

*The Shaping of America: a painter's perspective*  
*Exhibition Statement by Carrie Patterson*

From the very beginning of life, every person learns how to negotiate the spaces they live in, constructing ideas about the world. If I show you a group of maps drawn by children all living on Elm Street, each one would be different. Places of familiarity that are drawn boldly by one child would be left off completely by the other. Literal fact has no use in a children's map. If grandma's small house was THE place, then grandma's house might be largest of all. Places of personal history or importance might crowd the street on some maps and those same spaces may be absent in another. Our perceptual and analytic understanding of our world begins with our experience of space. We learn through trial and error, conforming to the rules of culture, and maximizing our potential for survival and success within a landscape. As we grow older, we prioritize and negotiate our prefabricated versions of new experiences with the spaces of old in our memory. For me and many others, painting is a way of learning about the histories embedded in the ground, buildings, landscapes, and thus humanity.

This exhibition features the work of ten women painters. Each painter embodies the tradition of negotiating space and translating lived experience into abstract painted form, pivoting our understanding of the American Landscape. The paintings in this exhibition suggests that the idea of landscape expands exponentially when the meaning and context of the artist are also considered. The ten women artists and their work illustrate that landscapes cannot be interpreted without considering the connections artists have to memory, experience, and ownership. By doing so, you, the viewer, have the opportunity to see and experience the full picture.

In 2015, I gave a talk at Mt. Gretna School of Art in Pennsylvania and thought for the first time, about the idea for this exhibition. Earlier that year and I don't remember why, I read the book *The Shaping of America* by D.W. Meinig, an American geographer. There was a lot to learn but one idea in particular stuck with me. Meinig suggests the idea of "landscape" only taking on meaning in relationship and context to what is in the mind of the viewer. Meinig writes of a situation with a group of people overlooking a scenic panoramic mountain view. He suggests that if each person were to describe a portion of the view, they may describe similar elements like a tree, barn, or fence, but that those elements, those objects in the landscape only take on meaning in relationship and context to what is in the mind of the artist and in turn, the mind of the viewer. Meinig goes on to divide the landscape into various paths that one could follow in terms of interpretation:

- Landscape as Nature: grandeur than any human can ever be
- Landscape as Habitat: something humans can alter
- Landscape as Artifact: existing as separate from humans
- Landscape as System: seen through the lens of science
- Landscape as Aesthetics: beautiful to humans
- Landscape as Wealth: owned by humans
- Landscape as Problem: rescued or documented by humans

- Landscape as Ideology: a vessel for the embodiment of human ideas
- Landscape as History: holding secrets to be mined
- Landscape as Place: equal to humanity as a living body

**Can you identify a painting in this exhibition that falls within one of those categories? Be sure to look at the biographies of the artists so you can see where the artist is from, how they grew up, and how they define their subject, or determine their creative process. If you can't, keep reading and more information might be helpful.**

Meinig's book doesn't have anything to do with painting and so I read some essays out there on painting and landscape theory.

In 2008 James Elkins and Rachael Ziady DeLue edited *The Art Seminar*, a book chock full of titillating titles for the landscape enthusiast such as *Elusive Landscapes and Shifting Grounds*, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* and *One with Nature: Landscape, Language, Empathy, and Imagination*. One idea that continues to stay with me from this collection of essays, is the idea of non-visual landscapes: itineraries, for example, which tell you how to experience landscapes while walking through them. It is actually suggested that experiencing landscape for the average person has more to do with driving than walking. This rings true in my experience of living in a non-walkable location for years, and finally, after 16 years, resolving to move, to live in a more walkable town and commute to my job.

Just as figurative painting and drawing cannot be understood in the context of one mode of expression, Landscape painting and drawing cannot be limited by one interpretation of intent, meaning, or process.

Let's think about the different meanings of the word Landscape:

- The physical elements of landforms or landscape
- how the land is shaped which is connected to cultural values and human presence
- or... landscape as the representation of a place or scene fully or partially depicted as subject matter in the creation of art.

For the purpose of this exhibition, I am relying equally on all three definitions, even though one painting or other may evoke one definition over another.

