

THESIS

WE WANT OUR VIEW AND EAT IT TOO

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ABSTRACT

WE WANT OUR VIEW AND EAT IT TOO

How do we amuse ourselves in America's most beautiful places? The relationship that many Americans have with the natural world is one of awkwardness and detachment that is manifested in the way we vacation in and tour around National Parks and other naturally beautiful places. Culturally instilled perceptions of place and a frantic pace to see it all keep many circulating around the edges of the natural world rather than experiencing it in more intimate ways. Many have a distanced appreciation for a beautiful natural landscape, especially those iconic views that are recognizable from ubiquitous travel brochures, postcards, posters, books, and calendars. They inspire awe and appreciation, but we soon shoot our photograph and quickly move to the next panorama so the view becomes a film, flashing by frame by frame through our vehicle's windows. Kitschy tourist stops, amusement parks, golf courses, shopping centers, restaurants, or funky little coffee shops and pubs bring urban pleasures and comforts to our experience of the natural world. Our behavior exposes several underlying tensions that exist in our individual and collective psyches: the tensions between conservation and consumption, observation and immersion, and the natural and artificial.

My intention is to visually investigate these tensions by exploring the roads we build, the parks we set aside, the objects we place within the natural landscape, and the

activities in which we participate, often pushing these into the realm of the ridiculous in order to raise questions about what we might do if we could. As a society we simultaneously want a world filled with beautiful landscapes and a comfortable lifestyle. However, our current way of life demands a high rate of natural resource consumption that destroys precious ecosystems, which by association destroys the beautiful view. We want the best of both worlds; we want our view and to eat it too. My work is aimed at visually exploring this paradox and the tension that exists when a society tries to reconcile competing desires.

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship that many Americans have with the natural environment is one of awkwardness, discomfort, and detachment. Estranged from the natural world, perceptions of nature have become conflicted and confused¹ and can range from anthropocentric to ecocentric.² For example, some people believe that humans should exploit the earth no matter how wasteful or destructive while others believe humans are a stain on the earth and should be exterminated. However, most people probably fall into less extreme, middle-spectrum categories that attempt to merge concepts that ostensibly appear to work in opposition with one another. Combine conflicting conceptions of nature with a lack of regular physical contact with the natural world and the result is a situation where Americans are generally perplexed about their relationship to the natural environment. It is this perplexity and ensuing behavior that interests me. I am fascinated by the space where indecisiveness and tension exist between two or more choices, how we reconcile our choices, and whether or not our values and beliefs are supported or contradicted by our behavior. Three social tensions pertaining to the natural world currently hold my interest: the tension between conservation and consumption, the natural and the artificial, and observation and immersion. We want to maintain iconic views and unspoiled wilderness, but we also want conveniences, beautiful land on which to build houses and commercial centers, roads for easy access, and to partition nature into convenient

¹ For the purposes of this paper the words “nature,” “natural world,” and “natural environment” will refer to land that shows minimal human development or intervention. The terms are relative. For example, a National Park has been developed with infrastructure such as roads, campgrounds, and park service buildings, but will be generally considered “nature” or “natural” because when compared to other developed areas, it has more wildness areas and wildlife.

² Gilbert F. Lafreniere, *The Decline of Nature: Environment History and the Western Worldview* (Bethesda, MD: Academic Press, 2007), 328.

enclaves. In other words, we want our view and to eat it too. My work is aimed at visually exploring this paradox and the tension that exists when society attempts to reconcile disparate desires.

My desire to intellectually understand and visually explore American sociocultural perceptions of the natural world is motivated by a dual pursuit of two master's degrees, one in fine art and the other in environmental science. The specific impetus for my thesis work was an encounter I had with a park ranger in Yellowstone National Park who commented that a very high percentage of park visitors never go more than a few hundred feet from their cars. Curiosity over this odd collective behavior provoked my investigation of both visual and literature sources, which confirmed my suspicions about the generalized detachment of urbanized humans from the natural world. Firsthand observation at several National Parks supplied referential subject matter for my work. I observed and photographed tourists while also paying close attention to my own tendencies as a tourist. The investigative processes of drawing and painting revealed tensions that I had observed from both without and within myself. The results of my research were a paper that connected landscape painting with sociocultural perceptions of the natural environment³ and a visually satirical collection of paintings that place people in settings that often cross into the realm of the ridiculous.

