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THE PUZZLED LANDSCAPE

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
Visual Arts

by
Amanda Musick
December 2018

Accepted by:
Anderson Wrangle, Committee Chair
David Detrich
Andrea Feeser

ABSTRACT

This series of work diverts landscape photography into object, material, and riddle. I investigate how we are conditioned to view and interact with the natural environment through constructing new, illusive vistas and forms using photographs I made in physical landscapes.

Photographs that range from iconic views to details of rock textures are combined and altered to construct dioramas that represent forest, desert, ocean, and mountain landscapes. The dioramas are then photographed and deconstructed. Their remains are reorganized into piles and photographed as unrecognizable representations of the original place. The piles exist in a white, voided space portraying a sense of loss and uncertainty. Representing the landscape in these modes demonstrates a timeline of my process and a metaphoric timeline for the landscape.

I consider the larger problem of our ever-changing environment and loss of natural landscape through the processes of reconstructing and deconstructing a photograph. The uncertainty of how to fix increasing problems like wildfires, rising ocean levels, and the repurposing of public land is reflected by the way I confuse space, time, and form by use of a camera and material. I consider the works to be landscape puzzles, a game of thoughtful play in my process of piecing together new landscapes. Humor is also used to invite the viewer to participate in the puzzle, investigating the blurred line between fabricated and real environments. This interaction with the work

extends beyond the physical installation to suggest the viewer's role in maintaining, restoring, and appreciating the landscape beyond the gallery.

DEDICATION

For my grandfather, Maurice, who taught me that change is inevitable, but taking time to appreciate the butterflies, the clouds, and those quiet details in our surroundings makes testing times a bit easier to navigate.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are many individuals who deserve great recognition for the instrumental roles they have played in my success as a graduate student and my life beyond the studio. Thank you, Dave Detrich, for sharing your vast knowledge of adhesives and more importantly for your enthusiasm and patience. Andrea Feeser, thank you for the fireflies, and for the invaluable conversations we have shared that remedied the testing moments in my work and daily life. Anderson Wrangle, I am overwhelmingly grateful for your unwavering support of me and my work, and to have had a graduate advisor with such an adventurous spirit.

To my friends and fellow graduate students, Amber Eckersley, Kymberly Day, and Haley Floyd, our absurd collaborative works, wheeled hallway adventures, and your irreplaceable friendship will be endlessly cherished.

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CHAPTER ONE

LANDSCAPE ACQUAINTANCES

We are guided in how we view the landscape and how we experience the natural environment by photographs, paintings, maps, the media and information provided at parks and natural history museums. Before arriving in a natural environment, it is probable that we have already seen images of the place or looked at instructions on how to navigate the area. We arrive with a preconceived vista in mind. This is most common with protected landscapes, National or State parks, but it is not uncommon to have an image in mind prior to seeing other landscapes as well. Chances are, we have been informed of what the place looks like by another source. We trust these sources and allow them to influence how we perceive landscapes prior to seeing them for ourselves.

In the summer of 2017 I drove across the United States with the intention of photographing several national parks and various landscapes in between. Earlier that year the President's administration had threatened to reduce the protection of 27 National Monuments and I wanted to see these grand landscapes before any further changes were made. I set out knowing I was going to visit and photograph the same landscapes that Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, Stephen Shore, Carleton Watkins and so many others had photographed before me. As I drove I considered the future of our public lands and the challenge of representing these landscapes in a new way.

While talking with friends in East Texas, I was convinced to visit Big Bend National Park in Southwest Texas. It was not on my planned route and though I intended for my travels to be relatively open, I had an agenda to be in Los Angeles, California in

72 hours. The destination was 13 hours off course, but I was overwhelmingly convinced that it was a place I needed to see. I drove seven hours starting at sunrise to get there. During the drive I saw a lot of government vehicles and barren desert landscape. I continually questioned my decision to visit this place without having done thorough research of what to expect.

Then in the late afternoon, without crowds, signage or other indicators, bold rock formations surrounded by massive cacti and colorful desert flora emerged from the desert ground. I arrived at the park visitor's center already in awe, without having seen any of the suggested landmarks, but still I went in eager to learn about the most significant experiences a person could have within the park during a limited amount of time. Despite my original intentions, I decided to stay the night. A park ranger informed me that there were quite a few campsites available in the Chisos Basin campground, but the vacancy was due to the storm expected to happen that evening and that campground was at high risk of flash flooding. The ranger said I should be fine, but it was to my discretion to stay there.

