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Death Vegas Valley

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“DEATH VEGAS VALLEY” or “Wild Life vs. Wildlife”

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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ABSTRACT

Death Vegas Valley: Wildlife vs. Wild Life

Eric Diehl, Masters of Fine Arts Painting + Printmaking

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Director: Arnold J Kemp

Chair and Associate Professor

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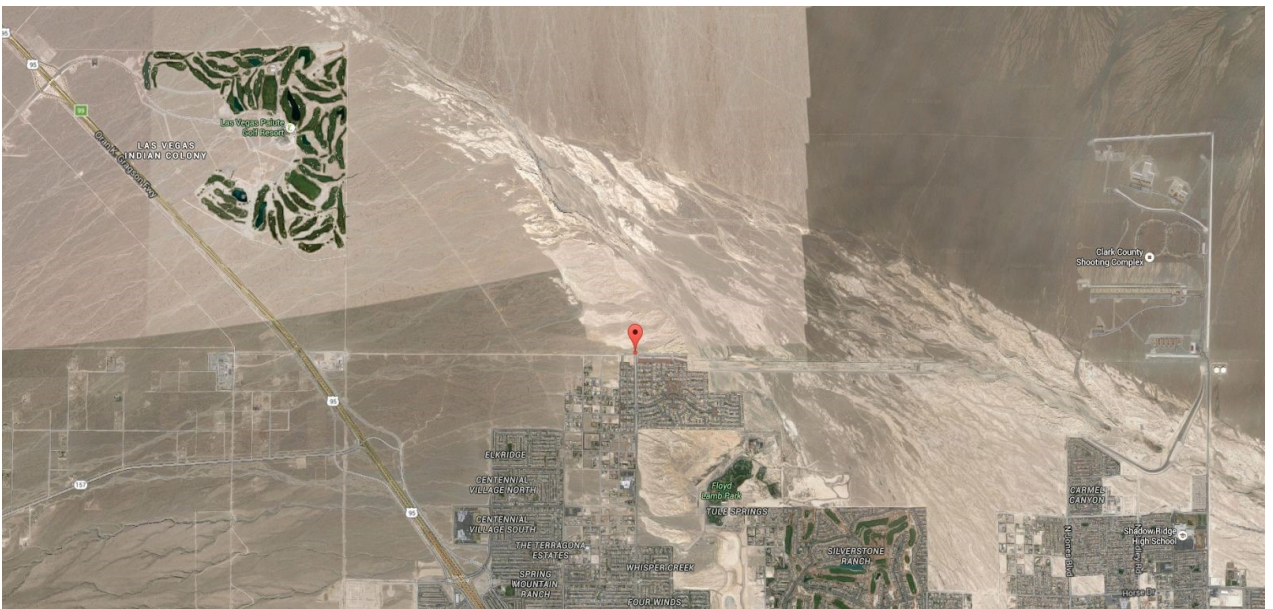
My work explores hallucinatory landscapes of the US American West, by using a combination of painting styles outside of the Western painting canon. I cross-reference painting and cinema, interweaving video, acrylic paint and the panorama to create a satirical homage to the history and present state of the USA. However, through an earnest devotion to the medium - both painting and cinema - I find my criticisms also yearn to hold onto a belief in a myth I know to be false.

This is an American History conversation about artifice and consumerism through advertising. I use Las Vegas and the Mojave Desert as my metaphor. Las

Vegas' rapidly expanding population has displaced actual plants and animals to replace them with artificial sculptures of the desert cactus and coyote. This desert landscape occupies what was previously Mexico and before that Indigenous lands. TV and hallucinogens play a part in my work - as a means to tap into the psychological staticky holiness of the desert, and I use certain painting techniques to mimic the optical effects of these phenomena. These techniques reference my experience with theater backdrop painting and psychedelic movie posters as well as kitsch hobbyist landscape painting. My focus is the specific territory outside of the National Parks service, the government lands leased to mining companies and housing developers. These are the mystical desert tracts of spacious landscape, just as ecologically important to the whole, yet considered "not quite pretty enough" to warrant a National Park sign or roaming ranger. The US government treaties have allowed Indigenous reservations on some of the most inhospitable terrain, in particular places without mineral deposits or a resource worth mining.

INTRODUCTION

I recall my visit in February, 2016 to Tule Springs fossil beds National Monument — currently the newest National Park in the country, founded December, 2014. At the edge of the sprawling North Las Vegas suburbs, butted up against Moccasin Road, white gypsum deposits modestly undulate across the desert towards a mega shooting range to the east and Sovereign Southern Paiute land to the west. This national park contains nothing spectacular in a visual sense, but holds some of the most intact fossils of woolly mammoths, giant land sloths, and saber-toothed cats ever found in the region. The discovery of these fossils and the allocation of preserved land now creates a northern barrier for Las Vegas' rapid expansion. Moccasin Road will now become the bridge between our ancient mammalian ancestors and the asphalt gray and tan cul de sacs. At one pivot point of latitude/longitude coordinates: (36.336084, -115.2787572) one can witness time with a current shooting range to the east, the cultural human history of the Paiute to the West, the distant past to the North, and the tidal wave of future Vegas suburbia rolling in from the South.



Google Map aerial views of the northern border of Las Vegas.

CHAPTER ONE: PSYCHOLOGICAL STATE

I. NEVADA

Nevada contains an amazing variety of specific land use regions — government land used by the military, land leased to the mining companies, housing development parcels, national and state parks, Native nations' outposts, and “wilderness” neither protected nor used, simply marked ‘Federal Land’.

“Nevada’s invisibility may be as alarming as the apocalyptic dimensions of its plight. The state is truly a peculiar place, a hole in public consciousness.” (Solnit, p. 128)

The state of Nevada synthesizes both aspects of American consciousness — the chronic amnesia of broken land treaties in the physical landscape and the schizophrenic dystopia of the entertainment and hospitality capital of the country, Las Vegas. Nevada tends to be ignored in the ecological preservation debate; for reasons perhaps directly related to the vested interests of mining and war games to continue unchecked and as unregulated as possible¹

The state of nuclear bomb testing has made for a bitter story to encapsulate the colonialist tale of Manifest Destiny. Land occupied by Western Shoshone and Paiute

¹ A boom for gold mines and containing 20 percent of all military-owned land in the States, Nevada has been a war tools testing ground for the US for the past century.

nations, among others was taken by Spain to become part of Mexico until the United States' annexation in 1848. A mushroom cloud has formed over the history of this region and left ample room for new fictions and myths, both historical and futuristic. In the southern corner of this quiet state of mystery lies the city of Las Vegas; A place where "wild life" competes head-on with wildlife. The current 72 residents of the Las Vegas Paiute Indian Colony are the descendants of the Tudu, or Desert People, who since at least 1100 A.D. lived along the Colorado River. The Las Vegas Paiute Smoke Shop sits in north central Las Vegas as a reminder of the continuing resistance of a people who refuse to leave their homeland; Patrolled by three squad cars of their own police force, the Las Vegas Paiute Police.

