dutch Whaling: Fluytschips and a Boat Going on a Whale, by William Gilkerson (1936, Fig. 7). This Scrimshaw work was carved into a whale tooth, and the image is wrapped completely around. On one side of the tooth there is a boat which is shown from a diagonal angle on some rough water. What is visually similar in this Scrimshaw work compared to the Betty B. is the way the ship is depicted. Both ships are shown from a diagonal, and in turn they both go back into space and allude to there being more expanse behind the boat. The artist Gilkerson was known to have a “relentless pursuit of naval architectural accuracy,” mixed with whimsy. This accuracy is evident when examining the tooth, and Swan’s Betty B. possesses that same highly detailed appearance. As mentioned earlier, the process of creating Scrimshaw is an extremely similar process to Swan’s woodcuts, where both artists would use found objects as the canvas of their works. Swan’s visual and technical similarities to Scrimshaw demonstrates her attention to traditional maritime artwork, and the importance this history holds for her works.

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45 Livermore, A History of Block Island: from its discovery, in 1514, to the present time, 1876, Hartford, CT: Lockwood & Brainard, Co., 1877, 44.

46 “Fishing Fleet,” Block Island Historical Society, https://blockislandhistorical.org/history/

47 Ibid.

The history of the Betty B., as well as the maritime history of Block Island plays into this prolonged identity of Block Island as reliant on fishing. Swan recognizes the importance of seafaring to the island within the Betty B. print, yet she documents the change in the boat’s function through its placement out of water. Swan could have chosen to draw the vessel floating on the water, yet she stuck to her catalogued documentation of what she saw in reality. The self-sufficient community identity is cracked, and the truth can be interpreted from Swan’s print of the Betty B.

Swan chose particular ships such as privately owned boats and public ferries in order to catalogue the breadth of Block Island’s seafaring history. Her most well-known seafaring work is of the Yankee Ferry, and the rich history behind the life of the ferry furthers the perpetual inaccuracy of the nature of Block Island seafaring. What the Yankee has become today shatters this image, and proves everything is commodifiable.

Swan’s decision to depict the Yankee ferry can be linked to the history of the ferry boat in itself. The utilization of the ferry has been around since the times of Ancient Greece, and is seen through the story of Charon. The character of Charon was the ferryman of Hades, who the Greeks believed ferried the souls of the dead across the infernal river, which separates the world of the living from the dead.\textsuperscript{49} Charon is a grim figure, and he was often depicted in the art of the Renaissance.\textsuperscript{50} (Fig. 8) Charon appears in Dante’s \textit{Inferno} as the boatman who is unwilling to transport Dante across the three infernal rivers of Hell. Dante describes this grim figure saying, “Charon, demonic form with eyes of burning coal, collects them all, beckoning, and each that


lingers, with his oar strikes.” Wick Griswold and Stephen Jones in their book *Connecticut River Ferries*, also describe Charon’s similarity with New England Ferry boat captains in terms of payment. Griswold and Jones note how historically ferry captains have been known to become impatient when the fare was not paid by passengers. In the case of Charon, payment was expected, and it was customary to place a silver coin under the tongue or between the teeth of the corpse in order to pay the fare. While Swan does not depict a particular captain running the Yankee, it is prudent to note the different traditions that carried over from so long ago. Block Island wants to be viewed within this timeless history. From this Greek myth, one can gather how important the job and transaction of the ferry was, because it was the vessel that transported people between the world of the living and the dead. Swan treats her depiction of the Yankee ferry in a similar mythological way, elevating it as an extremely important vessel and symbol to Block Island.

The *Yankee* (Figs. 9-10, 1977) print itself is on a large scale of 69 x 31 inches, and Swan has left no detail out in capturing every inch of the boat. The *Yankee* is a one-block woodcut, and Swan carved this out of a 14’ x 3 1/2’ hard pine board which she cut into three separate blocks. The wood grain from the original wood block Swan carved this image on provides the boat with the same grain markings, making the image even more life-like through the striations on the wood of the boat. Like Goldsworthy’s interventions within landscape, Swan wanted to capture Block Island as a location through her choice of material. The features of the wooden plank Swan chose brings true authenticity to her print because she went directly to the source, a similar

51 Ibid.

mindset Goldsworthy had. These same wood striations also give reference to the tactile process that Swan uses to make each print. The wood grain marks on the hull of the boat are not perfectly straight, but rather random and sporadic. The hard grain from the wood board gives the print a realistic brightness and movement. Swan carved out every single window on the boat, and because the entire print is essentially taken up by the structure, it further promotes the status and importance of the history this vessel carries with it. Like the Betty B. Swan has chosen to isolate the vessel in this print, where it is essentially floating in mid-air without any landscape behind it. There is no way to place the ferry in any particular time nor any particular location because of this isolation, and the recognition of the island solely on the Yankee itself.

The long history of the Yankee ferry, which was afloat for around 108 years, is a large part of why Block Island still associates with it today. The ship was built in 1907, and it was first named the Machigonne by the ship builders Neafie and Levy of Philadelphia. (Fig. 11) The first job this ferry had was as a passenger ferry for Maine’s calendar islands and for Boston harbor until WWI. In 1917, the ship was acquired by the US Navy, and named USS Machigonne. (Fig. 12) In 1921, the boat was bought by John E. Moore, and sailed to New York harbor, where it brought newly arriving immigrants from Ellis Island to the shores of Manhattan. (Fig. 13) In 1929, the ship was renamed Hook Mountain, and went between Battery

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54 National Historic Registration Document and Description, October 13, 1992.


Park, Liberty Island and Governors Island as an expedition boat.\textsuperscript{57} Decades later, the boat was bought by John Wronowski, and named the \textit{Block Island}, and it took people from the island to the mainland. The boat was once again pulled into WWII, and it was named \textit{League Island} in Europe, where it was given a diesel fuel engine instead of steam propulsion. Finally, after the war, it was named the \textit{Yankee}, and brought people from Providence to Block Island until 1983.\textsuperscript{58}

The \textit{Yankee} has many structural similarities to maritime prints from the nineteenth-century, namely Currier and Ives prints. Currier and Ives presents their maritime work in two different fashions; the stable catalogued ship and ships in action. Swan’s work reflects their stationary portrayals of vessels in many different ways. For example, the print \textit{New York Ferry Boat} (1873, Fig. 14), is set up in an almost identical way to Swan’s \textit{Yankee}. \textit{New York Ferry Boat} is shown from a profile view, and it seems that Currier and Ives was more focused on cataloguing the type of vessel this was, from all of the windows and levels of the boat, even down to the name of the ship. Swan creates a similar view with the \textit{Yankee}, where the viewer is provided immense detail and documentation with each line Swan etches in to the board. These two prints could be placed side by side in a catalogue of historical ferries from the East Coast. Swan’s connection to past art historical movements provides her work with that sense of nostalgia that relates back to the view of Block Island as a window into another world. The Yankee is shown in black and white, and when viewers look at the work, old maritime prints such as \textit{New York Ferry Boat} surface in their minds because of the striking visual similarities.

