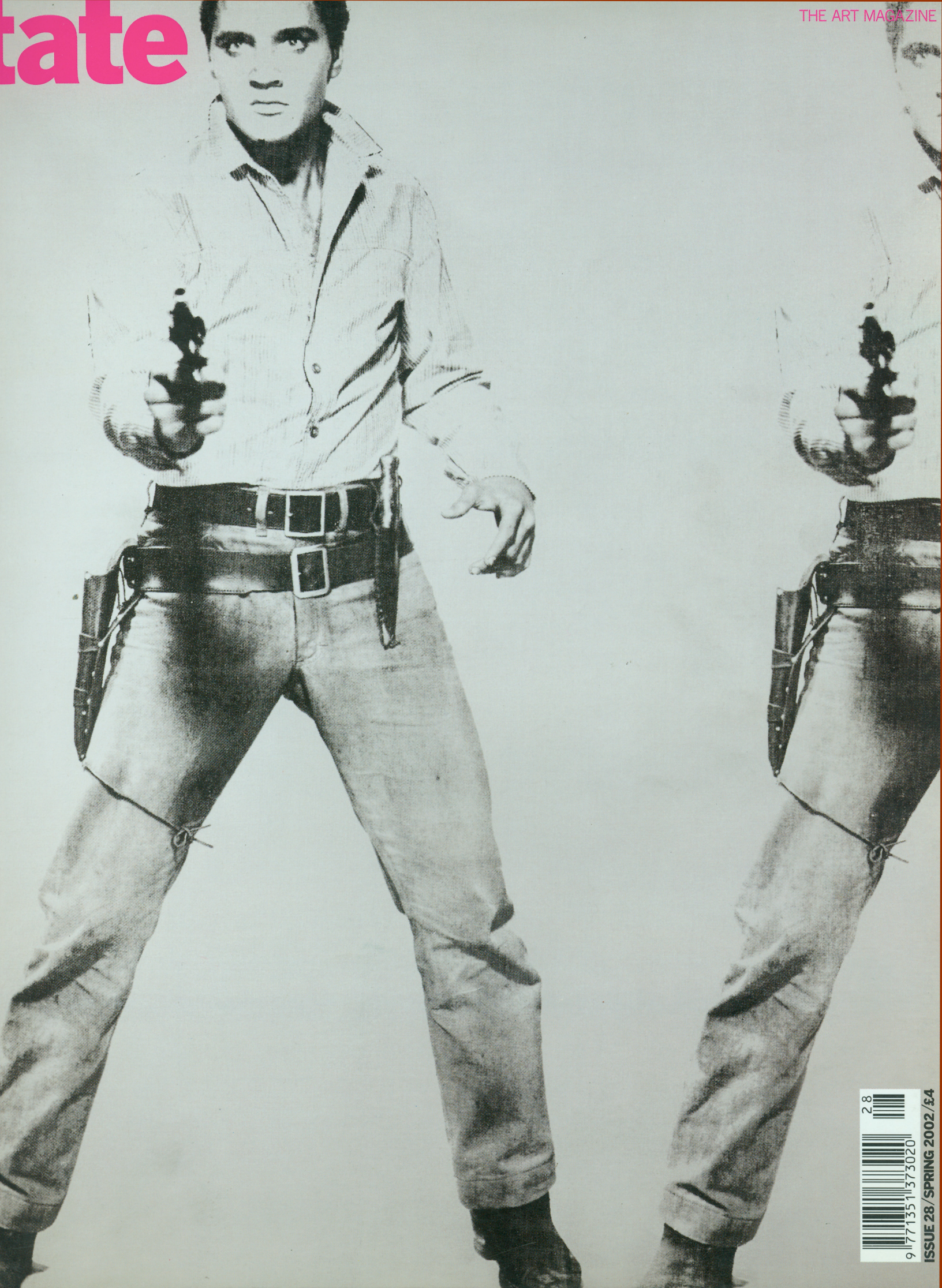


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minor debris, and a rich palimpsest of nineteenth-century graffiti is incised up and down and across the rocks. Maybe the most powerful presence, though, looking out upon the hotel's foundation lines picked out by the snow, is that of the hotel's interior. For it is difficult not to think of all the characters – even the fictional ones – whose minor deeds and trifling observations took place within the Mountain House, or out on its piazza. One thinks, for example, of Curtis, the “shop window” man, reporting in 1852 that the hotel’s “table is well supplied”, that “a written placard around the house announced that dancing music could be had at the bar” and that his two companions awaited him “under the Corinthian colonnade”. Or of Gertrude Flint, the Cinderella heroine of that bestseller of 1854, Maria Cummins’s *The Lamplighter*, being shown along with her dear blind friend Emily to “some of the most excellent rooms the hotel afforded”, hearing all the while the “loud murmurs of some of her fellow travellers who were denied any tolerable accommodations”. Or of Gertrude and Emily out upon the piazza, Gertrude describing the view to her friend, “one pair of eyes serving, as usual, to paint pictures for the minds of both”.

Or finally of another pair of young women, this time sisters, in 1830, “sitting in one of the parlours”, so the author of a brief Mountain House essay describes – “two interesting young ladies from Virginia, whom I shall call Penserosa and Allegra... together on a sofa”. Allegra, he reports, was “playfully tracing on the wall the outline of the profile in shadow thrown upon it by the bust of Penserosa”, even as Penserosa’s face was reflected in a nearby mirror, after which Penserosa “opened a volume of Wordsworth’s poems, which was lying by her, and... began to read aloud... a melancholy pathos in her voice”.

The author’s point is allegorical, meditative – he and a German companion engage the sisters in a conversation about the subject of mental association. Questions of multiple imagery abound, too. Very likely the entire anecdote is a fable, no such scene ever having occurred. But it stays in the mind, especially with the help of a companion engraving illustrating the two sisters, as a vivid instance of the sort of intimate trivial scene – the negligible bit of daily round – still exuding an aura there upon the Mountain House site: the polite but forgettable encounters, the trite observations, the sating of appetites, of which that mountain bluff, in all its emptiness, is such an exquisitely amassed representation. That Penserosa and Allegra are nowhere near as terrifying as Stephen King’s twin sisters does nothing to dispel their ongoing presence. Uncanniness, thankfully for us all, has returned to the mountaintop.

