LANDSCAPE AS MEANS TO UNDERSTANDING PLACE

MASTER’S THESIS

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ABSTRACT

The series Nature's Colors, the installation American Horizons, and the video Outlining Prospect concentrate on re-presentations of landscape. Nineteenth century American landscape painting, the contemporary use of nature in interior design, and a desire to inhabit uninhabitable spaces inspire these works. The visual representations of landscapes including tangible boundaries, such as mountains and rivers, and intangible boundaries of perception, such as personal and national identities, are primary conceptual concerns of each piece. Beginning with the realization that landscape imagery is largely arbitrated by culture, I have attempted with this body of work to uncover the power of attitude to affect the perception of surroundings.
Dedicated to my brother, Jake,

who for many years shared with me the same scenes and views.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I focus on the three series of work included in the Thesis Exhibition because they exemplify my body of work within the graduate program. To highlight my works' interrelatedness and to reduce repetition, Chapter two explains the commonalities among the series of works. Chapters three through five focus on each of the series. I have divided each chapter into two sections. In order to draw attention to details that I consider important, in one section I focus on describing the artwork and discussing the meaning culled from the visual. In the other subsection I will concentrate on the process of creating the artwork, both the physical and the research processes, and the meaning that follows from my processes. The meanings in both sections will be based on my interpretations and connections I have found to contemporary art and art criticism. Depending on the artwork or series, I have changed the order to highlight the most significant aspects and meanings of the work. Since the order is not consistent, I include subheadings labeling these sections. After each of these chapters, I include images of the relevant art work. Chapter six concludes the essay by discussing what I've learned through this process.
CHAPTER 2
COMMONALITY AMONG WORKS

Description

These works are based on representations of landscape. The series Nature's Colors is derived entirely from representations of landscapes from photographic reproductions of nineteenth century American landscape paintings. Similarly, the series American Horizons acquires all the landscapes utilized in Nature's Colors and additionally, thirteen other landscape paintings from the nineteenth century as reference for the horizon lines written in text on semi-transparent sheets of glassine. The two layers of interior wall paint behind the sheets of text are based on photographic representations of the backyard and field beyond the backyard of the house where I grew up on the north side of Columbus, Ohio. Outlining Prospect from my video series is a digital representation of the field previously described.

Representations are an important aspect of my work. The historical paintings used are disseminated through reproductive means. I understand these paintings not as paintings but generally as images in a book or on a computer screen or projection. I have been removed from the original artwork or
representation, thus even more so from the original landscape. This removal is commonly felt regarding sense of place, or at least, sense of place beyond what is known, and what is best known for me is central Ohio.

In dealing with multiple representations as reference for the work created, re-presentation is also a commonality among works. Re-presentation, that is, to present more than once, is often realized in tandem with the title of the works. In Nature's Colors, the title of the works are derived from the description beneath the image of the original painting in a book, so that the new title reads as follows: the artist, the original title of the work, and the date, just as it would in the book from which the image is gleaned. Including, for example, Thomas Cole in a title leads to the realization that not only is the paper paint sample construction referencing a particular landscape, but also it is referencing or rather re-presenting a landscape based on a landscape painting (or more specifically from an image of the original landscape painting).

The re-presentation of nineteenth century American landscape paintings, though altered in material and/or scale, provide an important recognition of their creation concurrent with a particular culture during a particular time. This re-presentation also illustrates the shift in value and regard of landscape as an artistic concern from one time to the next.

I am interested in the attempt to attain objectivity through removal and reproduction and compare elements of subjectivity through representation and re-presentations; how and where subjectivisms seep into the creation of art.
Also, how these delineations from objectivity speak to notions of desire and longing: to make visible the way things are seen or can be seen based on perception.

All work includes landscape imagery of physical elements characteristic of various American topographies. Landscape as representation was utilized in conjunction with notions of place: ownership of place, value of place, and entering place. Landscape also served as a catalyst for understanding place and its significance in relation to identity and perception of locating one's self relative to place. Also, all the works present a seemingly untouched image of place and an emphasis on natural, non-human constructions. Ironically, these works are completely constructed and fabricated by my skewed perception and my hand.

