

American Dreamland: Art, Illusion and Coney Island

by Gail Leggio

It's only a paper moon
Sailing over a cardboard sea
But it wouldn't be make-believe
If you believed in me.

Without your love
It's a honky-tonk parade
Without your love
It's a melody played in a penny arcade.
It's a Barnum and Bailey world
Just as phony as it can be,
But it wouldn't be make-believe
If you believed in me.

Written in 1933, “It’s Only a Paper Moon” was first heard in *The Great Magoo*, a now-forgotten Broadway musical set in Coney Island. The song (melody by Harold Arlen, lyrics by Billy Rose and Yip Harburg) acknowledges the blatant fakery of Coney Island’s amusements but celebrates the genuine emotion, romantic verve and optimism that thrive in that low-rent culture. (Noël Coward makes a similar confession, albeit in a posher accent, in his play *Private Lives*, when he writes “How potent sometimes cheap music is.”) In 1973, Peter Bogdanovich alluded to the thirties song in his exquisite film *Paper Moon*, a valentine to a (possibly) father-daughter team of con artists who travel the Midwest during the Great Depression, often in the company of an exotic dancer named Trixie. The seedy milieu is viewed through an affectionately nostalgic lens. This is an art film, strikingly photographed in black-and-white by László Kovács. Bogdanovich, a respected film critic, quotes John Ford’s *My Darling Clementine* in the last shot. A fondness for flim-flam—the entrepreneurial spirit in its most vulgar, disreputable, yet also vital and imaginative form—runs deep in the American psyche, going back to Mark Twain’s Tom Sawyer and Herman Melville’s *The Confidence Man*.

For over a century, Coney Island embodied the American dream of popular culture at its brightest and darkest, providing a place for social experiment, a rich body of iconography and an enduring idea. A dazzling touring exhibition, “Coney Island: Visions of an American Dreamland, 1861–2008,” originating at Hartford’s Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art (January 31–May 31, 2015), explores the phenomenon through 140 objects and a fascinating catalogue.¹

In the latter, exhibition organizer Robin Jaffee Frank documents the changing face of Coney Island in a series of excellent essays. Coney Island House, a beach hotel catering to wealthy New Yorkers, opened in 1829. The introduction of regular ferry service in the mid-1840s, a horse tram in 1862 and a steam rail link in 1864 made the beach resort more accessible, and by the 1870s there was a stampede of day trippers. The rapid democratization of Coney Island, Frank notes, was based on “the belief that all sectors of society—from entrepreneurs to factory employees—needed a release valve from the stresses of modern life.”² Two paintings depicting the early days of Coney Island show the relatively genteel beginnings of the resort. In Samuel S. Carr’s *Beach Scene* (c. 1879), everyone is well-dressed and well-behaved, including a black couple, a foreshadowing of Coney Island’s role as a zone for ethnic and class mixing. The beach, waves and sunlight all seem pristine, yet only one couple bothers to look at the water; one family poses for a tintype photographer, while another group watches a puppet show.

William Merritt Chase celebrates nature in *Landscape, near Coney Island* (c. 1886). Two figures—a young lady in white and a boy in brown—move through the sea grasses on the dunes, ignoring the already-established commercial zone, relegated to tiny silhouettes on the horizon. Yet clearly visible there are the Iron Tower (bought from the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876 and installed at Coney Island the same year) and the more-outrageous Elephant Hotel, 112 feet high, with thirty-one rooms named for the part of the beast—hoof, hip, head—they occupied. The Elephant had a reputation for prostitution and gambling, activities that Chase’s patrons preferred to keep in the distance. Chase’s modernism shines through in his flickering impressionist brushwork and off-kilter compositional gambits, but, as Barbara Dayer Gallati remarks, his suburban resort scenes “are framed in a conservative iconography...turning them into aestheticized, high art objects.”³

