

Landscape – Fractured.

by john ros

With continuing investments in fossil fuels, expansion of deep(er) oil drilling in the Gulf and Arctic, hydraulic fracturing and mountain top coal mining, it seems there is little being done to address climate change. There is a small and optimistic divestment movement taking shape among educational research centers and notable philanthropists (Stanford University, for one, and the Rockefellers), but the movement's important work happens far from our daily conversations. To grow in range and efficacy, the push to divest from industries that too often degrade the planet must take a multi-pronged approach to discussion and action within the broader community. We have to ask ourselves serious questions about how we can become better stewards of our fragile and dwindling ecosystem. We must find balance within our personal answers to those questions, as responsible stewardship is not a zero-sum game. I often repeat the saying “environmentalists still fly” — perhaps the single most harmful thing one person can do to the environment. Our options to reduce the effect we have on our environment are numerous. We must choose how we want to shape the world we live in.

Nature, like art, is necessary for the continued advancement of our species. When the natural world thrives, we thrive. When it suffers, we suffer. *Fractured Landscape* is an attempt to address the close relationship between human beings and our environment. It responds to calls for individual action and for community support. The discussion starts with each and every one of us. This exhibition focuses on four artists confronting the natural landscape. The artists bring to us their practice discussions so we can begin to better understand our surroundings and more importantly, so we can pose questions about sustainability to our broader community.

As a way of understanding her landscape, Nicole Donnelly throws herself in it. She is a traveler, an explorer and a researcher. Her recent project is an elaborate suite of thirty

drawings about, in her own words, “walking, water and the Continental Divide.” *Water, Divided*, 2014 is a delicate depiction of Donnelly’s travels along nearly 800 miles of the Montana and Idaho borders: graphite markings record her travels on foot, while splashes of blue map the sources where she collected water for drinking. About the drawings, Donnelly explains, “When I [think] about water and art ... [I] think about topography; the land telling the water where to go and the water shaping the land. ... In drawing it out I got to experience the landscape again at a human pace, only this time by pencil rather than on foot.”

This humble experience of memory on paper, after the long distances traveled on foot, marks a time of deep consideration for Donnelly. Though the journey is such a personal one, Donnelly is mapping out this land as a cartographer would, but in a way that is fleeting (through memory) and yet extremely accurate. “Maps show land all at once, as though viewed from the sky — something impossible to see while standing on the ground. Traveling through on foot one gains an intimate knowledge of what is immediately around with a vast expanse of unknown spreading out in all directions.” In her attempt to understand the “all-at-once” view of the land in her drawings, Donnelly forwards the experience to us in a new way. We are invited to explore the land, as she did. First, in an over-all experience, taking the landscape in as a whole, and second, in memory, slowly following the lines across the page. This transcendence of time and space is integral to our own appreciation of the everyday landscape that surrounds us. Donnelly asks us to collect our own data and to become more aware of our movements throughout our landscape.

Talin Megherian approaches the landscape in memory as well. Her modestly-sized pieces are subtly marked with figurative elements placed in airy, surreal spaces. Her landscapes are built by way of the human experience in history as she addresses the atrocities of war. The recollections are not her own first-hand experiences of pain endured during the Armenian Genocide. Rather, they are stories told to her by relatives who survived. Megherian is a storyteller creating her own experience by reliving others'

memories of past atrocities. Her interpretation creates a slight distance that gives Megherian a vantage point of greater scope. She imagines the land, much like the child of an immigrant might have to, traversing land and air, to feel “normality” in the unfamiliar or strange. Roaming the land on the page is a powerful way to unravel experience to reaccount for the past in a way that creates new possibilities for the future. Personal identity is of utmost importance to understanding Megherian's work as she treads the line in and out of two worlds. Megherian's landscapes are borne of this subtle dance with memory and reality.

Megherian's experiences unfold toward the surreal in strong relationships to elements of the earth. Earth, air, fire and water are ubiquitous within her Braid and One Hour Series. The reoccurring spherical shapes oscillate from planetary (*One Hour #11*, 2008, left) to solar/lunar (*Braids-Flower*, 2014, center) and back to planetary – containment vessels (*One Hour #3*, 2008, right). The water-filled vessels in *One Hour #3*, 2008, create tension from earth to air. This tension confines water within floating orbs of varying depths while air is divided into cool and warm, establishing a magnetic force on the page. The combinations of color, form and line develop in a way that is both investigatory and therapeutic. As uncomfortable memories settle on the page, Megherian does not look away, but rather confronts them. This connectivity can teach us something about our own relationships to our landscape. As experiences take shape and extend to broader elements within our surrounding environment, we are reminded of our own interconnectivity with the land.

