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DISSONANT FORMS: LANDSCAPE, NATURE-LOVE, and ART

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DISSONANT FORMS: LANDSCAPE, NATURE-LOVE, and ART

A Thesis Presented

By

TAYLOR FRENCH BENOIT

Submitted to the Graduate School
of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

MAY 2021

The Master of Fine Arts Program in Studio Arts

DISSONANT FORMS: LANDSCAPE, NATURE-LOVE, and ART

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ABSTRACT

DISSONANT FORMS: LANDSCAPE, NATURE-LOVE, and ART

MAY 2021

TAYLOR FRENCH BENOIT B.F.A. THE MAINE COLLEGE OF ART

M.F.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Department Chair Shona Macdonald

As artists continue the long and storied lineage of Landscape, are there aesthetic responsibilities that come with representing the forces that afford you the capacity to do so? As we delineate spaces into places, endless interconnectivity into knowable “systems”, and living matter into thing based taxonomies, who do these delineations serve and with what intentions do we proceed? My studio art practice explores what it means to give form to our Former—the Former being that from which we came, the here and now, our explicit ecological reality, the stuff of what we call nature. In this way, the Former consists of all the powers at play that unthinkingly formed the vital life-forces that afford us our perceptive and creative capacities, and in doing so, precede us chronologically. The primary questions my creative practice posits are therefore: what does it mean to give form to our Former through creative applications? In doing so, is it appropriate to assume that we are returning the favor?

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SECTION ONE

THERIN LIES THE RUB

Part One: Smarter Than We Can Think

The meanings landscapes hold are not just metaphorical and metaphysical, but real, their messages practical; understanding may spell survival or extinction... Relearning the language that holds life in place is an urgent task.¹

— Anne Whiston Spirn, *The Language of Landscape*

Ideas matter. Ideas that are elegantly made, but do not fit the human body or the human soul, may cramp us or trip us up. Ideas unsuited to the outside world may leave us parched, drenched, or frozen.

— Evan Eisenberg, *The Ecology of Eden*

An informative recreational sign installed at a vista point on a shiny new bridge that overlooks the Casco Bay in Portland, Maine reads: “carved by nature, reshaped by man” (fig. 1); Sitting in a college seminar your professor gestures toward the window when speaking of the “natural”, as if to say “its over there”; an individual that regularly refers to themselves as a “nature lover” intentionally lives an hour outside of their place of work to be in the forest, necessitating long commutes in their car; a tourist captivated by a scenic view utters “its so beautiful, its like a painting” as if to suggest its value is determined solely through its capture; a hiker encounters a fluorescent red-spotted newt on trail and transfixed in wonder asks, “is it

real?"; on that very same hike they encounter a bright orange polypore on the trunk of a birch tree and offer the observation—"it looks as if it could be fake" and goes on to liken the fungal surface to that of expanding foam insulation.

These observations speak to our (dis)association from the natural world. While these phrases, gestures, and experiences may seem inconsequential, I am transfixed by their perceptual affordances. When you stop to listen and look you begin to notice our intense capacities to feel

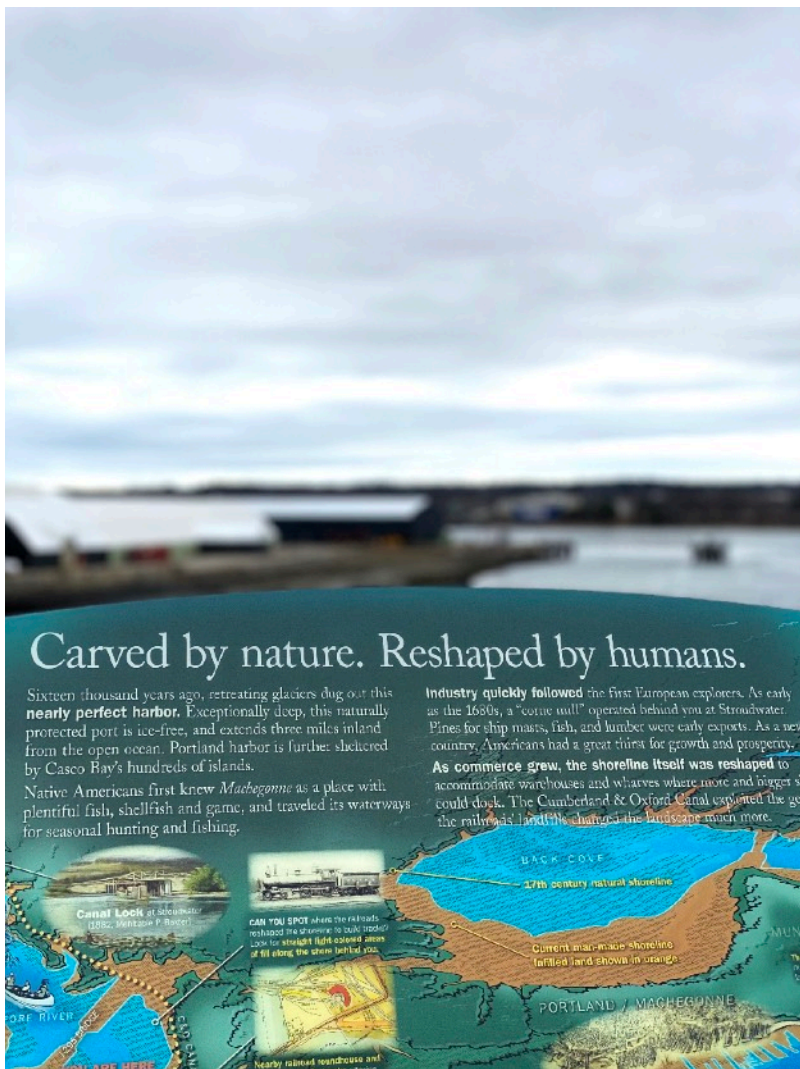


Fig. 1. Informational signage on the Veteran Memorial bridge, Portland Maine

separate from the natural world.

Through my artwork and research, I have become acutely aware of how language: symbolic systems that transmit meaning; and by extension philosophies: ways of knowing and/or making sense of the world, create and drive wedges that inform experience yet firmly divorce our minds from bodies, and bodies from natural environments.

Could it be that the affordances of our “higher” capacities of knowing through language also make us ecologically ignorant?

Language is not an inventory of nature, but a creative symbolic organization, defining experience and expectation. The retinal and perceptual experience of color, form, texture, and motion are arranged by names. Language imposes meaning and orientation and is necessary to the synthesis of ideas and mans' control of his environment... Words mediate between the otherness, the incredible and seemingly chaotic diversity, the existential solitude, and our necessary construct of the world. The world becomes... a more or less unified family of entities and events corresponding to words (Shepard, 41).

As ideas, concepts, and images—become stand-ins for our immediate experience of the world, a simulacral sediment accrues that obscures the world as quickly as we attempt to know it. Nature documentaries are piped into our homes via an energy infrastructure that prove to be more and more detrimental to the sustainability of the living systems that surround it. What does one do with a deep understanding of some colorful exotic species that exists thousands of miles away, as we fail to understand the ecosystems right outside the front door? I'm fascinated by this paradox of being that conflates abstractions of nature with ecological actualities. *Perhaps this is what caused that hiker to question the aliveness or legitimacy of that fluorescent red-spotted newt and orange polypore while hiking in Massachusetts.* As we confuse the map(s) for the territory we fictionalize our natural world (Wilber, 17). We live inside these fictions and in turn we abide by them. *That hiker clearly was experiencing some difficulty reconciling the image with the actuality right in front of them.* Through our map-making and consumption, we seem to excel at misrepresenting our very own cartographer again and again through conceptual frameworks of what nature is and isn't, as if we could come to a final conclusion.

