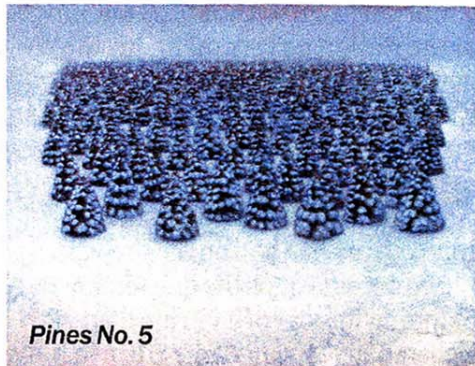




Christopher Lowry Johnson



Winkelman Gallery, through Sat 21
(see Chelsea)



Pines No. 5

Dominated by tones of cool blue and icy white, Christopher Lowry Johnson's paintings offer a somber update of the 19th-century Hudson River School. Half imagined and half real, Johnson's subjects—isolated pine-tree groves, the craggy rock faces of Mount Rushmore, a riverbed of pebbles-cum-skulls—evoke the contemplative, allegorical paintings of Thomas Cole and his followers. But however romantic Johnson's painterly style may appear, his scenes are anything but Edenic. The depopulated landscapes convey willful human abandon rather than

untouched wilderness and are subtly entangled with contemporary issues of war and environmental disaster.

In the show's most affecting work, *Pines No. 5*, Johnson portrays an awkward formation of evergreens, each decked out in Christmas tree lights, boughs heavy with dollops of snow. Softly advancing on the scruffy white ground under a gray-blue haze of twilight, these sad yet beautiful trees suggest an army of soldiers, bravely (or perhaps unwittingly) awaiting their demise.

The tension between order and chaos is a major theme in Johnson's work, as evidenced by *Chorus*, a painting that transforms the iconic monument of Mount Rushmore into a meaningless ruin. The image reads like an emblem of fallen power: Faces fade and crumble in a valley surrounded by snow-capped mountains rendered in a gorgeous, Cézanne-like geometry of fractured planes.

While Johnson's paintings are clearly a commentary on the state (and fate) of our current government, their criticism is distant. There is no indictment here, just a chorus of despair.—*Jane Harris*

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