When I think about formal reductive painting, I immediately think of Piet Mondrian's Tree series. As one looks at the entire series, Mondrian's chief concerns and thoughts are vibrantly evident as he moves from one painting to the next. Mondrian is 100% dedicated to understanding the relationship of the height to the width of the tree while exploring the weight of the central axis versus the pull of the horizontal reaching of the branches. His mark barely touches the edges of the page causing a kind of vibration between the form being created and the empty space around the form. In earlier versions, he still maintains the integrity of the overall form and shape but is also interested in the symbolic nature of color represented rather

than perceived. Rarely in a studio art class would a professor talk about these paintings and drawings in the context of landscape seen as history or landscape seen as place. We tend to focus on formal reductive qualities that Mondrian provides as a way of approaching the subject matter of landscape. ***Looking for the formal reductive qualities in each painting is one way that you can view this exhibition. Can you identify a painting that may show you parts of a whole? Or maybe remind you of many places rather than one place?***

Can a painter think reductively and also embody a specific sense of place? Lois Dodd, a contemporary Landscape painter, is a wonderful example of just such a painter. She paints what she knows, what is around her studio, the flowers in her backyard, or the shape that the laundry makes as it blows in the wind. She paints small and large, on site and in her studio. She looks closely and is physically close to her subject matter. Like other landscape painters, there is a discipline in her process that affects the outcome of her work. She does not settle for something that looks sort of like the landscape outside her door. She also does not edit out a scene so that it becomes purely picturesque. As the artist stated in an interview, "I would find it, see it, and say 'that's exciting' but I don't want to set things up." Dodd is part of a generation of painters who combined the pursuits of minimal and reductive art with figuration. Her work is an example of representing a landscape where one can feel the human presence, how we live in spaces, and navigate through spaces. ***Looking for the human presence in each work is another way you can view this exhibition. Can you identify a painting in this show where you can feel the human presence? Can you identify a painting where you can't feel the human presence?***

Thinking of landscape painting as Ideology brings to mind the Group of Seven. The painters in the group were Nationalists and believed that their role was to create a distinct Canadian Art that was directly tied to the land and in direct contact with nature. These painters were dedicated to their country and their identity was defined by their relationship with and their depiction of landscape and place. ***What paintings in this exhibition might be aligned closely with a national identity?***

It is part of our contemporary struggle that many of us are not "from" a particular place. Most of us would not associate ourselves with a nationalistic agenda like the Group of seven but instead find ourselves migrating between cultures. Lucy Lippard says in *The Lure of the Local*: "I am concerned not with the history of nature and the landscape but with the historical narrative as it is written *in* the landscape or place by the people who live or lived there."

When your version of local embodies not only the place where your feet stand but also the cultures that travel within you, the local becomes hard to decipher and can alter how we see and experience place. There are several painters in this show who cross cultures and even though they may paint somewhere specifically, the memories of other places influence their choices when representing the landscape of residence. ***Can you find a painting or two that may seem to cross-cultures?***

Subject matter for landscape is not limited to simply things that remain fixed or still. In fact, some artists like to interact directly with the landscape, altering its condition and then representing that alteration in the form of a painted object. Vija Celmins is such an artist, finding small things in nature to reproduce and duplicate exactly. Other artists try to affect landscape and then document their action. This idea of duplicating exactly what we see as a means of understanding perception is a challenge. What we see isn't always the version of landscape that we have in our heads. **Try looking closely at any given landscape. Draw or paint something that is literally an inch or two from your eyes – so that you can see everything that is inherent to the object or surface. And remember, within each surface is a history of landscape.**

It could also be that some artists use the material that they paint on as a starting point for narrative and symbolic meaning. For some it is even the tools that they use to make the paintings. I am thinking of John Cage at his Stone Painting Series where he traces stones to form an image. It may also be that some painters approach paint as an earthly material, representing landscape in the actual sensibility of painted matter. **Can you find a painting where the paint itself appears to be like a skin, or soil, or connected to actual land? Or a painting that uses material to represent a type of history or cultural knowledge?**

Some painters work more like scientists where they establish a set of rules for their process and they do not break the boundaries of those rules. I am thinking of painter, Bridget Riley. She has often written about her connection to nature, how by establishing her own set of working parameters in the studio, her paintings favor the events she experiences and then translates through a complex system of optics, paint, and color. Other artists team up with scientists in order to see landscapes that would otherwise be left unseen. **Can you find an artist in this exhibition who travels to unseen territory or one that has a clear set of rules?**

I would argue that all of the painters in this exhibition investigate the complex relationship between humans and land through the act of painting. We all produce objects that hold our memories of spaces we once inhabited while also translating new places of emotional and psychological resonance. None of us define landscape in literal terms and we all are deeply connected to the materiality of painting that can only be felt through the body. I would encourage any viewer to look at this exhibition and the paintings contained within it through the act of visual scaffolding, through the lens of intellectual inquiry and through visceral experience. By doing so, the idea of what it means to paint an American landscape becomes tilled and can grow.

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