Consider the concept of the color green—the word created to describe our retinal and perceptual experience of what many would call “the color of nature”. Established as a symbolic tool to signal environmental friendliness by activists in the early 1970's, “greenness”, or “to be green” to this day pervades much of our contemporary culture. As “the color of nature”, the connotations and optics of green have been coopted by business and marketing infrastructure, as

well as art and design applications. The fossil fuel and automotive industry even capitalize on green signage as if to signal that they care about the environment as they improve your sport model sedan's gas mileage. Ford, a company that has strategically harnessed the semiotic power



Fig. 2. Ford Motor Company's Eco-Boost badge on their SHO (super high output) Taurus sedan.

of 'nature', the 'wild', and 'American frontier' since the 1960s—with their two door sport coupe the *Mustang*—now find themselves in a strange position. In an admittedly successful campaign to capitalize on the green movement, Ford now produces an EcoBoost (engines with better power to displacement ratios) equipped Mustang, a model traditionally associated with high performance specs such as rapid acceleration (0-60mph in...seconds) and top speeds reaching past 140+mph. But perhaps an even more curious "green" *power play* from Ford Motor Co. was their 2010 reintroduction of the Taurus SHO. In another eco-animistic and perceptually dissonant sleight of hand, the 1990s reboot of the *Taurus* SHO, Ford's acronym for Super High Output, comes equipped with an EcoBoost power unit (**fig. 2.**), producing 365 horsepower with a twin turbo 3.5 liter V6. Fords EcoBoost engines *are* designed to produce the same amount of power as

their larger displacement antecedents while consuming less fuel, so there is an element of efficiency afoot. However, in the case of the oxymoronic *Super-High-Output-EcoBoost* vehicle donned with a green leaf logo that doubles as a winding road, the last thing you're being sold is an eco-friendly car. You're being sold an ideal long in the making: The American Dream, NOW WITH ECOBOOST!

Ford is not the only car manufacturer to use this deeply dissonant paradoxical rhetoric as marketing strategy. There is for instance, Subaru's PZEV, or *Partial Zero Emission Vehicles* (fig. 3). The ability to own an eco-conscious vehicle with super high output and the dissonant



Fig 3. Subaru Corporations PZEV (partially Zero Emissions) badge on their Outback SUV

structures that allow us to to be *partially zero polluters* are cultural oddities specific to our contemporary moment.

As artists we field the question—what is your medium?—with the expectation of hearing oil, acrylic, wood, marble or the likes of other traditional “mediums”. Instead, I consider these dissonances as my ‘medium’, from which I extract and invent forms with the appropriate materials to shed light on these often over looked eco-hypocrisies that largely define this cultural moment. I explore these dissonances in my 2020 sculpture *Hemlock in Drag* (fig. 4). Carved into

the rubber surface of a drag racing slick is over eight feet of tree bark; the bark pattern was captured and reproduced directly from an Eastern Hemlock in Sunderland, Massachusetts. If we were to visually and creatively describe the claims of Ford and Subaru marketing rhetoric, what might that look like? If approached literally, what would the “rubber meeting the road” in this situation entail? Tests were made in the form of prints and plans are being made to produce a full 102.4 inch “tree track” (fig. 5)

The larger irony is the literal and physical toxicity generated by “greenness”. Green pigments are among some of the most difficult to stabilize for use as paints and dyes. They require toxic additives such as chlorine, bromide, titanium, nickel, and zinc oxide, substances that make things that are green dangerous and sometimes impossible to recycle safely; the color green can never be “green”, literally or metaphorically (Rawsthorn). The color green is itself an concept; a concept that has then been nested into another; the use of “green” as virtue signal can result in some very confusing behavior



Fig. 4. *Hemlock in Drag*, 2021. Mickey Thompson drag radial tire and acrylic. 32x32x14 inches.

when examined at face value.

From these linguistic and semiotic equations, we can begin to notice how we actually start to know less, effectively obscuring the ground we walk on. This happens even if the goal is to generate a more perspicuous understanding of the world. Concepts get stacked and compounded. Things get hazy as green, the experience of color, becomes green the ideology, and so on. Our necessary and seemingly innocuous process of meaning making produces ideological sediments that inform cultural ethea that are often, as Evan Eisenberg states in the epigraph above, “elegantly made but do not fit the human body or human soul”—or the non-human soul for that matter (Eisenberg, xvi). My studio practice sifts through this sediment in order to test prevailing assumptions about nature.

My practice is committed to how we might contemplate the efficacy of our prevailing constructs about nature so that we might consider *better* ones. This approach is distinct from didactic lessons on how one ought to see the world. This sentiment can be seen in my 2020 print *Lamb Schematics* (**fig. 6**). The lamb, a classic symbol of purity and innocence, is caged within a blueprint’s grid. The architectural motif of a bygone era is digitally rendered and frames the front

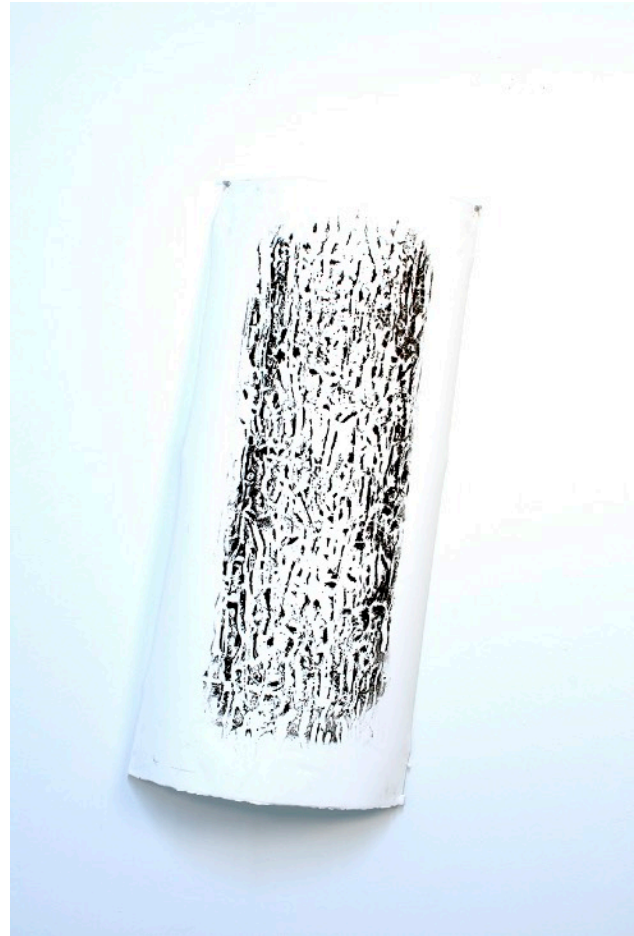


Fig 5. Test prints pulled from *Hemlock in Drag*.

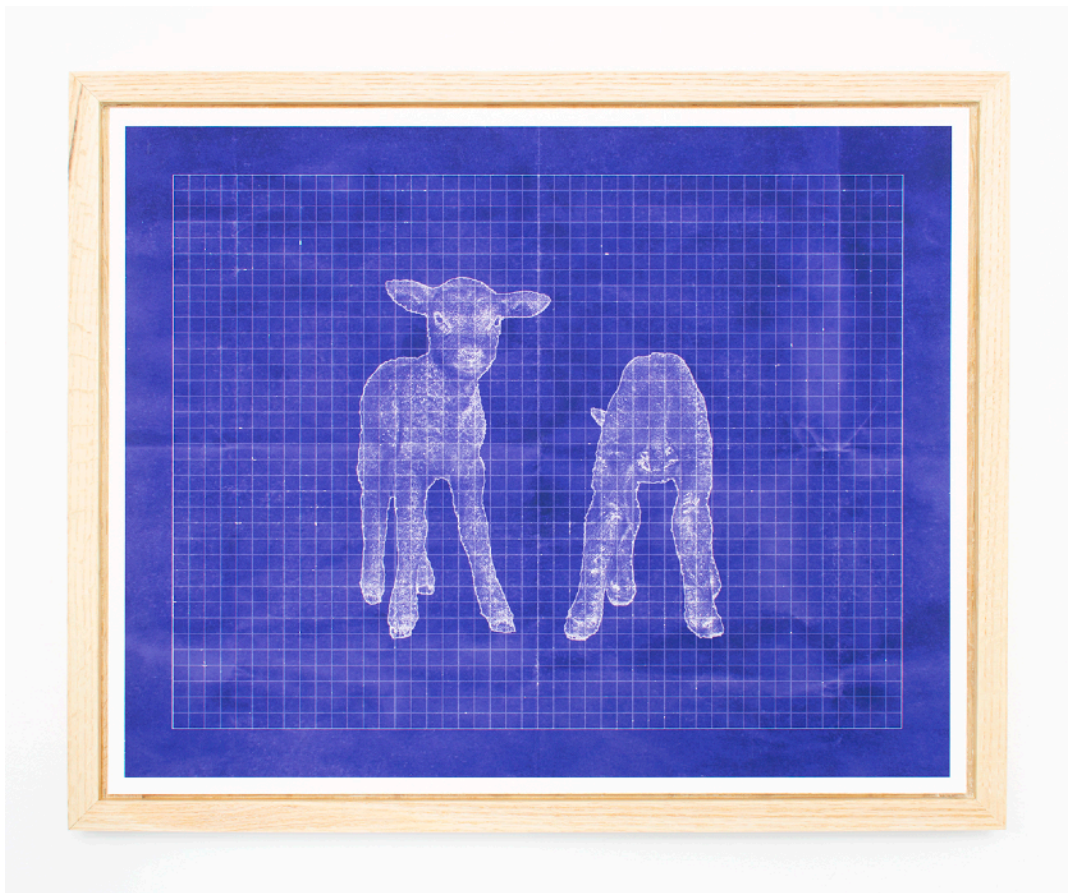


Fig. 6. *Lamb Schematics*, 2021. Digital print on foam core and white oak. 8x17 inches.

