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# Disclosures: Consciousness and Environment

Lauren Scavo-Fulk

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DISCLOSURES:  
CONSCIOUSNESS AND ENVIRONMENT

A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

Lauren J. Scavo-Fulk

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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The way in which human consciousness interacts with the external environment is subjective and individual. As we perceive and interact with the world, there is a contrast between our subjective interpretation of external stimuli and the objectivity of the external world. I examine this idea through the perspectives of phenomenology, environmental psychology, the work of contemporary deadpan photographers, and the historic genre of Romantic painting. My intention in this body of work is to draw attention to the varied and complex nature of our interaction with the external environment.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Landscape art has, since its popularization during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, remained one of the most widespread and popular genres in visual art. Perhaps the most significant reason for landscape art's continued popularity among artists and viewers, and one of the reasons that I have chosen to depict landscapes in this body of work, is the relatability of the land as a subject; it is ever-present, a constant observer of human activity and a pivotal player in every historical event. We are constantly in contact with the land, interacting with it on both a physical and psychological level. Just as landscape factors into collective histories and cultures, it is equally present in personal histories. Our personal experiences and emotions associated with landscapes inform how we interpret them; the experience of a particular environment is an inherently personal and subjective one.

Many factors determine these interpretive differences, most significantly that experience itself is personal and subjective. Human understanding is mediated through human consciousness, resulting in individualized perceptions of the external environment that vary from person to person, as consciousness itself varies from person to person. My work is an examination of the contrast between this subjectivity of experience and the objectivity of the external environment. I intend to communicate this through a variety of means, most significantly by borrowing visual elements from the contrasting art movements of Romanticism and deadpan – one of which is highly expressive and individual, while the other is inexpressive and uniform. However, I argue that neither movement is wholly one or the other. Romantic artists, though emphasizing their individual emotional responses, borrow heavily from previous artists and their 19<sup>th</sup> century contemporaries. Likewise, deadpan artists inevitably include their

own subjective perspective in their work despite their attempts at objectivity, as human perception is inherently subjective and a photograph cannot be divorced from the influence of its photographer. Subjectivity, objectivity, and outside influence are constantly at play in one's perception of a given environment. By heightening the sense of atmosphere in the places that I represent, while also maintaining a straightforward and first-person perspective, I seek to draw attention to these contrasting elements.

My primary philosophical influence is phenomenology, a branch of philosophy that deals with the subjectivity of experience, as our knowledge of the world comes primarily through our senses. Because sensory input is the primary means through which we can interact with the world, as we are beings in physical forms, we rely on these senses for how we interpret our experiences. These interpretations are also related to our familiarity with the given environment. The way in which we perceive and interpret our surroundings changes based upon our relationship to a given place, and how familiar we are with it. Experience colors our emotional responses, and fundamentally alters the way that we perceive and move through it on a physical level. By depicting environments that are ordinary and that I expect most of my viewers will find familiar, I hope to draw attention to the way that we interact with these familiar places on both an emotional and cognitive level.

## CHAPTER 2

### SUBJECTIVITY OF PERCEPTION

#### **Phenomenology**

Phenomenology examines the world through a first-person, experiential perspective, with the understanding that this perspective is the only way in which we can directly interact with the world. My work focuses on this first-person view, using an intimate scale, human eye-level perspective, and heightened atmosphere to engage the viewer in the experience of a particular area of land. My intention is to lead the viewer to introspection and to greater awareness of his or her own subjective responses to the environment.

Phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty focuses in particular on the way in which physical bodies engage with the external world, as the corporeity of the human body necessitates that consciousness can only engage with the external environment through the perception of the senses. The relationship between the body and its environment is central. Merleau-Ponty writes, “Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism; it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system” (Merleau-Ponty 232). This relationship is not superficial; one is inextricable from the other, and one’s physical engagement with the world is crucial in understanding it. Merleau-Ponty writes elsewhere:

We never cease living in the world of perception, but we go beyond it in critical thought – almost to the point of forgetting the contribution of perception to our idea of truth. . .

The perceiving mind is an incarnate mind. I have tried, first of all, to re-establish the roots of the mind in its body and in its world, going against the doctrines which treat

perception as a simple result of the action of external things on our body as well as against those which insist on the autonomy of consciousness (qtd. in Edie 3).

Consciousness is then, likewise, a central element in understanding the world and one's engagement with it. Consciousness cannot be separated from the physical body, and vice versa.

One of Merleau-Ponty's contemporaries in the twentieth century, Martin Heidegger, reinforces the assertion of the intimate relationship consciousness has with its environment, and the subjectivity that results from this relationship. Heidegger scholar Dan Zahavi states, "There is no pure point of view and there is no view from nowhere, there is only an embodied (and contextually embedded) point of view" (681). No one is able to perceive something in a wholly objective manner. Consciousness is inherently embodied in a subject and is therefore subject to that individual's perceptual interpretation. In fact, one of Heidegger's greatest legacies is his coining of the term *Dasein*, which means "being-in-the-world". This refers to an engagement with the world mediated through the self. By using an intimate scale in my work and heightening the atmosphere, I hope to bring my viewers to a meaningful recognition of their personal, subjective responses to the types of landscapes in these works through the depiction of representational forms in familiar environments.

Another key concept in phenomenology, particularly in the work of Merleau-Ponty, is intersubjectivity – the supposition that the way in which we understand and interpret external stimuli is in some sense dependent upon engagement with others who also interact with the world. Our interpretations of the world are subjective, and so are the interpretations of others; we understand the very concept of objectivity, then, by comparing our perspective with that of others. Zahavi explains,

There is a deep relationship between intersubjectivity so understood and objectivity. My experience of the world as objective is mediated by my experience of and interaction with other world-engaged subjects. Only insofar as I experience that others experience the same objects as myself do I really experience those objects as objective and real. . . The objectivity of the world is intersubjectively constituted (Thompson/Zahavi).