“American Sublime: Landscape Painting in the United States, 1820-1880”, supported by GlaxoSmithKline (foundation sponsor: The Henry Luce Foundation), Tate Britain, 21 February-19 May; Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, 17 June-25 August; Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 22 September-17 November

YOUNG AMERICANS



L C Armstrong on the Hudson River School

I came to landscape through pop culture, through the back door. I used to customise cars – painting them with Romantic landscapes, often with a lone figure. I wasn’t trying to reclaim the Hudson River School – but I have subsequently been interested in their work. In ‘Twilight over Twin Peaks’ (2001), above, for example, the winding river motif is taken from certain nineteenth-century paintings. I take photos from nature and make up landscapes, but they are not about specific places. There

is an element of the post-apocalyptic, but the overriding effect is one of awe. They do have a black humour; they are more poetic than instructive. I am in awe of nature and sunsets, but I realise that the world has changed. Awe is a nice word for the Hudson River School. It is also close to the word awful.

Adam Cvijanovic on the American Sublime

Painters such as Bierstadt, Cole and Church are very relevant to me. Cole did a strange series of Christian progress paintings called ‘The Course of Empire’.

They refer to the decline of the Roman Empire but are ostensibly about the threat of industrialisation on the United States. They are the Hudson River School paintings best known and most discussed by young New York artists. My own work connects directly. All their landscapes, like mine, have perspectival space. They imply the capital “I”, the ego-ed viewer.

The interesting thing about these big sky painters is the way they have been recycled within Hollywood. The relationship between Cole’s imagery and D W Griffith’s *Intolerance* is clear. *Intolerance*, the first Hollywood blockbuster, is about the death of Christ, but the relationship to nineteenth-century painting is very strong. Then think of George Lucas’s *Star Wars*, which I believe refers back to Cole’s ‘The Course of Empire: Destruction’ (1836), below.

You have to remember that the American Sublime is partly an immigrant vision. Bierstadt was Swiss and Cole British. There are distinct links to the European tradition too. It goes back to Ruisdael, who made the sky unknowable and the land familiar. The fact that he empties the landscape of people only concentrates the metaphor. Ruisdael, having set these ideas down, then gives the brush over to Turner and Constable. But the peculiarities of the American experience – religious dissenters finding a brave new world – make the idea of the sublime a natural one.