Chase’s view of the natural world is thoroughly and comfortably secular. Yet he has a good deal in common with earlier nineteenth-century artists, such as the religiously earnest Hudson River School, who popularized American scenery and—incidentally and often to their chagrin—paved the way for tourism. Niagara Falls was receiving twenty thousand visitors a year by 1838. A travel reporter lamented its “commercialism and general tackiness” in 1850; in 1850–52, the weight of crowds of tourists weakened the ledges overlooking the falls so severely that hunks of rock broke off. Yet Frederic Edwin Church and other painters showed none of the overbuilding that had nearly ruined this site. Church’s monumental canvas *Niagara* (1857) presents an unblemished vision of sublime nature.⁴

The nineteenth-century “culture of landscape”⁵ clung to the dream of the wilderness, embodied—however imperfectly—by Niagara Falls, the Hudson River Valley and Maine, before it drifted west to Yosemite and Yellowstone. Coney Island was a suburban resort. Rather than offering an escape into



Milton Avery, *The Steeplechase, Coney Island*, 1929

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK. © 2013 MILTON AVERY TRUST/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY

nature, the attractions offered fun-house versions of modern life—artificially lit, infatuated with speed and novelty, breaking down barriers between races and classes, between high and low, between art and entertainment. Electric lights and mechanical amusements lured crowds as dense as the inhabitants of New York City tenements. One early twentieth-century commentator condemned the perpetual carnival as “an orgiastic escape from respectability.”⁶ Thrill rides like the Steeplechase, Blowhole Theater and the Human Roulette Wheel threw the sexes together in unseemly ways.

And yet, Coney Island was at its most beautiful in the early decades of the twentieth century. Dreamland and Luna Park perpetuated the magic of the great international exhibitions, which exploited electricity, introduced around 1880, to dazzling effect. Because of electricity (and other artificial light forms, such as gas), Andreas Blühm and Louise Lippincott write, “night gradually acquired its modern identity, as a time of additional work, public entertainment and education.”⁷ At Luna Park, 250,000 electric lights outlined 1,210 towers, minarets and domes. The exhibition includes vintage photographs and short films that document the magical results, as well as a stunning painting: Joseph Stella’s *Battle of Lights, Coney Island, Mardi Gras* (1913–14). Stella, an Italian immigrant cognizant of European modernism, creates a kaleidoscopic whirligig of light and color against a dark background, clearly mimicking yet



Reginald Marsh, *Wooden Horses*, 1936

WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART, HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT. PHOTO: © 2013 ESTATE OF REGINALD MARSH / ART STUDENTS LEAGUE, NEW YORK / ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY

abstracting the motion of various rides against a night sky. The painting celebrates the propulsive, dizzying energy of Coney Island as an icon of American Futurism.

To recapture the Coney Island experience, the exhibition includes an impressive photography component. One striking image is Edward Kelty's *Harlem Black Birds, Coney Island* (1930), which documents the cast of an African American musical revue, posed under a jazzy banner illustrating a performance. There are many images by Weegee, best known for his hard-boiled crime scenes. His *Afternoon Crowd at Coney Island* (July 21, 1940) depicts a mass of cheerful beachgoers, closely packed and stretching as far as the eye can see. Red Grooms's acrylic-on-paper *Weegee 1940*, from 1998–99, is a direct homage, layered for a bas-relief effect. Grooms has made a Pop, pop-up image about Coney Island—and about Coney Island's artistic history.

The show also considers how film contributed to the mythology and iconography of Coney Island. Film, as a medium, grew up from low-culture beginnings similar to the amusement park's, but went on to become a dominant twentieth-century artform. Essayists Charles Musser and Josh Glick focus on Coney Island as an arena for experimenting with male-female relationships. The freedom—and license—of public spaces transformed by artificial light prompted “images of working class night life,” as Blühm and Lippincott remark, that continue to evoke “feelings of romantic nostalgia, raffish glamour

and sexual adventure.”⁸ *Fatty at Coney Island* (1917) is a slapstick roundelay, as Fatty Arbuckle and Buster Keaton (already a consummate acrobat but not yet fully developed as a soulful leading man) chase girls and are, in turn, chased by Keystone Kops.

