

JON CARSMAN
Rhythm, Movement, Energy

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Organized by the Sordoni Art Gallery

Guest Curator
Darlene Miller-Lanning, Ph.D.
Gallery Director and Adjunct Faculty
The University of Scranton

Essays by
Darlene Miller-Lanning, Ph.D.
F. Charles Petrillo, Esq.

September 7 – October 19, 2003
Sordoni Art Gallery, Wilkes University
Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania

September 7 – October 12, 2003
Mahady Gallery, Marywood University
Scranton, Pennsylvania

Jon in 4th Street Studio, photograph by Jack Mitchell

Acknowledgments

Special thanks must go to several individuals who were central to the success of this project. To Karen Plant we owe a tremendous debt of gratitude for her unflagging enthusiasm, generosity of time and spirit, and diligent attention to virtually every detail of the exhibition's preparation and presentation.

To Darlene Miller-Lanning, Ph.D., Director of the Art Gallery at The University of Scranton and Guest Curator, who first admired Carsman's work here at the Sordoni Art Gallery as an undergraduate at Wilkes University, we are indebted for her thoughtfulness and insight and, in particular, for her determination to see this project to its realization. Her essay herein only further enhances and illuminates her fellow alum's remarkable career.

We also wish to recognize other supporters of this long-awaited project, namely, F. Charles Petrillo, Esq., friend and devoted admirer of Jon's work; Sandra Ward Povse, Director of the Marywood University Art Galleries, with whom we are delighted to share this exhibition; and private lenders of work to the show: Mrs. Jack (Loretta) Carsman; Joseph Carsman; Ken Marquis; the Edward Welles, Jr., Collection, D. Leonard Corgan Library, King's College; and Sandy and Arnold Rifkin, long-time friends and supporters of the Sordoni Art Gallery and Wilkes University.

This project is, indeed, the happy result of collaboration.

Ronald R. Bernier, Ph.D.
Director

Karen Evans Kaufer
Associate Director

Reflections on Jon Carsman, 1944–1987

Jon Carsman was born in December 1944 in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. By the time he reached kindergarten, Jon displayed an extraordinary fascination with color and drawing. When Jon was eight, his parents, Jack and Loretta Carsman, arranged drawing lessons with Niccolo Cortiglia (1893–1982), a respected Wilkes-Barre artist-teacher. At Kingston High School, Jon was tutored by Graydon Mayer, chair of the school's art department, a remarkable naturalist who frequently took Jon and other students on weekend painting excursions to rural haunts in the Back Mountain and in Wyoming and Susquehanna counties. The Carsman family itself had a summer cottage at Harvey's Lake, and the rambling streams and waterfalls along Bowman's Creek, Buttermilk Falls, Hunlock's Creek, and Ricketts Glen were re-formed by his imagination. Jon also found inspiration in the small towns of Edwardsville and Courtdale, uniquely characterized by uphill perspectives and frequently found in his work.

After a year at Wayne State University, Jon enrolled at Wilkes College in 1963, where he was a record-setting member of the swim team to which he was elected co-captain by his teammates in his senior year. While still a student, Jon exhibited his work in Wilkes-Barre, Hazleton, and Binghamton, New York. Following graduation from Wilkes in 1966 with a B.A. in Art Education, Jon earned an M.A. in Art Education in 1967 from New York University. He subsequently taught at Harlem schools for the New York City school system.

After Jon's college graduation, Graydon Mayer introduced the artist to David Herbert, Wyoming Valley native and head of the American Art division of the Graham Gallery in New York City. Graham Gallery served as Jon's initial agent in New York, featuring him in individual and group shows in 1969 to 1974, after which Jon moved to Fischbach Gallery, also in New York.

