



## Interview with Nina Amstutz

**James Skidmore:** My name is James Skidmore and I'm the Director of the Waterloo Centre for German Studies, an institute at the University of Waterloo that promotes research into all aspects of the German-speaking world. To further this mandate, we've established the Waterloo Centre for German Studies Book Prize to recognize first-time authors whose scholarly work provides a substantial contribution to our understanding of German-speaking society. The shortlist for books published in 2020 has been announced, and it's my great pleasure to interview each of the six finalists about their work. Today I'm speaking with Nina Amstutz, author of *Caspar David Friedrich: Nature and the Self*, published by Yale University Press. Nina is Associate Professor for the History of Art at the University of Oregon. Nina, welcome and congratulations on having your book named to the shortlist.

**Nina Amstutz:** Thank you so much.

**JS:** Great to have you. Your book tackles one of the most beloved and probably well-known German painters, Caspar David Friedrich. Who was he?

**NA:** Sure. So Friedrich was a German painter from the northern part of Germany, the city of Greifswald, which is on the Baltic Sea. He came of age in the late 18th century. He was one of a younger generation of artists who were really kind of fed up with the way that art was taught in the academies at the time. He himself studied at the Copenhagen Academy in Denmark. At that particular moment, Neoclassicism was the predominant style in the arts, and the neoclassical education really promoted the revival of antiquity and Italian Renaissance art and the emulation of those forms. Friedrich found that this sort of endless copying of the Old Masters really stifled him as an artist, and particularly the focus on human form and always centring everything around religious and mythological narratives rather than looking more broadly. So he left the Academy completely disillusioned and took up landscape painting. At that time, landscape painting was considered sort of a minor art. It was certainly popular in the 18th century and the 17th century, but it wasn't considered as great as history paintings. So Friedrich really sought to change that. He started to explore the gamut of human experiences through landscape and often without direct narratives, biblical or mythological narratives. That's a little slice of what makes Friedrich an important artist for the history of art.

**JS:** I like the rebellious aspect [of] "I'm not going to go with the system; I'm going to try to do something that speaks to me more as an artist." You've been to the Hamburger Kunsthalle, I'm sure, and you've seen the Friedrich room in the Kunsthalle. You walk in and there's the Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog and all these other paintings, and it's hard not to be a little bit



awestruck by some of his paintings. And no historical themes, as you say; maybe a ruined abbey or something like that. What is it that has captivated people for 200 years? What is it about him that's captivating us?

**NA:** I think there are various things. One of the paintings, certainly, that is very famous from that particular collection is *The Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*. That painting in particular, I think, has a trope in it that is one of Friedrich's most famous. It's called the Rückenfigur, or figure from behind. This figure is remarkable, in a way, because it's simultaneously no one and everyone. Its identity is concealed from us but it serves as a kind of surrogate, if anything, for the viewer. It allows us sort of an access point. Even though Friedrich's paintings are 200 years old now and often have no kind of identifiable subject, as you mentioned, they always invite us in through these figures. Even those paintings that don't have those figures, they're often structured in a way also to have this kind of entry point for the viewer in some shape or form. I think they invite us to sort of adopt his gaze as our own. The paintings are as much about us, really, as they are about anything that he saw or represented.

**JS:** It's true. They draw you in, don't they? When you see *The Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, you can't help but look where he's looking and try to understand what he's seeing. I love that painting. [When I think] about your title, *Nature and the Self*, I think of two separate entities. Connected, for sure, but still separate. But I think in your book, you're trying to say something different, aren't you? About nature and the self.

**NA:** Yeah. Well, I think that idea of nature and the self as separate is something that we are constantly grappling with today. But in Friedrich's particular moment, he didn't imagine those things as separate. He was living in a time that was deeply influenced by the nature of philosophy of an individual named Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, and Schelling argued that nature is sort of this interconnected whole. That everything is somehow interwoven; including ourselves, human subjects. This is expressed in one of his most famous aphorisms, if you will, or one of the quotes from his text. He says that, "Nature should be Mind made visible, Mind the invisible nature." And that may sound a little bit abstract but, within his own time, natural scientists and writers and intellectuals more broadly really sought to look at the physical world, the empirical world, along those lines as well.

**NA:** And so Friedrich was certainly acquainted with a number of naturalists who refused to analyze the different parts of nature as discrete entities. They believed that if you're going to study botany, you also have to study animal physiology at the same time. And the human subject as well. And the mineral kingdom. These things can't be disconnected. All of their studies begin often from the cosmos, move to the mineral kingdom, look at the plant kingdom,



look at the animal kingdom, and then they culminate with human life and an analysis of human being. That's important in this respect, in terms of the relationship between nature and the self, because they viewed the human subject as this kind of compendium of nature that contains all of the different elements of nature within it, and is in turn also uniquely able to intuit or understand all of nature's internal workings. So I think, if we start to imagine a world in which nature is viewed in this way, you can begin to see how nature and the self are really one and the same thing.