I limited my subject to landscape in order to understand perceptions of place through a picture, which depicts both scenery and limitless expanse stretching into the boundless reaches of the horizon. I also chose landscape because it is so closely linked to Western expansion, colonialism, and development, and (as recognized more recently) a genre propagating national identity, ownership, and sense of self. Also, because landscape does not only serve as a locator, but also as an ascriber of a particular value set to a place, it is subjective in representation.

Although this chapter is titled "Commonality Among Works," the horizon line is extremely prevalent in Outlining Prospect and American Horizons and will be discussed here. Janine Antoni's piece titled Touch was very instrumental for
me to better understand the power of the horizon and how it encompasses our hopes and desires for the seemingly impossible. On the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) website for the *Art: 21* program, a transcript of an interview with Janine Antoni touches upon some ideas related to the horizon line that are applicable to my work. The following excerpt highlights the most important ideas,

For me the horizon was out there. It's a very hopeful image; it's about the future, about the imagination. And so for me to walk in this place seemed very appropriate... It made sense for me to go back to this horizon, this ocean that I had looked at my whole life. I realized that although I probably could have manipulated the video as I was walking all the time on the horizon, I thought it would have much more tension if I could walk along the rope and as it dipped that—just for a moment—I would touch the horizon, which would really talk about the incredible struggle to get to that place of the imagination. I call the piece 'Touch' because it is about that moment or that desire to walk on the horizon, which is obviously an impossibility and only an illusion that can be accomplished through the video camera. And you can see I'm hardly balancing there in that place of my desire. Thinking about what the horizon means to us, it's sort of a place of contemplation... But for me, I'm interested in it as a place that doesn't really exist. That if we were to try to go to that place, the horizon would just recede further.

The concept of a horizon as a thing rather than an actual place, or at least not an actual place that can be physically occupied, is fascinating. This fascination is further provoked by the representation of a place or landscape not physically inhabitable, since it is merely a representation rather than the actual site. These considerations inspire notions of the fantastic, the impossible, and a yearning if not to occupy the spaces of a landscape painting or a horizon physically, then to do so either through process or illusion.
Process

Since viewing things from a distance can help to create objectivity, in each of these series I use various methods of representation and re-presentation to create distance from the original landscape. The physical process of creating the works varies in methods and materials; however, having the image removed from its original context through reproduction creates a part of that objectivity which I seek in this work. The methods for reproduction are varied. The wall painting was created through projection of a photographic image of the landscape and traced where the landscape elements touch the sky. The video was created by tracing the horizon as seen from the camera’s viewfinder onto a transparent surface. The text on the glassine was carefully hand written by surveying the horizon of the reproduced image in a book. The miniature landscape constructions were created in part by thoroughly matching the colors from photographic re-presentations published in books with colors from the paper paint samples stocked in hardware stores.

The processes by which the works were created are integral to their meaning. One can never experience the landscape the way the painter did while recording (or attempting to record) the sublime on site. Many of the nineteenth century American landscape painters strove to create representations that corresponded with the topographical accuracy of the site. The requirement of accuracy coincided with westward expansion and the need for concise representations of the land as a means of surveying the places of impending
inhabitation. However objective this endeavor may seem, “the idea that one can eliminate value judgments in the act of conveying a picture of the landscape, however objectively constituted, might be difficult to sustain." ¹ This body of work is a combination of drawn horizon lines, images of sublime landscape paintings cut out of paper paint samples, and digital constructions reiterating the desires of Paradise as idyllic, unaltered land and of Arcadia as the idyllic scene with a self-consciousness of the fragility of the land.² These combinations serve as a point of comparison to romanticized representations of the American landscape and historic ideals. The images I create address the collective longing for mythical place. They assess the nation’s seemingly limitless potential for development. They also present a very Westernized view—from the theorists and writers referenced, to the allusions to paintings, to my own background and location in the world.