I went to the campsite and set up my tent with quite a bit of concern. I did not know what a desert storm was like, and before this moment I had never camped alone. However, the motivation to stay was greater than the desire to leave. That evening as light flashed around my tent from the lightning, I read about Terry Tempest Williams' experience in Big Bend from her book, *The Hour of Land*. She wrote about the remarkable color of green found in the park and what a precious opportunity it was, to see it in such a dry climate. As the walls of the tent breathed in and out from the winds of

the storm, my worry turned to gratitude. Earlier in the day I had seen that treasured green of the desert, and without the rain from the storms that would not be possible.

My time in Big Bend was unfortunately short and I was unable to see every suggested landmark. However, everything I saw and sensed was exciting and unexpected since I had no plan to be there. I explored that landscape having only seen a few internet images and hearing my friend's description of it. I have not experienced another environment the way I did Big Bend since I was a child. The way the light touched the mountains, the patterns of the flora growing in the river basin of the Rio Grande, and each rock seemed unreal at first because I had not familiarized myself with the place beforehand. This experience caused me to consider how we view and perceive the landscape and how the fragments we see define our view of the whole.

When I returned to the studio I began a series of interpretations of the landscape photographs I was making. I deconstructed the photographs with digital and material processes, creating color gradient maps, sculptures, collages, and other experimental manipulations. This investigation resulted in the current large photographs and sculptures of the thesis work as represented in the exhibition.

CHAPTER TWO

ICONIC AND INDIVIDUAL VIEWS

As I was trying to figure out an approach to imply change in the landscape, I referred to the work of photographers, Mark Klett and Byron Wolfe. In their project, *Reconstructing the View*, they photographed and constructed new iconic views of the Grand Canyon by superimposing them with old photographs and found images of the canyon showing change over time. They incorporate images made by unknown and famous historical artists like William Bell and William Henry Jackson. Their methods of combining past and present images into a singular photograph exhibits how photography can disrupt the limitations of time, space, and perspective.

In my work, I use about fifty photographs to make a collage. When I am in each landscape I make at least one hundred digital photographs to create a visual bank-- to draw from later. I photograph the iconic and ideal views- as well as unique details that I find on my path to and from the suggested scenery. While in the national parks I photographed the same landmarks as Ansel Adams and the scenes that draw in visitors every day. The collages incorporate near and far perspectives and show different ways we use photography to record. I follow the constructed experience of public lands that is laid out in maps and guidebooks because their pinpointed landmarks are undeniably extraordinary. I also photograph flora, fauna, rocks, trees, textures and anything else I respond to. *Arches National Park, Utah I (Fig. 1.1)*, shows repeated forms of the magnificent arches that I photographed while crowds of other visitors walked past. There is also a bright orange rock that is repeated in the composition. I photographed that rock

after hiking down an unoccupied trail, into a small canyon just in time to see that rock sliding off the canyon wall. Each collage is constructed by combining images that represent a shared and personal experience of place.

CHAPTER THREE

HUMOR IN A BOX

In this work the process of constructing collages, from photographs I made in the landscape, operates as an act of thoughtful play. I think of the collages as a landscape puzzle. It is a game of process that I create for myself to solve and piece together. How I piece together and manipulate the photographs in the collage creates illusions and uncertainty in the space and form of these new landscapes. This blurred line between fabricated and real environments invites the viewer to participate in the humor around my work and figure out the puzzle.

The processes of reconstructing and deconstructing my photographs is also a way in which I consider the larger problem of our ever-changing environment and loss of natural landscape. The uncertainty of how to fix problems like the rising ocean levels, increasing wildfires and the minimizing of public land is reflected by the way I confuse space, time, and form in the work.

Humor “can serve as a social lubricant, engendering trust and reducing conflicts.”¹ It can assist in communicating critical ideas that might be debatable or uncomfortable. I use humor as a critical device in the work to also ask the viewer to consider the larger issue of climate change and state of uncertainty where our land exists. The piles of landscape, *Big Rock Mountain, Pickens, South Carolina II (Fig. 1.2)*, *Arches National*

¹ Morreall, John. “Philosophy of Humor.” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2016 ed.). December 21, 2016. Accessed November 7, 2018. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/humor/>.

Park, Utah II (Fig. 1.3), Devil's Backbone Trail, Warriors Path State Park, Kingsport Tennessee (Fig. 1.4), Big Bend National Park, Texas (Fig. 1.5), and Yosemite National Park, California (Fig. 1.6) are amusing in how they are flattened as if the land has been deflated. The rock sculptures are also humorous in how they play a visual trick on the viewer.