Why are Americans so disengaged and confused about the natural world? In his book that won the 2008 Audubon Medal, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*, Richard Louv writes that today's sociocultural perception

³ Tammi Brazee, *Painting as Testimony to 19th and 21st Century American Sociocultural Perceptions of the Natural Landscape and Environment* (Fort Collins, CO: Stanley G. Wold Resource Center, Department of Art, Colorado State University, 2010).

of the natural world is one of separation and confusion.⁴ He writes that we are separated from food origins, that lines are blurred between humans, animals, and machines, that we have an intellectual understanding of our relationship to animals but do not have any substantial or meaningful contact with them (other than pets), that we are surrounded by artificially designed nature, and that suburbia is being overrun by rules that discourage interactions with nature.⁵ In short, we have become urbanized and over-civilized in the desire for order and control and tend to view authentic nature as existing somewhere else such as in National Parks.⁶

If most of us believe that nature exists elsewhere, what happens when we contact nature? For many it is often awkward, foreign, scary, or even boring. Aldo Leopold once wrote,

Perhaps the most serious obstacle impeding the evolution of a land ethic is the fact that our educational and economic system is headed away from rather than toward, an intense consciousness of land. Your true modern is separated from the land by many middlemen, and by innumerable physical gadgets. He has no vital relation to it; to him it is the space between cities on which crops grow. Turn him loose for a day on the land, and if the spot does not happen to be a golf links or a “scenic” area, he is bored stiff.⁷

Leopold defines a land ethic as possible only when we, the human community, begin to accept moral responsibility for the care of nature, stop perceiving nature as only a commodity, and begin to understand that we are a part of the fabric of the natural

⁴ Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2008), 19.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 26.

⁷ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac, with Essays on Conservation from Round River* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1974), 262.

community.⁸ Our disjointed relationship to the natural world is obvious and endemic, making a society-wide land ethic seem like a distant hope.

Other authors and researchers have studied the history of Western thought concerning the human relationship to the natural world. Through extensive research, these authors have confirmed what I had suspected about American society and have influence my art. In *Environment and Social Theory*, John Barry addresses how Western society values, uses, and thinks about the natural environment and examines Western social theories that have disconnected humans from the natural environment as well as theories that are attempting to reconnect humans to nature.⁹ Barry's goal is to link Western social ideas with human perceptions of the natural environment, which is very closely aligned with what I try to do visually through painting. However, I focus more on our odd collective behavior that is the result of social perceptions. Gilbert Lafreniere in *The Decline of Nature: Environment, History and the Western Worldview* follows historical shifts in thinking about the human relationship to the natural world from Medieval Europe through Modernism then Postmodernism and emphasizes how the roots of Christianity, Secularism, and Modernism are still influencing how Americans perceive nature.¹⁰ Like Lafreniere, I am interested in how the history of the West still influences contemporary perceptions of the natural world. For example, I have obliquely referred to specific historical perceptions about the American West in the painting *Hoola Hoopin Western Theme Park*. John Brinckehoff Jackson argues in *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time* that an urban environment has caused people to be more concerned with time and

⁸ G. Tyler Miller and Scott E. Spoolman, *Living in the Environment: Concepts, Connections, and Solutions*, 16th e (Canada: Brooks/Cole, 2009), 22.

