

ABSTRACT

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I see my work as intentionally mistaken metaphors about the rural/suburban American landscape. Infecting burlap sacks of tobacco leaves with vinyl siding within the privileged frame of the gallery, I create a catalyst for multivalent readings and multiple meanings. Wrapping straw bales with Wal-Mart brand plastic wrap creates a new object—a simulated product generated from the dialectical material interaction of the suburban/agricultural and the agricultural/suburban. These aforementioned materials act as visual metaphors that could easily be mistaken for metallic forms or plastic rope. This visual slippage allows for a pseudo-narrative to wind its way through the work. The hope is that the works that I create act as reflective symbols to an audience, who I believe at their core are symbol-mongers, while at the same time presenting an everydayness. This everydayness would be like the smell of Sunday dinner in the living room.

LANDSCAPE AS SYMBOL

By

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Preface

Home. It still represents one of the key concepts about how people construct themselves. Where is my home? Where am I from? Do I live in a place I consider my home? Am I proud of where I am from or where I currently live? All of these questions address a key cog in how individuals perceive themselves. We will observe how this process of reflecting on my idea of home, the landscape I associate with it and symbols that generate meaning for me have been brought about through my work.

I consider my home to be a tobacco farm in Mebane, North Carolina. This piece of land has been in my family for at least 200 years. I have never lived on this farm. Growing up I spent time at the farm but I never stayed for very long. It was on this 120 acre rolling plot of land that I remember learning how to bait a fish hook and shoot a rifle: Both southern rights of passage. At the farm I went with my father to split firewood for the winter, and whenever I return North Carolina I want to visit this place. I associate this landscape with my idea of home.

I use the image of this ever-changing landscape as a point of reference in my work. In particular, the landscape that sits between rural and suburban is undergoing deep-seated change due to market pressures. Areas like Bentonville, Arkansas, home of the corporate headquarters of Wal-Mart, that people would have once thought too remote to be of any significance to the world are now key seats of power. Bentonville is the new version of a company town, not solely relying on a single

manufacturer for economic production but instead a transnational corporation. The model of rapid suburbanization personified by the “big box” retailer is now an American way of life. And I am a product of this way of life.

This big box symbol within the image of landscape, or landscapes, is a complex and contradictory systems of symbols that are metaphors for a majority of America. This thesis touches on two trains of thought before turning to an analysis of my work.

First, I explore is the American vernacular landscape. Second, I investigate the concept of the mistaken metaphor. My work has brought me to these ideas over the past three years.

My work positions itself between the rural and the suburban and the tangible and the nostalgic; it simultaneously touches on all these variables and maintains a humanistic perspective. The synthetic landscape currently being infected with new forms of simulation provides material for me to excavate and transform.

An agricultural life is lost to history as a new set of suburban lives begins with hopes of their own.

Dedication

For Tamara.

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- 1) *Straw bales n' Steel***
straw bales, steel, mud, 2003
10' x 10' x 12'



- 2) *Tobacco Panels***
tobacco leaves, 2004
4' x 4'



- 3) *Cabin***
plastic wrap, wood, 2005
10' x 10' x 10'



4) Cabin

interior corner detail image
plastic wrap, wood, 2005



5) Silo

plastic wrap, straw bales, 2006
9' x 6' radius



6) Satchel

vinyl siding, tobacco leaves, 2006
dimensions variable



7) *Big Wheels*
straw bales, saran wrap, 2007
dimensions variable



8) *Home Sweet Home*
vinyl siding, tobacco leaves, burlap sack, 2007
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9) *Home Sweet Home* (detail)
vinyl siding, tobacco leaves, burlap sack, 2007
dimensions variable



10) *Log Wall*

vinyl siding, wood, rub n' buff, 2007
dimensions variable



Chapter 1: American Landscape

The idea of landscape occupies a predominate role in the social construct of reality in the United States, particularly in those parts of the country outside of the urban centers. The way we live, the housing that was and currently is constructed for us in which to live in is powerfully influenced by the pastoral ideal and the hope of framing an ideal landscape; almost every American town has an Elm St., Maple St., and an Oak St., whether or not these trees are indigenous to the area.