To further this memory-landscape connection Cecilia Whittaker-Doe inserts memory by way of experience into a systemic and automatic way of approaching the painted surface. These airy yet dense works all build from an approach that is multi-layered in actual material and in sequence of thoughts. She is constantly cultivating the land around her, moving spaces and shifting time in order to make sense of the ever-changing scene in which she stands. The actions by which she moves elements like rocks and trees, or directs water and rain, derive from a respect for the land rather than

a need to control it. When discussing *X-Rayed Earth*, 2014, Whittaker-Doe explains, “ A tree trunk may turn out to be swallowed by a cloud, or something suggesting a root can allude to a foot when its source is ‘taken away’ with more painting around it. I love the change that occurs with responding to what I see...each stroke made with the brush, hand, palette knife, rag...becomes an essential part of the imagery.”

Whittaker-Doe creates these impossible movements as gently as possible, as a spirit of the land, or part of the land. She moves medium over a surface and lets it to settle like a fog, allowing for a three-dimensional effect. She creates with precision, working a space just long enough, only to move on as if she had never been there. This is not to say the work lacks emotion or humanity — quite the opposite, for the way Whittaker-Doe manages to create land from surface and memory from land is magical. She offers the land its own peace and the viewer solitude in which to absorb the land. In *X-Rayed Earth*, 2014, we uncover a superb, mystical space. Sometimes upside-down, roots aerating through the misty clouds, a spot of sunlight calling us deeper — Whittaker-Doe responds to the space as it responds to her, with respect to what has been present for centuries and what has just revealed itself. These paintings challenge us to do the same.

Jeannine Bardo’s paintings are actively worked. Her landscapes are developed with effect, as if to depict the human pressure on them or, in her own words, “how we exploit our land”. Bardo is an activist. She brings her experiences as a community leader and educator into the studio. These hardy surfaces are poured over and harassed. Every bit of energy is extracted from them before they are brought back to life by sheer honesty and determination. Bardo offers herself for communal fortitude. She exhausts herself, like the materials, only to come out the other side with new knowledge. It is not so much the end result, but the process that is the focus here. These pieces stand on their own as beautiful works, but they reveal a tension — a history of activity that has moved from one place to another. Bardo takes us by the hand and walks us through these battered landscapes because she wants us to maintain the beauty.

Bardo's landscapes are battle fields. They are spaces broken by the hands of humans. In *Skin and Bones #6 – All in all*, 2013, the mix of blues and greens resemble an iconic serene landscape, but between the twisting and folding of the Tyvek on which it is painted and the introduction of metallic copper and deep Prussian blue, a picturesque space becomes something else: one cannot help but see mountain top removal in the Appalachian Mountains or polluted bodies of water. In fact, when discussing *Skin and Bones #5 – Fool's Gold*, 2013, which utilizes a similar pallet, but with less green, Bardo states, "*Fools Gold* had me thinking of strip mining and the practice of removing mountaintops for riches less vital to life than what is lost." Bardo calls us all to become stewards of the land. Her landscapes act as markers of history, scenes in time. They depict memories of lush open land and the future of a ragged poisonous future. This tension is exactly the anxiety we need to feel as Bardo calls us to action. She invites us all to take up arms to protect what is most sacred — our fractured landscape.

Art is a way to communicate ideas and bring them to the forefront of discussion. Art enables each and every one of us to take action by supporting creative thinking. As we discover the art in *Fractured Landscape*, I ask you to go deeper, beyond the surface. Become the researcher, the explorer, the cartographer, the activist. Our land is begging for our help and we must answer its call. I beg you to open up your mind. To wander. To explore. As you look to this art for clues and new mystery, go outside and stumble upon your own mysterious landscapes. Become an active voice in your community. We need community leaders with open minds and fresh ideas to nurture a sustainable and lasting movement for change. We must all answer the call and become better stewards of our land to protect the future.

john ros, 2014

johnros.com

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