

# New England Sky: Alston Conley

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McMULLEN  
MUSEUM OF ART  

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Designer: Josh Artman

Photographer: Christopher Soldt

Front: *End of the Day 5*, 2011 (plate 5)

Back: *End of the Day 1*, 2011 (plate 4)

This publication is set in Scala Sans, a humanist sans-serif typeface designed by Marin Majoor in 1993.

For materials related to *New England Sky: Alston Conley*, visit [goo.gl/TLCZi7](http://goo.gl/TLCZi7)

I live under a New England sky. The light, its color, intensity, sensation, season, and length of day influence my psyche, mood, interior life, and art practice. The long hours of daylight during summer and short hours during winter define our seasons, influence our lives, and distance us from our southern neighbors. The low sun, color-rich light, and long shadows of early morning or end of the day often silhouette the horizon or individual trees in shadow, while the light fills the sky.

Over the last couple of years I have made something between painting and collage. Collage tends to flatten any picture. It reminds the viewer of the surface, it contradicts illusion. My collages are combinations of painted skies conjoined with tree forms; a distant horizon where the treetops barely differentiate, or a copse grouped together, a wolf tree alone in the field, or a towering giant that dwarfs the viewer. The tree forms a foreground for the color and light of the sky.

Some trees have become very familiar through repeated observation and depiction. Others are remembered from walks, often revisited and drawn later. "Painting with scissors" was what Matisse called his collage cut-outs. I cut out forms with a razor knife, a blunt tool compared to a brush. It forces one to simplify, to see the whole and not get lost in details.

—Alston Conley



# Testing Boundaries

Katherine Nahum

*Northern Sky: Yellow Violet* (2012, plate 9) is a singular collage on display in *New England Sky*, and it may represent a turning point for the artist, Alston Conley. In contrast to earlier collages, this enlarged image of a battered balsam fir escapes its format, loosens its edges, and flaunts the fissures and bruises that it has endured. Conley's emphasis is dramatic, even tragic.

The unstretched canvas hangs from pins embedded in the wall. The canvas can move; the bottom portion showing paper trunk and boughs comes away from the wall toward us. The fir asserts its presence, even fearsomeness: branches sweep out and forward as sharp, cutting arms. They serve as the ground for small colored cutouts that seem to advance to occupy the same spatial plane of the black paper. Then a deepening space is indicated below the branches of the collage, and there the viewer can see a jagged perforation and the ends of boughs bent back upon themselves.

In a sunlit gallery it is hard to see that the image is mournful. Yet behind the fir the colors of the sky descend in layers from peach to yellow to faint washes of gray/violet, affirming the dark nature of the collage. Black exists in our world, while in the distance the yellow-violet sky falls like a rough scrim. *Yellow Violet* represents a striking change from work executed just the previous year: four framed and more conventional collages titled *End of the Day* (2011, plates 2–5).

The road toward *Yellow Violet* began when Conley became intrigued by a distant landscape ridge he saw from a terrace in Italy, so he played around with collage to make it. A suggestion of a parasol pine, an ancient church, and its bell tower were structured in layers of rough cut paper and backlit by a painted sunset. The black paper foreground took up more than half the canvas and became a dour, pasted presence that seemed to hide something. Conley titled this generative collage *Valley of Silence: Bell Tower* (2010, plate 1).

Technical problems involving the use of oil paint and acrylic occurred in some of the early *End of the Day* collages that followed. Gesso became the primary watery agent to prepare the ground because it is an acrylic composite that makes the support sturdy and textured to facilitate the adherence of the black acrylic-soaked papers. Acrylic provides more flexibility and freedom in creating fluid backgrounds whose varied colors offset the stiff forms of trees in paper. Paper reminds us of the strong material presence of trees from which paper is made.

The dark *Valley of Silence* was the starting point for both technique and thematic development of the series. Conley soon questioned including a parasol pine or bell tower in his own work because they were forms that spoke of Italy. Yet they put him in mind of those magisterial trees that rose before a changing sky that he saw from his studio in Maine. Italy inspired Conley, but his *New England Sky* series is a forceful expression unburdened by history and distinctly his own.

Conley cuts his black acrylic papers into curvilinear or jagged tree forms. He is interested in how the forms of trees work with or against the colored backgrounds. The sky is paramount, or to put it more accurately, it was paramount. Early works like the four framed *End of the Day* collages mentioned above show rows of black evergreens grounded at their base by solid black paper. The weighted band of black erupts as it moves upward to form the tops of silhouetted trees in a forest. At the same time that blackened paper—as if it were bark—widens slightly beyond the edges of the image left and right. But we do not notice that: the frames underscore the constraint that characterize these early images.