From his studio in lower Manhattan Jon completed a series of views of New York City rooftops in the early 1970s, followed by a critically successful exhibition of Harvey's Lake works, then a series of small-town roadways and frame houses in Bucks County and along the Delaware River, later returning to a favorite theme of woodland views. While Jon painted from photographs, his aim was not simply to recreate the scene: "I want to give you a feel of what it is like to be there when I was."¹ Indeed, one commentator found Jon's work an "interesting synthesis of photographic, art historical and personal resources."²

These "personal resources" included what has been described as a haunting quality in Jon's work, reminiscent, perhaps, of late-night walks with friends returning home from the Kingston Theater, tranquil summer days with his family at Harvey's Lake, and, in later years, the lush floral surrounds during excursions to the Hamptons, Long Island.

Individual exhibitions quickly followed in the 1970s, throughout the Mid-Atlantic region, southern and western United States, and Australia in 1976–1977. By 1977, Jon was represented in group exhibitions at venues as diverse as Paris and Santa Fe. During this period the artist was also featured in an exhibition at the Everhart Museum in Scranton, Pennsylvania, and he returned to his alma mater, Wilkes, for a group show in 1982 with other alumni.

1. *Jon Carsman: Paintings and Watercolors* (New York: Crispo Gallery, 1979).
2. Ruth Bass, "Jon Carsman," *Art Views*, May 1979.

By 1984, more than 80 museums in 31 states held Jon's work in their permanent collections, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Many of America's most prestigious corporate institutions also acquired Jon's work for their collections.

A visit around 1980 to Impressionist Claude Monet's adopted home at Giverny in France inspired Jon's final major group of paintings. An exhibition of this work traveled to Reading, Pennsylvania, Oklahoma City, and Little Rock, concluding at the Dayton Art Institute in Ohio in September 1984.

Jon's last exhibition with Hammer Galleries in New York, in October 1986, featured a broad range of paintings and watercolors. Shortly thereafter, Jon fell terminally ill and concentrated on cataloguing his body of work. As Jon would not compromise his art, he would not compromise his life—which he ended in December 1987.

Jon would not accept classification. While designated variously by the commentators as a "super realist," "new realist," "rural photo realist," and "impressionistic realist," Jon himself always sought to eschew comparisons and categories. Perhaps Jon's work—and Jon himself to those who knew and loved him—was best described by a friend and critic: "a singular intensity."³

Chuck Petrillo
Jon's Co-Captain
Wilkes Swim Team '66

3. Gregory Battcock, *Jon Carsman: Paintings and Watercolors* (Syracuse, Oklahoma City, Wichita: Everson Museum, Oklahoma Art Center, Wichita Art Museum, 1977-78).



Rite of Spring, 1978, acrylic, 84 x 120 inches, Collection of Karen Plant



Winter Lights, 1979, acrylic, 90 x 66 inches, Collection of Karen Plant



Pink Frenzy, 1974, acrylic, 70 x 50 inches, Collection of Karen Plant



The Covered Gate, n.d., watercolor, 34 x 25½ inches, Collection of F. Charles Petrillo, Esq.



Edwardsville, 1968, acrylic, 59 x 64 inches, Sordoni Art Gallery, Wilkes University, Permanent Collection



