

As Landscape

by

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ABSTRACT

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When I was 19, I found my neighbor's body on his front lawn after he committed suicide. After passing that landscape for years, I began viewing it differently. Landscapes have become for me places that hold pain, anguish, and blood in spite of their outward pastoral appearance. Yet, beauty has a way of being indifferent; the sun continues to shine. How we construct a narrative around a place defines our relationship with the landscape.

My work is an investigation into the relationship between landscape and memory and time's effect on the intensity of experience. Like Isca Greenfield's paintings of beach scenes based on vintage photographs, my work also acts "as a parallel to memory - the original event los[ing] details in each iteration or telling."¹As you look from panel to panel, there is a sense of peering out from the passenger seat as you drive by cornfields and small towns at 60 mph. The repetition begs a reconsideration of place and the hidden histories below the surfaces of seemingly mundane landscapes. There is no climax in these paintings. We pass by the site of a suicide and end up right where we started. I have used painting to convey the ineffable relationship between a person and place.

Landscape and painting have been intertwined since the origins of the word "landscape". In this paper, I address the connections between what the landscape means through lived experience and what it then becomes when it is reproduced into a painting. Our cultural and regional conditioning impact the way we perceive landscapes and ultimately affect our impressions and memory of the place thereafter. Primarily, my work attempts to respond to the paradox that exists between the seemingly simple and everyday places we pass by and the cultural and personal complexities interlaced beneath the surface.

¹Schwabsky, Barry. *Landscape Painting Now: From Pop Abstraction to New Romanticism* (Distributed Art Publishers, 2019), 124

CONTENTS

Introduction	i
Ch. 1 Landscape as Painting	ii
Ch. 2 Landscape as Personal.....	viii
Ch. 3 Landscape as Culture.....	xii
Conclusion.....	xxiii
Bibliography.....	xxvii

Introduction

“To be human is to live in a world that is filled with significant places: to be human is to have and to know your place.” -Edward Relph

Topophilia is a word invented by the British poet John Betjeman for a special love for peculiar places. A strong sense of place often becomes mixed with a sense of cultural identity among particular people and a love of certain aspects of a place.² This sense of place is a central theme to *Only Memories Remain*, because the experiences I had growing up in the countryside of northwest Missouri have directly affected the way I interact with the landscapes I have encountered since. I believe that the landscape(s) one has lived in defines one’s sense of place, how they move through the world, and potentially their behavior as well. In this paper I will discuss my personal connection to the Missouri landscapes in my paintings, the research supporting claims that geography, specifically psycho-geography, does affect a person’s behavior, and the role landscape painting plays in this through my own work and throughout contemporary landscape painting.

What I find to be so powerful is the possibility of landscapes behaving like their inhabitants and vice versa. I have no clear resolution or enough supporting evidence as to whether or not the landscape truly and quantifiably is able to influence a person’s actions or the opposite. However, I am interested in creating a conversation around the more abstract, yet at times palpable, ways that the landscape has affected my behavior and perceptions. As a romantic, I believe the landscape is able to feel, think, react, and respond just as humans do. There is no separation between what I am capable of feeling and the landscape’s potential to do the same. Throughout this paper, I will present arguments for both propositions — that landscapes have the ability to influence human behavior or that humans are the ones who affect the land — and leave the question unanswered. It is the mystery, as I address later on, that I find so intriguing and which leaves room for a person to freely interpret the landscape as they please, romantically or otherwise. Landscapes are capable of carrying our projections we cast onto them and ultimately influence our perceptions of the world, whether we are aware of it or not.

² Watts, Alan. *In My Own Way* (California; New World Library, 1972) 1

Ch. 1 Landscape as Painting

When the word landscape was introduced to the English vocabulary it was inextricably tied to painting, the former being dependent on the latter.³ Vittoria Di Palma in *Is Landscape...?*, states that the word *land-scape*, deriving from the Dutch *landskip/landskap/landschape*, was used to describe small panel paintings of rural scenery from the Netherlands.⁴ She quotes John Brinckerhoff Jackson, stating the English word landscape was taken from both the Dutch *land*, meaning matter making up the earth, and *scape*, a Germanic suffix denoting a bounded entity.⁵ It is a direct result of its introduction to the English language that the term *landscape* has always harbored an internal duality. It is understood to be both a bounded entity as well as the entirety of the Earth's surface (such as a vista or view) making it susceptible to various representations.⁶

Today, landscape painting can be defined and represented in an infinite number of ways. The most current compendium of landscape painting titled, *Landscape Painting Now*, by Barry Schwabsky, breaks down what he considers the overarching themes of landscape painting, from Pop Abstraction to New Romanticism. To give an impression of the collection, a few chapters are titled *Realism and Beyond*, *Constructed Realities*, and *Abstracted Topographies*. This wide array of landscape paintings and painters opens a world of possibilities to help decontextualize what landscape painting means today. Strong female artists such as Lois Dodd, Maureen Gallace, Gillian Carnegie, Amy Bennet, Isca Greenfield-Sanders, and others provide inclusion where it hasn't always existed in painting. They have forged a path for myself and others to continue this progress. I contribute to the discussion around the everyday landscape, instead of the sublime. My interest lies in the Everyday places me alongside painters such as Gallace, Hockney, and Greenfield. The similarities between Greenfield and myself are many, both of us using the impact of how memories fade and reinvent themselves as we recall a landscape so common to the eye. The 72 panel

³ Di Palma, Vittoria. *Is Landscape... Essays on the Identity of Landscapes: "Is Landscape Painting?"* (New York; Routledge, 2016), 47

⁴ Di Palma, 47

⁵ Di Palma, 47

⁶ Di Palma, 47

paintings of *Only Memories Remain* relate to Hockney's sketchbooks of Yorkshire, or Greenfield's paintings from vintage photographs. Each of us is repeatedly making images of apace in order to better understand our relationship to it and the memories we have created around it.



