

THESIS

THIS LAND IS YOUR LAND

**Submitted by
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**In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts
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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY DAWN S. COHEN ENTITLED THIS LAND IS YOUR LAND BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS.

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Abstract of Thesis

THIS LAND IS YOUR LAND

My thesis paintings are part of a study and exploration of the Cache la Poudre River. Over the past four years I have been visually exploring different areas of the Poudre River with paint, in and around the Ft. Collins area. For my thesis paintings I chose one spot from which to create numerous and encompassing paintings of the river. I chose this spot to investigate thoroughly how patterns reveal themselves in landscapes as the seasons, weather, the light (time of day), and temperature changes.

Each triptych or four panel painting is connected like a single painting because it follows the Poudre River as it flows down from the mountains and out to the plains. The paintings are on separate panels because there is a change and evolution of the impact of weather and light on the landscape and this ultimately resulted in a different painting on each panel. This evolution is meant to document the patterns and the passage of time while observing and painting this landscape.

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The Cache La Poudre River sculpts the land and the population along the northern front range of Colorado. The Cache La Poudre drains territory along the continental divide at Milner pass in Rocky Mountain National Park. It is one of many rivers in Colorado that flows east into the Mississippi River and eventually into the Gulf of Mexico. The Poudre River carves through Poudre Canyon and into Ft. Collins, then Timnath, Windsor, and Greeley, and joins the South Platte River just south of Greeley.

Over the past four years I have been plein-air painting in Ft. Collins, and most of that time was spent along the Cache La Poudre. For my thesis exhibition, I chose to paint an area of the Poudre River from a single elevated spot that has multiple interesting views of the river. This spot is located on a hill just south of Timnath, Colorado and overlooks the Harrison ranchland. Beyond lies a broad view of front range civilization, with a backdrop of the Rocky Mountains. I chose this spot because from this place on the hillside, I can simply turn my head up or down, North, South, East, or West to create more paintings than one could possibly imagine. Through these paintings I have explored what many observed landscape painters have explored, that is the relationships between Earth and people. In these paintings I also observe relationships between water and land, and the relationships between water and thriving human populations .

There are many paintings to be made along this river. As I walk, run, or bike the many trails along the Poudre, the landscape seems to breath as I come in and out of tight wooded areas to expansive fields. As I explore this river the views for painting seem endless. While looking towards the northwest, the mountains appear calm and smooth, as my eyes travel south, the mountains become more jagged and dramatic. The eastern skies

are also an impressive backdrop for a landscape painting. I enjoy watching the river and the different areas of movement and stillness of the water. Some areas have fast moving water rolling over the smooth rocks and carves steep embankments. Other areas have calm, still water that show clear reflections of the cottonwood groves and the sky.

Before Europeans settled along the front range, buffalo trampled the ground and ate every sapling that thought about becoming a tree. Today the buffalo are no longer doing that to the land. This allows the flourishing of lush cottonwood groves, aspen grooves, Yucca plants and various other plants, some were introduced by European settlers. Most of the flat and wide prairie land exists under the control of cattle farmers.

In the late 1800s and the early 1900s this area of the country was in a constant control battle between men and the land. When I look at the paintings of Charles Russell or Fredrick Remington, I am reminded of how the front range evolved to be how it is today. Their paintings illustrate scenes of Europeans interacting with the Native Americans, the weather, the buffalo, and a European landscape. I feel that these 'Cowboy' paintings depict both real and mythological taming of the 'wild' west. In comparison, my paintings show the result of the European settlement and their shaping of the land. The paintings of Russell and Remington function as windows into the past. Their paintings reveal the flat vastness of a relatively barren front range, and the crisp clear air of the Rocky Mountains(figures 1&2) . Their paintings are filled with exciting illustrations of men fighting amongst themselves and with the buffaloes. In contrast, my paintings depict a European embrace of the land by the calm and organized way in which people have controlled and evolved with the landscape (figure 3).

