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Modified Landscapes

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Modified Landscapes

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degrees of
Master of Fine Arts in Art

by

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Andrews University
Bachelor of Fine Arts in Photography, 2012

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This thesis is approved for recommendations to the Graduate Council.

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Abstract

Modified Landscapes is a body of work that reflects serious thought regarding Nature and its future. My personal experience and beliefs are at the core of why I believe this subject to be of great importance and why it will sustain many artists' investigations for the time to come. The influences that informed this process are explored through experiences I had traveling, reading and exploring the photograph as a material object. The manipulation of the photograph is meant to question the beautiful, untouched scene and break the Romantic gaze that is historically tied to representations of nature and insist upon contemporary reflection on the neglected state of our environment.

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Dedication

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Cheers to you, Sir.

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Introduction

Let me set the stage for you: I am in my studio eating a lunch-able (deplorable, I know) at 7:00 P.M. on a Thursday evening. My head is reeling from a studio visit that I had with a mentor earlier and still reeling from a similar visit a few days ago. Two things stand out from these conversations: The first, a belief system. One faculty said that my work seems to be my belief system, as in a reflection of what I believe to be true about people and the decisions we make. The other individual said that I hardly invest in anything unless I believe with my entirety. Both of these things are true, the second one I recognize in many other aspects of my life, but this is not the time for such introspection.

I believe land is important. I believe that Nature is important, not in just its growing capabilities, but in the experience, it provides: perhaps a view I climb for, a moment where I feel infinite and a place where I encounter water more powerful than your shower head.

My belief in the importance of land comes from growing up believing the most meaningful thing that would be passed down to my brother and I was the land on which my grandmother was raised. Her father, my great grandfather, bought this land in the midst of the Depression in a very rural region of Arkansas. They built a modest house close enough to the church and school that my grandmother and her sister would often walk or ride horseback. My grandmother did not live there her entire life, but she always found her way back home. After she and my grandfather retired, they built a home in place of the old house and settled-in for a life of taking care of cows and a deepening of their roots in what they called, “the promised land”.

I was recently visiting this sacred place, which I do as often as I can, and while walking our fields, I came upon the pathway that leads to a mountain of waste. There is no trash pick-up

in my grandparents' neck of the woods, just dump piles that never seem to leave our property. I saw the marked tire tracks in the field that led to this wooded area, I was hit with the scent before I could see the cause. I looked down the narrow ally that led to the family-formed mountain and did not wish to continue. Instead, I pulled out my phone, took a picture from where I stood then memorialized both the embarrassment and disgust I felt so that I could write about it later.

(Figure I)

I did not have to get close to recognize milk jugs, plastic bags, newspapers, Mt. Dew bottles and so many other materials that we buy and consume daily. My personal trash consists of objects that have a lifespan longer than my own. Shaving cream, lotion bottles, razors, food packaging, junk mail, frozen dinner containers, and so many other items I buy, use then discard with thoughts of "where does it go?" and "why can't I seem to choose differently?" Materials like this are seemingly unavoidable and certainly speak to a larger value system held by society (as a whole), but there are choices I can make that lead to less permanent discard. (Even as I sit in a coffee shop writing this paper, I am poised next to a jar of plastic straws.) However, my decisions to use materials, chemicals, and processes that leave a lasting mark only provoke more thought and guilt than actual action for change or alteration. Why?

I saw my grandparent's monumental heap as an entry point to a much larger and serious problem. If this abundance of plastic, aluminum, and polyester represents the waste of a 91-year old man who lives alone, consider me concerned.

What about cities? What about manufacturers? Corporations? Factories? Are they regulated? Do they have the conscience to recycle or not dump harmful materials/waste into our water and fields? I am going to go out on a limb and say no. Why? Money. Greed. Power: Things that can be summed up by the number "45" and reproduced by millions of people

everyday under the guise of convenience. Timothy Morton argues that the same patriarchy that suppresses issues of race, sex, gender also suppresses environmental issues.¹

Modified Landscapes is the photographic meditation and exploration of my experiences with the landscape. My thoughts and regard of Nature along with my examining the photograph as an object present the viewer with an opportunity to question the manipulation. Photography has become a primary method of absorbing information and I believe we should question the images we are swarmed with on a daily basis. Even though photography has been regarded as ‘truth’, there are still many decisions made in the production of any image. My formal disruption is meant to be an awareness of the falsehood that Romanticized landscape representations perpetuate. The installation of this exhibition pushes the tradition of the framed photograph. The varying placement of the photographic objects, whether in the corner or on the floor, utilize the structure of the gallery. The play with representation by way of multiples, shape, placement and fundamental elements of the medium also provide moments of thought and meditation.