Two films from 1928, more ambitiously, use Coney Island as a setting to explore the American Dream. In *The Crowd*, King Vidor shows the soul-crushing life of big city office workers: a shot of the huge work space at the Atlas Insurance Company, with an apparently infinite number of identical desks, has become a justly famous image. On a blind date to Coney Island, a boy and girl fall in love; he proposes, and they honeymoon in Niagara Falls. But there is no escape from the impersonal machinery of fate. His career does not advance; they argue, patch things up and have children. Then their daughter dies in a traffic accident, he loses his job and winds up carrying a sandwich board. *The Crowd* is a tragedy.

Speedy is a comedy, a triumph of optimism and ingenuity over obstacles. When Speedy (Harold Lloyd) loses his job as a soda jerk, he takes his girl to Coney Island, where they enjoy the physical contact of the rides, win a cradle at a carnival game and hitch a ride back to the city in a moving van, arranging an ad hoc love nest from the furnishings. He gets a job as a cabbie, driving Babe Ruth (in a cameo) to Yankee Stadium. When the girl’s father’s horse-drawn tram business is threatened by a corporate bully, Speedy saves the day, organizing a stereotypical but winning group of immigrants to help and staging a terrific *Ben-Hur* parody race through lower Manhattan (including the Washington Square Arch). It’s a marvelous film, especially viewed with an audience and accompanied by a live score (the Alloy Orchestra’s is superb).

The year after *The Crowd* and *Speedy* were released the stock market crashed, and Coney Island, like the rest of America, was diminished. (Luna Park and Dreamland, like the palaces of the international expositions, had been made of ephemeral materials and had already succumbed to fire.) But Coney Island endured in less-ambitious form, as another film, *Sinner’s Holiday* (1930, not discussed in the catalogue), demonstrates. A modest Warner Brothers feature, *Sinner’s Holiday* follows two young couples working in Coney Island. The ostensible leads (Grant Withers and Evelyn Knapp) are blandly decent. The supporting couple, a bootlegger and his girl (a kissing-booth blonde described by another character as a “gutter floozy”) are played by James Cagney and Joan Blondell. It’s no contest. The cynicism, seediness and sensationalism that were first seen as regrettable aspects of Coney Island now become its principal draw.

The Depression-era Coney Island is embodied in Tod Browning’s notorious sideshow melodrama *Freaks* (1931), a film that inspired Diane Arbus,⁹ and in the images of Reginald Marsh. Marsh’s *Pip and Flip* (1932) pictures the sideshow scene with hectic energy. The painting takes its title from one of the attractions, microcephalic twins Elvira and Jenny Lee Snow, known in the trade as “pinheads” (a type of disabled performer featured in *Freaks*). In one

of the giant banners behind the stage in Marsh's painting, the scantily clad twins are advertised as an exotic import from Peru, although the Snow girls were born in Georgia. Jenny sits demurely on the stage, flanked by gyrating non-white dancers, as the crowds jostle past. Marsh's jittery brushwork brings the scene alive, but it is also disorienting. Marsh's banners are garish in color, like examples in the exhibition: *Shackles the Great*, *Quito*, *Human Octopus*, *Jeannie Living Half Girl* (all 1940). The original banners exemplify snappy vernacular design, with blocks of strong color and emblematic representations of the subjects. Marsh's banners are part of the quivering mass of surface paint, expressing *horror vacui*, instability and the relentless movement of the crowds, simultaneously driven forward and distracted by the visual cacophony around them.

Marsh is sometimes described as a Social Realist, and he created some striking graphic images of hoboes and breadlines. Yet, in spirit, he is a descendant of the great eighteenth-century caricaturists Thomas Rowlandson and James Gillray, who skewered the foibles of the powerful, and, in the nineteenth century, George Cruikshank, who illustrated the working-class novels of Charles Dickens. Marsh was less interested in individuals than in the behavior of crowds, observing New Yorkers on the street, in burlesque theaters and at Coney Island.¹⁰ Marsh's 1936 *Wooden Horses* (detail, cover) depicts the Racing Derby, an adults-only merry-go-round that exudes "an atmosphere of menacing, out-of-control chaos."¹¹ The spokes above the riders suggest whirling speed (the ride went twenty-five miles per hour), while the couple in the foreground, a cigar-smoking man holding on to a curvaceous blonde, both astride the same horse, suggest sexual abandon. The horse seems to rear, baring his teeth in excitement. Marsh considered carousel animals some of the "best sculpture" of his time.¹²

