

CONEY ISLAND FOREVER

by Jonathan Weinberg



Joseph Stella: *Battle of Lights, Coney Island, Mardi Gras*, 1913-14, oil on canvas, 77 by 84¾ inches. Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn.



In 1913, to celebrate Mardi Gras, Joseph Stella took a bus ride to Coney Island that changed his life. The Italian immigrant painter remembered that up until this point he had been “struggling . . . working along the lines of the old masters, seeking to portray a civilization long since dead.” He continued:

Arriving at the Island I was instantly struck by the dazzling array of lights. It seemed as if they were in conflict. I was struck with the thought that here was what I had been unconsciously seeking for so many years. . . . On the spot was born the idea for my first truly great picture.¹

The result of Stella’s revelation, the enormous oil painting *Battle of Lights, Coney Island, Mardi Gras* (1913-14), was the inspiration for the traveling exhibition “Coney Island: Visions of an American Dreamland, 1861-2008.” I saw the show at its first venue, the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Conn., where it was curated by Robin Jaffee Frank. Stella’s vast canvas was given pride of place on its own wall, where it effectively supported Coney Island’s old claim to be the World’s Greatest Playground.

The prismatic dynamism of Stella’s painting was enhanced by its placement just beyond the opening gallery, where a series of restrained landscapes depicted the resort in its early days, when there were only a few hotels catering to a mostly upper-class clientele. Here, and throughout the exhibition, Frank wisely made no attempt to simulate for the viewer the honky-tonk jumble of sounds and images that has become synonymous with Coney Island. Instead, all the displays—whether posters or comic book strips, sideshow banners or carousel horses—were given generous space to stand on their own as beautiful objects, even as they acted to contextualize more famous works of art. Some of my favorite pictures in the show, like Winsor McCay’s *Little Nemo* cartoon strips or the roughly 21-foot-long

Strobridge Lithographing Company's foldout poster of the beach and boardwalk (ca. 1898), were not made to hang on museum walls. Similarly, clips from Thomas Edison's hypnotic early film of the lights of the Luna Park amusement complex and the montages of Valentine Shevy's documentary *Coney Island USA* (1952), were removed from their original cinematic contexts and looped on LCD screens. Placed in close proximity to contemporary paintings and photographs, they were a reminder that the rise of Coney Island's entertainment facilities closely paralleled the invention and proliferation of cinema.

It may seem strange that such a show would be organized by a museum in Hartford rather than in Coney Island's hometown, but the resort's significance reverberates far beyond its location. By 1909 its three amusement parks—Steeplechase Park, Luna Park and Dreamland—were deemed so inventive and uniquely American that popular novelist Reginald Wright Kauffman could declare Coney Island a national treasure without seeming hyperbolic.² For over a century Coney Island has been a subject for an extraordinary range of visual artists—Diane Arbus, Milton Avery, Paul Cadmus, Robert Frank, Reginald Marsh and Frank Stella—and writers: Djuna Barnes, Stephen Crane, Sarah Hall, Maxim Gorky, Bernard Malamud and Isaac Bashevis Singer. These figures found a microcosm of modernity in the spectacle of hundreds of thousands of people of all classes, races and ethnicities escaping the summer heat at the seaside.

In contrast to today's enormously expensive Disney World or Universal Studios, Coney Island has always been easily affordable. At its height in the first half of the 20th century, it was the Nickel Empire, where a mere five cents was subway fare to the beach, admission to an amusement ride, or the cost of a hot dog at Nathan's Famous. Italian immigrant writer Giuseppe Cautela, in 1925, called Coney Island "the ultimate melting pot," declaring: "Nowhere else in the United States will you see so many races mingle in a common purpose for a common good."³ Cautela's contemporary, the music critic James Huneker, was less sanguine, seeing in the beach resort's "vulgarity," "the monstrous debauch . . . where New York chases its

chimera of pleasure.”⁴ Nicknamed “Sodom on the Sea,” the place offered raucous beaches, dancehalls, bathhouses, brothels and bars that fostered intimacy between strangers and loosened codes of behavior. Later in the century, urban planner Robert Moses, deeply horrified by Coney Island’s crowded conditions and immorality, wanted to tear it all down and start over. Like many of Coney Island’s detractors, he could not fathom why people who spent their weekdays in tiny apartments, stifling factories and office cubicles would want to cram together on the beach.

These arguments for and against Coney Island are crystalized in the great vortices of Stella’s *Battle of Lights*. Inspired by such vertiginous rides as the Loop the Loop and Helter Skelter, it perfectly evokes Coney Island as a site of contestation, where our deepest fantasies and fears about the modern world are played out. If the broken planes and neon coloring of Stella’s painting suggest the exhilaration of contemporary life, they also express dislocation and alienation. Stella himself spoke of the “dangerous pleasures” of Coney Island, implying that its unleashing of desires could provoke anxiety.⁵ And yet for all of the dynamism of Stella’s aesthetic, his painting’s sweeping arabesques are checked by the rectangle of the picture plane, and its decorative unity distances the disruptive power

of its discordant subjects. The contained anarchy of Stella’s painting is the perfect metaphor for Coney Island’s manipulation and control of the unruly masses, who, at the end of the day, go back to their homes and their ordered existence.

