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THE LANDSCAPE DOES NOT CARE IT IS A LANDSCAPE:
A UTOPIAN PESSIMIST JOURNEY IN KENTUCKY

By
Shachaf Polakow
B.A, Open University of Israel, 2020

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A UTOPIAN PESSIMIST JOURNEY IN KENTUCKY.

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Shachaf Polakow

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By the following Thesis Committee

Thesis Director, Mary Carothers, M.F.A.

John Ritz. Ph.D.

Jennifer Sichel, Ph.D.

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Annabela Cockrell

John Day

Jessica Oberdick

Ophira and Avron Polakow

Torr Polakow

Angela Storey

The 2023 MFA cohort

ABSTRACT

THE LANDSCAPE DOES NOT CARE IT IS A LANDSCAPE: A UTOPIAN PESSIMIST JOURNEY IN KENTUCKY.

Shachaf Polakow

April 24, 2023

These thesis and exhibition, invite the viewers to travel through different places in Central and Eastern Kentucky. The region's landscape, like many other American landscapes, is often known to the public through the settler colonial lens—a lens that ignores Indigenous peoples' history in the region.

The work in the exhibition is a response to landscape art's history and its complicity with American settler colonialism- art that was recruited to create a new identity for the settlers and for the country from the beginning of the American Colonial Project. Landscape art was a crucial part of this effort, presenting the land as an empty, God-given place for white settlers. However, not only was this land not empty, but it has been occupied by Native Americans for millennia. Communities lived within the land and did not separate themselves from it. As opposed to this way of living, settler colonialism seeks to take over land and extract its resources, while trying to eliminate all Indigenous peoples. This approach has never ended and in many ways is the root of the climate and environmental crisis we live in.

The exhibition offers both moments and images that appear to be more dire; others are intimate and hopeful. This contrast and tension are a reminder that while we grieve the victims and losses of colonial violence, there are many survivors. Regardless

of what the future will look like, we can be inspired by resiliency and nevertheless
imagine a new world.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
LIST OF FIGURES	viii
INTRODUCTION	1
WHAT IS A LANDSCAPE?.....	8
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	10
SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS	11
ANTHROPOCENE OR PLANTATIONOCENE	14
SOUTHWEST	18
KENTUCKY	27
GETTING LOST	35
THE CREATIVE PROCESS.....	39
HISTORY OF PANORAMAS	40
THE ANTI ROMANTIC PANORAMAS.....	42
IMMERSIVE LANDSCAPE 360 VIDEO	45
SURVEILLED ABSTRACT	49
THE LANDSCAPE DOES NOT CARE IS A LANDSCAPE VIDEO AND SOUND INSTALLATION	56

CONCLUSION.....	59
REFERENCES	64
CURRICULUM VITAE	66

LIST OF FIGURES

- Figure 1: Shachaf Polakow, *The Arizona Water Project*, 2016. Arizona, USA.
- Figure 2: Albert, Bierstadt, *El Capitan, Yosemite Valley, California*. 1875. Oil on canvas, 32 1/4 X 48 in. Toledo Museum of Art.
<https://jstor.org/stable/community.13731506>
- Figure 3: Carleton Watkins, American, *Yosemite Valley from the Best General View*. 1866. Albumen silver print, Image: 41 x 52.2 cm (16 1/8 x 20 9/16 in.), Mount: 52.4 x 69.2 cm (20 5/8 x 27 1/4 in.). The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.
- Figure 4: George Caleb Bingham, *Daniel Boone Escorting Settlers through the Cumberland Gap*, 1851-53. Oil on canvas, 36 1/2 x 50 1/4 in. Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, St Louis MS.
- Figure 5: George Masa, *Cliffs of Whiteside Mountain, straddling Jackson and Macon counties, North Carolina*, 1929. <https://bittersoutherner.com/feature/2021/george-masas-terra-incognita>
- Figure 6: Google Maps. "Results for Hazard, KY" Accessed, March 25, 2023.
<https://goo.gl/maps/Zi6X7fE2YtgVJNGV9>
- Figure 7: Shachaf Polakow, *Non Romantic Landscape I*, digital archival print 44"x90", 2023. Kentucky, USA.
- Figure 8: Cross-section of the Rotunda in Leicester Square in which Barker's panorama of London was exhibited (1801) The Open University, April 13, 2017.
<https://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/visual-art/virtual-reality-19th-century-style-the-history-the-panorama-and-balloon-view>
- Figure 9: ÁRRAN 360°, inside view, Venice, Italy, 2022. <https://isfi.no/arran-360/>
- Figure 10: ÁRRAN 360°, the outside view, Venice, Italy, 2022. <https://isfi.no/arran-360/>
- Figure 11: Barker, Henry Aston, Lane, and Magendie. An Advertisement for the Panorama, Leicester Square, London: Showing the Battle of Trafalgar. Coloured Engraving by Lane, 1806, after H. A. Barker. [1806]. Engraving, with watercolour ;, image 33.5 x 30.
- Figure 12: Shachaf Polakow, Cropped image of a screenshot from the 360 camera, 2023.
- Figure 13: Nadar, *Aerial View of the Quartier de l'Etoile*. 1860. Albumen print, 23 x 18.7 cm. Musée d'Orsay. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.15671512>.

Figure 13: Marcus, DeSieno, 46.979000, -103.538700, Archival Pigment Print of a Still from a Surveillance Camera Feed. <http://www.marcusdesieno.com/surveillance-landscapes/iz2w23ortmu17smp2zm8jwhv780lrk>

Figure 15: Shachaf Polakow, *Surveilled Abstract IV*, digital archival print, 13.5”X13.5”, 2023. Kentucky, USA.

Figure 14: Shachaf Polakow, *Surveilled Abstract III*, digital archival print, 13.5”X13.5”, 2023. Kentucky, USA.

