

JOHN MARIN: MENTAL VOYAGES TO ANYWHERE AND EVERYWHERE

BY ANN PRENTICE WAGNER

JOHN MARIN

Weehawken Sequence, detail,
by 1916, oil on canvasboard,
10 × 14 inches

JOHN MARIN

A Rolling Sky, Paris, After Storm, 1908, watercolor on ivory wove paper (all edges trimmed), 13⁷/₁₆ × 15¹³/₁₆ inches, Art Institute of Chicago
FOLLOWING PAGE:
John Marin, circa 1908, photographer unknown



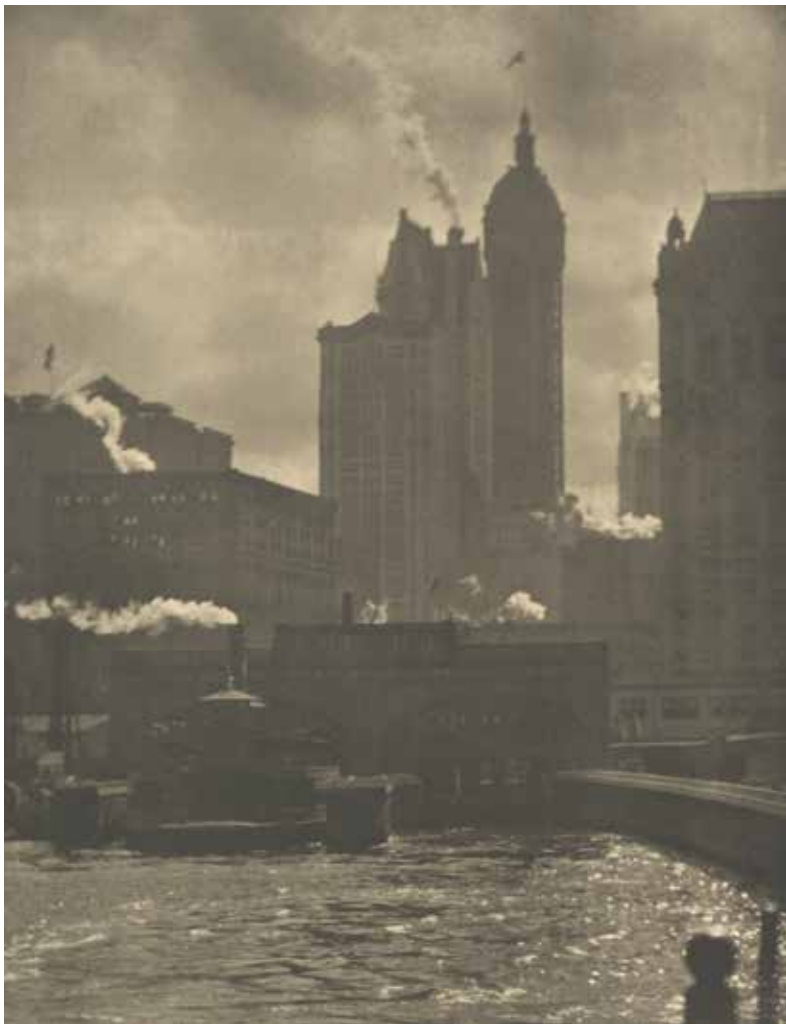
John Marin (1870–1953) was an artist of American places. His art, made on his annual travels, bridged the gap between two sides of twentieth-century American identity—the modern city of New York and the timeless countryside. In 1913, Marin wrote to his friend and art dealer Alfred Stieglitz about how his first works in each new place were “the beginning of the opening up of all those mental voyages to anywhere and everywhere.” It took Marin many years to work out this elaborate rhythm of travel and creation. “I was a kid until I was thirty,” he said. But his artistic blossoming in the second decade of the twentieth century proved well worth the wait. During those ten years, he advanced from being an unknown etcher to broad acclaim as one of the leading modern painters in the United States.

During his twenties and thirties, Marin meandered from New Jersey, where he tried architectural drafting in the 1890s, to Boston and New York, where he studied academic art at the turn of the century. From 1905 until 1910 he spent time in

Paris, where he made architectural etchings for European tourists. None of it satisfied him. Frustrated by the limits set by his art dealers, Marin felt the need to make etchings and watercolors in which he could “let go.”