and rear of a lamb as to question the creature’s symbolism, and calls attention to the manner in which we ascribe meaning unto the natural world.

While *better* could mean any number of things depending on who you ask, here I am thinking of it in terms of *being*. What would it mean to be *with* the world, rather than merely *in* it (Freire, 48). While *with* acknowledges the existence of non-human agents and gives credence to the value of worlds outside of our capacities to interpret them, *in* neglects any semblance of reciprocity and reinforces non-human substances and environments as other. At best, *in* describes our world as an abundance of “natural-resources” for our energy dependent economic exploits. The language of *in* gives us state managed wilderness areas protected by 300 page manuals of the dos and don’ts of “nature”; areas that satiate our voyeuristic yearnings for wilder, more

fecund worlds—“wild” worlds that ebb with our political tides. Are these places actually wild, or is the language that delineates them the only barbarous thing present?



Fig. 7. *Suns in the Corner*, 2018. C prints on foam core and white oak. 18x24 inches.

In my 2018 photo triptych *Suns in the Corner*, I explore the way representational motifs permeate our understanding of the natural environment (**Fig. 7**). I imbricate the “corner sun” motif that children so often employ in their drawings—with photo realistic images of the sky. The structural motif overlapped with the sky as we know it, through retinal processes, begins to pull a thread between ecological actualities and symbolic epistemologies when contemplating our positionality to the natural world. The vastness of the sky is cropped, diminished, and delineated with a seemingly innocuous yet prevailing motif; a way of seeing the environment that flattens and simplifies as it depicts space. Three different air spaces are captured at different times, with different weather, in different geographic locations, yet we experience this diverse

grouping through a single dominant motif. The visual relationships and the ensuing emotional responses their semiotic phenomena trigger, describes the perceptual packaging I see present in western cultures conception of “wilderness” and “nature”.

As we so often seem to *conceptualize* ourselves into a hole (even with good intentions), I find it useful to sit with the words written by psychological theorist Ken Wilber: *Nature is not only smarter than we think, Nature is smarter than we can think. Nature, after all, also produced the human brain, which we flatter ourselves to be one of the most intelligent instruments in the cosmos. And can a total idiot fashion a genuine masterpiece?* (Wilber, 17).

Part Two: Nature Love

Wilderness...is quite profoundly a human creation—indeed, the creation of very particular human cultures at very particular moments in human history. It is not a pristine sanctuary where the last remnant of an untouched, endangered, but still transcendent nature can for at least a little while longer be encountered without the contaminating taint of civilization. Instead, it is a product of that civilization, and could hardly be contaminated by the very stuff of which its made. Wilderness [or nature] hides its unnaturalness behind a mask that is all the more beguiling because it seems so natural.

— William Cronon, *The Trouble with Wilderness*

“Nature isn't cancelled!” the Patagonia clad, cliff bar equipped nature-lovers exclaimed as stores closed and events were postponed during our ongoing pandemic (**fig. 8**). The irony of our western culture's recreational call to “nature” as antidote for our bio-viral global predicament is uncanny. To feel compelled to announce that nature is not cancelled suggests it is within our power to do so; it paints the natural world as singular event, flattens it into a virtuous venue of consumption for our personal well-being. Yes, of course, nature is everything *but* cancelled; it is open for business, but not in the ways we care to acknowledge, not the fun, beautiful, or pristine ways. Nature is busy (a year later still) mutating a novel virus—and variants for good measure. Nature set the stage, literally, for the absurd drama in which natural environments and their processes are flippantly cast as either vicious or virtuous circles depending on what our worldview calls for at any given moment (De Landa, 12). This is yet another specific perceptual capacity we possess as humans—the creation and delineation of ethics, applied to our reality as we deem appropriate; it is a behavior you simply do not find outside of human culture:

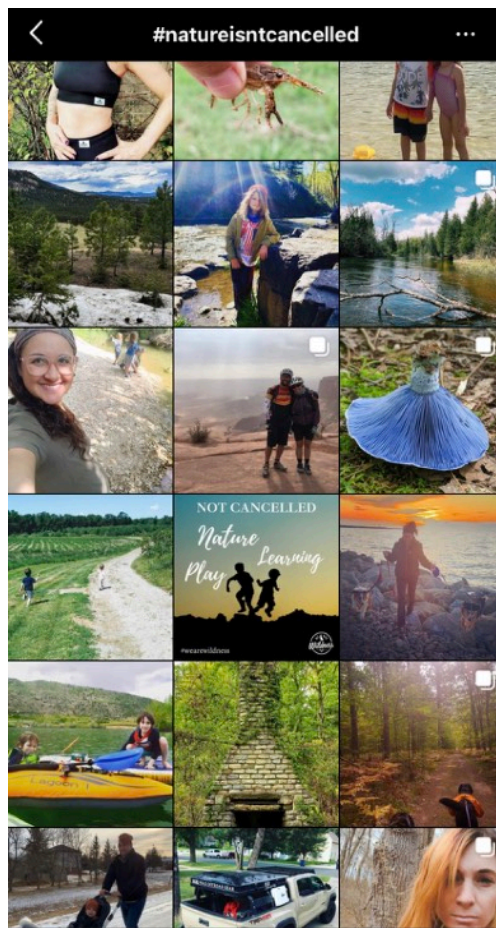


Fig. 8. Screenshot from Instagram’s #natureisntcancelled.

The fact is so commonplace as to hardly need mentioning, but the more one ponders it the more it is strikingly peculiar. Nature doesn't grow true frogs and false frogs, nor moral trees and immoral trees, nor right oceans and wrong oceans. There is no trace in nature of ethical mountains and unethical mountains. Nor are there even such things as beautiful species and ugly species—at least not to nature (Wilber, 15).

Wilber reminds us that what we call “nature” is steadfast in its *unthinkingness* and disinterest in taxonomical behaviors, ethical or otherwise. Of course nature is not cancelled; feeling the need to say so points to a deeply hubristic attitude and confusion about our place within the world. In the phrase alone is the evidence that we see “nature” as more an image of our making than a burgeoning reality that operates outside of our frameworks of thought. *Green is good; virus is bad.* Both are emergent properties of “nature”.

So then, what does it mean to be a nature-lover in the 21st century? What are the relationships being formed and fostered through nature-love? What and/or who exactly is

receiving love? We've heard of hugging trees, but what about earthquakes, tornados, or COVID-19s? What were those self proclaimed nature-lovers really trying to say as they confidently and somewhat judgmentally prescribed to us via social media as a healthy dose of "nature" as if it were an over the counter commodity accessible to all to be procured just down



Fig 9. Goat Puffer #2, 2021. Goat hide, ripstop nylon, and thread. 24x32 inches.

the road? My assumption is that they were referring to forested areas, mountainous terrain, bodies of water; what might be called *the great outdoors* or *Landscape* (the irony persists as state and federal wilderness and nature preserves were indeed "cancelled", as their gates closed to the public due to pandemic austerity and safety measures). My 2020 work *Goat Puffer #2* (**fig. 9**) is a material and semiotic conjuring of how this skewed disposition toward nature might manifest

formally as a product and/or utility for consumption. Retaining the outline of the animal it once held, *Goat Puffer #2* is one part goat skin and hair, and one part batting, ripstop nylon, and thread. Ideas of domestic and wild are explored through a “marketable” semiotic as the animals contorted hide becomes a vehicle for contorted views on what constitutes a “nature” experience.