Figure 17: Shachaf Polakow, *Non Romantic Landscape III*, digital archival print 44” X 70”, 2023. Kentucky, United States.

Figure 15: Image of the Cumberland Gap rendered from a prompt: ‘ The Hudson river school style oil painting of the Cumberland gap, 1820 american painting’, generated by DALL-E, September 22, 2022.

Figure 16: Image of the Cumberland Gap rendered from the prompt: ‘ Painting of The Cumberland gap in the 1700's’, March 26, 2023.

INTRODUCTION

My thesis explores landscape¹ art in the United States. It explores how it was used and aligned with the American Settler Colonial Project. The different art series and works in my exhibition are not meant to mirror the landscapes themselves. Instead, they are meant to introduce new questions that serve to help shift our potential engagement with the landscapes that surround us. The making of my art has allowed me to consider the differences between veracity and truth and how imagined realities around landscape representation are simultaneously active and passive. In her article, Nakano Glenn describes settler colonialism as a form of colonialism that, from its first moment, intends to take over the land and to settle the colonized land for good, which is different from imperial colonialism which mostly wanted to exploit the resources of the colonized land². To do so, one of the main goals of settler colonial society is to take over the land and do so by the forced removal and killing of the indigenous people. Glenn also argues that settler colonialism in the US never ended, and from the beginning, it helped to shape and form the social relationships of the American society, which includes race, gender, ethnicity, and in general, the treatment of communities and people that are not part of the white patriarchal hegemonic ruling class.

¹ I use the term landscape both as a reference to previous art, such as American Romantic Painters, photographers such as Ansel Adams, and even social media posts from National Parks. All of these and others are attempts to “capture” the sense of nature. I see nature and landscape as human made concepts that are often part of a greater attempt to control all that is not human or seen as not human.

² Evelyn Nakano Glenn. “Settler Colonialism as Structure: A Framework for Comparative Studies of U.S. Race and Gender Formation.”, *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 1, no. 1 (2015): 52–72. <https://doi-org.echo.louisville.edu/10.1177/2332649214560440>.

The American Colonial Project needed artists and the art world to expand settlers' imaginations, to help shape this new identity. Artists from the early days of the American Colonial Project joined this effort and created paintings and photographs that helped in this effort.

When one looks at American landscape art, especially in the early to mid-1800s, during the height of the American Romantic painters, artists portrayed the land as an empty place, a Biblical paradise given by God and to the European settlers. In an attempt to distinguish themselves from their counterparts in Europe, the Romantic painters intentionally created these paintings. They did this by participating in the New Settler Colonial Project, supporting the creation of the new American i.e., the white Christian man.

I argue that these images and aesthetics may have changed or evolved over time, but they are still common. The romanticized aesthetics that started with painting continued with photography. Early photographers who traveled West to document the “new” land created images without Native Americans, without non-white immigrants, and in many cases, presented the new idea of wilderness.

For this thesis, I created a new series of landscape art, which brings more of a broader presentation to the viewer, one that is not confined to specific aesthetics. In the first series, instead of big, panoramic, rectangle-shaped landscapes, I created panoramas that are a composite of a few images using Photoshop's automatic stitching and alignment tools. I do not crop these panoramas. These panoramas depict landscapes that have been changed by human activity and history. I do not crop these panoramas. While some

portray obvious destruction, others are more subtle. This invites viewers to think about which changes to accept and what seems wrong or unsettling.

My second series consists of five square black and white photographs. At first glance, the viewer might see these images as abstract art. Abstract images remind the viewer of movement, shapes, textures, and patterns. The drone-shot images illustrate the landscape in a very different way from the classical and romanticized versions.

Additionally, I created a personal immersive movie with a 360-degree camera and a virtual reality headset. This piece isolates the viewer from the outside noises of the gallery and allows them to experience different intimate moments I encountered while on my journeys. I intentionally chose places where the surroundings could be confusing at first. However, with the ability to look in every direction and hear sounds from these places, I have provided the viewer with an opportunity to relax from the stress of everyday life.

The final artwork is my video and sound art installation, which combines aspects from the panoramas, abstract art, and the VR experience. Some of what is seen and heard in my other artworks reappear throughout this installation. The recordings of the videos and sound are from several excursions I made around Kentucky and the region, aiming to connect current realities to the colonial past.

This installation was made from field recordings and videos. The viewer can immerse themselves in and listen to the landscape, which offers a wide range of emotional responses. Unlike the romantic landscapes, these landscapes were chosen,

curated, and edited to create more direct aesthetics, without much altering or editing of the landscapes. They serve both as a reflection of the past and an observation of the current state of the planet. The installation follows a non-linear pattern, similar to what we experience in nature and throughout history. By using multi-directional movements, some obvious, and some hidden. One valley can be a pristine site, while the next is destroyed by mining. Some histories are remembered, and others are forgotten.

I aim to not only evoke despair and anxiety but also hope and a gentle call to action. This is a reminder that the climate crisis is a long process. By familiarizing ourselves with different sites, species, and entities, we can imagine and work for healing and a better future. This is a future that is not human-centric but amplified by new relationships, and kinships, with other species, places, and moments. Maybe by doing so, we can divert the climate crisis or at least slow it down. These thesis and exhibition are a result of my complex relationships with different places and landscapes. Once one is aware of the complicated relationships humans had, and still have, with different places and lands³, the more aware of colonial history, past and present they will become.