The print of the Yankee also speaks to the relationship of the ferry with Block Island. The


\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
ferry is an interesting vessel because its connection to the island is one of transportation rather than destination. The ferry never actually touches the island, yet it is one of the sole ways to gain access to the isolated space. The ferry is its own entity, inhabits its own territory, and there is a relationship of reliance that is contracted between the vessel and the traveler. It had the occupation of transporter, historic symbol, postal service and time teller for the residents of Block Island. The liminal space of water is something else that is important when thinking of the relationship between the ferry and the island. Bodies of water can be seen as the transitory space between two different locations. American artists have long used water within their works to symbolize a certain middle ground, an indication of what will come next. This anticipation draws the viewer in and provides a further dynamic of what the painting means. This role of water can be applied to the role of the ferry because ferries can run for several hours between locations. This time out on the water is that moment of stillness, a sort of anticipation for what is to come.

In the 1980s, Block Island began to take away the old ferry boats one by one, including the Yankee, which was the first to go in 1983. It is said that people on the island could actually tell time by the Yankee because the boat only made one trip a day, which was a long four hour haul up to Narragansett Bay. The Yankee has a definitive black stripe on her hull, and when people saw the boat coming across the water they knew it was between 3:45-3:55pm. This


61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.
would in turn signal whether it was time for someone to leave the beach, go back to work, or begin their night out at the bars.\textsuperscript{63} This use of the ferry as a time teller perpetuates the idea of Block Island as a symbol of the past, perhaps from an early industrial time period, where they tell the time of day through a transportation system rather than a phone or digital clock. This “early industrial” story of the island is pushed even further because it relates back to a time with limited technology and when people relied on symbols such as the Yankee passing through at 3:45-3:55 in order to tell the time of day.

Currently, the Yankee is configured as a residence with eleven bedrooms. In 2003, Victoria and Richard Mackenzie-Childs bought the Yankee and renovated it with their own “creative touch.”\textsuperscript{64} (Fig. 15) The Yankee was featured on the HGTV network as a live in residence, and has become listed on the National Register of historic places.\textsuperscript{65} The interior of the vessel has completely been transformed into a living space with the quirky decorations of the Mackenzie-Childs, yet they have still preserved some nautical elements to retain the ferry’s history. (Fig. 16) The Yankee is listed for sale by Franklin Ruttan Unique Property Specialists, and the asking price is $2.37 million.\textsuperscript{66} To view the Yankee as a commodity today is rather disconcerting because it takes away from the history of the vessel, and arguably devalues the status of what this ferry represents. The Yankee is the oldest ferry that transported passengers from Ellis Island, yet can be purchased for only $2.37 million? The history of Ellis Island is

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{65} Letter to James Gallagher from the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, May 8, 1992. \url{www.mackenziechildsyankeeferry.com/Yankee%20History%203.pdf}

something extremely important to the history of the United States, and the large transportation of
immigrants that make up our country today. The Yankee was a vessel entrusted with this job, and
this provides the boat with a sense of honor and a clear place within the history of the United
States. This shift from historical figure to sellable commodity undercuts the fabled status built up
around the Yankee. Swan’s work does not outwardly elevate the Yankee as this grandiose
historical vessel, but it also does not show the sellable object it has become either. Swan is
floating in the space between the idolized Yankee and the Yankee that has become
commercialized. This middle ground allows Swan to create a catalogued nineteenth-century
version of the Yankee, where she is more of a visual historian of the island rather than a
theoretician or critic.

The *Yankee* print for Swan represents another page in the Block Island narrative of
seafaring through the public transportation of the ferry. The Yankee has been built up as not just
a transportation vessel for Block Island, but rather a symbol of the rich history of the island. The
truth of the Yankee is that it is a residence for sale, no longer the famed ferry boat it once was.
Block Island will look at this print of the Yankee as a symbol of rich history, but the reality of
the ferry is much in fact more complicated and.

Swan has also created more contemporary works of seafaring prints within Block Island,
in order to connect to a current audience and to still retain a foothold in the Contemporary art
market. Her print *Linda & Laura* (2004) (Fig. 17) is another example of the place seafaring holds
in Block Island’s identity. The Linda & Laura is a lobster boat which belongs to fisherman Jon
Grant, which he had built in Nova Scotia in 1997.\(^{67}\) Grant designed much of the boat himself,

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\(^{67}\) Robert Downie, *The Block Island History of Photography, Volume 2-1917-1960s*, Block
Island History, 2008, 257.
including her lobster tanks and fuel tank arrangement. The boat is named after Grant’s two sisters, Linda and Laura. Grant originally came to Block Island as a young man in the 1960s due to the draw of striped fishing and lobsters, and as a result he eventually had the Linda and Laura built because of his success at fishing on the island. Grant taught himself how to build his own lobster gear when he began his interest in fishing, and he would bend vinyl covered wire and knit twine for funnels, tying them into trap kitchens and parlors in the same fashion as the late nineteenth-century wooden traps. The Linda and Laura can be recognized by locals as the turquoise hulled vessel in Old Harbor from which Grant sells his catch. (Fig. 18) This image of the Linda and Laura at the docks is still advertised, yet the circumstances have slightly changed. It is not certain that Grant sells lobsters or fish he personally caught, yet he is still there every summer for the incoming tourists. Once again, the function of the boat has changed in purpose. Grant built this boat because of his passion for fishing. Now it has turned into an attraction for tourists, similar to buying cotton candy at a fair. The integrity of the ship is lost, and what remains is entertainment for summer vacationers.

Swan created the Linda & Laura as a way to connect the traditional medium and visuality of maritime prints, with a contemporary subject that patrons could still recognize and relate to. The print Linda & Laura is 37 x 50 inches, and many blocks were used in its creation. In the print itself, the dog seen on the boat is Grant’s lab Silas. Swan had the Linda & Laura moved


70 Ibid.

into a cove so intimate and detailed photographs could be taken. It took Swan around eighteen months to develop the final drawing and put all the blocks together for this print. The boat is shown idle in the water, and once again reflects the nineteenth-century traditional approach to maritime prints. Swan focuses on the details of the boat in order to categorize and place it within a series of images that Block Island can be associated with. Swan has depicted a historical ferry boat, a historical fishing boat, and now presents a contemporary fishing boat to create this historical life of Block Island as a seafaring community.

