Contested Terrain: Painting the Modern American Landscape

Docent Training Notes from Toby Jurovics
Two exhibitions (*The Great West Illustrated* and *Contested Terrain*) convey point-counterpoint perspectives on the development of the American West: the beginning of western expansion and the result of western expansion.
Consider what it means to be a contemporary artist of the American West?
Today, artists paint the West they know.
What are the landscape icons of our era?
What have we learned from the past?
Artists are interested in readdressing history.
Images contain elegance, practicality, truth, nostalgia, drama, activism, environmental issues....
Artists seem to be asking us to balance our needs with desires.

Important to realize landscape artists of the past, Karl Bodmer, Thomas Cole, Thomas Moran, and Albert Bierstadt among them, had agendas as well. All were working toward a specific goal, and each for a particular patron base. During the nineteenth century, as people even then predicted the destruction of the landscape would be a result of unregulated civilization, artists did their part to advocate for the preservation of the land by drawing attention to its splendor.

Wall Text
*Contested Terrain* considers the challenge of depicting a contemporary prospect that is rarely sublime or romantic. Reevaluating the traditions that helped to shape our expectations of the American landscape, these seven artists display a consciousness of the past while simultaneously working against conventional mythologies. Rather than searching for picturesque vistas or fragments of wilderness, they uncover a diversity of narratives — the cultural, technological, environmental, and personal histories that can be found in a careful reading of the topography. Images of housing developments, reservoirs, wind farms, and dams reflect an interest in sites where our preconceptions about the natural world are laid bare. Panoramic views of strip mines and clear-cut forests have replaced subjects like the Grand Canyon or the Rocky Mountains, turning instead to the monuments of an industrial landscape we have created yet still struggle to acknowledge. In this work there is also a recognition of the unpredictable strength of nature, found in ominous skies, chaotic horizons, and the slow erosion of our efforts under the weight of geologic time. By reworking accepted conventions to accommodate the realities of the present, the underlying elegance that endures at these complex intersections also becomes evident. Ultimately, the works in this exhibition point us toward a more complete understanding of the landscape that includes our presence, finds inspiration in unexpected places, and asks us to consider the effect of our imprint on the land and the choices we face in shaping its future.

James Lavadour believes in a tangible physical connection between the body and the natural world. Raised on the Umatilla Indian Reservation, the artist spent countless hours walking through the landscapes of northeastern Oregon, observing and absorbing his surroundings while seeking to better understand what part of himself resided in the land.

For Lavadour, the act of painting, like traversing the landscape, is about accumulating knowledge of the world. To that end, he emphasizes the importance of process in the creation of his work. In the mid-1990s, Lavadour studied printmaking, a development that led him away from naturalistic representation toward a more analytical approach to painting. He typically begins works like *Straight Ahead* by
throwing paint onto the surface of the panel, a gesture that recalls Jackson Pollock’s drip technique. Lavadour then allows abstract forms to emerge through the process of scraping and overpainting and the erosion of accumulated layers of paint. While his images often evoke familiar landforms of the American West, Lavadour asserts that he is not interested in representing specific sites, but rather in illustrating a process of “perceptual discovery” informed by the physical properties of his medium.

Alexis Rockman challenges the ways that nature is portrayed by popular culture. Drawing from a broad range of sources, including National Geographic magazine, science fiction, museum dioramas, and the writings of environmentalist Rachel Carson, Rockman seeks to create “genres that examine our misperceptions and where we go terribly wrong” in our understanding of the natural world.

The Berkshires and Property are from Rockman’s recent series “Big Weather,” a group of paintings that represent a significant shift in style. While his earlier images were teeming with real and imagined flora and fauna executed with painstaking attention to detail, works from “Big Weather” veer toward abstraction. Rolling clouds and the nascent funnel of a tornado advance across the heavens with a malevolent energy, overwhelming the calmer skies they seem to push from the frame. Only the slightest hints of the landscapes below are revealed — the gables of a few homes or a fence running along a low horizon. Painted at a time when extreme, destructive weather patterns seem to be the norm rather than an anomaly, The Berkshires and Property are sobering reminders of our powerlessness in the face of nature.

Jean Lowe draws attention to social issues such as suburban sprawl, land use, and excessive consumerism with a bold style that recalls the grandeur and spectacle of epic nineteenth-century landscape paintings. Her works, painted on large, unstretched canvases, portray Southern California as panoramic and expansive yet increasingly claustrophobic, as the built environment consumes and overwhelms what was once thought to be a verdant Eden.

Rancho Cielo depicts a tract of land that has been graded and terraced in preparation for the construction of a new housing development, its man-made contours now a substitute for the rolling horizon of the coastal hills. Meanwhile, the neighborhood in Green Acres displays the finished product — a suburban community with uniform houses built shoulder-to-shoulder in a crowded cul-de-sac. Lowe gives these anonymous vistas a monumental presence, employing lush colors and brushwork within ornate trompe l’oeil frames, adding a heroic presence to the everyday and mundane. Using scale to her advantage, Lowe compels viewers to pause and reconsider the remarkable transformation of their surroundings, a phenomenon of contemporary existence she believes is too easily and too often overlooked.