Hockney, David, *Yorkshire Sketchbook*, 2015



Greenfield-Sanders, Isca. *Yellow Surfboard*, 2015



No. 7, Oil on panel, 9 x 12" 2019

The history and continued revival of the significance of landscape painting has been at the heart of my career as an artist. Landscape painting was close to the only worthy endeavor if one was to study art in the Midwest (according to most who reside there). Consequently, I studied, admired, and created landscape paintings from a very young age. The strong ties and pride many people feel about their land — their home — was the only access point my community had to fine art. So, I painted the landscapes of my youth as an undergraduate and have never stopped.

These Missouri landscapes are so ingrained into my memory that I do not need to revisit each location often in order to paint it. However, for this body of work I have returned to my hometown six times, each visit contributing to a new way of perceiving the place where I spent my formative years. I performed repeated homecomings, time and time again, to a place I thought I had left behind. At first, I treated it as a way of documenting change (and continuity) of a rural landscape. Rural America has tended to be the last to evolve, slowly progressing through the eras, clinging to an imagined and glorified past of “better days” so that when I return not much appears to be different. But the aging process is evident even over a years worth of comparisons. It reminds me of the crows feet around our eyes that become more prominent from birthday to birthday, and quietly announce the passing of time as we look in the mirror begrudgingly. Now that I am an outsider and no longer a native, my eyes are acutely aware and ready to look for what has been altered, crows feet and all. Edward Relph, a Canadian geographer, concurs:

There is a common sensation of returning to a familiar place after an absence of several years and feeling that everything has changed even though there have been no important changes in its appearance. Whereas before we were involved in the scene, now we are an outsider, and observer, and can recapture the significance of the former place only by some act of memory.⁷

When I return to my studio, I work with the photographs, drawings, and videos I have taken of these places; in addition to my vibrant and evolving memory of the place. This is similar to Peter Doig's studio process, where the initial photographs and memories eventually become distorted through the act of repetition. This approach helps me to give an overall impression of the landscape, like a different version of plein-air painting. The Midwestern landscape — and the events that occurred there — are very peculiar to my life. However, everyone has a relationship — or non-relationship — with their personal geography. My being an outsider to this place allowed me to look with a critical and more objective eye. Yi-Fu Tuan discusses the aesthetic perspective of the tourist, or visitor, in a landscape in his book, Topophilia:

The visitor's evaluation of environment is essentially aesthetic. It is an outsider's view. The outsider judges by appearance, by some formal canon on beauty. A special effort is required to empathize with the lives and values of the inhabitants.⁸

I am both tourist and native, outside and inside, passing through yet firmly rooted. My position is that of someone with one foot grounded in each world, the one within and the one without. It is because of this, having lived and breathed this landscape for 22 years and then left (while so many never do), that I am able to look with both eyes. One eye steeped in empathy and the other objective and distanced. It is here, on the purgatorial fence, that I must sit, watch, and respond.



35 mm photographs of Graham (top/middle) and Skidmore (bottom), Missouri

⁷ Relph, Edward. *Place and Placelessness* (London; Pion, 1976), 31

⁸ Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.; Prentice-Hall, 1974), 64

The landscapes of your youth can become a landmark for personal growth and if/when you return there, your life has changed in even the smallest and sometimes indecipherable ways. Over the years, I have been able to see the regional and cultural identity that comes along with living in a rural landscape. When I left, I wanted to reinvent and distance myself from that sole identity. The new landscapes I inhabited created possibilities and growth for the new aspects of my identity I so desperately desired to have. Thus, when I returned to the Missouri landscape, I could reinterpret and redefine its weight and meaning in my life today. I have traded being a native for being a tourist, someone who never stays for long and to whom details seem unfamiliar. This allowed me to look with a critical eye at a place that has been so challenging to distance myself from.

For this body of work, I was interested in creating images that could carry a soft rumble beneath the surface. The outward appearance needed to be ordinary, the way that it looks when you are driving through a small town, but I was interested in the room a painting can have for mystery and imagination. Throughout my adolescence, my father would send my sisters and I out into the pasture to cut thistles in the summer. As one can imagine, this is not the desired pastime of a 10-15 year-old but there were some days when a large cumulous clouds would pass in front of the sun and cast an immense shadow along the rolling hills of this cow pasture. I used to imagine that I was in Ireland in the 19th century, doing my part with the chores so that the family farm could keep running (I have a large vein of Irish ancestry and had been reading historical period dramas religiously around that time). The ambiguity of that landscape to be able to turn into something else entirely for my young and active imagination behaved in the same manner as when one looks to the clouds to find a dragon or sailboat. This room for mystery is why the landscapes do not have many telling signs of tragedy. Although it is important for me to tell these grave stories of the people in rural northwest Missouri, the landscape is capable of becoming whatever the viewer wants it to be. We project our own experiences onto an artwork and when we travel we project our experiences onto the landscape as well. In Place and Placelessness, Relph, expands on this idea:

Perceptual space is also the realm of direct emotional encounters with the spaces of the earth seam and sky or with built and created spaces. Matore (1962) writes: “We do not grasp space only by our senses... we live in it, we project our personality into it, we are tied to it by emotional bonds; space is not just perceived... it is lived.”⁹

As humans we are bound to the landscape and will always need to relate back to it. In the film *Cold War* by Paweł Pawlikowski, the two lovers, who at different times escape Poland and flee to noncommunist France, cannot stay away from their homeland forever. They return separately and together, time and time again, even though there is risk of labor camps, restricted freedoms, and a dominant regime that has aided in destroying the land they love so much. In the end, after decades of hardships at the hand of the Iron Curtain, they return to the ruins of a church in the countryside, where they first met decades before, taking pills to end their lives in the only place that had held onto the quiet beauty and magic of that distant past — the place they recalled in times of trouble, a landscape where time stood still and created a space for love and magic.

