Exhibition catalogues are not supposed to be scholarly books, but a look at the hundred footnotes to Bruce Weber's introductory essay, many of the thoughtful, informative discussions of primary and secondary documents, suggests that something unusual is going on in IN NATURE'S WAYS: American Landscape Painting of the Late Nineteenth Century. By Bruce Weber and William H. Gerdts. West Palm Beach, Florida: The Norton Gallery and School of Art, 1987, $22.95. Weber tries to speak to the large number of paintings reproduced in the catalogue and shown in the exhibit. As he frankly admits, the relationships between one artist and the next, between one school of training in Europe and another, and between these and the complex network of American outdoor art classes which is described in William Gerds' essay are too complicated for easy generalization. Weber talks about such relationships in education as he can see or establish, and then points to unmistakable parallels and convictions in the works themselves. Equally serious in intention is Gerds' earnest effort to lay out a new field of scholarly investigation, the history of outdoor training in landscape painting. As is sometimes necessary in a pioneering study, Gerds repeatedly has to say, in effect, I can't figure out what this painter learned there; or, we don't know how they taught.

The reviewer, however, can generalize: the show was a knock-out—rooms of wondrous stuff by artists he didn't know, and works he had never seen by familiar figures in contexts which changed his understanding of their place. He can also name the American Studies issues for which the book is a rich source of material: the relationship between art and values, the self-conscious search for national artistic identity; transit-of-culture; artists as a kind of sub-culture; the history of the print media—for the art press was fully developed by the start of the period covered by show and book.

Your Faithful Editor's sense is that this marvellous show and unusually rich and complex catalogue came to be not merely because of the great energy and intelligence of Bruce Weber, who was the curator of the originating gallery, but because the gallery's director, Richard Madigan, believes that a good administrator should let his people break the rules when the quality of what they produce is high. His crew should know that those of us out in the scholarly professions appreciate the results.


Here's a quiz from Nancy Walker: What is an "afromobile"? A "Bible Bug"? A "cat wagon"? The answers, which may surprise you, are to be found in DARE, which stands for the DICTIONARY OF AMERICAN REGIONAL ENGLISH (edited by Frederic G. Cassidy, $60.00), now being published in multiple volumes by Harvard University Press. The scope rivals the OED, with as many as three pages devoted to one word or phrase, e.g., "bug," from its basic meaning "a louse" to the phrase "bug under the chip." Next time someone calls you a "bobbasheely," here's the book to consult. More restricted in scope, but no less thorough, is the LINGUISTIC ATLAS OF THE GULF STATES, (vol. 1, edited by Lee Pederson, $60.00), from the University of Georgia Press, which in its first volume describes migration patterns, geography and other influences upon the linguistic characteristics of the Deep South. Alas, these are bedtime reading only for weightlifters: the DARE alone weighs seven pounds.