Recently at a park visitor's center I came across an interactive display, with which you could "Frame Your Own View" of the landscape. The display was a framed box, the front side had the opening for the view and instructions of how to use the display, and the other side was open with slots cut out where you could slide in the precut, pieces of landscape available for you to select from. These landscape pieces had imagery of mountains, rolling green meadows, fields with houses, farm land, and pylons printed on them. You were to select up to five pieces and place them in the slots to create a landscape, you could view on the front side of the box. The instructions read, "If you were a landscape architect... what kind of view would you create? Use the panels below to create your own view. Make sure your view has a foreground, middle ground, and background. Try different combinations." This display is an example of how we are conditioned to view the landscape.

The armatures I build my collages on are similar to this landscape box. The framework I start with limits how I can construct the collage. I am set up to include a foreground, background, and horizon. I shape the compositions of the collages to point out significant features of each landscape. I am choosing from photographs of the original place, showing the viewer the scenes that I found most captivating. This emphasizes the

notion of being accustomed to viewing the landscape through the lenses of a painting or photograph in the rectangular frame or the cemented platform with guardrails angled toward the ideal view in a park.

CHAPTER FOUR

COLLAGE

The process of my work is based on a form of collage. I draw from the techniques of current and historical collage artists to include layers of information and reform the landscape. The layers used in making a collage allow for hidden messages and multiple entry points into the work. A familiar component is often included to make the work inviting. The next layer in a collage is used to show the viewer that something is wrong or different. The familiar is disrupted or removed from its original context. In the series, *House Beautiful*, Martha Rosler creates a push and pull of familiar and unfamiliar imagery, setting the viewer up to re-evaluate a recognizable subject.

Collage is used by Rosler and other artists as a vehicle to respond to issues they see in the world around them. I use the technique to respond to the rapid changes happening within the natural environment, and our complacency to accept the information put in front of us.

A photograph of the landscape represents a physical place shown at one moment from one perspective. The collages I make encompass multiple views at multiple times. Time and space are flattened by collage. The photographs I used to construct, *Big Bend National Park, Texas I (Fig. 1.7)*, were made over a stretch of roughly 85 miles. Some photographs were taken in the late afternoon upon my unplanned arrival, and others were made the following day under hazy, morning light. *Big Rock Mountain, Pickens, South Carolina I (Fig. 1.8)*, was constructed using photographs from four separate trips over the

course of three months. This piece shows the contour of the leafless mountains of winter as well as the new greens of spring. In both of the works, you can see the variation in light produced by multiple atmospheric conditions. Compressing time and space into one composition is one of the methods I use to defamiliarize the viewer with the landscape.

This series of work is composed of diverse environments. I include forest, river, desert, ocean, and mountains. I chose to make work about a variety of landscapes in order to democratize the series. Rather than showing a hierarchy between the collages of national parks and other landscapes, my intentions are to equalize the landscapes to state that each is important and deserves our attention. After photographing in the national parks and making collages of them, I wanted to continue this body of work, so I began photographing landscapes that were more accessible for me. This resulted in the making of the collages, *Holston River, Mendota, Virginia I (Fig. 1.9)*, *Devil's Backbone Trail, Kingsport, Tennessee I (Fig. 1.10)*, *Folly Beach, South Carolina I (Fig. 1.11)*, *Big Rock Mountain, Pickens, South Carolina I*, and *Laurel Fork Falls, Jocassee Gorges, South Carolina (Fig. 1.12)*.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE DESERT FELL ON THE FLOOR

The collage works are discernable as specific places and include the same design elements traditionally seen in landscape photography. They are a mode of representation that still engages with the idea of being guided in how to view the landscape.

In order to disrupt the parameters that the collages fell into, I explored digital and material approaches of deconstructing the photographs seen in the collages. During that exploration in my studio I needed to take down one the dioramas that had been made into a final photograph in order to make a new landscape diorama. I removed the individual prints that made up the collage and tossed them on the floor. I then observed that the prints in this pile form looked like a sad, flattened version of the landscape. I decided to photograph the piles and upon doing so I realized that they also functioned as a representation of the landscape.

This second evolution of the work was my solution to disrupting the traditional landscape photograph. The photographic prints that made the collage are reorganized in an open, white space allowing them to take a nonobjective form. In this format, the landscapes no longer have a horizon line, foreground, or background. They are removed from their familiar framework, making them unrecognizable from their original form and place.

