THE PROJECTED LANDSCAPE

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ABSTRACT

THE PROJECTED LANDSCAPE

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Western Carolina University (October 2015)

Director: Ron Laboray

Since the beginning of the industrial revolution, representations of the landscape have adapted to reflect changing western ideas of the separation between human culture and the natural world. The photographs, projection and paintings in the Projected Landscape exhibition continue to reflect this change in the present through a focus on the new technologies of image making as they relate to representations of place. The work uses traditional studio methods as well as newly emerged technologies. The results are composite forms of painting, photo and video which utilize optical illusions, fractured compositions and reframed locations to continue the trajectory of landscape painting into the digital era, as well as create a space for personal contemplation.
INTRODUCTION

In this exhibit the concepts of culture and nature are rejoined through a combination of traditional landscape painting and contemporary medias and result in altered landscapes that reflect new ways of perceiving. Traveling rapidly through the landscape in cars and planes allows for a passive viewing of the landscape through windows. Passively viewing the landscape also occurs in seeing the landscape mediated through a screen and not in actuality, and this current feeling of movement and separation is conveyed through the Projected Landscape exhibition. There are three bodies of work in the exhibition: photographs, projection and paintings. Each media approaches the idea of the hybrid landscape in a different way. The photographs create a contrast between white cubes and nature. The installation brings nature indoors by using a digital video of a waterfall that is projected onto the cubes. The paintings combine the photographs of the landscape with the projection installation to create a synthesis of the two opposing elements of man and environment.
THE PHOTOGRAPHS

The initial impulse for the photographs came from a desire to move from two-dimensional paintings into three-dimensional sculpture. Geometric abstracted landscape paintings were translated to three-dimensional cubes. The sides of the cubes were treated as six separate two-dimensional paintings, and they resemble cross sections of landscape. Flatly painted bands of color on the boxes represent the landscape layers in rock that geologically divide time. The cubes were painted to match the seasonal colors of the surrounding landscape, and were placed in nature and photographed. This action was intended to directly confront the landscape rather than merely replicate it in the studio space. Photographs were then used to bring the landscape’s expansiveness back into the gallery. Robert Ryman states, “By abandoning the frame, painting opens itself up to the environment” (Storr 32). This opening of the environment means moving painting outside of the gallery or studio space, and interacting with natural elements instead of merely copying them. In the photographs of the outdoor installations, the abstracted box paintings matched the seasonal color and layers of the mountain landscape.

The first photograph in the series took place on a summer morning when the morning mist was creating a grey to light-green gradient, which matched the cubes. The grey and light green boxes seemed to float in the fog that settled low and heavy. The fog shoot became the first move away from creating work inside the white cube gallery, and moving towards the outdoors.
In late November another shoot took place with a new set of boxes. The same desaturation palette restrictions were applied using red-orange and blue-violet that when combined make a neutral grey. The use of the desaturation scale causes extreme opposite colors on the color wheel to visually vibrate when placed next to each other. This palette was applied to the boxes in flat complementary colors, and it caused the color boxes to optically tremor or float in contrast to the natural environment. The colors connected the cubes with red-orange vibrancy of the leaves and cool blue-grey color of the mountains.

Later, the painted cubes were replaced by a minimal set of all white cubes. The white cubes seemed more alien in the environment. The cubes appeared as holes or gaps where they blocked out nature in the photo frame, or digital glitches where information was missing. Cubes have six sides, and this six-sided symmetry occurs naturally in nature with the enantiomorphism. It can be found in the structures of crystals and snowflakes. They are one of the five platonic solids, and the cubes represent an atomic or elemental reduction of landscape. Squares are universally symmetrical and inherently composed. The square’s artificiality was an asset in creating contrast to the natural organic forms. The

![Figure 1. Laura Sellers. Untitled. Digital Photography. 2015. 13”x19.”](image-url)
reduction of the cubes to one color follows modern reductionist theory, and it takes painting down to an almost binary form. White objects when positioned in nature work as a point of high contrast, and although the cubes seem minimalist in style with a mass-produced and industrially manufactured appearance, they are instead individually handmade wooden cubes that would eventually be biodegradable. This reduction of hand in minimalist art contrasts the evidence of the artist’s hand in handmade traditional work.

