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IMAGING TRESPASS

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by

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Report

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IMAGING TRESPASS

by

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My sculptures, performances, and photographs investigate issues surrounding landscape and ownership in late-stage capitalism. The investigation functions through acts of *trespass* -- recontextualizing trespass as an act of refusal -- a method to push against and forge space within systems that oppress, segment, compartmentalize, and monetize in order to control. In this context, trespass is wielded as a tool to remake the whole, a method of claiming and reclaiming land, body, and time -- a mending of the commons. At the same time, each trespass is also an assertion of individual privilege -- an expression of safety and power that imposes an individual perspective onto an *other*. These concurrent realities create a fundamental paradox -- while each trespass challenges the paradigm of ownership and control, it risks reinforcing the very dynamic it intends to critique. The challenge for me as an artist is to use an awareness of this distortion on the personal level to point to the distortion of the larger system, allowing the simultaneity to become a lens through which both can be witnessed and understood.

I see this contradiction mirrored in the canon of Land Artists who sought to critique the capitalist systems defining urban life and the art world in the 1960-70s, by traveling to the West to create works that responded to land as site. The mythos created around these artists echoes the tropes of the American pioneer -- the artist as rugged individual breaking away from society to create something out of nothing. As described by Miwon Kwon, curator of MOCA's Land Art survey exhibition *Ends Of The Earth*, this "breaking away" from the artworld is largely a fabricated

narrative. Contrary to the narrative of an individual artist escaping from art capital, the conical desert land works that include Double Negative (Micheal Heizer), Lightning Field (Walter De Maria), and Spiral Jetty (Robert Smithson), were funded by major art donors in New York City; with the art world centered as both the origin and audience of the work, Miwon Kwon observes that the land works “were more expansions of the market, and of the professionalism of the field” than a contradiction of it.¹ And like the pioneer, this expansion to the desert holds an inherent trespass that exists regardless of the artist's critical intent. With land framed as raw material for self expression, and the desert a blank slate somehow outside of history, the iconic land works risk subjecting themselves to the very critique of capitalism they set out to challenge. In a lecture referencing her book *Undermining: A Wild Ride Through Land Use, Politics, and Art in the Changing West*, Lucy Lippard frames the dangers of this approach -- the classical earthworks are, in her view, “either above or beyond it all... [they] procure their power from distance: distance from people, from issues and even from the places they are in...*site specific but not place specific*, (emphasis added) superimposed on their inhabitants rather than collaborating with them.”²

In my work, I seek to move from site specific to place specific by enacting a continuous and awake interaction with site/community/other that by design includes acknowledging the lens that shapes my perspective as artist. As proposed by the seminal anthropology text *Writing Culture*,³ this is a “reflexive” personal process -- a study of *other* not as a tool for judgment but rather as a tool for self-understanding. Instead of asserting dominance through looking, investigation of *other* becomes a mirror for understanding the lens of one’s own value system. My work follows this in one of two ways: either by exposing my *own* lens -- placing my labor at center to understand how the politics I project into the land/body/space live within my own relationship to the place; or by creating works that focus the viewer on *their* own lens -- creating architectural

¹ Miwon Kwon. “*Ends of the Earth (and back.)*” Talk Series- Miwon Kwon, 21 March 2013, Reykjavik Art Museum, Iceland. Keynote Address.

² Lucy Lippard, “*Undermining*” Talk Series, 21 March 2013 Diavad Mowafagian Cinema, Simon Fraiser University, Canada. Keynote Address.

³ Clifford, James, and George E. Marcus. *Writing Culture: the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. University of California Press, 2011.

works and installations that invite the viewer, through participation, to consider how their access and position within the built infrastructure curates their vantage point, shaping their relationship to other viewers and the landscape.

What follows is a narrative that traces my recent process of making -- from the initial moment of tension/reaction that catalyzes my engagement with a site, to the process of internalizing and contextualizing that critique to understand the limitations of my own perspective, to the ultimate translation into material -- how the context and content is translated back into form and presented to the viewer.

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IMAGING TRESPASS

LETTER TO A RANCH OWNER

This body of work began on the road to Marfa. To be clear I found nothing important on arrival in Marfa; what stuck with me was the 5-hour drive out there on I-10 -- a highway flanked by barbed-wire cattle fencing, completely segmented from the expanse of the desert. I had never before experienced such a clear visualization of ownership. Driving along that corridor, I was hemmed in, trapped in wide open space.

