

## Cypress Dome

### A Natural History of History

#### LOCAL ANTIQUITIES

The brook, older  
than manuscripts, tells  
the news:

the hills, out in the  
rain,  
antedate altars:

when the painter turns  
from “absolute”  
paint, it begins to

crack: weeds and  
bushes  
where cities stood

put the rubble  
down: we  
separate

our things from  
things, but only  
changing with change

stays beyond things  
and us, mocks change’s  
mocking changes.

A. R. AMMONS

From *Brink Road*, ©1966 by A. R. Ammons  
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Robert J. Curtis  
PORTRAIT OF OSCEOLA  
1838. Oil on canvas, 30" x 25"

From *Celebrating Florida: Works of Art from  
the Vickers Collection*. Photo by James Quine.

## I.

We stand atop the empire state building of our static imaginations, afraid to change the way we think about ourselves and our river communities. Blind to the poetry of biochemistry, we cling to historical, linear concepts of time instead of embracing the circular, symmetrical and alternating currents of the cell. Chemical sequences inside the cell may be diagrammed as going  $\rightarrow$  or  $\leftarrow$ , but the equilibrium of cell insures for every vector there is a counterforce. I want to set up the vector that will take us from this year back out of historical time into the womb of life and the first embryonic stem cell. We will be encountering what J. T. Fraser has called biotemporal time.<sup>1</sup>

Imagine you are at the top of a giant cypress that stands this past thousand years beside an elegant spring of the Wekiva. You can see all the way down to the limestone at the base of central Florida's civilization. You need courage, you feel, to face the tasks ahead, so you decide in this waking dream-state to take the dive, all the way down to the point where biosphere meets noosphere, where nature becomes culture, the edge indeed where the natural history of history begins.

What the heck, it's so far down you decide to throw in just a flip or two, before you plunge feet first into the mouth of the wide boil. It's only 150 feet. Every tree species knows the limits of loft in its building, and in Florida the giant cypress has literally thousands of years of lightning, droughts, floods, and hurricane winds to tell it how tall a tower of un-Babel to build. The trunk of this cypress is so straight and broad it seems much like a cliff with a slight overhang. Over there in the high oaks we can see a pair of ospreys have set their house of branches without roof, shingle, or tar. Let's find an open space here, without intervening branches, and let go our gravity.

We fly down together, a brief and painless reverse launch, immediately accelerating into a new dimension of time, slow enough for the profoundest contemplation. The body at high speed leaves the mind in near-perfect stillness, as though a swallowtail had suddenly clutched the soft white flower-sphere on a buttonbush:

- 1) 2000-1950 air travel, airboats, jetskis, cars, motorboats, land acquisition, the protection law, Sweetwater Oaks and Disney World, the Wekiwa State Park, Canaveral's Man on the Moon, the last dusky seaside sparrow: The Age of Retirement and Theme Parks
- 2) 1950-1875 car travel, trains, coastal development, the last ivory-billed woodpeckers, giant cypress, virgin longleaf pine, horse and buggy, steamboats and skidders: The Age of Wintering and Logging
- 3) 1875-1775 the Civil War, the Seminole Wars, the Trail of Tears, plantations and slavery, the Revolutionary War, the last wolves: The Age of Settlement and Warfare

- 4) 1775-1513 galleons, clippers, boats along the St. Johns, horses, plantations, Fort San Marcos, missions, and the last Timucuan communities: The Age of Spanish Exploration and Conquest. We land at the point where history first touches Florida.

II.  
Ponce De Leon in Florida



The Cummer Museum of Art and Gardens: Jacksonville, Florida  
Thomas Moran: *Ponce de Leon in Florida*, 1877-78  
Oil on canvas, 63 x 115 in.

4/19/02

You sit in front of this painting and it sucks you into Florida wilderness, a hydric hammock with some ephemeral pool to the left and a spring in the deepest background. It moves back on the right of center to a small medallion of pale blue sky—the rest of the heavens covered entirely in a canopy of fronds, vines, and leafy branches. From a distance of fifty feet, a soldier of the Spanish realm, with helmet and bright red cuirass moves with a rifle through the brush toward you. He has emerged from a troop of sixty soldiers and their leader far off under tall trees in a clearing about three hundred yards away. If you ask who these men are, they come in conquest to a land where

even now no one knows them. Only history can tell who they are. The swamp and the sabal palm care not, know less, that it is 1513 and Spain has arrived to an outland it can only settle in fifty years and only defend after that for two hundred more. The cypress and some of the oaks in here will still be sapping up when The Fountain of Youth is being superseded in American mythology by fifty cubic feet of shore-stone called Plymouth Rock. History comes and goes like the glint of the firefly, a brief twinkle of illuminism with only a faint trace of afterglow. In Florida, Moran seems to have caught a glimpse of the time that precedes history.

