

A LASTING LANDSCAPE



Northampton exhibit focuses on iconic Holyoke Range

By **STEVE PFARRER**
Staff Writer

It's a modest range, made up of hills rather than mountains, even if the peaks are labeled as such. Perhaps its most interesting feature is that it runs east to west, rather than north to south as most mountain ranges are configured.

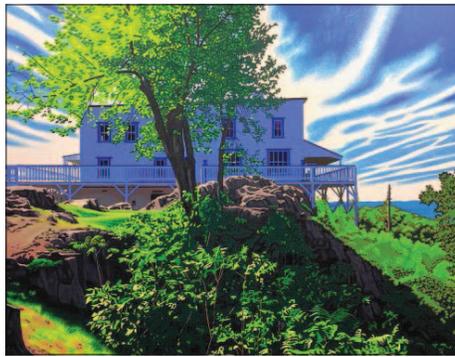
But the Holyoke Range, and the winding Connecticut River at its feet, is one of the most distinctive parts of the Valley landscape, and it's a regular subject for many of the region's artists.

The mountains have inspired plenty of past artists, too: Thomas Cole, founder of the 19th-century Hudson River School of landscape painting, created two of the most memorable images of the area in the 1830s, including a view of the Northampton Oxbow from the range's namesake peak, Mount Holyoke.

Now R. Michelson Galleries in Northampton, along with the Kestrel Land Trust, the Amherst conservation group, are taking a page from Cole's work to celebrate those iconic hills anew. "Views of the Mount Holyoke Range," which runs through June, features a variety of art — paintings, photographs, woodcut prints — offering views of the hills, the Connecticut River

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Above: "Summit House View From Rustlewood Ridge," watercolor painting by Kathleen Hession
From left: "Mount Holyoke," woodcut print by Nancy Haver; "Summit House," oil painting by Robert Brooks; "Clouds at Sunset Above Seven Sisters Range," photo by Michael Zide.



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Exhibit

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and its surrounding fields and woodlands.

Exhibit organizers say Cole and his fellow painters helped spark a renewed appreciation of the American landscape, and the first glimmerings of the conservation movement, in their time. In turn, preservation groups like the Kestrel Trust that have helped protect the Holyoke Range have given artists a chance to capture the same settings early U.S. artists painted.

"We all benefit from the work the Kestrel Trust has done," said Paul Gulla, the curator of the exhibit and manager of Michelson Galleries. "This is our way of helping out, of putting value into this work."

The exhibit, said Gulla, will donate about 20 percent of sales to the Trust, which in the last few years has helped preserve about 1,000 acres of the Holyoke Range and nearby Mount Tom; about 11,000 acres of the area's 16,000 acres are now protected, according to the Trust, which hopes to preserve another 1,000 by 2020.

The show's concept dates to early last summer, when the Kestrel Trust staged a "Paint Out" on Holyoke Mountain with Lewis Bryden, in which the Valley painter led an "en plein air" workshop on the peak and discussed Cole's work from the same mountain-top.

"They told us about the workshop, and we helped advertise it," said Gulla, who notes that Michelson Galleries has represented Bryden's work for years. "Then we talked about the possibility of doing a whole show [about the Holyoke Range] next year."

Kari Blood, communications and outreach manager for Kestrel, says the group is thrilled by the show and touched by the generosity of the artists and gallery in donating a portion of exhibit sales. Above all, she said in an email, she hopes the display will serve as a reminder of the value of the Holyoke Range, both as a vital part of the Valley's landscape and a home to endangered species.

"We believe there's a deep and valuable connection between the arts and the land," Blood said. "We hope that as people view these powerful and beautiful works of art, they will be reminded of how important this landscape is to



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"Oxbow," oil painting by Thomas Locker

their daily lives."

The artistic view

About half of the the 55 pieces in the exhibit — representing 26 artists — were commissioned directly for the show, said Gulla. Some are from artists the gallery represents, he added, "but we have quite a bit from other artists whose work we really admire and we're happy to show."

One artist whose work most closely channels Cole's is the late Thomas Locker, a prolific painter and, later in his career, a children's book author and illustrator. Though originally from New York state, Locker visited the Valley a number of times — his work was represented by Michelson Galleries — and his painting was influenced by the work of the Hudson River School artists.

Locker's four oil paintings on exhibit offer a similar kind of romanticism and lyrical ode to nature's beauty. In "Oxbow Study of the Near" and "View North from Mount Holyoke," the sky takes on an almost mystical glow, with the sun in "View North" surrounded by concentric circles of soft yellow, gold and orange.

Locker's two other works offer variations on Cole's 1836 "The Oxbow," including the famous storm clouds above the Connecticut River Valley giving way to rays of sunshine.

The Summit House, on Mount Holyoke, serves as a focal point for a number of works in the show, whether

seen from a distance or up close. Robert Brooks, in his oil painting "Summit House," depicts the historic building in vivid colors and strong lines; the overall effect is somewhere between realism and pop art, with an almost 3D effect.

By comparison, in Kate Session's moody watercolor "Summit House View From Rustlewood Ridge," the building is a small block of white in the distance; the painting is dominated by a ground-level view of a marshy meadow and a small copse of trees to the left, in soft colors that show the last bit of light fading from the sky.

"What I really like about the show is the variety of viewpoints the artists present," said Gulla.

Deborah Rubin, for instance, offers a general portrait of nature: a watercolor still life of fall leaves, with such detail it could pass for a photograph at first glance. As exhibit notes explain, Rubin's paintings "combine a spectacular large scale with brilliant light and meticulous detail," in a unique style that pushes "the boundaries of photo-realism and hyper-realism."

Former scientific illustrator Nancy Haver presents detail of a different sort in her woodcut print "Mt. Holyoke." With its intricate black and white lines, the print helps define "the cliffs and high points ... [and] dramatic basalt formations that cleave over time into angular sculptures" in the

Holyoke Range, Haver writes in her exhibit notes.

And the view from the top of the range, Haver says, encompasses so much — the rocky cliffs, the winding Connecticut, the fields and hills to the south — that it reminds her of John Muir's observation of nature "chasing everything in endless song out of one beautiful form into another."

Though the exhibit is dominated by painters, a number of photographers get a chance to shine. Stephen Petegorsky, who has made an extensive study of the Northampton Meadows, has three black-and-white images that frame the Holyoke Range from that perspective, the hills in the background and the Meadows front and center.

And Michael Zide's two color photos, focused on the sky above the range, recall something of Thomas Locker's paintings with their mix of light and shadow. "Clouds at Sunset Above Seven Sisters Range," in particular, brings both a painterly quality and a sense of peacefulness to a portrait that serves as a testament to the Holyoke Range's place in the our imagination.

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"Views of the Mount Holyoke Range" is on view at R. Michelson Galleries, 132 Main St. in Northampton, through June. For visiting hours and additional information, visit rmichelson.com.