So I wrote postcards to leave in a few small mailboxes at the homestead gates along the highway. The cards briefly introduced myself as an ignorant stranger, new to this land and in need of a mountain to climb to look out on the landscape. Would they be willing to talk with me, to share their story and allow me to share space? In some ways I wrote it to serve myself, to move the feeling of helplessness, but really I wrote it to see the fence from the other side: Who stands there? What do I look like to them?

No post card response.

Back in my studio, I was still rattled, so I attempted to think my way out through research. I started with the miles of cattle fences and homestead gates and worked backwards -- following the built architecture to find the larger historical and political narrative, a legacy of settlement and independence that sets Texas apart from the rest of the Western states. I collected a list of numbers:

1820 -- the year the Mexican government began to dole out huge swaths of land to colonists in exchange for their promise to drive the native tribes from the land

55 -- the number of years that the native tribes were attacked during the Texas Indian Wars, before the government declared them “eradicated”¹

1876 -- the invention of barbed wire, the material used to rapidly transform the state from a free-range ecosystem to a patchwork of privately-owned sections²

95% -- the percentage of land that is now privately owned in Texas, double the amount of AZ, NM, and UT respectively.³

In my work I often engage in this kind of research. I build a fortress of facts and historical data as infrastructure to make sense of a divide. But as I stand atop the thesis I have built, I am still looking out from my own perspective, no closer to understanding how the person on the other side of the fence sees this history. And that is where the work begins. At this dead end, art provides a third space, a practice of looking that allows me to reach outside my own perspective and occupy the space of the other.



Figure 1. *OPEN*, still from performance video, 2019

¹ Gutiérrez, Margo and Meier, Matt S. (2000). *Encyclopedia of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement*. ABC-CLIO, LLC.

² Henry D. and Frances T. McCallum, *The Wire That Fenced the West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965).

³ Ramirez, S. (2018, July 31). Why We Need To Protect Private Land in Texas. Retrieved August 11, 2020, from <https://texaslandconservancy.org/why-we-need-to-protect-private-land-in-texas/>

Performance allows me to situate myself at the center of this critique. In the video *OPEN*, I raise a flag with the word “OPEN” in a fenced-in industrial lot in East Austin as a critique of ownership, embodied in the declaration of an “OPEN” flag within a fenced-off, private space. The video focuses us not on the image of the flag, but on the action of raising it - an act explicitly linked to conquest and ownership. The risk and precarity of the climb up the ladder calls on the rugged individualism - and concurrent sense of entitlement - of the pioneer. The piece explores the contradiction between an opposition to land privatization and a parallel craving to carve out a space of my own. In this way, the work occupies both sides; a critique and an embodiment of the frontier dream. It creates a bridge from my perspective to that of the rancher, turning the critique inward to identifying the duality in my own relationship with landscape.

CAVES AS FREEDOM

The ground below South Austin is riddled with caves. On Sundays, I go underground with cavers to explore these small damp spaces. Today we are standing behind the Circle C development. We are inside a small fenced area, standing at the edge of a gaping hole in the ground, the entrance to Wonderwall Cave. A veteran caver checks my harness and knots. Preparing me for the repel, he talks to me about what the underground space means to him.

“Once you understand the knots, you have access to the whole world underneath. It’s why I have been at this so long -- caving is freedom.” I laugh out loud, and he looks puzzled. So I shake my head, “Nothing, It’s just funny -- I have been thinking a lot lately about looking for freedom.”

Before his words, I hadn’t connected my interest into caves to the feeling I felt on the road to Marfa. I thought I was going into the caves to understand the aquifers that run beneath the ground in Texas-- thinking through water as a resource that refuses to be bound by the quiltwork of ownership on the surface. But his comment refocused me: these cavers were not accessing the

underground to understand the ecosystem; they were venturing down in these tight, wet, uncomfortable spaces to access the same thing I had been craving on that road in West Texas: some sense of unclaimed space, “wild” and “free,” something absent from their lives in the space above.



Figure 2. *Cave Part A*, Drop ceiling tiles, steel, 2x4s, drywall, molding, vent, electric heater, 8' x 8' x 2', 2018



Figure 3. *Cave Part B*, Still from video model of cave space, 2018

But in seeking a space beyond their control they also enact a trespass on the fragile filtering system of the caves. Each human body that enters endangers a part of the ecosystem that is crucial to the health of the aquifer below. When done for scientific purposes, conservation ethics deems this impact as necessary, to better understand the space and facilitate its best use. But what about our trip down into the cave? How do we justify our impact on a collective ecosystem when it is done to satiate an individual craving? These questions begin in the cave, but quickly expand outward: when our very presence is a burden, how do we negotiate ethics of access, as we relate to land and its existing human and non-human communities?