Artist's Father, 1968, acrylic, 49 x 37 inches, Collection of Loretta Carsman



Trexler's Corner, 1974, watercolor, 30 x 22 inches, Collection of Karen Plant

Realizations: The Paintings, Prints, and Watercolors of Jon Carsman

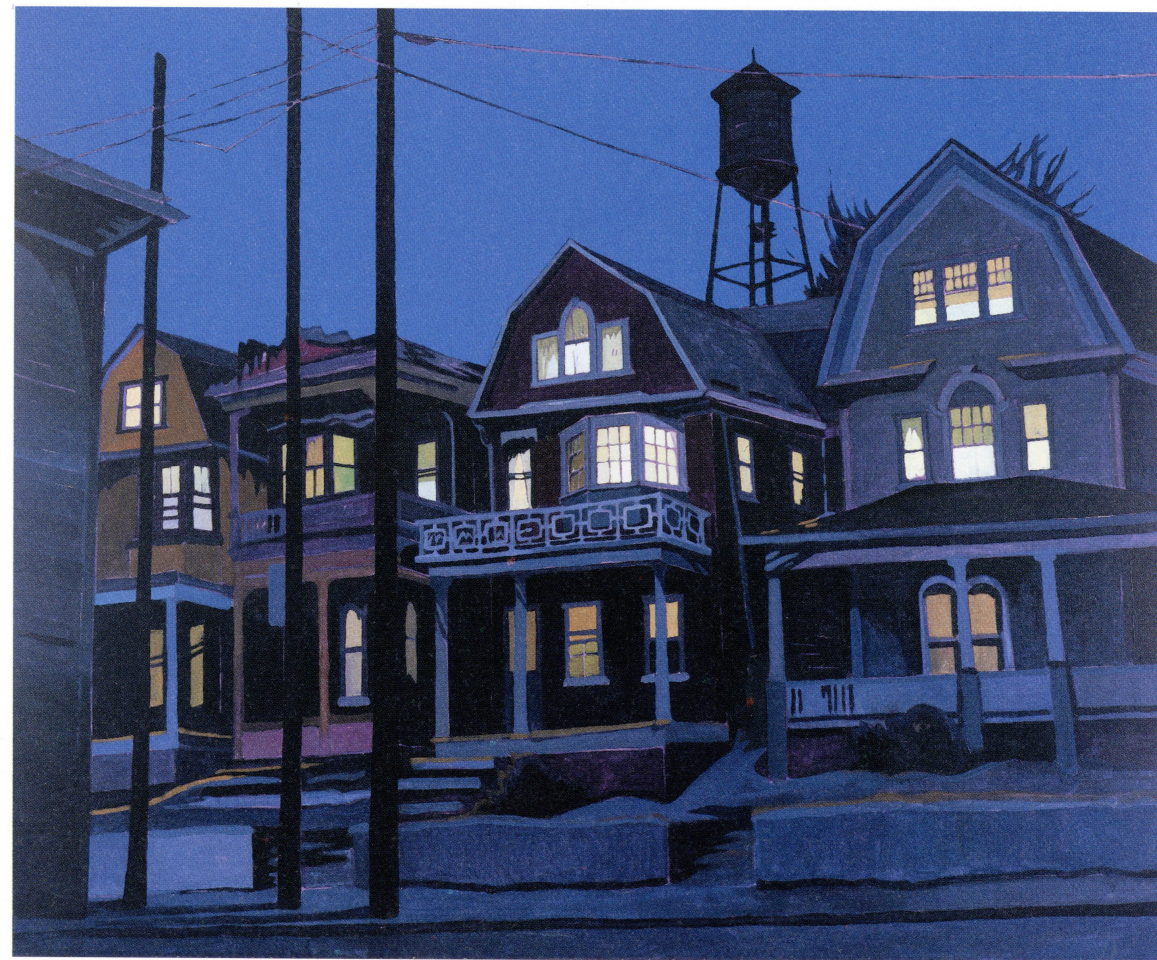
Following in the footsteps of Jackson Pollock and James Dean, Jon Carsman was a classic example of a creative and charismatic American artist who, during his short but productive career, lived a vibrant life and died tragically young. Carsman, in the style of both his life and art, was truly immersed in the New York art scene of the 1970s and 1980s. Represented by established galleries like Graham and Hammer, the artist was well received by critics for *Art News* and *Arts Magazine* and was described as one of the New Realist or Photo Realist painters who reestablished the importance of representational imagery in the wake of Abstract Expressionism. Carsman's true strength as a painter, however, lay not in his ability to keep pace with his peers but in his capacity to ground a popular and emerging art style in enduring personal and art historical traditions. A native of northeastern Pennsylvania's Wyoming Valley coal fields, Carsman never lost his fascination for the region's lonely towns and woodland glades nor his respect for the American Scene painters, Charles Burchfield and Edward Hopper, instilled in him by a local high school art teacher. Carsman's flat and brightly colored depictions of Victorian houses, overgrown gardens, shadowed waysides, and neon lightwires combined elements of Photo Realism, Pop, and the American Scene to address issues of cultural and technological innovation and isolation. In America's fast-flowing current of change, the stillness of rural pools and eddies revealed that contemporary progress was uneven and inherently linked with loss. The artist faced this reality with optimism and tempered it, only slightly, with regret.