Consider the rise of Romanticism, beginning at the end of the 18th century and ushering in the idea of the sublime: the sense of awe and magnificence found while in the natural; an unknown quality of being that captured the imaginations of 18th century creatives as they attempted to qualify their place within the world. The notion of the Sublime coincided with the rise of new technologies and better life expectancies in the 18th and 19th centuries. From the mid to late Renaissance onward, in the short span of about 250 years, our enhanced comforts, leisure, and ensuing western gaze, produced a monumental flip flop of perception. Wilderness, or nature, made a full wardrobe change from Satan’s home to Gods temple (Cronon ,71). One could marvel in and revere the natural world rather than cower in or behind it’s dark presence.

It is fascinating to contemplate this shift of perception in conjunction with our current state of affairs. Our climate crisis, environmental degradation, destruction of bio-diversity—the symptoms of tipping our ecological scales on earth—clearly coincides with this shift in relationship status. Why did we start killing the natural world the moment we could begin loving it?

Or perhaps we started killing as a result of being able to love ourselves; after all, the validity of the individual experience was another facet of Romanticism’s ontological roll-outs. Scrolling through Instagram images under #naturelovers one will encounter a barrage of self

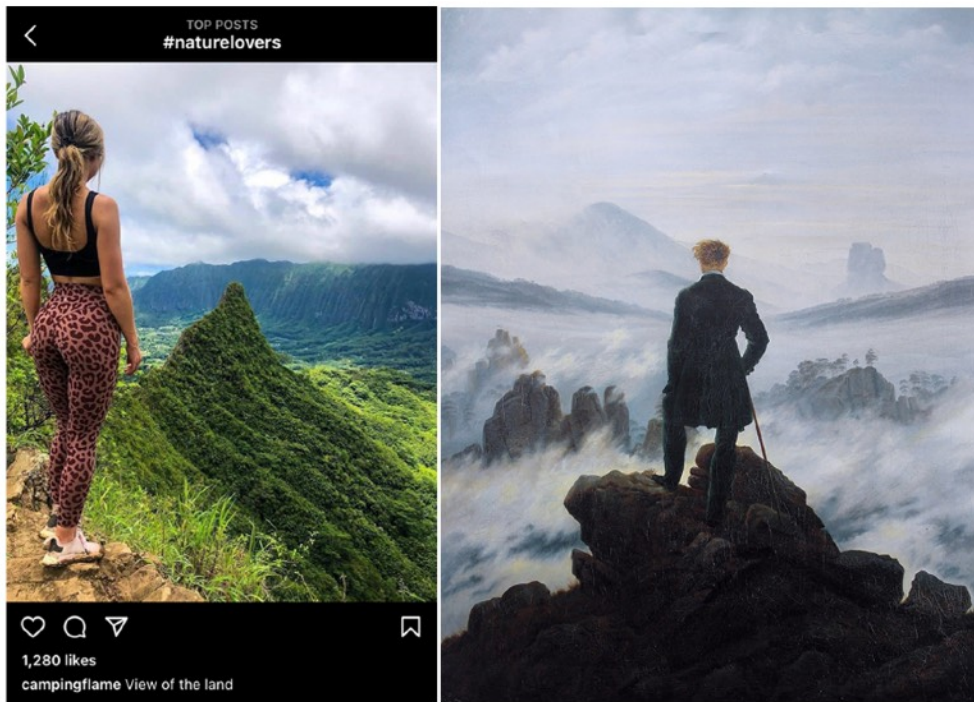


Fig. 10. Casper David Friedrich’s *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* and a 2020 Instagram post side by side.

promotion via exoticism, commercialism, and sex appeal that truly makes one ponder where the love and affection for “nature” is being placed. As you pan through the images, a consistent pattern emerges: exotic landscape—synthetic clothing—attractive men and women provocatively posed—colorful flora—majestic animals—more exotic landscapes. You can find a woman in a bikini, her arm outstretched toward the sky holding fried food as a gull hovers inches above to receive the woman’s offering. You’ll see simulacral oddities such as leopard print spandex hugging the legs of hikers that traverse rainforest terrain; semiotic incongruities, like a lone mixed drink perched atop a cairn built on a mountains summit; and my personal favorite, the seemingly endless, albeit probably subconscious, re-stagings of Casper David Friedrich’s *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (**fig. 10**). Nature-love, it seems, is the love for the sublime abstractions of nature, and also, love for oneself; its hard to find an eco-conscientious streak in any of this particular kind of affection—add it to the ever larger pile of paradoxical dissonances of our contemporary moment.

Perhaps the most striking feature of Instagram's #naturelovers and #natureisntcancelled is its overwhelming whiteness and able-bodied-ness. The fact that you can scroll through images under these two hashtags—and for the most part predominately find only able-bodied white men and women—is consistent with Cronon's claims about how fading American frontier myths, as a result of growing urban and industrial centers, inevitably lead to the *construction* of “wilderness” as we know it today. The notion of “wilderness” Cronon writes, began as “the last bastion of rugged individualism”, and the frontier nostalgia that urban men felt “became an important vehicle for expressing a peculiar bourgeois form of anti-modernism. The very men who benefited from urban-industrial-capitalism were among those who believed they must escape its debilitating effects”. Cronon continues:

If the [stolen] frontier was passing, then the men who had the means to do so should preserve for themselves the some remnant of its wild landscape so that they might enjoy the regeneration and renewal that came from sleeping under the stars, participating in blood sports, and living off the [stolen] land. the frontier might be gone, but the frontier experience could still be had (Cronon, 75-76).

This is the sad but true beginning of environmentalism in America. Our contemporary understanding of wilderness conservation has its roots in the creation of recreational space for privileged white men in fear of losing their masculinity to the “feminizing tendencies of civilization” (Cronon, 75). This series of events gives rise to two important ironies: the first of which breaks hearts and confuses the senses, and the latter which becomes important for understanding the untenable western ideas about “wilderness”, and our positionality towards “nature”.

The first irony of course is the dissonant logic of white settlers in America. As these settlers effectively demonized and marginalized the indigenous peoples of North America in the

name of “civility”—taking from them their land and way of life (the two being synonymous in the indigenous worldview)—yet another perceptual flip flop occurred— and again it was engineered by western culture. The land they stole was used to satiate an urge for closeness to the natural world—an urge they had not remembered existed until they had finished dominating the American landscape and its original inhabitants. This was the ontological oversight that has been disturbingly consequential for the environment and its original, rightful, peoples.

From this dissonant behavior came the American *wilderness*: “the landscape of choice for elite tourists, who brought with them strikingly urban ideas of the countryside through which they traveled”—created though a process that, paradoxically, ensured a wilderness that reflected “the very civilization its devotees sought to escape” (Cronon, 76). Wilderness, and more broadly speaking, nature, became recreational and commercial; a space of reprieve from the “civility” that killed and uprooted so many indigenous peoples and ecosystems; a complimentary fiction for the crusade of imposed order that necessitated its construction. “In virtually all of its manifestations”, Cronon writes, “wilderness represents a flight from history...and offers us the illusion that we can escape the cares and troubles of the world in which our past has ensnared us” (Cronon, 76). Green can never be green and the American wilderness can never be wild.

When it is recommend that we reconnect to “wilderness” or “nature” as an antidote for our troubling times, what exactly is being asked of us? What does it mean to reconnect to something we were never actually without? Rather than a return to some semblance of ecological understanding or stewardship, I more often witness a return to Cronon’s idea of “nature”, the slippery concept that is attached to, and produced by civilization, as evidenced by Cronon’s theories above. Certainly we cannot all be trained biologists, but as we contemplate our

positionality to the world, how does one know how or where to place their affection, and therefore their responsibilities, for the natural environment?