While daydreaming through the streets of Las Vegas and the endless strip malls in the 115 degree heat, I imagine the future of this city; A cyborg of transplants quadrupling its population over the past 35 years. But in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008, the rapidly expanding development has halted the outwardly grasping tentacles of track homes and cul de sacs. Most of the grand basin in which Las Vegas sits has been filled and now McMansions rise into the foothills and mountains surrounding. Earthmovers displace tons of rocks of the landscape to sculpt these new Hollywood Hills. My attempts to trespass on these plowed earthworks² make me think

² Earthworks: also known as earth art or land art, began in a contemporary art context by several US artists from the mid 20th century and the Minimalist movement of the 1960's and 1970's, by manipulating parts of the landscape in vast, western US states. Using natural elements such as rocks, wood, soil, and water, artists would construct large-scale gestures within the landscape, to be viewed in the context of the landscape. Michael Heizer's "Double Negative" in Nevada (1969-1970) and Robert Smithson's "Spiral Jetty" in the Great Salt Lake, Utah (1970) are among the earliest and most renowned. Their influences can be traced back thousands of years to earlier civilizations' use of large scale drawing in the landscape, known as geoglyphs, such as the Nazca lines in Peru, credited to the Nazca civilization, an earlier civilization than the Inca civilization, pre-200 A.D.

of the lifespan these specific hills will have compared to the natural process of erosion. These geoglyphs are born out of civil engineering necessities rather than the purity of expression, but look almost identical to many of the land art artists from the 1970's. Their scale is impressive akin to Michael Heizer's 1972 piece *City*, also located in Nevada, but with a much different purpose in prophesying future installments of "luxury suburbia." Rather than working with the landscape the way the Pueblo or adobe



architects have by building into the hill, the contemporary need for sameness in suburban dwelling

Excavated land in Lake Las Vegas for housing development.

necessitates a violation of the hill. There exists an inner conflict with the struggle to tame the land, and a refusal to use time-tested techniques of desert dwelling. All wars are civil wars. And in this case also a civic war. The violent approach of this type of architecture in the landscape I compare to the sharp jolt a drug has on the mind to reach the same place as an alternate form of transcendental experience.

II. TECHNIQUE

My paintings reflect a first-hand account of the city where the architecture vaporizes into the high desert air leaving a defiantly-quiet tension of wildlife seething to reclaim the city's land. Even within Las Vegas the flora and fauna invade the scraps of unkempt parking lots, welcoming the destroyed ecosystem back to life with new growth.

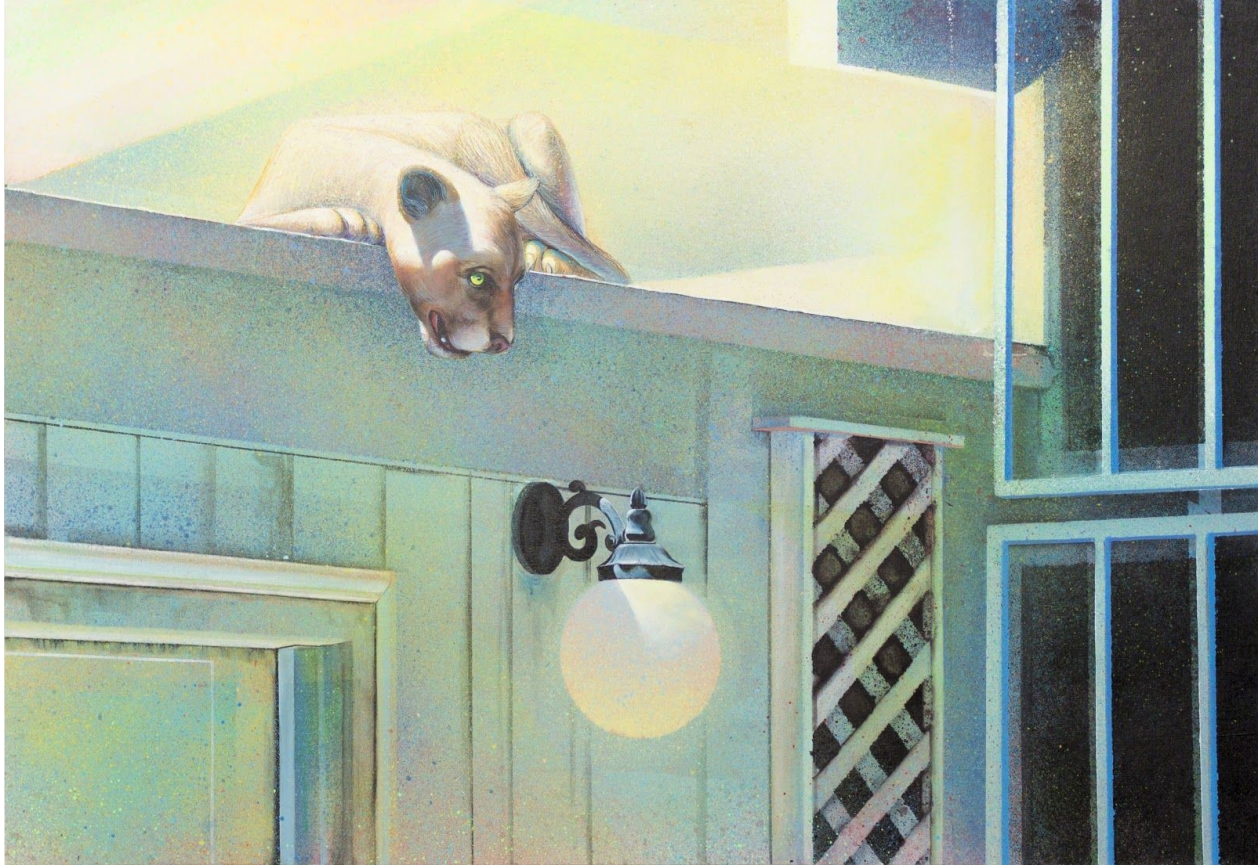


Plowed trench for a future cul de sac in Lake Las Vegas on the Eastern city limits.

I've found that both close viewing of a television and the oracular experience of psilocybin mushrooms break and dissipate the perceived matter within my view. Singular objects become a universe of millions of smaller objects, squirming and vibrating, their individual colors more vibrant than the whole. In the case of Las Vegas' expanding city limits I think of a 'bad trip' in its maniacal geometric dominance of the land. I credit the influence of the Impressionists and the Post-Impressionists for their

contribution to optical color mixing.³ Since their time, this way of painting has influenced other arts, including the way a color operates. Through a spraying technique of individual colors, I layer my paintings one color at a time. I will use a combination of small, speckled color dots to create a specific hue that vibrates more than if I was to mix the pigments before applying it to the surface. As I begin to pull images for painting from screenshots of my video, I look to mimic the vibration of a TV screen, the original way I've experienced these landscapes of the West as a child — through the cinema of spaghetti westerns and Looney Tunes. This experience also reminds me of the way I've observed color after ingesting psilocybin and the heightening effect it has on the optical perceptions of color. Rather than taking surfaces and objects for granted as one-color tonal values or gradients, the surface breaks apart into tiny, sparkling atoms.

³ Optical color mixing is created through the perception of color, when two colors are laid down in small amounts next to each other. Rather than mixing the pigments of two colors, where intensity is lost, the two pigments are laid down for the eyes to mix them optically. The effect takes place when there are too many colors for our eyes to completely comprehend, so we create a new color that may not be present in the design. This phenomena is also used in painting theatre backdrops as well as for television where a combination of red, green, and blue electron beams coat the phosphor surface of the screen. When light is shot through the screen in specific patterns, color can be perceived through a combination of these three colors.