**JS:** When you put it like that, I see what you're saying. You'd written in your introduction something about that, where you talked about Friedrich's "scrupulous and sensitive study of the natural world." That "sensitive" part, what did you mean by that? That he was open to the natural world? Or was there something more to that?

**NA:** Well, I think that in his particular historical moment, his whole generation was suffering from this feeling of alienation from the environment. Although he would argue that that's absolute false, [that] it's an illusion [or] an invention, it was very much something that was connected to the Industrial Revolution, for instance; where we see the migration of a lot of farm workers into cities, working in factories, and really experiencing a loss of connection to the land. But also in the Sciences, during the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment, most naturalists coming out of Descartes or Newton, they analyzed nature as this kind of machine; where they looked at individual parts as if they're sort of spokes on a wheel rather than trying to understand nature as a sort of interconnected or interwoven hole. So all these things led to this sort of feeling of alienation. And I think Friedrich's study of nature, his close observation, that sensitive and scrupulous study, as I described in the book, was about trying to overcome that ultimately false feeling of separation. It was through that study that he began to see again the common origins, the shared processes in the natural world.

**JS:** And did Friedrich think that human beings had once understood this notion of oneness between nature and the self, and that they had lost that through things like scientific progress? Or was it something that he thought that others, such as Schelling or other philosophers and thinkers of the time, had discovered?

**NA:** Oh no; I think it's a story of loss, really. And where that begins is not so straightforward. I think it's very cultural in a way, and that it can be brought back to the Christian origin story of the Fall of Adam and Eve and their banishment from the Garden of Eden, forced to wander through a hostile wilderness rather than enjoying the bountiful natural world from which they had been expelled. And that's a very uniquely Western story. Indigenous creation stories are quite different, for instance. But I think this experience of loss is not specifically unique, necessarily, to



Friedrich's moment. There are influencing factors there but the discovery is something that certainly precedes them. They were looking back, for instance, at a lot of Early Modern Mystics as well. During the Early Modern period, one of the predominant ideas, which also finds its way into Leonardo Da Vinci's work for instance, is that a human being is a microcosm, a sort of world in miniature of the macrocosm, the larger cosmos. And that way of imagining the world is even much older than the Renaissance but it, of course, imagines a world where things are deeply interconnected. And so the Romantics are certainly looking back to older ways of knowing the world or imagining nature in the way that they're positioning themselves. The main difference, I would say, is that they're still deeply invested in empirical observation. So they inherit that from the Enlightenment while also adopting elements of Early Modern Mysticism.

**JS:** Interesting. And Friedrich, of course, was a very keen observer of the natural world, right? He would have taken that notion to heart and applied it, if you will, within the context of this larger philosophy. When one looks at the general tone or the general direction of studies about Friedrich, one notes – and obviously I'm not an art historian but I teach a lot of courses on German cultural history and so, of course, Friedrich comes up and because I like him so much that I try to put him in there quite a bit because I just enjoy being able to look at his work – and often the criticism of these works, in terms of the academic criticism and examination of these works, tends to focus on their relationship or commentary on religion or politics or the changes in society that might be political or social, some of which you've already mentioned. But in your book, you're taking a different angle. You're suggesting that the science of the Romantic period – some might call it the late Enlightenment period but science at the time of Friedrich's active working life – you're suggesting that [the science of this field] offers us a deeper insight into his work. So I guess I want you to try to explain that as well as you can in the short time we have [is] just how that works. And just what that is that you're bringing into this academic conversation.

**NA:** Yeah, sure. I think maybe I wouldn't say deeper insight, necessarily; just different insight. There has been excellent scholarship that looks at the [inaudible 00:15:07] politics, as you said. But I think one thing that we're all doing as scholars is finding new ways to think about things. With respect to the issues of religion and politics in Friedrich's time, I feel like that line of inquiry has been exhausted in a way; or at least I wouldn't know what I would contribute to that. So that's one reason why I'm not necessarily approaching the subject from that trajectory.

**NA:** But also I think, for me, when we're talking about landscape painting, really what we're talking about is the representation of nature. And, for me, it's much more intuitive to approach the subject of nature by thinking about how nature was understood in that particular historical



and cultural context. And the natural sciences are maybe the most obvious place, if you will, to find clues [about] how nature was understood in that particular time. So I think it's just my own inclination to approach the subject from that angle as well. And that's not to say that Friedrich's work is directly informed by science or vice versa. I think there are cultural ways of knowing or looking at nature that characterize any particular time; and, in many times, those are most clearly articulated in science even if they don't necessarily come from science. There could be, I think, in this context a much broader *Zeitgeist* that is to some extent making its way into science as much as it is into art, rather than originating in one and moving into the other. But yeah, I hope that answers the question. Science and religion and politics, I think, are also deeply interwoven at this moment. We can't really separate them entirely. But beginning from a different place, beginning from the Sciences opens up new ways of understanding Friedrich's work that complement some of the perspectives that other scholars have already brought to the table.

