

A Conservator Responds to Constable's Historic Cloud Studies

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"Cloud Study," by John Constable, 1821, oil on paper. Collection the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, CT

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A distinguished art restorer was inspired by plein air cloud studies and small landscapes created by the great British artist John Constable (1776–1837). Mark Leonard's 11 oil paintings on paper will be exhibited in New Haven, Connecticut, starting November 30, 2012.



"Constable Study I," by Mark Leonard, 2011, gouache and synthetic resin on panel, 9 x 12 in. Collection the artist

The Yale Center for British Art will present this special installation of contemporary paintings created in response to John Constable's oil studies. Opening November 30, "Reflections on Constable's Cloud Studies: Paintings by Mark Leonard" will feature a suite of 11 works by Leonard, a renowned conservator with a long history of treating paintings, including works by Constable.

After years of laboriously painting large compositions outdoors in front of his chosen subjects, Constable (1776-1837) began a series of studies in oil paint on paper. From 1820 to 1822 he completed more than 50 studies of sky and cloud formations at Hampstead Heath. These are annotated on the back with the date, time, and a description of the weather conditions. The studies are dynamic, imaginative representations of the force and variability of nature that could also be used to complete finished works in his studio.



"Extensive Landscape With Grey Clouds," by John Constable, ca. 1821, oil on paper on panel, 7 5/8 x 11 in. Collection Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, New Haven, CT



“Constable Study II,” by Mark Leonard, 2011, gouache and synthetic resin on panel, 9 x 12 in. Collection the artist

For this project, Leonard turned away from his usual practice of caring for and restoring paintings by other artists and instead set himself the challenge of creating his own works of art. As someone who has spent decades studying the work of other artists, stroke by stroke and layer by layer, Leonard searched for underlying geometries, or the “natural framework,” in Constable’s seemingly unstructured paintings of sky and landscape. The resulting paintings will be displayed in a one-to-one relationship with Constable’s works in the permanent collection galleries on the center’s fourth floor. This unique installation will allow visitors to study the Constables in a new light, and also to appreciate Leonard’s rigorously structured and highly detailed paintings.

Mark Leonard (b. 1954) is among the most respected paintings restorers working today. He has studied and treated thousands of paintings, including works by Reynolds, Renoir, Rembrandt, and Velazquez. He was recently appointed chief conservator at the Dallas Museum of Art and will continue working as an independent artist, with an eye toward returning to his own studio full-time.

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