Vegas Scarecrow 36" x 54", Acrylic on linen, 2016

Both the casinos and the landscape fall apart in the impressive expanses of time. The human built structures rapidly disintegrate while the surrounding mountains erode at a much slower pace. This dissipation of matter — both in the paint and the painted subject underlines my investigation of the artificiality of the city of Las Vegas. In the case of taking drugs, even the beiges of stucco and concrete vibrate with fluorescent color combinations. I build these greys and tans using high chroma color — often pure red, green, blue etc. I turn my attention to paint the more permanent objects with a more opaque brush. The rocks, plants, or animals receive special treatment in the form of a liner brush smoothly flowing over the canvas, a technique a sign painter would use. The spackle and spray minimally touches these subjects, for they have a resilience to

this place far beyond that of human built suburbia. Even though an animal dies, its offspring continues on in the world for another generation. That is, unless human corruption of a land makes it impossible for the species' occupation.

Employment of psychedelics can be a way to break open the protective sheath of the psychological interior if the exterior environment does not provide flexibility. Within the repressed experience of living within the actual suburban cul de sac, the ingestion of mind-altering or mind-expanding drugs includes a variety of states such as euphoria or paranoia or even extreme revelation, but requires the maintaining of composure. I don't know if this is due to an aesthetic of stifling whiteness within these spaces or if it's due to the design of the suburbs itself. Either way, ingestion of such chemicals can potentially create a magic effect even in the most plain of decor and design, making room for mystical transfiguration. I'm looking to dig under the Antique Parchment vinyl siding and find the underlying haunting vibrations of the home. The idea of the psychedelic trip also connects to why people choose to live in a place like Las Vegas. The search for utopia or exile from a previous life relates to the drug trip. Relief from a European or East Coast shackle may be the reason in a cultural sense.

I think of myself as an East Coast nephew of a generation of West coast artists including Mike Kelley, William Leavitt, and Jim Shaw. I am a product of the underlying, gothic darkness of the 1990's that they (giving credit primarily to Kelley) helped to define, especially the proto-punk, pre-goth aesthetic attributed to Kelley. I hope to paint scenes that radiate light, but at the same time communicate a sense of unease. Viewing the pristine scenes of suburbia in the high desert air, such as in my panorama, *Death Vegas Valley*, I give careful attention to every piece of artifice and faux-finishing.

A carefully laid stone wall sits atop a multi-colored rock lawn, complete with fake desert plants. Boldly displayed home security systems and sparkling neighborhood watch



signs add to the paranoia and underlying darkness and voyeurism. I will discuss the content and relevance of the panorama of *Death Vegas Valley* further in chapter two, but I want to mention the technique here. I choose to paint almost entirely in acrylic so as to layer the spraying quickly and embrace its plastic feel. The softness of the paint finish helps me articulate the fuzzy lighting, but once a

layer is down, it is permanent. To correct an area requires a whitewashing of the underlying image, similar to the historical stories of the region. The only spot I employ oil is the bottom central area of the painting — the reflective pool. Whether an oil spill or a freshwater pond in the middle of a desert, I am content with either scenario. It is the wishing well to gaze within. Its blurred reflection of the rusted steel cactus melts the hard lines of the surrounding acrylic to remind myself of the suburban scene's impermanence. I cannot separate saccharine sweetness of high-chroma color from the dark corners of my subjects' psyche. The cheerier the scene, the deeper discomfort I feel.



Death Vegas Valley 79.5" x 271" acrylic and oil on linen on wooden panorama, 2016

As I mimic aspects of the heroic landscape painter, or kitschy wildlife painter typically found at NRA gun shows I think of the satirical posings of The Yes Men appearing as alpha lawyers to undermine a corporation's immoral business practices. Although a large painting — comparative in scale to the New York Abstract Expressionist painters of the mid 20th century — its format is a crucial difference in attitude. The 19th century panorama painters were not recognized for their contributions to the dominant canon of European painting. The largely anonymous work crew of panoramic painters were held in lower esteem and importance to the oil painters, such as Gustave Courbet, who worked on square and rectangular canvasses. I believe my painting *Death Vegas Valley* would present itself very differently were it to be painted on a flat rectangle. It would only reinforce the machismo of large canvas painting, rather

than attempting to subvert or sidestep the heroic attitude. The brightly colored, pastel battle scenes of a Rococo Tiepolo painting come to mind. Although not as stark a difference between an actual representative for Dow Chemical and Andy Bichlbaum of the Yes Men posing as a representative for Dow Chemical⁴, the medium, structure, and technique I employ helps to differentiate my position. My structure of the panorama references a 19th century form of popular entertainment before cinema, but in context I'm speaking to US blockbuster culture and rabid consumerism — the type of hungry, wild-eyed coyote hunting found in the eyes of black Friday shoppers at large wholesalers in the United States around national holidays. In the past year curved, panoramic monitors have become the next “must-haves” to heighten your home entertainment system. Regardless of their staying power or temporary novelty (I suspect the latter) the panoramic television is a poetic nod back to the beginnings of mass media consumption. Now in the 21st century it luxuriously infiltrates the private homestead of the suburban settler. The pioneering US American's dream of autonomy free from the shackles of a European socialized community is further realized; Your personal blockbuster home entertainment system.

⁴ On December 3, 2004, the 20th anniversary of the Bhopal disaster, Andy Bichlbaum appeared on BBC World as “Jude Finisterra” a representative for DOW Chemical. In his interview, he claimed DOW would liquidate their subsidiary, Union Carbide, the company responsible for the chemical disaster that killed 3,800 people in Bhopal, India and affected half a million more with delayed death and health problems. The \$12 Billion net worth of Union Carbide would go to assist the victims in India still affected by the disaster. For two hours the story spread within the media before being corrected, and in 23 minutes DOW's stock shares dropped 4.24% resulting in \$2 Billion loss (to eventually rebound after the real DOW Chemical issued a statement of denial of financial retribution). The stunt brought widespread awareness to the issue but did not affect DOW's original \$470 million settlement with the families affected.



III. Antagonism

Although my own politics regarding nature preservation is a driving force in the paintings, it underlies a focus on the artifice and the belief in the resilient ability of nature to reclaim. I use the coyote as a metaphor and symbol of the wily creature able to exist in an antagonistic environment. The US coyote population is growing, and its ability to adapt in suburban and urban environments will ensure its survival as a species. In Las Vegas a swift takeover of the desert has rapidly confronted the resident wildlife. Coyotes, foxes, bighorn sheep, horses, reptiles, bats, and tortoises all intermingle with the land between the Casino strip and the surrounding state parks. Some have been completely displaced, such as the bighorn sheep, while others stand

their ground and refuse to vacate the sprawling urbanization. These species thrive in what looks like a desert wasteland, including the vulnerable land ripe for developers.



Las Vegas street median with artificial coyote and desert plants.

I paint these creatures in plain view interacting with the quiet, neighborhood-watch-laden, suburbs. Vector home security systems mean nothing to the hungry mountain lion. I also think of these animals as encapsulating “the rude”. I think of rude as a term for an abrasive critique of the dominant force in a situation. Rudeness relates to satire as a mocking of the status quo and an attitude of irreverence that challenges authority. In this case, housing developers are the domineering authority with the ability to sculpt the landscape, while the wildlife stands by submissively. However, the coyote

can still employ rude qualities to fight back, such as eating homeowner's pets⁵. Being rude is the next step when politeness has proven ineffective. It is about maintaining a mental and spiritual freedom to subvert even in light of physical or economic dominance. One example I am inspired by comes from the closing statements of the 2012 trial of Russian feminist punk trio Pussy Riot:⁶

"I am overwhelmed that truth really does triumph over lies even though physically we are here in a cage. We are freer than the people sitting opposite us for the prosecution because we can say everything we like, and we do...Katya, Masha and I are in jail but I don't consider that we've been defeated."