Three related collages of maple trees go on to show color-streaked skies that represent the primaries in sequence: blue, red, and yellow (plates 6–8). These three open up Conley's exploration of color, format, scale, and spatial boundaries in 2012. Trees in collage become increasingly detached from their backgrounds. These maples do not emerge from any ground and become more abstract, stretching up the canvas as well as beyond and below it. They float: the two maples of *End of the Day: Blue* (plate 6) seem to walk off the canvas independent of one another; the maple on the right is ahead of its neighbor. Their trunks extend below the edge of the canvas. The sky of *Blue* has little reference to what is observed in nature. Unusual colors occur at sunset but those of *Blue*, *Blue Orange* (plate 7), and *Yellow Orange* (plate 8) make us think more about the facture and feeling of the colors and not what they represent.

Two of Conley's small studies, preparation for the maples mentioned above, demonstrate the artist's pleasure in the tight cutting of paper forms (plates 23–24). In a third, very different study (plate 28) he cuts and applies newsprint that has been washed with tenebrous veils of gray that obscure the printed words running from bottom to top. If the image is turned one can read "Aggressive...victims," "...ear Inquiries reveal flou... Wide." It is a mysterious nighttime scene of a tree with a full moon shining from behind its branches, and it provokes thoughts of all those collages from Picasso to Jasper Johns where we are meant to use language to expand meaning. I assume that this is a road the artist shuns taking.

To cut out forms of maples and evergreen trees Conley uses the X-Acto knife, "a blunt tool that forces one to simplify, to see the whole and not get lost in details." Yes, but God is also in the details, details that Conley controls, subsumes neatly within the whole. He uses the knife and scissors with finesse, cutting maple leaves into tortuous curvilinear forms, and we are reminded of Matisse. But where Matisse's decorative cutouts play with form and color at the surface to make us delight in these visual manipulations, they go no further. Conley leads us into denser territory.

The branches of two collaged maples become so interleaved (*End of the Day: Yellow Orange*) that we fail to understand where one tree stops and another begins. This merger becomes a plane of flat back. As we have seen in *Yellow Violet*, the orange sky behind moves forward in space to establish orange shapes—stars, seagulls, figures—within the black plane. We have the feeling that if the two maples were to rotate their branches into one another they would interlock like puzzle pieces, or like gears. A third maple shown as a fragment in the left foreground of *Yellow Orange* responds in surprise to the maples' coupling; its branches, like startled hands, are raised.

The trees have become protagonists while the New England sky is not; it is an emotionally laden, sometimes spiritual, often beautiful background that furthers the significance of the whole image. Conley speaks of how the tree is intended as an anchor in the foreground—the foreground itself—for the world of color and light. The long summer daylight and the shortened light of winter affect his mood and drive his artistic

practice. Color and light is his subject: he holds it there by means of a line of undifferentiated trees, then three trees, two trees, and finally one tree—and the shift from a foreground of color and light into the background has taken place. Conley says collage tends to flatten any picture. True or not, and whether or not he is aware of what he has accomplished, he has countermanded this phenomenon. There is a physical enactment of a collaged tree or trees working against the flat of the canvas, contradicting flatness—and the trees become agents, the subject. This is because the trees in collage test their boundaries.

The exhibition includes several paired evergreens that are anthropomorphized. Conley would walk around two well-known trees and sketch them from different vantage points. *Winter Solstice 2* (plate 17) shows the evergreens in heated conversation; *Winter Solstice 3* (plate 18) has them chastely joined at their trunks and falling into an embrace. A tree or group of trees suggests the human presence. The tree of life evokes the Christian presence; regimented forests suggest a military battalion; an isolated tree distorted by the onslaughts of nature represents the lonely human response to adversity. Conley's isolated trees against gradations of fading light derive from Caspar David Friedrich's romantic landscapes showing single figures contemplating nature (*The Monk by the Sea*, 1808–10; *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, c. 1818). These figures are contemplative, ruminative. Conley turns the dynamic around to make his protagonists assertive, moving out from the canvas.

It seems that by 2013 Conley had recognized the power and beauty of *Northern Sky: Yellow Violet* and others like it. Conley's theme of the single autonomous tree stands as a personal declaration. These collages often refer to human contingencies, have some barren branches, and are called “lone wolf” trees because they have been left standing while companionate trees have been wiped out. They are all larger works and display single evergreens overlapping and striding forth from unstretched canvases. They are painted with exquisite background color that suits the form and tenor of the tree. *New England Sky: Yellow* (2014, plate 14), an aggrieved lone wolf, is the most powerful of them, having an internally consistent aesthetic of jagged branches, frayed canvas edges, and a strident yellow background that is overwhelmed by the evergreen—jarring, but it seems just right. *Northern Sky: Pink and Tree* (2013, plate 11), by contrast, has delicacy as well as calm power in its striations of pale pinks and lacy branches reaching upward; and we can also say that the softer cut boughs swell outward from their context of pinks. The title seems to suggest it. In the McMullen exhibition these “lone wolves” hung at the front of the atrium gallery looking out onto lawns and evergreens, not far from the earlier, timid *End of the Day* images and *Northern Sky: Yellow Violet*.

