Thirty-Six Views of One World Trade Center in Context: The Symbolic Power of Landscape

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Brenda Berkman, *Tribute*, from the series *Thirty-Six Views of One World Trade Center*, 2013, lithograph on paper

Art aids us in accessing symbolic landscapes. It carefully weaves our fragile and fragmented memories together with real places and recorded history. When Brenda Berkman created her lithographic series *Thirty-Six Views of One World Trade Center*, she managed to capture New York City in a state of flux. As a resident New Yorker and first responder to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, her prints reflect and document the architecture of One World Trade Center as it came into being, while acknowledging the deep traumatic loss of the Twin Towers that preceded its construction. Her work layers temporalities and gives us unique insight into the ephemeral process of creating something new while navigating psychic pain. Her series is a body of work that challenges us to remember and mourn; to rebuild and heal. However, while *Thirty-Six Views of One World Trade Center* is notable for its specificity to both time and place, Berkman's visual approach looks beyond New York and even the United States to ask deeper questions regarding how we make meaning of monumentality in our landscape — and how we cope with the loss of symbolic power in the face of sudden and dramatic change.

Brenda Berkman's series adopts the format of "thirty-six views," or *sanjūrokkei* in Japanese. First popularized by Edo-period (1603–1867) print artist Katsuhika Hokusai in the 1830s, it is a unique approach to viewing a singular site from all angles, all distances, and all seasons. Berkman uses lithography to guide us through the construction of One World Trade Center, mediating it through a variety of perspectives. Her approach has something in common with artists of the past and Berkman's work can be seen within a broader transnational lineage.

When nineteenth-century Japanese artists like Hokusai or Andō Hiroshige assessed the Edo (now Tokyo) skyline, the towering image of Mount Fuji loomed large in their view. Singular and central in the landscape, the mountain had long captivated the Japanese imagination.[1] Its form was described in poetry as early as the seventh century and represented in artwork as early as the eleventh century. Perhaps due to its iconic and symmetrical form, the mountain took on symbolic valence in Japan, with a range of spiritual meanings in Pure Land Buddhism, Shintōism, and Japanese folk beliefs. With the passage of time and a burgeoning fascist state in the 1930s, artists even mobilized the image of Mount Fuji to reinforce a nationalist state ideology.[2] While the mountain is often used to symbolize permanence and immutability through generations, the meanings attached to it have hardly remained stable over time.

1 According to art historian Takashina Shūji, the mountain is eulogized in several poems dating back to the Man'yōshū, Japan's oldest poetry anthology compiled after 759 CE, and was visualized in painting as early as the mid-eleventh century. See: Takashina Shūji, "Mount Fuji in Edo Arts and Minds," Nippon.com. First published in *Japan Echo 30*, No. 1 (February 2003). *https://www.nippon.com/en/currents/d00021/mount-fuji-in-edo-arts-and-minds.html.*

2 The shifting symbolism of Mount Fuji during Japan's prewar period is addressed by Asato Ikeda, *The Politics of Painting: Fascism and Japanese Art During the Second World War* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2018).

Despite its powerful iconicity, Mount Fuji formed a part of the everyday landscape for the average person bustling about the capital city of Edo in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. While its appearance was subject to conditions of season, weather, and light, it was an ever-present monument in the Japanese landscape and cultural imagination. Hokusai created *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji* (Fugaku sanjūrokkei), one of the most famous representations of the mountain in art history, between 1830 and 1832.[3] While the overall shape of the mountain remains consistent throughout the print series, Hokusai manages to capture our visual interest by depicting the mountain from locations both near and far and by documenting its shifting appearance throughout the seasons. At times, the mountain appears large and dominates the composition, such as the majestic ruddy peak featured in *Rainstorm Beneath the Summit* [Figure 1]. At other times, the mountain is made a small detail in the background as our attention is drawn to a scene of daily life in the foreground. As viewers, we not only perceive the mountain's omnipresence in these prints, but we also engage with the idea of its permanence in the face of nature's capriciousness.