Drawing a comparison to the restrictive dominance Pussy Riot accuses Putin of wielding, I use the coyote as a face of resistance against a history of US occupation in North America. It pays no mind to traffic laws or "stay off the lawn" signs. Trespassing on private property is a foreign concept to the coyote.

⁵ In heavily urbanized areas of the United States, such as Los Angeles, domestic pets have become the predominant diet of nearby mountain lions and coyotes, creating a new dependence on the suburbs for sustenance.

⁶ Pussy Riot's performance in The Cathedral of Christ the Savior on February 21, 2012 caused their arrest on hooliganism charges and eventual prison time up to 21 months for some members of the band.



A living hawk perched along Nu-Wav Kaiv Boulevard in sovereign Las Vegas Paiute Indian land.



Coyote 80" x 68" Acrylic on canvas, 2016



Looking North from the Stratosphere Casino towards Fremont Street (Old Town) and Paiute and Moapa territory.

In my video, *Before There Were Words*, I portray Las Vegas as a partially occupied city and unnerving dystopia. Filmed on location largely during the morning hours, it highlights the sunny, hangover hours of its visitors. This time tends to be quiet in the city, as those employed by the casinos are at work and the tourists are still in bed. Originally influenced by a stop at a petroglyph recreation area in central Nevada⁷, the video became a parallel means of communicating antagonism and melancholy within a rapidly

⁷ Hickison Petroglyph Recreation Area and Interpretation Site lies in almost exact central Nevada along the Pony Express trail and Highway 50. The area contains a small walking path and 16 campsites to view 10,000 year old human drawings. The high desert area sits 6,500 feet above sea level on the edge on Monitor valley in Nevada's Great Basin.

expanding urban environment. I had scheduled to meet a friend at high noon on a hot July day — me on my bicycle coming from the east, and he on a motorcycle coming from the south. Once intercepted, we began behaving as ancient hominids, stooping low to the ground, using grunts and gestures as communication rather than words. As the project developed, I decided to use this friend as a mime to bridge the ancient, language-less human, and the art culture of European colonization in a new land. His experience in the production of Blue Man Group as a Blue Man proved a natural transition, as both Blue Men and mimes communicate without the use of voice or language. I think about the mime as an emotionally open person, but also a character that antagonizes the art elite, dismissed as any sort of legitimate “artist” within the context of performance. I think of it (the mime I refer to as ungendered by using the “it” pronoun) as emotionally open because of its need to communicate through gesture and expression, especially through the eyes. Without using language the mime’s duties as performer require a melodramatic exaggeration so that from a stage an audience can understand its emotional state. The mime also recalls a “bad taste” street performer and the tourism industry. I wished to create a sympathetic character out of an archetype that tends to annoy and antagonize, which was certainly setting myself up for a challenge.

After a glittery, high energy opening introducing Las Vegas, narrated by a cheery-but-judicious voice recalling a nostalgia of the 1960s and 70s, the mime awakes in a foreign, black-and-white world. Trying to piece together a lost memory of the night Before (or possibly its entire life) it navigates its way through a late 20th century post-modern designed interior dwelling. As this “civilized” domestic mime gets dressed and makes itself a caprese salad it experiences flashbacks of another mime in the



desert. Hallucinations prompt our protagonist to walk out into the city. As the mime figures out how to interact with the populous there is a sense of alienation and confusion — until transportation into another

“zone”⁸ where the domestic mime discovers the feral mime.

The two mimes go walking hand in hand as the feral mime directs the protagonist back to society. Eventually, the feral mime reaches its boundary and must point the domestic mime off to its hero’s journey⁹ alone. As the mime makes its way through the desert it comes across a half buried urban landscape painting, unstretched in the dirt depicting a glimpse of houses kissed by the magic hour light of the desert. The domestic mime paints its way back to the city, conjuring civilization through the discovery of the torn canvas in the dry lake bed. Civilization or its domestic reality is thus constructed by the domestic mime through painting. As the mime walks with the map through the desert it encounters visions of painting — gloved hands mixing and spraying paint — in flashback form, creating a magic panorama of the city from whence it came. The archeological remains of a torn canvas reference a past civilization and the

⁸ A reference to Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Stalker* where the characters’ journey into an otherworld within Soviet Russia that holds mystical powers. This place is repeatedly referred to as “the Zone”.

⁹ The hero’s journey is a pattern of narrative defined by Joseph Campbell in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. The 12 stage structure involves a transition from ordinary world to special place and then back to ordinary world. This can be found in folklore and myths in almost every culture throughout the history of humanity.

precariousness of Las Vegas' position in the Mojave Desert, to one day become a forgotten memory. The mime's amnesia begins to wear off.

We see the domestic mime travelling great distances. Before making it back to the city the mime wanders into a bulldozed area of the wilderness — a conspicuously manipulated landscape¹⁰. Plants and weeds have sprouted atop the plowed terrain



terraced into the foothills. The mime recalls a domestic memory and then pantomimes

sweeping the floor, cooking food, and other motions associated with a domestic space. On the empty earth the mime prepares its bed for another night of sleep in the ambiguous civil engineered landscape.

¹⁰ Lake Las Vegas is a golf and retirement community in the Lake Mead foothills east of Las Vegas. Several of the expanding neighborhoods have been halted due to the economic downturn in 2008. Presently, terraced earth marks the plots of future homes and cul de sacs riding up and around Lake Las Vegas.

CHAPTER TWO:

I. FIRST CONTACT AND A HOLY LAND FOR THREE PEOPLES

Clark County, Nevada resided within Mexican borders until 1848, but four years earlier a group of US scientists, scouts, and spies, led by John C. Fremont (of the famous Fremont street, downtown Las Vegas) infiltrated the Meadow to establish a clandestine fort. President Tyler was preparing a war with Mexico and needed intel on the area. Once claimed as US lands, a small group of Mormons moved made their way down from Utah to establish a small trading post and farming community in 1855. It was an early dream of Brigham Young to see a thriving LDS fellowship in the valley, and after a few failed attempts, a sizable Mormon population cemented its stake in the area. 'Las Vegas', meaning 'the meadows' in Spanish was named by Mexican scout Raphael Rivera. For millennia the Paiute people lived in this lush valley of artesian wells and green pastures, rich and protected from the rest of the Mojave's harsher and drier climate. The Europeans brought violence and disease and had all but wiped out most of the Paiute population by the end of the 19th century. Paiute territory runs from eastern Oregon, through Nevada and eastern California into the Mojave and also includes parts of Utah and Arizona. The Southern Paiute lived in the Las Vegas area and the Colorado River, speaking a distinct language from other Paiute and suffering occasional slave raids from the Navajo. Mormon missionaries strategically annexed the Paiute water sources upon arriving in the area creating a dependence. A clear subjugation, yet it stopped the raids from the Navajo and the Paiute and Mormon

population lived relatively peacefully for a handful of years until the Mormon's practice of raising cattle scared the game away, thus destroying their way of life. Terminated as a tribe in 1954 under Federal assimilation efforts, the Paiute regained recognition in 1980. The current reservation, Las Vegas Tribe of Paiute Indians of the Las Vegas Indian Colony, sits adjacent to northwest Las Vegas city limits, with 52 residents and a total of 71 enrolled members and encompasses 3,850 acres. Total estimates of all Paiute, northern and southern is around 6,300 presently.