In the works, *Big Rock Mountain, Pickens, South Carolina II* (Fig. 1.2), *Arches National Park, Utah II* (Fig. 1.3), *Devil's Backbone Trail, Warriors Path State Park,*

Kingsport Tennessee (Fig. 1.4), Big Bend National Park, Texas (Fig. 1.5), and Yosemite National Park, California (Fig. 1.6), the disassembled collage elements have been reorganized into a pile, showing the landscape deflated and condensed. The reduction in size and recognizable form make them seem less important than the collages. In their collapsed form they appear to be pushed aside for another purpose or forgotten. Placing the forms on a white background causes them to float in space, implying a place of limbo or void.

The landscape piles are a critical part of the process in this work. Exhibiting the collages and piles together give the viewer the opportunity to compare multiple processes of reconstructing and deconstructing landscape. Without being able to see the commonalities with the collage, and without a supporting title, the floating landscapes would not be an identifiable representation of place. The collages and floating landscapes are not placed side by side in the exhibition for a quick, easy comparison. Instead they are placed apart from one another in the gallery. I introduce this matching game by showing *Big Rock Mountain, Pickens, South Carolina II (Fig. 1.2)* as a larger print than the other floating landscapes, on a wall by itself. As you move to the right of the piece, following the flow of the space, the next piece you come to is the collage, *Big Rock Mountain, Pickens, South Carolina I (Fig. 1.8)*. Both works can also be viewed simultaneously from the entrance of the exhibition. Arranging the two forms of my work in this way allows for a comparison of colors and forms between the collage and piled landscape, revealing that one originated from the other. The connection between the two provides a timeline of my process and a metaphoric timeline for the future of our natural environment.

CHAPTER SIX

PHOTOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE

My understanding of the collages and pile landscapes was influenced by Thomas Demand who makes photographs of convincing architectural and landscape scenes he constructs out of paper. After he takes a photograph of the elaborately constructed reality, he destroys the construction leaving only photographic evidence of their existence. I also destroy the dioramas I construct and choose to show the photograph instead of the dioramas. Demand says his interest in architecture and landscape “deals with utopias and ideas of a somehow better future.”² His practice of destroying the constructions suggests an unreachable utopia. My process of deconstructing the dioramas to make the pile photographs implies a similar sense of loss and disappointment.

The photograph I make of the diorama is all that remains of the landscape I created. Making that photograph is critical because once I tear down the diorama there is no going back. Each time I take down a diorama I experience angst and conflict because I cannot build the same landscape twice. Though I still have the pieces used to build the diorama, it cannot be pieced together exactly the same due to the holes, tears, and folds caused from the deconstruction. The conflict of tearing down a diorama mirrors the idea of never seeing the same landscape twice.

² Quinn, Bryony. “Thomas Demand.” *It’s Nice That*. March 14, 2012. Accessed November 13, 2018. <https://www.itsnicethat.com/articles/thomas-demand>.

The work also functions as futuristic representations of the landscape. In regard to the debate of when and how the earth as we know it will end, humanity might be left with only photographs of landscapes. The photographs may not be present either, and scenes of the landscapes have to be rebuilt by those who remember how they looked.

I am making the dioramas to photograph them, rather than showing the dioramas themselves. The work is about the formal operations of the camera. Using a camera and showing a printed photograph, allows me to control perspective. The camera flattens the composition but also creates a continuous push and pull in perception because of the depth of the dioramas and the varying depth of field of the photographs used to construct it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

FRAUDULENT ROCKS

Once more I considered how the smaller fragments of an environment play a role in representing place. The detailed photographs of rocks and their textures I used in the collages led me to make the rock sculptures, the third evolution shown in this work.

In their project, *Icons*, photographers Jojakim Cortis and Adrian Sonderegger reconstruct iconic photographs like Neil Armstrong's footprint on the moon and the 1934 photograph of Nessie, the Loch Ness monster. Their final photograph shows a close replication of the original as well as the equipment and materials used to construct the scene. *Icons* is a critique of the authenticity of a photograph, and how the digital age has further reduced the truth of a photograph. I was influenced by their work in the making of my rock sculptures, where I use a photograph of a rock to design a deceiving representation of the original rock.

