An extraordinary array of artists have perceived Coney Island as a prism through which to view the American experience. Their visions have imagined the future and recalled the past; they have conveyed shifting ideas about leisure, and explored issues of race, ethnicity, and class. What artists saw at Coney Island, known as America's Playground, from 1861 to 2008, and how they chose to depict it has varied widely in style and mood, mirroring the aspirations and disappointments of their times. Coney Island: Visions of an American Dreamland, 1861–2008 is the first exhibition to look at the site's enduring status as inspiration for artists, from its rise in popularity as a seaside resort in the Civil War era through the closing of its space-age amusement park, Astroland, in 2008, after decades of urban decline.

Charles Freimont's nineteenth-century song "Down at Coney Isle" described New York City's sandy backyard as a place to
Fig. 1.Stephen Skull Fanny Fosse, a.d. Painted metal, diameter 23 inches. Collection of Ken Harsh.  
Fig. 2. Pip and Flip by Reginald Marsh (1898–1954), 1932. 
Tempera on paper mounted on canvas, 48 3/4 inches square. Terra Foundation for American Art, Chicago.  
Fig. 3. Beach Scene by Samuel S. Carr (1837–1908). c. 1879. Signed "S. S. Carr" at lower right. Oil on canvas, 12 by 20 inches. Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts, bequest of Annie Susan Cabot (Mrs. Louis Earned Cabot).

Fig. 4. Landscape, near Coney Island by William Merritt Chase (1849–1916). c. 1881. Signed "Wm M. Chase" at lower left. Oil on panel, 8 1/4 by 13 1/2 inches. Hyde Collection, Glens Falls, New York, gift of Mary H. Burman to the Prange Family Collection.
meet people from different neighborhoods in a setting
that promised romance: "There's the Bow'ry boys with
Nellie, and the East Side girls in style." The girls from
up in Harlem, too, and Johnny with his smile." Suma-
ded in "S. Carr's Bath Scene" (Fig. 3) painted in the aftermath
of the Civil War celebrates the democratic spirit and the
growth of commercial entertainment at Coney Island,
with singles, couples, and families enjoying donkey rides,
posing for a tintype photographer, and watching a pap-
er show. An elegant African-American couple is both
part of and distant from the group of spectators
gathered before the puppet show, documenting the
crowd's diversity but also its divisions.

Fig. 1) appeared on signs and tickets at Steeplechase
Park from 1897 to 1966. The stretched and smiling
mouth echoes the grimaces of barkers shouting out
attractio ns to passersby. The hair parted in the middle
and rising to two points suggest horns, implying that
Steeplechase is presided over by a mischievous devil
intent on subverting rules of proper conduct.

No painting captures Coney Island's modernity
more powerfully than Joseph Stella's monumental
Battle of Lights, Coney Island, March 1913—1914
(Fig. 5). Sited at its center is Luna Park's two-
hundred-foot-high Kaleidoscopic Tower, which
emitted beams at night, broadcasting America's
technological and commercial power. An Italian im-
migrant, Stella viewed Luna's 250,000 lights as a
symbol of America's dazzling possibilities. He married
an Italian cubist-futurist style to an American spec-
tacle in an ambitious painting that embodies the
frenzied energy of the crowd, the lure of the lights,
and the promise of the American Dream.

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But Stella's awe was tinged with ambivalence. He called Luna's Mardi Gras "the new bacchanal" and spoke of the "violent and dangerous pleasures" generated by "the surging crowd and the revolving machines." To the right of center, sonorousailing circular forms mimic the simulated terror of being propelled through the twenty-five-storey vertical loop on Luna's famous Loop-the-Loop, by contrast with Stella's painting. Walker Evans's photograph Coney Island presents the landscape of Luna Park as far more human in scale. The couple gazed up at the heart on Luna's Keleidoscopic Tower as if it were the moon. The man's jacket draped over his arm, his rolled-up shirt sleeves, and the woman's dress—with its thin neckplunging back—evoke the heat of summer and the license for public intimacy encouraged by the resort. Who are these

While such acts involved demeaning stereotypes, they also introduced audiences to jazz and the blues.

In the wake of the stock market crash of 1929 and the ensuing Depression, Coney Island became known as the Nickel Empire. For five cents, day-trippers could get there by subway, enjoy the beach, the longest boardwalk in the world, the rides, and eat Nathan's Famous hot dogs (at an additional nickel each).

Reginald Marsh's paintings of sideshow entertainment explore the complex and changing relationships between audiences and performers. In Pip and Flip of 1932 (Fig. 2), a boisterous crowd, drawn from the crossroads of American life, packs the street, but relatively few buy a ticket, reflecting hard times. An immense banner at left advertises the scantily clad "Pip & Flip Twins from Peru." Although the microscopical sisters, Elvira and Jenny Lee Snow, were in fact born in Georgia, promotional hype made them seem exotic by associating their development with a foreign land. At the center, Marsh depicts Jenny Lee Snow in a way that underscores the discrepancy between the sideshow's atomic hype and the vulnerable performer.