In a vacuum, we have no way of ascertaining that which is objective and that which is subjective. We must engage with the perspective of others, as we can only perceive the world through a first-person perspective. In my work, I am interested in how the subjective interpretation of the viewer changes the tone and significance of the areas of land that I am representing. In drawing these landscapes, I am communicating my own perspective on them. However, by engaging with them and interpreting them through their own first-person perspectives, my viewers are engaging with my perspective as well as their own. There is a conversation happening, then, among the objects being represented, the way they are represented (my interpretation of them), and the way they are perceived (my viewer's interpretation). This can be seen as a kind of intersubjective examination of the landscape.

Phenomenological description is a means of attaining awareness and understanding of intersubjectivity. Zahavi writes, "The subject realizes itself in its presence to the world and to others – not in spite of, but precisely *by way of* its corporeality and historicity. The subject must be seen as a worldly incarnate existence, and the world as a common field of experience, if intersubjectivity is at all to be possible" (Zahavi 680). As another key concept in phenomenology, and one of the primary phenomenological methods, phenomenological description is the idea of understanding a particular experience by explaining how it appears and how it feels to oneself as an individual, rather than explaining why it appears or feels that way

(Smith). This type of description centers on describing the phenomenon rather than explaining it. I view drawing as a type of phenomenological description. Drawing is an inherently individual means of expression, and by drawing an environment, I am in a sense describing my own perception of it through visual means.

I have chosen to approach my work through phenomenology rather than the more contemporary philosophy of post-structuralism, which argues that objectivity itself does not exist or is not ascertainable, because I feel that the moderation in phenomenology and the tension between subjectivity and objectivity represented in it is more indicative of the reality of how we interpret our surroundings. Rather than arguing for the rejection of objectivity as a whole, I am positing that a tension exists between truth and perception – that perception stands in the way of objectivity, and that the reality of perception is the result of a conversation between subjective experience and the concrete reality of the external environment.

### **Environmental Psychology and Landscape Studies**

Humanity's relationship with the natural world is complicated. Our intervention in the natural world is often invasive and destructive, causing lasting damage that we may attempt to undo but ultimately cannot. However, the relationship is not wholly negative. Humans are necessarily rooted in environment, both physically and culturally, as it provides a setting for all of human life. Simon Schama writes on this extensively in his book *Landscape and Memory*, which elaborates on the influence place has had throughout human history in the unfolding of every historical event. Early in the book, Schama acknowledges the inextricability of humanity and nature, and the complexity within this relationship:

While we acknowledge (as we must) that the impact of humanity on the earth's ecology has not been an unmixed blessing, neither has the long relationship between nature and

culture been an unrelieved and predetermined calamity. At the very least, it seems right to acknowledge that it is our shaping perception that makes the difference between raw matter and landscape (Schama 10).

Perception, then, is a key factor in this relationship, and the way in which it has factored into previous experiences influences our growing perception and understanding of those experiences. In my work, I intend for the complexity and ethical ambiguity of humanity's relationship with the environment to be present. Though I often represent landscapes that are significantly altered by the human hand, I present them in a straightforward manner that does not condemn or condone this involvement.

Elsewhere in his book, Schama posits that the relationship between the actual landscape and our perception of it is so close that they are equal parts of the reality of a given landscape. Memory provides just as much information about a location as the actual physical makeup of it (6-7). In my work, I rely on the memory and perception of my viewers to give the work much of its significance. By minimizing the context surrounding the scenes that I represent, and by simplifying the environments, I hope to call to mind memories of particular places in the experiences of my viewers, although most have not been to the specific locations represented in each piece. By calling upon the memories and experiences of the viewers, I am emphasizing the element of viewer participation that is present in any work of art, as well as the participation that subjective experience has in the everyday relationship of consciousness and its physical environment.

Landscapes lend themselves particularly well to memory because they are so emotionally connected in our minds with our personal experiences. Landscape scholar Mark Roskill writes,

“[Landscape] actualizes for us webs of memories and emotion associated with particular conjunctions and confrontations distributed over space and over time. Whatever is special and persists in the mind about this kind of experience must, basically, be *seen* rather than *said*. We pass through a place in a particular season, or time of life or frame of mind about being there, alone or accompanied” (2).

Because we are constantly in landscapes, they become unconsciously connected to whatever event is happening in our lives during the time of our presence in that landscape, and the two become visually and emotionally linked. As humans, we also have an innate desire to determine our individual place in our larger surroundings. Scholar David Jacobson writes, “As humans we are constantly *locating* ourselves, always mediating between the finite moment we are in and the almost infinite vistas of memories and futures, utopias and dystopias we can imagine. If we just processed information in the ongoing present, ‘here’ and ‘there’, ‘now’ and ‘then’ would not exist. Thus ‘place’ is a constant of the human condition” (Jacobson 192). Memories of past experiences are intertwined with current experiences, and our physical locations relate to both.

One’s connection with the landscape also helps to inform one’s identity and sense of cultural belonging. Art critic Lucy Lippard, in her book *The Lure of the Local*, discusses the cultural significance of landscape, and its role in determining one’s identity, both on an individual and collective level. She writes,

“The lure of the local is the pull of place that operates on each of us, exposing our politics and our spiritual legacies. It is the geographical component of the psychological need to belong somewhere, one antidote to a prevailing alienation. The lure of the local is that undertone to modern life that connects it to the past we know so little and the future

we are aimlessly concocting. It is not universal (nothing is) and its character and affect differ greatly from person to person and community to community” (Lippard 6).

Our geographical location, then, is a significant factor in our sense of who we are on a deeper level, as it connects us to the larger external world. It is a universal experience to be located in a place, but the experience itself varies significantly from person to person – no individual has the same perception of a place as another. Lippard later reinforces this idea when she states, “If landscape is a way of seeing, there are potentially as many landscapes as individual ways of seeing. . . Otherness and familiarity are reinforced by impressions of landscape” (Lippard 61). The experience of landscape is an inherently personal one, contributing to one’s sense of self and identity as well as one’s connection to others and to the environment.