Carsman's connections to Photo Realism were evident in *Rite of Spring*, a large-scale acrylic of 1978. With its broad areas of flat color and sinuous arches of flowing line, this representational woodland scene, which owed its clarity to the artist's use of photographs as preliminary studies for his works, was comparable in style and content to paintings by predecessors Neil Welliver and Fairfield Porter.¹ Critics reviewing Carsman's work during the 1970s recognized these obvious links but also acknowledged that the paintings moved beyond them. Noting that Carsman interpreted and extended the content of his initial photographs, Patricia Hamilton credited the artist with developing "a new vocabulary in nature," while Robert Doty observed that Carsman's landscapes contained "suggestions of mystery, hints of an unearthly presence [and were] redolent with omnipresent but unseen



Hunlock's Creek, site for *Rite of Spring*, 1978

1. Graydon Mayer, conversation with the author, Tunkhannock, PA, 24 June 2002; *John Carsman/Fairfield Porter Exhibition Announcement* (Southampton: Tower Gallery, 1973).



Evening Geometry, 1986, acrylic, 60 x 72 inches, Collection of Karen Plant

powers.”² Carsman himself conceded that expressive exaggerations of natural forms, sometimes described as “bats,” regularly appeared in his paintings. In an analogy particularly suited to *Rite of Spring*, which took its name from the Stravinsky ballet, Carsman likened these forms to patterns of rhythm, movement, and energy found in music. Beyond its existence as a landscape painting, he described *Rite of Spring* as an attempt “to force an involvement with the state of being in the woods at springtime and seeing its arrival. Other people have attempted to produce this state with color, words and music. The chevron-eye shape is Spring. . . . There are growth-like shapes around the trees that are flying towards you. These to me signify the arrival of spring in the woods. It happens there whether or not someone is there to experience it.”³

Themes of transformation and change found in Carsman’s representations of nature were also evident in his depiction of rural structures and roads. In the acrylic *Winter Lights* of 1979, Carsman’s heightened realism bordered on Pop: nineteenth-century brick and clapboard cottages stood as white and vermilion patches against an ultramarine sky, while violet and lavender phone lines and guard rails paralleled the yellow markings of a darkly shaded lane. Like his Pop predecessor Andy Warhol, Carsman exploited the satirical quality found in this juxtaposition of the traditional and commercial and further reinterpreted it in the related silkscreen *Winter Shadows* of 1980. Carsman’s two-man show with Warhol at the Tower Gallery, Southampton, in 1982, demonstrated that these similarities were more than superficial.⁴ Using what John Canaday described as “a curious double recall of past masters, being remindful at once of Charles Burchfield and Dwight D. Eisenhower, when the latter was painting by numbers,” Carsman infused otherwise nostalgic subjects with jarring elements of contemporary technique and content.⁵ All vestiges of picture-postcard tranquility were banished and replaced, in the words of Richard Lorber, by Carsman’s “hallucinogenic vision of the apple-pie American townscape.”⁶

Finally, Carsman’s paintings of domestic landscapes sparked debates about American culture and provincialism. Throughout the artist’s career, critics linked his style to those of the American Scene painters: like Carsman, Burchfield had stylized and energized his depictions of vegetation to create an aura of mystery; Hopper had heightened and lengthened his buildings and shadows to address issues of existentialism; and both artists had possessed a love and mastery of watercolor. The riotous color and haunting architecture found in Carsman’s acrylic *Pink Frenzy* of 1974, did little to dispel these comparisons, although



New Lumberville, site for *Winter Lights*, 1979

2. Patricia Hamilton, “Jon Carsman,” *Arts Magazine* (February 1976): 9; and Robert M. Doty, *Jon Carsman* (Huntsville: Huntsville Museum of Art, 1975): 2.