Much of my research is informed by postmodern art criticism, identity and cultural politics, urban theory, postcolonial theory, and contemporary capitalism. Research can begin in various ways. For me, it almost always begins prior to the physical production of art and begins with the recognition of a connection between a perception or representation and a place. The idea or the concept is formed, sometimes based on a conversation, or a passage in an essay, or an

advertisement. Then research through text or materials is set in motion with near simultaneity. The research informs the initial concept and vice versa. The concept shifts or expands in relation to the research conducted. For this body of work, a history of landscape in art, particularly nineteenth century American landscape painting was researched with as much fervor as was modern and contemporary theory of landscape, site-specific art, community-based art, public art, installation art, conceptual and process art, and land art. Actually, research, for me, is not separate from the art making process; it is the first step in the process and continues to guide and inform the physical process of creating any artwork.

Through the research conducted and the works created, I have arrived at a number of realizations: representations of place are intrinsic to the geography of hope and desire; the geography of hope and desire is typically not the geography of reality; representation replaces the actualization of the geography of hope and desire; capitalism perpetuates geographical homogeneity while simultaneously creating regional stereotypes; transient experience with place contributes to a lack of identity resulting in a feeling of not belonging anywhere, which spurs attempts at realizing the uniqueness of place.
CHAPTER 3
NATURE'S COLORS AND TRANSLATING THE SUBLIME INTO THE PICTURESQUE

Description

The series titled Nature's Colors are comprised of cut paper paint samples. Some works contain over thirty separate colors, each of which is included as a layer of paper. The end result is a collaged work four inches by five inches in dimension. At a distance of four feet or more, these pieces are unmistakably perceived as landscape. Upon closer inspection, they become abstracted, relegated to various cut shapes of flat color. Yet it is the layering of these paper paint samples that creates depth and is consistent with perspective; the closest paint samples are in the foreground of the composition, the furthest away in the background. The cut portion of these pieces is further amplified by the white edges. These edges are a result of revealing the white paper underneath of the samples of paint. The size of the pieces was determined by the largest paper paint sample available from the hardware store. Coincidentally, the size is similar to that of a postcard or photograph, which are both relics of places traveled or sights seen. When brought or sent home as totemic emblems
of experience, they become symbols of conquest, similar to the American landscapes referenced in *Nature's Colors*.

The white lines of paper halo almost every cut, creating an aura around each element of the landscape: the tree line, the mountain range, and the banks of the lake. They, along with the flat colors and planar nature of the paper, serve as a barrier or shield, protecting the image from penetration and interrupting the seamless transition of colors possible with blending paint. This outlining reinforces the notion that these places are impenetrable, that one cannot physically enter these landscapes. They are a re-presentation of a reproduction of a representation of a landscape. In other words, they are delineated from an actual landscape, which was represented in a painting, the painting was later photographed, and the image from that photograph was printed into a book that I then used as a reference to create the pieces. Due to these layers of reproduction, the landscapes meant to be depicted cannot actually exist the way they are depicted. The cut out when coupled with the readymade, color-coded aspect of the paint sample lends itself to decoupage craft, or perhaps even the scrapbook die-cut, both of which are related to design and decoration, and perhaps even to the home. These associations demonstrate how the intrinsic desire to occupy an environment causes attempts to create environments that one can attempt to occupy through representational means, but can never truly inhabit.
Process

The selection of each color sample is based on photographic reproductions of specific paintings. Beginning with a color of the background of a painting and ending with a color in the foreground of a painting, these paper paint samples are cutout using an X-Acto blade, glued, and stacked one on top of the other. This work is based on representations of sublime landscape paintings in the United States from approximately 1820 to 1880. Thomas Cole, Albert Bierstadt, Frederic Erwin Church, Asher Brown Durand, John Frederick Kensett, and Sanford Robinson Gifford created the paintings I reference. Finding paintings to reference from this time period was integral because this era explored notions of national identity signified by American empire, westward expansion, and Manifest Destiny. Most importantly, the paintings created during this time prescribed a set of values regarding the frontiers depicted, thus becoming agents of empire. These artists often executed visual representations of wilderness only recently discovered by Americans. These paintings prompted further exploration of those landscapes, advancing the development of those areas.