The great break of Marin’s career came in 1908, when his work was shown at the annual Salon d’Automne in Paris, an exhibition known for accepting cutting edge art. Marin’s tonal watercolors caught the eye of American expatriate Edward Steichen. Steichen, a photographer and painter, moved in the avant-garde art circles of Paris, watching for artists who might interest New York-based photographer and gallerist Alfred Stieglitz. In 1905, Stieglitz had founded the Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession as a venue for the artistic photography called pictorialism. With Steichen as vital go-between, the gallery began to bring in modern paintings, drawings, and prints from Europe to alternate with photographs on the walls. The gallery, known as 291 for its address on Fifth Avenue, became a modernist outpost in America.





ALFRED STIEGLITZ

ABOVE: *City of Ambition*, 1910, photogravure, 13³/₁₆ × 10¹/₄ inches, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut, Gift of the Doris Bry Trust, 2018.84.23

JOHN MARIN

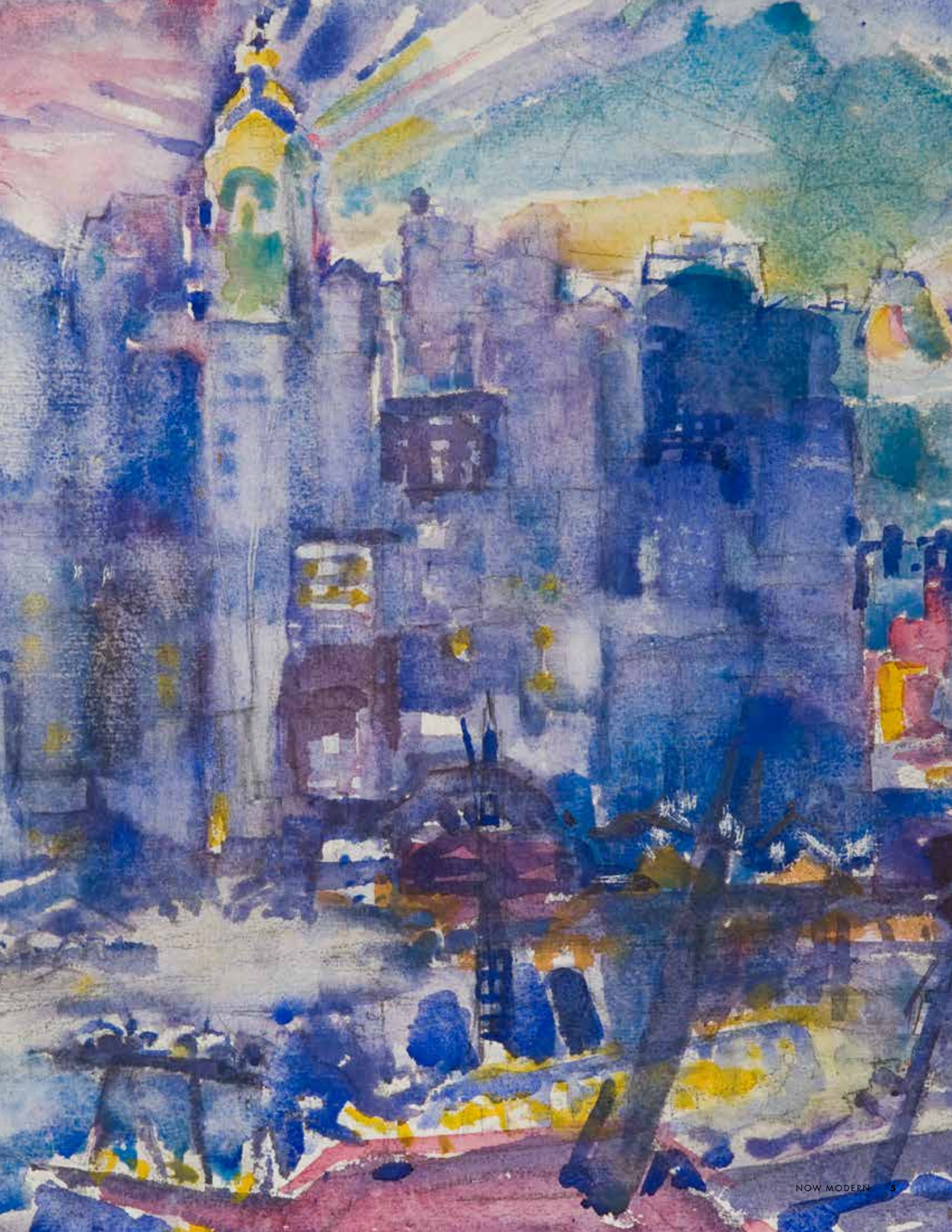
FOLLOWING PAGE: *Downtown from the River*, detail, 1910, watercolor on paper, 14 × 17 inches, private collection

Stieglitz and Steichen assembled a 1909 exhibition at 291 that paired Marin's European watercolors with brightly colored oils by another expatriate, Alfred Maurer. The exhibition launched Marin's modern art career in the United States. In Stieglitz's magazine, *Camera Work*, James Huneker of the *New York Sun* termed the images "delicious in tonalities, subtly evocative," and writer and critic Charles H. Caffin described Marin's watercolors as "constructed vigorously, in free, broad washes of color. . . ." Caffin had sensed the energy that became central to Marin's mature art.