3. Robert Pavlik, “Jon Carsman: An Impressionistic Realist,” *Arts Magazine* (February 1979): 160.

4. *John Carsman/Andy Warhol Exhibition Announcement* (Southampton: Tower Gallery, 1982).

5. John Canaday, “Art: Carsman Shows Strength,” *New York Times* (8 December 1973).

6. Richard Lorber, “Jon Carsman,” *Arts Magazine* (April 1976): 21.

Carsman himself dismissed them, stating “If there are similarities in our work, so be it, for we all experience that excitement of nature and attempt to communicate it in our paintings.”⁷ More perceptive writers interpreted Carsman’s ties to early twentieth-century American realists in terms of shared insights rather than shared styles. John Ashbery aptly stated that Carsman’s intent in portraying scenes of rustic disrepair was “neither to isolate some fragments of the always vanishing American scene for purposes of nostalgia, nor to suppress the picturesque, anecdotal side of his subject in the interests of ‘pure’ landscape painting, but to give both the evocative and the painterly their due.”⁸ Similarly, Richard Lynch, writing fifteen years later, maintained that while Burchfield and Hopper had painted American landscapes that were haunted and isolated, Carsman was at peace with his memories, painting “not portraits of inexplicable fears, but rather thoughtful compositions constructed from life’s experience.”⁹ Even in his watercolor series of 1980–1984, which depicted the famed willows, bridges and waterlilies from Monet’s garden at Giverny, Carsman’s American sensibilities prevailed. Forgoing Monet’s accepted associations with Japanese aesthetics and French Impressionism, Carsman, in the words of Lowell Adams, “sifted through the hazy, ephemeral and atmospheric visions of Monet to produce his own more clearly defined and tangible imagery,” which, when coupled with the fluid watercolor medium, proved to be “the perfect foil to Monet’s scumbling, dots and dashes of oil pigment.”¹⁰

Ultimately, Jon Carsman’s paintings, prints and watercolors, with their combined elements of photography, Pop, and American Scene, were works concerned not with stylistic debates about realism but with broader issues of cultural realization. Recognizing that American culture, for all its vibrant, free-spirited vitality, could, on its exuberant march into the future, sometimes benefit from a glimpse of its slightly haunting, barely dismissed, and not-so-distant past, Carsman synthesized the phenomena of mass-media and postmodernism with subject matter drawn from more traditional built and natural environments. In an era when the reality of everyday life stood on the verge of the virtual, Carsman respected the enduring resonance of direct encounters with the material world.

Darlene Miller-Lanning, Ph.D
Gallery Director/Adjunct Faculty
University Art Gallery
The University of Scranton

7. Pavlik, “Jon Carsman,” 158.

8. John Ashbery, *Jon Carsman* (New York: Graham Gallery, 1971): 2.

9. Richard Lynch, *Jon Carsman, Paintings and Watercolors* (New York: Hammer Galleries, 1986): 2.

10. Lowell Adams, *Jon Carsman: Giverny Watercolors* (Reading, Oklahoma City, Little Rock and Dayton: Reading Art Museum, Oklahoma Art Center, Arkansas Art Center and Dayton Art Institute, 1984): 3.

Exhibition Checklist

Dimensions are given in inches, height precedes width.