As someone who grew up in Israel, I became politically active at a young age, both for Palestinian liberation and environmental justice. In the years before I moved to the US, I became more and more involved in support of Palestinian Liberation. I was

³ I use land for the moment, it is the term that is closest to what I feel comfortable using to describe an area a place, or a region.

active both as an organizer for Anarchists Against the Wall⁴ and as a member of the Activestills photography collective. These involvements and experiences led me to believe that only the dismantling of the Israeli Colonial Project will lead to justice and peace for all who live there. While a lot of what I did involve protest and direct action, both as a documentarian and as a participant, there was a key aspect that I could not escape. From the moment I learned of the ethnic cleansing of Palestine and the Nakba⁵, it became impossible to ignore and see every ruin, abandoned fruit orchard, etc. All are evidence and reminders of the colonial violence and ethnic cleansing that happened to Palestinians and has never stopped.

Once I moved to the US, a similar change happened to me, first in the Southwest of the US and more recently in Kentucky. While trying to understand my new environment, I learned about the Indigenous history, past and present, the violent colonial past and present, how they never stopped clashing, and how these conditions still manifest in each of these places.

It is my belief that this conscious point of view is a post-colonial one, one that digs below the colonial narrative and brings marginalized stories and histories to light. It might seem at first that this body of work does not have a direct anti-colonial political

⁴ Anarchists Against the Wall was a group of Anti-Zionist Israelis that was active between 2003-2014, more or less. The group was formed in 2003 after Palestinian communities called for a joined struggle against the construction of the Israeli apartheid wall and Israeli occupation. The group mobilized Israelis and internationals, joining demonstrations, protests, direct actions, and legal support for Palestinian organizers and activists.

⁵ The war of 1948, also known as the Israeli independence war, is called by Palestinians The Nakba, which translates into The Catastrophe. Around seven hundred and fifty thousand Palestinians were displaced at the end of the war; and after the war, Israel destroyed more than four hundred villages and towns. The ruins of these communities are scattered around Israel and often can be seen on the side of the roads, hillsides, valleys, and pretty much everywhere.

message. But I will argue that this work carries a tension that is a result of colonial violence that took place in the places I visited, the uncanny feelings one experiences when one hears a high-pitched oil pump, or the orange traffic cone and the mountain top removal site.

Similar to the postcolonial lens, posthumanist environmental theory discusses humans' effect on land and the environment. Many scholars who demonstrate or introduce the complexity of relationships between land, geography, people, and non-humans. This school of thought decentralizes the human and creates a more rhizomatic relationship between all actors. Doing so gives agency to all of them. Postcolonial highlighted the evidence of colonial violence, while posthumanists emphasized the environmental costs that modern human societies put on the land and all its species.

Many face the challenge of bringing both approaches together. Often, one is ignorant of the other. Following indigenous and native knowledge allows scholars and activists to see a landscape in a new light or, at the very least, to step away from the Eurocentric perspective. Of course, it is a delicate act, and too often, non-native or indigenous people easily appropriate knowledge and spirituality.

The post-colonial and posthumanist theories call for a new way of thinking, challenging hegemonic systems and narratives. These theories lead me through my process when travelling in the region, when editing and presenting the work, and through the theoretical analysis in this thesis.

As seen through this thesis, any approach to representing a physical landscape is not only limited but often biased. The idea of containing a complex land, area, or region as a genre or art piece is often a distortion of reality and incomplete. One cannot bring everything that exists into one piece of art, but it should not stop us from trying to do so, especially if it is an honest approach and a non-distractive ideology behind it.

WHAT IS A LANDSCAPE?

I found that trying to define what landscape is a dynamic process and one that might never end. The humancentric notion and need to define what a landscape is, is often ignored more humans experience a place. Humans, or at least the Eurocentric point of view has and had needed a part in taking control over a place. Of course, we can define an area, but that is a self-serving attempt to understand a place. For a tiny ant, a tree bark can be a whole landscape, while for a great white shark the whole Indian Ocean between South Africa and Australia is a landscape. Many of the existing definitions that are used arrive from preexisting notions and histories.

The landscape itself does not know it is a landscape or does not need to be defined by humans. Modern borders and laws were created to control the land and its inhabitants. While many cultures worldwide see and experience lands and spaces in different ways, what might look to some as an empty desert or frozen tundra is a rich land and central to some cultures. This idea is the core and force that drives many of the planet's changes, so the least that can be accomplished is to use our current understanding of the landscape and methods and tools that help to do it.

W.J.T Mitchel,⁶ in his “Imperial Landscape”, offers a new way to approach landscape art. This approach views landscape art as neither a purely aesthetic

⁶ W. J. T, Mitchell. *Landscape and Power*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

achievement nor only metaphorical text with a semiotic system of representations.

Mitchel offers a dynamic medium that cannot be seen only as one or the other.

I will discuss in this thesis how landscape is constructed as a social marker through a survey and interdiction of different semiotic approaches. I will introduce my approach and how I think landscape can be seen, or if it should be defined or even defined at all.

Once the semiotic approach is defined, I will use it to analyze previous American landscape art, showing how it was complicit with the American Settler Colonial Project. Starting with early Romantic painting and through the photographic era, extending to today's social media posts.

With this in mind, I will introduce a holistic approach to creating art that is site/region specific and is created consciously to its history, both human and non-human.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To better understand the choices and processes I made for this exhibition, I will explain the theory that led me to the making of this body of work. I cannot ignore the fact that all my artwork was created after I made a clear decision with a specific approach. While I had a general idea and theoretical base for this work before it even started, both the work and the theory evolved during the time this body of work was created.

This thesis will discuss semiotic tools to understand and analyze landscape art, the history of landscape art in the US, and how the current state of the world, specifically in relation to the Anthropocene, is related to American Settler Colonial history. While these are the core aspects of my thesis and work, this is not an attempt to present an extensive survey of them. A lot is already written about these topics, and I will position my thoughts and art within them and the discourse they are part of.

SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

For a long time, the study and discourse about landscape art were grounded in a modernist tradition, focusing on the aesthetics of the landscape, the techniques, and the methods the artist used to create each piece. While this approach is important to learn about the history of art, and more so of landscape art, it is also often missing the relationships to the social political, and historical realities of the time these pieces were made.

With the emergence of semiotic and postmodern discourses, scholars and artists started to look at existing systems of power and what kind of relationships they have in different spaces. Art pieces were no longer seen just as aesthetic achievements; they were also examined as a representation of the society and reality they were made within, often looking to power holders and interests that informed them. At the same time, the postmodern approach made the artist irrelevant, and the viewer's interpretation became the focus.

The Rhetoric of The Image by Roland Barthes⁷ is widely regarded as a fundamental article for understanding symbolic systems in images and other cultural products. Barthes borrowed from linguistics and argued that every image has a literal, direct aesthetic. At the same time, a simultaneous connotated message is less direct and

⁷ Roland Barthes, and Stephen Heath. "*The Rhetoric of The Image*" in *Image, Music, Text*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977) 32-51.

dependent on the cultural context of the image. This system of signs and symbols often represents different social power systems and hegemonies which often exist in their service. In other words, in a romantic painting, a light in the sky carries a message as not just the sun coming through clouds but as a representation of God and the divine.

W.J.T Mitchel,⁸ in his book *Landscape and Power* (1994), discusses the importance of the Landscape, suggesting it should be transformed from a noun to a verb, or it can be said that a landscape by itself is a medium that is not passive but constantly changing- a medium that, on the one hand, represents the landscape but on the other hand it is many times being shaped by social structures and its creator.

Similarly, Federico Bellentani in his article, ‘Landscape as Text,’⁹ argues and uses a semiotic approach. He argues that we need to look at landscape art not just as an art object but as text that should be thoroughly investigated. For Bellentani, the landscape is a crucial aspect of different cultures.

While I agree with both scholars, I also believe that the use itself of semiotic analysis needs to be looked at cautiously. This includes considering which semiotic approaches are used, and how the use of analysis itself and the discourses are becoming a structure of power.

As an activist, artist, and scholar, I often use semiotic analysis when discussing and looking at art and culture pieces. I try to unlearn what stands behind the pieces and

⁸ W. J. T Mitchell, 1994.

⁹ Federico Bellentani, “Landscape as text”, in *Concepts for Semiotics*. Higuera Claudio Julio Rodríguez, and Tyler Bennett. Tartu Semiotics Library, 16. (Tartu: University of Tartu Press, 2016), 76-87.

why different choices were made. This includes aesthetic choices, content, medium, and how all these pieces create a narrative or message that is not necessarily visible at first glance. When I researched the history of landscape art in the US, as I explain here, my approach was not restricted to the human¹⁰ lens. I choose to include more than a human approach. This approach considers all that existed on the land, those that exist now, and speculation about what will exist in the future. This approach is not limited to the often more Euro-Centric lens that only gives agency to a few living organisms, and within it, centers the white Christian men and puts them at the top. I see the landscape as an assemblage of all in it, different entities with different agencies, connect in a rhizomatic network.

In their article, scholars Kati Lindström, Kalevi Kull, and Hannes Palang discuss and survey different approaches to the semiotic analysis of landscapes in their article¹¹. Their discussion about of ecosemiotic approach is what I would like to introduce. They explain it as a semiotic approach examining the complex relationship in different ecosystems. It gives agency to both the cultures that use this landscape and to the those who live on it. These relationships exists both in the physical space of the landscape and in the symbolic space that it is represented in.

¹⁰ It is critical to remember that human is not a fixed definition. In history it was used to create hierarchy inside human societies, often to identify who is not human to empower those who were consider human.

Black Africans who were not considered human, Women in Ancient Greece that were less human than man, Jews and others during Nazi Germany and sadly there are many more examples.

¹¹ Kati Lindström, Kalevi Kull, and Hannes Palang. "Semiotic Study of Landscapes: An Overview from Semiology to Ecosemiotics." *Sign Systems Studies* 2, no. 4 (2011). <https://doi.org/10.12697/SSS.2011.39.2-4.02>.

ANTHROPOCENE OR PLANTATIONOCENE

Many today refer to this era as the Anthropocene, arguing that we have reached a point in which humans are changing the earth in a similar way to previous geological eras, such as the Holocene, Paleocene, and many more. Many scholars argue that the Anthropocene is too general, in that it places the responsibility on all humans and ignores different histories, especially the last few hundred years, where colonialism, industrialism, and globalization have created hegemonic powers. Some people and groups hold concentrated power, while others remain powerless, and are most affected by the climate crisis. Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing¹² offer a new and more focused framework to discuss climate change- the Plantationocene. This framework looks at the multiple histories of plantations in the last 500 years. It emphasizes their violent nature, forced labor, destruction of the land, and removal or extension of different species. They don't limit this analysis to historical colonial times. Instead, they refer to current agricultural and destructive labor projects, such as mono-crops, mining, and more. There is little doubt that humans are transforming the planet in many ways, such as geographically, geologically, climate-wise, and much more. All these lead to the escalating ecological crisis and the state of the world. One term often used in discussions about the current state of the world is The Anthropocene. The Anthropocene is defined as

¹² Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing, "Reflections on the Plantationocene: A Conversation with Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing", *Edge Effects*, October 12, 2019, <https://edgeeffects.net/haraway-tsing-plantationocene/>.

the era of humans. This means that, like the previous geological eras, humans are the leading cause of all the changes on the planet.

Many, particularly indigenous people and communities in the global south argue, that the definition and use of The Anthropocene ignore the last few decades of colonial violence, extraction, and globalization. More so it is critical to remember that the climate crisis affects the Global South and lower classes much more than anyone else. They should lead any solution.