Figure 1. Katsushika Hokusai, *Rainstorm Beneath the Summit,* from *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji*, 1830–1832. Series of 36 polychrome woodblock prints on paper. Later expanded to 46 prints. In the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. PUBLIC DOMAIN

The success of Hokusai's *Thirty-Six Views* inspired fellow printmaker Andō Hiroshige to produce his own *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji* in 1852.[4] The concept also informed Hiroshige's famous series *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo* (Meisho Edo hyakkei), serialized from 1856 to 1858, which documented the vibrancy of life across social classes in the capital.[5] It is this series that engaged Berkman's imagination in her own revisioning of *Thirty-Six Views of One World Trade Center*. Hiroshige brings new aesthetic considerations and variety to his prints in his reimagining *meisho*, or "places with names," which were locations with literary and poetic allusion. He was able to address not only conventionally famous places around the capital, but also little-known locations that had topographical or historical interest. In contrast to his earlier work, Hiroshige's *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo* separates the foreground and the background of the composition. To invoke the words of historian Henry D. Smith II, Hiroshige creates a "sense of separation ... between the viewers and the world viewed."[6] He explains, "typically the foreground is more active, more symbolic, and sometimes more personal, while the background is more passive, neutral, and public. Thus he places lively, warm, festive foreground elements against a background that is still, cold, and workaday."[7] In *Fukugawa Susaki and Jūmantsubo* [Figure 2], we delight in the close, playful form of the eagle about to dive to catch its prey contrasted against the still, barren wintry marsh and mountains below. Produced in his older years after Hiroshige had taken formal vows renouncing the material world to live as a Buddhist priest, one has to wonder if this separation is also Hiroshige's own lonely gesture to distance himself from this landscape before his own death in 1858.[8] Regardless of intention, his aesthetic practice allows us to explore relationships across both distance and time uniquely suited to a personal reading of landscape.[9]

Figure 2. Andō Hiroshige, *Jūmantsubo Plain at Fukugawa Susaki*, No. 107 from *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*, 1856–1858. Series of 118 polychrome woodblock prints on paper. In the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. PUBLIC DOMAIN

The influence of these print series by Hokusai and Hiroshige reached far beyond the confines of Japan. In the nineteenth century, their work was fervently collected by French artists interested in Japonisme — a word used to describe the Japanese influence on Western aesthetics. One of these artists, Henri Rivière, composed his own "thirty-six views" titled *Thirty-Six Views of the Eiffel Tower* (Les Trente-Six

3 Katsushika Hokusai, *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji* (Fugaku sanjūrokkei), 1830–1832. Series of 36 polychrome woodblock prints on paper. Later expanded to 46 prints.

4 Andō Hiroshige, *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji* (Fugaku sanjūrokkei), 1852. Series of 36 polychrome woodblock prints on paper.

5 Andō Hiroshige, *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo* (Meisho Edo hyakkei), 1856–1858. Series of 118 polychrome woodblock prints on paper.

6 Henry D. Smith II, "Introduction," in *Hiroshige: One Hundred Famous Views of Edo* (New York: George Braziller Inc. and The Brooklyn Museum, 1986), 10.

7 Smith, 13.

8 Smith, 10.

9 Smith, 13.

Vues de la Tour Eiffel) in 1888 to 1902.[10] Like his Japanese predecessors, he took inspiration from the changing landscape around him, namely the cityscape of modern Paris and the construction of the Eiffel Tower. Unlike Mount Fuji — a landmark created by natural forces — the Eiffel Tower served as the ultimate symbol of French achievement in the modern, industrial age. Built between 1887 and 1889, the tower on Champ de Mars served as the entrance to the 1889 World's Fair.