Looking closely at *Battle of Lights* we might be able to make out fragments of actual rides and even shapes that suggest people, but Stella’s abstraction obscures the luridness of the sideshow acts, the drunk sailors, the amorous couples and the scantily dressed bathers who were so much a part of the allure and menace of Coney Island.

Such bodies were the great subjects of Reginald Marsh. Instead of Stella’s spirals of lights abstracted and seen from a distance, Marsh’s *George C. Tilyou’s Steeplechase Park* (1936) gives us a close-up view of the Human Roulette Wheel where young women are spun into all kinds of unladylike postures. For the Yale-educated Marsh, Coney Island was a chance to go “slumming,” to mingle with the

lower classes on the beach and in the amusement parks. Hostile to modernism and abstract art, he reimagined bathers and sideshow audiences in poses derived from Michelangelo and Rubens. And yet, like Stella, Marsh overpacked his Coney Island paintings so that every inch is activated and in motion like a carnival ride. The highly compressed space of a Marsh painting like *Pip and Flip* (1932), with its collagelike play of rectangular billboards advertising human-oddity sideshows, would be unthinkable without the precedent of Cubism that he supposedly detested.

The inclusion of items from Marsh's archive—such as objects from sideshows and the photographs he took and used as the basis for his paintings—emphasizes his effort to depict the actual places of Coney Island. But the big-breasted women who populate so many of his pictures are fantasies, as if the performers from the burlesque shows he liked to watch had suddenly filled Coney Island's streets.

In contrast, Paul Cadmus, who shared Marsh's use of old-master forms and techniques but not his heterosexuality, filled his beach painting with purposely ugly women and mostly beautiful men. The main action in Cadmus's *Coney Island* (1934) is the human pyramid of men and women at its center. And yet the Adonis who lies on his stomach in the foreground has no interest in this heterosexual game. Instead, he looks off at another muscular youth farther down the beach. For Marsh, Cadmus and their fellow Coney Island artists, the chance to gaze unabashedly at the body of a stranger was one of the great pleasures of the milieu.

Stella's abstract canvas may have been Frank's inspiration, but traditional figuration, like that of Cadmus and Marsh, is so dominant that the exhibition arguably offers an alternate history of American art—one in which the modernist painting of Milton Avery or Frank Stella seems like a sideshow. Breaking out of the canon of modernism, "Coney Island" puts new focus on neglected realist painters like Harry Roseland, Robert Riggs, George Tooker and a particular favorite of mine, Henry Koerner.

The Austria-born Koerner, whose parents died in the Holocaust, found in the rides and attractions reminders of growing up near Vienna's Prater amusement park. Yet *The Barker's Booth* (1948-49) is disturbing rather than nostalgic. Posters in torn layers advertise a sword swallower and a fat lady, but the real "freak show" consists of the distorted faces of the barker and his audience in the mirrors encircling the booth. The spectacle of people making fools of themselves, always at the heart of the Coney Island experience,

becomes unsettling; the hideous reflections we see in the funhouse mirrors might be who we really are.

Even less known than Koerner is Samuel S. Carr, whose wonderful *Beach Scene* (ca. 1879) is one of the earliest paintings in the exhibition. Painted well before the major amusement parks opened, it nonetheless encapsulates many of the themes of later representations of Coney Island. Among the people enjoying the many pleasures of the beach—donkey rides, puppets shows, the ocean itself—is a well-dressed African-American couple. They are both in the scene and slightly apart. For Frank, they represent the “uneasy diversity” that was one of the hallmarks of Coney Island throughout its history.

Given the prevalence of racism and segregation in America’s past, it is remarkable to see so many paintings and photographs of Coney Island in which people of all races share a common space. But appearances can be misleading. For much of Coney Island’s early history, bathrooms and changing facilities were segregated, and the pool at Steeplechase Park excluded blacks right up to its closing in 1964. The incomplete integration of African-Americans into the life of Coney Island is reflected in their location at the margins of paintings like Carr’s. An interesting exception is Joseph Delaney’s painting *Coney Island* (1932), showing a carousel where a black boy rides a lion at the center while the white people around him sit on horses. Frank speculates that the lion might be an ennobling symbol of a royal African past, but the boy seems dejected and isolated. In pictures of the beach, such as midcentury photographs by Morris Engel, people seem to congregate in racial and ethnic groups.

The family posing for a tintype at the center of Carr’s *Beach Scene* reminds us that even at the beginning of the resort’s history, going to Coney Island meant being photographed at Coney Island. One striking example is Weegee’s famous *Afternoon Crowd at Coney Island, Brooklyn* (1940), which is used as the cover for the catalogue. As far as the camera can see, every bit of sand is covered by half-naked bathers, some of whom smile and wave vigorously at the photographer. As many as a million people assembled not to see a celebrity or to protest some injustice but to enjoy each other’s presence. More than the rides or the honky-tonk shows, the crowd was the entertainment at Coney Island.

Looking at Weegee's photograph, it is easy to be carried away with longing for what seems like a simpler and happier time.