I use the photographic image to create an illusion, causing the viewer to think they are seeing a real, tangible element from the natural environment to then realize that it is constructed from a photograph. The images I use in the collages and for the rock sculptures must be sharp and have good contrast of shadows and highlights in order to produce a convincing imitation. Highlights and shadows in the photographs inform me how to form the material of the printed image. I make sure the highlighted areas of the photograph are facing upward toward the light source and the shadowed areas are folded inward or otherwise fixed away from the light source.

Similarly, to how Cortis and Sonderegger reveal the framework around their construction, I keep one side of the rock sculptures exposed to the constructed armature showing that the rock is a fake. The armature is an untidy, unstable construction and is not a desirable view. This rough construction is used to imply that the sculpture will soon fall apart and will not withstand time or force. The rock sculptures and their construction embody my brief experiences in the natural environment and the undetermined time we have left with the landscape as we know it.

In this exhibition, there are rock sculptures placed around the work *Laurel Fork Falls, Jocassee Gorges, South Carolina I (Fig.1.12)*. The sculptures mirror the same rocks that are shown in the photograph and intersect with the image hung on the wall. Allowing the built components to be seen and placing them with the collage is humorous, and further shows how I materialize a photograph into an illusion.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION

In this work, landscape functions as object, material, and riddle. I use the photographic image as artifice to invite the viewer to become an active participant in the composition. The illusion of real, natural objects I employ with a photograph causes the viewer to investigate the truth of what they are looking at. The three forms I include in the exhibit provide a timeline of my process and show a reduction and deconstruction of the landscape. This interaction with the work extends beyond the physical installation to suggest the viewer's role in maintaining, restoring, and appreciating the landscape beyond the gallery. Once the illusion is gone and the pieces are put together, the myth of unsullied nature is removed and the effects we have on the landscape are no longer fiction.

FIGURES



Fig. 1.1 *Arches National Park, Utah I*



Fig. 1.2 *Big Rock Mountain, Pickens, South Carolina II*



Fig. 1.3 *Arches National Park, Utah II*



Fig. 1.4 *Devil's Backbone Trail, Warriors Path State Park, Kingsport, Tennessee II*



Fig. 1.5 *Big Bend National Park, Texas II*



Fig. 1.6 *Yosemite National Park, California II*



Fig. 1.7 Big Bend National Park, Texas, I



Fig. 1.8 Big Rock Mountain, Pickens, South Carolina I



Fig. 1.9 *Holston River, Mendota, Virginia I*



Fig. 1.10 *Devil's Backbone Trail, Warriors Path State Park, Kingsport, Tennessee I*