Given the size of the canvas in this bright room of Jacksonville's finest museum—it seems to fill almost the entire wall—one has to wonder why the human scene Moran illuminated is so far away, so overwhelmed and repressed in detail. The chief of the Spaniards is set off smartly against the lichen-bright oak in the background, but only the title of the painting could reveal who he is and what the occasion. Landscape dwarfs the conquistador of yesteryear, but only so much as is required to register that this is the history of the search for treasures in America's wild world. He gave the whole state its name—after the flowers of Easter, the day when he arrived—and he gave it as well the myth of the eternal return, a spiritual image of Florida that has survived longer than the monarchy that coined it.

### III. The Natural History of History

How are we to say what the natural history of history is? History, according to nature, is a species of time-consciousness. It belongs to an organism that keeps track of when things happen, that builds upon the multidimensional cyclical seasons of the sun a permanent record in two directions, backward but mostly forward in time. History is a straight line made out of a circle. Just as there is no sense in pretending that Ponce de Leon (who eventually died of an arrow wound) or his Fountain of Youth actually exist and function in present time and forward, the normal concept of time itself is outmoded.

As many surmised at the beginning of the twentieth century that (the old) God is dead, so now Time has likewise passed away into something new. In the face of the facts of gravity and energy and their simple conversion as a factor of mass and velocity, we know that simple time does not exist. Our plunge from the cypress dome is showing that. Time is a myth as colorful and as problematic as the Fountain of Youth. Sitting in the Cummer Museum we know that if the universe contracts tonight, the whole vector of simple time (what Fraser calls historical time) will be undone and mortality will become immortality. Ponce de Leon will be ahead of us briefly and then the sea will swallow our peninsula and eventually calcium will close out of the picture entirely. The big question then will be whether the brief history of history was worth all the expansion in the swamp gone back to chaos. It is not difficult to imagine, using Moran's cues, that the illumination of history is but a brief and ephemeral flutter in the black-as-peat Florida jungle, one step removed from implosion into a black whole.

It seems clear that this painting, which Moran hoped would stand in the U. S. House of Representatives together with other monumental western landscapes of Yellowstone and the Tetons, did not identify a particular place for the Fountain of Youth nor a particular event in time, for example a peace treaty or the erection of a fort. Instead, the painting recalls in general the fact of Contact itself, Native Americans seated casually in front and to the left of the first Spanish governor in what is now the United States. The Timucucans did not, I presume, have time on a recorded line moving forward with Manifest Destiny of any kind. The question, then, is how does the helmet of history fit into the patterns of native nature.

Moran's view of Ponce de Leon's negotiation of this scene shows that even now, we live in our immediate real world outside of history, for example, right now being made in the Middle East (is World War III in progress?). For most of us the war on terrorism isn't really happening in the Florida swamplands any more than the Fountain of Youth is going on there. By contrast, non-stop biological magic is happening in every cell. Actually, the Fountain of Youth is visible in kindergartens all over the transcendental world, easy enough to visit any weekday.

#### IV

### Castillo de San Marcos St. Augustine, Florida

4/20/02

The black crow is diving and squawking at the great blue heron, out over the meadows and marshes of the Matanzas River. A lonely oak stands sentinel, beyond the newly constructed outer battlement of the ancient fort. The nearest perch is half a mile away, and the harried heron sweeps back and forth evading his pursuer, each time just at the last second. This is an event both birds will remember—the yin of a panic inside the yang of a pursuit. But it is no history. The heron has her autobiography in her head, but without recording the dates or places for others to see later. The crow is a different story in a larger social unit, no doubt; but both of them here are just playing out mutual instincts of preservation and escape, as mundane as the delivery of the morning paper, as opposed to the headlines which might sell it. How quickly the headlines change, marking the rising or setting of a sun each day.

Meanwhile history records that this mammoth fort was built of coquina stone (1672-95) to protect St. Augustine from British invaders who burnt the original wooden fort that in some sense dated back to the founding of the city in 1565. The outer walls slant inward as they rise so that it is a pyramid without a peak, a monument of such mass that it will not likely stop being history for a long time. Just up the St. Mark's river a mile to the north, history records as well the first free black settlement in America at Fort Mose (1738). On a crude map of the era, you can see the words "Negro Fort" marking the outpost. Here blacks, sold out by their fellow humans

and ripped out of Africa, brought their native songs and their family tribal lore to a strange Florida habitat and climate. Only recently have scholars recovered some of the scraps of those stories to inscribe into the text of American or Florida Studies.