**JS:** I think it's good to bring that fresh perspective. What I like about it in terms of bringing a scientific perspective to understanding Friedrich is that it allows us to, as you say, see these paintings again, see them for the first time almost, in the way you analyze them and interpret them with an understanding of what Friedrich's understanding of some of these scientific methods – or at least that scientific culture – might have been. I think the best way to try to understand that would be to have you walk us through a painting. We'll do it orally; we'll put a link to whichever painting you think would be a good one to discuss in the show notes so that anyone is listening can see the painting for themselves. But it would be wonderful to have you show us how this works with an actual object, [an] *objet d'art*. Literally.

**NA:** Absolutely, I would love to do that. I think my instinct would be to talk about Friedrich's *Oak Tree in the Snow* from 1829, which is in the *Alte Nationalgalerie* in Berlin. This is one of a few portraits of oak trees that he completed in the 1820s but I think this one is particularly suitable to talk about for a reason I'll get to in a moment. But Friedrich's oak trees, including this one, are painted really as if they were a portrait of a human subject. They tend to be right in the foreground with a tremendous amount of detail and without any kind of larger narrative context whatsoever. What's notable about them, as well, is they tend to often be depicted in winter or at a time of year where there are relatively few leaves on them, which really showcases the structure of dendrites.

**NA:** In Romantic sciences at the time, within these texts that are looking at the natural world as this interconnected whole that begins with the mineral kingdom and leads to the human subject, they frequently talk about the branching of trees – dendrites, really – as being a form that is



carried forward in the human body and in the bodies of sentient beings through the vascular system, first of all, and then through the nervous system as well, in even more elevated or heightened form. And that's not just through the formal system of branching, but also through the means of circulation. The way fluids circulate through the body is parallel to the way that plants circulate fluids through their branches. And I think this is really interesting because it's an idea that comes up again and again in the Romantic sciences. In particular, Lorenz Oken for instance, who was an important naturalist at the time, describes the vascular system as a kind of residual plant living inside the human body. Almost like a proto-evolutionary model, right? Where the plant kingdom gets more and more complex until it becomes a sentient being and then ultimately a human being. Because, of course, they were still thinking pretty anthropocentrically and positioned the human as the most important form or most developed form.

**NA:** So what does this all have to do with Friedrich's portraits of oaks? Well, these portraits have a remarkable similarity to the ways in which the vascular and nervous system were illustrated at the time; not just in anatomy books, but in artists' manuals and in other places in which the body was showcased in one way or another. This particular oak tree has a kind of really opportune scale in that, if you're standing in front of it, the length of the oak more or less corresponds with the dimensions of a large human torso or the length of one's spinal cord. And it forces us to sort of ask what our relationship is to this form, at least if we're seeking to view the landscape with Romantic eyes or from the perspective of that particular understanding of nature. Part of observing this form is to find those commonalities; the ways in which there are forms that are shared and processes that are shared between the human subject and whatever element of nature is being investigated. And, again, in this case, it's a tree. So I think there is this way in which the tree mirrors our internal workings, even though it is absolutely an oak tree. It is sketched even from life; he went outside and sketched this particular oak tree, although he's made some changes. [But] the way he positioned it in the landscape and the scale that he's chosen for it beg for us to ask these questions about our own relationship to this form.

**JS:** Yeah. That's incredible. Reading the book, you make numerous observations along this line where you really make us see these elements within the paintings from a really fresh perspective. And you say in the book [that] you can't really prove, for example, that Friedrich had painted the oak and had determined that the height of it had to be sort of proportional to a human torso, right? You can't prove that. You don't have any notes from Friedrich where he says, "You know what I'm going to do today? I'm going to paint a human being as an oak tree" or vice versa. So how do you make that argument convincing?



**NA:** Yeah. One thing that's at the heart of Romantic nature philosophy is this tension between empiricism and speculation. And that's equally central to all the natural scientists at the time who are closely observing nature and then making these leaps of imagination, if you will, in terms of the interconnectedness of the tree in the nervous system. That comes from, first of all, observation. But then all sorts of a priori principles are coming into play here to imagine this world of connections. With my own project, that tension is something that I seek to perpetuate, in a way, throughout the book. And, of course, that's complicated to do as a historian. And I think it actually speaks to some of the problems of being a historian – particularly a historian of art but also a historian of music or literature – is that our practice is, of course, a science. It's a form of science; or we understand ourselves to be academics. And, of course, we're always searching for evidence and facts in order to reconstruct the past; to reconstruct it in a way that is as truthful as possible.