The three vessels analyzed in this chapter foster the idea of Swan’s wish to catalogue Block Island through her choice of subjects. Each of these boats has a connection to the island’s past, as well as the art historical past of maritime imagery. These boats however have lost their original purpose and use to the island. The tourist sees an island rich with fish that still maintains a strong seafaring practice. This is far from the truth, and has shown one of the cracks in the foundation of the self-created Block Island identity. The use of the water and even the land has vastly changed since the settlement of Block Island. The land populated with farms has become, like the Yankee itself more for show rather than use. Swan moved to creating works that highlight this landscape because of the importance it used to have, yet sheds light on just how much these practices have changed.

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72 Sandra Swan, Book of Prints, in the author’s possession.

73 Ibid.
Chapter 3: Landscape

Swan chose to feature Block Island’s landscape as another main subject matter in her woodcuts, due to its role within Block Island history. The landscape of Block Island is one of the main features the island still preserves today. The surface of the island is beautiful and has been described as “an undulating, irregular-at places knobby-landscape, a wealth of ponds and wetlands, and abundant low vegetation, including small trees and shrubs.”74 In 1972, the Block Island Conservancy was founded, and Captain Rob Lewis headed the campaign to “Save Open Space.”75 The Conservancy as well as other land conservation organizations are responsible for the protection of over forty-seven percent of the island from development.76 The conservancy has established greenway trails across the island, and they provide tours to this day, which include conservancy land with historical sites as well as walks of the island cemeteries. Block Island followed a similar pattern to other parts of the United States and even Europe during the 1960s and 1970s. During this time in the United States there were several environmental movements enacted to help preserve the land. By the late 1960s, several environmental groups were formed, which prioritized air quality and the protection of natural resources such as timber, lakes rivers and oceans. Swan began her artistic career in woodcuts around the same time all of these environmental acts were taking place around the U.S. and Block Island. Perhaps Swan’s choice of scavenged wood as her medium was a nod towards the push to preserve land. By using found wood, Swan in turn would be contributing to the preservation of Block Island, while at the same


75 “Block Island Conservancy Founded,” Block Island Historical Society, https://blockislandhistorical.org/history/

76 Ibid.
time demonstrating her interest in the history of the island and the natural resources it produces.

Swan’s personal story is a main component in her choice to portray the vast landscape of Block Island. As a child and throughout her career, Swan describes how she loved to sketch from nature. As an ongoing personal project, throughout the years Swan has taken small journals with her out into the fields of Block Island while she walks her dog. On these walks, Swan writes a little passage in the notebook about what she saw, and where her and her dog went. To top these personal notes off, she then draws delicate flowers or mushrooms, vines, essentially anything that caught her eye on her walk (Figs. 19-20). When Swan would return home, she filled in her small drawings with watercolors to create a realistic representation of what she witnessed that day. These notebooks show Swan’s interest in the natural world around her, and what specifically one can find around Block Island.

Swan’s drawings and woodcuts of the landscape of Block Island once again demonstrate a more realistic and contemporary view of the island. Swan chose to depict particular elements Block Island advertised over the years as staples of the Block Island experience. She created images of horses, stone walls, and particular vegetation that once had a specific function, yet now have become something different. The original functions of these parts of Block Island have become commercialized or simply an aesthetic attraction, rather than what they were once intended for.

One example of an area of Block Island that has changed are the farms that populate the landscape. Throughout the island there are several different large farm estates that were vital to the survival of the island when it was first settled. These farms produced different crops as well as raised livestock, and these goods were used throughout the island. Horses were a large part of

77 Sandra Swan in discussion with the author, July 20, 2018.
the function of a farm, whether it be sifting through fertilizer with their hooves, or carrying farmers around the property and pulling carts filled with different crops and tools. Horses were also used during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries on the island for transportation purposes. They would pull trolleys and buggies around the island to take people from point A to point B.

Today, these jobs that were assigned to horses have vanished. Horses are no longer used to tend the Block Island farms, and there are automobiles now which have replaced the need for horse transportation. Instead, horses are advertised on the island as a leisure activity. People can purchase pony rides to obtain that full Block Island experience of being in touch with the land just like people in the early days of the island were. Horses are essentially kept on the island as a tourist attraction or an activity for people to do on their vacation. They are also dispersed throughout the island to still maintain the agrarian lifestyle they claim to possess.

Swan’s work Sprague Farm Horses (Fig. 21, 1999) depicts the physical landscape of Block Island that has been in place since the settlement in 1661, as well as this horse attraction. In the background of the print are the green rolling hills Block Island is known for. This particular woodcut is made up of nine blocks of wood. Swan shows two little structures in the back corner of the print, demonstrating the vast amount of land and property many residences and farms are built on. Swan depicts three young Percheron horses in the center of the print, which she found living together on Sprague Farm on Block Island’s west side. Their names

78 Livermore, A History of Block Island: from its discovery, in 1514, to the present time, 1876, Hartford, CT: Lockwood & Brainard, Co., 1877, 184-187.

79 Sandra Swan, Book of Prints, in the author’s possession.
from left to right are Domino, King and Dusty. These horses are standing idly in the foreground of the print without any real purpose. Swan alludes to the advertisement of horses around Block Island with this print by placing them on display and not performing specific farming tasks. Swan has a fascination with drawing horses, and she is currently working on another depiction of Sprague farm horses that she found wandering the farm. (Fig. 22)

This print also bears striking similarities to prints of horses Currier and Ives produced in the nineteenth-century. Currier and Ives not only created prints for a mass audience, but they also had specific prints made up for the wealthier classes at a larger size. These prints would include subject matters that appealed to this class, such as horses and horse races. The prints would sell at five dollars, which was rather expensive for the time. These more expensive prints are similar to Swan’s woodcuts in that her large original prints run expensive, while her secondary prints are on a smaller more mobile size that are much more affordable to the masses. Currier and Ives had that catalogued quality throughout most of their prints, in part to keep them easily distributable. Their images of horses demonstrate how they were seen as a commodity even during the nineteenth-century, and the amount of prints they created on this subject shows its overwhelming popularity.

Prints such as Rysdyk’s Hambletonian (Fig. 23, 1871), by Currier and Ives artist John Cameron, is set up in a similar fashion to Sprague Farm Horses. Cameron draws the horse on a large scale, with a simple country home in the back left corner of the print, and he leaves no detail out in capturing the horse’s every curve. Swan does a similar set up in Sprague Farm

80 Ibid.

81 Sandra Swan in discussion with the author, July 20, 2018.

Horses, where her three horses are directly in the front of the print, leaving the houses and landscape as the background. Each of the three horses has a different and unique coloring, demonstrating how they are indeed three individual horses that can be spotted on Block Island today. Tourists to the island might look at this print and say ‘I rode this horse’ or ‘I saw this horse on our trip.’ This print then becomes an expensive souvenir to document a middle or upper class vacation on Block Island. Both of these prints honor the horses they are depicting, and they were both drawn from their contemporary moment. In her approach to the set up and look of her print, Swan once again looks back at traditional prints of animals to create her woodblock prints. Her tie to the contemporary world comes through the individual identities of the horses, whom she claims to have sketched from life at the time she created the print in 1999.