The brown grackle flies up to the slanted face of the exterior battlement wall and grabs hold of a corner of the coquina stone—not a ledge, really, but a slight knob to which the wary bird can attach two little feet. It seems precarious, but satisfying, as she marvels in the bright sun at the crowds of tourists. Are grackles tourists when they migrate? We know of course that they stop to eat in busloads, but do they look around and contemplate retiring here? It reminds me of the time we had a beautiful concert on the Lower Wekiva River at Katie's Landing, to celebrate Wekiva Awareness Day, and a local flock of fifty grackles came from across the flats and all up and down the river to sit in the cypress trees. Some just listened, but the majority squawked along. They wanted to be a part of Marble Feather, a Celtic jazz group with twelve-string guitar, bass, synthesizer, and percussion, singing their songs of Florida and the Wekiva.<sup>2</sup>

Human tourism in St. Augustine is almost always about history—a vacation being a time out from real work to contemplate the great encounters, those wars and invasions, battles and executions that we are told have shaped who we are. Hard to argue that it matters a great deal when Florida gets traded for Havana in the aftermath of one war and then back again after another, just twenty years later. Still, we defend our territory like the crow and celebrate the dawn of any new enterprise in great convocations like the grackles.

Now a few young men in confederate costumes enact the training drills by which this fort was defended from 1825 through the Civil War era. A pigeon lands on the drainpipe that extends from the deck to the outer wall and a second lands right beside her, the first sidling up the curved little ramp into the dark and crusty wall. Later, when we descend into the bowels of the fort, the same pair arrive in a small window of the dungeon we tramp through, a much more imposing appearance, but they are still not even close to making history. It strikes me that with respect to the large motions of history, we all stand like two pigeons in a drain pipe. Okay, if you want something a little more glamorous, two ospreys on a cypress dome. But, even if we are the actors, as in a battle, a protest march, or a migration to the suburbs, our actions are short and simple compared to the outcome which becomes a portion of the history lesson.

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<sup>2</sup> Angela Sterling Forest, *Marble Feather*, 2000. The group has since disbanded.

## Emerson: On the Right Side of History

*...Slow slid the vessel to the fragrant shore  
 Loitering along Matanza's sunny waves  
 And under Anastasia's verdant isle.  
 I saw St. Mark's grim bastions, piles of stone  
 Planting their deep foundations in the sea  
 Which spoke to the eye of Spain...*  
 Ralph Waldo Emerson: "St. Augustine"

When it's over, someone writes our history, just as Moran records Ponce de Leon's encounter with the Timucuan. As far as the painting goes, they forever remain nameless, both the tribe and the individuals. It is an entirely imagined event, a concoction of a scene from a myth, some assume, about the narrow personal quest of a Spaniard for something other than gold, silver, and exotic plants. Anyone who reads the *relaciones* of the Spanish conquistadors or the depositions of their subordinates and captives understands the cloud of unknowing in which they wrote of themselves and their encounters.

That's history for you. Throw up a timeline and hang your best clothing on it for the neighbors to admire. However, the Castillo de San Marcos, with its four triangular abutments, certainly is no fairy tale. It gave the settlers not so much immortality, as postponement of death. So the troops of tourists tramping around St. Augustine today, discovering like Twain at each new corner the next "oldest" house, are getting a sense of history. This is especially true if they ride in a carriage behind the clap of a horse's hooves named Dolly. In this endeavor I am riding behind the wisdom of America's first great philosopher who visited St. Augustine in 1827, just after Spain's withdrawal. His journal is full of the cruel conditions for natives, Minorcans, and slaves, but his poetry rises slightly above that.

Emerson had it straight in his essay on history when he spoke of no dates, no events, and no persons. For him the person was not an inhabitant of a once-occurring war or election, but the possibility of a long cosmic journey in which all the energy that mattered was consistent.

So, does it matter if we live inside the forces of history, as of evolution, barely able at any point to discern our changing place? What seems to be important is, as Florida Audubon's Clay Henderson once put it, to be on the right side of history, to make the right choices, to support the enduring causes. A citizen of the river community would want to do that by using biochemistry to balance history. This means, in our journey backwards in time, to cross over and join the

Timucuan at Wekiva, to inhabit their biotemporal imagination. Hence, we need above all else to restore the Timucuan to Wekiva.