Undoubtedly, the picture's sense of naïve jubilation was part of its appeal for Red Grooms, who essentially copied the image in paint for *Weegee 1940* (1998-99). And yet, like much at Coney Island, Weegee's photograph is an illusion. Taken when Europe was already at war and the Depression had not yet ended, its merriment was only a momentary respite.

Little Fugitive (1953), one of the most beautiful films featured in the exhibition, conveys the feeling of moving through the enormous crowds in Weegee's photograph. The creation of two master still photographers, Morris Engel and Ruth Orkin, and writer Ray Ashley, the film tells the story of Joey, a seven-year-old boy who runs away to Coney Island. But if Joey initially exalts in the freedom of being lost in the crowd, he feels abandoned when the amusement park closes down. Robert Frank's photograph from the same year of a man asleep on a deserted beach with the Parachute Tower at his back echoes the film's invocation of the resort's fleeting joys. When Coney Island empties out it reveals the superficiality and pathos of the fantasies it evokes. In 1894, even before the big amusement parks were built, Stephen Crane mused about how in winter the "mammoth" hotels became "gaunt and hollow, impassively and stolidly suffering from an enormous hunger for the public."⁶

For Henry Miller the sense of Coney Island's pleasures as a cheap illusion concentrated the essential nature of American capitalism: "Everything is sordid, shoddy, thin as pasteboard. A Coney Island of the mind. . . . In the oceanic night Steeplechase looks like a wintry beard. Everything is sliding and crumbling, everything glitters, totters, teeters, titters."⁷ As its carnival rides and sideshows became increasingly dated in the 1960s, Coney Island was unable to maintain even the phony thrills that Miller derided in the 1930s. In Diane Arbus's *The House of Horrors* (1961), the fake skeleton and the cartoon ape mask aren't as scary as the ride's sorry state and the impression that something terrible has driven all the people away. (The 1970 low-budget slasher film *Carnival of Blood*, not included in the exhibition, brilliantly uses this seediness to create a sense of uncanny doom.) In Arnold Mesches's painting *Anomie 1991: Winged Victory* (1991), the creaky rides mingle with images of war, turning dreamland into an apocalyptic nightmare.

Inevitably, the specter of Coney Island's decay and the nostalgia it evokes hangs over the entire exhibition. Even when we lose ourselves in the joyful colors of Jane Peterson's paintings of Luna Park from the 1910s, or the exuberance of Lisette Model's photographs of full-figured women bathers from the '30s, we know how Coney Island's story ends: bankruptcy, neglect and partial demolition. Or do we? Although there are several images in the exhibition that might reinforce this narrative—photographs of empty rides and crumbling signs by Lisa Kereszi, Harvey Stein and Lynn Hyman Butler—there are other works that suggest a continuing vitality, such as Daze's *Coney Island Pier* (1995), a painting of a teenager diving into the ocean as his friends cheer him on, and Swoon's *Coney, Early Evening* (2005), an installation where a cutout boy raises his fist in solidarity with his neighbors. Frank, for her part, ends her catalogue essay on an upbeat note by focusing on signs of the neighborhood's resurgence, citing the activities of the arts organization Coney Island USA and its annual Mermaid Parade.

But I wanted to see for myself. So in early June, with the exhibition still fresh in my mind, I made a trip to Coney Island to find out what remained of its storied past. Nathan's Famous is still selling hot dogs at its original location on Surfside Avenue. The Wonder Wheel, the Cyclone and the boardwalk have survived. While there are some new rides, overall the modest amusement park suggests an itinerant carnival set up in a shopping mall rather than an international tourist destination. But as I walked along the boardwalk, I began to watch the extraordinary mix of people having fun—a Hasidic boy and a black teenager taking turns doing gymnastic stunts, some Latinas in bikinis dancing to disco music, a white male couple walking hand in hand down the pier, and an assortment of hipsters eating hot dogs. It was as if the multicultural revelers of Red Grooms's *The Funny Place* (2005) were materializing before my eyes. At one point the sun broke out of the clouds, illuminating the pink sand and the dark blue ocean behind, and I was reminded of Carr's early beach scenes. Coney Island's essence as a sanctuary where people can let loose was obviously still alive.

In 1953, toward the end of his life, Reginald Marsh lamented: “I hardly recognize Coney Island anymore. . . . All the things of the old days were so much better to draw.”⁸ Sadly, Marsh mistook change for the end of Coney Island when, as this exhibition so eloquently attests, it has always been in transition, always busy reinventing itself. Today people still come to Coney Island to escape the heat, but also in search of what Charles Denson, the executive director of the Coney Island History Project, calls an “anti-Disney World,” an experience that in its very low-budget grittiness feels anything but pre-packaged or corporate.⁹ Ironically, the place that Henry Miller thought was synonymous with the phoniness of commodity culture, now feels authentic, evoking a past, not of superficial pleasures, but of our deepest desires: “We are such stuff as dreams are made on.”

"Coney Island: Visions of an American Dreamland, 1861-2008," at the San Diego Museum of Art through Oct. 13. The exhibition will travel to the Brooklyn Museum, Nov. 20, 2015-Mar. 13, 2016.

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