Figure 1.

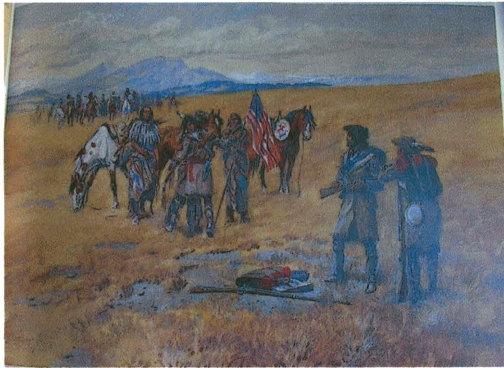
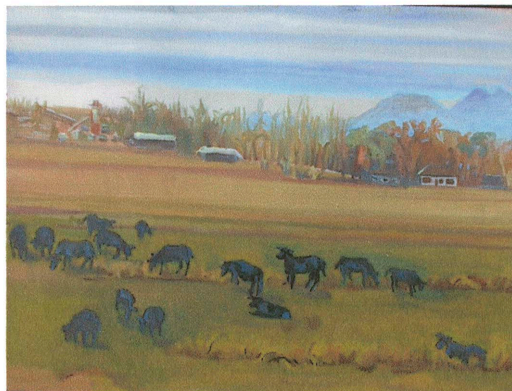


Figure 2.



Figure 3.



People tend to settle and live near rivers and bodies of water because of the life giving force of the water. Therefore there are ranches, farms, and towns all along the Poudre river. My paintings reflect the current state of a small portion of the northern front range along the Poudre river and how it has developed in European farmers hands.

The first painting I made from this spot was at the height of fall (figure 4). I was initially attracted to the bright colors on the trees and in the reflections on the river. After making this painting, I realized the potential for all the ideas about painting which could

be expressed at this location through landscape painting. Besides the patterns of color in the trees and water, I discovered patterns of civilization in the distance. This discovery presented a multi-faceted exploration of pattern in painting. Also, by painting on site, my thoughts wandered to many diverse issues about the landscape, such as land ownership, old western cliché, and the relationship between rivers and the nature of life.

Figure 4.



In the first triptych I painted (figure 5), one is able to see how the heavily wooded river flows into an open and fenced prairie landscape. The trees follow the river and create patterns of color through the branches. The trees also add a rhythmic patterning across the triptych. This late fall triptych connects itself as a single painting by the U-shape of the river, the patterns of the cows, and the trees sprinkled along the river. Because the sky and the river take up less of the composition, this triptych concentrates on the shape of the land around the Poudre river as a storm is on its way. The trees, fences, and cows create intervals of pattern as well as the flow of the river. This triptych

is divided into three panels to give the viewer a panoramic scope of the landscape. The panels are separated to indicate changes in weather and time of day. Each panel is its own composition and its own complete painting, when put together, one gets a sense of the view of the land and the affect of changes in weather.

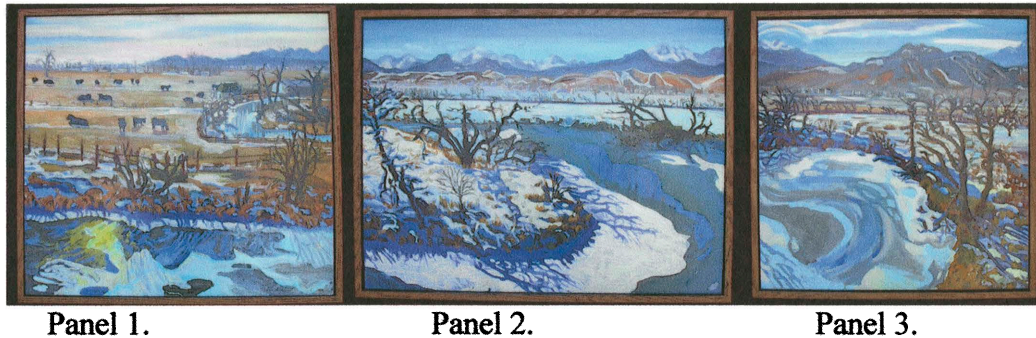
Figure 5.