Donna Haraway (2015) discusses in her article *Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin*¹³, a new way of thinking about the climate crisis and the current state of the world. She introduces an approach where colonial history and plantation politics can be seen as the beginning of the climate crisis. The Plantationocene is a multi-species approach that identifies the colonial powers and violence through history but also gives agency to those who escaped and survived the plantations. The Plantationocene also identifies the evolution of extractive capitalism, showing how colonial powers transformed different ecologies from the very first moment. A living forest turns into a mono-crop desert; a mountain becomes a huge crater. From my point of view, one of the most appealing parts of the Plantationocene is the idea of the fugitives, those that survived and escaped the destroyed ecologies. This is not only that their survival is a miracle, but it also teaches us about humans and the resiliency of other species.

¹³ Donna, Haraway. "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin." *Environmental Humanities* 6, no. 1 (2015): 159–65. <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3615934>.

While I agree with much of Haraway's article, I found the conclusion problematic. She calls for "Make Kin Not Babies"(162)¹⁴. I agree with the first part. We must make kin with all that exists on Earth, from entities such as rivers to cicadas in the summer, and ever more so, the destroyed landscapes and those who survived there. As many people from the Global South argue, we need to be very careful when discussing the human population. Too often, we hear calls for reduced birth rates, easily transformed into eco-fascism¹⁵. While the wealthy such as Elon Musk, try to make as many babies as possible, the ruling class rarely criticizes him. At the same time, they advocate for birth control in the Global South, particularly among the lower classes and poor communities.

Regardless of the problematic use of population control, the call to make kin is one that I want to emphasize. I have always seen different species as part of a horizontal relationship since I was a child. I never thought of them as less worthy. As I grew older, I saw my surroundings as complicated networks and relationships between humans, other species, plants, geographical features, and regions. I believe that from the understanding that the human-centric colonial point of view led to a place where extraction and profits are above all. The social and political powers that rule the world, are ignoring other species and experiences.

¹⁴ Personally, I understand this call, and, in our household, we decided to not have children, but that does give us or others the right to order people what to do.

¹⁵ Eco-fascism is a newer branch of the violent white supremacist world. It uses racist ideology to advocate for environmental solutions. Those who believe in this ideology often argue that some people are beneath others and to save the planet, they should be killed or at least not helped to survive the climate crisis. Many on the far right use Eco-Fascism as another tool to attack migrants, global south communities, native and indigenous people, and pretty much anyone that is not a white heterosexual man.

This article from the Sierra Club is a good one looking at the mass shooting in a Walmart in El Paso, August 2019, and how the shooter was motivated by eco-fascist ideology. Ruxandra Guidi, "Eco-Fascism, Uncovered," Sierra (Sierra Club, December 27, 2022), <https://www.sierraclub.org/sierra/4-november-december/feature/eco-fascism-uncovered-el-paso-texas>.

By answering Haraway's call to make kin, we can move forward with the understanding that we must respect other species and places. We must understand that by harming them and destroying the Earth we have no future. If we treat a mountain range as kin, we can create sympathy for what is there. We can also listen to the sounds and voices around us both in urban areas and in natural environments. We can hear all the others around us, and hopefully, understand that they are not less significant than we are.

This approach and belief led to this body of work. But the process and techniques I used for this artwork result from my previous experiences in different places around the world.

In many ways, this body of work reflects my years I lived in the US. It also reflects how these years and different experiences led to this body of work. So, before I discuss Kentucky and this work, I will discuss Tucson, Arizona, and what I learned when I lived there.

SOUTHWEST

Moving to the US more than a decade ago, I was fascinated with the idea of what AMERICA is and how it is perceived globally and locally. How does the idea of the most powerful nation, state, or, more accurately, empire in human history, manifest itself in everyday life in the US? While my interests reached all directions, and I learned and am learning more every day, the idea of what the American Landscape is became one of the main subjects of my interests.

The first place I lived after arriving in the US was Tucson, Arizona, a place with a common or popular perception of the Southwest of the US is what we see in movies, tv shows, photography, and many other cultural and artistic pieces. For many, the Southwest of the US is seen as the Wild West, a desert full of cacti, mountains, and cowboys.

From my first days there, through my activism and personal interest, I learned from Native American friends and activists about the history and present of the region. I became aware of the colonial powers and violence that started decades ago and never stopped. I learned about the militarization of the border with Mexico and the effect it had on them, Native American communities in northern Arizona that lack infrastructure. I also noted the disrespect towards sacred sites that have been destroyed for mining or recreational use. More so, I witnessed the expansion of cities ¹⁶ in the desert while there

¹⁶While the Southwest of the United States suffers from a long drought and continues to overuse water resources, Arizona cities and Phoenix in particular see an on-going high population growth. While

was an ongoing drought and the overuse of water for mining and agriculture. The so-called “Wild West” was not wild. It was scarred, taken over, dried, and exploited continuously.



Figure 17 Shachaf Polakow, The Arizona Water Project, 2016. Arizona, USA.

In addition, I became increasingly aware of the attacks on migrants, both with xenophobic rhetoric and policies and of people who were being detained, imprisoned, and deported, along with those who were the lucky ones who successfully crossed the migration routes in the Sonoran Desert. These are the same routes people used to travel through the region and interact with others. The US government intentionally

State and city officials argue that the water crisis will not be an issue, many others are more skeptical. <https://www.npr.org/2023/02/27/1159281768/heres-why-arizona-says-it-can-keep-growing-despite-historic-megadrought>

transformed them into death zones¹⁷. At the same time, all around Arizona detention centers and prisons, both private, state, and federal, were popping up.

