On Top of the World

The renowned 19th-century German artist Caspar David Friedrich painted figures silhouetted against vast landscapes, with their backs turned to the viewer as they contemplate the sprawling sea or fog-strewn mountains before them. This motif of witnessing the divine in nature is replaced with the individual experience of the modern city in a new exhibition at Deutsches Haus at NYU.

Romantic Sublime showcases private views of the New York City skyline from the rooftops of peoples' homes and offices. German artist Paul Gisbrecht references Friedrich's classic landscape paintings by capturing figures from behind as they gaze out into the distance—a perspective that allows viewers to join the subjects and see what they see.
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Gisbrecht’s photographs also draw inspiration from a childhood experience when he climbed atop an elevated platform and was so transfixed by the spectacular cityscape view that he lost consciousness and fell, only to wake up in the hospital with a broken arm. “I was blinded and struck down by the view,” he remembers.

Curator Yinzi Yi notes a similar effect in Gisbrecht’s latest work: “The New York cityscape is so grand that its immensity somehow amounts to a velocity. It approaches you in a split second, more swiftly than what your perception could manage.”

Gisbrecht’s contrast between the distant image of the city and the dilapidated rooftops in the foreground also raises questions about the sustainability of western models of urbanization, charging his photographs with paradoxical notions of hope and futurity on the one hand and abandonment and morbidity on the other.

As part of Deutsches Haus at NYU’s 40th anniversary celebration, Romantic Sublime will be on display through October 28.