Swan’s works reflect a new time in Block Island’s history, where traditions have changed, yet they are said to have stayed the same. This contradiction can be seen throughout Swan’s works, and it argues that Block Island has not remained untouched by the outside world, but in fact has been influenced by time just like everywhere else. Her reference to the past as well as her incorporation of found wood into her works can also be seen in other Contemporary land art works around the same time. One example is the work Sultan the Pit Pony (Fig. 24), designed by the Welsh artist Mick Petts and completed in 1999 after a three year work period. Sultan the Pit Pony is a large 200-metre raised-earth sculpture in Caerphilly, South Wales. The sculpture is made out of coal shale from mines in Britain, and was used as a reminder of the industrial past that changed Britain during the Industrial Revolution during the nineteenth-

Ponies and horses were often used in the underground coal mines in Europe and The United States from the eighteenth-century up until the mid-twentieth-century, and they were deemed “pit ponies.” The earthwork appears to be a horse in motion leaping through the air, and while there are some details, the message of the image seems to be more important than detailed accuracy. Petts approached this work in a similar way to Swan’s. Instead of unveiling the reality of what a certain practice has turned into (i.e. the use of horses on Block Island) Petts unearthed the disturbing reality of what horses were once used for in the pits of Great Britain. Both choices of medium directly connect the works with the corresponding geographical locations, while at the same time recycling natural resources the earth has provided. In this way the works connect on a conceptual level as well as an understanding and push for the preservation of the earth. Both works used a piece of the land, whether it be coal shale or scavenged wood, and this was extremely important to the meaning of the works. They were also both completed in 1999, which shows their connection through that contemporary moment. Land art was still being created at this time, and Swan no doubt paid attention to her fellow artists.

Swan also includes in Sprague Farm Horses an important piece of Block Island’s landscape, the stone walls that cover the island. (Fig. 25) There are approximately 350 miles of stonewalls on the island, which define the borders of the old farms and grazing lands. When Block Island was first being settled, a law was published which stated that “an upright fence shall not be above four feet high from the ground to the top thereof, and if it be hedge and ditch,

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85 Ibid.

86 Livermore, A History of Block Island: from its discovery, in 1514, to the present time, 1876, Hartford, CT: Lockwood & Brainard, Co., 1877, 27.
or stone ditch, or stone wall, it shall be in the same proportion according to the town viewers [...]”

This rule is still in effect today, and most of the fences around the island are made by stones because of the scarcity of lumber that emerged early on in the island’s settlement. Each wall was man made throughout the life of the island, and residents today still maintain these walls because they are so important to its created identity. This manual labor links back to the significance of history to Block Island and New England areas in general, because residents still insist on physically keeping up the walls themselves, which is reminiscent of an agrarian society. The walls also symbolize another Block Island characteristic and attraction that has changed over time. These stone walls were originally used as property markers between landowners farmland. In reality, these markers are no longer accurate, and in turn are not used in a functional way anymore. Throughout books on Block Island such as Block Island: Rhode Island’s Jewel and Block Island by Donald A. D’Amato and Henry A.L. Brown, as well as vacation sites plant this idea of the tradition of stone walls around Block Island as this historical piece of the island still maintained today. This is to push the image of Block Island as lost in time, a world untouched by change. The reality of the stone walls provides another flaw in this Block Island narrative due to its loss of functionality.

Swan also chose specific vegetation throughout Block Island to demonstrate the changes the island has experienced. Her work The Shadblow Tree (Fig. 26, 1998) is one of her most complicated works to date. Swan began drawing the Shadblow Tree in 1977, and she found this precise tree in the Ball-O’Brien park in Block Island. It took Swan a year to develop the drawing of the tree, and then another year to find all of the blocks and carve them. Swan began to heavily

87 Ibid.
work on this piece after her third husband died in the 1990s. She describes this sort of mania or obsession with the *Shadblow Tree*, and she felt as though she had to get it done. Swan poured all of her energy into this piece, and there are over eighty blocks of carved wood that make up the complete print. Many of the branches are printed on blocks made from sheets of packing crates. Interestingly enough, Swan never pieced together the woodblocks permanently to create a whole woodcut, but rather left the pieces individual so she could make different variations of the trees after she created the first large print. In a sense Swan is reconnecting pieces of the physical island together in her works. This materiality is once again an important component to Swan’s artistic process.

The image of the Shadblow tree itself is not a happy one. The branches of the tree twist out like skeletal limbs reaching for something or someone, and Swan plays with light and shadow as the natural light hit the branches. The Block Island landscape can be seen in the distance behind the tree, however the main subject of this piece is no doubt the force of nature itself. The tree almost appears to be alive in the way it twists and turns, the branches like serpents dancing up the trunk of the tree, and Swan has created this cropped shot of the figure, so that the tops of the branches are cut off from the viewer. When one looks at this image it evokes a sense of the coldness and peacefulness of winter. We see the passage of time through the bare branches of the tree as a marker of what no longer is. In the winter the island is sparsely populated, with only the year-round residents and occasional visitors roaming the empty streets.

88 Sandra Swan in discussion with the author, July 20, 2018.

89 Ibid.

90 Sandra Swan, Book of Prints, in the author’s possession.

91 Ibid.
Block Island is supposed to be viewed as a place of tradition, as well as a land that is self-sufficient. In reality, much of the agricultural production from the early days of the island has ceased, and while there is still a farmer’s market during the summer season, many of the food sources are being imported from the mainland. In this image we see a bare tree that looks twisted and worn down. The shadblow tree used to have a specific use for the indigenous people that first inhabited the land. The berries that come from the shadblow were used to make pies and sweetbreads, and they could also be dried into raisins. The indigenous people also used the shadblow berries to make tea, which aided in digestion, and children who had worms were told to bathe in shadblow tea. The berries could be boiled and eaten with meat and made into paste and dried for winter use. Today these trees are seen around the island mainly for aesthetic purposes. We see the change in purpose and erasure of the island’s early history once again in the shadblow tree, a shell of what was once important to the survival of humans on the island. These changes would not be so significant if there was not this fabricated narrative of Block Island as a place of tradition. These apparent changes contradict this identity, and force the viewer to see the reality of what the island has become. Most places in the world find change and progress to be something to celebrate, and when one looks back one hundred years ago one can see all of the amazing things invented over this time period. Block Island does not want to look at change this way, and in fact avoids the mention of it in order to sell their “Old New England” image.