So then, *therein lies the rub*: we fall in love with problematic symbolic representations of nature that were produced by our ruthless and questionable history, inadvertently undermining the needs of our living ecosystems in the process; a fuzzy haze of appreciation and lust obscures the actualities of our destruction. As you contemplate the origins of wilderness and its preservation, it becomes painfully clear that nature-love is without love all together; it is in actuality, a quite hateful affair of upholding a myth that was concocted to appease our nations elite antecedents and their perceived masculine short comings in the wake of their own hubris. 'Nature isn't cancelled' they shouted, unaware that what they promote is nothing more than a specter of our troubled history, born from behavior that could be described as anything but loving.

Part Three: The Infamy of Landscape

The appreciation of landscape as an aesthetic object cannot be an occasion of complacency or untroubled contemplation; rather, it must be the focus of a historical, political, and (yes) aesthetic alertness to the violence and evil written on the land, projected there by the gazing eye.

—W.J.T Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*

My interest in Landscape painting stems not from its mastery of illusion on the canvas, but rather, its mastery of delusion in our hearts and minds. The production of landscape images aided in our trajectory away from feeling as though we are part of the world within which we dwell, and was a crucial device in upholding those flights from histories, as described by Cronon. They helped us distance ourselves from our troubled pasts and current responsibilities that come with being *with* rather than *in*.

Also concerned with questions of loving nature and what this looks like given our contemporary understanding of landscape, Paul Shepard offers these sentiments:

Ostensibly sympathetic to nature...linear perspective, that reflex within which our modern delineation arises, was not a loving means of verification, but of distancing, detaching, and disintegrating...If the landscape meant the wonder and mystery of the natural world, those feelings of an intuitive sense of shared existence and a common ground of being, it was used to subvert and capture that impulse by transforming it into scenery. Thus it served corporate greed and the industrialization of the world (Shepard, xxv).

Images, as we well know in our age of screen saturation and platforms for curating entire worlds of *appearances*—such as Instagram—wield an incredible power, especially when paired with the dominant ideologies of a cultural moment. Before screen culture, and the advent of photography prior to that, painting was the primary medium that operated as such. In the same way Instagram

and other social media platforms afford visual devices that obscure the perceptual reality of one's lived experience, and paired with mentalities of a then burgeoning modernism that suggested the possibility of complete human control over nature, the landscape “becomes a ‘landscape’—an aesthetic object, sprayed with fixative. Beneath the glossy surface, reality decays” (Eisenberg, 163). Decay, or entropic states, are normal; it is the speed at which we cause decay that is concerning. Landscapes imagery helps us see the natural world as a beautiful fiction, and fictions are not subject to entropy, at least not in a physical sense.

“To prepare a still-life [or landscape image]” Bruno Latour writes, the artist first has to kill it, as it were, or at least interrupt its movement...[from] which the manipulator seizes only a moment, through what is appropriately called a “freeze frame’ ” (Latour, 18). The seized moments of 18th, 19th, and 20th century landscape painting are the quick glimpses that inform the aforementioned tourists’ need to legitimize a scenic view by uttering, “*its so beautiful, its like a painting*”. Its amazing to think about the power of landscape representation—it is so immense that we flatten breath taking experiences into two-dimensional paintings in our mind, as we witness them in real time (even when were not flattening them with digital imaging for our social media accounts).

Landscape representation has helped bolster untenable ideals about nature, wilderness, and our positionality to them, and for this reason we must rethink what constitutes *landscape*, and examine how these specific types of images work on us perceptually. Latour makes this point as he warns against the odd ways in which we address our climate issues by engaging in nature-love and western ideals of “nature”: “Above all, don't try and turn toward ‘nature’. You

might just as well try to cross through the picture plane of the painting to eat the oysters that gleam in the still life” (Latour, 19). The questions of how to be *with* the natural world and where to place ones affection for nature can pile up quickly. With so many entrenched ideals about wilderness, nature, and our place within it, an objective course of action is seems difficult, if not impossible to develop.

In her 1998 book *The Language of Landscape*, architect Anne Whiston Spirn makes firm connections between language and the landscape (here the landscape being the literal space in which we inhabit). Spirn has theorized and designed projects such as water run off systems for urban areas that closely model the way in which rain traverses and is stored below ground in natural ecosystems—however, it is her way of thinking about landscape that lead to these kinds of projects In which I am most interested. Much like W.J.T. Michell’s idea that “landscape is already artifice in the moment of its beholding, long before it becomes the subject of pictorial representation... a representation of something that is already a representation in its own right”, Spirn calls the landscape “the first human texts”:

The language of landscape is our native language. Landscape was the original dwelling; humans evolved among plants and animals, under the sky, upon the earth, near water. Everyone carries that legacy in body and mind. Humans touched, saw, heard, smelled, tasted, lived in, and shaped landscapes before the species had words to describe what it did. Landscapes were the first human texts, read before the invention of other signs and symbols. Clouds, wind, and sun were clues to weather, ripples and eddies signs of rocks and life under water, caves and ledges promise of shelter, leaves guides to food; birdcalls warnings of predators (Spirn, 15).

Spirn offers us perspective into a way of being that has been diminished by our signs and symbols, of what she might consider as secondary languages, those that came after the language of landscape (imagine how green the world really was before we had a word for it!). I appreciate

the credence Spirn affords *the thing itself*; and the essence of our sensory experience of place as a means to understanding our place within it. “Landscape is the material home” she writes, but “the language of landscape is a habitat of mind” (Spirn, 16). This implies that there is a kind of truth in the functions and processes of the place in which we dwell, and our conceptions and understandings—our languages of these places—can be scrutinized and rewritten to come closer into sync with our “native language”, or the language of landscape.

We are clearly beyond the point of full return to the more primitive state that Spirn describes to have engendered our “original text”, and it seems appropriate that an architect would be putting forth these ideas. An *architect* makes sense because our goal is not so much to *be* less human and more like nature, but to realize that human culture, especially in the west, has the ability to design ontologies that acknowledge that from which we came, without completely denying who we are and what we've become. Latour furthers this point by offering these sentiments:

The difficulty lies in the very expression “relation to the world”, which presupposes two sorts of domains, that of nature and that of culture, domains that are at once distinct and impossible to separate completely. Don't try to define nature alone, for you'll have to define “culture” as well (the human is what escapes nature; a little, a lot, passionately); don't try to define “culture” alone, either, for you'll immediately have to define the term nature (the human is what cannot “totally escape” the constraints of nature (Latour, 15).

So then, Culture and Nature are but two concepts floating amidst a larger reality; a reality we might think of as our *Former*: that which affords life and is utterly disinterested in the dichotomies we produce. How to align ourselves with this well oiled reality is the arduous and complex work that lies ahead of us.

SECTION TWO

PASTORAL-MINIMAL LANDSCAPES

Part One: Pastoral-Minimal

We currently seem to exist in a liminal state between what Evan Eisenberg calls planet *fetishers* and planet *managers*. The first term is a call for a full return to a pre-modern state of being that *fetishizes* our natural and organic systems. The latter, the belief that modernity and its ever expanding technologies can be used to moderate, or *manage*, our current self-inflicted ecological and global predicaments; as we dwell in an untenable and anxious state of “middlehood” were left unable to take any decisive actions—our skies warm and oceans acidify (Eisenberg,...)

In this section I will discuss the work of a few artists; work that I see as being reflexive to what I have called our contemporary state of middlehood. *Pastoral-Minimal* is a term to signify the junction of two genres. When analyzed through this imbricated lens, issues of language, perception, and images that surround our positionality to the natural world can be critically approached. Respectively, these two genres, Pastoralism and Minimalism, have pivoted in meaning and usage over time and therefore have manifold cultural dispositions. So then, I will first describe the ways in which I am deploying these terms.

Part Two: Apple Picking

Pastoralism can be seen as *the* symbolic spatial referent of middlehood, and it is this defining spatial quality that is of most use to my argument. Beautifully stagnant in character, the pastoral setting has long been the landscape that is not quite wilderness and not quite civilized. In the canons of literature and film it is the setting of “convivial yawns” and “gorgeous paralysis’ ”, in which time stands still under an unblinking sun (Eisenberg, xvi). In landscape painting, it is the provocation of W.J.T. Mitchell’s call for landscapes that move away from “complacency” and “untroubled minds”. In short, the pastoral setting is where privileged minds have historically taken refuge—as the untenable prescriptive dichotomy of wild vs. civil they created gives rise to an inexplicable dissonance they cannot begin to explain to *others*. Contemporary versions of pastoral can be witnessed as summer-homes (affectionately referred to as “camps” by a particular breed of “summer people”), or, suburban developments and their *sprawl with a view*; city facing vistas in one direction—easy access to middle-class family favorites of little bits of “nature” in the other. This again signals an uncanny contemporary re-telling of William Cronon’s theories of preserved “natural” areas and whom they serve; this can be demonstrated with a personal anecdote. But first a little background.