Marsh knew what he was talking about, as demonstrated by the carousel animals in the exhibition, Charles I. D. Loeff's *Arabian Camel* (c. 1895), Solomon Stein and Harry Goldstein's *Armored Horse* (c. 1912–17) and Charles Carmel's *Carousel Horse with Raised Head* (c. 1914). Closely resembling the lead animal in Marsh's painting, Carmel's horse—made of painted wood, embellished with "jewels" and enlivened by glass eyes and a horsehair tail—is a triumph of imaginative iconography and old world craftsmanship. Most of the carousel carvers, like the Russian-born Carmel, were Jewish immigrants who also worked on decorative projects for synagogues. They remind us of the rich background of the best American vernacular art.

The free interchange of ideas and motifs between high and low is a recurring theme in American art. Marsh, visual chronicler of the working class at play during the Depression, was a child of privilege, born in Paris to artist parents. His multi-figure compositions feature muscular men and voluptuous women, figures that reflect his knowledge of Renaissance drawings, Titian and Rubens. At the same time, Marsh submerges the figure-painting tradition in



Charles Carmel
*Carousel Horse
with Raised Head*
c. 1914
AMERICAN FOLK
ART MUSEUM,
NEW YORK

a hectic, modern milieu that seems far from classical. Another painting in the exhibition, however, combines classicism and contemporary forms with striking success.

In *Coney Island* (1948), George Tooker infuses the spirit and form of classicism into a scene from mid-twentieth-century America. Tooker was a master of egg tempera, a demanding (and sometimes wrongly considered archaic) medium that gives his surfaces a luminous smoothness. The architecture of the setting organizes the space in a way reminiscent of early Renaissance compositions. The foreground figures are arranged in the shadows of the boardwalk, and the supports of the structure function like classical columns to establish perspective. The smaller background figures cavort in full sunlight on the beach, oblivious to the somber group in the foreground. Tooker's principal group is arranged in a Lamentation, with a woman cradling the body of a young man, who may have drowned or may just be asleep. The attendant figures have a spiritual gravitas, their bodies are sculpted, and they subtly draw our attention to the *pietà*, without undue emotion. Note the way two figures frame the central scene: a young girl on the left raises her arms and closes her eyes, while a black woman on the right (Tooker, artistically conservative but socially progressive, often depicts racially mixed groups) turns her head to confront and emotionally engage the viewer.

Due to various economic and social factors, Coney Island's fortunes waned in the second half of the twentieth century. Corporate theme parks drew middle-class audiences with promises of a more homogenized, essentially bowd-

lerized, recreational experience. But the old democratic idea of Coney Island, often messy but also inspiring, lingered. Several works in the exhibition draw on that idea, including *Coney Island Pier* (1995), an oil by Daze (Chris Eliot), a local graffiti artist. A group of teenagers stand on a pier, watching as a friend jumps off, arms spread in a leap of faith. *Coney Island Pier* focuses on the survival of this place, perennially welcoming—even in its diminished form—new groups of residents and visitors, often immigrants from different lands. Coney Island has always held up a mirror, exaggerated but instructive, to both New York City and the United States.

Coney Island exists perhaps even more vividly in memory. Both Marsh and Tooker capture the vitality of the real place as they observed it, although Marsh emphasizes the never-step-in-the-same-river-twice flow of sensation, while Tooker takes the everyday gestures of a group of beachgoers and distills a timeless image of human experience. In contrast, the image of the perennially shaken house under the roller coaster in Woody Allen's film *Annie Hall* (1977) is a fantasy: the house existed but belonged to the roller coaster operator, not to the family of the film's protagonist. (The roller coaster is the Thunderbolt, built in 1925, closed in 1983 and demolished in 2000.) The Thunderbolt dominates Milton Avery's *The Steeplechase, Coney Island* (1929), a painting that documents



Red Grooms, *Weegee* 1940, 1998–99

PRIVATE COLLECTION. IMAGE COURTESY MARLBOROUGH GALLERY, NEW YORK ©2013 RED GROOMS

his personal experience and simultaneously transforms the scene into nearly abstract art. Avery and his family spent weekends at the beach, taking the subway, which had been extended to Coney Island in 1920 and cost only five cents, leading to one of the resort's soubriquets, the Nickel Empire. The Averys stayed on the beach, rather than frequenting the more-expensive amusement park. The painting avoids anecdote, however, reducing the boardwalk crowds to black dots and the silhouetted figures on the beach to flat shapes under a grey sky, and stylizing the roller coaster to a modernist parabola.