One photograph took place on a small peninsular island in a river late in November. The tripod was situated above the peninsula creating a higher perspective. The cubes also represent urban housing as development spreads through the more remote regions. This can be seen clearly from an aerial perspective when flying over suburbs, and as the houses diminish they start to appear as cubes in the landscape.

Another photograph was taken in the middle of January after a fresh blanket of snow. Part of the photograph contains untouched snow, but the path created by positioning the cubes interrupts the perfect flat surface. Landscape photographer Frederick Sommer works in similar ways to attract visual attention to the entire planar surface of the photograph, rather than have any hierarchy of elements. The exclusion of a skyline in his photographs creates a radical figure ground dynamic similar to the downward perspective in the photographs of the cubes in the exhibition. Sommer’s photographs abandon a subject matter in favor of an overall field and have a submersive quality. His photographs have a similar confused perspective as the photographs of the cubes existing somewhere between aerial photography and a vantage point from a standing position (Timberlake 116-118).
Figure 2. Laura Sellers. *Untitled.* Digital Photography. 2015. 13”x19.”

Figure 3. Laura Sellers. *Untitled.* Digital Photography. 2015. 13”x19.”
Photographer John Pfahl takes the marks people make on the land as subject for his photography. The photographs of the cubes are a trace of building on the land, and Pfahl’s work uses perspective to create perfect geometries in contrast to the organic landscape (Longmire 22). Earthwork artist Robert Smithson used industrial square mirrors for his mirror displacements in the Yucatán peninsula. These mirrors worked as reflections of the sky or portals, and the cubes similarly work as gaps where information in the photos is missing or blocked out. Smithson similarly had to document his remote mirror displacements through the medium of landscape photography (Roberts 544).

One of the photographs in the exhibition has been digitally combined with another photograph in Photoshop®. This photo collage creates a strange appearance that the cubes are being projected onto a snowy landscape, or that they are small video screens placed out in a snowstorm. The combining of the cube photographs would later inspire photo collages used for the paintings. The photographs work in opposition to the paintings as they highlight the contrast between the cubes and nature whereas the paintings seem to combine these opposing forces into one flattened scene. The photographs are a real depiction of an installation that occurred in familiar spaces, and they work inversely to the other bodies of work. The photographs highlight the difference between the human-made and the natural while the paintings and projection unify those seemingly opposing forces.
Figure 4. Laura Sellers. *Untitled.*
Digital Photography. 2015. 13”x19.”

Figure 5. Laura Sellers. *The Photographs (Installation View).*
Digital Photography. 2015. 13”x19.”
THE PROJECTION

Critic Hal Foster stated, “There are artists who want to push the futuristic freedoms of new media, and others who want to look at what this apparent leap forward opens up in the past, the obsolete” (Round Table 73). The projection installation uses cutting edge video projection technology, and painting the projection installation in traditional medias on canvas allows for new ways to interpret dimensions in landscape painting. Traditional landscape paintings are a staple in the artistic cannon. However, the notion of landscape painting is being analyzed as technology lets painters explore new perceptions of the landscape that align with their experience. Painting, photography and projection all have an extensive interrelated history that combines archaic and digital states. Projection is creating new opportunities for traditional medias of sculpture, painting and photography (Iles 4). Painters have always looked for ways to redefine and reawaken the discipline, and projection is providing new opportunities (Viola 64).

The projection installation Inverted Waterfall Cubed is a modern painting using light. It is viewed in a black box in contrast to the modern white cube gallery space used for the paintings. In projection installations, the dark room offers an experience of sensory deprivation (Iles 15). Viewing Inverted Waterfall Cubed becomes a meditative experience for some viewers. The meditative experience of being outdoors in solitude allows for an internal psychic reflection similar to being in a sensory deprivation type state. Wide-open distances along with minimalist presence allow for a similar perceptual reorientation. Through the immersion of the projection installation, this sense of isolationism and sensory adjustment takes place. It takes the audience from the modern white cube gallery space to the meditative space of hearing and watching a waterfall.