I was born and raised on an apple farm in the small township of Sterling, Massachusetts. Sterling, home to Mary Sawyer—that little girl from the nursery rhyme in which her lamb follows her to school in an idyllic landscape—and adjacent to Leominster, Massachusetts, home to Johnny Appleseed and what would later ironically become the plastic capital of the world—is

wrought with pastoral narratives and lore. When the farm was originally purchased in 1912, the year of deflated hubris in the wake of the Titanic's demise, it was indeed used as a place for "summering"; my Great Great Grandfather and his family lived down the road 10 miles or so in the city of Worcester. Over the years the property was built up to support four season living; the apple trees and their yield grew in numbers. Family pets were named after different apple species and the time passed by. There was Macin the German Schnauzer, Tosh and Sir Prize the Black Labradors, Wolf and River the yellow tabby cats, and the list goes on.

By the time I was a young boy, about the age of nine or ten years old, my grandfather ran the farm full-time. He pruned limbs, cleared brush, mended apple boxes, and picked the fruit when they were ripe. Sometimes at night I would awake to hear the soft droning of my grandfather's tractor and the spray rig it pulled, distributing pesticides over that years crop. This would eventually become an oddly comforting white noise of my youth. Though I never witnessed it, I've heard stories of my grandfather strategically placing apples at the edges of the orchard, his logic that the deer would eat the apples either way, and better that they eat the apples that have dropped from the trees than the apples worth harvesting and selling.

Anyone from the outside looking in would consider this a pastoral setting. Having distance from it myself, it can now sometimes feel that way. This is where my personal anecdote starts: I'm not sure my grandfather, the other apple farmers, or the migrant workers at larger orchards that were often paid unlivable wages, would have seen their environment as pastoral in the easy-going, pristine, always noontime and somehow never unshaded from the sun kind of way. I witnessed in my grandfather the work ethic that was required to operate such an

enterprise, and I am not proud to say that I dreaded helping out as a young boy. Helping usually took the form of picking apples in the fall. This was tedious work and I would quickly grow tired of the labor the harvest required and make a stink; again, I'm not proud.

It is at this moment that a deep confusion took hold and remained a perceptual thorn in my side. I learned that just as there are summer people, there are fall people too. Learning that there were swaths of people who were willing to pay money for an afternoon of hard labor, picking a bag or bushel of apples to bring home with them, confused my senses. I now somewhat understand the desire to experience a lifestyle apart from your own, but I've never quite shaken the strangeness I felt toward this recreational fall activity. Like so many aspects of contemporary life, it is difficult to sit with the dissonances this situation produces. There are two main difficulties I perceive.

Firstly, recreational fall apple picking devalues labor—the labor that is already undervalued and being done behind the scenes. It is hard to imagine witnessing this privileged behavior, the commodification of laborious activity for consumption, as a migrant working long hours and making unlivable wages. This alone is a hard cultural occurrence to contemplate.

Secondly, I think recreational apple picking rubs me the wrong way because it functions as a microcosm of the ideas discussed in this paper. It paints a skewed version of nature and our relationship to it; always fecund, non hazardous, peaceful, forgiving; always for the taking; an experience to be purchased; available on demand for our entertainment and leisure. The scale may be different, but it occurs to me, that playing apple farmer for an afternoon effects our environment, the way playing surgeon for an afternoon would effect a patient; consequential to

say the least. Reality gets bent in the same way it did by those late American settlers described by Cronon, only on a smaller, more discrete scale.

It seems some of New England's favorite *pastimes* are also as Cronon would put, a "flight from [our troubled] history" of exceptionalist attitudes, as well as a flight from our prickly contemporary moment. I imagine the fall apple picking enthusiast to be seeking a reprieve from a life laden with synthetic materials, situations, interactions, etc. However, as per Cronon, the simulated farm experience becomes just as contrived, if not more so, than the escapee's "synthetic" world.

The pastoral setting, used as an antidote to the perceived spoils of a global industrial capitalist existence, only reinforces it. Though it can and has been defined in numerous contexts, the pastoral in my present experience is the domestication of "wilderness" to the extent that it comfortably satiates the urbanites desire for "nature"; a quick fix; a golden yet hollow spatiotemporal cure-all for the minds that suffer from the symptoms of feeling simultaneously part of, and apart from, the natural world; symptoms that become increasingly particular to our contemporary moment.

Part Three: Toward a Minimalist View of Nature

When you google search ‘Minimalism’, the first links you encounter are as such; 8 *Essential Principles of a Simple Lifestyle*; *Minimalist Living: How Can It Benefit Your Life Significantly*; *What Is Minimalism? A Practical Guide to a Minimalist Lifestyle*. Though it is curious to consider that pastoralism’s thinly spread midcentury disguise as a sprawling suburbia can almost be seen to coincide with the thinning, dilution, and cooption of 1960’s minimalist avant-garde strategies—as to permeate an audience more attracted to movements more closely aligned with Kitsch or Pop—the sellable “lifestyle” and “self-help” versions of Minimalism are not useful for describing the lens of what I’m calling a Pastoral-Minimal aesthetic.

Emerging in the early 1960’s from a New York art scene largely dominated by the “elsewhere-ness” and personal narrative arcs of Abstract Expressionist painting, and the modernist sculpture that seemed to exist in the “siteless realm” of the institution, art practitioners reacted and minimalism was born (Foster, 38):

With minimalism sculpture no longer stands apart, on a pedestal or as pure art, but is repositioned among objects and redefined in terms of place. In this transformation the viewer, refused the safe, sovereign space of formal art, is cast back on the here and now; and rather than scan the surface of a work for a topographical mapping of the properties of its medium, he or she is prompted to explore the perceptual consequences of a particular intervention of a given site. This is the fundamental reorientation that minimalism inaugurates (Foster, 38).

If we transcribed this succinct passage from Hal Foster’s chapter *The Crux of Minimalism* from his book *The Return of the Real* to address the ideas and problems of wilderness, nature, and



Fig. 11. Robert Morris Untitled (mirrored cubes)

landscape presented earlier, we can see that minimalist strategies afford perceptual inroads to critically approaching the issues of human positionality to the natural world.

What if Foster's lines were to read, "with minimalism *it is revealed that nature doesn't stand apart, on a pedestal or as pure representation*"; in this transformation the viewer, refused the safe, sovereign spaces of *idyllic wilderness and sublime pastoral settings*, is cast back on the here and now"; and, "rather than scan the surface of *the natural environment in which they dwell* for a topographical mapping of the properties of its medium, he or she is prompted to explore the perceptual consequences of *their* particular intervention of a given *landscape*"?

It is hard for me *not* to notice the perceptual capacities that minimalism would afford the individual that is wittingly or unwittingly analyzing their place amidst the natural world and its manifold representations and simulations. Like Anne Whiston Spirn's study of ground water

while designing more efficient water run off systems, minimalist strategies have the potential to highlight the grand designs of the natural world, and expose the grand narratives of modernist ideals; the broadest being the illusion of human ability to control nature. Narratives like “Green” as semiotic savior, “wilderness” as described by Cronon, and the pastoral as perfect and passive landscape, a fiction between fictions (wild—pastoral—civil), can be dismantled and approached critically when situated in tandem with the tenets of minimalism (even if only aesthetically). Myself, as well as others, are currently working with this particular semiotic tool box, and producing works that challenge our predominant understandings of landscape art and the natural world itself.

Part Three: Pastoral-Minimal Artworks

Letha Wilson, Patrick Jacobs, and Hugh Hayden are contemporary art practitioners that traffic in the Pastoral-Minimal aesthetic that I've set out to define. I say *practitioners* because their material and process choices remain largely fluid, and/or defy traditional approaches to traditional methods, and are hard to pin down categorically. I will also include examples of my own work in this discussion.