Twenty-first-century Coney Island is a palimpsest, with overlapping layers of history and memory. The contemporary watercolorist Frederick Brosen creates meticulous simulacra of reality, yet his paintings are fictions. In *Fortune Teller, Jones Walk, Coney Island* (2008), this stretch of Coney Island is swept clean and brightly illuminated, notably by the huge Wonder Wheel sign in pink and green; neon design objects are part of the mid-century-modern vernacular that we have come to consider beautiful. While it looks open for business, however, this place is devoid of human presence. Brosen's *Astroland* (2008–13) is even more layered. During the five years he worked on the picture, the artist added his wife, son and daughter to the composition, and he shows the long-shuttered food stalls open. In eerie, beautiful and not-quite-natural light, the principal form is the Astro Rocket, a seventy-one-foot, twelve-thousand-pound ride that closed the year Brosen began his study. Sometimes called the Star Flyer, the Astro Rocket was installed in 1962 to take advantage of public interest in the space race.

Coney Island's attempts to keep up with the times were ill-starred. The amusement park had a reputation for crime and drugs, and the powerful urban planner Robert Moses initiated a series of now mostly discredited renewal projects that favored the middle class over the poor—and the suburbs over the city, including Jones Beach on Long Island, accessible only by car. Jones Beach is a pretty place, and on a spring evening, you can drive along spotting rabbits by the roadside. Indeed, Coney Island may have been like this in pre-urban days (*coney* was a synonym for rabbit in Colonial times).

We have learned to love Coney Island, however, in all its often-seedy incarnations. The Astro Rocket is in storage, under the protection of the Coney Island History Project, with hopes of future reinstallation. Current attractions include Sideshow by the Sea, the nation's only non-profit freak show, and the Coney Island Museum, a permanent collection of memorabilia. Robin Jaffee Frank sums up the continuing allure of the place and the culture it embodies: "Looking back nostalgically and ahead confidently, innumerable artists recognize what would be lost if Coney Island became a sterile site for only condominiums and malls, instead of the visceral, atmospheric and beguiling dreamland it once was and perhaps could be again."¹³

After closing at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art on May 31, the exhibition travels to the San Diego Museum of Art in California (July

11–October 13, 2015), the Brooklyn Museum (November 20, 2015–March 13, 2016, with an ancillary show of photographs from the mid-nineteenth through the early twenty-first century) and the McNay Art Museum in San Antonio, Texas (May 11–September 11, 2016).

NOTES

1. Robin Jaffee Frank, *Coney Island: Visions of an American Dreamland, 1861–2008* (New Haven: Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in association with Yale University Press, 2015).
2. *Ibid.*, 15.
3. Barbara Dayer Gallati, *William Merritt Chase: Modern American Landscapes, 1886–1890* (New York: Brooklyn Museum of Art in association with Harry N. Abrams, 2000), 101–4, 17–18.
4. *Frederic Church, Winslow Homer and Thomas Moran: Tourism and the American Landscape* (Boston: Cooper-Hewitt, Smithsonian National Design Museum in association with Bulfinch Press, 2006), 7–13.
5. *Ibid.*, 3.
6. Frank, *Coney Island*, 36.
7. Andreas Blühm and Louise Lippincott, *Light! The Industrial Age 1750–1900: Art and Science, Technology and Society* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2001), 26.
8. *Ibid.*, 35.
9. David J. Skal, *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror* (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1993), 145–59.
10. See Morris Dickstein, “The Urban Spectacle of Reginald Marsh” in *Swing Time: Reginald Marsh and Thirties New York*, ed., Barbara Haskell (London: D Giles, Limited, 2013).
11. Frank, *Coney Island*, 85.
12. *Ibid.*, 87.
13. *Ibid.*, 197.