⁹ John Barry, *Environment and Social Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

¹⁰ Lafreniere.

movement rather than with place and permanence and specifically addresses the contemporary blue collar urban American relationship to the natural environment.¹¹ He states that, “untamed nature is rejected as too unpredictable” and that many people prefer groomed parks.¹² Jackson’s theory about Western society’s obsession with time and movement is evident in many of my thesis paintings. An example of this is the reoccurrence of blue, vaporous people who appear as ghosts gliding through the landscape. Many more authors address sociocultural perceptions of our relationship to the natural world, too many to address here, but the general consensus seems to be that our relationship has changed drastically over the past few centuries and that most people view nature as being something separate from society rather than being intrinsically intertwined with human existence. Because many of us no longer rely on direct contact with the natural environment for our survival, we seem to have simply forgotten that we are completely and utterly dependent on the natural world, and this forgetfulness has clearly affected our collective behavior.

I believe one way to appraise a society’s level of separation from nature and its distance from a society-wide land ethic is to observe people’s behavior when they do interact with the natural environment. Because many of us do not interface with nature in our everyday urban existences, observing tourism in natural landscapes exposes the often hidden relationship that Americans have with the natural world. I attempt to re-contextualize what I observe in the Parks through the process of painting, which visually reframes behavior and underlying social perceptions.

¹¹ John Brinckehoff Jackson, *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time* (Binghamton, NY: Yale University Press, 1994).

¹² *Ibid.*, 89-90.

Paint is the medium of choice for my thesis work not only because I am academically trained as a painter, but also because of painting's long history in relationship to the land. For thousands of years humans have marked the land with paint. For example, the paintings of Chauvet Cave in France were made around 24,000 BCE. Although the landscape as represented in traditional Western painting has a much shorter history than cave painting, it too marks the land. Rather than physically marking the land itself, it is painted on a mobile support and is a representative reconstruction of the history of the West's changing relationship to the land. In American art, the Hudson River School painters of the 19th century reflected sociocultural conceptions of the land as a symbol of America's strength as a nation, of nature's endless bounty ready to be exploited for human needs and desires, and of transcendental ideas of God in nature and nature as God.¹³ As the Hudson River School's paintings mirrored sociocultural ideas concerning the land, my work is an attempt to do the same except that I am making satirical social commentary rather than representing a social ideal. The Hudson River School artists painted some of America's most beautiful places that are now preserved as Parks, but our relationship to these beautiful places has changed. I am using the traditional medium of paint to continue the visual painted record of the history of the human relationship to the natural world.

CONSERVATION VERSUS CONSUMPTION

The tension that exists between the dichotomous desires to both conserve and consume is often a classic case of wanting our cake and eating it too. Most people want to

¹³ Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Paintings 1825-1875* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3-4.

preserve iconic natural places so that they and their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren can enjoy it. However, conflict arises if preservation interferes with personal interests. Preserving the view is highly dependent on preserving the entire underlying ecosystem, which often extends far beyond the boundaries of a Park or wilderness preserve and into private land. We want to contain nature in nice, neat enclaves while we consume everything beyond its boundaries and invade and control everything within its boundaries. An excellent example of this is the human/grizzly conflict surrounding Yellowstone National Park. Most people want grizzlies to be protected as long as they remain in the Park and do not interfere with their visit within the park. *Please Don't Harass the Humans* (Fig. 1) addresses this specific situation while also referring to a more generalized problem of the desire to confine or partition nature. The people in this painting are dressed more for an urban stroll than for a wilderness adventure and appear somewhat displaced. A bear casually ambles into the frame and although the people and the bear face each other, neither seems to take much notice of the other. Where the dirt road meets the hill there is a slight division between the bear's space and the people's space, but it can easily be crossed over by either party. Park boundaries are porous, imaginary, human-made marks on a map that mean nothing to animals that often move in and out of park boundaries. If the animal happens to be a large, scary predator that wanders into human dominated space, trouble can erupt. The painting's complementary color palette is representative of the tension created by such scenarios. Not many people want grizzly bears to be extirpated from the continental United States so they favor conservation; however, most people do not want grizzlies popping up around the swing sets in their back yards either. As more people move into

areas surrounding National Parks or nature reserves, more pressure is put on the animals in and around the Park. Red represents this pressure and it is encroaching and pushing forward into the viewer's space. The partitioning of human space versus natural space is a worldwide problem, not just a Yellowstone problem. We want to consume land and resources while conserving nature, but in some places we cannot have it both ways.