The second triptych, figure six, investigates this land with an early winter snow storm. In this triptych I have explored how the color patterns of snow change the view of the mountains, land and the river. Observing the river, I noticed different areas where water, snow and ice creates patterns of color and shapes. Also, in painting two and three, the trees and embankment cast a different color shadow or reflection on each state of water to make an interesting double pattern effect. Within the third painting of this triptych, time passage is observed to record what parts of the river melt first and which parts retain snow or turn to ice. Each form of water reflects its own color and texture as all three modes melt, solidify or remain the same. The shadows from the trees and

embankment change color as they travel over various stages of water. This creates an endless opportunity to create patterns of shape and color within these paintings.

Figure 6.



In triptych one and two, there is direct reference to the heavily populated civilization which thrives along the Poudre river. Behind the river and the farm in all six paintings lie many buildings and farm structures. In earlier artists' paintings there likely would be flat land with herds of buffalo in the background. This represents a change of scenery of the same landscape that has happened over the past hundred years.

In the first set of four panel paintings (figure 7), is a closer look at the changing modes of water and a magnified inspection of how the texture and pattern change where trees and land meet the water. I am examining the river in the opposite way in which the river flows. I have painted these four panels from left to right whereas the river actually flows from right to left. Because of this, these paintings may function differently or be read differently by someone from a foreign culture. I am also interested in how the different modes of water react to the reflection of the sun as it sets.

Figure 7.



This four panel painting is an enlarged view of the embankment covered in snow that is slowly melting. Panel one of this painting is a misty, snowy afternoon. I am recording how the trees create pattern on the land between the branches and on the river, and observing where they cast shadows and reflections. Panels two and three are catching the reflection of the sun. In panel two, I am examining the snow and shadows on the ground and comparing them to the snow and shadows on the river. In this panel, the sun is reflected off the ice and as a result, the brightness of the sun is dulled. In panel three, the sun has melted an area of the river and is reflecting in the waves of the water. In panel four, the shadows are stretched and exaggerated down the river to show how the shadows react as the sun sets (figure 7, panels 2 & 3). The colors are different in each painting which indicate a progression of time as the sun sets and melts the snow.

William Wylie, an accomplished photographer, with long time Colorado connections, spent a great amount of time along the Poudre River. He made a book titled Riverwalk, which documented his observations as he traveled the full length of the river, and he took black and white photographs of the stretch of the Poudre River and its surrounding landscape. In his photograph entitled, “River bend and eddy near Windsor,” he has observed a likeness to panel four of my first four panel painting (figure 8 & figure

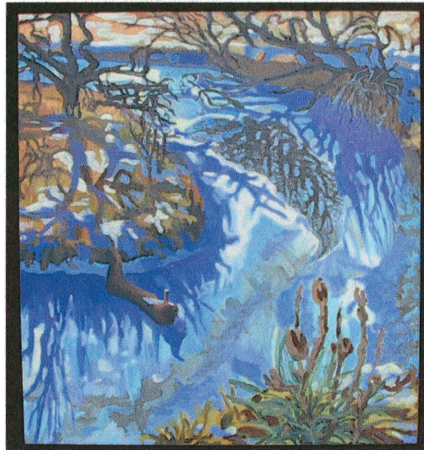
7, panel 4). This photo explores how the shadows appear on the embankment and then stretch forward on to the ice and water.

Figure 7.



Panel 2.

Panel 3.



Panel 4.

Figure 8.



Bill Wylie also took a photo from the same spot where I have been painting. His photo entitled, “Looking West towards Continental Divide from Timnath,” has a similar composition as my second four-panel painting (figure 9 & figure 10).

Figure 9.



Figure 10.