You will find photographic processes through most of Letha Wilson's work, though its not in ways you'd expect. In a practice perhaps defined somewhere between sculpture and photography, Wilson simultaneously questions photographic traditions, the role of the gallery

space, and our western cultures preconceptions of natural spaces. She endlessly experiments with photographic transfer processes that conflate images of wilderness and pastoral settings with the built environment; modern building materials such as concrete, steel, and dimensional lumber which acts as conduits, mediums, and supports for the picturesque photographs she takes on site in various national and state wilderness preserves. Wilson's work gives credence to our awkward cultural positionality towards the natural world and calls to the forefront the reality of coexistence and codependence between these two concepts we tend to uphold—that of nature and culture. In her 2014 installation *California Sunset Lean*, Wilson crudely props up a picturesque image of a sunset printed on vinyl with a 2x4 that spans the entire width of the space (fig. 12).



Fig. 12. Letha Wilson's *California Sunset Lean*, digital print on vinyl, wood, drywall. Installation view of Ad Infinitum, American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center, Washington, DC. November 8 - December 14, 2014.

When I interviewed Wilson about her work, she made a point to mention her pursuit of intentionality; she fought hard to circumvent concerns of fire codes in order to span the entire

space with the image's supporting 2x4, as she deemed this integral to the work's message. While not overtly mentioning an interest in minimalist strategies, it is clear that Wilson is using space strategically. *California Sunset Lean* impedes the path, and more importantly, the prevailing perceptions of nature, wilderness, and landscape, as the work is encountered. For me, Wilson's spatial concerns bring Eva Hesse's 1966 wall sculpture *Hang Up* (fig.13) to mind, only the frame is not empty and the "hangup", or perceptual obstacle presented, is directly tied to the ways in which we sometimes reduce nature to idyllic imagery. This strategy of blending the spatial

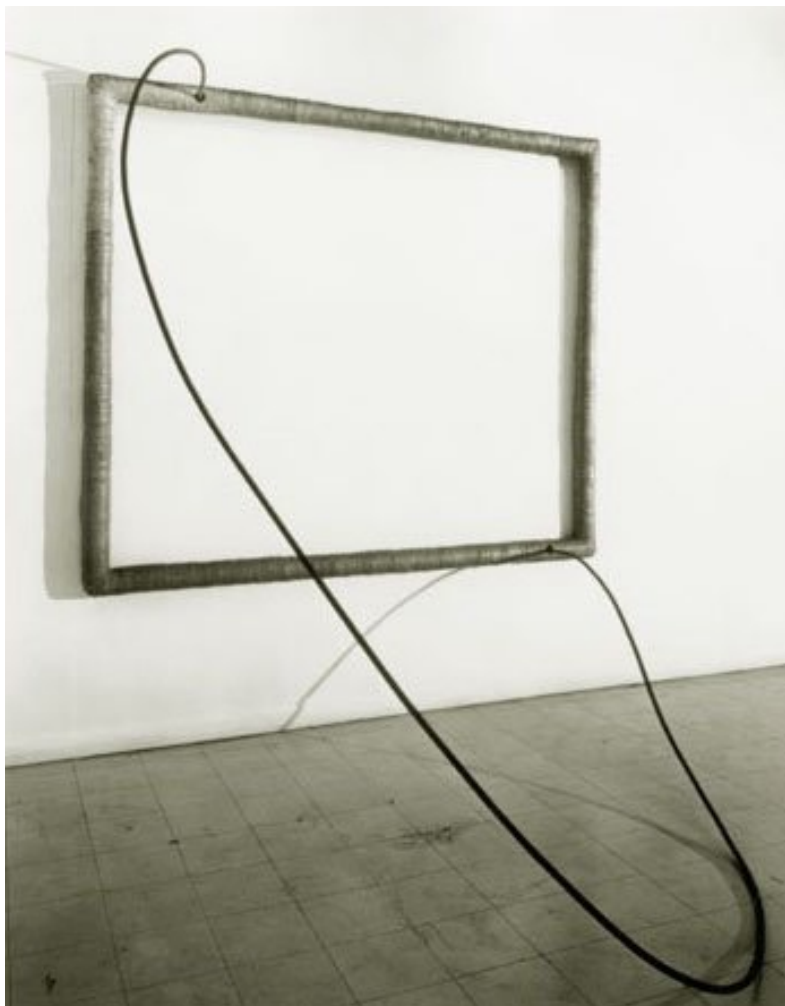


Fig. 13. Eva Hesse's *Hang Up*, 1966. Acrylic on cloth over wood; acrylic on cord over steel tube. 182.9 x 213.4 x 198.1 cm (72 x 84 x 78 in.)

qualities of sculpture with the illusion of landscape scenery can also be read in Wilson's *Slotted Sunset* (**fig. 14**), in which she scores the wall of the gallery to receive one of her c-prints, using picturesque scenery to effectively produce an architectural mainstay: the column; a column where a column is not needed, attached at neither plinth nor pediment; a floating and imposed integrity where none was needed.

In these ways, Wilson's practice engages and activates both the potentialities of minimalism and pitfalls of the pastoral, effectively critiquing the ways in which we prop up and envisage untenable ideals concerning the natural world.



Fig. 14. Letha Wilson's *Slotted Sunset*, 2015, Archival inkjet print, aluminum, 72 x 8.3 x 4.1 inches.

The work of Patrick Jacobs is more comfortably situated in the realm of sculpture but nonetheless references the flattened landscape image, and similarly to Wilson, pays special attention to the gallery space in order to examine the *here and now* vs. the *elsewhere and some other time*. Jacobs' produces dioramas, *Field with Dandelions* (**fig. 15**) being my personal favorite, that speak to our cultures' tendency to perceptually cast "nature" as a discrete entity that



Fig. 15. Patrick Jacobs' *Field with Dandelions*, 2015
Diorama viewed through 7.5 in. (19 cm) window.
30 (H) x 44 (W) x 29 (D) in. (76.2 x 112 x 74 cm).

Styrene, acrylic, cast neoprene, paper, hair, polyurethane foam, ash, talc, starch, acrylite, vinyl film, copper, wood, steel, lighting, BK7 glass.

exists “over there”; a place to look in on from time to time, rather than an all encompassing force. When viewing Jacobs dioramas you cannot help feeling like a tourist or voyeur, as you witness something precious but perhaps also sinister. Jacobs buries the dioramas in the gallery wall. It is an uncanny experience to encounter his glowing circles from afar only to find entire worlds, seemingly fecund yet locked away behind the edifice of the architecture in which you stand (**fig. 16**) There is an “allegory of death” present as the simulated ecology resides on another plane separate from ours, effectively speaking to the ways in which distance we ourselves from our given environment—an environment that supports life—our life (baudrillard, 1018).



Fig. 16. Patrick Jacobs Diorama Installation View: Foreign Terrain, 2011. Pierogi Gallery

This entire experience unfolds and suddenly you come to the full realization of where you stand—literally and perpetually. You are in a box, most likely within another box, perhaps within a third, peering into a box of perceptual tricks. You feel a mixture of wonderment and remorse as you shift your body to gaze into the *embedded* landscape. It is in this moment of strain, whether needing to crouch or stand on your toes, to *approach* the *embedded* quality of the *idyllic scenery* that situates Jacobs’ work as Pastoral-Minimal. If the minimalist insistence on the here and now asks us to simply become more aware of our disposition towards space and time, Jacobs insists we take the minimalist

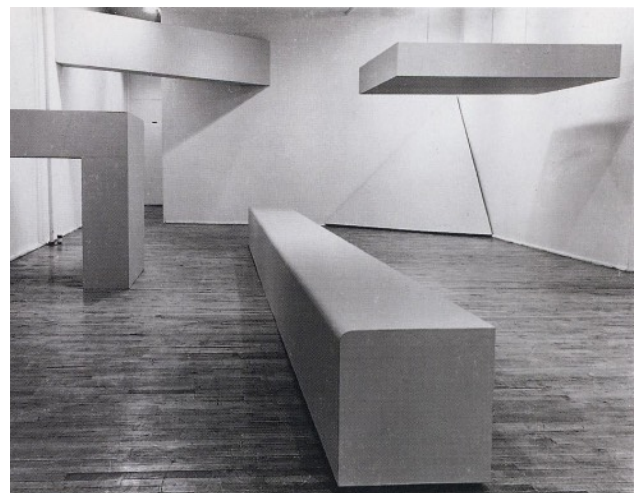


Fig. 17. Robert Morris’s “the ply-wood show” 1964.

project further, into the realms of ecology and environmentalism (Foster,...) Much like Robert Morris's minimalist sculptures that conflated architecture with art and confused the senses in the early 1960's (**fig. 17**), Jacobs utilizes space in a similar way only he highlights the gallery's architecture by leaving it as what appears to be at first glance, empty. Without objects, attention is called to you, the subject. In this way, time and space poke and prod you just as much as his caged landscapes—leaving you asking yourself just how caged you yourself might be—perceptually and by extension, literally. Whereas Morris pulled threads between art and architecture, Jacobs pulls them between human culture and its positionality towards the natural environment.