My first response to these questions was to visualize that the trespass is necessary -- to assert that the experience of engaging directly in “wild” space is not transferable and cannot exist extracted from the site itself. *Cave Part One* and *Part Two* is an earnest attempt to bring the experience of cave space into the gallery. *Cave Part Two* takes us through a physical rendering of the space using photogrammetry, a photo triangulation software that creates an exact digital model of the space. Hovering in virtual space, the model is exact but incomplete: the scale, material, and atmosphere central to the experience of the cave are absent. *Cave Part One* seeks to fill these voids by using the architecture of the gallery to recreate the cave's impact on the body. The hanging ceiling asks the viewer to be vulnerable, contorting their body within the structure in order to experience the warmth of the space inside. Separate but together in the gallery, these distinct views strive within their limitations to articulate the whole.

In the works I think through the caver's description of the space as freedom. He describes a shift from mind to body. The underground space is defined by an absence of light; the absence of sight forces him to be fully present with his other senses so as to move safely through the cave. This recalibration of his experience of the world prioritizes non-visual over visual, refocusing

experience from mind to body. In a society and culture that prioritizes the mind, the cave is freeing.

The work *Cave Part One and Part Two* succeeds in describing the split between mind and body but falls short of articulating the emotion that is central to this shift in perspective. I think this failure is the more useful function of the work. In attempting to translate through compartmentalization, the works speak to how our human systems of understanding rely on categorizing and organizing, segmenting life into unhelpful parts that lose the beauty and complexity of the whole.

BREAK THINGS APART IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND

When, on the same day, two cedar waxwings flew into my studio window, I saved the bodies. I had been wondering how to describe my thoughts about sacrificing the complexity of wholeness to the clarity of segmentation; I felt intuitively that the two little birds might hold a way. I found them right as they died, before their bodies went cold and their eyes clouded over. What was more indescribable than watching their life go out? I thought I would try to alphabetize them.

So I got some books out of the library on the anatomy of a bird. And then I began to dissect the birds fully, separating and labeling each and every part: first 8,000 individual feathers, then wings and bones, hearts and organs. Each time I cut a piece from the body it became unrecognizable, a small bit of red or white, segmented from its vital function as a part of the whole. The alphabetical labels became the only record of their meaning.

The first cuts were brutal, the violence of my knife on their little bodies nearly unbearable. But slowly this emotion shifted, as the birds became sectioned off; they became just parts, pieces of a puzzle that I was beginning to understand. The tenor of the labor fluctuated like this throughout the process, oscillating between intimacy and violence. Like the video *OPEN*, the final work

functions by bringing the viewer into the contradictions of my labor; the photograph asks the viewer to trace the hand, following the tension of the act to contemplate the impact of seeking to understand.