Michael Scott offers a disquieting portrait of a forest that has been systematically logged and stripped of its commercially viable resources. A tangled maze of felled trees clutters the foreground, while irregular stumps remain as sentinels within a denuded landscape. Yet the gloom of this scene is countered by a vividly colored sky that seems to reach out beyond the canvas. Here, Scott recalls the Hudson River School of the mid-nineteenth century, often considered the first American genre of painting, and its later iteration, Luminism. Although the Hudson River School artists celebrated the sublime beauty of the American wilderness, some, like Thomas Cole, used their work to call attention to the irreversible changes brought on by the rise of industrialism and the destruction of the landscape along the eastern
seaboard. Scott establishes a palpable tension between the devastation of industrial logging and the vibrant, glowing sunset, creating an image simultaneously alluring and troubling that forces us to question whether nature is ultimately forgiving of our actions or vastly indifferent.

Chuck Forsman portrays the tensions and contradictions of the modern world, offering an uneasy account of the landscape we have created: “I have come to believe that the long tradition of celebration and optimism in landscape painting is on shaky ground. To look honestly at the world around us is a sobering activity. Escapism may be possible, but escape is not.” And nowhere are the changes we have made more evident than in the American West, where our actions are laid bare by open topography and arid terrain.

Rather than gazing across the rim of the Grand Canyon, we now find ourselves overlooking the Clifton-Morenci pit, the largest copper mine in Arizona — yet these two monuments speak equally about our conflicting desires for wilderness, landscape, progress, and ongoing development in an unsustainable environment. It is a complex equation without an easy solution, but in the end, Forsman’s desires differ little from those of the first artists who portrayed the West a century and a half ago: “The horizon can be a hopeful metaphor for seeing beyond. Color and form enrich and enliven. The seduction of space and atmosphere or simply the wonder of seeing something fresh can breed hope.”

Karen Kitchel wrestles with the traditions — and confines — of landscape painting. Breaking away from the expectations of large, horizontal compositions bisected by the horizon, she began to paint prairie grasses and plants in grid after grid, measuring the landscape in intimate detail. Her careful observations remind us of the richness of nature to be found even within the smallest framework, yet the regular format also reflects the manner in which the landscape has been measured and divided, without regard for topography or natural boundaries.

Kitchel is also aware of the multiple histories a landscape can carry, including our own personal narratives. The topography of Promontory Summit is nondescript, yet it holds a central role in our national mythology and was a powerful draw for the artist: “Preparing for a westward migration of my own (I was about to move from Denver to Los Angeles), I went to Promontory Summit in mid-2003 to spend a few days contemplating this favorite American story of identity, expansion, and ambition. . . . In my paintings, the absence of trains, horses, guns, or historically costumed actors is notable, presenting a quiet, intentional contrast to conventional pictorial strategies. Instead, the integrity and humility of a visually plain, unremarkable landscape speak of time, isolation, weather, speculation, and abandon.”

Don Stinson has adapted the heroic scale and panoramic sweep of works by nineteenth-century artists like Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran to the vistas of the modern West, memorializing the monuments of our culture under the same azure sky that has always inspired western painters. The title The Necessity for Ruins refers to a book of the same name by John Brinkerhoff Jackson, an influential cultural scholar who championed the acceptance of the built environment as an integral part of our perception of nature. For Stinson, it also reflects his belief in the importance of artists reflecting the era in which they live and work, explaining, “…with growth happening so fast, everything needs to be looked at, and thought about.”
Seen alongside *Llano Estacado: High Plains, High Stakes*, this pair of images speaks of two eras of the West. There is nostalgia for a romanticized past at an abandoned drive-in theater that is being slowly overtaken by the prairie, and the challenge of creating a sustainable future. Although *Llano Estacado* places the heavy stamp of technology on the horizon, it is also possible that the elegant, rhythmic sweep of their blades will one day be seen as equally a part of this high desert palisade.

**Artist Panel Discussion June 30 Notes (summarized)**

Chuck Forsman  
Born in Idaho; raised in California; lives in Colorado

Karen Kitchel  
Lived in Montana in the 90s  
Few contemporary artists are able to show landscape as something other than Romantic/idealistic  
Part of this has to do with the 150-year old traditional style

CF  
Photography and painting are kindred spirits. By accident CF moved outdoors, looked at what was around him, and attempted to capture it. Robert Frost “I have a lover’s quarrel with the landscape.” The visible impact of man may not be obvious. The air might appear clear, but the visible effects of pollution might not be apparent.

Q-How has the public accepted your work? Is photography more widely accepted as fact than painting?