The idea of the strong connection between place and identity is also addressed by landscape studies scholar John Jakle. Experience and interpretation of landscape, according to Jackle, goes beyond the visual into the psychological. He writes, “Character of place is as much a matter of quiet introspection as of seeing. It is a personal identification with the objects of place. It may result in an affective tie with the material environment . . . ‘topophilia’” (76). When we identify with our surroundings, we are culturally rooted in that place. He takes this idea of giving human character to a place further, later writing that “The search for character involves interpreting the objects of place as symbols of human intent. Place meanings encourage or discourage sight-seers according to behavioral expectations” (Jackle 76). We perceive the world in terms of its practical function, and interpret the character of a place accordingly. We see the environment in terms of its relationship to us, as we cannot divorce it from our own personal experiences. This is reinforced by the number of man-made objects that dominate the

contemporary landscape; the environment is increasingly functional for humans, for better and for worse.

These ways of understanding and interacting with the land influence the way in which we physically and mentally engage with it, and alter our emotional responses to it. By representing landscapes, I hope to pull from some of these varied influences to engage my viewers on both an emotional and cognitive level. When we interact with the landscape, it is on both a physical and a psychological level – an idea that is reinforced by the concept of phenomenology, which emphasizes the connection between consciousness and the physical world. Environmental psychologist David Seamon is interested in the phenomenological engagement that we have with the environment, and particularly focuses on the phenomenological idea of body-subject combined with his own concept of feeling-subject. Seamon defines body-subject as the connection between the body and its environment that allows it to move unconsciously and habitually through the world, as the mind instinctively directs the body. (Seamon 41). In addition to this mental and physical engagement with the world, he posits that there is a strong emotional component, too, which he refers to as “feeling-subject”. He writes,

Feeling-subject, coupled with body-subject, is a primary experiential force underlying our daily relations with the geographical world. Though it speaks in a language foreign to cognition and logical thinking – i.e. affective expression – feeling-subject can be said, like its bodily counterpart, to act intelligently and consistently. Feelings for centres or places may often seem logically incongruous or foolish. Yet as the cliché expresses it, ‘The heart has a mind of its own’ and acts in a way internally consistent with emotional bonds to place and space (77).

When we move through the world, we instinctively form emotional relationships to the places that we engage with, sometimes obviously and sometimes subtly. This is particularly true in regard to places with which we are deeply familiar.

The more we are present in a particular environment, the more familiar we become with it both physically and mentally, as well as visually and spatially. The body's intelligent connection to the world (as elaborated upon in the concept of body-subject in phenomenological philosophy) allows one to move through the world instinctively, freeing the mind for activities beyond simple tasks and movement direction. This has a number of additional impacts on how we engage with the environment, both positively and negatively. A sense of well-being and safety can be cultivated through this sense of familiarity. David Seamon elaborates on the significance of this: "In its regenerative powers, the home provides a stable place in which the person can recoup his physical and psychic energies. The person at home has a place where the possibility of rest is taken for granted and secure. Without a place for regeneration, a person's life almost surely disintegrates" (Seamon 82-83). This sense of at-homeness is important in maintaining mental and physical health, as it provides a place of security and rest. Lucy Lippard poetically reinforces the significance of this sense of at-homeness: "The search for homeplace is the mythical search for the axis mundi, for a center, for some place to stand, for something to hang on to" (Lippard 27). The need for a familiar home and resting place is one that is present throughout humanity. The environments that I have chosen to represent in these works are mostly places that are connected to this idea of home for me as the artist; some are taken quite literally from my own backyard. By choosing places that are near to home for me, I hope to communicate a sense of familiarity and at-homeness in some of these pieces, as this is such a significant element of some types of familiarity.

This familiarity, however, also results in an overall decreased perception of the minute realities present in the everyday landscape. Landscape historian John Jakle points out that the brain instinctively searches for and remembers pattern and harmony. An effect of this, he writes, is that “. . . 90 percent of the familiar environment remains ‘unseen’ by the conscious mind. Input slackens as an individual becomes used to a given landscape or kind of landscape. . . The mind becomes progressively biased in favor of the familiar and the person becomes predisposed to see what experience, stored in memory, suggests ought to be seen” (19). Rather than necessarily seeing what is actually there, the mind fills in what it thinks is there based on previous experience of either that same environment, or similar ones. Attention to detail decreases as familiarity increases.

This reliance on memory for recreation of an environment is especially true for visual artists who represent landscapes through their work, as it involves more than just the physical makeup of the location. Scholar Edward Casey states that, for the artist, “. . . only through memory is knowledge of an entire region sustained . . . Confronted with the spatially and temporally expansive character of a given region, a landscape painter draws upon his or her memory of numerous experiences of that region in order to hold together otherwise disparate experiences – and to be adequate to the complexity of the region itself” (Casey 76). In order to represent the complexity of a given environment, familiarity with it is essential. Because only a small part of the environment is typically being represented in an individual work of art, the artist relies upon their own memory and understanding of the larger whole of the landscape to accurately represent the multi-faceted and diverse elements of the place. Memory, then, is key in the role of both the viewer and the creator of the work.

In my work, I seek to represent places that feel familiar to my viewers. All of the environments that I choose to depict are ones that are familiar to me and that I interact with on a nearly daily basis. Though they are locations that are specific to Western Pennsylvania, they are also the types of environments that I expect most of my viewers will be able to recognize: the corner of a building, an overgrown fence, a forest clearing, a creek, a guardrail in a parking lot. Some of them are more naturally visually appealing than others, but overall my intention is to represent the mundane and incidental spaces that contribute to our sense of location without typically becoming the focus of our attention. By representing these commonplace environments, I seek to highlight the sense of familiarity that comes with the experience of a particular type of landscape, and by drawing attention to these spaces, acknowledge the understated beauty that occurs there.