In time-based art, such as films, there is an agreement that viewers must give the piece a designated amount of time in order to experience it fully as it is most often linear. My paintings, while non-linear, also demand time to be spent by the viewer in order to fully engage with them. There is a clear passing of time that occurs in the way I have painted each panel. It suggests that I am an obsessive observer about specific places across different seasons, giving a sense of returning. The paintings harken to the experience of long drives and the time it takes to get from one place to another. David Hockney, when speaking about his series “joiners” (a series of photographs of a subject arranged in a grid), he acknowledges what multiples of an image can do for time spent with a work. He writes:

However, fairly early on I noticed that these joiners also had more presence than ordinary photographs. With five photos, for instance, you were forced to look five times. You couldn't help but look more carefully.¹⁰

⁹ Edward Relph was aligned with other geographers such as Yi-Fu Tuan and Anne Buttimer in the 60s and 70s concerning the significant role place has in the human experience. These were later dubbed “humanist geographers”. *Place and Placelessness* was a response to the dissatisfaction Relph had with the lack of research about the phenomenology of place and aimed to examine the events and meanings of the everyday experience that typically go unnoticed. Relph, 10

¹⁰ Kleon, Austin. “From *Cameraworks* by David Hockney with Laurence Weschler”. *Austin Kleon*. 9 February 2010, tumblr.austinkleon.com/post/380534798



David Hockney, *Pearlblossom Hwy., 11-18th April #2*, 1986



David Hockney, *Sun on the Pool, Los Angeles*, 1982

Time is something all artists want from their viewers. Time to appreciate, to understand, and to discuss. By having many paintings a part of *Only Memories Remain*, I ask the viewers to look, over and over again, and to look more carefully as Hockney suggests. I want the viewer to spend time with each small panel before taking in the work in its entirety. There is the chance that the viewer could feel inundated with images, like the feeling you have when looking at Instagram or other social media sites designed to overload the eye. But my paintings enjoy a slowness of pace and of mark that requires you to stop and take it all in visually and leisurely.

Ch. 2 Landscape as Personal

There are distinct events in my life which directly inform my work and in order to fully understand *Only Memories Remain*, the paintings must be contextualized through these stories. For many years, I either blocked these events from my memory or disregarded their role in my relationship with the landscape. My paintings are my attempt to make visual what that relationship has meant in my life.

I had a neighbor growing up who my father had told me, “was a rough character because life has not been kind to him”. This sufficiently explained to me why he was often standing in the gravel road, belligerently drunk, almost every time my dad and I would drive by in our Ford truck. Even so, I loved admiring his well-manicured and adoringly cared-for gardens in the summer. He was always kind-hearted to us children when he was not on a *bender*. I remember one winter, when I was around 15 years old, we were in the middle of a week-long ice storm and had run out of water. He had let us pump from his well and offered us candies while we waited for the five-gallon buckets to fill. Years later, I had left my parents’ house early on a Sunday morning with my little sister. As we approached the crossroads, I noticed something in his lawn. That is when I saw his body lying on the grassy corner of the bank of his yard, near the gravel road. I thought he had had a stroke or heart attack. That is, until I saw the gun next to him. Afterwards, I could never go by that piece of grass at the four corners up the road from my parents’ house again without a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. Most often, it was a reminder of death and loneliness. Now, it reminds me to continue grieving, for the life that was lost and for the life that could have been so much better. I grieved the loss of my innocence as well. The act of looking at landscapes, however, was a way of dealing with these turbulent emotions. I can never look at a landscape the same way again when I travel. Now when I am in a seemingly bucolic place, I am suspicious of what has occurred on that soil before my arrival. I look at the locals and wonder what they see when they look at that specific strip of land, what flashes before their minds’ eye, and whether it reminds them of something beautiful or something tragic.

The landscape where my neighbor had died is no longer made up of a small lawn with a 200 sq. ft. shack, two large oak trees and a pristine garden in the summers. Those two acres, surrounded by row

crop already, were sold for about \$40,000 and either corn and soybeans are rotated there each year. I was saddened to see those trees absent from the horizon, the peony bushes stripped, and that tractor tire he used as a flower bed tossed away. He had been erased from that landscape, or at least the physical remnants of his life there had been. But I could never forget, and even then, I documented the destruction of that corner of the land, the trees uprooted and splayed horizontally on the dirt just as his body had been. I could not let go of that moment, a moment which had affected my very way of seeing the world. I had painted those four corners before, in my first advanced painting class. It was my symbol of moving on from my childhood (as it was the only road out to the nearest city — or to any city — i.e., my escape from the future I could so easily imagine if I had stayed); it was the path to reinvention and moving up in the world, away from the constraints of farm life. Now, I paint that landscape to remind myself — and others — that there are so many tragedies, so many losses, and so much pain in everyday places.