“Incapable of conquering true wilderness, the Europeans were highly competent in the skill of conquering other people, and that is what they did. They did not settle a virgin land. They invaded and displaced a resident population.” (Dunbar-Ortiz, p. 47)

People had already worked out a way to live in North America. Starving settlers initially were saved by the Powhatans and taught how to survive in the Virginia climate. The existence of Vegas disregards the time tested desert dwelling of the Paiute and Shoshone, but to its own detriment and peril. The arrogant gesture to build homes and golf courses in the Mojave is beginning to crumble and may very well completely dissolve due to suffering Lake Mead. In other parts of the country the US has adapted to the climate in ways the native people discovered over tens of thousands of years. But it is most striking in the architectural arrogance of Las Vegas of the brazen disregard for sustainability of a city.

The interlude in “Before There Were Words” features the Ghost Dance¹¹, “a form of resistance that spread like wildfire in all directions from its source” (Dunbar-Ortiz, 153). The symbolism of the state of Nevada as a schizophrenic place embodies the epitome of US excess culture in Las Vegas and Native resistance to US forced cultural assimilation. Las Vegas and its party/drug world mimics the ghost dance in a bastardized form of hallucinations and ritual.



Still from “Before There Were Words” interlude: “Ghost Dance”

¹¹ The Ghost Dance (Caddo: Nanissáanah) was a new religious movement incorporated into numerous Native American belief systems. According to the teachings of the Northern Paiute spiritual leader Wovoka (renamed Jack Wilson), proper practice of the dance would reunite the living with spirits of the dead, bring the spirits of the dead to fight on their behalf, make the white colonists leave, and bring peace, prosperity, and unity to native peoples throughout the region. The basis for the Ghost Dance, the circle dance, is a traditional form that has been used by many Native Americans since prehistoric times, but this new ceremony was first practiced among the Nevada Paiute in 1889. As the Ghost Dance spread from its original source, Native American tribes synthesized selective aspects of the ritual with their own beliefs. The Ghost Dance was associated with Wilson's prophecy of an end to white expansion while preaching goals of clean living, an honest life, and cross-cultural cooperation by Native Americans. Practice of the Ghost Dance movement was believed to have contributed to Lakota resistance to assimilation under the Dawes Act. In the Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890, U.S. Army forces killed at least 153 individuals from the Lakota people. The Caddo Nation still practices the Ghost Dance today.

II. ORIGINS AND ROOTS, IMPORTANCE OF PLACE (HOW DID I END UP HERE?)

The connection to my autobiography and subject lies in place. The importance on location, region, and geography is my primary thought when meeting new people and relating it to my own culture. As a North American having grown up in Pennsylvania Dutch country of Lancaster, PA I was told that I was Dutch, German, Czech, etc. — basically a euro mix and not necessarily *American* however second and third generation American born. After a few conversations with actual Europeans I discovered I was not German or Dutch culturally but significantly a citizen of the United States' empire in my upbringing. The complexity springs from my family's post immigration. Both sides of my immediate family involve a migration within North America from the east to the west, as well as involvement and intermarrying with Indigenous people. My father was born in Fairbanks, Alaska due to my grandparent's relocation to the territory before it was a state. My grandfather moved to Alaska with my grandmother to work with the Inuit people on establishing a school where they proselytized Christianity as missionaries. My other grandmother and her sister moved to Taos, New Mexico from the farmlands of Indiana in the 1940's to teach English, in this instance to the Navajo (Dine') people. Eventually she made it out to Long Beach, California where she met my grandfather, But her sister stayed in New Mexico where

her daughter married into the Navajo and lives on or around the reservation lands¹² to this day with my second cousins. This form of missionary colonial ambition has made for a broad, meandering stretch of my family's *place* throughout the US and also explains the chance place in which I grew up. My parents moved to Amish country from Philadelphia right before I was born to find a more rural or suburban area in which to raise children. I am using this order of familial events as metaphor to become a background player in this current project of the no-place of Las Vegas born out of the desert.

Lancaster County recalls the homesteader culture of the 19th century, where lower class, European immigrants could build out small subsistence farms after paying off their years of indentured servitude for passage to the New World. The shaping of my upbringing played into the homesteader and settler ways of life, including homeschooling, subsistence gardening, and even raising the occasional pig for food. It was not necessary by any means and more of a fantasy for my parents of a past nostalgia to raise us in this way. There is a quote by Mike Kelley from a talk in *On The Beyond* that resonated with me when he mentions Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*:

"His book struck me as incredibly nostalgic. It is beautifully written but, still, it seemed like a sophisticated version of a Reader's Digest story...the propagandistic stories of hearth and home — geared toward geriatric readers at the doctor's office — was omnipresent.

¹² The Navajo Nation (known officially in English as 'Navajo Indian Reservation') is a semi-autonomous self-governing territory comprised of land in the four corners region within New Mexico, Arizona, and Utah. The total area encompasses over 27,000 square miles — an area larger than the state of West Virginia and the largest indigenous sovereign land within the continental United States. Through a series of treaties begun in 1868 to 1934 the territory grew to its present day size.

Such stories revel in depictions of a phony country domesticity that never was. And, even stranger, it is a past that the reader could not have actually lived because it was before their time. It was a false nostalgia...I grew up basically in a stage set that symbolized some invented pre-modern idyllic time.” (Bechtler, p.55)

Conveniently this pre-modern idyllic time leaves out the bloody conflict and massacres of Indigenous peoples through the many instances of land grabs and calls to “head West”. The myth of free, open land in which to stake a claim still perpetuates itself in US consciousness and education. “That narrative is wrong and deficient not in its facts, dates, or details, but rather in its essence.” (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2) The consensual national narrative thoroughly catalogues the conflict and treatment of the native nations of North America but romanticizes heavily on the side of imperial colonialism. Not only is the romanticization of this popular version of US history highly insensitive and cruel, it is also highly inaccurate to an outsider’s perspective. From the earliest computer games such as Oregon Trail to the thoroughly exhausted narrative of the “US Roadtrip” (directly relating to the “sea to shining sea” Manifest Destiny myth) the US American child is inundated with this essence of history while still aware of the poor treatment and debatable *genocide* of the Indigenous nations — similar to the acknowledgement of a country built on African slavery, but rationalized into a softer narrative. I love the landscape and I believe in nature, in interacting with it even if it kills me — it is, after all, a “harmony of overwhelming and collective murder.” (Werner Herzog) I connect this to early American attitudes on the wild, rugged landscape perceived as terrifying and ugly, before the Hudson River school and the romanticization of the picturesque landscape. There are numerous pilgrimage and spiritual journey stories of traversing the

continental US from WWII until now. Many of our artists and poets recall their tales on the road in the United States of America. The change in how we travel has evolved from issues of maps (paper or satellite), AC, Wifi availability, Rest stop conveniences, communication during the trip with people in other vicinities, and so on. If we imagine back to the time of the Pioneers — and specifically the Church of Latter Day Saints — traversing the landscape on ancient trails. I'd like to begin here as the starting point for Las Vegas as a trading post and point of early contact with the Shoshone and Paiute people.