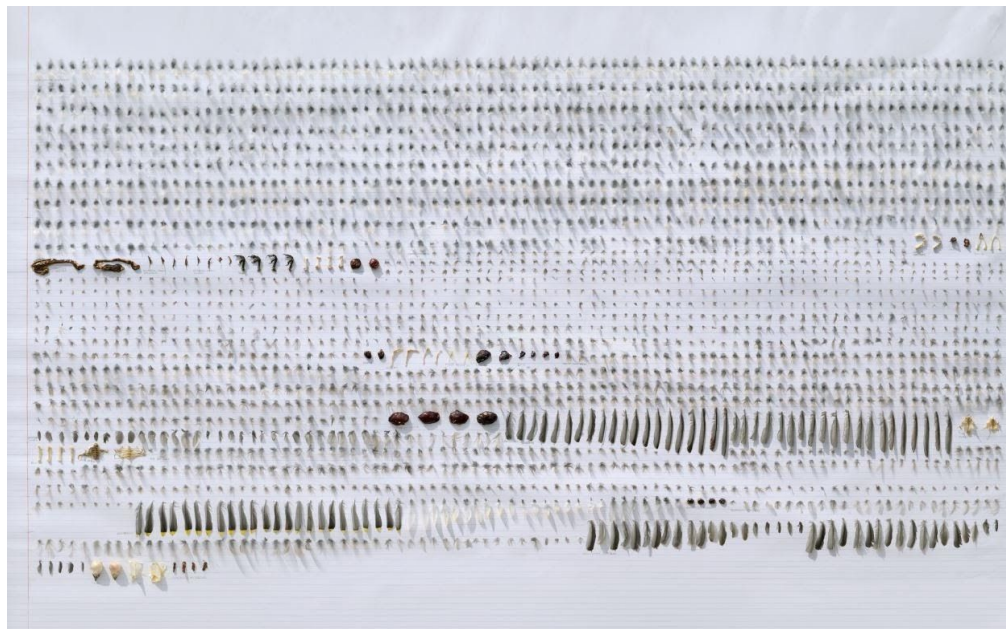


Figure 4. *On Looking*, 4' x 6' inkjet print, 2019



Figure 5. *On Looking: Detail*, 4' x 6' inkjet print, 2019

VIOLENCE IN IMAGING THE SUBLIME

The vacant lot at the end of Glissman Road was a little spot of green in an industrial park. The gallery had just acquired the land, and wanted me to create a temporary exhibit onsite to introduce their audience to the space.

It was a strangely sweet place: outside the dust and rumble of the work week, it offered a quiet oasis tucked away. There was a man living there who thought so too, inhabiting a tent that he called home. He told me a lot of things, in broken sentences, including a story about how he came to live there. I was listening with a lens: I was interested in the lot, in its relationship to something about wild space, about ownership, and the gentrification of East Austin. So I mostly heard one part of his story -- it was a story about birds. Before this he lived for years in Zilker Park, as far away from others as he could and still walk out for beer. He said he liked it back there because it was just him alone, and the birds. One day he got thrown out -- the cops came and dragged him out of his home. He swore it was the birdwatchers. He repeated this part three times. The only reason the cops knew he was there was because of the birdwatchers; they were the only ones ever back there and he didn't fit their view, so they got rid of him.

I was interested in the friction his story posed. The birdwatchers and the man were connected in that they shared a common motive -- they were both seeking nature as a sanctuary, a space isolated from others. They were separated by the birdwatchers' definition of "nature," as an ecological sanctuary, a space that has no room for another human body. In their constructed view, the man was framed as other and his use of the space was rewritten as an act of trespass. This erasure is familiar -- it is recorded in the first images of the American West, paintings that depict native lands as empty; majestic landscapes full of resources and devoid of human bodies, ready to receive the fantasies of the colonist psyche. This Romanticist construction links the pursuit of the sublime with erasure -- embedding a violence in the imaging of an idealised space. I am cautious of this history as I begin on this site. I was brought here as part of an effort to add

value to the lot -- the city of Austin funding the gallery in an effort to revitalize a seemingly “empty space.” To create a place-specific work involves more than adapting to the physical space of the site; it must also include acknowledging the context of the prompt itself-- as the origin point of where I stand in relationship to the place.



Figure 6. *Grounded in Culver*, Screen, 2x4's, lenses, Monteray oak tree, birdfeeder, 28' x 18' x 8', 2019

I begin by choosing two materials to drive the work. First is the screen of the man's tent -- from his perspective, the thin membrane is a necessity, the only separation between the elements and his home; whereas for the birdwatchers it is a screen porch or a camping trip, a material of leisure that allows them to tamper the outdoors with comfort. Depending on where one stands the material meaning transforms, dictated by the perspective of the user. The second material choice is the use of lenses, the birdwatchers' tools for looking -- I pull them out of binoculars, cameras, and scientific equipment. These too speak of perspective -- looking through a lens edits the world down to a single viewpoint. Curating the world through these apparatus, you lose full sight in exchange for a magnified view.



Figure 7. *Grounded in Culver: Detail, Screen, 2x4's, lenses, Monteray oak tree, birdfeeder, 28' x 18' x 8', 2019*



Figure 8. *Grounded in Culver: Detail, Screen, 2x4's, lenses, Monteray oak tree, birdfeeder, 28' x 18' x 8', 2019*