A brochure I found while in the paint section of Lowe's hardware store inspired this series. The brochure created by the brand Olympic Paints had text on the cover that read “A shade borrowed from nature...” Upon opening the pamphlet the text continued “…was just what I needed to bring the beauty of the great outdoors in, and create a natural environment.” The inside of the pamphlet
also contained small samples of paint as representations of a color directly
gleaned from the natural landscape. Stacked alongside these brochures were
the paper paint samples themselves.

I later came across an advertisement in a magazine for Valspar Paints.
The ad depicts an iceberg with a rectangular chunk of the pale blue frozen mass
missing, only to be found recontextualized as a paper paint sample next to the
slogan at the bottom of the page, which read, "Bring the beautiful, durable colors
of nature home." The value of these advertisements propagating the stealing of
colors directly from the landscape in order to enjoy the beauty of nature at home
was becoming clear. I wondered if it truly was the color that made the difference,
rather than the actual paint. I also considered why it was necessary to remove a
particular color from the natural scene from which it came. Working with these
considerations, I created a series of miniature landscapes using the paper paint
samples provided by these two brands of paint from the hardware store.

It is interesting that the national landscape of the Yellowstone, the
Catskills, or the Grand Canyon could serve as potential color samples for interior
paints. Though artists of the nineteenth century used paint to convey the
landscape, my consideration focuses on the construction of a landscape using
paint samples. Through this visual and written piece of advertising, a new
consideration was given to landscape as design element. The preselected colors
claiming to be either inspired by or directly referencing nature seems ironic when
compounded by the fact that these colors are meant to don the walls of the
interior. The public exterior of natural landscape can now be brought inside the private domain of the home. Since the desire to claim nature as a decorative element is illusory, I decided paint samples are the perfect medium to reinforce values clearly propagated in the advertisements.

Figure 1. *Nature’s Colors* series.
Figure 2. *Albert Bierstadt*, “Looking Down Yosemite Valley,” 1865.
CHAPTER 4
AMERICAN HORIZONS AND COMPARING
THE HISTORIC TO THE CONTEMPORARY

Description

The work *American Landscapes* is a wall installation of a painted landscape mural and twenty sheets of glassine paper with horizon lines of text written in graphite. The painted portion of this work is in two separate colors and depicts the trees and ground that make up a landscape familiar to me, leaving the white of the gallery wall to represent the sky. The painting is flat, planar, and comparable in appearance (though vastly different in scale and application) to the cut pieces from *Nature's Colors*.

The particular way the wall is activated in this work is generally understood to include the wall as part of the composition. In this way, the wall is acting in exact opposition to the paint advertisement and is instead utilized as blocking the sort of illusion that an image on canvas offers. Also, the wall painting is more permanent. Even when it is eventually painted over and is obscured, the paint application still remains. Including painted imagery on the wall also stimulates awareness of the architecture in the space where the work is installed, as does the rustling sheets of horizon-lined text. The architecture of the building also
activates the work in the way the public is expected to navigate a gallery. In this case, walking along a wall. Walking along the wall of the work is similar to the way the horizons of the wall and sheets of glassine were created, which is also similar to reading and writing in that it is executed top to bottom, left and right.

On top of the wall hangs tiny text written to form the shape of a specific horizon. Each sheet is 36" x 57". The twenty separate sheets of paper are adhered to the wall and layered over each other. The undulating line and shape of the paper leads the viewer to the realization that it is a landscape. Each horizon drawing of text on glassine is lined up, overlapped, or crisscrossed with either a portion of the painted horizon on the wall or the hand-writing horizon on another sheet. Beneath these drawings is a painted landscape on the wall. Since the glassine is semi-transparent, the colors on the wall are visible through the paper.