In the bowels of this fort they put on display the implements of all the players. We see the Timucuan atlatl in the context of the swords of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spain, their bow and arrows opposing a heavy pistol. They exhibit the images of de Bry (based on Le Moyne) which show Timucuan bent over a field of corn. A scholar's footnote calls our attention to the fact that the plow shown by de Bry is not authentic, but rather the intrusion of a European for a native implement. In the same way Moran, lacking any Timucuan models, imports his western natives into Ponce de Leon's presence, but Florida's swamps he supplies in details which are exquisitely accurate because of the sketches he brought back to New York from his regular visits to Florida. So we find that the reruns of history are full of migrants and exotics, concoctions and anachronisms, sometimes entirely inadvertent, for our delight.

History was really the courage of actual warriors and defenders, the crafts of the coquina masons (mostly their slaves and natives), the patience of mothers and farmers, and the stamina of the workers, all governed by the pompous rhetoric of Castille. Without alphabetic record and numerical calculations, history died quickly with the memories of a Timucuan tribe, said to have faded in 1729 when the last one expired in exile in a suburb of Havana.

Of course, the last of the Timucuan is undoubtedly now part Seminole or part Hispanic or part African—perhaps all three—and thoroughly American, that is, speaking some dialect of English and living anywhere from here to Anchorage. She is more difficult to trace than the oldest house in St. Augustine. She belongs still to the biosphere, you see, and is moving through life, not through text or cultural artifact. I like to imagine her, sitting on the banks of the St. Johns River, catchin' a mullet so big that all the neighbors gather around like gulls, but in perfect awe, until she invites them to join the feast. Timucuan who once sat at the feet of Ponce de Leon in Moran's imagination are now lost back into life, ten times more precious than the Daughters of the American Revolution who can trace themselves back to the beginning of our British history, because that much more rare and undiscovered.

There is a curious ownership in the affairs of history that tribal traditions do not seem to evince, a kind of private property of text. The provenance of Moran's painting, for example, makes for a great allegory of this process. The succession of people ready to pay first \$10,000 (about \$200 a square foot), now ten million, shows art history as commodity. Intended first as a national treasure, this fine painting soon became a perfectly private one. Then Henry Flagler, the oil-rail-tourist tycoon, used it as the signature piece of his commercialization of St. Augustine's history in a hotel (part of Flagler's history theme park); after that it "fell" again into private hands; and finally it was "acquired for the people of Florida by the Frederick H. Schultz family and Nations Bank" (itself now the acquisition of another entity) and fostered by the Cummer Museum. Meanwhile, the longer America endures, the stronger the biotemporal imagination of Moran becomes. He has given us an icon of the edge between nature and culture, of the balance between growth and preservation that the endurance of the spirit of Wekiva really needs.



Emerson and the transcendentalists were interested when they started the American declaration of independence from the culture of Europe to couch the history of America in a new context of natural history. Whitman especially wished us to stop making myths out of feudal heroes and patronage art. I don't know exactly what he would do with Ponce de Leon and the first contact in Florida, but I think he and Thoreau would have applauded Moran's zooming out so far that the swamp, indeed the fountain of youth itself, are contained in a hydric hammock as big as the Tetons or Yellowstone Falls. Moran doesn't go so far as the Chinese screen painters to make the human figure as small as the butterfly, but the effect is given of both a dwarfing of human history and a closeup of the always rapidly changing and very slowly evolving natural world.

Not since I was a boy, have I gone to the Fountain of Youth in St. Augustine or to Ripley's Believe It or Not, two youthful adventures of growing up in credulity. Moran too has placed the same skepticism in our hearts by having that soldier in the foreground en garde against the jungle. To enter the bastion of St. Mark now is to enter a different time zone, to walk inside a text that has more or less stood still while we changed. However, to enter the swamp in the imagination of Moran and de Leon is to move through the almanac of ever-changing patterns of dove mating. Culture is not exactly as meaningless as the GACT nucleotides that form part of the transcription material of DNA, but it does not combine and regenerate itself in the blindly erotic and compulsive manner of organisms and species.

This is not to deny the history of culture wars and the miscegenation of ideas and forms which American art is always throwing at us. It just seems a shame that often culture has little capacity for recognizing that all that it does in some sense comes from the inside and that every new child born *tabula rasa* into a culture, as Emerson maintained long ago, is a fountain of youth to the species, nation, and family.