Still from Before There Were Words. Flashback image shot in Death Valley, CA (Western Shoshone).

CHAPTER THREE: AFFECTS

I. CRAFT AND THE HOBBYIST

The first theme of low-brow and technique I would like to address is the crafting hobbyist. Unaware of the kitsch that may exist in their earnestness, the hobbyist creates as a means of escape. By definition, the hobbyist is working in some other way to earn a living or contribute to society in some other fashion and spends time with these projects on the weekends or late at night. Their schedule can seem similar to the aspirational artist, but it may end there. The hobbyist creates comfortably outside the conversation of contemporary painting and therefore strives to create naturalistic illusion through paint as a scientist or tinkerer. In my own work I highlight the tension between the moments of tight, observational/naturalism oil painting happening overtop an acrid, stomach acid sprayed acrylic color that looks like young adult book covers from the late 20th century. I frequently cringe at the kitsch essence my paintings can take on in their

TIPS FOR ARTISTS WHO WANT TO SELL

- GENERALLY SPEAKING, PAINTINGS WITH LIGHT COLORS SELL MORE QUICKLY THAN PAINTINGS WITH DARK COLORS.

- SUBJECTS THAT SELL WELL : MADONNA AND CHILD, LANDSCAPES, FLOWER PAINTINGS, STILL LIVES (FREE OF MORBID PROPS --- DEAD BIRDS, ETC.), NUDES, MARINE PICTURES, ABSTRACTS AND SUR-REALISM.

- SUBJECT MATTER IS IMPOR - TANT: IT HAS BEEN SAID THAT PAINTINGS WITH COWS AND HENS IN THEM COLLECT DUST --- WHILE THE SAME PAINTINGS WITH BULLS AND ROOSTERS SELL.

process. Admittedly, I fear they could at times be purely a kitsch painting, rather than a painting about kitsch. But I commit to riding this line because kitsch is so much a part of my early exposure to painting. I'll never forget some great-uncle of mine at my grandmother's funeral dinner telling me how much I needed "to get into wildlife art. That's where it is!"

John Baldessari, Tips for Artists Who Want to Sell (1966-68) acrylic on canvas

John Baldessari's piece, *Tips for Artists Who Want to Sell* flattens the distance between the commercial world of a sign painter and the high-minded oil painter. For the painting Baldessari commissioned an actual sign painter to recreate some of the friendly market advice from a how-to-paint book. His concept both pokes fun at the art market but also brazenly disregards its advice. His constant experimentation in multiple mediums has been a model for me, as well as his cheeky disregard for art trends over his 50-year career.

The painter Dan Attoe works within the context of an American landscape painter.

His biography plays a large role in the specific *place* of his paintings, the Western States and the Midwest, and his early attraction to spray paint, crafts and long hours in the woods. There is also an element of camp to the work (albeit definitive ‘straight’ camp exaggerating machismo) to which I relate and will discuss further ahead. His smaller scaled paintings can also highlight the fragile ego of the monumental spirit of the depicted images, such as *Monument Valley Meteor Shower* depicted here.

I distinguish myself as being a softer painter in light, technique and attitude from Attoe,



but recognize some overlap — especially in subject and the involvement of rural hobbyist/crafting ‘whiteness’. At times Attoe’s work embraces a white trashiness in a celebratory way, whereas I lean towards a cosmopolitan critique of a past that

Dan Attoe, Monument Valley Meteor Shower

haunts me. However, I appreciate Attoe’s genuine spirit of affection for these places so familiar to him.

Black light posters and stoner art also make their way into my choices for color and lighting. With the splattering technique using household cleaner spray bottles the painting *Cave of the Mind* depicts a massively scaled mouth of a cave, with a holy light streaming

in from above. The title comes from the concept of Plato's Cave in *The Republic* (a reference I echo in a silhouette shot in *Before There Were Words*). In it I have depicted an ambiguous space through tape, spray, and a central, backlit light source. In the foreground rests the remains of a small campsite with empty green wine bottles, a fire pit, the striped shirt of could possibly be a mime. It is the reminder of the human effect even on a place so removed from society. In my explorations of caves outside of the city of Las Vegas I constantly found human litter in the form of empty six-packs and flattened cigarette packs. Beyond the campsite mystical green and violet hills rise up pointing to an opening of the earth. I used the tape to create geodes and crystal-like structures to line the proscenium¹³ of the theatrical cave mouth. The painting reminds me of psychedelic posters and trashy sprayed t-shirts I would find on the boardwalk at the Jersey Shore growing up. Almost every summer my family made the trip out to the 'shore' that was a wondrous escape out of the bland Amish farmlands of Lancaster County. A boardwalk consumer culture of novelty stoner paraphernalia, mini golf, arcade games, and salt water taffy became so attractive to counter my upbringing in a plain, nostalgic-for-the-19th-century region of Pennsylvania. In these shore malls off the boardwalk I would wander, sometimes stoned, gazing at the posters of Jimi Hendrix and Kurt Cobain in black light rooms passing through doorways of beaded curtains and silk.

¹³ The arched frame in a theatre in front of the curtain, typically embellished and carved, that creates the portal into the world of the play.



Cave of the Mind 80" x 68" Acrylic on canvas, 2015

II. SPAGHETTI WESTERN AND CAMP

The cowboy metaphor in the spaghetti western was frequently used as a stand-in to address civil rights and the Vietnam war in the 1960's. An updated cowboy metaphor today would be the transient day laborer, the displaced refugee, or as a closer reflection the "liberated" freelancer without job stability or health insurance. The cowboy stood for a myth of the "self-made" persona, possessing a particular set of skills for hire. It is a heavy-handed, patriarchal character that certainly colonized my brain when I think of the West, and I find myself more intrigued with the secondary characters and their plight in — the barkeep, saloon owner, working girl, etc. Not all protagonists were brutes and in Sergio Leone's trilogy¹⁴ Clint Eastwood plays a very stylish, somewhat cosmopolitan character, slightly too lean and pose-y to be taken as a complete 'outdoorsman'. Here there is a crafted persona and fashionable myth sold to us through Hollywood. *Turn*



Turn Right and Squint 8" x 10" oil on canvas, 2015

Right and Squint a painting pulled from a screenshot of *The Searchers* allowed me to investigate John Wayne's weathered, squinting face for a day so that I

¹⁴ Italian director Sergio Leone's first three US westerns are considered to be a loose trilogy — referred to as the 'Man with No Name' trilogy, *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), *For a Few Dollars More* (1965), and *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966). They defined the Spaghetti Western genre of a highly-stylized aesthetic and more overtly political messages relating to the Civil Rights movement and the US involvement in foreign wars.

could then discard this stand-in for patriarchy and begin to work with my mime character as an alternate western hero. Richard Dyer discusses the straight camp affection for the Wayne character,

“Many straight men find him camp now, but they love him just the same. Gay camp can emphasize what a production number the Wayne image is — the lumbering gait, drawling voice and ever more craggy face is a deliberately constructed and manufactured image of virility. In this way, gay camp can stop us from treating John Wayne as an embodiment of what it ‘really’ means to be a man.”(Cleto, p.114)

Even in my disgust for this character I demand to know why and for what reason. In Andrew Britton’s *For Interpretation: Notes Against Camp* the author argues that according to Richard Dyer, John Wayne can be camp, of which Britton claims to be too easy an assertion,

“But which ‘John Wayne’? The Wayne who advocates, on screen and off, Johnson’s policy in Vietnam and McCarthyism, or the Wayne of Ford’s westerns? Wayne ‘means’ very differently in the two cases, and while those meanings are intimately related, they cannot be reduced to one another. To perceive Wayne merely as an icon of ‘butchness’ which can be debunked from, apparently, a position of ideological neutrality, is either complacent or philistine.” (Cleto, p.140)

Thus, the “Wayne” in its entirety is not to be taken only as a straight, campy character but as an ideological hawkish conservative. Here the mime contrasts that

representation by wearing its heart on its sleeve and showing emotion in a landscape portrayed for decades as a place for emotionally stunted men to shoot each other. The mime still connects to white, colonialist culture but perceives the landscape through a passive or submissive quality rather than a cattle roping dominance. Its politics are ambiguous but certainly not calling for war.