Living there and listening to Native American and indigenous knowledge¹⁸ and ways of living, I learned that the land cannot be defined through the Eurocentric Western lens. The different attempts to define a land are too confined and restricted to the Western imagination. From the first moment that it arrived; it was limited to a Christian patriarchal view. From early days, this view led to the contradiction that the “new world” is both closer to the divine and at the same time, is a resource that should be used for extraction and settlement.

The most profound thing I learned is that ‘existence is resistance’. Any Native American that is living today is a victory over a settler colonial entity that was and still is designed to eliminate them, or as scholars define survivance. More so, all that and those that survived the colonial and capitalistic violence is a victory.

The mountain ridges, dry rivers, deep canyons, tarantulas, coyotes, saguaros, bees, ants, rattlesnakes, jaguars, pines, and cedars, the smell of the desert after the rain, flash floods, and thunderstorms during the monsoon season all are a victory. Together, they are creating an assemblage, a rhizomatic dynamic entity that holds them together against the attempts to eliminate them and control the land.

¹⁷ “Designed to Kill,” *Crimethinc*, May 22, 2011. <https://crimethinc.com/2011/05/22/designed-to-kill-border-policy-and-how-to-change-it>

¹⁸ The community I worked mostly with are from the Tohono O'odham people, who live on both sides of the US/Mexican border. One of the projects I supported was The O'odham Solidarity Across Borders Collective. <https://oodhamsolidarity.blogspot.com/>



Figure 18 Bierstadt, Albert, 1830-1902. El Capitan, Yosemite Valley, California. 1875. Oil on canvas, 32 1/4 X 48 in. Toledo Museum of Art. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.13731506>

All of these brought forth many questions. “If this is the “American West,” how did it get to this point?” “Which colonial powers were and are involved in the creation of a false image and representation of the region?” “What were the different tools that helped to shape this vision of the “West?”

The American West has been seen in art and popular culture for over two hundred years. Starting in the early eighteenth century and continuing today, American Settler Culture is fascinated with the "West" and its “wilderness.” Beginning with painters (Figure 2), through photography, cinema, and today's digital era with the internet and social media platforms, the West and the Southwest created a set of known aesthetics. I

want to focus on early landscape art and photography and their role in the American Settler Colonial project.

From the early days of American photography, the medium was recruited to support the American Settler Colonial project. In many ways, photography continued to do just what painters did. It showed the expansion to the West and the “newly” found land as untouched wilderness, which was given by God to the European Settlers.

This is even more relevant when looking at the era’s landscape photography and the most influential and known photographer Carleton Watkins. In his article, Martin A. Berger¹⁹ discusses in length the role Watkins had in creating what people see in “The West”. Watkins's photos became common in East Coast cities, but they were also used to create the federally protected area of Yosemite in 1864. Moreover, like the romantic painters before him and almost every settler at the time, Watkins ignored and erased the existence of the Indigenous and Native American people. In the case of Yosemite, it was the people of the Ahwahneechee, a tribe of the Southern Sierra Miwok, were ethnically cleansed and removed from the valley for the creation of the protected area.

As he further explains, the erasure of indigenous people also took place when settlers surveyed the area, named places, and created maps. The new names were much more anthropomorphized and came from European traditions and relationships to nature.

¹⁹ Martin A. Berger, “Overexposed: Whiteness and the Landscape Photography of Carleton Watkins.” *Oxford Art Journal* 26, no. 1 (2003): 1–23. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3600444>.

Indigenous people had many more names for more features and places and did not have a clear separation between people and the environment in which they lived.

Another aspect of Watkins's photography that I found crucial was that he worked for mining and development companies. Like many of his time, Watkins believed that places, such as Yosemite, should be protected, so that other places could be exploited and extracted. This sentiment is the core of the American Settler Colonial project and identity. Even today, we see examples of “necessary extraction” for progress, ignoring Indigenous people and the damage to other species and the land itself. The Biden administration recently approved the “Willow Project” ²⁰in the Arctic, an oil extraction project that will harm the people and others that live in that region but will affect globally and contribute to the climate crisis.

²⁰ The Willow Project is a massive oil production project in remote Alaska on public land. Ignoring indigenous people, climate scientists, and others, the Biden administration decided to proceed with the project. The approval is against the need to reduce carbon emissions.

The project will damage Indigenous people’s environmental and spiritual connections with the region. For more information, refer to the Earth Justice report - <https://earthjustice.org/article/willow-project-federal-fossil-fuel-leasing>



Figure 19 Carleton Watkins, American, 1829 - 1916. [Yosemite Valley from the Best General View]. 1866. Albumen silver print, Image: 41 x 52.2 cm (16 1/8 x 20 9/16 in.), Mount: 52.4 x 69.2 cm (20 5/8 x 27 1/4 in.). The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

From his first visit to Yosemite Watkins thought about the tourists that would come to visit, how they would experience the valley, and where the best viewpoints would be. If we take Yosemite as an example as a creation of American Settler Colonial landscape aesthetics, we can follow photographic history and see how almost every generation had some photographic reproduction of these aesthetics. While Watkins did not have human figures in his photos, painters and other photographers of the era often had a figure observing the landscape. This figure was typical of the American Settler, a colonial man surveying the land.

From Watkins on the colonial image of Yosemite is reproduced. Ansel Adams and his dramatic photos, family road trips and the Kodachrome photos, the climbing culture from the 60s hippies and recent movies are examples that followed . With the arrival of digital photography and cellphones the park (and other national parks as well) became overcrowded park with hordes of visitors and between them are photographers trying to take the same photo fighting each other for a spot. All of these are examples of America's Colonial Landscape archive. In my opinion, what might become the biggest archives are social media platforms and shared photos, while this is a much more democratic or at least participatory archive. In comparison to traditional and institutional archives, it also creates a critical mass of reproduced aesthetics, curated by trends, hashtags, algorithms, and hegemonic interests. When one search the internet today for images of Yosemite they will either do it via google images, social media platforms or professional landscape photographers, all of these will more often show the common Colonial Landscape Aesthetic.