In this second four-panel painting (figure 10), I created the composition to include a large part of the sky. By including more sky, there is a direct reference to the weather and time of day. Panel one depicts a calm day, old snow, and a fast breeze of clouds accumulating. In panel two, the snow has practically melted away and a dark

storm is moving in during the late afternoon. This panel depicts the feeling of the stillness of a mid-winter day. The third panel is representative of the landscape after the stormy weather on a midday afternoon. I designed this painting to observe how prevalently life exists along the river. The houses and human dwellings are pronounced and the cows are close to the foreground of the painting. The river in panel three flows down into panel four, where the sun is setting dramatically behind the mountains.

The Poudre River is an exceptional source for western landscape paintings. The river is relatively over-utilized by agricultural development and somewhat downtrodden by recreational use. Overall, these paintings of the Poudre river show how humans use the river to thrive and grow. The river and all life forms exist together to create a common and basic interest which is the growth and continuation of life. “Remembering that rivers are the oldest moving things, and despite the western American water laws, the Poudre is a Common. All she wants to do is reach the South Platte.”¹ The elevated ground from which I worked allows me to see more than one would see from the towns or ranches along the river. I am able to see over the foothills at a clear view of the Rocky Mountain National Park, and simultaneously, close at the emerging patterns in the water and nearby land. The patterning in the landscape which excited me the most about painting was the colors of pattern which I observed in the river and ground after a large snow storm, as in triptych two and the first four panel painting. I enjoyed finding patterns of subtle blues, purples and yellows in the snow and contrasting these colors to the surrounding plants

¹ Gilfillan, Merrill. Riverwalk. Forward, University Press of Colorado, 2000.

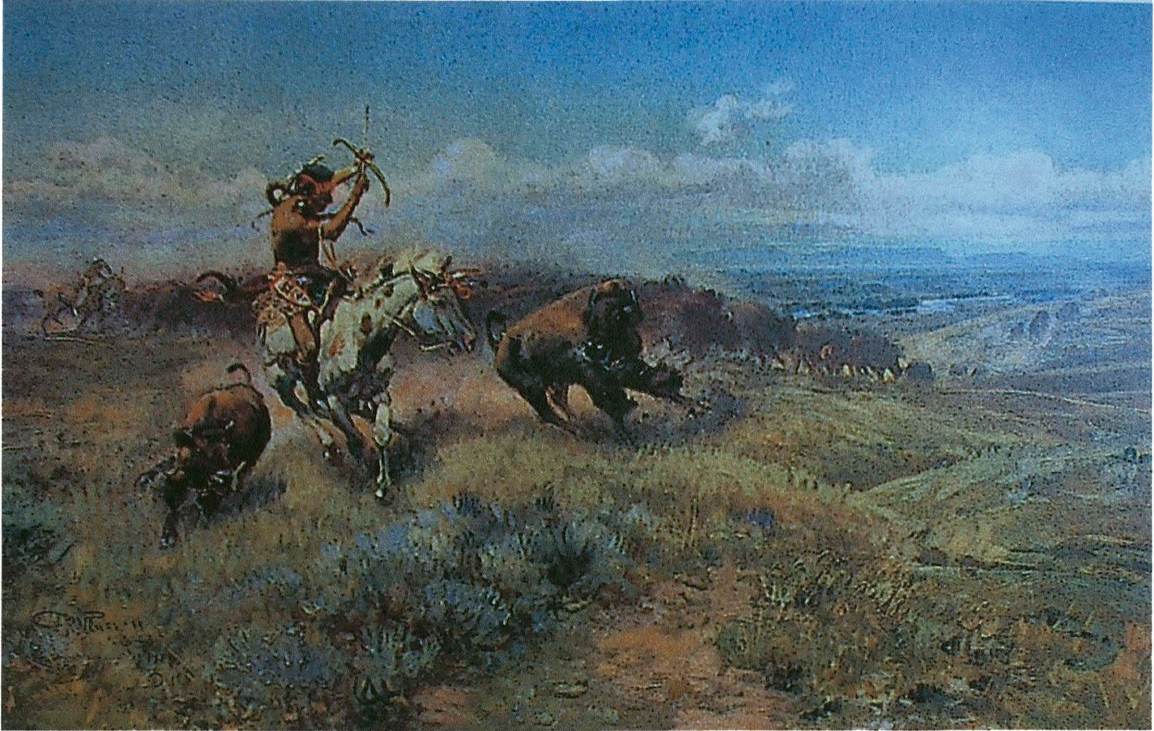
and trees. I especially enjoyed painting the ever changing reflections of colors from the sky and land. The entire river is alive and rich with great views of patterning in nature for landscape painting, but this particular spot is exceptionally fertile. This area of the Poudre river is special to me because of the all encompassing views it presents to my approach toward landscape painting and to my ideas about the Colorado landscape.