This piece serves as a metaphor for what these great American landscapes do to personal landscapes. In a contemporary sense, great American landscapes can be understood to be propaganda, since in comparison the landscapes experienced daily seem ordinary and of less worth than the extraordinary images of the American landscape as depicted during the nineteenth century. These landscapes propagate a hierarchy of nature. The relationship of the glassine to the wall is a metaphor for the relationship of canonical American landscape to personal landscapes or vernacular landscapes. The sheets of horizon lined text obscuring the painted landscape, signifying that

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the grand landscape is more important than the common landscapes. I develop another meaning with the text of the horizons, which describe what landscape does. Since I am consciously trying to do with American Landscapes something not contemplated in the copied text, by the arrangement of the piece I am creating a situation in which canonical American landscapes do the opposite of what I previously explained. A common reaction to the work is frustration with the semitransparent surface obscuring the painted image, creating a desire to see what is behind the glassine – a vernacular, personal landscape. Usually the reaction to viewing the traditional landscape paintings does not provoke the desire to see one’s backyard. The meaning of horizon, for this piece, goes back to propaganda that was part of the culture of the time and that is obscuring an image of a personal horizon. The horizon from the great American Landscapes represent certain hopes and desires. In this way, these hopes and desires embodied in the landscapes of the past must be confronted prior to recognizing or seeing the hopes and desires embodied in the landscapes of the present.

Process

Both the colors of paint for American Landscapes were selected from an aforementioned brand, Valspar, but unlike Nature’s Colors, the primary reason why they were chosen had less to do with palette and more to do with name. The color painted in the foreground is titled “Aspiration” and the color painted behind it is titled “Possibilities.” The titles of the paint selected for this
installation, though not posted for the viewer, where the natural choice. This landscape, which marked the boundaries of my childhood, is indicative of aspiration and desire to go beyond their borders. These feelings are similar to those perpetuated by the paint brand advertisements, in that the natural exterior is brought into the unusual interior of the white cube via wall painting.

Each of the drawn horizon lines of text on a sheet correlate to the horizon's of twenty separate nineteenth century American landscape painting reproductions. These images were from many of the same artist's works that were referenced in the Nature's Colors series of miniature landscapes. The size of the sheet was determined by the common ratio of the original landscape paintings: 5:8. I used six of the original nine theses concerning landscape from W.J.T Mitchell's book Landscape and Power. Mitchell is a professor at the University of Chicago, who, as is stated on his University of Chicago homepage, "is associated with the emergent fields of visual culture and iconology . . . [and] is known especially for his work on the relations of visual and verbal representations in the context of social and political issues." The theses were circumscribed in the shape of various horizons from nineteenth century American landscape paintings. These theses were always written in the same way. Beginning with the first thesis, the following theses were written sequentially and repeated, if necessary, to complete the length of the horizon line from the painting. This process is similar to repeatedly writing the same text in an attempt to remember them or give them resonance. In this way, the glassine sheets with
text are more of a sketch and not quite as formed as the paint on the wall; a method employed in an attempt not only to understand, but also to intrinsically know the text I am writing.

My approach to landscape comes from understanding it as both tangible elements such as trees and mountains and intangible elements such as culture and identity, and recognizing that landscape is actually an amalgam of the tangible and intangible. I found these ideas to resonate with W.J.T. Mitchell’s theses on landscape:

Landscape is not a genre of art but a medium. Landscape is a medium of exchange between the human and the natural, the self and the other. As such, it is like money: good for nothing in itself, but expressive of a potentially limitless reserve of value. Landscape is a natural scene mediated by culture. It is both a represented and presented space, both a signifier and a signified, both a frame and what a frame contains, both a real place and its simulacrum, both a package and the commodity inside the package. Landscape is a medium found in all cultures. Landscape is a particular historical formation associated with European imperialism. Landscape is an exhausted medium, no longer viable as a mode of artistic expression. Like life, landscape is boring; we must not say so.¹

These abridged theses exemplify contemporary attitudes regarding the use of landscape in art. “Landscape, which has long meant either the real countryside or the pictured representation of it, is in effect the combination of the two, or the dissolving of the two together, ‘a natural scene mediated by culture.’”²

Considering this melding or hybrid notion of landscape as both an actual place and a representation of a place stemming from a cultural perspective, I began the first step in creating the series American Horizons.

This notion of landscape goes back to the central realizations acquired from research and outlined in chapter two of this paper. It was fortunate to stumble upon this writing so similar to my own thoughts. Applying the theses to my work served as a means to better understand what Mitchell meant. It also served as a means to compare them to nineteenth century American landscape, and as a way to incorporate them into my lexicon.