History and Expectation

Historically, the medium of photography has been instrumental in preserving land. Carleton E. Watkins and William Henry Jackson were the two who captured the grandness of Yosemite and Yellowstone with the intent of saving it from becoming a natural “Disneyland”. Photography continues to guide people to specific environments. The medium that was instrumental in forming legislation to preserve some of our country's most beautiful natural phenomenon’s is perpetuating the influx of spectators. Today, social media hashtags and geotagging are the contemporary tour guides of posted experiences that make those who “like”

¹ Morton. P. 9

them envious of the selfie posted for the world to see. I often think of the damage done to places through their own advertisement. How can we advocate for land but also protect it?

Before photography, landscape representations included issues of ownership, dominance, nationalism, livelihood, war, and religious or spiritual figures. Painters such as the German landscape artist, Casper David Friedrich, employed his background, rich in religious teachings, for his use of Nature. His deepest influences were writings, sermons, and poetry by the pastor and writer Gottard Ludwig Kosegarten. Landscapes were used to evoke emotion and connection to something spiritual: God. “God dwells in and is identical with Nature” were ideologies Nature representations gripped tightly.² The figures captured within paintings such as *The Wanderer* are either turned toward the landscape or at a distance from the viewer. These techniques allow us to relate or envision ourselves in their shoes, connecting with the powerful scene. (Figure 3) Scale is also noteworthy. In *Monk by the Sea* the small figure, contemplates the view of the seas and seems so small compared to the grandness of the sea. Perhaps this was used to portray how small the human frame is compared to both the majesty and power of the sea. (Figure 2) Romantic and sublime representations of landscape have created a deep-rooted tradition where wild scenes of nature are deemed untouched and more powerful than the human hand. What precedent have these representations of Nature set for our contemporary culture?

The notions of romantic ideologies are false, inappropriate, and dangerous. While introspection and meditation are inevitable for a viewer, the antiquated ideas of the ‘all powerful and untouchable nature’ must be disrupted. In the past, an attention to distance and grandness propelled the fundamental austerity of Romanticism but we must snap out of this idealism and our reality must be brought to the foreground of the severity of the current state of our climate.

² Chu. p.173

During the 20th-century, a pivotal moment in the history of landscape photography was the exhibition, *The New Topographics*. Photographers such as Robert Adams, Stephen Shore, Bernd and Hilla Becher, along with many other artists replaced the traditional, untouched wilderness with industrial scenes. The human infiltration to the American west was evident. One could argue that if this was the new landscape photography, then the Nature once relied on for spiritual guidance had disappeared. Their photographs were full of cars, hotels and tourist attractions. The dominance of outstretched urbanism has continued to rule over any vacant, unexplored land, and even the spaces that are supposed to be protected.³

John Szarkowski describes the frame as a means of selection, acknowledging the subject extends beyond the four corners. Relying on these historically established rules, photographing what seems to be wild and untouched scenes of nature grounds the tradition of landscape photography, but when that settled expectation is shaken, questions have an opportunity to arise.⁴

Theory of the Image

Susan Sontag, a very strong, prominent voice in the criticism of photography, offers thoughts on how this medium has shifted our ways of experience and expectation.

“Photographs, which fiddle with the scale of the world, themselves get reduced, blown up, cropped, retouched, doctored, tricked out. They age, plagued by the usual ills of paper objects; they disappear; they become valuable, and get bought and sold; they are reproduced.

Photographs, which package the world, seem to invite packaging.” This ‘packaging’ term is congruent with landscape representations and how it is given within four corners. So often our initial interaction with Nature is through a screen or photograph that is contained by 90-degree angles and the chromatic limits of the paper or smart phone screen. This first, digital exploration

³ Adams, *New Topographics*

⁴ Szarkowski. The frame is essential fundament of the photograph.

of a place can be eye-opening but also limiting by creating a predestined expectation of our experience. If we could imagine the wandering qualities John Muir set out with when he was exploring the High Sierra mountains or the feeling he had when he “stumbled upon” vistas, rather than constantly looking down at a confined version on a screen, perhaps we would engage more with the necessity of these spaces and the experiences available to us.⁵

Photography has acted as a means of power, dominance and comfort as Sontag proclaims: “Recently, photography has become almost as widely practiced an amusement as sex and dancing—which means that, like every mass art form, photography is not practiced by most people as an art. It is mainly a social rite, a defense against anxiety, and a tool of power.”

The more contemporary voice of Hito Steryl explores image value as it pertains to resolution, size and viewership.⁶

Experience is an element I believe to be necessary for my research and is at the core of my decision to travel and photograph landscapes rather than outsource or appropriate images. I find something disingenuous about asking viewers to consider and meditate on the state of our environment if I, myself, did not appreciate what Nature offers. My exhibition questions the limited capacity of what a representation of a natural space can be and accomplish. In the objects presented, I did not aim to force my personal participation in the landscape on to the viewer but to create a more experiential view of the photograph.

