

radical landscapes amy balkin et al., amanda eicher, pablo guardiola, cybele lyle, robert minervini, trevor paglen, and elizabeth sims

february 6–april 3, 2016

When examining the word *landscape*, two possible meanings emerge: “domain” and “scenery.” Domain can be defined as a region or place where people live, situating it in relation to any number of discursive frameworks, such as politics, economics, or community. Scenery, on the other hand, connects to our visual surroundings or the aesthetics of space. The entanglement of these two distinct terms in one word is an accurate reflection of the many manifestations of landscape that occur when art and nature overlap. *Radical Landscapes* presents the work of seven artists with ties to the Bay Area whose works operate within this tensile field. They ruminate on a range of universal concerns—including climate change, surveillance, and identity—that make up our understanding of landscape now. Taking romantic notions of the natural environment as points of departure—from the dreamy paintings of J. M. W. Turner to the sweeping photographic vistas of Ansel Adams—the exhibition presents contemporary approaches to nature that reflect our rapidly evolving world. Through photography, installation, drawing, painting, video, and food, the artists’ diverse practices upend familiar, anodyne approaches to landscape and instead critically examine our perception of the world—both real and imagined. Trevor Paglen, Amy Balkin et al., and Amanda Eicher look closely at our physical domain, offering new ways of seeing complex circumstances through tangible means, while Robert Minervini, Pablo Guardiola, Cybele Lyle, and Elizabeth Sims invent visions of nature that don’t exist but rather prompt a reimagining of what could be. Together, the works demonstrate the continuing power of landscape as artistic form to define time and place, and to record, explore, and understand

the natural and human-made world and our place within it.



Circles (video still), 2015

Trevor Paglen’s large-scale photographs and video works give visual form to the invisible terrain of mass surveillance. His projects, which intentionally reference traditional photographers of the American West, expose governmental uses of technology and their effects on policy, geopolitics, and our daily lives. Much of the impact of Paglen’s work derives from the tension between banal and often beautiful imagery and the sinister undertones of what lies beneath. In essence, Paglen gives people tools to see the world they inhabit. Utilizing a mix of high-powered camera technology, customized astronomy software, and amateur observational data, his photographs capture landscapes of secrecy from classified air bases to clandestine spacecraft in orbit. The eerie video *Circles* (2015), installed in di Rosa’s back gallery, shows aerial footage of the Government Communication Headquarters (GCHQ), the UK equivalent of the National Security Agency (NSA), captured by Paglen. By surveilling the campus and its spacey, Panopticon-like architectural structure, Paglen inverts the gaze, and thereby, the entity’s organizing logic. As a result, the artist actualizes the physical presence of these entities in the world, demystifying the materiality of powers typically shrouded in secrecy and invisibility.

Amy Balkin et al.’s project *A People’s Archive of Sinking and Melting* (2012–ongoing), presented here in the form of a newly designed wall graphic, manifests through an open call for items from places around the world that may disappear due to climate change.ⁱ Initiated in 2012, the collection now holds approximately 200 objects from individuals from over 18 countries and regions, such as Antarctica, Mexico, and Cape Verde. Ranging from tools and utensils to printed ephemera, Balkin et al.’s archive creates a physical, political, and economic portrait of the effects of rising sea levels, coastal erosion, and desertification through object stories. The project humanizes these concepts, typically dispersed through abstract facts and figures, by displaying them in visual form. This deeply personal index of localized environmental destruction also creates a globalized account of shared experiences and speaks to the income inequality and political exclusion of individuals in places most likely to disappear.



Precursor (study), 2016

Amanda Eicher’s socially engaged practice invites communities to participate in non-traditional approaches to art making that address a range of topics including activism, education, and migration. Here, her work expands on explorations in food, specifically

looking at how we might detect the effects of recent environmental shifts—such as the severe fires and drought felt so prominently here in the Napa Valley—on the food we eat and the wine we drink. Stemming from her collaborative work with OPENrestaurant,ⁱⁱ Eicher’s *Precursor* (2016), the launch of a long-term research project at di Rosa, investigates the landscape surrounding the Gatehouse Gallery and engages with farmers and producers operating within it. A sculptural form acts as a preservation cabinet for objects and agricultural products (such as honey, cheese, and canned goods) collected over the course of the exhibition to capture flavors that reflect the current moment. The artist’s work will culminate in a tasting event that allows audiences to exchange dialogue around climate change and our local environment.ⁱⁱⁱ



Contemplating the Moon, 2015

Robert Minervini’s large-scale, multi-layered acrylic paintings examine the liminal spaces at the boundaries of civilization and wilderness. For this exhibition, Minervini has created a series of new paintings that continue his ongoing project of addressing the ecological impact of humanity on the land through dystopian mash-ups of cityscapes and landscapes. The artist’s interest in environmental transformation is inspired by historical painters such as Thomas