Swan’s works of the makeup of the Block Island landscape highlight subjects which have


93 Ibid.
been shrouded under a veil of distorted tradition. As mentioned previously, people yearned in the nineteenth-century for the agrarian society, away from industrialization, and Block Island was argued to be that place of rural preservation. Farmer’s *New England Scenery* once again is the perfect example of nature, untouched by machines and manufacturing. Block Island still maintains this identity of a self-sufficient traditional place, yet as shown throughout this thesis there are countless holes in this story which point to Block Island as a place of commercialization selling nostalgia to vacationers. Swan’s works lead the viewer to these conclusions without outwardly saying it. By drawing what she saw, Swan demonstrated the changes all throughout the island, whether people want to believe them or not. These changes can be seen physically through different structures around the island, which are slowly decaying. Each of Swan’s works, whether it be the water surrounding Block Island, or the physical landscape are all part of a larger narrative of Block Island as a place that has despite itself changed and transformed and is very much a part of the contemporary world.
Chapter 4: Architecture

It can be argued that Swan was equally drawn in by the island’s haunting Victorian architecture, which showcased decaying and dilapidated buildings around the island. As a result she chose broken down structures throughout the island as her subject matters to emphasize the ghosts she felt embodied these places. This started with her works on the Highland House Hotel, but later on Swan moved to larger and more well-known structures. Swan graduated from creating “wood paintings” with the material of the Highland House, to carving large scale prints of other broken down buildings that populated the island. She chose battered buildings in the classic New England resort architectural style to bring back viewers to the time of the island’s expansion in tourism, as well as to bring attention to a time, like “Old New England,” that existed when the island was first becoming a popular destination.

Swan’s narrative of her early time on Block Island demonstrates her pull to the architecture of the island and provides insight into her choice of medium. When Swan arrived on Block Island in 1960, she came across the abandoned Hygeia Hotel (Fig. 27), owned by the Champlin family, and she wrote the owner and asked if she could occupy this abandoned space during the summer of 1960.94 During its prime, the Hygeia was a house “fronting the ocean on the east at 68 x 33, with an ell 18 x 24, 3 stories high in front and 4 in the rear, with a basement.”95 The owner allowed Swan to live in the Hygeia for $600 the entire summer, and this is where she began her Block Island artistic career.96

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95 Providence Daily Journal, June 14, 1886.

96 Sandra Swan in discussion with the author, July 20, 2018.
Swan later moved in with her mother and sister in a house on the island, and next door was the abandoned Highland House Hotel, where Swan got the idea for her “wood paintings.” Swan spent a lot of time in the broken down hotel, and while she sat on the porch she noticed the peeling veneer that decorated the floor. Swan rescued this veneer from the dilapidated structure, and this was what she used to create many of her wood paintings. In these wood paintings, Swan would find tiny strips of wood and make collages of island scenes out of them, and these at first glance would appear to be paintings. (Figs. 28-29) One particular wood painting titled *Highland House Hotel Window* (Fig. 30), was created out of wood strips that Swan collected from the broken down and deserted Highland House.

The Highland House has a long history, which adds to its nostalgic importance to Swan. Delorin Mitchell (1845-1922) built the Highland House in 1876 on High Street in Block Island, “shortly after the breakwater was built, allowing tourists to easily visit the island, and causing Old Harbor to grow as though it were a boontown of the Old West.” The original structure of the building was constructed in the island’s standard resort design, “three stories high, with a ginger-bread-decorated porch wrapped around the front of the first floor, and a cupola atop the mansard roof.” (Fig. 31) The style of the architecture for the Highland House was a strong example of seaside New England resort architecture. Most of these buildings were “white, rectangular buildings two or three stories high with wide front porches and mansard roofs;

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97 Sandra Swan in discussion with the author, July 20, 2018.


100 Ibid.
prominent cupolas or projecting pavilions are centered on the long facades.” The mansard roof was double-sloped, and imported from Second Empire France, which came into fashion around the 1860s and 1870s.

One mainland newspaper wrote about the Highland during the late 1870s saying, “The Highland House, located on a beautiful eminence, with a commanding view of the island and surrounding objects, is a new place for public favor.” This boom of the hotel lasted until around the 1900s, when the economic decline of the New England seacoast resorts began. The 1930 Depression and the second World War also cut the island’s population in half, and fifty percent of the hotels were closed and boarded up. The Highland Hotel fell to this same fate, and in the 1960s it was unpainted, abandoned and decaying. Some say the house would draw people to come walk the creaking floors, like a Siren pulling in its prey. Robert Downie describes walking through the hotel saying “Exploring room by room, floor by floor, was just plain fun-like having a Hollywood movie set or Western ghost town always there to impress unsuspecting friends with.” The Highland House eventually became known as the haunted house of Block Island. Eventually, the Highland House was torn down by the town council due

101 Ibid.

102 Historic and Architectural Resources of Block Island, Rhode Island, 11.


104 Ibid.

105 Ibid.

106 Ibid.

107 Ibid.
to tax delinquency in October of 1968.\textsuperscript{108} It was said that the Highland House enchanted artists on the island, and it clearly had an effect on Swan and her love of the island’s architecture during her time on the island. After her creation of several wood paintings, Swan decided to go bigger and create woodcuts of an entire hotel structure.

Swan’s print \textit{The Old Manisses Hotel} (1970, Fig. 32) symbolizes one of the most important aspects of Block Island’s landscape, the Victorian architecture. The name of the hotel, the Manisses, was what the indigenous people called the island. It is intriguing that Block Island would name one of its original hotels after the indigenous people who populated the island before it was settled because of that unwritten history discussed earlier in the paper but in fact illuminates this history as rewritten. This also further promotes the faulty notion that Block Island continues important traditions from a past world, because Block Island wanted to turn their relationship with the indigenous peoples into a positive and honorable one, rather than focus on the negative relationship of the past. One would not associate the island with what took place between the settlers and the indigenous people if they named a main hotel after the tribe. They are not erasing the tribe from existence, but rather rewriting its history.

Swan depicts the original structure of the building, which has come to be known as a staple of the island. When Swan carved this image, the whole back end of the Manisses hotel had fallen into disrepair, yet she felt the condition of the building provided wonderful sway to the drawing’s lines. The hotel seems to be tilting in numerous directions, and this adds to the age and history of the structure. The decay Swan depicts represents ephemerality and passage of time, which fuel the preservation of history. History is built on what remains, whether it be literature, physical artifacts or artwork. Something that is ephemeral cannot be preserved, however it can be

documented. People will believe a primary source because it was taken directly from the time period. This does not make the source true, but it does make an impression. Decay can be detrimental to history because this is what scholars depend on. This particular large section of the hotel was torn down during the 1970’s. The woodcut itself was carved on one old shelving board, and it was printed on Tableau and Okawara machine-made rice paper. As with the Yankee, the grain of the woodblock helps provide the building with a wooden texture and brings this site to life. Swan once again reinforces her drive to weave the physical island into her works as much as possible. She specifically chose boards of wood with characteristics that demonstrated the tactile material of the building, as well as the age and decay of these buildings that are present throughout the island. Swan not only visually depicts a falling building through the Manisses, but also brings to the forefront these old structures that remind visitors of an older time, perhaps even “Old New England.”