Seeing it as ubiquitous and a material that is largely comprehended by most, Hayden sources, manipulates, and sculpts with felled limbs and trees. Milling and dressing discarded tree parts, he produces dimensional lumber, much like you'd find at the lumber yard, to make his sculpture. What is unique to his practice, is the painstaking process of producing dimensional



Fig. 18. Hugh Hayden's *Communion*, 2020. Chestnut with steel hardware. 405 x 1050 x 620 cm. 159 3/8 x 413 3/8 x 244 in

lumber while retaining and preserving the limbs and branches, sometimes later sculpting them to knobs, thorns, or phallus's, and other times leaving them whole. Hayden makes sculpture as well as furniture. The furniture questions its own utility and becomes more akin to his sculpture. These works that have both form and function challenged by their materiality operate under a Pastoral-Minimal aesthetic. Hayden harnesses the semiotic power of the tree and its defining properties to challenge societal norms, and in many cases he addresses our conceptions of nature and wilderness.

I read Hayden's work as confronting the pastoral—in the contemporary suburban sprawl sense—because it resonates with my own decision making when it comes to which forms to produce. Picnic tables and picket fences feature heavily in his semiotic lexicon, these objects being clear demarcations of the middlehood defined by the environment in which I was raised. In his 2020 piece *Communion* (**fig. 18**), Hayden presents an ‘unworkable object’, unless however, you are willing to work within the confines of the patterns that natural forms and material afford. *Communion's* title suggests a coming together, or reconciliation of the forces that all too often cause an interpretation of humans as separate from the natural realm; a meeting of straight lines and rectangles with their wiggly counterparts from which they were derived.

The Jones Part 3 (**fig. 19**), is Hayden's 2018 sculpture of a picket fence with original limbs still intact, some of which remain treelike while others are sculpted to resemble phallic protrusions. The work, made from eastern red cedar (Hayden is careful to include its scientific name: *Juniperus virginiana*) measuring 78 1/2 x 180 x 26 3/4 inches, seems to encapsulate Cronon's argument about wilderness, civilization, and elite masculinity in one succinct art object.



Fig. 19. Hugh Hayden's. *The Jones Part 3* , 2018. Sculpted eastern red cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*) with steel 199.4 x 457.2 x 67.9 cm 78 1/2 x 180 x 26 3/4 in

Unlike the generative sense of coming together that *Communion* instills in the viewer, *The Jones Part 3* seems to critique America's history of white elites and the desire to eat their cake and have it too—the civility of the picket fence, the ruggedness of the wilderness experience (faux or otherwise), all in service of retaining their frontier 'cred'. and the perceived state of masculinity that it affords.



Fig. 20. Hugh Hayden's *America*, 2018. Sculpted mesquite (*Prosopis glandulosa*) on plywood. overall dimensions: 43 1/4 x 81 x 81 in.

Hayden’s practice and the work he generates is admittedly more pastoral leaning than not, but his interest in “borders”, whether geo-political, our nature-culture divides, or the white picket fence, firmly implicates the body—its relation to space and time—and therefore appropriately fits the Pastoral-Minimal. There is an intimacy to his work that feels at once both personal and collective. While I have not had the privilege of viewing Hayden’s work in person, I wonder what phenomenological reflexes his work would produce upon the approaching interlocutor that encounters the available yet almost unusable refuge that is *Communion*; or, one of his more poignant works like the 2018 sculptural dining set titled *America* (**fig. 20**), which at this point I think can speak for itself.



Fig. 21. Richard Tuttle’s *White Paper Octagonal*. 1971. cotton cloth. overall: 104.8 x 88.9 cm (41 1/4 x 35 in.)

In my pursuit of understanding certain art objects and practices through a Pastoral-Minimal lens, I too have begun to deploy this particular aesthetic in my formal and material considerations. My 2021 piece *1st Hide Octagonal (after Tuttle)*, is inspired by Richard Tuttle’s formal contemplations of purity. Hoping to dismantle connotations of purity derived

through the color white and other idealistic symbolism, Tuttle produced a series of cut paper and cloth “octagonals” in the mid 1960’s (**Fig. 21**). Off white and with irregular sides, Tuttle’s Octagons became visual cues that described the kind of purity he was chasing:

“purity” seems, in large measure, to be a function of the viewer rather than of the work...In the end, even the purity of the white paper is questionable. I have a hatred for this white thing. I cant stand the kind of purity that white implies in our environment. But the kind of purity that comes out of the complete electrical functioning of the whole human being—that’s the kind of purity I aspire to (Pincus-Witten, 62)

I explore Tuttle’s desired connotations of purity—and how perhaps it should be defined by its inherent unknowability through its complexities and irregularities—with *1st Hide Octagonal* (Fig.22). The work piggybacks on Tuttle’s mode of working and makes the philosophic target a bit smaller as I question the efficacy of our pastoral modes of seeing the natural environment.



Fig. 22. *1st Hide Octagonal*, 2021. Cut cow hide, tacks. 62x62 inches.

Another Pastoral-Minimal artwork I’ve produced is *Moss Terrariums (after Haacke)* (Fig. 24-25). As a child I would lust after the plastic objects presented to me in the toy vendors outside the grocery market and other venues, as my mother and I would complete weekend errands. To this day I am still unsure of why I had to have what was in those machines, but I can still recall the

intense wanting that would overcome my being; a quality of that lust was formless yet strong.

Combining this feeling, with the behaviors of nature love and Hans Haacke’s attempt to “take the



Fig. 23. Hans Haacke's *Condensation Cube*. 1963-65. Clear acrylic, distilled water, and climate in area of display. 12x12x12 inches

temperature” of the institution with his *condensation cubes* (**Fig. 23**), *Moss terrariums (after haacke)* takes the temperature as well. With this iteration I aim to take a reading of the aforementioned untenable ethos of nature love. The work explores the cultivation of ideas about nature and how we buy into them over time, as the moss and other plant life is isolated and contained for the viewers entertainment and potential purchase.



Fig. 24. *Moss Terrariums (After Haacke)*, 2021. Toy vendors, moss, soil, water, lights. 12x12x 56 inches



Fig. 25. *Moss Terrariums (After Haacke)* detail, 2021. Toy vendors, moss, soil, water, lights.

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

Does it Bleed?

In his lecture on the 2009 *Ghetto Biennale*, the curatorial scholar Myron Beasley once asked the class in an undergraduate art history course I attended, “what happens when first world art rubs up against third world art? Do they bleed?” (Beasley, 3). While my practice is not as much concerned with the interchange between human cultures, as it is with the interchange and friction between—*cultural ideals of nature* (or what is delineated or made sense of via cultural frameworks), and *Nature itself* (all of nature’s narrative-less processes and systems that happen whether or not culture is compelled to make sense of them)—the question “does it bleed” has stuck with me throughout the years. “Does it bleed” implies the question—is there evidence of potential life? It inquires about the vitality of a potential *third* object as the result of friction, or conflict, between two variables. The ambiguity of “does *it* bleed?”, suggests both variables are vulnerable and susceptible to forceful shifts in their constitutions. The phrase also grounds us in the body, and therefore the senses as a primary epistemic mode. “Does it bleed” humanizes dissonance, marking it as inherent to human perception while asking, what is at stake? It breathes promise into the idea that through art we might effectively produce visual and formal neologisms that have the potential to describe alternative realities; neologisms that are borne out of an

intentionality of consciousness and examination of specific dissonances—cultural, natural, or in my case, the dissonant matrix that is produced between the two.

The vital resonance of “does it bleed” is life affirming, and therefore death affirming; the two are never present without the other, in the same way the concepts of nature and culture are co-dependent.

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