

Things That Ignore

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by

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Table of Contents

| | |
|----|---|
| 3 | Acknowledgements |
| 5 | Abstract |
| 6 | Denaturalization |
| 9 | Cinematizing Landscape and the Generosity of Slowness |
| 12 | Divine Indifference: Absence Faith and the Sublime |
| 14 | Bibliography |

Abstract

I make landscape and figurative paintings and prints that explore means of representing slowness. My work touches on a quotidian desire for a theory of the sublime rooted in divine indifference, the notion that the divine attracts what it initially repels and that absence is presence. Much of my imagery is pulled from a cross country archive of personal photographs and a no-brow collection of film stills. Drawing comparisons between these sources and the ongoing history of landscape, I denaturalize subjects through a painterly appropriation of cinematic sensibilities in order to destabilize a fixed gaze, foster a slow sense of pace, and embed an ambivalent characterization of place. The transient figures, animals and apparitions that populate my work are the personified limbs of the landscapes they traverse, wrestling with false ideologies and wobbly sentiments of faith. This thesis will attempt to expand upon and interconnect the purpose of denaturalization, the aesthetics of slow and the theory of divine indifference.

Denaturalization:

I am invested in landscape as a site to restage ideological attachments . The use of natural and urban imagery suggests that I am influenced by naturalist painters or artists within that lineage. Although the choice of my imagery and influences may suggest an aspiration towards naturalism, I am fascinated by how the materiality and process of painting can denaturalize subjects and undermine the desire for stability. Denaturalization

My interest in denaturalization in relation to landscape stems in part from the work of environmental historian William Cronon. In *The Trouble with Wilderness, or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature*, Cronon confronts human-centric conceptions of nature, and in particular the myth of wilderness. Cronon denies the contemporary, idealized and marketable brand of wilderness as “a pristine sanctuary where the last remnant of an untouched, endangered but still transcendent nature...can be encountered without the contaminating taint of civilization.”¹ Idealizing natural spaces as wilderness has colonial ties, of a nature not yet conquered or developed. It is dependent on nature being a place. Cronon is wary of even characterizing nature as a place. In fact it is more of a slow, ongoing event that permeates space and place. Wilderness, in this case, would be nature not permeating, but left uninterrupted. This is a myth, a cultural construct, a “reflection of our unexamined longings and desires...not a solution to our culture’s problematic relationships with the non-human world.” Wilderness is an attempt to contain nature, something that is evolving, living and dying, and indifferent, into a place that is somehow more natural than nature. When nature is named it is made still, and longings and desires can be projected upon it.

Consider the reflection of a landscape on water. The water reflects nature as a mirror would, which visually suggests nature views itself the same as the human eye. This is a naturalization of the human gaze, a visualization which affirms that how we perceive nature must be correct.² The reflection is treated as a separate picture, apart from the landscape that the water is in and the landscape it is reflecting, when rather it is not an image but an event.

There are not many other, if any, examples of nature naturalizing the human gaze like the reflection of a landscape on water. In a way the reflection is a facade. The surface of water would have to be pretty opaque to produce a clear reflection. Below the opacity and the reflection on the water, the landscape and nature continues. Perception does not consider what is below, just the reflection, what is returned to the eye. In this way, landscape, as in reproductions of explorable spaces, has more in common with theatrical set design, a location definitively unnatural, than it does with ecology. Wilderness is one such location. The personal or cultural insecurities that motivate the construct of wilderness desire a nature that is nameable, measurable, and exists on a spectrum. The spectrum oscillates from the least natural to most natural (wild): the weed in the sidewalk is natural but not wild like the same weed growing somewhere free of (or with limited) human development.