When colonial New England was first building and forming an architectural style, one could tell what year a particular structure was built because the styles changed so often from year to year. The remote sections of New England such as Nantucket would have a particular architectural style linger for a few years due to its distance from the mainland. In the very beginning of settlement houses had only one room, and this style persisted in Rhode Island for a generation before 1660. The next big style outside of Rhode Island was called the lean-to house

109 Ibid.


111 Ibid.
(Fig. 33), and this was the dominant type of dwelling in New England. The style of the structure has a sloping roof to provide protection against winds in the winter, and most existing examples of “Old New England” architecture are of this style. The Dutch-cap house (Fig. 34) was another popular style some years before and after 1800, and this had one or several central chimneys. Block Island, which was also apart from the mainland, maintained a Victorian building style with mansard roofs, and this was a style seen in the later nineteenth-century, perhaps after the Dutch-cap house design was popular. There are a small number of building types on Block Island, and during the nineteenth-century important design trends came to the island. These trends came from the changing fashion and the infusion of summer residents from North Eastern areas such as Boston, Philadelphia, New York and Connecticut. Different trends such as picturesque and gothic architecture emerged, but the hotels on Block Island mainly stuck with the classic mansard roof style mentioned earlier.

Swan depicts the Manisses Hotel as a decayed structure to symbolize the history of Block Island and to demonstrate the passage of time. These ideas of ephemerality and ruin tie Swan’s work in with American landscape artists of the nineteenth-century. The theme of architectural ruin within American landscape painting is something that has been around for centuries, and appears in artwork from groups such as the Hudson River School artists. There was a fascination with ruins during the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries and “the yearning for the romantic qualities of broken columns, dilapidated brick arches, and of half-destroyed bridges is

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113 *Historic and Architectural Resources of Block Island, Rhode Island*, 11.

probably nowhere more clearly expressed than in artificial ruins.” Ruins can remind one of the transience of human life, devastated by time and incomplete, representing a combo of man-made forms and of organic nature. Ruins occupy a transitory space between art and nature, where the original architectural intention has been lost, and now a form of natural artwork has been created. This ties in with Boym’s definition earlier of nostalgia, and how one connects certain images or places to an imaginary past.

During the nineteenth-century, the appearance of ruins within landscape art was popular for picturesque artworks, and its Romantic associations. One artist that painted ruins in his works was Thomas Cole, and this can be seen through his work *Ruined Tower (Mediterranean Coast Scene with Tower)* (Fig. 35, 1832-36). Cole’s depiction of the crumbling tower was a rumination on mortality, and perhaps the triumph of nature. America was a young country during the nineteenth-century, and people wanted that long and powerful history that could be seen in countries such as Italy through the ruins of Ancient Rome. American artists turned to depicting locations such as Jamestown, VA, or Fort Putnam at West Point, which both held historical importance to the nation. Cole painted *View of Fort Putnam* (Fig. 36) in 1825, and in this he depicts the fort as a ruined castle, which resembled “castles like those crowning the precipices along the Rhine.” These crumbling structures hold that sense of ephemerality that material possessions have, and Swan shows this same passage of time through her architectural works.

Many of the buildings Swan has depicted are completely gone from the island. Even though these places have disappeared, Block Island still perpetuates their memory and keeps

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116 Ibid.
them as part of their identity. One hotel that was the largest Block Island has ever built, and which eventually burned down is the Ocean View Hotel. Swan chose this monstrosity as an example of the architectural style Block Island is known for. Her print Ocean View Hotel (Fig. 37, 1970), depicts the famous Ocean View Hotel, which was built in 1873 at the time when hotel construction dramatically increased on the island. The woodblock print of the Ocean View Hotel is 32 x 74 inches, and Swan scavenged the large wood plank from one of the abandoned buildings in the back of the hotel. When one looks at the image the number of windows immediately catches the eye. Swan communicates the enormity of the building through this inclusion of every single window and door on the front façade of the building, and of course the size of the wooden panel she chose to carve the image on. When Swan created this piece she had to figure out a way to etch the letters for the name of the hotel on the top of the building so that they were not backwards, which would be necessary to transfer from the physical block onto the paper. To fix this problem Swan decided to lay the print paper on top of the board and used a soft lead pencil to make a rubbing of the letters.

Swan also created a woodblock titled Ocean View Laundry Building (Fig. 38), which she finished earlier in 1968. This structure housed the help for the hotel, as well as the laundry facilities. The building had long been abandoned when Swan explored it in the early 1960s. She found the wide plank that the image is carved on within the laundry building itself. The print of the building demonstrates its ram shackled appearance at the time Swan encountered it, and there is once again a true sense of the grain from the wooden plank Swan chose for this piece. In the upper right-hand corner over one of the end windows, it appears as though a knot in the wood

117 Historic and Architectural Resources of Block Island, Rhode Island.

118 Sandra Swan, Book of Prints, in the author’s possession.
has been transferred over onto the print. This tactile quality of Swan’s work is one of the things that makes it so gripping and understandable. One can get a real sense of the decay and feeling of the rotting wood through the use of this wooden board because it possesses flaws and knots, and provides a sense of touch that the viewer might not have gotten with a simple slab of sanded wood.

The board of the *Ocean View Laundry Building* was filled in with plaster, oiled and sold to a collector after 50 prints were created from the plank.¹¹⁹ Not only does Swan capture a very detailed, and perhaps life like image of the hotel, but she also evokes this sense of time lost. This is for a building that no longer exists, and was part of the larger picture of the hotel boom and rise in tourism that happened to Block Island during the late nineteenth-century. There is a passing of time present through the decayed condition of the building that Swan has chosen to represent, and it harkens back to an earlier time when the island was first profiting and expanding due to the rise in New England vacation spots. Perhaps it is the hue of black and white in these images, but one can almost look at these prints as black and white photographs or prints from an earlier time. Swan has preserves these buildings through her woodblock prints, and what was once seen as the “jewel of the island,” can be reminisced over through Swan’s artistic eye.

These architectural prints once again share the visuality of nineteenth-century prints of architectural structures. Images from Currier and Ives such as *Old Blandford Church* (Fig. 39, 1865), created by Fanny Palmer, or *U.S. Post Office, New York* (Fig. 40, 1878), are examples of the flat, detailed and catalogued images Swan seems to be following. *U.S. Post Office, New York* is similar to *Ocean View Hotel* in that it is front facing, and each window and decoration on the outside of the structure has been painstakingly copied down. *Old Blandford Church* reflects

¹¹⁹ Sandra Swan, Book of Prints, in the author’s possession.
the time that has passed since this church was first built, through the moss growing over the roof and the general wear one can see on the structure itself. Swan’s Ocean View Hotel Laundry Room, possesses similar qualities of wear and tear that once again show the passing of time and the life of the building itself.

