

HILL AND DALE

BY MEISHA ROSENBERG

LANDSCAPE FOREVER

THE CENTER FOR PHOTOGRAPHY AT WOODSTOCK, THROUGH FEB. 28

THE WOODSTOCK LAND CONSERVANCY (WLC), a nonprofit group founded in 1988, has managed to save more than 1,000 acres of land from developers' machines. For this exhibition, the Center for Photography at Woodstock collaborated with the WLC, and curator and photographer Dion Ogust gave artists an assignment they were eager to embrace: range over the Conservancy's holdings and make photographic images.

While the works in this small show vary in style and sophistication, they are all high quality and evince a reverence for place.

And it's quite a place: Overlook Mountain, birthplace of the Hudson River School, and the Zena Cornfield (the inspiration for WLC's founding, it was used by Native Americans and then Europeans as early as 1720), these are just two of the preserved sites.

Perhaps both the spirit of conserva-

tion and the practice of art may come from the habit of observation—appreciative, slow looking. But one must consider, too, that the words "conservative" and "conservation" are related. As with *National Geographic* imagery or the Audubon calendar, nature photography can fall into the trap of simplifying or glorifying what is complex and shifting. Nature in this exhibition is not red in tooth or claw (not even a little bit pink). This isn't to say the photographs are lacking in value, just that many partake of a sometimes sentimental—conservative—nature aesthetic.

As an example, Carla Shapiro's black-and-white prints are stylized forest dreamscapes in which light dances on dark black backgrounds. Less fantastical but just as dreamlike is *Snake Rock Pond* (June 14, 2009, 2:08 pm), a large-scale color panorama by husband-and-wife team Yva Momatiuk and John Eastcott depicting what seems a sun-dappled child's summer day in which the murky pond is festooned with lily pads and a single, bright pink flower. The almost hyper-real image plays with perspective so that one feels one is partially submerged in the water along with the green plants, enveloped by a cropped and shortened foreground.

Another husband-and-wife team, Williams & Russ, who own the gallery Photosensualis, take a pictorialist's approach to ferns on the forest floor and the multi-toned surface of a stone wall hung with vines, using smoky greys that give the prints an antiquated feel.

Also evoking the ephemeral, but taking a less nostalgic stance, Gay Leonhardt erases portions of color photographs: in *Expanding Field*, a hill and field are seen as if through a streaked glass; *Frost Rising* captures the ethereality of a misty, frost-covered field and the line where a mower stopped. She is interested in that boundary between the wild and the civilized in her artist's book, too (titled *Whereas*), which juxtaposes images with legal easement text.

Fawn Potash, in works from her series *Looking at the Planet with Seven Eyes* and starting with a satellite image of conservancy land, uses encaustic and found materials to create what seem more like tiles or assemblages than photographs.

Back in the realm of traditional nature photography are a group of delightful color photographs of birds doing their twittery things, by Peter Schoenberger.