⁵ Muir. He would often leave the small village in Yosemite with nothing but bread in his pockets and wander for days at a time. His writings and deep appreciation for Nature also was influential in the development of the National Parks system as he took Roosevelt on a journey into the mountains.

⁶ Steryl, Defense of the Poor Image

I believe the photograph should be residue rather than the primary objective, of an experience. I find myself in the position so forcefully described by Sontag:

A way of certifying experience, taking photographs is also a way of refusing it—by limiting experience to a search for the photogenic, by converting experience into an image, a souvenir. Travel becomes a strategy for accumulating photographs. The very activity of taking pictures is soothing and assuages general feelings of disorientation that are likely to be exacerbated by travel. Most tourists feel compelled to put the camera between themselves and whatever is remarkable that they encounter. Unsure of other responses, they take a picture. This gives shape to experience: stop, take a photograph, and move on. The method especially appeals to people handicapped by a ruthless work ethic—Germans, Japanese, and Americans.

I hike to photograph. I travel to photograph. I use photographs as a memory tool. I have banks, folders, drives that store and collect my visual thoughts and memories. For what purpose? So that in 50 years my grandchildren can dig through my cloud storage and romanticize their grandmother as a young artist making work in such a social time as this? Oh, the images they will find (insert a frightened emoji here). Rather than uncovering tokens of the past such as love letters or old photographs; the forward generations will be left with materials that point to our need for ease and convenience; materials that obviously do not keep their well-being in mind.

As I continue to trek through my family's fields, I find myself documenting a repeated experience: Showing the world where I am and what I am doing in a 15 second or less clip. Why do I feel compelled to do this? Curating what the world sees of my actions and choices are cultural decisions my generation must cope with. While traveling for my exhibition, piling hard drives full of varying terrains, I found this traditional four-cornered "package" was so separated from my personal experience.

Viable Ecology

During my research, I was greatly influenced by Tim Morton's 2007 book, *Ecology Without Nature*. In the introduction, Morton makes a case that in order for us to have ecological

thought, we must disregard Nature. That seems backwards, but it also makes sense: "...the idea of nature is getting the way of ecological forms of culture, philosophy, politics, and art."⁷

While investigating Deep Ecology, I have found the discussion of human value systems to be the center of both 'why' and 'how' we have gotten to this state. Thomas Berry, in *The Viable Human*, brings attention to 'the how' by acknowledging the ways in which our need for convenience overrides any choice that could be made in benefit of other living organisms on earth. "Our main experience of the divine, the world of the sacred, has been diminished as money and utility values have taken precedence over spiritual aesthetic, emotional and religious values in our attitude toward the natural world."⁸ Our desire to dominance over the earth as well as prioritize ourselves over other living beings, has led to the creation of an atmosphere that puts us in danger. This post-industrial society conflicts directly with ecology. The more I read this piece, the more I understand why and how we have gotten to this point, but I am also less hopeful of any resurrection of Nature in the future.

Similar Vein of Works

It is frightening to think of the multitude of ways artists, environmentalists, and activists could talk about the use of harmful materials and its effects on Nature. Photographs of beaches covered in plastic, animals in the sea holding Q-tips, melting glaciers, fracking for oil, mountain-top mining would all highlight the negative impact the human race has on Nature. However, I must argue that despair is ineffective. Chris Jordan's series, *Albatross*, is saturated with emotionally charged imagery of dead birds who have consumed so much plastic that they die of hunger. It is sad, yes. I can imagine the immediate guilt felt after drinking a Diet Coke from a convenient plastic bottle and then absorbing the visual information shown in this work without

⁷ Morton. *Ecology Without Nature*, P. 1

⁸ Berry. *Viable Human*

changing my habits. How is this despair and sadness effective? I have seen so many photographs of plastic filled ocean shores, rivers and landfills, that I feel I have now been made aware of their existence. I am convinced the representing the ravage materials we leave behind is not an effective way of to produce change.

My favorite attempt to portray the effect of my human existence is what I refer to as the “Holy Glacier”. Yes, they are melting. We get it. Stop representing these artifacts in such a sublime and glorious manner that they seem untouchable. The fact is they are touchable. Not just in the physical sense but as a representative of how choices made thousands of miles away can directly impact what is out of view. The hit glaciers get from my impact are so distant from the actual decision that using them as a representation for climate changes is pointless.