Cole, but also has a powerful contemporary and regional resonance at this moment of extreme population growth and demographic change in the Bay Area. While the surfaces of his canvases are visually seductive, the compositions, which often juxtapose familiar elements of corporate high-rise developments and highway infrastructure with mountains, shorelines, and open space, hint at the tensions between creation and decay. For example, in *Contemplating the Moon* (2015), natural landscape trademarks such as open water and rolling hills are overlaid with artificial spray-painted forms of palm trees and urban architectural projects. Installed at di Rosa, the work mirrors the elements of the landscape just outside the gallery windows, highlighting the contrast between the environs of a nature preserve and the imprint of recent agriculture, suggesting that Minervini’s visions are not as fantastical as they might at first seem.

Pablo Guardiola’s multivalent conceptual practice highlights the power of context in the creation of meaning. His graphic manipulations of vintage postcards and other appropriated imagery depicting oceanside resorts and cityscapes in locations such as Puerto Rico and Mexico City question the effects of globalism and modernization on the land. The artist recently relocated to his native San Juan from the Bay Area, and his idyllic vistas, drawn from his larger body of work *Jet Travel* (2011), transport the viewer to distant locales of times past. His imposed color blocking, which references the colorful patterns of nautical flags, and Surrealist rotation effects further abstract the view and disrupt scenes of leisure and progress, suggesting things are never as they seem. Guardiola’s gestures underscore

the political contradictions that percolate beneath the pristine façade of modernization, exposing tensions between development and colonial struggle. By looking to the past, Guardiola prompts new perspectives of the present and, in the process, a reflection on our own changing landscape of the Bay Area and the resulting frictions.



Everything I’ve Known I have forgotten (study), 2016

Cybele Lyle transforms her surroundings through installation and photography to create environments that reflect personal narrative and explore queer space. In the new installation *Everything I’ve known I have forgotten* (2016), the artist uses a landscape photograph taken during a recent residency at Project 387 in Gualala, California, as the foundation for the work. Her process involved defacing the image with white paint and then blowing it up to disrupt the pristine natural beauty of her captured surroundings and more accurately reflect her own worldview. The raw wooden elements, protruding from the wall mounted photograph, bring the imagery into the gallery space and create an immersive environment that allows the viewer to explore what otherwise remains unseen. Lyle highlights the invisible, drawing attention to the aspects of ourselves and our surroundings that are uncomfortable and problematic. Instead of framing the image, the architectural structure

supports it, giving shape to the slippery inner terrain of the self and providing a tool for understanding our humanness in relation to the external world. For Lyle, the landscape becomes a malleable medium—similar to how a writer uses text—that is meant to be edited and rewritten.



In the Ninth Year: When the Gaze Became the Wall (Daruma), 2014

Elizabeth Sims’ diverse practice explores politics through landscape. Depicting natural phenomena of the American West—such as obsidian rocks, bristlecone pine trees, and cloud formations—her meticulous graphite renderings presented here are inspired by radical historic figures, such as Edward Abbey, Bas Jan Ader, and Everett Ruess, who were drawn to the wilderness in an effort to escape “oppressive social conditioning.” Sims’ approach to landscape emerged from her own community organizing and activism culminating with participation in the Occupy movement. Frustrated with ego obstructing collective effort, Sims retreated to the backcountry in search of a more authentic, liberated way of being in the world. This suite of images, culled from the series *The Wandering Ecstatic* (2014), reflects her own

encounters in the natural world and looks to them as models for the mutable characteristics that necessitate tactical forms of modern radical movements. Sims’ tumultuous, organic representations merge the interior wilderness of the individual with the profound ancestry of the landscape. The artist states, “That something as seemingly static as stone bears evidence of its own fluidity serves as a potent reminder of the immense power of time and pressure to enact change.”

Radical Landscapes illustrates that nature can no longer be understood as a distinct realm apart from human activity and inquiry, as the conditions in which we live become ever more tangled in a matrix of environmental, social, and political relationships. Through the multifarious interpretations and investigations present in their work, the artists in this exhibition challenge us to consider these issues through new ways of seeing. In so doing, their works illuminate what is at stake—our foundational spaces of privacy, habitat, and the self—in the landscapes that we shape, and that in turn, shape us.

— Amy Owen, Curator

Notes

- i. Visit www.sinkingandmelting.org to contribute.
- ii. OPENrestaurant turns the daily activities and infrastructure of the restaurant into a medium for artistic experimentation as a means of exploring issues around food and society.
- iii. The event will be held at di Rosa on April 2, 2016, 2–4 PM (see reverse for details).