¹ Cronon, William, *The Trouble With Wilderness, Or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature*, 1

² WJT Mitchell *Landscape and Power*, 24

Wilderness is supposedly the most untouched, transcendent place at the end of the spectrum. However, Neither nature or wilderness are a place, nor are they synonymous. Wilderness is a specific desire resulting in a distancing relationship from the non-human world and nature is an event in motion. Wilderness denaturalizes nature by categorizing it as a type of landscape. Landscape is dependent on a still, fixed horizon to describe nature, but horizons are an unattainable limit. Landscape presents natural imagery in a constructed measured way motivated by longings and desires in order to present nature as wilderness, as if a horizon line is also a scale that judges the authenticity of nature from nature.

The writer and environmental advocate Edward Abbey was also wary of the idealization of nature and the allure of wilderness. In *Desert Solitaire*, Abbey shares his desire to avoid the mythic temptation of wilderness, viewing wilderness as the “personification of nature.”³ Abbey viewed nature as the root of all things, a force that also beckons all things to return, but is ultimately indescribable and unattainable in its unknown, most authentic form. Abbey named this impossible desire as “bedrock and paradox,” his desire to merge with the “non-human world” and “yet somehow survive still intact, individual, separate.”⁴ Although Abbey questioned the notion of wilderness and attempts to know nature definitively, he was still misled and motivated by the mythification of the American West and rugged, masculine individuality. Abbey projected his frustrations with tourism, technology and government onto the rural Utah desert landscape whilst avoiding addressing his own frontier mentality and the fact that it was Manifest Destiny that opened up rural Utah for his musings. Although Abbey expressed his skepticism of wilderness, he ignored the history that brought it into existence and ultimately was unable to shed the ideology that caused its invention.

In *Landscape and Power*, art historian W.J.T. Mitchell names landscape the naturalizer of ideology. According to Mitchell, landscape assumes a dual purpose in relation to ideology: it naturalizes artificial human constructs, be they cultural or political as if they were “given and inevitable” and interpellates the viewer in a relatively fixed relationship to the givenness of the landscape as “sight and site.”⁵ Landscape is a tool that marries ideology, which is an aspirational pseudohistory, with the human made or natural (which can be mistaken as prehistory) into a unified image or object. Landscape provides a foundational, subterranean scaffolding for an ideology all the while veiling its germination and construction. Cronon recognized that wilderness is a type of landscape containing an ideology, and Abbey knew it on a personal level but was unable to reorient his gaze.

If landscape has served as an implement to naturalize ideology, then at this point in its ongoing history, denaturalizing landscape can expose the limits of perception and dismantle a desire for ideology. Denaturalization is a means of exhibiting an ideology and its idealized form as ultimately unachievable, incompatible and irresponsible. I am uninterested in naturalizing my vision or self. Denaturalizing my vision and self leaves my questions laid bare.

³ Abbey, Edward *Desert Solitaire*

⁴ Abbey, Edward *Desert Solitaire*

⁵ WJT Mitchell *Landscape and Power*, 2

The Cinematization of Landscape and the Generosity of Slowness

Cinema has reoriented the representation of time in painting. Mitchell even states that it is in fact cinema that necessitated a reevaluation of the history of landscape painting altogether.⁶ Cinema has an especially unique relationship with landscape in that it can map landscape while exploring it spatially. The representation of a landscape in cinema has the triple privilege of varying perspective, editing, and movement. This relates more closely to the actual experience of moving through a space on a physical level than painting can simulate. Painting cannot compete with the immersion of cinema.

What is more elusive and alluring is how cinema represents the passing of time or lack thereof. The rate at which cinema unfolds temporally, its pacing, determines its read and how it negotiates desire. Fast, even, and predictable pacing meets the desires of an audience and asks very little. When cinema achieves slowness, it demands patience, a longer look, a lingering gaze. Slow cinema can afford to provide less information and hold fast to its subject. Although slowness does not seek to entertain, I am convinced that the aesthetics of slowness is ultimately more generous. When confronted with something that does not name or explain itself quickly, tension is not dissolved. Resolution requires engagement, a quieting down, a conversation between the spectator and the thing that ignores the spectator. It is a temporal device that clears room spatially and temporally through its quietness.