While Marin's watercolors were on view in New York, the artist was still working in Paris, where Stieglitz visited him in June 1909. Seeing the bold, gestural etchings Marin's dealers had rejected, the gallerist said, "If I were you and could do things like that, I'd tell off the dealers and do what I wanted." But to follow this course Marin needed a supportive dealer; Stieglitz took on the challenge.

When Marin returned to the United States later that year, he was thrilled by the towering skyscrapers that had grown up in Manhattan during his absence. His palette brightened immediately, embracing blues, violets, and greens to express the vibrant modernity of America. At the center of *Downtown from the River* is the Singer Tower, then the tallest building in the world. Rays of colored light radiate through the sky around the skyscraper. Such 1910 watercolors signaled the start of Marin's many art works celebrating New York City and its inhabitants.

Marin's art became a mainstay of 291. In May 1910, his European watercolors and pastels were the focus of his first solo show at the gallery. After the exhibition, Marin sailed back to Paris and began creating watercolors and etchings as he visited German cities and the countryside. His most productive six weeks were spent making watercolors in Kufstein, a popular vacation spot in the Austrian Alps. Marin gave little attention to the town's picturesque architecture and instead turned his gaze to the snow-capped mountains and green pine forests. The same vivid blues and purples the





JOHN MARIN

ABOVE: *The Tyrol*, 1910,
watercolor on paper,
15½ × 18¼ inches

FOLLOWING PAGE: *The
Brook, Tyrol Series I*, detail,
1910, watercolor on paper,
18¼ × 15¼ inches

artist had used to describe Manhattan skyscrapers now depicted craggy peaks and snow. Marin hiked through Alpine forests and began exploring the types of rural subjects he would later seek out in America.

In 1911, 291 exhibited Marin's Austrian images, including *The Brook, Tyrol Series I*, alongside other European subjects. The review in *Camera Work* was enthusiastic, "This was the third exhibition of Marin's held at the Little Galleries, this distinction being fully warranted by the importance of his work." While modernists like Marsden Hartley and Max Weber continued to move back and forth between the United States and Europe, Marin did not. After he returned to the United States on the last day of 1910, he never crossed the Atlantic again. His travels were kept to the United States.

During the winters from 1911 to 1919, Marin stayed with relatives or friends in New Jersey or New York. He roamed the streets of Manhattan to paint urban sights like the Singer Tower and the Brooklyn Bridge, but spent his summers in green places far from the city. In 1911 and 1912, Marin worked along the Hudson River above Manhattan, on Long Island, in the Adirondack mountains of New York and in the Berkshires of western Massachusetts, often traveling with Lelia and Jennie Currey, the maternal aunts who had raised him. In 1911, Marin and his aunts stayed in the tiny Berkshire village of Egremont where, in 1912, the artist's fiancée Marie Jane Hughes joined them on their summer adventures. Marin was an enthusiastic hiker, fisherman, and hunter who energetically rambled through fields and forests



APRIL 10



JOHN MARIN

Black River Valley, New York,
1913, watercolor on paper,
16 × 18¾ inches

with Hughes at his side. Marin and Hughes wed in December 1912.

In 1913, Marin's dynamic watercolors of the Woolworth Building, the new tallest building in the world, and other New York structures were featured in a solo exhibition at 291 before moving down the street to the International Exhibition of Modern Art (later known as the Armory Show). The enormous exhibition introduced the American public to a wide array of European and American modern art.

After the excitement of those successes, Marin and his wife retreated to the tiny upstate New York town of Castorland for the summer. The artist strode across farm fields in search of subjects. "May the man who invented barbed wire fences be eternally damned," Marin wrote to Stieglitz in July 1913. Nonetheless, Marin reported that he was having a productive summer at Castorland, "I have about 50 sheets of paper daubed up. I'll be beginning on their back sides pretty soon."