Between the massive number of photos and the other factors, many of these images are taken in the same places Watkins marked as the best viewpoints in the valley. While Watkins erased the Indigenous people from the frame, people today try to avoid having any people in their photos unless they are taking self-portraits. In both cases, they want a 'pure' and clean version of nature.

It is important to mention that in the last decade, with social media, more indigenous voices are resisting the American Settler Colonial narrative. One example is

the group Indigenous Women Hike²¹, a group of Indigenous women who challenge the environmental and outdoor narratives around the Sierra Mountains. With this resistance to the general notion of what Yosemite is (and other attempts), and how we need to decolonize the outdoor and environmental communities comes the possibility of rouge images infiltrating the archives bypassing algorithms, or at least creating some space in the archive that is counter-hegemonic.

²¹ <https://www.instagram.com/indigenouswomenhike/?hl=en>

KENTUCKY

When I moved to Louisville, it was a different story, I knew very little about the city and the region. Not long after our move, I learned about another violent aspect of the American Settler Colonial project. The racist history of the city and region, much like the colonial settler violence in the Southwest never stopped. The legacy of redlining that still cuts through the city, the river that divided freedom and enslavement, the crumbling infrastructure, and abounded building, air, and water pollution have been contrasted with the image of ‘The Derby City’ - horses, bourbon, and hipster bars, colossal music festivals and conferences.

For those in the state that are not from Louisville, the city appears to be a liberal city. For some who are seeking sanctuary, the city can feel safe. Some from rural areas see the city as an elitist place. Of course, both are true and wrong. Like many places, Louisville has all the elements that represent American society’s current reality.

These tensions and contrasts came to a violent climax after Breonna Taylor was murdered by the police in 2020. After months of uprising, all these tensions and demanding a systematic change to the city were brought to the front.

Unlike the Southwest, I had no visual idea of familiar aesthetics or how Louisville and Kentucky were collectively seen. The closer image I held was akin to rural Appalachia, both the stereotypical image of the lower class and rural communities and one of the mountains. But even with that, I did not relate my ideas or understandings to Kentucky.

While I learned about the history of the city and got familiar with the city aesthetics, it took a while before I traveled out of the city. In my research into the region, I learned about the Daniel Boone National Forest and the Red River Gorge, with its history of mining and extraction in the state and the region. Moreover, like Arizona, I realized there are tensions and disconnects between the conception of Kentucky (and in many ways Appalachia) and what it is.

I read and learned about the history of the region- the fact that Kentucky was one of the first “frontiers,” about the myth and ethos of Daniel Boone, that the river and city carry so much history, about the Indigenous communities that lived here²², the slave market that was downtown, the underground railroad paths that crossed Kentucky, the Trail of Tears and the successful ethnic cleansing and removal of almost all Native American people in the region, the mining, extraction, and destruction of many places

If there is one figure that represents the creation of the myth of the American Settler colonial story in the region (and, in many ways, the rest of the country), it is Daniel Boone. Boone is considered by many to be the first settler to cross the Cumberland Gap and lead the settlers west. While he was not the first European to cross the Cumberland Gap, he was the one that was commissioned to develop the ‘Wilderness Trail’, starting in Virginia and crossing the Cumberland Gap into what today is Kentucky. He continued to Louisville and the Falls of the Ohio. While Boone was not the

²² While some Native American mounds were leveled with the development of the city of Louisville, there is a burial ground that survived and is in the middle of the UPS airport. <https://www.wlky.com/article/ups-worldport-ancient-remains-louisville-airport/37951311>

first to travel through the Appalachia, he is remembered as a trail blazer and his efforts led to the development of roads for settlers to follow, altering the land.

Not only is the story of Daniel Boone celebrated, but it has also often portrayed him as a friend of the local Native American communities that he encounters. Nevertheless, even if his personal experience might not have been in direct violation against Native Americans, Boone helped to create and support the image that Native Americans are savages and violent.

The region and areas had a rich history of many cultures that lived here; this can be seen with routes and paths that existed for millennia. Mammoths and giant Bison migrated and roamed in the region, following natural paths in the region's geography. Native Americans used these same trails and later were used by European settlers, including Boone.



Figure 20 George Caleb Bingham, Daniel Boone Escorting Settlers through the Cumberland Gap, 1851-53. Oil on canvas, 36 1/2 x 50 1/4 in. Milder Lane Kemper Art Museum, St Louis MS.

In many ways, art was the tool that helped to shape and expand the imagination of the settlers. Art was created and presented in the service of the young nation-state. At the same time, it converted the land into commodity for extraction, settlements, recreation, or anything else in the name of progress and control. As seen in Figure 3, as early as mid-19th century, Daniel Boone was seen as a biblical figure. Bingham painted this scene that looks like it was taken straight out of the New Testament. Daniel Boone is a modern-day prophet, leading a woman on a white donkey or mule, much like Jesus and Maria, on the path to Bethlehem. The land itself is dark and scary, dead trees. Daniel

Boone is leading the settlers through the dark and scary Cumberland Gap; he is the light connected to the divine light seen in the skies. The American Settler Colonial myth remembers Boone and erases or ignores the Native and Indigenous histories.

Rightfully so many activists and community members in the city demanded and demonstrated the removal of Confederate statues in the city; these statues represent the violent history of the American Settler Colonial project against Afro-American people and are seen explicitly as supportive of their enslavement. While the activists focused on the removal of confederate statues, not from there, there is a Daniel Boone sculpture at the entrance of Cherokee Park. This park and the others in city that are named after Native American tribes don't have any place or statue to celebrate and teach about the rich history and presence of these people.

