

Mullarkey, Maureen. "In the Tonalist Mood: Paintings from the 1860s to the Present".  
*CityArts*. January 26, 2011.

Tonalism developed from two European springs: the French Barbizon School, by way of its American disciples, and Aestheticism. Practiced from the mid-19th-century into the early 20th, it was less a coherent movement than a shared sensibility among Europhile American artists. Chief among these were George Inness (and his followers) and James McNeil Whistler, American expatriate and evangelist of tonal harmony. Whistler's low-toned atmospheric arrangements, those ethereal nocturnes and harmonies, were a prime impetus behind the spread of a loose convergence of styles that did not even have a name until the 1890s and still earns sparse mention in art survey textbooks.

There are many gratifying surprises in this show, delicious work by names less familiar today than in their time. Kenyon Cox, one of the best-known painters and art critics of his day, personified academic classicism with an American flavor. His "After the Harvest" is a poetic vista of a sloping field broken by the delicate mass of a low-growing tree. An Ohio Valley pastoral, it paraphrases Inness' rejection of explicit detail in order to heighten suggestions of space and distance. The misted contours of Corot lie a generation behind it. Elliott Daingerfield's prim little "Garden of Eden," with its silly rabbit and distant classical ruin, illustrates the academic pitfalls Cox had the wit to evade in his landscapes.

Arthur Wesley Dow, deeply engaged by Asian aesthetics and the tenets of the Arts & Crafts movement, is wonderfully represented with two very different natural scenes. "Moon Through the Trees" epitomizes the evocative power of subdued light on diffuse contours, that refined spatial ambiguity inherited from Aestheticism. It carries the warm, vespertine tones used earlier by Théodore Rousseau in scenes of Fontainebleau Forest. "Study for a Field Kerlaouen," a much-reproduced Breton landscape, has the clarity and lively coloration of a motif begun in the open air. Both are so lovely it does not matter what tag is placed on them.

"In the Forest" is a small jewel by John La Farge. An autumnal woodland scene, its luminous russets and ochres convey light with the richness of stained glass. The painter's love of Delacroix shows in the intensity and depth of color. American museumgoers are familiar with his floral still lifes, evocative of Fantin-Latour. Here is reason to know his landscapes better. Henry Prellwitz's "Swirling Clouds in the Moonlight" typifies the splendid nocturnes that were his forte. This captivating view of a turbulent sky over Peconic Bay embodies the fluctuating Tonalist straddle—of 19th-century academicism on one hand and modern motives on the other—tipping it decidedly toward the modern.

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You cannot leave this exhibition without wanting to see more of John Francis Murphy, Leonard Ochtman, Arthur Hoerber, Charles Warren Eaton, George Fuller, Hugh Bolton Jones and Birge Harrison. It is precisely the unselfconscious beauty and pictorial intelligence of these more under-recognized painters that makes the exhibition revelatory.

The mongrel character of Tonalism welcomes in its name almost any low-keyed landscape with indistinct forms. Even ones not so low-keyed, such as Terry DeLapp's highly abstract "Passing Storm," slip in under the umbrella term. Among the more contemporary aspirants to Tonalist aims, Lisa Breslow earns her place here. "Central Park No. 4" bows to the spirit, if not the pyrotechnics, of Whistler's "Nocturne in Black and Gold."