The temporal quality of the video installation in Inverted Waterfall Cubed is amplified by the delicacy in which the software and technology must be aligned for it to run. The paintings, in contrast, exist in a physical state and cannot be lost to data erasure or signal delay. The digital video used for the installation consists of stored images in a computer’s memory that is later projected. The subject matter
within the work could be defined as outer landscapes consisting of the “hard” physical environment of the real world, and an inner landscapes that are the mental idea or the “soft” environment. This “soft” psychic interpretation of landscape is particular to each individual. The paintings, the projected installation, photographs and concept drawings are all a part of the same experiential artistic undertaking of exploring the psychic landscape. The work contains a mixture of physical geographical sites and a psychological site brought on by meditative experiences installing cubes in nature. When installed, the cubes possess a primitive inertia and immovable idleness in comparison to the moving video.

Figure 6. Laura Sellers. *Inverted Waterfall Cubed.* Projection Mapped Sculpture Installation. 2015. 77”x56.”
Museums and white cube gallery spaces can convey a sense of lifelessness. To liven up these seemingly cold spaces, museums are leaning towards entertainment like the disco tech and a less formal experience of art (Smithson, Flam 43-44). This is happening to bring the vibrant energy of mainstream entertainment and the music industry to the conventional art museum setting. There is a merger of techno-futurism with hippie drug culture in lighting displays that mimics psychedelic hallucinatory states (Kotz 107). The combination of digital media with traditional disciplines of painting is creating a new environment in the contemporary museum space. The Projected Landscape exhibition has a traditional white room for displaying paintings, but also has the futuristic blackened out room for the projection.

Viewing the projected video installation is similar to viewing a movie in a movie theater. In a sort of sensory deprivation, all attention is on the cubes. Touch, smell and taste are reduced as sound and sight take over (Smithson, Flam 138). The gallery space is clear and uncluttered, in opposition too the urban diversions. Experiencing the chaotic elements of hiking in to an outdoor location to install and film the cubes in nature is in opposition to the comforting cinematic experience of the projection installation indoors. Travelling in vehicles allows for a similar passive viewing of the landscape where the viewer does not have to directly confront the forces of nature to see its sublime elements. The projected installation gives the viewer the sensation or the idea of the waterfall, but they are separated from the reality of the physical environment. The glass in a vehicle separates the viewer from the tangible hard landscape that rapidly moves past the window, and this layered movement and separation characterizes the modern experience of landscape.

The sublime space projects back onto the viewer in darkened projection installations, and self-awareness is realized. People can mentally recreate the meditative space of experiencing a real waterfall by submerging themselves in the projection installation. This meditative space allows for internal reflection to take place. Critic Hal Foster talks about this virtual spiritual experience. He says the viewer can feel “an experience of spiritual immediacy effected through intense media immersion, and people
love it, this bewitching mysticism” (Round Table 81). Philosophical enlightenment comes from being in a darkened space away from the distractions of the illuminated world (Iles 5). The projected installation comments on society’s obsession with digital or fake landscapes mainly in its infatuation with television. The digital photographs and videos are much more easily disseminated into television, the Internet and social media. It is much more difficult to have a large audience experience a temporal installation of the cubes being in a remote setting. It is much easier to access the installation through projection in a gallery space, and adds another level of removal to the experience of the landscape. Television, although not considered by many to be a true reality, has more of an effect on people today than the natural landscape. The video projection allows for the artist’s sensory experience of the sublime to be easily translated to a broader audience than could visit the installation in nature first hand.

James Turrell is an artist operating in earthwork and projection form with his illusionary architectural manipulations. He uses light as a medium to alter space in his photographic documentation. Projectors used in his work create the sense of floating geometries. The atmosphere of his work is mesmerizing as well as calming (Bagatavicius 87-88). He is also challenging human perception with his brightly colored immersive light installations. Artist Jennifer Steinkamp combines natural subject matter and psychedelic coloration to create abstracted projection installations. She states her work is a form of “fake nature” (T.R.M. 11). Steinkamp uses light and movement to dissolve architectural elements. Similarly, the projected video installation dissolves the architecture of the cubes.