I Want My View and Eat It Too (Fig. 2) addresses the tension between the desires to both conserve and consume, but unfortunately, consumption has the upper hand in this painting. The landscape surrounding the little mountain town has been decimated to the point of being almost unidentifiable. A barely recognizable forest creeps across the top of the painting, but it too has been touched by the effects of mining and is unnaturally pink with touches of ominous green. The giant green man eats and his ravenous appetite affects everything around him. He throws a green cast onto surrounding objects, which is indicative of both individual and collective responsibility for out-of-control consumption. The artifacts of mining are strewn throughout this image, symbolic of the raw resources extracted from the earth and of the environmental destruction that is often left behind. But the question remains, do we really *need* all that we take from the earth or are there some things we can live without?

I Want My View addresses the responsibility that comes with awareness. The person looking out at the viewer is the only person aware of being observed, and by capturing the viewer's gaze she registers the viewer's awareness of this disturbing scene. This painting asks the viewer, "Now that you see the problem, and I *know* you do, are you more accountable to do something about it?" A moral dilemma becomes evident. In whose backyard should we dig? If it is not in yours, then is it in mine, or in some other

unlucky soul's backyard or neighborhood? The scene in this painting is the result of a generalized social detachment from the effects of the over-consumption of natural resources. It asks, "Would you want to vacation in a place like this? If not, would you want to live in this place? If not, should anyone have to live here? If not, should we abandon environmentally damaged places, leaving it for future generations to clean up?"

Clean it Up (Fig. 3) has similar content to *I Want My View* except there is an attempt to clean up the mess, albeit a poor and ineffective one. It begs the question, "Can environmental messes be cleaned up effectively or is it better to not make a mess in the first place?" The old mine building is unstable and in ruins, signifying the need for alternatives and new ideas about how and what we consume. The landscape appears healthy and normal except for the sickly green and pink colors. The window washers try in vain to clean the view, but what exactly are we seeing? If the window washers are really cleaning the air, from what are they hanging? Because they logically cannot hang from clouds, what they are doing is unbelievable and impossible, raising further questions about retaining old ways of living and expecting different results. If they are not hanging from clouds, they could be cleaning a billboard that is trying to sell us the comforting idea that the earth is fine and that we can go about life as usual. This painting can be read in multiple ways, but the general idea is that something is amiss. It represents the general public's disconnection and confusion about what is really going on with planet Earth.

THE NATURAL VERSUS THE ARTIFICIAL

Tension also exists between our desires for the natural and the artificial. Natural refers to that which comes to us as nature intended and is relatively unscathed by humans.

The term *relative* is important here because very little remains that has not been affected by humans.¹⁴ The artificial refers to that which is human-made and to sociocultural perceptions of nature. Postmodern philosophy espouses the idea that human perception is controlled by culture, and that human perceptions about the world are artificial mental constructions created through the use of language and symbols.¹⁵ Craig McDaniel writes in *Themes of Contemporary Art* that “the contemporary world is becoming increasingly artificial because secondhand images [. . .] in media substitute for direct experiences and exert a powerful influence on how we perceive and understand the world.”¹⁶ When we view television, movies, web images, print, or advertising, they are artificial experiences that are mediated by people who choose what we see. These encounters shape our conceptions of nature and symbols become attached to these concepts. For example, symbols of America’s iconic landscapes as captured in ubiquitous travel brochures, websites, postcards, posters, books, and calendars are mediated and artificial because we develop general sociocultural ideas about the meaning of these symbols or icons. For Americans, particular geographic locations and images of nature are loaded with symbolic meaning and are deeply tied to our identity as a nation.¹⁷ For example, in the 19th century the most beautiful and unique natural areas that were later preserved as Parks were the symbols of America’s strength and eternal natural bounty.¹⁸ I suspect that today many Americans think of the Parks as symbols of the homeland even if they have never

¹⁴ Miller and Spoolman, 184.

¹⁵ Lafreniere, 373.

¹⁶ Jean Robertson and Craig McDaniel, *Themes of Contemporary Art; Visual Art after 1980* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 22-23.