I often return to the work of Kelly Reichardt for her spare cinematography and the relentless slowness of her narratives. Her first foray into genre and western, *Meek's Cutoff*, follows six settlers lost on a Beckettesque trek through the Oregon High Desert, led astray by the titular overconfident Stephen Meek and eventually led by Emily Tetherow. Meek is unable to admit he is lost, inexperienced, and unsure of how to proceed. The settlers trek across a great distance, likely in the wrong direction. They are moving without advancing. The film culminates with Tetherow's gradual realization that Meek is lost and her unceremonious, anti-climatic ascension as the group's leader, without any indication of the settlers' survival. Reichardt dilates the experience of time over the course of the film to match the character's lack of progress in a monotonous desert. There are plain, eye level shots of the High Desert not depicting anything especially scenic, long tracking shots of the settlers walking without the heroic horizon behind them, tedious portrayals of quotidian tasks like fixing a wagon wheel or filling buckets with water depicted in their literal duration. Reichardt leverages and challenges the "idle, yet unhurried" spectators' immobility and desire for narrative progression. Notably, the position of the spectator is counter to the settlers. In *Exhausted Drift: Austerity, Dispossession and the Politics of Slow in Kelly Reichardt's Meek's Cutoff*, the art and film historian Elena Gorfinkel characterizes Reichardt's temporal aesthetic as "austere slowness."⁷⁸ Reichardt deploys the aesthetic of austere slowness to sync the settlers' movement without advancement with the

⁶ Mitchell *Landscape and Power* 4

⁷ Bellour *The Pensive Spectator* 120

⁸ Gorfinkel *Exhausted Drift: Austerity, Dispossession and the Politics of Slow in Kelly Reichardt's Meek's Cutoff* 123, 124

temporal reality of the landscape, a site that is indifferent to their timeline and moves at a geological pace. The long walking shots are trance-like and rhythmic, opening up the settlers' situation to interpretation. This kind of pacing complicates how the predicament of the settlers is perceived by making their plight plain but unheroic. Slowness cannot support their ideological motivation.

Reichardt's framing choice is equally spare. Reichardt's choice of a 4:3 aspect ratio is claustrophobic even when depicting the High Desert. It is portrayed as inhospitable, unpromising and endless in the sense that there is no sense in surveying the land. The tight, near-square framing eliminates a sense of vastness and re-emphasizes the settlers' stuckness. There is not enough distance for "tomorrow or yesterday," only a stern, eternal present which haunts the settlers and the spectator.⁹ Without the characteristically "American cinematic idiom" of vastness, the image loses its ideological implications. The oft-romanticized expansiveness of the desert, a synecdoche of the American landscape, is more wasteland than promised land. Reichardt restages recognizable and undeniable American landscape imagery as a site without the structural integrity to support lofty ambitions. It cannot support "the dream work of ideology" a function Mitchell argued that most landscapes aspire to achieve.¹⁰ The manner in which Reichardt restages and deromanticizes the iconic High Desert arguably posits that what is often mistaken as sublime is actually ordinary. By taking advantage of the aesthetics of slowness and cinema's access to landscape, Reichardt asks for varying degrees of the spectators' empathy for the settlers and shakes belief in the American landscape.

Slowness, albeit demanding, is nevertheless bountiful in its generosity. When something must travel at a fast clip, its path is determinate, straighter, and predictable. An interstate or a river with class five rapids do not drift and meander until they must slow down and separate into a grid or a delta. More routes permit varying speeds, directions and means of moving through a landscape. Slowness in painting is when the temporal state of a painting is more ambiguous, and thus requires a more considerate, longer gaze. The allowance of multiple temporalities changes the immediate now to eternal present, negates the need for a time of day in image, and allows light to indicate a psychological state. Slowness builds a generous repository of time.