The mechanics of the installation include cameras, film, memory cards, but time is the essential media. Videos exist in a latent state and once called to play back, they unfold on a digital channel. It unfolds in a set pattern, every time replayed. Video has become today’s representation of experience through time (Viola 232-233). Experiential video based installations are entering in the gallery space and can be looped or paused. Some of the films are more formal and contain echoes of meditation or hints of visionary thoughts (Kotz 108-109). Unlike a painting, a still of a video does not encompass the whole artwork, and similar to the mind, a video signal is always moving. Video’s main media is time itself, and
this enters it in to conceptual space (Viola 173). Time is involved when experiencing the changing landscape through a car or plane window, and the projection installation loops the endless movement of a waterfall. Most people are removed from the landscape either experiencing it through the window or through viewing a landscape through cell phone screens or on television. The projection installation has a similar sense of digital removal from the reality of the waterfall.

Figure 7. Laura Sellers. Inverted Waterfall Cubed (Viewed from the Back). Projection Mapped Sculpture Installation. 2015. 77”x56.”
THE PAINTINGS

The Projected Paintings investigate painting’s relationship to color theory and its ability to create the illusion of multiple dimensions. Traditional landscape painting uses the hand and brush, and it suggests art from a specific time before modern art changed painting techniques. This application associates itself with the great American landscape painters that worked in large scale. The flatly painted forms within modern landscape echo the projected cubic forms placed in the foreground. All the paintings in the series are painted with the use of the projector, and their locations range from pastoral to urban. The paintings in the series have three-dimensional qualities but exist on a two-dimensional canvas surface. Hundreds of photographs supply the inspiration for the paintings.

All of the paintings are based on the original projection with various photographs of the cubes in the landscape. The series Projected Paintings uses subtle tonal differences to create the illusion of cubic surfaces on the two-dimensional canvas surface. The painted boxes are extruded versions of the previous abstract canvas paintings. The palette was created from the desaturation palette in color theory. The palette used on the boxes was created from two opposite complementary colors with the addition of white. This scale provides neutral greys and all the tints in between the two opposite colors. The color system of opposites yellow-green and violet resembled the colors of foggy summer mornings. The horizontal and diagonal lines in the boxes mimicked the horizon line of the mountains. In the environment, the intended color relationship and the illusion of expansive space worked together.
Contemporary landscape painter Louise Belcourt has a similar sculptural painting technique. She paints minimalist sculptural landscapes of colored boxes compressed onto one canvas. Her paintings attempt to ground cubic forms in space, and the projected paintings similarly give floating cubic forms a sense of grounding or place. The cubic forms in Belcourt’s work are symbolic reduced structures that are representative of a landscape. Belcourt’s work deals with experiencing expansive space in the country as a way to connect with the magnitude of the planet. She explains how hearing and focus is heightened over long distances, which also enhances this feeling of space. This sense of infinite space can provide spiritual meaning and happiness. The colored cubes in the exhibition are similar to Belcourt’s minimalist interpretations of landscape; but, to reduce it further, the cubes were changed to white (Greenbaum 1).

When working on the paintings of the white cubes, the white has a tint change that causes an illusion of advancing and retreating sides, or a push/pull of space. Some surfaces jut out, and others tuck back in due to subtle tonal shifts. The cubes mimic the “white cube gallery space”, and in the natural
environment they create a tenuous relationship and seem ill fitted. The cool and warm faces of the painted cube offer planar divisions that flirt with three-dimensional optical illusion (Storr 35-36). White works as a form of neutral that can allow for clarification of nuances in a painting. Painting expresses itself through changes in tone. The neutrality of white becomes less perceivable when situated next to other white surfaces.

The series of projected paintings have a changing figure-ground dynamic as the viewers’ focus switches from painted cubes inserted in the real landscape background to the cubes from the projection in the studio. Contemporary artist Mary Iverson similarly paints blocks from her studio into her paintings as representations of shipping containers moving into the untouched landscape. Her work directly illustrates consumer products moving into remote regions of pristine wilderness (Farr 48). There are brush strokes that mimic organic forms in nature and show the human hand, and others are painted flatly to minimize the presence of the artist.

There is an additional layer of graffiti or sketches painted on top of the paintings to add an additional two-dimensional front layer loosening up the rigid painting style made by taped off areas, and it allows for a unification of the composition. This technique is used in the painting *Projected River Cubed*. It conveys the sense of a log piercing water that came from a sketch. The log sketch on top of the painting alludes to the mental place where the shoot occurs. The sketch is from memory, and the log also serves to divide above water from the submerged world below. It is also another instance of the artists’ hand manipulating the landscape.
The graffiti in the painting *Projected Graffiti Cubed* was actually sprayed on the garage door in the photograph from New York. In the other paintings, the graffiti was painted in from other photographs afterwards to unify and add another dimensional layer to the composition. The application in which it was painted shows the artist’s hand in opposition to the rest of the strictly gridded composition. This last layer unifies the composition through looseness of application and line. It breaks the grid of the painting and was a major breakthrough in freeing the work. The graffiti also overwrites the realistic optical illusion that was painted, and in a way breaks or destroys the realistic aspect of the work.