KK  
Painters are more often considered “angry” when tackling environmental issues. Painting is sublime, interpretive, emotional medium and photography is “fact.”

CF  
Re Thomas Moran. People had to go there (West) to escape the tyranny of Europe. The Grand Canyon and elsewhere were wastelands, so to speak. Moran and 19th-century photographers had goals as well. Ansel Adams inspired environmental groups. Moran influenced Congress to preserve parklands. Visions have to move and shift. It allows us to appreciate things in a different way.

Q - Ansel Adams was a political figure. Do you see yourselves as political?

KK  
Yes, politics and the world of art often intersect.  
The message might be if we love and care for this, maybe we can make it better. When a painter includes a piece trash in a painting, people often wonder what’s wrong with the artist. They are in a sense “blamed” for putting the offensive item in the painting. Photographers don’t share that “blame” since they are simply documenting what’s before them.

CF
Considers his work more resignation than protest. “Nature is always with us.” The fires raging currently in Colorado denude the experience of nature, but we are resigned to it. We recognize it as reality and make the most of it.

Artist made a list of influences—all manner of people and artists, for better or worse. It’s important to pay attention to the bad so as not to deny and not repeat past wrongdoings. Recognizing bitter legacies along with the good allows us to move forward.

Humility is an important to appreciating nature. Robert Adams, for instance, exudes humility. If things are done with humility, you will be paid back. A good artist observes and responds. Walking, listening, smelling are all part of a sensory awareness needed to be a good artist.

**Don Stinson**
There is a dichotomy to *High Plains, High Stakes* (Stinson’s painting of the wind farm). On one hand renewable energy is environmentally friendly, but they bring with them land disputes (Comanche Indian property), development must be carried out on a monumental or industrial scale, wildlife suffers, etc. Stinson is carrying on an age-old tradition of trying to understand the world—trying to get a grip on it. Cole et al were also trying to capture the incomprehensible landscape.

**CF**
We need to assimilate things visually but nothing is designed to shock and dominate, to jolt. There are formal challenges to deal with. If you don’t understand how to assimilate or incorporate all the elements, paintings are capable of creating a jolting effect.

All the artists on the panel admit to using old-fashioned or traditional techniques. Digital media is today considered more suitable for temporal, conceptual pieces. By choosing to paint in oils, the works automatically become draped in associations with the past. In a way this chokes the images.

**DS**
Realist painting at the end of the 21st century called for deliberate decisions with the marriage of technique and a desire to embrace something new. The switch to photography makes the easy turn toward technology. The painters in this exhibition address contemporary issues obliquely while still responding to people’s habits of looking.

**CF**
Forsman is drawn to Colorado forest fires. He has learned ways around firefighters’ barriers, though he’s been “caught” trying to capture the image. He personalizes the destruction of trees as if they were his children. Access to mines has also been a problem. Administrators can be defensive and suspicious at first but become more accommodating, however, once an honest and straightforward dialogue begins to take place. “I wish I made more of a difference” says Forsman.

**KK**
I don’t want to be a tourist artist or a voyeur. Though she is not a trained botanist, she feels she has a responsibility to get it right. She consults experts, owns lots of books and speaks to extension office personnel frequently. The absence of a horizon line carries different meanings.
Inspiration comes from a waft or a smell or a certain sound. He strives to be aware all the time. It’s important for artists to be informed on all levels. The demise of so many gas stations piqued his interest, and made more sense when he learned that the federal government regulations of the 1980s (or whenever) called for improved below-ground gas storage—something that most mom-and-pop filling stations couldn’t afford. This explains why so many were abandoned. Mystery is an essential part of his work.

CF
The largest strip mine in America It took Forsman many years to access the mine. Why is the perspective—inside out—so important. The view of the inside aids and informs the view from the outside. Photography is a creative way of filling in the space.

DS
Stinson explores different relationships with the horizon. He finds the aerial view is interesting.

KK
Kitchel has mostly eliminated the horizon line. It implicates an attitude about why you’re picturing what you’re picturing. Evolved into putting herself and the viewer into the landscape and “eliminates domination.”

CF on frames
The odd shaped frames are not designed to mimic car windows or anything else. Any reference to care windows is only coincidental and not deliberate. They were an expedient remedy to a problem—he found it necessary as paintings got bigger and bigger and the edges more and more undefined.

On the relationship of photography to painting:

CF
There is less of one, less distinction, and more cross-fertilization. Photographers get so myopic—tend to look only at other photographers and not at painters.

Q – Why are photographs more accepted as legitimate documents rather than intellectual activities?
Q – Does it have to do with the question of authenticity?

We don’t know what the new standards will be. One criticism is that artists are compelled to make the ugly into something beautiful. Do you have hope in the American West?

CF
There is optimism in the American western landscape, always has been

KK
Art is a hopeful endeavor.

DS
Hope is fairness and fairness is essential. With every big shift in technology there is an effort to erase the old and clean the slate as it were. The land is precious and should always be treasured.