¹⁷ Susan Davidson, ed. *Art in America: 300 Years of Innovation* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2007), 26.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 105, 140.

experienced them personally. The icons of pristine nature, the beautiful view, and heroic myths of rugged outdoorsmen are re-created in American contemporary media and are the epitome of how we experience nature in a mediated and removed manner. This is what Louv meant when he writes about Americans having an intellectual understanding of nature and animals rather than an experiential relationship. We have mental perceptions and symbols *of* nature, but very little meaningful, authentic, and tangible contact *with* nature.

Many of my thesis paintings contain an element of iconic nature, views that one might find on a postcard; however, these are symbols gone wrong. They are skewed, discolored, and have clunky, awkward people, roads, or other objects plopped down in the middle of them. These images are intended to distort established sociocultural perceptions by wrecking iconic views of nature. However, in contrast to the iconic perception of nature as eternally pristine is the relatively new idea of nature as fragile.¹⁹ The perception of a fragile, sickly earth arrived on the American sociocultural scene with the Environmental Movement of the 1960s and 1970s.²⁰ I visually represent the idea of a frail earth through the use of exaggerated and artificial color. My thesis paintings reflect both sides of the American sociocultural coin, the eternal iconic view of nature on one side and a sickly, fragile earth on the other.

Cars, trucks, and RV's are found throughout my thesis work and represent the artificial as it relates to human-created artifacts. Vehicles transport us to Parks from far-flung locations and bring urban comforts and technology into nature. RV's are the

¹⁹ Malcolm Andrews. *Landscape and Western Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 213.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

quintessential vacation vehicle and are the lumbering beasts of the modern outdoors. They are the slow, cumbersome means by which we bring all our conveniences with us. By looking through a postmodern philosophical lens when considering how we travel, how few of us wander from our vehicles, how many mediated images we encounter, or how human infrastructure has changed the natural world, it becomes evident that nearly all our experiences with the natural world have become artificial and detached. Tension exists between the desire to experience authentic, unmediated nature and the desire to experience comfortable, convenient, urbanized nature.

Roadside Attractions (Fig. 4) juxtaposes the natural and artificial. There are mountains, snow, trees, a road, vehicles, tourists, and kitschy human artifacts. The mountain sheep on the right blur the line between the artificial and natural. The sheep are of unusual size and are the same color as the other two obviously artificial animals in the painting; however, there are no humans posing with the sheep to assure the viewer of their artificiality. Furthermore, they appear normal in physical form unlike the imaginary jackalope, and they belong in this mountainous environment unlike the giant, misplaced prairie dog. The jackalope and prairie dog are completely false, whereas the sheep are in question. Regardless of what is real and what is not, who would erect giant eyesores in this beautiful, if not slightly saccharine, mountainous landscape? This raises the question of whether or not the landscape itself is real or artificial. The color of the snow is that which a little girl might imagine, but it must not be too cold outside because the tourists are not dressed for winter. The landscape is an eclectic mix of nature and tourist trap, exactly the convoluted paradox between the natural and artificial that many tourists seem to prefer.

Like *Roadside Attractions*, *Hoola Hoopin Western Theme Park* (Fig. 5) also juxtaposes objects that do not belong together. The setting is Monument Valley on the border of Utah and Arizona that is protected as a tribal park by the Navajo. It is the quintessential American western landscape made famous by old cowboy movies. The cowboy hats worn by some of the hoola-hoopers recall the mythical American West, but this landscape is not the tough cowboy landscape of American legend. Rather, it is a theme park for hoola-hoopers and rollercoaster enthusiasts, and the majority of the figures are *cowgirls* who spin hoola-hoops in the desert while pink pronghorn gallop by. With much exaggeration, this painting pokes fun at what contemporary Americans might do to the landscape if it was free for the taking. However, maybe this painting is not an entire exaggeration; Las Vegas, Nevada is an extreme example of human fantasy plopped down in an unlikely ecosystem. Like Las Vegas, this painting represents a desert ecosystem that is incapable of supporting large numbers of people without extreme, artificial intervention and damage to the environment. But what is supposed to be artificial or natural in this painting? Could this be a representation of a miniaturized human reproduction of a Western landscape, like a stage set or theme park simulacrum? The people on the mesas are very large or the mesas are very small; the pronghorn are pink, and the people are blue. The entire scene could be an artificial Disney Land experience and exist outside the real Monument Valley. Thus, the painting becomes a simulacrum of a simulacrum of a natural landscape; the line between the natural and artificial is impossibly blurred. It raises questions about the rationale behind some of the ridiculous things we do to the land, the fantasies we create about the land, and about our distorted social perceptions of the land. Conflicting sociocultural desires to both enjoy the

