RESISTANCE, RESILIENCE, AND RESTORATION

Gardening, agriculture, and other forms of land modification have long defined human interaction with the broader natural world. However, these interactions have radically changed over the past two centuries. The impact of large-scale industrialized agriculture, strict municipal and neighborhood association ordinances regarding yard maintenance, and the increasing urgency of climate change have fundamentally re-shaped how people view their relationship to landscape. Taken from ecologist Philip S. Lake’s concepts of resistance, resilience, and restoration, this exhibition explores contemporary and historical contexts of landscape in art, and asks how we might extend the definition of human communities to include a broader ecology.

SPIRITUAL LANDSCAPES

Landscape was Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn’s muse during two separate periods of his life – first in the 1640s, when this print was conceived, and again in the 1650s, at which time the artist revisited many of the plates from his initial landscape studies a decade earlier. Composed from sketches captured in the countryside around Amsterdam, these images may not appear to convey religious meaning at first glance. However, the sloping, irregular roof line and shedding thatch conform to what American art historian Walter S. Gibson has termed “rustic ruins.” Some scholars have argued that the inclusion of obviously decaying buildings has a Christianized, moral bent. While the exact moral is a bit difficult to determine, several experts suggest that depictions of ruined homes are meant to underscore the poverty of the figures we can see here crouched in the doorway, and thus their humility and joy in simple God-given pleasures. The leafy contours of the modest home are difficult to distinguish from the trees and subtly undulating horizon line, suggesting a unity – perhaps spiritual, certainly physical – between humanity and environment.

Across the world from Rembrandt, Wang Hui was the most celebrated painter of late seventeenth-century China. Through his synthesis of historical landscape styles, Wang developed a distinct, innovative artistry that came to define late imperial Chinese aesthetics. Unlike Rembrandt, Wang did not construct his landscape images from encounters with the natural world. Instead, Wang sought spiritual resonance with great painters who had come before him by adapting and transforming their styles.

Like Rembrandt and Wang, American ceramicist Christine Federighi also infused her work with spiritual meaning and searching. Federighi often referred to her work as visual journeys, or physical records of experiences, events, and what she called “small histories.” For Federighi, the emblem of a house was a stand in for a feminine body – she thought of human bodies and built structures as interchangeable and spiritually linked, and further condensed environment and human body by inscribing the surface of her house-shaped forms with images of nature: trees, rivers, and rolling lush fields.
LIMINAL LANDSCAPES

Landscapes between, such as the forest fringe captured in oil by Iowan artist Catherine McCartney, can serve as reminders of ecological vulnerability. Rendered in pastoral pinks and vibrant greens, this landscape captures the fragility of first bloom as well as the excitement of new life. Known for the exquisite softness of her brushstrokes, McCartney’s work was well-regarded in the Midwest. She participated in exhibitions sponsored by the Des Moines Women’s Club at Hoyt Sherman Place and focused primarily on landscapes. The “Art Notes and News” section of The Midwestern described McCartney’s work in a 1907 review of one such exhibition: “…Miss Catherine McCartney’s ‘Pastel’ and ‘Among the Trees’ were done with a delicate touch.” McCartney went on to teach at the University of Iowa, where as acting head of the Graphic and Plastic Arts department she vehemently opposed Grant Wood. Regardless of McCartney’s personal relationships with other artists, her painting captures a liminal moment between seasons as well as between nature and human habitation.

Psychological liminality can also be expressed through landscape art. Enigmatic and startlingly red, the abstracted figure centered in Durga Prasad Bandi’s woodcut dissolves into richly textured gray. Conceived of as a series of eight prints, this work’s title alludes to a landscape that never materializes. Behind the tortured bird-like form (perhaps derived from an image of a crowned crow that appears in another contemporaneous series), there is no discernable horizon line or geographic feature. Instead, gouges hint at grass blades, but the contours of a wider topography remain undefined. Drawn to the psychological tension cultivated by painter Francis Bacon, Bandi also aims to represent the angsts and miseries of everyday life. However, Bandi places figures into disintegrated landscapes whereas Bacon often situated his subjects in minimalist interior spaces. The urgency of both color and frenetic line work imbue the print with a malaise – where does figure end and landscape begin? Is humanity fated to fade into an unknowable nature?

LANDSCAPES OF LIGHT AND FURY

Similarly, photographer Ruth T. Thorne-Thomsen’s surreal composite of shoreline and human form depict a humanity subsumed by an unknowable yet omnipresent (and perhaps malevolent) natural world. The unknowability of nature sometimes manifests in the awesome power of weather. German painter and printmaker Emil Ganso captured the brooding mystery of late season thunderstorms in the small agrarian watercolor included in this exhibition. Iowan artist Ellen Wagener was equally captivated by the menace of gathering clouds, and her miniature pastel sketch positions the sky as a defining feature of the Midwestern landscape. Increasingly sophisticated flight technologies, including dirigibles like the one photographed by Alfred Stieglitz included in this exhibition, expanded the limits of landscape as well as weather data collection. As climate change accelerates, the unpredictable fury of weather will accelerate in tandem, and we may well fade back into the earth, once again indistinguishable from the landscapes that bore us.

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