I only realized later that my upbringing was plagued with the macabre. The neighboring town of Skidmore, where several of my friends lived, had a reputation for the strange and disturbing. In the early 1980s, the town became infamous for “taking the law into their own hands”¹¹ and murdering the town bully, a terrible man who raped, stole, committed arson, and terrorized many of the local residents for years. The law enforcement could never seem to gather enough evidence to convict and send him to prison, and many in the community feared he would burn the small town to the ground eventually. The murder consisted of three bullets to his head, neck, and back, but to this day, no one will say who did it. Local gossip says that the police who arrived on the scene, happy to be rid of this terrible man, tossed the bullet casings (the evidence which would convict the perpetrator(s)) out the window on their way back to the station. When you search, “Skidmore” online you will find articles from the New York Times, CBS News, The Washington Post, and People Magazine, discussing the “town that got away with murder”. Sadly, that is not the only thing that will show up in the Google search¹². In 2001, Branson Perry went to his shed behind his parents’ house in Skidmore one afternoon in April and has never been seen or heard

¹¹ There have been several articles about McElroy’s murder in national news papers as well as a book and film both titled, *In Broad Daylight*. The phrase, “The town that took the law into their own hands” has been used in various instances when describing this event. Thirty years on, there is still no conviction and the town resident’s lips are sealed.

¹² Associated Press. “A Small Town With A History of Violence”. *CBS News*. 18 October 2007. cbsnews.com/news/a-small-town-with-a-history-of-violence/

from again. There is still a sun-faded billboard I used to pass by on the way to school a few miles outside of town with the words:

ENDANGERED MISSING
BRANSON KAYNE PERRY
DISAPPEARED APRIL 11, 2001

If you have seen me or have ANY information that might help in this case, please call 911 or
your local law enforcement agency.

REWARD OFFERED

In 2004, a young pregnant woman had the baby cut out of her stomach in Skidmore. This heinous act was performed by a crazed woman under the guise of an interested buyer for one the young woman's Terriers. The deranged assailant fled with the baby — who survived — and left the pregnant woman to die in her living room, only a few minutes away from her mother's work. There is a monument now, to Bobbie Jo Stinnett, in the center of town. She was twenty-three years old, three years younger than I am now. Her little brother was in the grade below me in school. I remember seeing him in the hallway not long afterwards and realized how impossible it was to fathom what he was feeling. Every time I rode through Skidmore with my parents, I thought of him and what he might see when looking at the town from the backseat of a car.

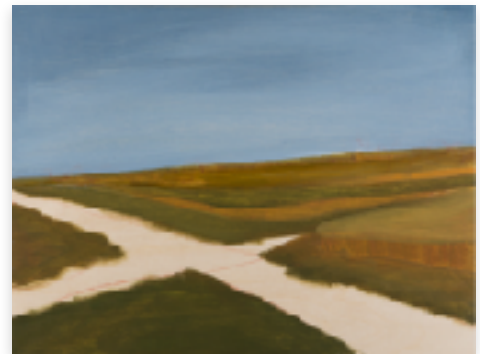
When I was in the 7th grade, a senior at my school committed suicide. My sister had been friends with him. He had gone to a bridge near my parents' house, by the rock quarry, which is now closed. The bridge, reasonably new then, had short sides and stood above the Nodaway River. For the next six years, I would see the graffiti his friends and family left him on the walls of the bridge. "Next 1 4U Pickles" and

“U R a crazy bitch” are a couple that still remain twelve years later, like voicemails from a different life. I cross this bridge every time I drive to my sister’s house in Skidmore. When I leave from my parents’ house, I must pass the eroded earth speckled with orchard and Timothy grass growing in the ditch where Marv, my neighbor, committed suicide, then where Dakota did the same on the wide rusted bridge, on to Skidmore and the boarded up houses where Bobby Jo was murdered and Branson Perry went missing. And finally I drive by a dilapidated tin building in front of which Ken McElroy, the town bully, was killed only after committing atrocious crimes himself. All of this occurred within 15 miles of each other over the spans of 30 years. So, is it reasonable to come to the conclusion that this landscape — my hometown and a place very dear to my heart — is cursed? Is there “something in the water” that has caused it to be a breeding ground for these terrible things to happen? Perhaps the beautiful and pastoral landscape is merely a stage, indifferent to the goings-on of the people inhabiting it. What geographical factors affect the behaviors of a group of people and drives one to do these things? Does the landscape have anything to do with it? Can a landscape hold the memories of what took place there? Is the land a mirror of the people or are the people a reflection of the land?

Ch. 3 Landscape as Culture

Isolation is a common feeling we have all endured at one point or another. We have seen or been in an isolated landscape, one deprived of people, buildings, or animals. Or it was isolated because of the difficulty to get there. In many cases, it happens when one is in a crowded place, a feeling of non-connection, where there seems to be no common denominators between yourself and the others around you. This is similar to how my paintings behave. Arranged in a grid, they suggest a sense of community, they speak to each other and behave according to an invisible set of rules or guidelines. Yet they are alone, separate, and isolated from one another. The incidents they portray, are isolated, unrelated other than proximity of location.