**NA:** But what happens when the object of study is something that can't be fully explained through facts? And I don't mean just in the sense that the archive is incomplete; because it always is incomplete. I guess I mean it more in the sense that facts themselves are inadequate to express the significance of those objects. And I think that's absolutely the case with Friedrich. So, in my own project, the empirical dimension really revolves around providing evidence for this particular historical context in which speculation was embraced. In my own readings of Friedrich's paintings, I've tried to work from this historical context knowing full well that, of course, it's impossible to ever fully see these paintings from the perspective of someone living at that time. That time is lost. At the same time, though, if we don't try, then I think that we inevitably don't get to experience some of the remarkable things about these paintings; or at least they remain unexplored, if that makes sense. I guess it's about finding the balance between our craft as historians and making sure that we're crossing our t's and dotting our i's – but then also opening ourselves up to possibilities, even if those possibilities can't ever be fully proven.

**JS:** I think the approach is really invigorating, and it's a pleasure to read. As you write in the book, you argue in the spirit of Romanticism just as you've described it. And I have to admit, I found that quite interesting because it helped me as well to try to imagine how it would have been received at that time. If I were living in Dresden and walking past Friedrich studio, in what kind of cultural milieu would I have to be to understand that? I like that approach. It's challenging, I'm sure. I'm sure you have critics who want a more empirical approach, as you put it, but I think you've done very well with this approach. And you've produced a lovely volume; the book is beautiful. All of these reproductions are just lovely in that book. So congratulations



on that. The thing about books [is] they answer questions but they also raise new questions. And so I'm wondering, what new questions does your book raise?

**NA:** Sure, yeah. I always seek to raise new questions, at least in the end of my scholarship. And I've tried to do that a little bit in the conclusion. In the narrowest sense, the central question that comes out of this book is where does Friedrich fall within the history of art? There's always the possibility that he was a fundamentally religious artist, which is certainly what some scholars argue. Many root his work in the allegorical tradition of landscape that was popular in the 17th century. And there's also the possibility that he was this pioneer of abstraction, which is something that the art historian Robert Rosenblum famously argued in relation to Friedrich's most famous painting, probably, *Monk by the Sea*. He suggested that this painting is sort of the first in this trajectory that leads up to Mark Rothko and [inaudible 00:29:20] painting. Or, as I'm proposing in the book, I see him as part of this longer trajectory of artists who are really interested in the natural world, organic form, and the place of the human being in the larger compass of life.

**NA:** And so, I think the question that this book hopefully raises is that there are many possible ways in which we can understand him within larger narratives or trajectories, and it's really open to interpretation. In a larger sense, I think that the material that I bring to the table, particularly with respect to Romantic science, forces us to ask how other ways of knowing nature might offer some kind of insight into living more sustainably. These Romantic scientists that I talk about have not been important for the history of science, at least up until this point; they've been largely dismissed as Mystics. But [in] my book, along with a whole range of other texts that deal more with Romantic science and literature that have come out in the last decade or two, I think I've drawn attention to the important ways in which the Romantics resonate with contemporary ecological thinking and the ways in which we're seeking to understand nature. Again, not in the mechanical way, but instead as this interconnected whole in order to live better with others.

**JS:** Yeah. Marvellous. I think your book does raise those questions and points to them. So congratulations on that. I think you've succeeded there. A final question for you; completely different topic. You're a scholar, so you do a lot of reading. I'm curious, what are you reading lately that you're really intrigued by and want to talk about?

**NA:** Sure. Yeah. I am reading a book right now; and this is sort of both scholarly reading and bedtime reading, sometimes they actually come together.

**JS:** That's nice, yeah.





UNIVERSITY OF  
**WATERLOO**



**NA:** I'm reading a book by Robin Kimmerer called *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teaching of Plants*. This book has become a bestseller, so it certainly is making its way around. But it's really wonderful. Kimmerer is an environmental scientist, and she is Native American. In this particular book, she shows how these different world views, the Western science perspective as well as the Indigenous way of knowing, sort of intersect in her research, in her approach to teaching etc., and how they can actually be mutually enriching. This is certainly something that I think resonates with things that I'm thinking about for future projects as well as projects past.

**JS:** Yeah. Marvellous. I have heard of the book but I haven't read it, so that's a good recommendation. Thank you. And again, congratulations on being named to the shortlist for the book prize.

**NA:** Thank you. It's an honour.

**JS:** I've been speaking to Nina Amstutz, whose book *Caspar David Friedrich: Nature and the Self* has been shortlisted for the Waterloo Centre for German Studies Book Prize. To find out more about Nina and her book, check out the show notes or go on over to [wcgs.ca](http://wcgs.ca). Thanks for listening.