⁹ Gorfinkel *Exhausted Drift: Austerity, Dispossession and the Politics of Slow in Kelly Reichardt's Meek's Cutoff* 128

¹⁰ Mitchell *Landscape and Power* 4

Divine Indifference: Absence, Faith and the Sublime

“We are saved in the end by the things that ignore us.”¹¹

-Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality*

My return route to a renewed relationship with faith was mediated by a period of absence as it often is for those from religious upbringings. Mine was caused by disillusionment, skepticism, misunderstanding and a desire for new experiences. These feelings waxed and waned in intensity and maybe verged into apatheism when I was the furthest away mentally from spiritual belief. Faith is not easily, if ever, replaced. It's loss creates an absence.

Absence is a hole, a gap, a vast emptiness of a thing that is lost or in waiting. Absence is immobile, it exhibits the non-thing but can still possess the original thing power. This monolithic, immobile nothingness conjures a sense of ambivalence, if what was absent was present, or if what was absent remains absent. Ambivalence activates the gaze, demands patience, and unfolds at a slow rate. Whatever it is that is absent, a narrative piece of information that provides resolution, a hierarchy that clarifies purpose, or a framework for locating meaning, desires acknowledgement.

My return route to a meaningful relationship with God and faith has been intentional but gradual. One notion in particular was a catalyst for my renewed interest in faith, one which spoke about the power and reality of absence. I was rummaging through one of my mother's stacks of theological books and came across a copy of *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* by the professor and theologian Belden C. Lane. I had a nascent interest in the sublime at the time and suspected that the reason for that stemmed from the absence of a relationship with the divine that felt personal or tangible. In the essay *Fierce Back Country and the Indifference of God*, Lane recalls walking in the desert alone in the morning, watching his encampment glow and shrink, and the tension between his desire to return but walk further until the glow was extinguished by distance. The oscillating feelings of beckoning and repulsion reminded Lane of the worth of “temporary states of being” above a stoic stability and appreciating “a spiritual sense of place.”¹² On the same walk, Belden entertains the thought that he would not be a Christian simply if he were raised differently. Belden mentions Judaism and Buddhism as likely candidates.¹³ He notes the three faiths originated in desert and mountain landscapes, landscapes which summon the “aseity of God, a divine indifference of having as its

¹¹ Lane, Belden C. *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality*, 59

¹² Auping, Michael *A Nomad Among Builders* 124

¹³ Lane, Belden C. *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality*, 53

goal the ultimate attraction of that which it initially repels.”¹⁴ What is ignoring Belden in this case, is the sensation that the cause of his surroundings is independent of his own.

The pairing of the divine with indifference can be mistaken as the absence of the divine or an uncaring divine, which is polar to its meaning and understanding of indifference. Rather, when a vulnerable self faces “an audience that isn’t there,” one faces the “things that ignore.”¹⁵ A sense of self remains, and is affirmed, when there is nothing to acknowledge the self. This can be initially perceived as absence or even terror, a repellent, but can dissolve into a “great remembered wholeness that is strangely akin to love” if the spectator is attracted to what was initially terrifying.¹⁶ This is not unlike Abbey’s desire to merge with the “non-human world” and “yet somehow survive still intact, individual, separate” despite his lack of interest in the divine.¹⁷ Ultimately Abbey was uninterested in surrendering the insignificance of his own selfhood in order to achieve the synthesization with the natural world he desired. Lane on the other hand is willing. Indifference can be a stabilizing or destabilizing force.

Divine indifference is a working theory of the sublime. It posits that absence is presence, Similar to other interpretations of the sublime, it functions via a duality, the push and pull of belief and doubt. The belief that what is known is final and the sudden or gradual doubt that this belief is not so. The notion of divine indifference is not a theory of the divine or sublime that perfectly contains my system of spiritual belief. Believing in a perfect container seems counter to having faith in indifference. Rather, I have faith that what I do not know is likely true.

¹⁴ Lane, Belden C. *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality*, 53

¹⁵ Lane, Belden C. *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality*, 57

¹⁶ Lane, Belden C. *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality*, 59

¹⁷ Abbey, Edward *Desert Solitaire* 17

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