The farm I grew up on was secluded. Marv, a quarter mile up the road, was our closest neighbor and the interactions were rare. Now, my parents' closest neighbors are about two miles away in any direction, further isolating them from any form of community. Although Skidmore is a small town, in which the residents are tightly grouped together in a small perimeter, the community of Nodaway-Holt school district spreads over 20 miles and two others townships. I had never felt a sense of community, or pride, or oneness with the others, the kind that you see on family oriented television series. We were all on our own and just so happened to be lumped together in certain circumstances. That loneliness is evident in my paintings. The wintery scenes are cold and aloof, indifferent and grey skies with dirty snow cover the empty cornfields and barren streets. All forms of life are dead or barricaded indoors, secluded from the elements. My memories are becoming isolated and compartmentalized; they have begun to blur together and parts of them have disappeared completely. This is best represented in my paintings where parts of the panel are left unpainted, details left vague where the particulars of that image seem to no longer



No. 67, Oil on panel, 9 x 12", 2019

be a priority. I have tried to picture these landscapes so many times that they constantly evolve and I am beginning to lose fragments of the information as it becomes hazy and at times nondescript. The intensity of the event is beginning to fade as well, the act of repeatedly painting the same image over and over from different vantage points and seasons has aided this process.

What fascinates me is how the landscape begins to behave like the people who inhabit it. Or perhaps it is the landscape that determines how the people behave. Lawrence Durrell writes in support of the latter in a partly serious caricature of environmental determinism. He argues that human beings are expressions of their landscape and that their cultural productions always bear the unmistakable signature of place:

I believe you could exterminate the French at one blow and resettle the country with Tartars, and within two generations discover to your astonishment that the national characteristics were back at the norm — the restless metaphysical curiosity, the tenderness for good living and the passionate individualism: even though their noses were flat. This is the invisible constant in a place. [...] In short, the spirit of a place lies in its landscape.¹³

Anyone who's spent time in Missouri or knows a Missourian well, would say they are typically polite, warm, and above average small talkers (if it were a sport, we'd probably come in second — never quite the best at anything). There is a proudness to many of them, which prevents asking for help, essentially a “do-it-yourself” kind of people. There is no place for boasting about achievements, wallowing in sorrows, or succumbing to weakness, at least not until behind closed doors. This is why the landscape of my childhood strikes me as so tough. It is not until you spend time with it that it shows its vulnerability, its poetic side. My paintings, too, quietly ask the viewer to spend time with them, to sit and study the variation of blues in the sky from season to season, painting to painting. Or sense the mood of the day because of the way the sun is shining or the clouds are covering, and identify with the loneliness of these landscapes and the people you never see. They do not however, shout for initial admiration or understanding, they are seemingly indifferent to your response just as the landscapes you pass on a road-

¹³ Relph, 30

trip appear to be. So that when you drive through Missouri this is precisely what you do, you drive through it — and it lets you — it never begs for attention or desperately calls out to be noticed.

The Missouri landscape is unforgiving and the seasons are harsh. It creates a people that are also at times unforgiving and willing to carry grudges with them to their grave. Archetypal Missourians are practical and share a no-fuss attitude about aesthetics, placing functionality above all else. My paintings reflect this attitude. The landscapes I chose to depict carry the weight of the wrongs that took place there and cling to it while that weight lingers beneath the surface for generations. The land only opening up when someone takes the time to acknowledge the grief it must bear. By making paintings of these landscapes, I am requiring the viewer to look, and if they look long enough, perhaps they will be able to acknowledge this grief. Each panel is not fussed over, the brushstrokes are economic yet lyrical; as I was uninterested in tricking the viewer with photo-realistic representation. Rather, I wanted to gain their trust by encouraging contemplation about the space that can easily be adapted to a number of landscapes passed in a lifetime. I aimed to have few specifics in the paintings that would clearly bind them to only my experience. My audience for these paintings are the people of Missouri, the ones who do not feel that art today is made for people like them. My paintings were created in a legible fashion so that anyone, most specifically the stewards of the Midwestern landscape, could easily and readily approach them. John Berger writes about Max Raphael's quote from Cézanne, who also wanted to appeal to the less "elite" audience:

I paint my still lifes, the *natures mortes*, for my coachman who does not want them, I paint them so that children on the knees of their grandfather may look at them while they eat their soup and chatter. I do not paint them for the pride of the Emperor of Germany or the vanity of the oil merchants of Chicago [...]¹⁴

Since my relationship to that landscape is personal, I do not expect the viewer to identify with the details of my background. However, I do believe that the viewer can identify with an emotional connection to a place, more specifically the everyday place, and recognize how that has defined so much of their character and perception of the world. When I speak of the Missouri landscape, I know that many from any Midwestern or stereotypical "fly-over-state", would most likely be able to identify with the

¹⁴ Berger, John. *Landscapes: John Berger on Art* (Brooklyn, NY; Verso, 2016), 45

qualities I find Missouri to have. While New York, Los Angeles, and Miami are of course representations of American and/or Americans, they don't quite capture the bigger picture that is the wide spans of the non-coastal United States. So the question is, what is the American landscape? While there can be no exact definition, the country is too large and too diverse to claim any overarching and defining scene. I find the quiet and slow spaces to be more telling than the loud and bustling ones, I am aware this is a personal bias, so I am really only capable of relating what I know to the world through my paintings.

