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**Rezension zu Nina Amstutz:**  
*Caspar David Friedrich.*  
*Nature and the Self.*

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**Rezension zu Nina Amstutz:  
*Caspar David Friedrich. Nature and the Self.*  
Yale University Press 2020.**

Sander Oosterom

In the past few decades, scholarship on the work of the German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich has increasingly become a German affair. Since Joseph Leo Koerner's groundbreaking study *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape* from 1990, no major publication on the artist had appeared from overseas (unless we consider the slightly expanded and revised second edition of Koerner's book from 2009). With the broadening of the art-historical curriculum in the Anglo-American world, it seems that particularly small and somewhat traditional subfields as the study of German Romantic art had difficulty legitimating their position within the discipline and drawing young and talented new students to their field. It is therefore only laudable that one of the major American university publishing houses, Yale University Press, has entered the market with the first English monograph on the artist in thirty years. Lavishly illustrated with numerous full-page color reproductions of Friedrich's famous and lesser-known paintings, the book's format is a delight to the eye. The question remains, however, whether Nina Amstutz's book also has the potential to revive Friedrich scholarship intellectually.

From the opening pages onward, the comparison with Koerner directly impresses itself on the reader. For reasons that do not immediately become clear, the first page mimics almost exactly the opening of Koerner's book as both works start with a visual analysis of Friedrich's *Trees and Shrubs in the Snow* from 1828. Just as Koerner three decades earlier, Amstutz concentrates on the abstracted nature of the tree and bushes, painted against a monochromous white background devoid of any natural or human traces. Yet, whereas Koerner argues that the apparent absence of human traces is belied by Friedrich's detailed rendering of the trees and bushes that locate the scene in the subjective experience of the artist, Amstutz goes one step further in her interpretation. Situating Friedrich's "portraits of nature" in the scientific tradition of natural history illustration, she argues that human presence in Friedrich's late landscapes is not expressed by a stress on the artist's subjective viewpoint but instead anthropomorphically embodied "in natural forms as an interiorized mode of self-portraiture" (p. 16).

Belonging to the recent wave of scholarship that seeks to bring the studies of art and science together, it is Amstutz's goal to "situate Friedrich within a much larger narrative of modernism characterized by artists concerned with organic form, biology and evolution, and, ultimately, the place of human beings in the larger compass of life and matter" (p. 5). She does this by aligning Friedrich with the tradition of Romantic *Naturphilosophie*. For Friedrich, Amstutz argues, nature and self were not two distinct categories, but instead intricately linked. Friedrich's explorations of nature should therefore be seen as an investigation of his own existence as a natural being within the larger order of nature; an exploration that manifests itself formally by a convergence of the categories of self and nature in his art. With trees and shrubs signaling human vessels, and small patches of vegetation becoming esoteric traces of human blood, the novelty of Amstutz's interpretation consists in the fact that she understands this convergence literally. For her, Friedrich's paintings do not merely offer a view on nature, but also form a special class of self-portraiture that pictures the human as landscape.

Interesting and provoking as her thesis may be, it unfortunately requires a serious stretch of the imagination to follow Amstutz in her argumentation. For this review, I will concentrate on one of my main concerns with Amstutz's interpretation, which concerns her methodology. As she herself acknowledges in the introduction, there is only little documentation that directly links Friedrich to the intellectual, let alone scientific climate of his day. She thus writes that her interpretation "does not hinge on the artist's biography or textual proof," but instead "works from the premise that aesthetic and scientific concerns often intersect within a given cultural-historical context" (p. 8). Although I am highly sympathetic to this approach, the way all of this unfolds within the individual chapters is disappointing. Instead of further explaining how a cultural-historical approach may bring the discourses of art and science together, the way Amstutz generally proceeds is that she first offers a close reading of the nature-philosophical literature on a topic where the categories of nature and human collide, and subsequently looks for anthropomorphic equivalents in Friedrich's art (e.g., rock formations that vaguely resemble human hands or faces). This "looking" may be understood quite literally, moreover, for example when she writes that she just "sees" a similarity in the way Friedrich and his scientific colleagues deal with the reciprocity of human and non-human forms in their work (p. 79); a vision that apparently does not require more substantial argumentation.

Without a central core that ties the artistic and scientific discourses together, it is perhaps not surprising that Amstutz repeatedly falls back on a biographical approach after all. Despite her earlier misgivings, the book abounds in biographical and intentional claims that serve no other goal than bridging the gap between art and science by pointing to the direct influence of the nature-philosophical tradition on Friedrich's art. For example, we read that Friedrich "turned to contemporary brain science to convey the cerebral essence of his being" (p. 23), and that his "exposure to the natural sciences" led him to discard allegory and adopt a hieroglyphic conception of nature for his art (p. 94). The result of all of this is that we end up with an account that uneasily wavers between two different approaches, and where biographical conjectures must carry the weight of cultural-historical assumptions that cannot be substantiated on their own terms.

In the end, however, we simply do not know to what extent Friedrich was aware of, or even interested in the scientific developments of his day. In the only substantial discussion of art that Friedrich left behind, a description and evaluation of artworks from the Dresden art collection from 1830, nothing points to the artist's interest in science or philosophy, nor is there any indication that he understands nature hieroglyphically, as Amstutz repeatedly assumes (see e.g., p. 143). Moreover, the suggestion that Amstutz recovers a Romantic period eye, as another reviewer has suggested, cannot be sustained either. If "the Romantic world" was really founded "on a sense of primordial oneness between self and nature" (p. 23), which is another of Amstutz's sweeping generalizations, one can only wonder why the metamorphosis of human into landscape was not commented upon, nor even hinted at by any of the artist's contemporaries.

As if aware of these problems, Amstutz directly addresses her critics toward the end of the introduction. In contrast to the historical-cultural approach she proposed earlier, she now writes that her observations are provocatively and self-consciously meant "to approximate the tension between empiricism and speculation upon which *Naturphilosophie* as a method was based." Adding that her book "is written and argued in the spirit of Romanticism" (p. 17), the speculative character of her reasoning makes her to a large extent dependent on the sympathy and goodwill of the reader. Yet, the question we ultimately must confront is whether her "Romantic" musings also lead to convincing scholarship. Here, I believe the answer must be negative. It is, among others, for the methodological concerns expressed above that Amstutz's

interpretation finally left me unconvinced. Although appreciating her admirable attempt to make Friedrich's work speak again to contemporary concerns, I nonetheless expect that Koerner's book will continue to remain the standard account of Friedrich's art in the English language for some time to come.