Figure 1.



The Parley
Fredrick Remington, 1902. Oil on Canvas, 27" x 40".

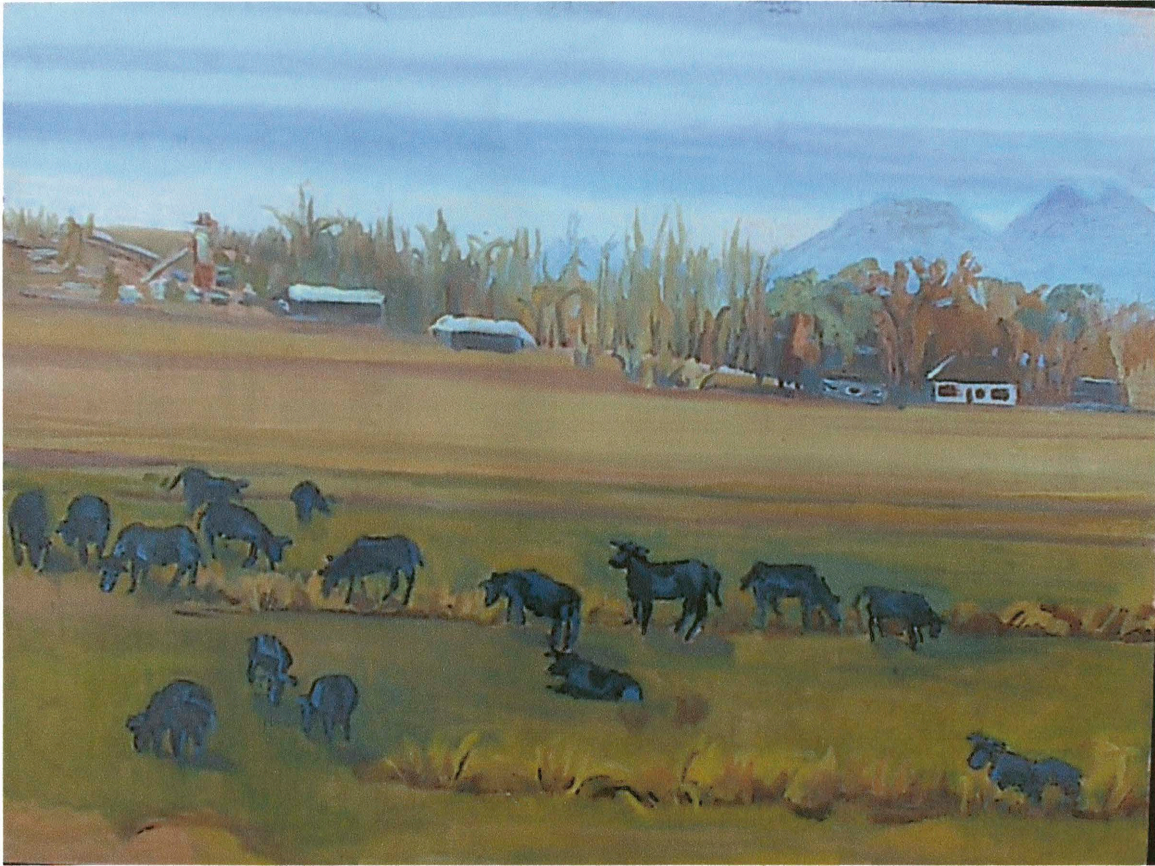
Figure 2.