### **Photography**

To emphasize the commonplace nature of the locations in these works and our subjective interpretations of them, I borrow many elements, both visual and conceptual, of contemporary photography. A common debate in photographic theory is the precise nature of photography's relationship to truth, a relationship that is ultimately not possible to strictly define. However, at best, it is a changeable and unreliable relationship. This is elaborated upon by numerous scholars and critics, including critic Kendall Walton. In his essay on photographic realism, Walton posits that photography, though not always truthful in what it represents, is an inherently transparent medium. If an object is depicted in a photograph, then that object must exist in the physical world. Thus, when one looks at a photograph, one is seeing the actual object depicted – not a secondary representation of it, but the object itself (252). This does not mean that all photographs are truthful; Walton writes, “To see something through a distorting mirror is still to see it, even if

we are misled about it. We also see through fog, through tinted windshields, and through out of focus microscopes. The ‘distortions’ or ‘inaccuracies’ of photographs are no reason to deny that we see through them” (258). Though misrepresentation and misinterpretation may easily occur in the creation and viewing of a photograph, this does not negate the inherently real nature of photography. The object in the photograph still existed at some point, and is being seen directly through the photograph, as through a mirror.

Because of this inherent connection with reality, particularly when photography first started becoming popular and widespread, it was commonly thought to be the most accurate means of visual communication. In order for a photograph to exist, there must be something in the real world that also exists in order to be photographed. Unlike painting and drawing, a photograph cannot be wholly fabricated, because of its very nature as a means of replicating. However, as writer and critic Susan Sontag argues, this is a fundamentally mistaken belief. She writes, “The photograph was thought to be an acute but non-interfering observer – a scribe, not a poet. But as people quickly discovered that nobody takes the same picture of the same thing, the supposition that cameras furnish an impersonal, objective image yielded to the fact that photographs are evidence not only of what’s there but of what an individual sees, not just a record but an evaluation” (Sontag 88). Though the technical means of creating the image is mechanical, it is impossible to divorce the image from its human connection. In order for a photograph to be taken, someone must select what is being photographed, arrange the composition (whether intentionally or not), and by necessity, leave certain elements out of the frame. Additionally, the viewers of the photograph bring their own interpretations to the image, often influenced by the information that is left out of the frame. Human subjectivity is inevitably present in photography, whether obviously or subtly.

Some evidences of photography's influence in my work are my use of photographs as reference materials, my borrowing of photography aesthetics, and the realism with which I depict the given environments. Instead of working *plein air*, I remove myself from the landscape by taking photographs first and then working from them rather than from direct observation. My use of realism also calls photography to mind. My intention is for my work to appear photographic from a distance, and for the mark-making to only become visible upon closer examination. This is to highlight, again, the contrast between objectivity and subjectivity in human perception – that which appears objective contains undercurrents of subjectivity when it engages with human consciousness.

By choosing to draw these images instead of leaving them as the original photographs, I am adding a more evident level of perceptible subjectivity to the images. In contrast to photography, drawing is frequently seen as an inherently expressive and honest medium. It is often referred to as spontaneous and direct, revealing the hand of the artist and making no claims of objectivity. The techniques used are usually transparent and readily visible to viewers (Kenin 6). In this sense, the viewer is typically aware of the presence of the artist in the drawing. Taking this further, drawing can be a way of thinking on a fundamental level. Drawing scholar Deanna Petherbridge writes, “[D]rawing needs to be reaffirmed as intelligent practice, which is as much about thinking, seeing and interrogating as inventing, and which communicates as intensely with others as it refers to the affective self” (432). Drawing is a means of understanding the physical environment, and of communicating thought to others and to oneself. It can draw a connection between one's thoughts and the external world. Because of this, and because of its universal presence throughout time and geographical location, drawing is a crucial means through which humans learn and communicate. Petherbridge earlier writes, “Learning to draw, while no longer

a privileged activity in either school or specialist art teaching, remains an activity of enormous importance and potency for education as a whole. Learning to observe, to investigate, to analyze, to compare, to critique, to select, to imagine, to play and to invent constitutes the veritable paradigm of functioning effectively in the world (Petherbridge 233). `It is a fundamentally human activity, and it strengthens mental functioning, aids in understanding, and acts as a visual means of communicating that can extend beyond language and culture.

The reason that I have chosen to utilize drawing for this body of work is this relationship between drawing and thought. It reflects individual perception, a concept that is key in my work. French art critic Charles Blanc expounds on this concept:

. . . drawing is not a simple imitation, a copy corresponding mathematically to the original, an art reproduction, a pleonasm. Drawing is a work of the mind, as is indicated by the orthography of our fathers, who wrote it *dessin* – design. Every drawing is the expression of a thought or a sentiment, and is charged to show us something superior to the apparent truth, when that reveals no sentiment, no thought. But what is this superior truth? It is sometimes the character of the object drawn, sometimes the character of the designer, and in high art, is what we call style (Charles Blanc, quoted in *Writing on Drawing* 30).

Drawing can reveal much about the object being drawn, or about the person drawing the object, or both. It can be more truthful than photography, as the physical object being drawn can be manipulated so that it better reflects actual perception than photography can. Drawing is not just the representation of an object, but also an interpretation of it. In this way, drawing an environment can be a more accurate depiction of how one actually perceives and interprets a

landscape than a photographic reproduction, even if the photograph is inherently transparent in its relationship to that environment.

These differences in perception and the expression of them in drawing is still very present in realist art, even though the emphasis is on an accurate depiction of the physical object or environment. Realism in art changes based on time, location, and culture, as perception changes and as artistic conventions change (Goodyear 22). Though drawing is a personal expression of the artist, it is also dependent on where and when it was created, as it is in conversation with the rest of art history. Critic E. H. Gombrich writes, “If art were only, or mainly, an expression of personal vision, there could be no history of art” (E H Gombrich qtd in Goodyear 22). The progression of artistic movements and styles throughout history speak to the relationship between art and perception, and to the relationship between artists over time. This relates to the concept of intersubjectivity earlier discussed, that one’s individual perception is deeply related to the perception of others as a means of determining objectivity.