natural landscape while plunking down artificial objects on top of it, or to simply artificially recreate what we observe in the natural world can result in creative but outlandish outcomes.

What about those things which are natural but that have been affected by humans so that population, behavior, or other aspects become artificial? The view in *Speed Bump* (Fig. 6) is of an RV park where nuclear green elk block the passage of tourists who want to get to their RVs. The tourists look past the elk because they have seen enough of them today and just want to get to the comforts of their portable homes. The elk should be considered the natural inhabitants of these woods, but the RVs seem more at home than the elk. The impetus for this work is the unnaturally high elk population in Estes Park and Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado. Tourists want to see elk when they come into the park, but the elk population is so large that they are wiping out their food sources, spreading pathogens, and disrupting the balance of the surrounding ecosystem. The elk population is abnormally large because wolves were extirpated long ago. Without wolves to keep the elk population in check, humans must do it. However, the general public does not want the elk herds culled. Thus, there are elk everywhere, natural inhabitants of the mountains in artificially high numbers. We want to experience the beauty and awe of nature, but we also want the artificial plunked down right on top of nature, including synthetically large populations of desirable megafauna for our viewing pleasure. When natural ecosystems are out of balance, various components can become artificially enhanced, reduced, or dramatically changed depending on the specific situation. There is a general lack of public understanding of how ecosystems function, which is partially due to a deficit of direct, regular interaction with the natural world.

OBSERVATION VERSUS IMMERSION

For many of us in our fast paced society observation is the quickest way to assimilate information. When touring National Parks or other beautiful landscapes, there seems to be a strong drive to see as much as possible in the shortest amount of time. Many are satisfied to view the landscape rather than to immerse themselves in it. For this paper, immersion in nature refers to kinesthetic movement through the landscape as well as the experience of vision, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. To experience the natural world only with our eyes is very limiting and disconnecting, placing a divide between the viewer and nature. Immersion requires more effort and intimate contact; it requires the participation of all our senses. The combination of visual observation and “leave no trace” policies further exacerbates a lack of connection to the natural world.²¹ Rules that discourage touching or taking objects, going off trails, or getting too close to animals can have a limiting effect on our experiences in the outdoors. “Leave no trace” policies are necessary for protecting Parks and animals from the damage that ignorant tourists or high volumes of visitors can inflict, but they have also changed how we interact with the natural world, causing it to feel more like a museum²² where alarms might sound and tickets might be issued if rules are broken. Observation *of* nature rather than immersion *in* nature has become the norm for many in American society.

Although healthy immersion in the natural world would reconnect people to nature, it presents its own potential problems. For example, if too many people want to trek through a popular wilderness area it will become trampled and suffer from high human impact. From personal experience, finding solitude in the wilderness in a National

²¹ Jackson, 101.

²² Ibid.

Park or other wilderness area, especially those found on the U.S. east coast, can be difficult at times. These two issues, trampling and the loss of solitude due to high numbers of visitors seeking immersion, raise questions about the wisdom of encouraging more immersion from the general public. On a large social scale, there is tension between encouraging more public immersion in nature and keeping large numbers of people out of wilderness areas in order to protect the wilderness.