Artists such as Letha Wilson utilize the power of material choice against the landscape representations within her installations. Her work is our industrial supply forcing itself against Nature, causing disruption visually in a very aggressive and crushing manner. The weight of her materials corresponds with the weight of the impact the objects and their use have had. The steel beams and structures also point to the industrial time period that initiated severe impact on the environment.(Figure 4) Another artist employing manipulation is UK based artist Dafna Talmor. Their reconstructed landscapes are not meant to be references to specific locations, but an ethereal connection to the memory and metaphor landscapes provide. In the exhibition titled *Landscape #1* Talmor, along with two other female artists, in a what has historically been a male dominated field, used a more deconstructed approach to landscape representations. These broken

landscapes offer a fictional sense of place by using non-referential imagery, which allow more psychological introspection on space and memory.⁹

While I applaud artists who directly reference actions and materials that are destroying our environment, I question whether this work is effective for the purpose of a fundamental shift in behavior. Work that reuses materials, seems to me, a sympathetic approach to the underlying, fundamental problem.

Objects for Experience and Meditation

How we view, and experience landscape continues to shift through time. We no longer wander open terrains, but travel with an agenda. Digital platforms provide expectations that guide our experiences within Nature, leaving little room for exploration and discovery.¹⁰

How do we now experience contemporary landscape representations? What mediums and devices rule our avenues of information? Printed photographs, travel books, social media on smartphones, and documentary films projected or on-screen rule what we see and, perhaps, inform what adventures we desire to seek in Nature. My goal in the installation of my objects is to provide elements of stability within the medium by having framed pieces at a recognizable size along with broken and disrupted moments weaving in and out of the viewers trail through the space. Horizon line and viewpoint are tampered with, but still respected as an anchor of view.

My process of making begins with a complete rectangle, allowing me to make choices in relation to and against each individual image. Moments I spend looking at the complete image meditating, on my experience in the location, are followed by the dismantling of the photograph which begin to break my personal relationship to the space. The more dissected the object

⁹ Barnes writes on how photography is rapidly changing and the use of traditional, timeless subjects like landscape and still life imagery allows them to question the format but also retain roots in history.

¹⁰ Solnit. *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*

becomes, the more removed I am from the represented space and time. The photographs act as a memory source, storing information so that I am never completely severed from the space and time; however, the act of cutting and slicing helps distance myself, so I can begin to initiate objective thought.¹¹

My use of geometric shapes utilizes angular forms that fight against the shapes of the landscape elements they are representing. Utilizing the corner, floor, gallery pedestals, and having exposed wire engage artificial, built elements that are incongruent with natural, open, living spaces. (Figure 5) The consistent use of paper is meant to be a strong tie to the tradition of the photographic object. The ease of digital reproducibility, play with size and scale and its manipulation characteristics allow experimentation to create an experiential photograph. My intention with these objects is to create varying methods of reflection.

Conclusion

Every time I go back to my family land, the infiltration of waste and consumptions awakens me. A place that has acted as a retreat for my entire life, has now become a force that pushed me to question the future. I walk through the fields and by the lake seeking contemplation and space from responsibilities, but the opposite occurs. When I constantly see the plastic, aluminum and other waste creeping its way into our fields, my peace becomes frustration. Immediately my thoughts of disgust lead to the question “Why is this here?”

That what was once my safety zone for freedom and thought has now been tainted. When my grandfather dies, I will become responsible for what has been discarded. What is out of his sight is very much on my mind. Money, time and other resources will be used to move, burn or bury the stack of disposed crap - time and money I could use saving the world with my

¹¹ Berger. Reading Photographs. Photographs act a a memory.

research. Experiences that provided constant disruption and frustration have brought me to no conclusion, but rather to a place of awareness and concern.

The process of making, traveling and the act photographing has provided me with a deeper awareness of not only the unavoidable materials we use but also the fundamental behaviors society has developed. My exhibition of photographic and digital media works, I hope, offers a moment of reflection on the alteration made within the photograph leading to contemplation on the importance of Nature. I believe the issue of landscape will continue to be represented by artists, such as myself, because of the importance of the experience it provides for people. My time spent in in open fields and in mountain ranges has provided me with a sense of self and reliance that I have not found elsewhere.

Figures

Figure 1

*Human Formed Mountain*, Courtesy of the Artist, 2018

Figure 2

Casper David Fredrich, *Monk By The Sea*, Alte Nationalgalerie, National Museums in Berlin, 1808-1810

Figure 3



Casper David Friedrich, *The Wanderer*, Kunsthalle Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany, c. 1819

Figure 4



Letha Wilson, *Steel I-Beam Wall Push*, Digital C-print, steel, 2018

Figure 5



Esther Nooner, *Geometric Landscape I*, Archival Inkjet Print 2017

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