Hokusai and Hiroshige could not envision a Japan without the existence of Mount Fuji or without the iconic sites of the Edo capital. But Rivière knew full well what the landscape looked like before the Eiffel Tower's existence. His prints revel in the excitement of change. He saw the tower being raised and even gained access to the tower prior to its completion along with friends from the famous Parisian nightclub Le Chat Noir.[11] At that time, he made several sketches and took twenty-seven photographs to document the final stages of its construction.[12] Rather than attesting to the power of nature, the Eiffel Tower demonstrated man's ability to mold it.

By 1918, the tower had become a symbol of Paris and greater France. But Rivière's 1902 series was released at a time when the tower was new and did not yet have the strong iconicity that we associate with it today. Rivière's *Thirty-Six Views of the Eiffel Tower* exhibits a fascination with Japanese aesthetics that characterized the work of many artists from Claude Monet to Edgar Degas to Mary Cassatt. Adapting Hokusai's title, Rivière went on to depict the tower up close and from afar from various vantage points around the city. In some images, we stand with the artist on the metal scaffolding of the tower [Figure 3]. In others, we observe the tower quietly as its silhouette spectrally recedes into the distance and becomes a part of the new Parisian landscape [Figure 4]. Rivière was not interested in a landscape that had always existed, but in a landscape that was in a state of becoming.

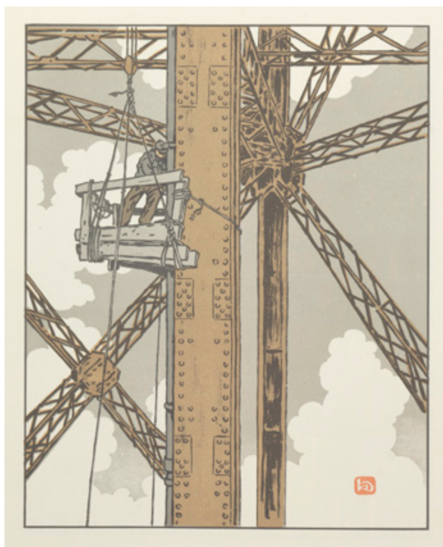

Figure 3. Henri Rivière, *A Plumber on the Tower*, No. 30 from *Thirty-Six Views of the Eiffel Tower*, 1888–1902. Series of 36 lithographs printed in four tones on thick-wove paper. In the collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art. © 2021 ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK / ADAGP, PARIS

Figure 4. Henri Rivière, *From the Quai de la Conférence*, No. 8 from *Thirty-Six Views of the Eiffel Tower*, 1888–1902. Series of 36 lithographs printed in four tones on thick-wove paper. In the collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art. © 2021 ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK / ADAGP, PARIS

And using innovative approaches that he adapted from Japanese printmaking, he simplified perspective to allow the viewer to focus on the shape and rhythm of the tower's form.

Brenda Berkman's *Thirty-Six Views of One World Trade Center* enters this lineage of artists interested in cultural and architectural icons by depicting New York City's altered skyline while pondering the nature of both loss and renewal. She is personally connected to the World Trade Center site in her service as a fire officer on September 11, 2001, when the Twin Towers were destroyed by the terrorist group Al-Qaeda. Prior to their destruction, the towers of the World Trade Center had become part of the everyday environment and an expected and notable feature on the skyline since their construction in 1968–1969. In the wake of their sudden and traumatic disappearance — and the loss of many lives that their absence marked — the question of when and how to rebuild on the sixteen-acre site was not easily answered in the years that immediately followed. However, after much debate and negotiation, the foundations of a new complex designed by architect David Childs would be laid in 2006. The completed One World Trade Center opened on November 3, 2014.

Berkman began her project in 2013, prior to the completion of the "One WTC." The first print in her series marks our anxiety about dealing with the past while moving into the present as a ghost of the artist hovers amidst the signs of new construction. Like Rivière, Berkman's work engages with the marvel of construction as we see the site come together from a variety of perspectives and distances. Her series of lithographs does not let us forget the trauma of 9/11 as we contemplate her personal experience and the haunting absence of the towers from the skyline itself. But there are also prints that seem to revel in the optimism of the future in line with Rivière. After all, Rivière did not fear modernity like many of his peers and he embraced the visual challenge of representing his changing environment. Berkman too looks forward in her prints as she encourages us to think about the process of rebuilding — and healing.