The conflict between observation and immersion exists not only on a large social scale but also on a smaller, personal scale. Those who love observing the beautiful view may wish they could trek through the wilderness but do not have the skills or courage to do so. People fear the unknown and the contemporary disconnection with and lack of a working knowledge of the natural world have created a lot of unknowns for the wannabe wilderness traveler. People fear wild animals, sunburn, insect bites, falling off cliffs, getting lost and being alone in the woods, but yet many see nature as a source of energy, a place to gather peace-of-mind and health.²³ The perceived need to go into nature conflicts with the fear of actually going. On the other hand, some people do not fear the wilderness enough and do not understand that it can be dangerous if one is unprepared and inexperienced. People visiting the Parks do endlessly stupid things. My favorite is when people think elk or bison are like domestic cattle and walk right up to the wild animal only to get gored or trampled. There are also people who think the outdoor enthusiast is crazy. In reference to a camping or backpacking trip, how many of us have fielded the question, “Why would you want to do THAT?” Some people have become so disconnected from the natural world that they cannot fathom wanting to purposefully

²³ Jackson, 89.

immerse oneself in it. Therefore, the conflict is not only a large social one but also a very personal one that can either show itself as fear of the unknown, ignorance, or as ambivalence and confusion over why people would want to immerse themselves in the natural world.

Bison Traffic Jam (Fig. 7) addresses the problems associated with immersion. People are moving through the landscape by various means, but yet they are still separated from it and appear as blue ghosts moving through a high-chroma, artificial, almost featureless landscape. The bison are nearly identical and lined up in an orderly, repeating pattern, creating the impression of an assembly line. The car waiting at the end of the line, with an unknown number of cars waiting behind it, is caught in a bison/car traffic jam. The bison and the car(s) are all heading in the same direction, insinuating that the people and the bison are all competing for the same space. My observations of others who use the land as a means for exercise prompted this painting. I once saw a cyclist ride within a foot of a large male Bighorn sheep who reared up to butt the cyclist. Fortunately, the Bighorn changed his mind and the cyclist avoided harm, but it was a lesson that just because people put themselves in the middle of the natural world does not mean they are particularly connected to it, understand it, respect it, or appreciate it. We often need to share the land with wildlife or even give them their own space without human interference. *Bison Traffic Jam* is about unsustainable numbers of human visitors that push animals out of their habitat and about the disconnection of some people who appear to immerse themselves in nature but have no clue about what is really going on around them.

The paintings *WTF* (Fig. 8) and *10 Performing Purple Bears* (Fig. 9) both address some of the problems associated with observation. A large amount of pressure is put upon the ecosystems associated with National Parks because the Parks are simply loved too much. 285,579, 941 people visited the National Parks in 2009,²⁴ most of which probably observed the Park not far from their vehicles. The National Park Service's number one mission is to "care for special places saved by the American people so that all may experience our heritage."²⁵ This is a wonderfully democratic idea that is deeply admirable, but the two missions of preservation and tourism can operate in opposition with one another. For example, large numbers of visitors need restaurants, restrooms, parking lots, campgrounds, RV hookups, and other types of infrastructure. Crowds of people disrupt our ability to experience the calming effects of nature. Tourists drive vehicles into and through the Parks and require roads to get to the views. Large numbers of vehicles result in traffic jams, air pollution, fragmentation, and the potential for collisions with animals. Plus, our attachment to our vehicles keeps us from wandering far, preventing a more immersive experience. We want to preserve our Parks so they retain their beautiful iconic views, but we also want open and easy access by road, animals for our viewing pleasure, and our conveniences. It is easy to see that the desire to preserve wild places while providing easy access to the beautiful views has its own, unique troubles.

WTF (Fig. 8) focuses on the crowds that visit the Grand Canyon each year.

Tourists are pushing into the view from both sides. They are observers, here to snap their

²⁴ "Frequently Asked Questions," National Park Service, 10 October 2010, (accessed 26 November 2010). <http://www.nps.gov/faqs.htm>.