Swan’s works possess a similar conceptual as well as visual element of the passage of time that blends in with other contemporary artists. Swan demonstrates this concept of ephemerality and vanishing materiality through her images of broken down buildings as well as boats and landscape qualities that have changed in the use and purpose of what they were originally designed for. These elements of change are exactly the opposite of what Block Island identifies as. Block Island is supposed to be the land untouched by the hands of time, yet Swan’s works show either visually or conceptually that this is not the case. This is a direct counter to the identity Block Island has created for itself, and once again cracks the foundation of this narrative of the place time forgot.

The Ocean View’s history and eventual downfall is important to understanding the conceptual passage of time Swan’s work points to. The Ocean View Hotel (Fig. 41) opened in 1874 and was enlarged in 1878. It began right as the regular steamer service became available. If one looks at an image of the hotel, they are immediately blown away by the enormity of the building. The hotel was three stories high, had a mansard roof, and was over 300 feet long, placed along the cliff walk.¹²⁰ (Figs. 42-44) The Ocean View was built along the same lines of the New England architecture that sprung up during the late nineteenth-century, and belonged to the category of seaside New England resort architecture. The Ocean View held essentially all of these architectural characteristics, just on a large scale. The hotel provided rooms for up to 500

¹²⁰ Historic and Architectural Resources of Block Island, Rhode Island.
visitors, and in turn was the largest destination for vacationers at the time.\footnote{121}

The hotel can also be recognized through some of its famous historical visitors. On August 18, 1875 President Grant was invited to the hotel by owner Nicholas Ball, and he came for the day to the island and dined at the Ocean View.\footnote{122} The U.S. Supreme Court was also in attendance to the hotel, providing it with a very high reputation. The hotel was known among many throughout the country, and it was said that they had the longest bar in New England. The hotel eventually became known as the “Queen of the Atlantic Coast,” due to its charm and elegance. One esteemed guest named Annie A. Peckham wrote a description of her view from the windows of her suite at the Ocean View, and this was published by the hotel for advertisement purposes. Annie A. Peckham was a socialite in New York City, and was married to Wheeler H. Peckham, who was a lawyer during the late 1890s into the early 1900s. At the time of her death in 1916 an article was written about her in the New York Times titled “Wills $50,000 to Charity: Mrs. Peckham Disposes of $1,000,000 Estate in her Testament,” which describes in detail the bequests she left to her family, charities and servants in her Will. This woman was clearly a well-known figure in society, and the numbers in the title of the article demonstrate the kind of money the Ocean View’s “esteemed guests” possessed.\footnote{123} The title of the poem is Sea Slopes, and it reads;

\begin{quote}

\footnote{121} \textit{Historic and Architectural Resources of Block Island, Rhode Island.}

\footnote{122} Livermore, \textit{A History of Block Island: from its discovery, in 1514, to the present time, 1876}, Hartford, CT: Lockwood & Brainard, Co., 1877, 120.

\footnote{123} “Wills $50,000 to Charity: Mrs. Peckham Disposes of $1,000,000 Estate in Her Testament,” \textit{The New York Times} (1857-1922); Nov. 21, 1916; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times, p. 11.
\end{quote}
Oh! My sea slopes rich in clover
With the daisies running over;
The buttercups so golden straying there!
At their foot light waves are splashing
On the stones and breakers flashing
Their gladness to the waiting summer air.

Then the sea rolls onward
Ever striving with sublime endeavor
The glory of the wondrous sky to tell
Sea and sky so full of blessing-
With a touch strong, yet caressing
In joy and hope we claim your magic spell.\textsuperscript{124}

This poem supports the idea of Block Island as a unique and almost imaginary destination not only through the admiration of the island’s features, but also the language that Mrs. Peckham uses. She uses words like magic and sublime, which both lend themselves to a space that is beyond natural beauty, a place that has a certain power over the human population. Mrs. Peckham was an important figure in New York society according to the New York Times article about her Will, and it is clear that the Ocean View chose to publish this poem by her in one of their brochures because of her fame within high society.

The tragedy of the Ocean View Hotel is that the structure completely burned to the ground on July 6, 1966 (Figs. 45-46). The hotel caught fire due to an oil leakage at around 5:00pm, and eventually the flames were extinguished on the exterior by volunteers.\textsuperscript{125} There was however no way the volunteers could fight the blazing fire in the interior of the hotel. The fire lasted about two hours, and the entire building was burned to the ground. There were around 30

\textsuperscript{124} A Summer at Sea, Ocean View Hotel, Deland & Barta Printing, 54 Pearl Street, Boston, 1883.

\textsuperscript{125} Downie, Block Island: The Land, Rhode Island: Book Nook Press, 1999, 235.
guests at the hotel, and none were injured except two volunteer firemen.\textsuperscript{126} Only the stones of the foundation remain on the premises today, and it has been turned into a preservation site for those who want to visit the grounds (Fig. 47). The grounds had remained empty for twenty years after the fire, however the land was often used by walkers. There were several different rumors floating around throughout the 90s, which suggested the building of another huge hotel or even condominium developments, however the property was eventually purchased by two conservation groups. One group was the Island’s Land Trust, which acquired the bulk of the land, 14 acres. A smaller portion of one acre was bought by a newly formed private organization called The Ocean View Foundation. This group was “dedicated not only to preserving the land, but to educating residents and visitors about the importance of Block Island’s-and the earth’s-environment.”\textsuperscript{127} A simple pavilion with inset benches was opened for the public on the grounds in May of 2000. This addition of the pavilion allows people to enjoy the space that the Ocean View Hotel inhabited, and ironically they are provided with an amazing “ocean view” while exploring the grounds. The preservation of the space also lends itself to the continuation of the Block Island narrative, because instead of using this space to build more houses or attractions, the island would rather commemorate and remember one of their biggest attractions. Now people are forced to look back in time when visiting this space because it is literally dedicated to the past.

One of Swan’s pieces that is tailored to those who know the detailed visual history of the island beyond a broader touristic view is her woodblock \textit{Champlin’s Car Barn} (1972, Figs. 48-49). This print is significant in that it speaks to this history down to the very minutia of visual

\textsuperscript{126} Downie, \textit{Block Island: The Land}, Rhode Island: Book Nook Press, 1999, 236.