As an artist, I believe it is my duty to portray the world how I see it and try to connect the threads of my observations with my experiences of the place. I consider this approach to be a filter through which I see the world. *Only Memories Remain* visualizes this filter. I create a sense of the physical spaces of the landscape while also recognizing the intangible passing of time; how the landscape transforms and becomes something new with each encounter. Similar to investigative journalism, I go out into the field and gather research about my subject. I live and breathe the world of my subject matter and return to the studio to compile my findings in an intelligible fashion. The repetition is at the core of my research. Without the repeated encounters with this landscape and the people who inhabit it, I would be unable to accurately represent the way I now experiences these places in my paintings. While the memory of the events still haunt me, the landscape is indifferent and moves on. There are no longer many telling signs of tragedy to encounter there. Each painting is a snapshot of a memory I have of those landscapes throughout the repeated interactions with them during my life. Many of these panels are almost identical with one another, from the same season or a different one. Like Peter Doig, I begin with photographs and memories that get distorted in some way.¹⁵ I am now continually passing through, no longer a permanent resident but a tourist, eternally bounded to these landscapes I have struggled with for so long. Relph reflects on this tension that occurs when one is tethered to a specific place, saying:

There is a sheer drudgery of place, a sense of being tied inexorably to this place, of being bound by the established scenes and symbols of routines. [...] There is not merely a fusion between person and place, but also a tension between them.¹⁶

¹⁵ Schwabsky, 172

¹⁶ Relph, 41-42

For years I have tried to separate myself from the small-town life and the restrictions it can place. I ran away to Europe the first chance I had in order to free myself from the limitations I considered rural living to possess. Yet, here I am today, having made 81 paintings of that very landscape I so often daydreamed about escaping from all of those years. As Relph notes above, I do feel inexorably tied to Missouri, I can never flee that landscape and it seems futile to try. My body's born from that piece of earth and will always call back to it, both yearning for and despising that connection.

My paintings first began with my fascination over the dualities a landscape seems to contain and what time and distance does to distort one's memories of the place. On the surface my paintings tell the viewer one thing, which could be beauty, a sense of calmness, chaos, destruction, ruin, industrialization, agriculture, etc. It initially appears straightforward and that there is nothing new to learn or feel while there. Yet it is lying, or at least withholding information to the disinterested passer-by. In so many places I have travelled to or read about, there are always many more stories beneath the surface, living in the soil and the life-blood of the place.

The phrase "vernacular landscape" was first used by John B. Jackson in 1986 in his book, Discovering the Vernacular Landscape. He uses it to describe a cultural landscape that evolved through use by the people whose activities or occupancy shapes the physical landscape. This also encompasses social or cultural attitudes of an individual, family, or a community. This is what we would consider the everyday or banal in the American landscape, the landscapes where the day-to-day is the only activity that often occurs there, thus mirroring the attitudes of the inhabitants. The landscape is then able to reflect the physical, biological, and cultural character of those everyday lives.¹⁷ Through his creation and production of the magazine *Landscape*, from 1951-1969, Jackson was able to change the way everyone — including writers and scholars, planners and designers, artists and the general public — came to understand and interpret the everyday places that surround us and influence us in fundamental ways.¹⁸ Relph supports the enriching quality of the vernacular, or everyday, landscape saying, "The simple landscape is the landscape that declares itself openly, presents no problems or surprises, lacks subtlety."¹⁹ However, this idea of a

¹⁷ Jackson, John B. *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (Yale University Press, 1984), 32

¹⁸ Wilson, Chris. Mendelsohn, Janet. "Drawn to Landscape: The Pioneering Work of J.B. Jackson". *Worldcat*. 2015. worldcat.org/title/drawn-to-landscape-the-pioneering-work-of-jb-jackson/oclc/907662017

¹⁹ Relph, 136

simple landscape, one that lacks subtlety, does not exist. For all landscapes are capable of the carrying the complexities of what occurs within them, although not always visible.

In painting *No. 18*, you can see a connection between Relph's idea of the "simple" landscape and how I have represented that visually. I am upfront about the what has happened there, through my statements and other writings, and only "hide" these events the same way that the landscape does. The landscape is capable of neutralizing the visual marks of trauma and continuing on. I did not want the paintings to look very different from how these places look in reality (and in the very non-reality of my memories). What



No. 18, Oil on Panel, 9 x 12", 2019

struck me initially was the fact that there were no clear or visible signs of tragedy when I passed by these places. Instead the scenes were anything from bucolic and pastoral, to the prosaic and unremarkable. These were the places we see over and over again and, after some time, nothing stands out as you recall them. I wanted to convey this feeling of repetition that you have while driving, so that your eyes can scan quickly, as they normally do on long journeys, or you can choose to focus on what is happening in that specific scene. The grid composition creates a setting for this to happen in *Only Memories Remain*.

The grid has been a regular framework in my art practice for several years. Originally, I assumed it was because of the clarity of arrangement, a non-hierarchical and organized approach to viewing artwork. Jackson, however, is able to address the subconscious level and significance of the symbol of the grid in the American landscape. He writes:

The sameness of the American landscape overwhelms him [the passer-by]. This sameness is a product of the grid — not only the grid in every town and city west of the Mississippi, but the grid imposed on two-thirds of a nation, stretching from the Appalachians to the Pacific, from the Rio Grande to Canada, where in a modified form it continues far into the north.²⁰

²⁰ Jackson, John B. *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time* (Yale University Press, 1994), Oz: Vol. 8

He goes on to say; “The grid merely made it possible for every future American, settling in the newly surveyed regions, to satisfy two basic individual needs: the need for a place — a piece of land to farm and call home and the need for belonging to a community [...] But that was all. The grid ignored topography; its straight lines crossed lakes and mountains and forests. It ignored climate and the quality of the soil.”²¹

Although dated, this way of defining the grid is still applicable to my childhood and the continued livelihood of my family and community I left behind in Missouri. The grid marks the acres of land to be owned, rented, and farmed. The roads, designed in a grid, connect these plots of croplands and makes it easier to haul grain to grain elevators in nearby cities, where the grain is then sold and stored for its intended purposes as livestock feed, soy and corn based products, ethanol, and so on. The grid defined my childhood and the way I understood how to organize the world, how I navigated through it and still