²⁵ "About Us," National Park Service, 10 October 2010, (accessed 26 November 2010). <http://www.nps.gov/aboutus/index.htm>.

photos and quickly move to the next view, like blue ghosts moving through the scene. On the top of a cliff perches a building from which souvenirs are sold to flocks of tourists. There are RVs parked in an unlikely place, ruining tourist's photos by spoiling the view with unsightly human artifacts. The unusually large mountain sheep could be authentic and confused about the unnaturally high numbers of people pressing into his space, or he could be artificial and placed in the view for tourist's photos. The high chroma and color separation in the painting distinguishes between that which is human and that which is landscape or animal and is indicative of the disconnection of the observers from the view they behold.

All of my thesis paintings have elements of the three tensions in them, but *IO Performing Purple Bears* (Fig. 9) is the culmination of this body of work. The tourists are partitioned from the land, visually separated from it by the viewing platform and railing, by divisions of color, and by clearly defined and layered space that divides foreground, middle ground, and background. The physical separation of tourists from nature protects sensitive wilderness areas from over consumption and is a conservation measure. Still, the landscape beyond beckons those who prefer immersion rather than only observation. The only possible way of getting into the blue beyond is blocked by purple bears that are nearly identical and that stand in an evenly spaced line. Are the bears real or artificial? Whether they are stuffed, plastic, or real bears that have been trained for a circus act, they exist either as a barricade between tourists and the wilderness or for the entertainment of the tourists who do not appear to notice them. The tension between the natural and artificial is further exacerbated by the presence of the window washers who are either cleaning and conserving the real view or are only cleaning glass in front of a museum

display or theme park simulacrum. The tensions that exist within this painting have created an overall separation of the natural world from humans who are trapped into observing a conserved but questionable view.

CONCLUSION

My thesis work employs satire, large scale, color compliments, not-quite-so-believable visual space, and strange juxtapositions. Satire exaggerates and lampoons human behavior in order to question behavior's underlying causes. The large scale of many of the paintings is a commentary on the Hudson River School's propensity to paint enormous canvases that were meant to completely enrapture the viewer by presenting him or her with America's most dramatic, natural scenery. My intention is to engulf the viewer, swallow him or her up, rather than to enrapture with a beautiful view. The size of many of the canvases is meant to draw the viewer into the work while the use of intense color simultaneously pushes the viewer back, mimicking the paradox between the pull of the natural world on humans and the feeling of separation from nature that many people experience. The color palettes are difficult to look at, almost florescent, with some passages vibrating with the tension created by juxtaposing complementary colors. In contrast to color's repulsive force, I paint most of the figures from behind because I feel that it is psychologically easier for the viewer to enter the work and become part of the group as an active participant. The intention for this body of work was to visually create humor, interest, attraction, repulsion, and discomfort in order to represent the issues and tensions that surround America's relationship to the natural world. The paradoxical desires for conservation and consumption, the natural and artificial, and observation and

immersion trouble us all. Our attempts at reconciling differing desires are both the cause and effect of our separation from the natural world. I personally feel this tension both within American society and within myself. There are no simple solutions to the problems we face concerning the human relationship to the natural environment. We are simply a society that wants our view and to eat it too.

FIGURES



Figure 1. Tammi Brazee, *Please Don't Harass the Humans*, 2010, oil on canvas, 48" x 72"



Figure 2. Tammi Brazee, *I Want My View and Eat It Too*, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 62" x 86"



Figure 3. Tammi Brazee, *Clean It Up*, 2009, acrylic on panel, 48" x 57"



Figure 4. Tammi Brazee, *Roadside Attractions*, 2010, oil on linen, 30" x 78"



Figure 5. . Tammi Brazee, *Hoola Hoopin Western Theme Park*, 2010, acrylic on linen, 72" x 120" on two panels



Figure 6. Tammi Brazee, *Speed Bump*, 2010, oil on canvas, 27" x 90"



Figure 7. Tammi Brazee, *Bison Traffic Jam*, 2010, oil on panel, 48" x 71"



Figure 8. Tammi Brazee, *WTF*, 2010, oil on linen, 66" x 88"



Figure 9. Tammi Brazee, *10 Performing Purple Bears*, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 72" x 144" on four panels

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