Though the majority of the works in my exhibition are drawn, several are also oil paintings. Many of the same assertions previously made about drawing are also relevant in a discussion on the merits of painting, but the visual and technical differences between the two media allow them to achieve different elements of the same overarching goal in this series of work. In contrast to the drawings, the paintings are in color, allowing them to access an aspect of perception that the black and white drawings cannot. Color changes the way in which we perceive and understand an environment and is strongly connected to emotion. By altering the colors in these paintings, I highlight the subjectivity associated with color, and depict a wider variety of types of light and times of day than is present in the more consistently toned drawings. The paintings also feature more simplified compositions and forms than the drawing. The largely

concealed brushstrokes, more solid blocks of color and value, and less textural variety lead the paintings away from the photographic aesthetic of the drawings and are more indicative of a sense of memory in which only the essential elements of a particular scene are called to mind. This sense of memory further emphasizes the impact of familiarity that I seek to represent through these places.



Fig. 1. *Light Pole in Bloom*. 2018.

## CHAPTER 3

### VISUAL INFLUENCES

The depiction of the environment in visual art has a rich history. The natural world has proven to be an inexhaustible source of inspiration for artists both historical and contemporary; its ever-present nature and the constantly changing way in which humanity relates to it have resulted in a dialogue that is in continual development. Landscape scholar Mark Roskill studies the way in which landscapes are interpreted throughout the course of human history; he writes, “The way in which, in [a] kind of parallel to poetry, landscape in general becomes ‘sign,’ standing for an abstract, metaphysical quality independent of any question of correspondence to a physically present and concrete actuality, is anticipated already in certain paintings of the later nineteenth century” (Roskill 207). Landscape is not simply the depiction of an environment; instead, it refers to something more abstract and encompassing, representative of what is perceived through it rather than what it is in purely physical terms. Its depiction is highly symbolic in nature.

In this body of work, I have chosen local landscapes for my subject matter in part because of this symbolic nature. Landscape is reflective of the perceptions and perspectives of its viewer, and no one sees the same environment the same way. As I am interested in the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity in the relationship between human consciousness and its environment, I have selected as my visual influences artists who represent styles of artwork that are in strong contrast to one another: Romantic painting and deadpan photography. There are a number of dichotomies at work in the relationship between these two movements. They exist on two opposite ends of an “expressive spectrum” in visual art – Romanticism as a movement emphasizing the open expression of human emotion, deadpan as

the repression of emotion in favor of accuracy and objectivity. Additionally, Romanticism, while it does exist in photography and other media, is primarily associated with painting, while deadpan is a photography aesthetic. This adds an additional layer of difference between the two, as painting and drawing are often thought of as expressive acts, while photography has historically been seen as a more truthful and objective means of depicting objects, environments, and people.

### **Deadpan Photography**

Deadpan photography, characterized by a disengaged and emotionless tone that indicates a certain level of objectivity on the part of the photographer, is one of the most popular and widespread visual aesthetics in contemporary photography. One of its appeals is that it seems to go beyond the perspective of the individual, and to have a higher degree of truth and objectivity than other art being made, particularly following the 1980s emphasis on neo-expressive painting. Deadpan helped photography develop a name for itself in the art world, bringing it alongside painting in contemporary art galleries. Photography curator and scholar Charlotte Cotton writes on deadpan's contemporary significance:

The adoption of a deadpan aesthetic moves art photography outside the hyperbolic, sentimental and subjective. These pictures may engage us with emotive subjects, but our sense of what the photographers' emotions might be is not the obvious guide to understanding the meaning of the images. The emphasis, then, is on photography as a way of seeing beyond the limitations of individual perspective, a way of mapping the extent of the forces, invisible from a single human standpoint, that govern the man-made and natural world (Cotton 81).

Deadpan gives the illusion of seeing beyond the perspective of a single, first-person point of view – of seeing something represented clearly without the intervention of human emotion and biased perspective.

One of the most well-known deadpan photographers is Ed Ruscha, also known for his word paintings. He created a number of art books, several of which featured his quiet, emotionless photographs of buildings, people, and landscapes. One such book was titled simply *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, indicative of exactly the content of the book's images. In an essay examining the Heideggerian influences of Ed Ruscha's photographs, scholar Aron Vinegar draws a connection between the Romantic sense of wonder and the understated quality of Ruscha's work; he writes:

In the words of Heidegger, 'Wonder does not divert itself from the unusual but on the contrary, *advert*s to it, precisely as what is the most unusual of everything and in everything. Objective tone reserves judgment and allows for viewer engagement.'

Wonder might very well look like a deadpan expression, just as a state of calm, cheerfulness, and even joy might pervade 'authentic anxiety', as indeed it does for Heidegger. . . 'resolute raptness' . . . the ability to remain open to the ordinary as a site of the disclosure of wonder (Vinegar 46).

Ruscha, he posits, is not creating images that are purely emotionless, but rather ones that allow for greater viewer engagement, and that express a sense of wonder in a way that is perhaps more indicative of the way in which wonder is actually expressed by those who experience it. By eliminating exaggerated displays of expressiveness or emotion, he creates a sense of honesty and straightforwardness that allows viewers to relate to and project their own emotions onto his images. It is an emphasis on the ordinary, and a seeking after understanding rather than opinion

or judgment (Salveson 52). There is nothing inherently noteworthy about the locations being photographed; what is noteworthy is the way in which it is experienced and interacted with by its viewers.

Another reason why many contemporary photographers choose the deadpan aesthetic is because it can feel more honest; this is particularly true in photographs depicting the environment, a genre of photography that has historically not been quite so honest. Ansel Adams' romantic photographs of the West, appearing to be untouched by human hands and displaying a widespread grandness and purity, only gives one side of what the contemporary natural world looks like in reality. The New Topographics exhibition in 1975 responds to this one-sided conversation by focusing on the opposite; "Man-Altered Landscapes" is the subtitle of the exhibition. The landscapes depicted in these photos include buildings, parking lots, fences, trailer parks, and telephone poles. Like Ruscha's photographs, all of the places are ordinary. However, they still have an understated beauty about them, indicating both that the natural beauty is inherently present in even these altered environments, and that the supposedly objective images are not as objective as they are purported to be because of their connection to an individual's perspective. Regardless of this subjectivity, these photos do not seem to be overtly commenting on humanity's physical engagement with the landscape; they do not mourn the loss of the pure, untouched environment, but they also do not condone humanity for tampering with it (New Topographics, "Irony and Critique"). The subtlety in them results in an ambiguity that does not allow for a simple, blanket interpretation.