Only Memories Remain, Oil on birchwood panel, 72 9x12” panels, 2019

²¹ Jackson, *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time* (Yale University Press, 1994), Oz: Vol. 8

continue to. My family takes their freedom to attend to the land quite seriously and I believe that heartfelt desire is undeniably American. My ancestors left Europe and traveled west across the United States to create their own lives within the parameter of the grid, the plot of land on which you establish your *destiny*. Jackson writes:

You wanted the individual to have total responsibility for his own decisions. So here you are, here is your demythologized, existential world. Here is a set of schematic boundaries, here is your rectangular plot of land, here is your chance to shape your own destiny, establish your own relationship with the natural environment and with your neighbors.²²

The definition of the grid equates the need for control. A control over one's own life, and subsequently over the American subconscious. These are boundaries that are inseparable from the grid and the limitations and freedoms it encompasses. The limitations are obvious, visually and conceptually, a clear and defined edge of space and thought, these small, organized compartments of ideas and place. There is freedom of within the grid, like the boundaries Agnes Martin gave herself with the line, it enables exploration within a set of defined parameters. Thus creating space for delving deep within the margins of the grid visually, like how I arranged the panels in *Only Memories Remain*. I spaced each panel six inches apart so that there was a proximity between the panels above, below, and beside each other yet never quite reaching an intimacy. Each panel was on its own to speak for itself, yet the entirety of the community of isolated panels is a visualization of how I felt in the community I grew up in. Conceptually, while the grid poses a need for control, this control creates space for a person to imagine and establish their own environment, their own interpretation, *their own destiny*.

Generally speaking, there may be a common misconception about Americans from rural landscapes. These "fly-over-states" behave as a barrier one must traverse in order to arrive to the desired destination. Because of this feeling that the landscape is uninteresting and unable to garner attention or desire, people believe it is simple. I will agree that when I drive the nine and a half hours traveling between Colorado and Missouri, I dread the seven I must pass through Nebraska. It is flat, tedious, and with so few attractions it is difficult to acknowledge that it too is the landscape dear to many hearts for

²² Jackson, *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time*, Oz: Vol. 8

both beautiful and tragic reasons. Just as my small rural corner of Missouri is to me. Addressing this need to recognize the commonality among humans and their relationship to a place, Relph states:

The individual is not merely in his own place at the centre of his own space, but recognizes from the start that all other individuals have their perceptual spaces and places.²³

Ingrained into our subconscious, we are cognizant of the fact that we are not the only people on this planet and that we only take up a small corner of it (instead of the center of the universe as we often gravitate towards feeling). I am not the only person to have a relationship with the land and it is imperative that I appreciate other perspectives of the world based on the landscapes and personal geographies of another. It is through painting that I can acknowledge this phenomenon and give the viewer a space to also experience this relationship. That while we are all isolated in life, there is a possibility of community in the experiences we have and the relationships we form with a landscape.

The uniformity of these “simple” landscapes begins to behave like a loop in these vernacular American topographies. As nothing new is repeated I get lost in my thoughts. Perhaps these are the landscapes that are the most important for reflection and rumination about the land. Just as a room designed for meditation has few distractions, the flat repetitive landscape of the Midwest and Great Plains allows the mind to flow freely and go deep within the soul. As you look from panel to panel, up and down and back and forth, room is created in your mind so that it is allowed to wander. I chose to use a more traditional landscape palette so that it is easily accessed by the viewer and they can instantly recognize the existence of this type of scene. Similar compositions appear frequently so the viewer begins to feel that maybe they have already seen this panel or this landscape. Except you have not, not exactly like this; the image may be a few steps closer than the previous or they are looking a little to the left of the building, or up towards the sky. The reality of my point-of-view is particularly important in my work because it is one of the few elements that acknowledge a human presence. While all aspects of the landscape (corn fields, roads, and tree lines) nod to human intervention, there is a palpable loneliness in the paintings because of the lack of explicit human presence.

²³ Relph, 12

Over the years I have traveled and lived in a variety of places in Europe and the United States. Although these new landscapes speak to my identity today, it is the American Midwestern landscape that has become the foundation for how I perceive all new landscapes I come upon in my life. The slow, everyday, and “normal” landscape that defined my youth as it has for so many other Americans. It is vital to my understanding of life, it affects the choices I make, and it influences my character. Wilson and Groth quote JB Jackson referring to this vitality of the everyday landscape in their book, Everyday America:

I’ve wanted people to become familiar with the contemporary American landscape and recognizes its extraordinary complexity and beauty. Over and over again I’ve said that the commonplace aspects of the contemporary landscape — the house and fields and places of work — could teach us a great deal, not only about American history and American society, but about ourselves, and how we relate to the world. It is a matter of learning how to see.²⁴

When someone is beginning to learn how to draw they must first learn how to “look”. It is a common practice among drawing and painting professors to require the students to look at the object they are drawing more often than at their paper. This is because our minds are constantly storing stock images of these everyday objects so that when we begin to draw a real and unique one in space, if we don’t continually look at and study the object, our mind will fill in the blanks with generic information. So, a good artist will learn how to engage with the object through looking and through observation, noticing the peculiarities that exist in that exact moment and place. Naturally, this approach to looking can be applied to landscapes of the Midwest, or any “simple” scene one passes by while journeying from one place to the next. Jackson reflects on the American landscape specifically and how it has influenced, if not defined, our identities. The more we look and understand this everyday landscape, the better we can know ourselves. Pierce Lewis supports this argument by championing the tradition of treating landscapes as vital, if often complicated and contradictory, evidence of history and culture.²⁵ It is this history and culture that speaks to the complexity that is inherent in all landscapes. In my paintings I strive for this

²⁴ Wilson, Chris. Groth, Paul, *Everyday America: Cultural Landscape Studies after JB Jackson* (University of California Press, 2003), 85-86

²⁵ Wilson, Chris. Groth, Paul, 84

complexity to become apparent after time spent with them and for the viewers to recognize that the overwhelmingly “simple” landscapes have so much more to offer if you give them a chance.