An inspiration for this alternative Western narrative is Michelangelo Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point*. Here the story of a college student at the height of protests against the Vietnam War drives to Death Valley to escape arrest after shooting at a police officer. From a UC campus in Southern California, the protagonist travels as the typical cowboy into "Indian Country" (the official US term) away from the consequences of the law akin to Tuco in *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. He finds himself mesmerized in a hallucinogenic world that dissolves into a poetic orgy of youthful bodies. The landscape becomes a playground for softer escapades. The liberation of sex from reproduction consistent with the time period, marks a stark difference from a cinematic history of the necessity of reproduction by white settlers. It actually relates more closely to Indigenous relationships to sex, which in general has a more flexible role in the Pueblo, Dine, and Shoshone societies throughout the Southwest than the European Protestants. *Zabriskie Point* marks a point of re-direction in the US desert landscape in stark contrast to George Stevens' 1953 western *Shane* for example. In *Shane*, the story of land rights between settlers and cattle grazers centers on a child of a homesteader — the representation of the future. This offspring of the settler couple heavily cements the myth of westward expansion into a hope and promise of Manifest Destiny. In *Shane* lies a garish but not surprising example of hetero-futurism where, "the sacralization of the Child thus necessitates the sacrifice of the queer." (Edelman, p. 28) The mime and its

“it” ness pronoun denies its sexuality (or at least does not address it) denying the future and trying to figure out its place in the present.



Humor and camp surface in the paintings through a necessity of coping with a heavy sadness. Because of a tragic history of the United States and an attraction as well as a repulsion of the propaganda in the historical monuments I employ heavy amounts of nationalistic satire. Irony helps me distinguish my position while also sublimating the politics in my work. The paintings become psychologically driven rather than overtly political because of the light and tone in emulating a style they are critiquing. The camp in the cottage industry of alien abductions also play a terrifying psychological role.¹⁵ Some of the very first memories I can recall were of the golden

¹⁵ The cottage industry of Alien Abductions can compare to the search for belief and spiritualism. The particular green people image is so closely tied to a specific landscape of the American West and other giant pop culture phenomena of Marvel Comics and Hollywood. The true believers run an underground, low-budget, lo-fi internet presence, sharing their personal stories of abduction and violations through probing and medical testing.

age of Serial Films, or Nickelodeon chapter pictures. I remember watching dozens of these series with my siblings including *Captain Marvel*, *Radar Men from the Moon*, *Deadwood Dick*, and *The Vanishing Shadow*. Looking at these images now it is laughable the artifice and unbelievability of the special effects, and even as a kid I was amused at the fakeness of these plays on screen. Whether the setting was on Earth, Mars, or the Moon, the Southern California desert was unmistakable as a fantasy backdrop for my imagination. By insisting on an alternative attitude I am queering the landscape to open up other possibilities of engagement. In my painting *Radiator Springs Racer* I depict an artificial landscape from the more recently built ride at Disneyland.¹⁶ Because of the paint splattered technique, it is not important for me to communicate that this is a depiction of an artificially constructed place. All throughout Las Vegas a similar manufacturing occurs with the vegetation.

¹⁶ Cars Land is a themed area of Disney California adventure theme park, inspired by the 2006 Pixar movie, *Cars*. 12 acres of artificially built desert terrain mimics Monument Valley — a red sand desert region of the United States — an area falling entirely within the sovereign Navajo (Dine) Reservation land. The main attraction, *Radiator Springs Racer* (depicted in the painting) opened on June 15, 2012 and uses the technology of Epcot's Test Track.



Radiator Springs Racer 54" x 36" acrylic on canvas, 2015

III. Jack the Creationist, Blissful Ignorance and Escapism

“I have always been interested in a person’s inner world, and for me it was far more natural to make a journey into the psychology of the hero’s attitude to life, into the literary and cultural traditions that are the foundation of his spiritual world” Andrei Tarkovsky from the film Directed by Andrei Tarkovsky

A creationist named Jack who looked like a silver haired Marlboro man stopped his small Ford ranger pickup truck on Highway 50, “America’s Loneliest Road” in Nevada. He sat inside the truck and after exchanging brief pleasantries asked me, “Have you made plans for eternity?” Slightly terrified by his enigmatic question, I responded with a purposefully aloof, “You mean for when I die?” He pulled his truck onto the shoulder and strutted out to where I was stretching by my bicycle on the side of the road. He then tried to convince me that the earth is 6,000 years old. To me it seemed obvious that the mountain ranges on either side of us spoke of a much longer geological history, but Jack had his reasons. These reasons inevitably led to a proselytizing of his faith in Jesus and my need for redemption. At some point I mentioned the term ‘evolution’ to which Jack had to slap his knees, vigorously shake his head and let out an incredulous “EEvoLOOSHun?!” making me feel like I had just said the dumbest thing imaginable. I kept dodging his steely eyed stare to assess my level of danger by peering into the dusty bed of his truck, keeping an eye out for guns, ropes, metal chains, anything he could use to convince me further. Come to think of it, Jack

made my heart race and certainly made me fear for my life. It was just me and him standing between two mountain ridges at least 30 miles from anything in either direction. The convenience of being a white male saved me though, as Jack being an old-fashioned gentleman let me be on my way as soon as he noticed my desire to end our chat. I saw the cultural successor and offspring of a real cowboy that day.

I recount this story to point at the amnesia of our culture in such a place. Through faith, this man would believe it was his God-given right to make his homestead in a place already occupied by other people. Perpetuating the delusion of 'virgin land' Las Vegas builds buildings of any place, culture, or time — the Pyramids, the Eiffel Tower, the Brooklyn Bridge — but its own of a 21st century US American city in the Mojave Desert. Even in the acknowledgement of place — such as the desert plants in the freeway medians — artificial fabrications exist of stone and steel to stylistically mimic a cactus. Not once did I see a real desert plant purposefully planted within the landscaped strip freeway. You have to get to the side streets and edges of town to see the weeds begin to grow, and have a physical confrontation with the desert as place. The city is an evolved Disneyland — further developed and more enveloping than the theme park of the 20th century. The majestic landscape surrounding the city seems to carry on the facade of artifice, however the geologic wonders such as Red Rock Canyon or Valley of Fire were not conceived by Disney's Imagineering team.