During the Depression a reporter for the New York Times invited readers to spend a Sunday at Coney Island, where "the Depression is reduced to the status of a ghost … having no part in the brilliant drama of the melting pot at play." The "melting pot" appears in beach scenes painted in 1934 by Marsh and Paul Cadmus who both feature bathing beauties and musclemen, a human pyramid, and bits of newspaper that refer to world events. Marsh placed Yiddish newspapers in the sand at a time when German Jews were widely reported to have been banned from Wannsee, Berlin's version of Coney Island. In Cadmus's painting, the paper held by a beacon's bear the headline "Hitler." Germany's new chancellor, casting the shadow of impending war over the beach.

The photographer Mervin Engel, who lived in Coney Island as a teenager, understood its romantic allure. In Coney Island Embrace, 1938, a soldier and his girl are physically intertwined while the Pepsi bottle planted in the sand beside them functions as a commercial flag declaring this beach to be America (Fig. 8). The likelihood that the man would soon leave to fight for his country adds poignancy to the moment preserved by Engel, who joined the Navy in 1941.
The solace of love on a crowded beach is a theme of several Coney Island photographs.

The solace of love on a crowded beach is a theme of several photographs, particularly Homer Page's *Coney Island (Couple on Beach)* of about 1949 showing an attractive young couple reclining on the sand (Fig. 9). Their bent arms mirror one another, while the undulating sand echoes the young woman's curvaceous body. The man's face is hidden, but his partner's closed eyes and parted lips suggest a state of erotic reverie.

The predominantly working-class citizens portrayed in photographs and films set in Coney Island do not conform to sentimental ideas about childhood innocence. Engel's film *Little Fugitive* tells the story of Joey (Richie Andrusc), a seven-year-old who runs away to Coney Island after being tricked into thinking he killed his brother. Thanks to Engel's hand-held camera and improvisational script, viewers see Coney Island through a child's eyes as Joey wanders on the beach and among its amusements. A production still captures him walking with slumped shoulders under the Coney Island boardwalk (Fig. 10). The shimmering pattern created by shadows and light falling through the slats onto the sand suggests Joey's isolation. The soul of the film is the emotional landscape of childhood and the enchanted setting of Coney Island, where a child's sense of wonder eventually triumphs over fear.

A witness to the traumas of history, Henry Koen- ner, a native of Vienna, lost his parents and brother in the Holocaust. He came to the United States in 1933, served in the Army during the war, and then worked as a courtroom artist in Germany during the Nuremberg trials. He created *The Barbarer's Booth* (Fig. 7) soon after he returned to America. When viewing the painting, we stand before the dismembering mirrors cladding the barber's booth and imagine ourselves, "normal" spectators, turned into "franks." Koerner suggests our identities are fluid and subject to distortion as in Nazi Germany and McCarthy-era America, where yesterday's citizens could be declared today's pariahs. Like Koerner and other artists and writers in the postwar period, the beat poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti adopted America's play-
ground as a cultural metaphor for the deep conflicts in the collective soul of a nation in his halluciogenic collection: A Coney Island of the Mind.

By contrast, Davidson's inspiring photograph taken on Independence Day in 1962 shows African-American couples embracing and gazing up at fireworks (Fig. 6). The bright lights are those of the ethereal Wonder Wheel, and wonder animates nearly every face. This striking image is included in Davidson's book *Time of Change...* a collection of photographs documenting the civil rights movement.

In 1961 President John F. Kennedy promised to put an American on the moon by the decade's end. The spirit of patriotic optimism inspired the construction of Astroland Park, a Coney Island space-age extravaganza, created during a period of urban decline and captured by a number of artists. But only two years after Astroland opened, the longest running park, Steeplechase, closed. Coney Island fell victim to civic neglect, destructive urban renewal projects, and rising crime. The legendary national playground became a contradictory place where utopia and the inferno collide.

He layered his relief to bring the vibrancy of Coney Island's past forward into our space with figures selectively cleaved to spell out "Wings for Victory." Rodies interlock like flat puzzle pieces, forming a joyful unity—the great assembled public of a pluralistic democracy, recording a time when attendance was at its highest at America's Playground. Comparing these works by Weegee and Grooms invites people to consider what the exuberant Landscape of Coney Island meant at different moments in the nation's history.

The Parachute Jump, Wonder Wheel, and Cyclone—icons of Coney Island's past grandeur as the World's Greatest Playground—have become potent emblems of vulnerability, endurance, and hope for the future in images by artists and filmmakers. Having withstood decades of deterioration, these rides have been preserved, both as physical landmarks and through their immor-
"It is blatant, it is cheap, it is the apotheosis of the ridiculous. But it is something more...and not to have seen it is not to have seen your own country"