

ARTFORUM

“Thoreau Revisited” and “Three for Society”

WAVE HILL 675 West 252 Street, June 7-August 26

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Henry David Thoreau's best-remembered writing emerges from two rooms: the Concord prison cell where an overnight incarceration inspired “On the Duty of Civil Disobedience” and the ten-by-fifteen cabin he built for himself at Walden Pond. The enclosure and enforced solitude of these spaces shaped his singular contribution to literature, precise and practical observations crafted into a convincing (if sometimes contradictory) social conscience. Two exhibitions taking cues from Thoreau’s work rehearse his practice of deep introspection that reverberates outward. At 303 Gallery, “Three for Society,” a reference to the number of chairs in Thoreau’s cabin, draws inspiration from observations in *Walden* of how social interactions in his quarters and in the surrounding woods differed. Therein Thoreau complains of “the difficulty of getting to a sufficient distance from my guest when we began to utter the big thoughts in big words.” Strong individual contributions by David Thorpe, Collier Schorr, Robert Boyd, and Agathe Snow struggle similarly to strike up a conversation within their narrow confines. Wave Hill, a Bronx cultural center and public garden overlooking the Hudson, offers a more expansive setting for considering the complicated dynamic between seclusion and civic life inherent in Thoreau’s personal philosophy. Spencer Finch revisits Thoreau’s comments on the pond’s changing colors by charting his own recordings of a March morning at Walden through the curious medium of Monet reproductions, and Anne Lindburg’s “plumbago” experiments with graphite touch on Thoreau’s less heralded achievement as an innovator in pencil design. Richard Torchia’s quietly spectacular re-creation of Thoreau’s cabin as a camera obscura leads into the rambling woodlands, and other contributions by Ellen Harvey, Jon Rappleye and Mary Temple, and Alan Michelson press up against the gallery’s Georgian Revival windows, using Thoreau’s writings to reframe the view. Thoreau describes listening to the town clock and nearby inn during his jail stay as “like traveling into a far country, such as I had never expected to behold.” If Thoreau could gain such a sense of transport from a prison cell, than certainly we might hope for as much from a gallery.

“Three for Society” is on view at 303 Gallery until July 27.

—Colby Chamberlain