Because of the lack of stylistic elements, it is the compositions and the elements in them that create the impact of each work, rather than the perspective of the photographer himself or herself. Scholar Kelly Davis writes, "The photographs are beautiful not only because of the

photographer's eye . . . but because we can be moved by such naked juxtapositions of human exploitation and the beauty of the constructed landscape – all we have ever known of nature despite a century's worth of landscape photographs that have attempted to convince us otherwise.” The way in which humanity coexists with the environment creates enough tension and beauty on its own without the commentary of the photographer. In an essay in the New Topographics exhibition catalog, Britt Salveson writes that the photographs “reconcile beauty and ugliness, love and hatred, progress and degradation and a host of other contradictions. They epitomize the paradox of indifference in being both boring and interesting” (Salveson 37). They contain within them so many contrasting elements in part because of their impartiality and subtlety.

I seek to emulate this impartiality and subtlety in my work, particularly in the pieces that demonstrate the coexistence of humanity and the natural environment. These works include elements such as overgrown garages, powerlines cutting through tree lines, and guardrails separating paved roads from fields of weeds. I am particularly interested in areas in which nature seems to be directly interacting with the man-made elements that interfere with it, as it indicates the close relationship of humanity and the environment, as well as the tension and power struggle that exists in this relationship. Additionally, I have chosen to include works that do not feature any man-made elements and are instead of purely natural environments that still appear to be untouched by humanity, as these areas are still readily found. By representing both man-altered and untouched areas of land, I hope to create a more honest depiction of what the contemporary landscape truly looks like – some places largely impacted by humanity, some still untouched, and many somewhere in between. By borrowing elements from the deadpan aesthetic, I seek to

communicate the complexity of this relationship by presenting it without clear approval or judgment.



Fig. 2. *Wire Fence*. 2018.

### **Romanticism**

In contrast to the emotionless objectivity of deadpan photography, the Romantic movement emphasized the often passionate and turbulent emotions of the artist, with a particular focus on the depiction of the natural environment. There are a number of ways in which artists demonstrate their emotional responses through their mediums, and the ones that I have chosen to borrow in my own work are a heightened sense of atmosphere and expressive mark-making. Mark-making is a vital concept in drawing, especially, as it is the direct mark that the artist makes and it indicates the hand of the artist. By using minimal but expressive mark-making in

the depiction of greenery and foliage, I seek to subtly indicate my own emotional engagement with the environments in the work. I also alter and usually heighten the atmosphere in these works in order to lead the viewer to engage with the scenes on an experiential and emotional level rather than a purely visual and intellectual one.

Another key concept in Romantic art is the sublime, which is the experience of nature as powerful, awe-inspiring, and beautiful. The depiction of the sublime in nature is not nature as it actually exists, but nature as interpreted by and mediated through human consciousness.

Landscape art scholar Edward Casey writes, “Combining Heidegger with Kant, we can say that the sublime arises from the interaction of the earth and world – of the sky and sea – with the mind (or better, psyche) in the creation of a work of art. Nature is not sublime in itself, but it *becomes* sublime by a process of psychological internalization (in imagination and reason, memory and understanding, appreciation and evaluation) that leads in turn to reexternalization” (Casey 90). Though the sublime is something that is perceived in nature, the existence of it as a concept is dependent upon the engagement of human consciousness with the environment. A scene is not sublime unless it is perceived as such.

Though the sublime is commonly associated with the more Gothic style of Romantic art, which emphasizes the powerful and often dangerous beauty of nature, art historian Edward Casey distinguishes this style of sublime from a calmer, quieter sublime depicted in works of painter Frederic Edwin Church. This sublime focused on “light, space, and silence” as an indication of nature’s beauty and capacity for influencing human emotion (Casey 45). It is this style of Romanticism that I seek to emulate in my work, through the depiction of everyday, familiar spaces that hold a sense of harmony and understated beauty. By depicting these scenes, I intend to elevate the commonplace – a concept that is present in both Romanticism and deadpan.

Romanticism elevates the commonplace by depicting typical scenes of nature in dramatic and emotional ways, while deadpan does the same by depicting everyday spaces in unremarkable ways, but through the very act of choosing to depict them proves them worthy of being seen and experienced.

Proponents of the Romantic movement, poet William Wordsworth and painter John Constable in particular, emphasized the significance of an experience with nature that is direct and unmediated. A primary and arguably paradoxical goal of these artists is to recreate the experience of direct contact with nature, making this communicable through an inherently mediated means – paintings and poems. Constable wrote on his painting method, “When I sit down to make a sketch from nature, the first thing I try to do is, *to forget that I have ever seen a picture*” (qtd in Heffernan 2). He sought to be uninfluenced by other painters, and to instead be entirely honest and personal in his portrayal of his own experiences. Through plein air pencil sketches done in the environment he was experiencing, Constable sought a deeply expressive, intuitive, and spontaneous portrayal of the way in which a particular landscape impacted him emotionally in the very moment that he was experiencing it. Shortly before his death, he stated in an academic lecture on landscape, “We are all of us no doubt placed in a paradise here if we choose to make it such. All of us have felt ourselves in the same place and situation as that of our first parents, when on opening his eyes the beauty and magnificence of external nature broke on his astonished sight intensely” (Heffernan 2). A successful painting, then, is one that captures the experience of viewing a landscape for the very first time – as if one is the first person to ever see it. It is honest, personal, and expressive, and indicates the power and sublimity that the natural world has on the uninitiated.