10 Henri Riviere, *Thirty-Six Views of the Eiffel Tower* (Les Trente-Six Vues de la Tour Eiffel), 1888–1902. Series of 36 lithographs printed in four tones on thick-wove paper.

11 Armond Fields, *Henri Rivière* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1983).

12 Henri Rivière, *Les détours du chemin, souvenirs, notes et croquis,* 1864–1951 (Saint-Remy de Provence: Editions Equinoxe, 2004), 68–70.

Figure 5. Katsushika Hokusai, *Tatekawa in Honjō*, from *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji*, 1830–1832. Series of 36 polychrome woodblock prints on paper. Later expanded to 46 prints. In the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. PUBLIC DOMAIN

Figure 6. Henri Rivière, *Building Site, Eiffel Tower*, No. 2 from *Thirty-Six Views of the Eiffel Tower*, 1888–1902. Series of 36 lithographs printed in four tones on thick-wove paper. In the collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art. © 2021 ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK / ADAGP, PARIS

While unique in their capacity to depict this American story of loss and renewal in the physical landscape of New York, there are several ways that Berkman ties her work to that of fellow creators of "thirty-six views." While loosely based on a concept originally carried out by Hokusai, artists Hiroshige, Rivière, and Berkman all strive to depict a singular landmark or place that was iconic to their respective culture and time while framing its magnitude in the wonders of everyday life. We see this attention to the mundane in Hokusai's print *Tatekawa in Honjō*, which shows a group of laborers stacking planks in the Honjō lumberyard. Mount Fuji can be seen between the planks in the upper right of the print, but we are often too absorbed with the details of the men and their work in the foreground to notice [Figure 5]. Rivière takes a similar approach in *Building Site, Eiffel Tower*, which shows the initial construction of the Eiffel Tower [Figure 6]. While the tower is certainly important, the viewer cannot help but focus on the labor of the men working at the construction site. Berkman's second print in her series, *Building the Plaza*, captures this same spirit as workers busily collaborate to build One World Trade Center.

Occasionally Berkman's references are more specific in homage to her predecessors. Careful viewers might notice how Hiroshige's name is turned on its side, scrawled like graffiti on a metal beam in the print *View from the Q Train*. Or how Hiroshige's eagle once hovering above the winter marsh now surveys the construction site in *Bird's Eye View*. In Berkman's *Spring Blooms*, we gaze up at One World Trade Center through the bough of a magnolia tree that at once obscures our view and isolates the building akin to the way that Hiroshige frames the town of Massaki and Mount Tsukuba through the blossoms of the double-petaled cherry in *Suijin Shrine and Massaki on the Sumida River* (1856) [Figure 7]. In both prints, the middle distance is entirely collapsed. There are many such surprises awaiting those familiar with Berkman's historical influences. Her prints are uniquely tied to an American experience and perspective, but they are global in their resonance. Like her Japanese counterparts of the Edo period, she is invested in our idea of iconicity and the way that these structures permeate our imagination. But as Rivière reminds us, these landscapes and our skylines are subject to change — both in terms of their destruction and renovation. One has to wonder what artists like Hiroshige and Hokusai would make of the shifting dimensions of a city like New York.

Figure 7. Andō Hiroshige, *Suijin Shrine and Massaki on the Sumida River*, No. 35 from *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*, 1856–1858. Series of 118 polychrome woodblock prints on paper. In the collection of the Brooklyn Museum. PUBLIC DOMAIN

Will One World Trade Center ever achieve the same kind of visual recognition that the Twin Towers were known for? As it comes into being, what new kind of symbolism might the structure establish? Brenda Berkman's *Thirty-Six Views* allows us to ask these questions as we think about both past, present, and future. In this space of layered temporality, her work prompts us to think about the role of these monumental structures and the meaning behind our attachment to them. ■

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