Fresh Meat

Charles Russell, 1928. Oil on Canvas.

Figure 3.



Cows in the Pasture

Dawn Cohen, Oil on Wood, 12"x 9".

Figure 4.



Painting 1

Dawn Cohen. Oil on Board, 26" x 28".

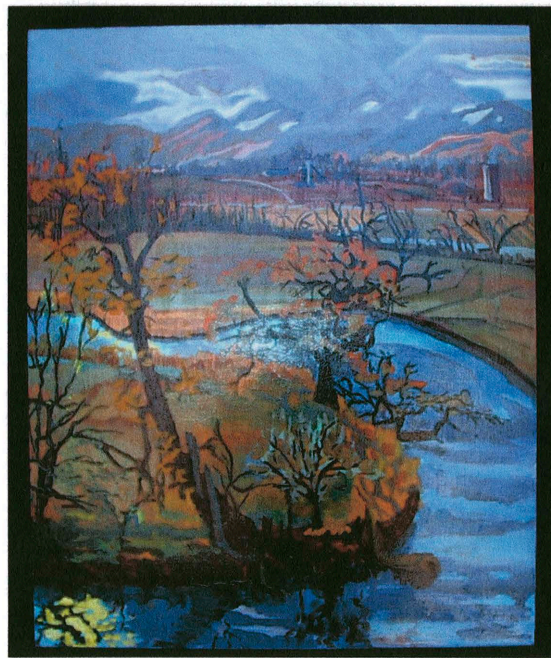
Figure 5.

Triptych 1



Panel 1

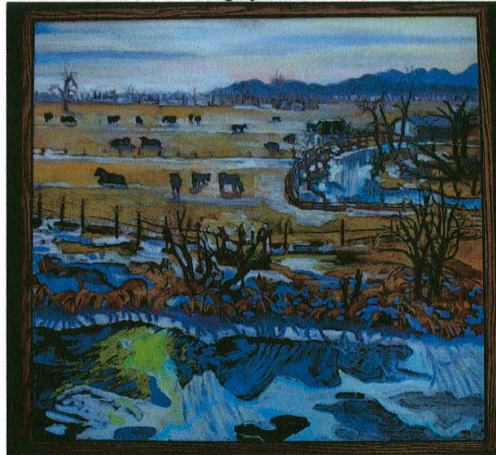
Panel 2



Panel 3

Figure 6.

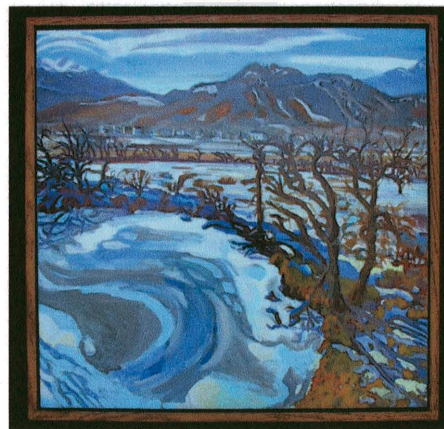
Triptych 2



Panel 1



Panel 2



Panel 3

Figure 7.

Four Panel Painting I



Panel 1

Panel 2



Panel 3

Panel 4

Figure 8.



River bend and eddy, near Windsor

William Wylie, Photograph, 8" x 10".

Figure 9.



Looking West towards the Continental Divide from Timmath.
William Wylie, photograph, 8" x 10".

Figure 10.

Four panel Painting II



Panel 1

Panel 2



Panel 3

Panel 4

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