\textsuperscript{127} Ibid.
landmarks on the island, so it is not just being maintained for the tourist eye but for the “local”
eye as well. This particular barn was located across from the Block Island weather station on
Ocean Avenue during the 1970s, and Swan herself has a personal connection to this architectural
structure.\textsuperscript{128} The structure of the barn itself is typical on the farms throughout Block Island, and
these farms had multiple buildings that took up the property.\textsuperscript{129} The title of the woodblock
\textit{Champlin’s Car Barn} comes from the fact that the barn housed the horse-drawn trolley cars that
took visitors between the old and new harbors. These horse-drawn trolley cars (Fig. 50) ran on
the island until around 1920, and they were never switched over to electric trolley cars.\textsuperscript{130} It took
the trolleys around fifteen minutes to travel between harbors, and this was a popular activity for
summer vacationers. Swan’s mother rode on one of these trolleys when she visited Block Island
during the summer of 1917. This sentimental choice of subject matter particularly highlights
Swan’s feelings of nostalgia in her work, and it is as though she wants to mark or document the
barn in history for eternity.

\textit{Champlin’s Car Barn} is presented in a front facing view, similar to both the \textit{Ocean View
Hotel} and the \textit{Old Manisses Hotel}. The wooden planks shown that make up the roof look worn
down, and Swan even disperses lighter and darker hues of wood to show that perhaps this roof
has been fixed multiple times. To the everyday viewer, this print appears to simply be of an Old
New England barn, however this structure carries much more meaning because of the history and
sentimental value Swan has attached to it.

\textsuperscript{128} Sandra Swan, Book of Prints, in the author’s possession.

\textsuperscript{129} \textit{Historic and Architectural Resources of Block Island, Rhode Island}, 16.

\textsuperscript{130} Robert Downie, “The Block Island horse cars, more than just a ride,” Block Island Times,
July 6, 2009.
This image truly gives a feel for the type of buildings one sees across the island as well as the New England coast line, and Swan chose some of the more understated treasures to emphasize. The structure of the car barn is no longer on the island, and this is one of the many objects Swan has chosen that no longer exists. When asked if there was any particular reason for the choices of these lost structures, Swan simply said “I chose what I liked to look at, and the disappearance of these structures was an unknown conclusion.” Swan even said jokingly that her friends have suggested that “wherever I go, things fall to ruin.” Swan caught these structures just at the right time in order to preserve them through history by elevating them in high art, and perhaps she knew at some point these buildings would no longer be there. Swan found a hard pine board that she used for this work, which measured 3 feet by 14 feet. She had the board cut into three sections and used these three pieces for Champlin’s Car Barn, the Yankee and the Liberty Bell Warehouse Building.

The story of Block Island as untouched by the contemporary world can be viewed through these prints of the island’s architecture because Swan chose the structures that emanate the island’s imagined original architectural style. By choosing dilapidated buildings, and structures that have mansard roofs, Swan emphasizes the old-fashioned quality that the island’s buildings possess. There are of course contemporary houses and structures on the island, but this would not fit in with Block Island as the “lost island.” People are drawn to things that are falling apart because they can assign their own narrative and history to them. Swan does not outwardly depict any new or modernized aspects about the Block Island architecture, yet her hints of the decaying of the island’s buildings can symbolize the crumbling of the nostalgic veneer that the

131 Sandra Swan in discussion with the author, July 20, 2018.

132 Ibid.
island identifies with. One can either read her work on the surface and mold it to the existing
Block Island narrative, or as we have done in this thesis break it down to reveal a more complex
and rough history.
**Conclusion**

Block Island artist Sandra Swan unveils the invalid story of Block Island through her woodblock prints. Swan’s meshing of traditional nineteenth-century prints with a contemporary subject and technique allows her work to occupy this newfound identity between two art movements and styles, and become documented images of what she saw on Block Island. Swan focuses her subject matters on the seafaring history, Block Island architecture, and the island’s relationship to nature and preservation in order to create a catalogued narrative and identity of Block Island. This story Swan creates through her images of the island does not counter the view of Block Island as untouched by time, yet at the same time it does not outwardly support it. Swan achieves this nonpartisan status by combining tradition with the contemporary moment, allowing her to create a view from the outside. Her prints take on a catalogued status because of that ability to not comment on the story of Block Island directly. This altered history of the island however is extremely important to Swan’s work because it provides a historical context to her subjects, and also allows the viewer to dig into the prints on a deeper level.

The role nostalgia plays in Swan’s work is interesting because she addresses the island’s pull to it, while at the same time breaks down how it does not truly exist. Swan demonstrates how Block Island creates this immersive environment for visitors, where people are drawn in by these “ideas” of Block Island as traditional and a space from a different time. Swan’s simple documentation of the island points to the deception in this tale that is spun about Block Island, and this is accomplished through the acknowledgement of progress and change. From her choice of medium and technique to her subject matters, Swan borrows themes from maritime art history such as Scrimshaw and Currier and Ives to maintain the tradition that her work sprang from. Swan uses the landscape of Block Island to further link her works’ connection to preservation
and nostalgia, due to the amount of land the island maintains to this day.

The history of Block Island is another key component to analyzing Swan’s work in this thesis, because a historical context allows viewers to further understand Swan’s subjects. Where the island came from and how it developed are essential pieces of information to Swan’s works because it helps to further reveal what Swan’s prints mean to the notion of Block Island as a place from the past. The history of when Swan began creating her wood block prints also demonstrates what was happening in the art world at the time, and knowledge of the different lithographic styles from the nineteenth-century provides direct visual connections between Swan’s works and prints and paintings from that time. The true story of the plight of the indigenous people is essential to Swan’s works because that was the first piece of the longtime honored history of Block Island that was created by the settlers. This demonstrates how Block Island has maintained an untrue history since the beginning of European settlement, and this still exists today.

Swan’s technique of incorporating found planks of wood around Block Island into her works physically connected the history and myth of Block Island to her artworks. This notion of inserting wood that has its own history and demonstrates the passage of time, and points to the lives these structures had and what they had experienced. All of these components make Sandra Swan’s woodcuts of Block Island unique pieces of artwork, that have a space carved out for them between the world of tradition and the contemporary world we live in today.
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## Illustrations

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Sandra Swan, *Yankee*, 1977, woodblock print, 69 x 31 inches

Figure 10

Sandra Swan, *Yankee*, 1977, woodblock, 69 x 31 inches

Figure 11

The Yankee as Hook Mountain
http://www.mackenziechildsyankeeferry.com/index.htm

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The U.S.S. Machigonne, 1918-1919
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Figure 13

The Yankee at Ellis Island
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Currier and Ives, *New York Ferry Boat*, 1873, chromolithograph, 11 5/8 x 15 5/8 inches
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Printed by Robert Downie, Stone walls in Block Island, Rhode Island, c. 1880, Block Island Historical Society

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Sandra Swan, *Champlin’s Car Barn*, 1972, woodblock, 44 x 26 inches

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Robert Downie, photo of a horse car on the rails at Old Harbor in front of the old drugstore, near the statue of Rebecca