Fig 1.11 *Folly Beach, South Carolina I*

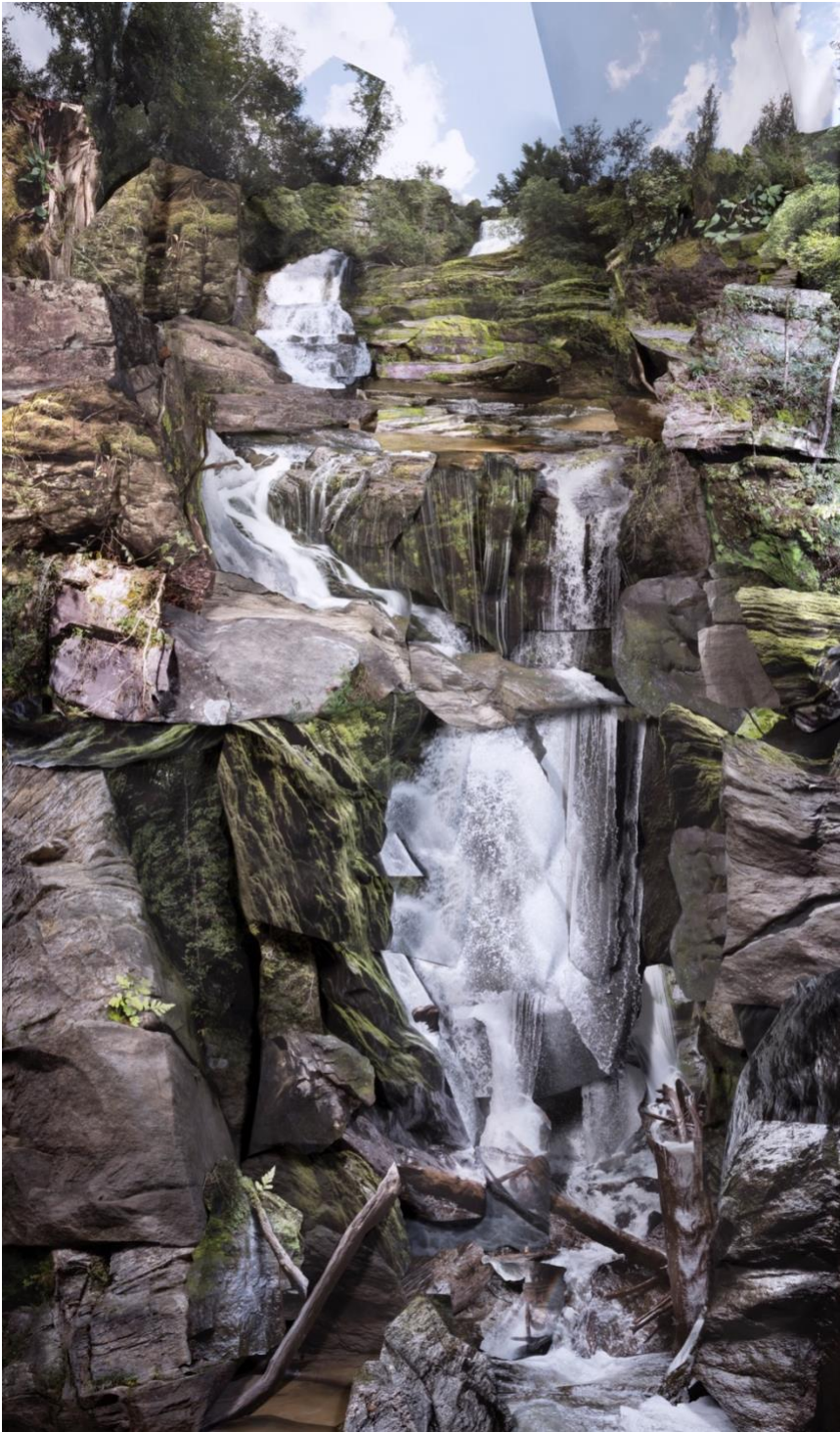
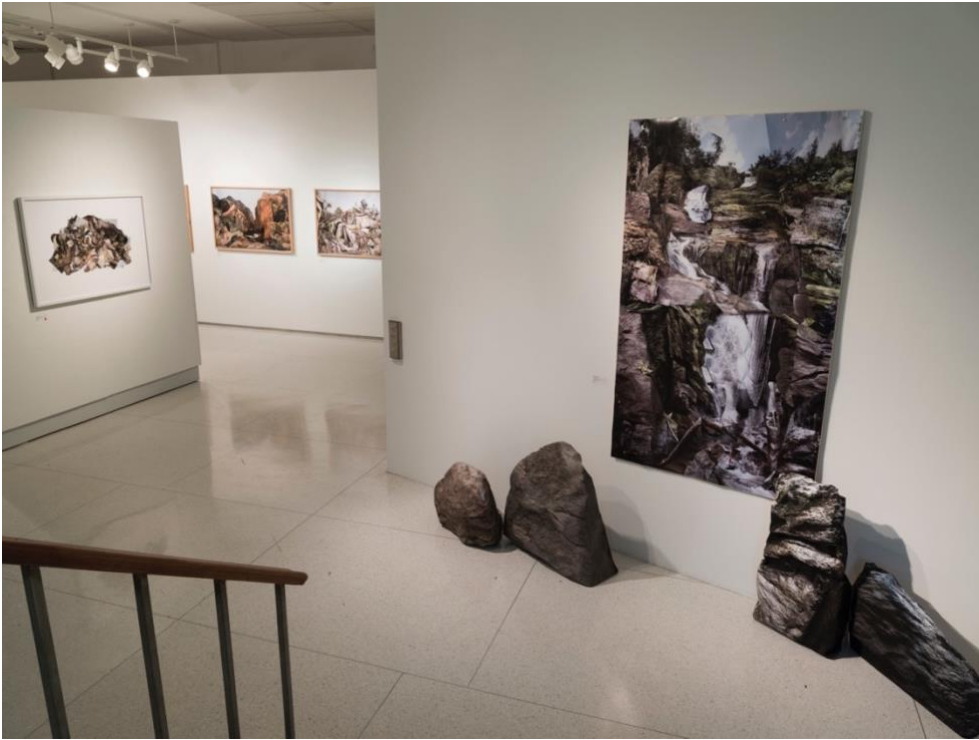


Fig. 1.12 *Laurel Fork Falls, Jocassee Gorges, South Carolina I*

INSTALLATION VIEW







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