As dynamic as many of the collages are, Conley fulfills his stated aim of creating images of contemplation. *End of the Day 2* (2011, plate 2), *End of the Day with Two Trees* (2012, plate 10), and *Vernal Equinox* (2017, plate 21) convey the deepening of this mood over time, and they speak of stability, endurance. The latter two emphasize human agency. The earliest, *End of the Day 2*, shines among them, and among the other earlier framed images having the same title. It has, like them, dark trees thrust forward to subtly overlap the canvas edges. Its unique aspect is the surprising diagonal orientation of those pink clouds that streak into the background, deepening the space and the collage's meaning.



1. *Valley of Silence: Bell Tower*, 2010, oil, acrylic, and collage on paper, 26 x 22 in.  
\*not in exhibition\*



2. *End of the Day 2*, 2011, oil, acrylic, and collage on paper, 16 x 22 in.





3. *End of the Day 6*, 2011, oil, acrylic, and collage on paper, 16 x 22 in.



4. *End of the Day 1*, 2011, oil, acrylic, and collage on paper, 28 x 22 in.



5. *End of the Day 5*, 2011, oil, acrylic, and collage on paper, 28 x 22 in.



6. *End of the Day: Blue*, 2012, oil, acrylic, and collage on paper, 19.5 x 22 in.





7. *End of the Day: Blue Orange*, 2012, oil, acrylic, and collage on paper, 18 x 22 in.





8. *End of the Day: Yellow Orange*, 2012, oil, acrylic, and collage on paper, 18 x 22 in.



9. *Northern Sky: Yellow Violet*, 2012, acrylic and collage on unstretched canvas, 39 x 27 in.



10. *End of the Day with Two Trees*, 2012, acrylic on unstretched canvas, 31 x 22 in.



11. *Northern Sky: Pink and Tree*, 2013, acrylic and collage on unstretched canvas, 30 x 36 in.





12. *Winter Sky*, 2013, acrylic and collage on paper, 18.5 x 23.5 in.





13. *September Sky*, 2013, ink, acrylic, and collage on paper, 22 x 28 in.



14. *New England Sky: Yellow*, 2014, acrylic and collage on unstretched canvas, 30 x 35 in.



15. *Northern Sky: Summer Afternoon*, 2014, acrylic and collage on unstretched canvas, 35 x 47 in.





16. *Morning Woods*, 2014, acrylic and collage on paper, 20 x 26 in.



17. *Winter Solstice 2*, 2014, acrylic and collage on paper, 22 x 28 in.





18. *Winter Solstice 3*, 2014, acrylic and collage on canvas, 22 x 28 in.



19. *Woods' Edge*, 2015, acrylic and collage on canvas, 19 x 28 in.



20. *Yellow Light*, 2015, acrylic and collage on canvas, 24 x 20 in.





21. *Vernal Equinox*, 2017, acrylic and collage on unstretched canvas, 31 x 48 in.



22. *End of the Day: Pine Dusk* (study), 2011, acrylic and collage on paper, 11.75 x 11.5 in.



23. *End of the Day: Yellow* (study), 2011, acrylic and collage on paper, 12 x 11.5 in.



24. *End of the Day: Blue Twilight* (study), 2011, acrylic and collage on paper, 12 x 11 in.





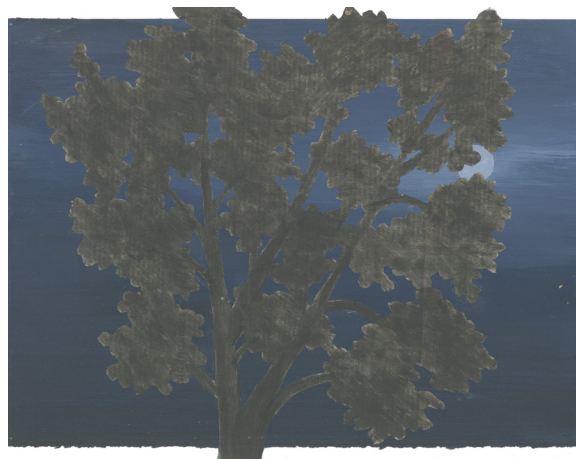
25. *Rosy-Fingered Dawn with Tree* (study), 2012,  
acrylic and collage on paper, 11.5 x 11.5 in.



26. *Rosy-Fingered Sky with Tree* (study), 2012,  
acrylic and collage on paper, 7.5 x 11 in.



27. *Trees on Green*, 2012 (study), ink on newsprint, collage and acrylic on paper, 11 x 15 in.



28. *June Moon* (study), 2014, ink on newsprint, collage and acrylic on paper, 12 x 15 in.



29. *Pine and Fir Ridge* (study), 2015, ink on newsprint, collage and acrylic on paper, 12.25 x 15 in.



30. *White Pine* (study), 2015, ink on newsprint, collage and acrylic on paper, 11 x 15 in.