Conclusion

Landscape as the subject of a painting may not have as deep of a canon back to the Greeks or Romans but is instead a quite modern act. Paintings of landscapes were primarily backdrop or never considered high art long throughout art history.²⁶ That is until the late 18th century when the academy recognized landscape painting as historic and important.²⁷ To document nature was considered an educational study and ultimately paved the way for the Hudson River School, American's first form of creating and documenting the idea of the American history.²⁸ Landscapes were no longer a setting for something else to take center stage; they were now the subject and could carry meaning and exert influence. It is around the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries that we begin to see some of the most beloved landscape paintings by Van Gogh, Turner, and Cézanne who were able to pave the way for modern landscape painters such as Maureen Gallace, Lois Dodd, Fairfield Porter and now myself.

Stories give meaning to things of the past. Like a parable, they are an easy entry point to something that is most likely much more complicated. There is an origin myth surrounding the beginnings of landscape painting that I find appealing. Edward Norgate, a miniature painter, musician, and writer on art in the 17th century, wrote in one of his manuscripts about a traveler and his painter friend. The traveler, exhausted and excitable about his long and wondrous journeys, began to recount the tales of cities and countrysides, and the ruins and mountains he had seen to his friend who was at his easel working on a portrait. The painter, enthralled with the imaginative descriptions of his friend's journey, stopped what he was doing and began to depict the stories he was hearing onto a new canvas. He did this so well that the traveller, shocked and impressed, was convinced that the painter must have been his companion on the journey in order to capture the sense of place so well, so enthrallingly. The painter was able to describe the description in a more legible and lasting character, better than the traveller's words.²⁹

²⁶ Berkley, holland. Igor, Medvedev. "A Brief History of Landscape Painting". *Parkwest Gallery*. 3 February 2012. parkwestgallery.com/a-brief-history-of-landscape-painting-holland-berkley-and-igor-medvedev/

²⁷ Berkley, Medvedev

²⁸ Berkley, Medvedev

²⁹ Doherty, Garreth. Waldheim, Charles, *Is Landscapes... Essays on the Identity of Landscape* (New York; Routledge, 2003), 48

I find stories and myths to be important in sustaining a childlike wonder about the world. This origin story is improbable, yet the sentiment is what I find to be significant: that painters, storytellers, and poets can all breathe life into the everyday things of this world. I am able to tell stories about the intensity of a place, and of the memories I have of it, by pushing paint around on canvas. While words always presented difficulties for me when trying to express myself, painting has given me room to grow as a storyteller and to explore the myths and memories I have found solace in — or been haunted by — for many years.

The landscapes of my life have had the greatest impact on the way I perceive the world around me. Because of this I have used the act of painting as a catalyst to discuss the importance of observing and understanding the relationship one has with a landscape. Landscape is not only a scene or vista to be gazed upon, rather it is something to be meditated on. Landscapes are capable of carrying our projections onto it, we can choose to seek or ignore the reality of the place because the landscape doesn't need us, instead it is we who need it.

My work exemplifies the struggle between what is seemingly simple on the surface; a flat piece of land or a small white building, and the complexities which live within these places that are both cultural and personal. The everyday American landscape often begins to mirror its inhabitants and becomes an access point for those traveling through to better understand the people and the land. It may not seem attention worthy initially, in the same way many everyday or mundane things are not, but there is a depth that I am attempting to reach in my work — these visually simple scenes coexist with the complex narrative that the land carries with it.

With no identifiers within the paintings, these places could be anywhere in America. Anyone could have driven by these cornfields on a road trip from city to city. I intended for this to be apparent so the viewer could project their own landscapes onto my paintings. The ambiguity allows room to daydream and to let the mind wander, to ruminate on whatever is important at that moment. I used landscapes as a child to escape my reality, they transported me to where I would rather be and it is the most generous gift the landscape will ever give me. The landscape shaped my imagination and has always been my outlet when I needed to leave the present realities, out of boredom or out of sadness. The gravel roads, lonely and long, are symbols for options, a way out but also a way to return. The wide expanse of

these landscapes for some resemble anxiety, too much open space with too little in it. However, I equate the expanse with possibility and room to breathe, a place I can relax my shoulders and let my mind move slowly and softly, taking in the moment with each of my senses. I feel both connected with and disconnected from this landscape that I have been trying to leave for so long now I no longer feel that I can call it home. Yet, I can no easier, or with less feeling of being an imposter, call my new landscapes home. I am now in a state of placelessness, like my dark panels — a non-place — in a limbo between belonging and not-belonging, being and not being, coming and going. The night has only just begun or the sun is ready to rise over the horizon, I am in a constant state of in-between, still sitting on that



No. 45, Oil on panel, 9 x 12", 2019

purgatorial fence, never knowing which it is I will choose. It is because of these competing emotions that I did not want to remind viewers that there is only one landscape they can call home, but rather that all landscapes can become whatever you want them to be, that they are complex living things, capable and ready to take on your joys and sorrows, your love and anguish — if you're willing.

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