Furthermore, the idea of landscape is one of art's most prevalent contributions to Western culture. As the vernacular architectural historian, J.B. Jackson observes, "First it (landscape) meant a picture of a view; then the view itself. We went into the country and discovered beautiful views, always remembering the criteria of landscape beauty as established by critics and artists."¹ Though contemporary art's current interpretation of landscape is radically different from the 18th century, this visual archetype forcefully remains with us to this day. The synthetic imagery that was reflected back to the world through the intentional artistic omission of unsightly details, such as muddy roads, visually articulated the landscape as concept, motivating individuals to manipulate the earth to reflect the paintings. Furthermore Jackson states, "...the formula landscape as a composition of man-made spaces on

¹ John Brinckerhoff Jackson, "The Word Itself," *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, (New Haven, Ct.: Yale University Press, 1984) 3.

the land is more significant than it first appears...a landscape is not a natural feature of the environment but a synthetic space...”²

The agrophilia that predominates the American landscape dramatically distinguishes it from its European counterpart in Western culture. Verticality and density are the hallmarks of the European urbanism. Horizontality is the predominate image of a majority of American geography. The origins of this horizontal aspect are easily spotted. When the United States was originally colonized European settlers were greeted by huge tracts of land by their standards. This coupled with a predominantly agricultural economy helped shape a flat, low, horizontal landscape with small towns sporadically located to facilitate commerce.

Sameness has always pervaded the American landscape. Simply drive from one small town to another and they will all run together. “Much as the Roman traveler found reassurance in the identical grid layouts...the traveler in the United States finds evidence wherever he goes of a specifically national style of spatial organization.”³

Contemporary development practices only reinforce this agrophilia. Farm land is now purchased by developers, roads are cut, parking lots are paved and low, big box, centers of convenience are built. In the mountains of West Virginia former coal strip mining sites now are home to movie theaters. Spectacle is anchored in the horizontal, synthetic landscape to create a new form of simulation. I would argue the grand

² Jackson 8.

³ John Brinckerhoff Jackson, “Agrophilia, or the Love of Horizontal Spaces,” *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, (New Haven, Ct.: Yale University Press, 1984) 67.

nature of this exhibition of the artificial was originally perfected in America (Las Vegas), and has spread throughout the country side at varying scales. Whether they are casinos or Wal-Marts, these centers are cultural icons, status symbols in the landscape. Ask any local from a small town where the nearest, new “Wally World” is and they will be able to point it out to you – most with some degree of pride.

Chapter 2: Symbol-Mongers and Mistaken Metaphors

Art and its reflective act of communication that is fundamental to human understanding. Everyone forms opinions on the art, “Art and raising children, everybody is an expert.”⁴ To put it another way, I refer to Walker Percy’s essay *The Delta Factor*, “The truth is that man’s capacity for symbol-mongering in general and language in particular is so intimately part and parcel of his being human, of his perceiving and knowing, of his very consciousness itself, that it is all but impossible for him to focus on the magic prism through which he sees everything else.”⁵ I include the study of art in this “magic prism”. Symbols and visual communication are central our understanding of ourselves, though no one has truly been able to explain why. Artists have the unique ability to provide these meanings, producing objects/images/happenings, etc. through a number of various strategies.

One of these strategies to which my work has taken me to is the idea of the intentionally mistaken visual metaphor. Metaphors assert identities between two or more different things. An initially mistaken visual metaphor alleges a relationship between two or more symbols, generating a new object that in turn has the capacity to generate new meanings beyond the artist’s intention.

Percy illustrates this idea in a story he writes about a hunting trip he took in south Alabama in the 1920’s with his father:

⁴ I attribute this quote, and many others, to W.C. Richardson. I am not sure if he is the primary author but I do know he is the individual that shared this idea with me and for that he deserves some form a credit.

⁵ Walker Percy, “The Delta Factor,” *The Message in the Bottle, How Queer Man is, How Queer Language is, and What One Has to Do with the Other*, (New York: The Noonday Press, 1976) 29.

I remember hunting as a boy in south Alabama with my father and brother and a Negro guide. At the edge of some woods we saw a wonderful bird. He flew as swift and straight as an arrow, then all of a sudden folded his wings and dropped like a stone into the woods. I asked what the bird was. The guide said it was a blue-dollar hawk. Later my father told me the Negroes had got it wrong: It was really a blue darter hawk. I can still remember my disappointment at the correction.⁶

As Percy begins his essay in earnest he articulates his position more succulently, “Metaphor has scandalized philosophers, including both scholastics and semioticists, because it seems wrong: It asserts an identity between two different things. And it is wrongest when it is most beautiful...This element of outlandishness has resulted in philosophers washing their hands of beauty and literary men being glad they have.”⁷ The artist’s interjection of this wrongness opens symbols up for new investigations.