Of course, it is not possible to be entirely uninfluenced by others, and Constable himself is evidence of this. Heffernan draws attention to Constable's artistic influences, focusing particularly on the work *Dedham Vale* (1802); he writes, "Though Constable produced this picture after several months of studying nature at first hand, he could neither forget nor escape the compositional patterns of traditional landscape painting or of beauty in the abstract; he could hardly think of producing a 'beautiful' landscape without them" (27). Despite Constable's efforts to create work that was completely fresh and contained only his own instinctive responses to the landscape, his work shows clear evidence of reliance on artistic conventions and other factors of external influence. This does not mean that his paintings or intentions were insincere, but perhaps indicates that the influence of others runs deeply and often unseen in one's consciousness. This relates to the idea of intersubjectivity as previously discussed. The way in which we represent objects and environments in the world changes based upon artistic conventions of the time, whether one is aware of this or not.

This can even change the way we perceive environments. The role of images in culture is so significant that the way in which humans perceive the world is inextricable from their influence. Susan Sontag uses sunsets as an example of this, writing, "So successful has been the camera's role in beautifying the world that photographs, rather than the world, have become the standard of beautiful. . . Photographs create the beautiful and – over generations of picture-taking – use it up. Certain glories of nature, for example, have been all but abandoned to the indefatigable attentions of amateur camera buffs. The image-surfeited are likely to find sunsets corny; they now look, alas, too much like photographs" (Sontag 85). The contemporary image-saturated culture, Sontag posits, has stripped the wonder of the natural world and made it commonplace and mundane. Popular conventions in photography have extended beyond

photography and have influenced culture to the extent that it has changed the way we perceive the world.

### **Gerhard Richter**

Gerhard Richter only occasionally depicts landscapes, rather than making it the bulk of his subject matter. With his command of many different styles, subject matters, genres, and media, Richter resists classification – an intentional decision on his part. Speaking to his choices of subject matter, he states, “I was trying to avoid everything that touched on well-known issues – or any issues at all, whether painterly, social or aesthetic. I tried to find nothing too explicit, hence all the banal subjects; and then, again, I tried to avoid letting the banal turn into my issue and my trademark. So it's all evasive action, in a way” (Richter 54). Richter strongly resists the idea of being classified as a particular type of artist, and many of the decisions that he makes regarding subject matter seek to avoid this classification.

Throughout most of his work, Richter alternates between photorealism and abstraction. He uses tools such as large squeegees and sponges to blur out and obscure the subjects of his paintings, and to scrape away and blend paint in his large-scale abstract pieces. Particularly in regard to his photo-based paintings – some photorealist paintings and some actual photographs that he has painted over – Richter finds interest in the idea of the unreliability of images to convey full and accurate truth, always leaving a sense of incompleteness to be filled in by the viewer (“Gerhard Richter”). The blurred effect that he uses in his photo paintings also add a level of photography-based realism that goes beyond meticulous detail; by reducing the sharpness of his images, Richter accurately mimics the way in which photographs represent objects, rather than the way in which they appear to the human eye in person.

I am interested in Richter's work because of his work with photography – the fact that many of his paintings are photorealist, and seek to represent the appearance of a photo rather than the object in the photo. I also find his seemingly indiscriminating choices of subject matter to be relevant. The significance does not lie in the object themselves, which are often unremarkable, but rather in the way they are represented and perceived. Though the subject matter in my work does hold significance, I am drawn to the banal and ordinary and am less concerned about whether or not the environments in each piece are visually noteworthy.

### **Rackstraw Downes**

Rackstraw Downes actively resists conventions of landscape art in many ways, beginning at the compositional level. He states that, having once noticed that environment paintings tend to be bottom-heavy by nature as the land sits underneath the sky, he looked for ways to reverse this. As a result, he did a series of paintings from underneath bridges – the heavy structure of the bridge overtop of the land giving the heavier compositional weight to the sky and therefore the top of the canvas rather than the bottom (*Rackstraw Downes*). In these subtle ways, rather than dramatic ones, Downes makes his work different than that which has come before.

Downes sees value in painting the same locations repeatedly. He works en plein air, completing the majority of his paintings on-site rather than from memory or from photographic references. In an interview with Jennifer Samet of the art magazine *Hyperallergic*, he states, “My work is very slow; it evolves very slowly. I have been drawing in a four-block range, with the Columbia Presbyterian Hospital on the right, and the overpasses and on and off ramps from the George Washington Bridge on the left. I could work there for years. When you're there, as Cézanne said, you keep seeing more and more things. Almost anything becomes a composition and a possible motif. The longer you look, the more you see.” He takes his time when he

observes and recreates the environment that he is in, and this results in paintings that are meticulously detailed and lifelike, and that make grand the mundane, simply by recreating them in a manner that forces one to slow down and take note. It is this elevation of the commonplace, as well as his unusual uses of composition, that I find particularly compelling about Downes and seek to emulate in my own work. Though I frequently draw from the historical compositional conventions used in Romantic art, I also include less intentionally composed images that appear more incidental or static, rather than dynamic or visually and emotionally appealing.

### **Emily Nelligan**

The charcoal drawings of Emily Nelligan appear quiet and unassuming; they possess a softness and atmospheric quality that give the viewer a sense of the calm and expansiveness of the Great Cranberry Island in Maine, from which she draws inspiration. In fact, it provides inspiration that she does not find in any other location; it is one of the few places in which she finds herself able to draw. She and her husband split their time between Connecticut and New England, but she finds the forest far too claustrophobic to gain any inspiration from it. In my own work, I frequently revisit the same locations, so I am particularly interested in Nelligan's inexhaustibly repeated examination of the same environment; I believe that this highlights the subtle changes in perception that occur from day-to-day, even hour-to-hour, in a singular location. As a drawer who exclusively works on-site, Nelligan relies on the atmosphere of a place in being able to accurately represent it (Weisgall). She titles her pieces simply, and they consist of the date of their completion. This straightforward simplicity in titling mirrors the simplicity of the work itself. Her expansive and moody depictions of the seascapes and cloudscares of Maine exemplify simplicity to the point of abstraction, paring down the forms to

shapes and gradients that clearly reference landscape but often requiring visual deciphering in order to determine exactly what one is looking at.