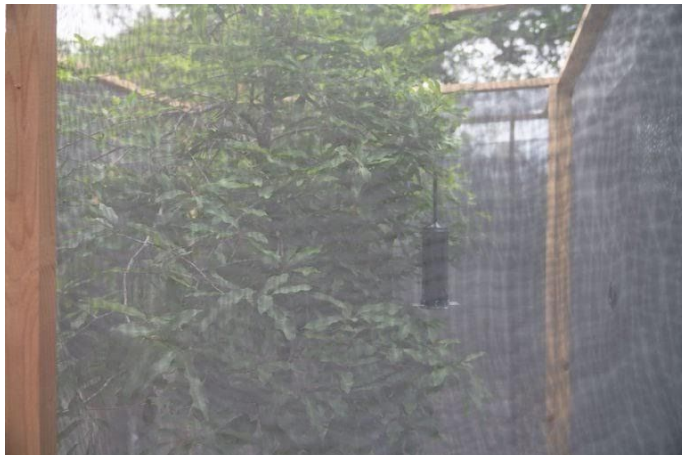


Figure 9. *Grounded in Culver: Detail, Screen, 2x4's, lenses, Monteray oak tree, birdfeeder, 28' x 18' x 8', 2019*

I want to build a structure that challenges the power/agency of the birdwatchers, removing the seeing apparatus from their hands and embedding it in the architecture. The lenses will be suspended in the structure to require a physical negotiation of the space. The piece functions through withholding: the narrative movement into the work provides no culminating moment, the lenses do not present one revealing viewpoint. Instead the center is found along the way-- it is in the subtle changes of light through the screen that render the screen visually porous and then solid-- and the succession of lenses that each hold their own viewpoint, that magnify and distort, providing an array of subjective views. The withholding of the structure attempts to articulate something about wild. The whole point of accessing wild space is to experience humility -- the center of the experience is never what you are looking for; it speaks more quietly than you would hope. In this story, the center for the birdwatchers is not the pursuit of a captured image of a bird, but the uncomfortable dissonance created by their reaction to the man in their “wild” space.

So while viewers study the site through the structure, they also watch each other. Entering into the screen corridors, they are each given agency as the looker-- the voyeur who is able to see into the isolated space within. But in their inquiry they are also on display, the single layer of screen on the external structure making them visible from the outside, at once the watcher and the watched.

MY OWN EXPECTATIONS

I had created a space at the center of the work, a courtyard, that was physically and visually separated from the viewer, with thick screen walls and no roof, accessible only from above. I struggled with what to put in this center; I knew that I wanted it to be something autonomous, separate from the constraints of the viewer, with its own sense of time. I thought it would be

perfect to have birds in the space, able to move freely in and out, while the viewer watched from within a screened cage.

Of course the birds did not come on demand, even with the lure of the birdfeeder I placed in the center to tempt them. Ironic to watch my own expectations thwarted in this way. So as a defense, I put a tree in the center -- the tree did not have the same agency as the birds, but it served as an entity that was “other,” of a different time, and large enough to fill the space and extend above it, underlining the limited access of the viewer. But without the living bodies of the birds, the work was changed.

The real protagonist of the work was the man's story, and I was afraid to use it. I was afraid that using his image to fit my own making would reinforce the very aspect of the story I wanted to critique, enacting an added trespass. As I often do, I redirected my social critique onto nature, using the birds and trees as metaphor. But in this instance the work lost its center. Without the tension of his story, the work just became about witnessing the natural, uncritically adopting the viewpoint of the birdwatchers. Glasstire pronounced it “a break, a pause... [a structure for] ... reclaiming the mysticism of witnessing existence.” In this description the work is focused more on the sublime of Romanticism than the dangers of pursuing it.

I attempted to correct this imbalance by inserting his story back into the work. I wrote a version of his story and then spoke it as a script, playing the adapted narrative through speakers while the audience moved through the work. In many ways I think the audio worked. It reinstated the source and avoided trespass by filtering his words through my own lens. But as an afterthought it was not integrated into the sculpture; the audio's narrative time did not align with the experience of the object.

I continue to wonder how to move closer to my critiques. It seems the tension in representing the story of an “other” is not an offshoot but a center, a place that should be explored. I wonder now if there was a way I could have done this with material, instead of a tree, more closely referencing the body, or absence of body, but through my own lens.

A LAST NOTE

A bird did come. When I was alone on the site the last day, preparing to deconstruct the work, I heard a flutter inside the center space. There was a robin flying in and out of the tree, tending a nest with three eggs inside. I put down my tools and watched her through the lenses for over an hour, witnessing her work.

It was the saddest, sweetest thing-- here in her presence, I was at once validated, a witness to the spontaneous intersection of my work with an autonomous being, and implicated, responsible for the removal of her livelihood.

In her presence, I was full and empty, met by my own critique—

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