A stellar example of the wrongness of a metaphor is seen in Robert Gober’s 2005 show at Matthew Marks Gallery in New York. In this show, Gober installs a project that manipulates a series of metaphors to signify a church. The manipulation of individual elements then opens the viewer up to new meanings. The bench forms on the floor, creating an aisle that leads the viewer to a crucifix with a decapitated Jesus on the cross and water coming out of his nipples. To the left of the cross is a handmade version of plastic lawn chair. The entire show is an essay in symbols and mistaken metaphors. In my work, I use the same strategy incorporating symbols from the rural/suburban landscape.

⁶ Walker Percy, “Metaphor as Mistake,” *The Message in the Bottle, How Queer Man is, How Queer Language is, and What One Has to Do with the Other*, (New York: The Noonday Press, 1976) 64.

⁷ Percy 66.



Robert Gober at Matthew Marks, 2005, detail



Robert Gober at Matthew Marks, 2005

Chapter 3: Progression Through Process

My work over the last three years has brought me to a point of understanding my interest with the American landscape and its contradictory symbolic meanings. The acts of building, stacking and wrapping have proven intuitive for me. My material selections are determined somewhat by my feeling of nostalgia and loss when considering the suburbanization of the rural landscape. The intention of the work is to offer a frame in which to consider the issues of landscape and how they function as a symbolic field and backdrop for our collective histories.



Straw bales n' Steel was the first piece in which I was confronted with the nostalgic concern for the rural matters. The straw bale itself is a symbol of the rural/suburban dialogue. Often considered rural in origin, straw bales are now most often encountered by people at suburban landscaping

spread on their lawns, to hold down grass seed nurseries and purchased by people to quintessential suburban lawn. As building blocks, the straw bales created a sizable tower, encasing steel plate and rendering the steel ornamental.

The series of *Tobacco Panels* allowed me to focus and meditate on a symbolically loaded material that has formed the historical spine for my family and my home. Soaking dehydrated tobacco leaves in a sink to give them new life, the process of



peeling individual leaves from one another and carefully placing them in a stack to be quickly adhered with mud to each other on a panel. I studied the formal quality of each leaf, their flesh like texture and vein structure. The tactile delicacy of the leaf left me with a new aesthetic appreciation of it.



To stop the consideration of my connection with rural America at such a naturalistic place would deny what rural America is at this stage of development. *Cabin* allowed me to weave together two

seemingly dissimilar elements, which actually coexist in the current rural/suburban landscape-generic brand plastic wrap and split wood. The process of splitting the wood connected me to my childhood and the expeditions my father and I would take to cut down and split wood for the winter.



Structurally the process of wrapping the wood manically generated knuckle like logs that when formed an enclosure that brought to mind everything from log cabins to “Lincoln Log,” a popular toy in my

youth. Infected with plastic, the piecemeal wood log appears smooth and pristine as with most plastic exteriors, the wood interior of each log rotted. The simulated skin never revealed the material condition of its infrastructure. This is a direct inversion of the current state of most cabins you encounter in the country. These ruins are beautifully weathered and visibly decayed to the point of collapse. Functionally no longer needed, they stand as imperfect reminders of lives lost to history.

The combination of the manic wrapping and the straw bales was the genesis of *Silo*. Twisting a straw bale around a jig, the plastic wrap actually holds contorted form of the straw bale. Post-redneck legos, the contorted straw bale lends itself to endless assemblies. *Silo* was the first construction. Silos operate much as cabins do in the



contemporary rural landscape, mostly serving as ruins that remind the public of yesteryear. Their historical significance goes beyond serving as a rural icon. Silos were one of the primary icons that Le Corbusier and other modernist architects drew on for inspiration.

Satchel marks a foray into a new realm of material manipulation and symbolism for me. Working directly with vinyl siding, this environmentally toxic, symbolically charged suburban material marks a distinct shift from previous metal



casting experiments with the material. Forging a tobacco satchel out of vinyl siding, manipulating the material to resemble the burlap sack in which the tobacco leaves are typically carried, has brought about a new phase of my work.

Big Wheels, Home Sweet Home and *Wall Logs* are the three pieces I offer for my thesis exhibition. These three pieces represent a visual language that is self-aware of



Big Wheels, 2007



Home Sweet Home, 2007



Log Wall, 2007



Home Sweet Home (detail), 2007

its grounding. I finally feel as if I am in dialogue with the work, not simply making in order to understand. It is my hope that the intellectual framework provided for the work provides insight into my motivation for creating the pieces and the symbolic narratives I attempt to frame.

Bibliography

Jackson, John Brinckerhoff. *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*. New Haven, Ct.: Yale University Press, 1984.

Percy, Walker. *The Message in the Bottle, How Queer Man is, How Queer Language is, and What One Has to Do with the Other*. New York: The Noonday Press, 1976.