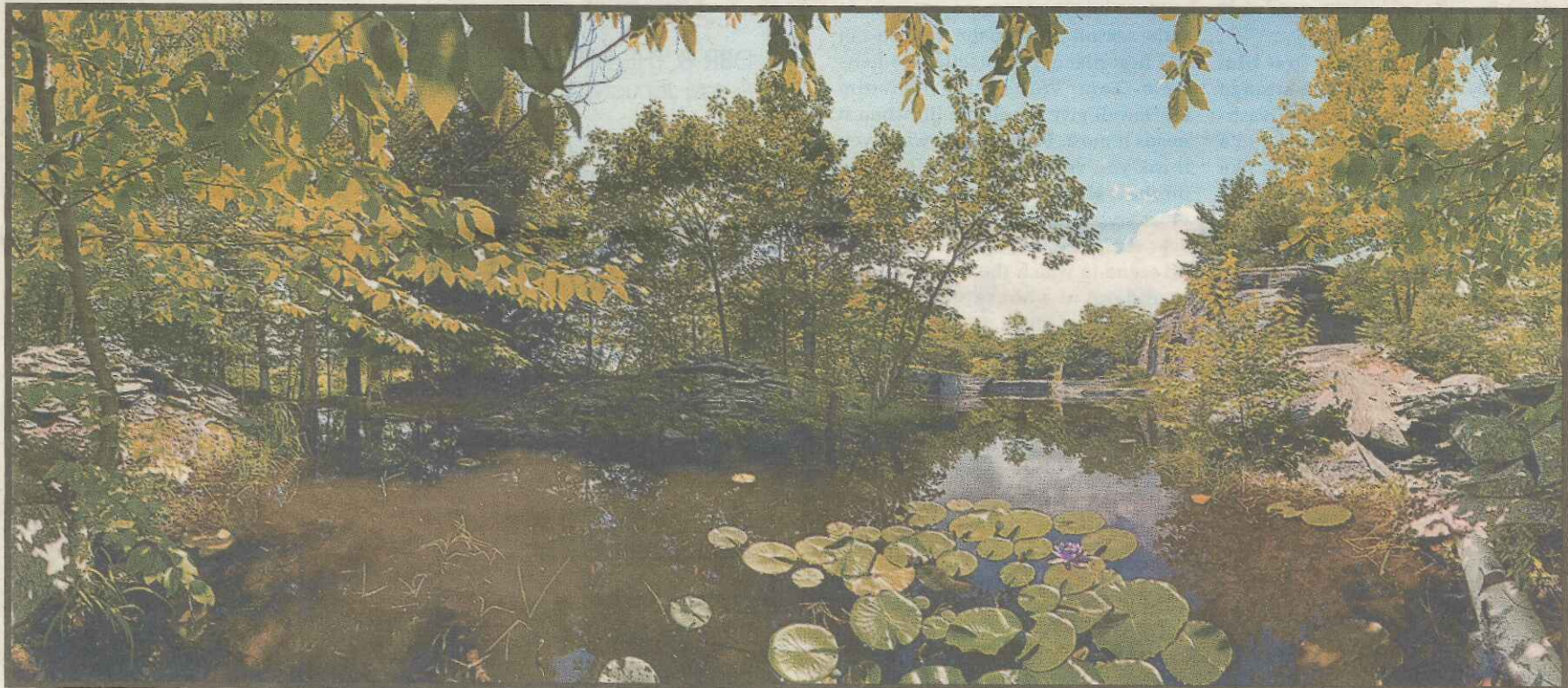
Straight or realistic photographs capture the natural world with honesty, but abstraction can distill the elements. In one of Bill Miles' superior black-and-white images, framed in rough wood planks, we encounter the classical

snow-capped mountain form of a submerged rock speckled with lichen at Snake Rock, topped by reflected trees. Miles uses exaggerated contrast to emphasize the stark harmony of a stand of trees in winter in another image.

Minus the heightened abstraction but also using a minimalist's approach is Richard Edelman, whose winter photos were among my favorites. He gives us branch shadows hovering on a sand-colored wall, while in another, a blasted tree trunk keeps a lookout on a lonely outcropping, and the land seems to become an all-encompassing physical presence that dwarfs the viewer. Images of California Quarry and Sloan Gorge capture the age-worn character of fragmented shale and boulders. The understated *Zena Cornfield #1* uses a wide, flat perspective to capture the field under cover of snow.

And not to be missed are the photographs taken by children participating through the Woodstock Elementary School: Go to the Center for Photography's Flickr site to admire how they caught details closer to the ground.

Our visual culture and the politics of land use are interdependent, and it matters how we envision nature. Natural landscape photography, when it transcends cliché, can bring us into a more complex, site-specific relationship with the world, and I hope such collaborative efforts continue. ■



Unreal: Momatiuk and Eastcott's *Snake Rock Pond* (June 14, 2009, 2:08 pm).