In Robert Venturi's architectural project book *Learning from Las Vegas* the heightened symbolism is dissected of other places, fantasies really, of Xanadu, Disney World, and the Alhambra that led to the creation of a pleasure zone in the midst of a hostile desert environment. Here for "three days one may imagine oneself a centurion

at Caesar's Palace, a ranger at the frontier, or a jetsetter at the Riviera rather than a salesperson from Des Moines, Iowa" (p.53). The escapist doesn't go to the Mojave because there is a desire for the desert. The salesperson goes to Vegas to forget the restrictions of place and have fun — recreate amongst other willing adults. The insanity of belief that any place can be an ahistorical encapsulation is what initially compelled and repelled me about Las Vegas. The first thing one understands about the city is its place in the desert whether flying into McCarran airport or driving over the Hoover Dam. The water level has plummeted so low at the dam below any visible mark from the freeway that multiple signs expressly prohibit any stopping. The question posed by Venturi in *Learning from Las Vegas* asks where the architects acquired the references for these other places.

"Where are their tastes formulated? Do they study it in school? Do they go to the museums? Do they travel in Europe? Only one place — the movies. They go to the movies. The hell with everything else." (Venturi, p.80)

This quote from architect Morris Lapidus, famous for the Miami Beach style postmodern curved hotels is also fond of saying "If you like ice cream why stop at one scoop? Have two, have three. Too much is never enough." European settlers wanted more ice cream and eventually made it to the Mojave lands of the Shoshone, Paiute, and Ute. Jack's cowboy fantasy of living as an individual in self created utopia died out long ago as reality. The open range effectively closed with the invention of barbed wire in the 1880s, making Jack's horse ranch in central Nevada quite related to the escapist

desires of Las Vegas' tourists. Las Vegas exists as a city apart from civilization inside a state that exists in a cloud of mystery. Not only can this be seen as possible utopia but also as exile. Other parallel histories of the city involve California businessmen seeking tax shelters. Jack's desire to seek a life off the grid is also a self-imposed exile. Apparently when given enough autonomy from the influence of outside culture you can believe anything.



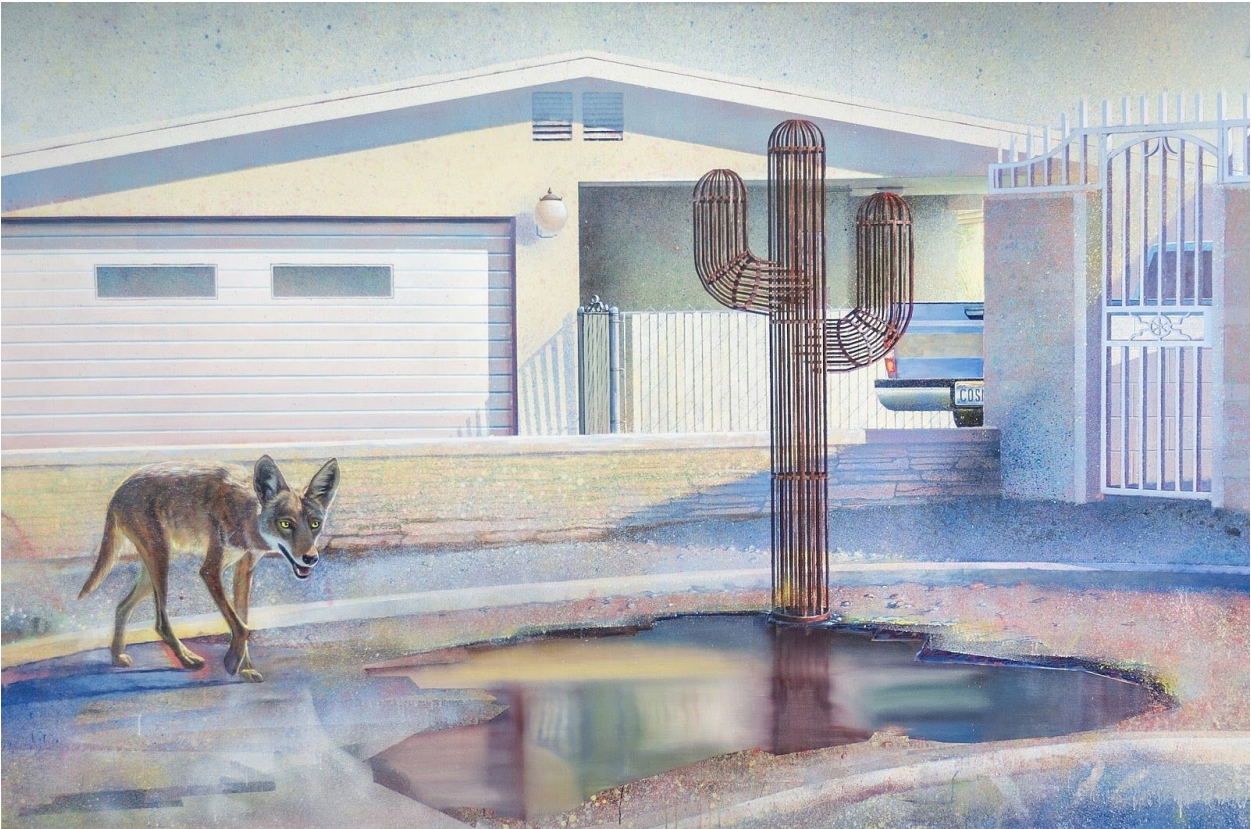
Medicine Man Way 5" x 7" Micron pen on paper, 2015

III. The Future; A Reckoning

I fantasize of impending reclamation of the land by nature. Out of the obsolete strip malls come the coyotes at night to play in the empty parking lots hosting millions of ants beneath the asphalt.

Author Denis Johnson in his 1998 fictional novel *Already Dead: A California Gothic* acts as social critic in his dissection of every archetype of a post-1969 Golden state character. Misty and hazy in northern California as opposed to the Mojave in the South (*Gold, Fame, Citrus* by Claire Vaye Watkins) Johnson interweaves multiple narratives into a hallucinatory and drug addled escapade where the landscape shapes the people's consciousness. Burned-out hippies as well as exhausted southern California cops sort through their current mental state amongst the clandestine pot fields and week-long rainfalls through Humboldt and Mendocino counties. The bipolar brother, the stubborn dying father, the husband taking a hit out on his wife by hiring a man he rescued from suicide, all converge into a grand metaphor of crisis of society beyond redemption. Johnson's own personal history I relate to as well as Watkins' views on the desert (a native Mojave herself) and her intimate experience living in this specific landscape. Johnson's book reflects on the melancholy state of a post endless summer of 1960s sunny California. The final conquering of the Western US has reached its finale through advertising the land and sun itself. Millions of people from the Midwest to all over the World have colonized a sovereign land and as the population continues to grow, the commodity of space disappears. I draw a line from Johnson's 1990 novel to Claire Vaye Watkins 2015 futuristic prediction of the consequences of a mass population move.

In the midst of a collective party striking for fame or gold the enigmatic, anonymous coyote paces through the streets. The mime and panorama painter share the lack of authorship and recognition for their labors against a backdrop of advertisement and promise of fame and fortune, while multiplying suburban homesteads cover the ochre land. Once a lush meadow fed by the Colorado River, Death Vegas Valley now heavily mediates its lushness within golf courses and personal pools. Chlorinated water saturates the landscape, evaporating into the crisp desert air.



Detail from Death Vegas Valley 79.5" x 271" acrylic and oil on linen, 2016

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