Figure 3. American Horizons installation image.
Figure 4. A detail image from *American Horizons*. 
CHAPTER 5
OUTLINING PROSPECT AND ILLUSIONISTIC MIMICRY

Description

Outlining Prospect is displayed in the Thesis Exhibition as a video on a monitor in DVD format at approximately three minutes in length and is looped to repeat. This video is an on-site performance of outlining, obscuring, and revealing an actual landscape using Plexiglas and paint. As the video begins, the monitor displays a green field lined in the background with trees. A bird flies into frame and the faint swaying of trees in the wind is detected. A hand emerges from the bottom of the screen. It is holding an implement. Gauging the horizon, the hand steadily and carefully draws a black mark above the tree line. The hand continues to draw a line, occupying the space between the tips of the trees and the edge of the sky. Leaving a dark paint trail behind, the hand pauses periodically to reposition, to tighten its grip, or retrace its steps. After completing the outline across the length of the horizon, the hand moves away to again reveal the landscape with the residue of the performance seemingly hovering above.

This performance embodied repetitive themes of making something not real, real or making the intangible, tangible. Yet, it is a real American landscape.
It is both a reminder of my childhood hopes and desires and an actual place whose meaning changed over time, which is something that cannot be captured. I cannot go back to that place as it existed in my childhood just as a horizon is a place I cannot reach.

Process

Examining a familiar place is also an examination of notions of personal identity. This work began as a way to integrate an interest in occupying spaces and places seemingly uninhabitable with an interest in familiar landscapes, which evoke another sort of yearning or desire to reach beyond and transform the boundaries of that environment. I literally began close to home, choosing the landscape of my childhood as a backdrop or template to build upon.

In this way, my process is not so dissimilar from a developer, and development or expansion beyond lines of demarcation being particularly important regarding the history and current concerns of suburban sprawl and urban redevelopment and renewal in central Ohio, as well as for my own history and the history of the neighborhood where I grew up.

In order to give the illusion of a traced horizon, this video required a more elaborate set up than what appeared. An easel was constructed upon which to place the sheet of glass. The camera was placed in front of the transparent surface to both record the performative gesture and to serve as a membrane through which to view the landscape, since I looked through the viewfinder at the
horizon line as it was traced. The line that trails behind my hand is awkward and clumsy. Often, the dark residue or mark left behind, mapping the trajectory of my journey, does not match up exactly with the space between the tops of the trees and the sky.

This performance inserted both art process and art media into the landscape. The act of art making, drawing the horizon with paint, obscures the view of the horizon at the same time it forces our attention to it. It also forces our attention to the mistakes or subjective liberties taken while it was being represented. Though given a concentrated effort, the execution of the drawn line matching up to the horizon does not always fair well. Sometimes the line jets off from the tops of the trees, or misses a particular branch all together. Perhaps the reason why the drawn horizon line does not always match up with the actual horizon line is that this place I thought to know so well I did not know well any longer. The place had changed, and I had changed. Or perhaps the very deliberate tracing did not always coincide with the actual horizon because I was not viewing the landscape in a truly en plein air approach. The viewfinder on the camera negated my view. I saw the landscape through a monitor as I was attempting to outline it, know it, and claim it.

The marks left behind from my hand outlining, or tracing the horizon on a transparent surface is an attempt to both understand that horizon and make it tangible as an actual place. The irony is that the notion of horizon line as place is made visible through illusionistic means, in this case drawing. It is also an
embodiment of aspiration: yearning to go beyond relegated space, or to evoke social and economic upward mobility by searching beyond the landscape extending as far as the eye can see. The viewfinder on the camera and the sheet of glass are both picture planes: containers or crucibles for marks, and obstructions: barriers between nature and me.

Figure 5. A video still from *Outlining Prospect*.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

This series was inspired by explorations of place – through images of place, through art, and through literal places. By searching and researching landscapes past and present, I developed concepts and images into works for this exhibition. This body of work not only explores such places, but also has changed how I see my personal landscape. I imagine these works as an opportunity to change landscape views.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