**Figure 9.** Laura Sellers. *Projected River Cubed.* Acrylic Painting. 2015. 66”x48.”
Artist Mary Iverson uses a similar technique of scratching the surface of her realist oil paintings, which damages the priceless work. It is considered sacrilege to some that graffiti be painted on top of a realist painting of a landscape, and it relates directly to humans desecration of the land (Farr 58). The painting *Projected Waterfall Cubed* shows this layering of graffiti on top of an inverted waterfall, and this graffiti or artist handprint often occurs on boulders or walkways around scenic parks. Rudolph Stingel is another contemporary landscape painter that uses degradation methods on top of realistic landscape paintings. He leaves his finished landscape paintings on the floor to catch dust, dirt, footprints, paint and coffee spills. Stingel’s paintings look stained and tarnished like the viewer is looking through a dirty car window, or is looking at an old photograph. Stingel’s degradation and Iverson’s scratching technique work to damage their pristine landscape paintings. Their work is similar to the graffiti overlay tags that go on top of the *Projected Painting* series (Johnson C26).
The photograph used for the painting *Projected New York Cubed* was created using photos from a visit to New York City. The photo used for the painting was taken in Frederick Law Olmstead’s manicured landscape, Central Park. Unlike the abandoned rural landscapes used in some of the paintings, the surrounding skyscrapers kept this landscape from the experience of the limitless horizon. Frederick Law Olmstead created Central Park, and it is an example of an ongoing relationship between man and nature. The continuous management of Central Park makes it a dialectical landscape where nature’s natural processes are replaced by human maintenance (Smithson, Flam 160). The cube installations in Central Park carry with it the history of art and human intervention. This sensory experience of being in the new but inauthentic landscape is a newer version of a tradition connecting with contemporary audiences.
In the paintings several different images are superimposed creating one psychic landscape with multiple perspectives creating a dynamic figure to ground relationship. The overlapping images include rural and urban landscapes, a group of variously arranged white cubes, and sketchbook drawings and diagrams. Some of the paintings combine brush strokes that show the artist’s hand, and other areas are painted in flat even strokes that minimize the presence of the artist. The layering of different medias and perspectives offers a way to alter perspectives of perception. The viewer is seeing from two angles at once, as if they are moving through the landscape rapidly, characteristic of the way people move through land today. This movement keeps the eye from settling on any specific point in the paintings. The three different bodies of work all address the landscape, but with different results. This body of work considers the tradition of landscape with new medias a way to project the current state of urbanization.
Figure 13. Laura Sellers. *The Projected Paintings (Installation View).* Acrylic Paintings. 2015.

Figure 14. Laura Sellers. *The Projected Paintings (Installation View).* Acrylic Paintings. 2015.
CONCLUSION

The grand tradition of landscape painting is central to American history, however Hudson River School artists like Thomas Cole and Albert Bierstadt did much to depict the American landscape at the turn of industrialization. They depicted the landscape as it changed and transformed (Nickel 20). These painters also documented the decreasing wilderness that occurred over the course of the 19th century. The Projected Painting Series analyzes the landscape as it is interpreted now through car and plane windows. This layering and multiple perspectives cause a movement and shifting creating a hallucinatory, unsettling effect. The faceted and reframed compositions reflect how modernization changes the way people move through and experience the land.

The combination of technology and altered landscape painting allow for a new mode of seeing. The figure ground dynamic in the paintings allows for several spatial planes to be compressed into one surface. The paintings use contrasting flat and rough brush strokes and subtle tonal changes to create multi-dimensional planes. The video projection installation on the cubes allows for a three-dimensional meditative experience of a dimensionally flat video. The photographs, sketches, paintings and video are unified conceptually by the idea of altered landscape. These composite works define the experience of place through the use new technology and traditional studio practices.
WORKS CITED