JOHN MARIN

LEFT: *Black River Valley, Castorland, New York*, 1913, watercolor on paper, 15½ × 18 inches

BELOW: *West Point, Maine*, 1914, watercolor on paper, 14⅞ × 16¼ inches





JOHN MARIN

LEFT: Reproduction by Geoffrey Clements after Alfred Stieglitz, *Marin, Mrs. Marin, and John, Jr.*, 1921. Courtesy of the Estate of John Marin

FOLLOWING PAGE: *Movement B*, detail, 1917, watercolor on paper, 16¼ × 19¼ inches, private collection

The following summer of 1914 was a turning point for the artist. His friend, the etcher Ernest Haskell, had suggested that Marin try summering in Maine. “It was in Maine that the true Marin was revealed to me,” recalled Haskell of Marin’s first summer there. Marin and his family grew to love the wild landscape, with Marin beginning to make watercolors, and a few oil paintings, celebrating the juxtaposition of deep green pines with wave-battered coasts.

When Marin and his family returned to the New York area during the winter (son John Marin, Jr., was born in November 1914), Manhattan’s streets and skyscrapers were not the artist’s only subjects. Weehawken, a port in his home state of New Jersey, was a favorite subject for him through the decades. The massive forms of warehouses appeared in countless drawings, watercolors, as well as in oils including *Weehawken Sequence*, with the New York City skyline in the background. The stark geometry of Weehawken’s warehouses, docks and ship masts inspired Marin to try making abstract paintings and etchings in 1916 and 1917. Pink tones that recall sunsets over the Hudson River slash through the center of the abstract 1917 watercolor *Movement B*. But the experiment did not last—Marin found his inspiration in the visual realities of the city and the country.





JOHN MARIN

By the Sea, Small Point, Maine,
1917, watercolor on paper,
15⁷/₈ × 18⁷/₈ inches

The year 1917 was hard for Marin. Since the sensation of the 1913 Armory Show, the rising American interest in modern art had brought many new galleries to New York to compete with 291 for exhibition audiences and sales. In 1917, economic and personal pressures associated with America's entry into World War I caused Stieglitz to severely cut back his expenses by closing 291 Gallery and stopping the publication of *Camera Work*. It was a devastating blow to Stieglitz's loyal artists and collectors. But Marin survived it; Stieglitz still managed to sell a few of Marin's pictures. Stieglitz also arranged shows for Marin at other galleries. In 1917, Marin had a solo show at Daniel Gallery, run by Charlie Daniel, who was an enthusiastic fan of Marin's art. Stieglitz also



JOHN MARIN

ABOVE: *Low Tide, Moosehead Point, Maine*, 1919, watercolor and charcoal on paper, 13 $\frac{5}{8}$ × 16 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches
 FOLLOWING PAGE: *The Wharf*, detail, 1926, watercolor and charcoal on paper, 14 × 16 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches

arranged a 1917 exhibition for Marin at Ardsley Gallery. With this support, Marin was able to spend a very productive summer painting with his family in Small Point, Maine. The Marins also made a stop in the Berkshires in the summer of 1917, resulting in poetic watercolors whose colors hark back to the blues and violets of Marin's 1910 watercolors made in the Austrian Alps. Yet his 1917 watercolors' confident, angular strokes show how far the artist had come.

In the summer of 1919, the Marins returned to Maine, renting a house in the fishing port of Stonington. Marin wrote to Stieglitz in July 1919, "It seems that Old Man God when he made this part of the Earth just took a shovel full of islands and let them drop." Hikes and boat trips took the





JOHN MARIN
On Deer Isle, Maine,
 1923, watercolor on
 paper, 16½ × 19⅝ inches

artist to many other inspiring views. The Marins would continue to summer in Stonington for most of the 1920s.

The Marin family found a winter home in 1920, when they purchased a house in Cliffside, New Jersey. Marin had now established the two poles of his existence. The family lived in New Jersey for the rest of Marin's life, near the moral and financial support of Stieglitz and the art collectors and artists who gathered around him. Only rarely did the Marin family miss spending at least part of the summer in Maine.

The familiar routine of traveling between city and country helped to keep the artist on the move

artistically, learning and expressing more each season about America. Each year, he tried out new types of brush strokes, new color combinations, and new compositional strategies. Each year's art built on and ventured beyond the work of previous years. Between 1909 and 1919, his first decade showing with Alfred Stieglitz, Marin had reinvented himself as one of the country's star modernists. During that decade he established the visual language with which he could speak for and to both urban and back-country Americans.

This piece is an excerpted version of an annotated essay by Ann Prentice Wagner. For a copy of the essay in its entirety, please contact the gallery at 212-879-8815 or alana@schoelkopfgallery.com.