## CHAPTER 4

### EXHIBITION ANALYSIS

The exhibition *Disclosures: Consciousness and Environment* opened March 30, 2019 and continued through April 27, 2019 in Kipp Gallery at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. The exhibition consisted of 20 works in total, each piece measuring 20x20", including frames. The frames selected were medium gray in color, in order to provide an additional structured border around each work without dominating the grey value scale within the drawings. The paintings were also framed in the same color, for the sake of uniformity and cohesiveness. Each drawing, within the white border, measured approximately 5x7", the small scale inviting the viewer to examine each work from a close distance and experience a sense of intimacy and personal interaction with the environment depicted.



Fig. 3. *Installation Image 1*. 2019.

The drawings and paintings in the exhibition were evenly spaced throughout the gallery, each piece displayed approximately 37” from the one next to it. The nearly square format of Kipp Gallery allowed for six works to be displayed in this manner on each of the three full walls, so that no one wall dominates the attention of the audience. No individual piece was intended to visually dominate, either; this reinforces the work’s intention of elevating the commonplace, as some of the works are compositionally dynamic while others are more static, but all were presented with the same level of significance in the exhibition. The generous space between each work was intended to allow the viewer to engage with each drawing and painting on an individual level and prevent visual overstimulation that might occur with more limited space.

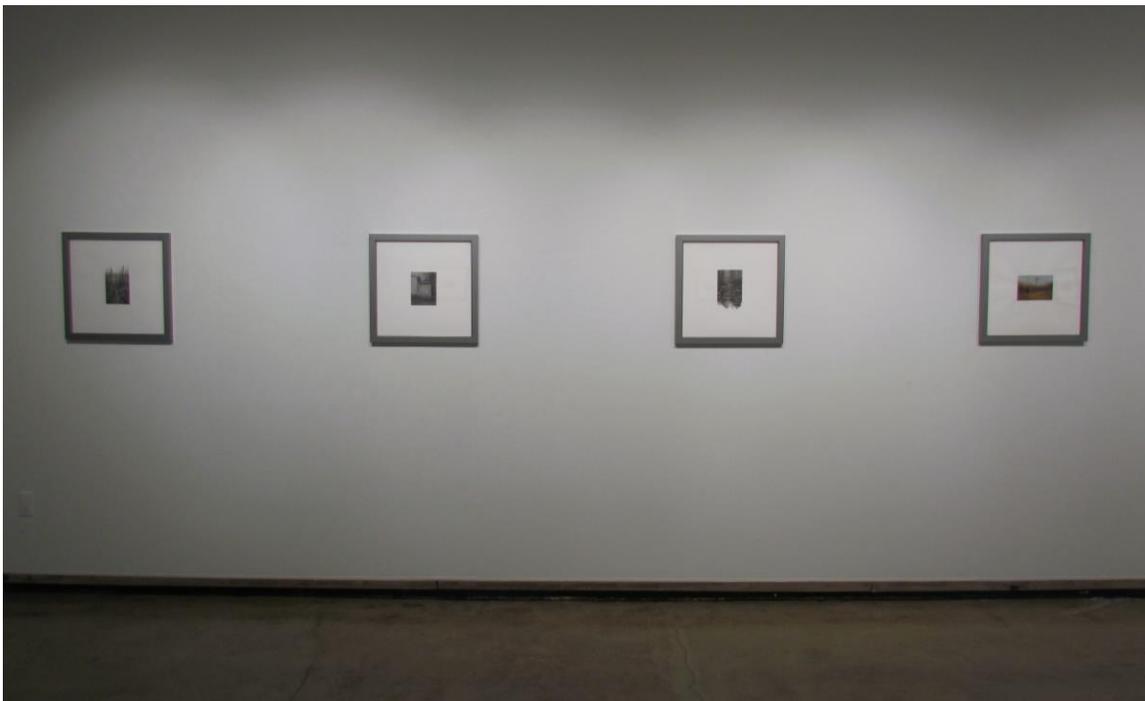


Fig. 4. *Installation Image 2*. 2019.

The titles of the drawings and paintings varied somewhat in content and tone, with some of them being very simple and vaguely descriptive (“Wire Fence” and “Forest Interior”), others with specific references to location (“Whites Woods” and “New Kensington”), and a select few with references to how the locations relate to my own personal experience (“Road from Robert

Shaw” and “The Old Backyard”). The straightforwardness and simplicity of the titles was intended to mimic the deadpan aesthetic of the work, and the limited personal references and titles of specific locations gave indication of my own personal connection to these places while leaving the descriptions open enough to allow the viewer to make his or her own associations with the environments.

15 out of the 20 works in the exhibition were charcoal drawings, with the remaining 5 made up of oil paintings. The five paintings were interspersed among the drawings to create a visual break for the viewer and to allow for more direct comparison between the drawings and paintings. Both the drawings and the paintings were representative of different elements that make up our individual perceptions; by placing them next to each other, they could be directly contrasted and compared to each other. The muted color palettes, as well as the matching sizes and formats, allowed them to visually integrate with the drawings.



Fig. 5. *Installation Image 3*. 2019.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

As we move through the world, we are constantly making judgments and forming emotional and cognitive relationships with the landscape, whether consciously or not. The experience of places, in particular, are inherently personal and subjective; the physical environment, because of its all-encompassing and ever-present nature, acts as a backdrop for all human activity and so is inextricably intertwined in human life. No one experiences the same location in the same way, as perception is colored by memory, character, and familiarity. My work highlights the tension between this subjective response and the objectivity of the external world by contrasting the apparent objectivity of deadpan photography with the heightened emotion of Romanticism. By presenting the viewer with familiar and ordinary environments on an intimate scale with a heightened sense of atmosphere, I hope to lead to viewer into a sense of introspection and awareness of both their surroundings and of their emotional and cognitive responses to those surroundings.

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