Sordoni Art Gallery Wilkes University

Pink Frenzy, 1974
acrylic
70 x 50
Collection of Karen Plant

Evening Geometry, 1986
acrylic
60 x 72
Collection of Karen Plant

Artist's Father, 1968
acrylic
49 x 37
Collection of Loretta Carsman

Edwardsville, 1968
acrylic
59 x 64
Sordoni Art Gallery
Wilkes University
Permanent Collection

Blue Runner, 1979
acrylic
50 x 60
Collection of Sandy and Arnold
Rifkin

City Scene, New York, n.d.
oil
16 x 20
Edward Welles, Jr., Collection
D. Leonard Corgan Library
King's College

Second Avenue, New York City, n.d.
acrylic
12 x 14
Edward Welles, Jr., Collection
D. Leonard Corgan Library
King's College

Giverney Cannas, 1981
watercolor
29 x 22
Collection of Karen Plant

Winter Shadows, 1980
serigraph
33 x 24
Collection of Ken Marquis

September Stillness, 1983
watercolor
21 1/2 x 29
Collection of Sandy and Arnold
Rifkin

Winter Lights, 1979
acrylic
90 x 66
Collection of Karen Plant

Lakeside Shadows, 1974
acrylic
26 x 32
Sordoni Art Gallery
Wilkes University
Permanent Collection

Hippie, 1966
crayon
10 1/2 x 11 3/4
Collection of F. Charles Petrillo, Esq.

Lake Winola, 1971
acrylic
72 x 72
Collection of Joseph Carsman

Lehigh Valley Railroad Station, 1966
watercolor
13 x 21
Collection of F. Charles Petrillo, Esq.

Man in Window, 1967
watercolor
8 x 11
Edward Welles, Jr., Collection
D. Leonard Corgan Library
King's College

Red Rose Bar, NYC, 1968
pencil
13 1/4 x 10
Sordoni Art Gallery
Wilkes University
Permanent Collection

Velvet Waters, 1982
watercolor
29 x 22
Collection of Karen Plant

Covered Gate, n.d.
watercolor
34 x 25 1/2
Collection of F. Charles Petrillo, Esq.

Mahady Gallery Marywood University

Rite of Spring, 1978
acrylic
84 x 120
Collection of Karen Plant

Blackman's Patch, 1985
acrylic
80 x 66
Collection of Karen Plant

Woodland Pool, 1978
watercolor
30 x 22
Collection of Karen Plant

Azure Arches, 1981
watercolor
35 x 26
Collection of Karen Plant

Sunflowers, 1983
watercolor
29 x 22
Collection of Karen Plant

Pink House, 1983
watercolor
22 x 29
Collection of Karen Plant

Culvert, 1987
watercolor
29 x 22
Collection of Karen Plant

Evans Falls, 1966
watercolor
13 x 19
Collection of F. Charles Petrillo, Esq.

Shaded Passage, 1979
acrylic
72 x 96
Collection of Karen Plant

Trexler's Corner, 1974
watercolor
30 x 22
Collection of Karen Plant

Autumn Splendor, 1980
watercolor
29 x 22
Collection of Karen Plant

Spirits Rising, 1985
watercolor
29 x 22
Collection of Karen Plant

Golden Stars, 1983
watercolor
42 x 30
Collection of Karen Plant

Waterlily Pond, 1983
watercolor
60 x 40
Collection of Karen Plant

Pennsylvania Gothic, 1985
watercolor
29 x 22
Collection of Karen Plant

Roaring Waters, 1985
acrylic
60 x 72
Collection of Karen Plant

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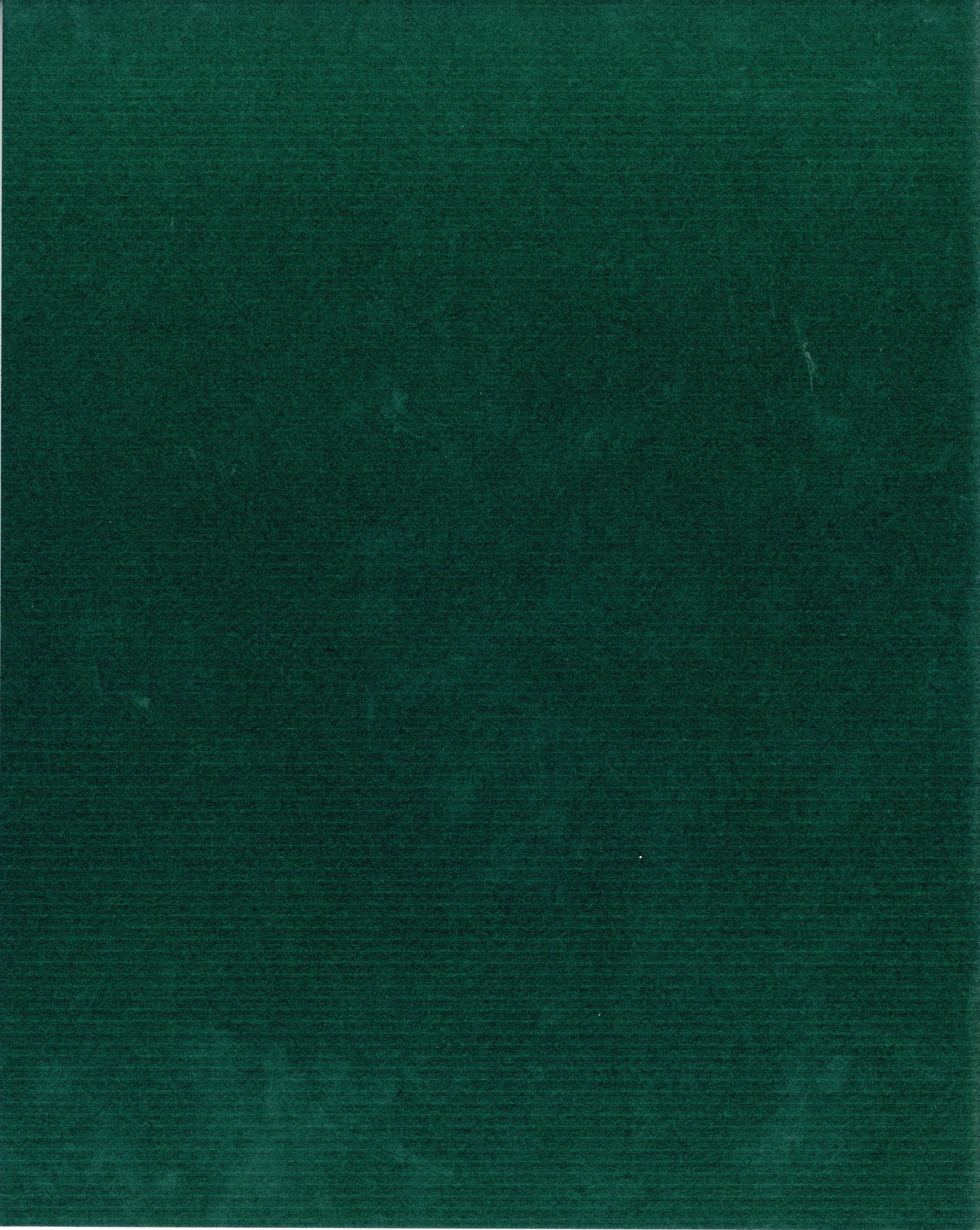
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570-408-4325

September 7 - October 19, 2003

Hours: Noon until 4:30 p.m. daily

Gallery Talk: Guest Curator, Darlene Miller-Lanning, Ph.D., Gallery Director,
University of Scranton, Saturday, September 6, 2003, 4:30 p.m.
Reception immediately following

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Exhibition continues at:

Mahady Gallery
Marywood University
September 7 - October 12, 2003

Visual Arts Center
2300 Adams Avenue
Scranton, PA 18509
570-348-6278
www.marywood.edu/galleries

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Gallery Talk: Wednesday, September 17th, 7 p.m., Darlene Miller-Lanning, Ph.D.

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