Outside of the city and all around the region, one can find the name Boone showing up everywhere towns like Booneville, to coffeeshop in the Red River Gorge, historical markers, and much more.

The Appalachian Mountain range is among the oldest in North America, and for many people, it is seen as the wilderness of the East Coast. The history of the region carries many stories, Native American and Indigenous histories, unions and miners' struggles, the era of slavery, and the racist and colonial violence that never stopped.

Much like the "American West," Appalachia carries different images and lives in the popular imagination in very limited aesthetics. Movies like *Deliverance* (1972) embedded the image of the rural "uneducated" and violent communities living in the middle of the wilderness.

While photography has many people traveling around documenting communities and people from the region in a positive and supportive way. Most landscape photography follows the same trends from the “West”; either we see romantic landscapes or environmental justice or ecological photography, showing the destruction of mountains and land.

Eric NeSmith²³ tells the story of George Masa, a Japanese American landscape photographer whom few had heard of, was one of the first photographers to travel to Appalachia and document the Blue Ridge Mountains. While his personal story is fascinating, what caught my eye is the similarities to Ansel Adams aesthetic. Some of these similarities are the result from the technical abilities that photography could offer at the time, nevertheless, the choice of frames and style are alike.

Even though Masa was a new immigrant, he held a similar approach regarding the mountains. Masa started taking photos in the 1920s, around the same time Adams started his photography career on the other side of the country. Like Watkins, both of them saw them as unexplored or wild mountains, which of course was far from the truth. Their work supported the preservation of each area, leading to the creation of national parks. Their perception of empty land results from the ethnic cleansing that happened in these areas. While Adams should have been familiar with existing reservations and other Native American communities in California, Masa worked in an area where hardly anyone was left. Native American and indigenous communities were either killed or displaced.

²³ Eric NeSmith, “GEORGE MASA’S TERRA INCOGNITA”, *The Bitter Southerner*, October 26, 2021, <https://bittersoutherner.com/feature/2021/george-masas-terra-incognita>.

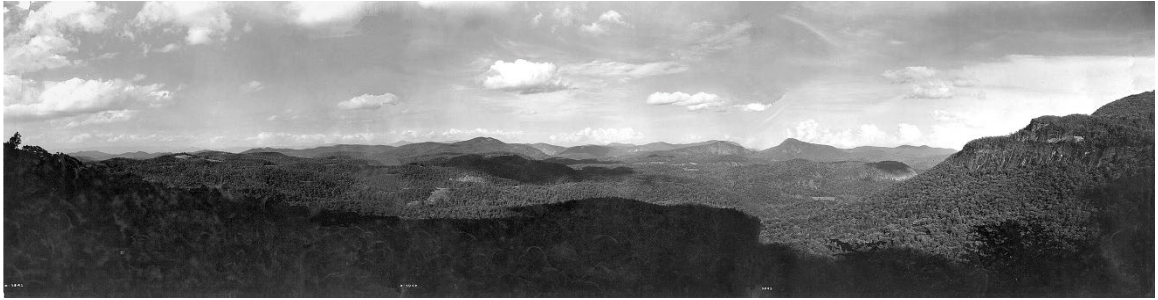


Figure 21 George Mase, Cliffs of Whiteside Mountain, straddling Jackson and Macon counties, North Carolina, 1929. <https://bittersoutherner.com/feature/2021/george-masas-terra-incognita>

While Masa explored and photographed other parts of Appalachia, I wanted to travel to different parts of Kentucky to explore the places and land shaped by this colonial history. I knew that this trip would create a dynamic process. I had never visited any of the many places I chose to go, and each excursion led to the next destination. The aesthetics I was looking for became more apparent with each trip. I never assumed that I would capture or represent the whole of what I experienced.

I chose to focus on the forests and mountains of central and eastern Kentucky, looking for evidence of the relationship between humans and the land. Some evidence was clear such as oil pumps and pipes, and some were more hidden, such as old paths or roads in the forest.

While some of the footage can be devastating, other footage is supposed to create a more intimate relationship with the viewer. I believe we are in a crucial moment for the planet and all that live on, but I do not believe that imagery and narrative of despair are the only ways to fight for a better future.

To challenge this notion, I decided to create an immersive experience, which includes a multi-channel video and sound art piece, a 360 VR experience, and two still

photography series. Knowing that this is not an attempt to bring the whole landscape into the gallery, I acknowledge that my goals are a mere attempt to share moments from my journey in the region.

As I explain in later chapters, each component is approached within a relationship to landscape art, panoramas, world expos, painting, and more.

GETTING LOST

In her book, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*,²⁴ Rebecca Solnit discusses the notion of getting lost. Solnit's perception of getting lost is not a desperate notion of being lost but more so an invitation to explore the unknown around us. When creating this body of work, I often felt that my travels were an attempt to navigate and explore Kentucky and its landscape similarly to Solnit's suggestion. While the locations I traveled to were researched, and every trip had some kind of a plan, in reality, I rarely visited places that I have been before, unless I decided to return to same area more than once. I started my research by observing satellite views on google maps, looking for areas visibly affected by human activity (figure 5)²⁵. I looked for scarred landscapes, blank areas in a middle of a forest, highways cutting through ridges and more visible marks. Most often, this research was done concerning known and unknown histories. While the American Settler colonial narrative was heavily documented, the Native American and indigenous histories were less so.

²⁴ Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

²⁵ Figure 6 is an example of how I would search and find places to go. In this map, one can see the mines in Hazard, KY. I would go through the map and look for places where I could fly my drone and wander around. Unlike national forests and other managed areas, in rural areas and especially near mines I had to be sure that I could safely take photos and videos without upsetting anyone.

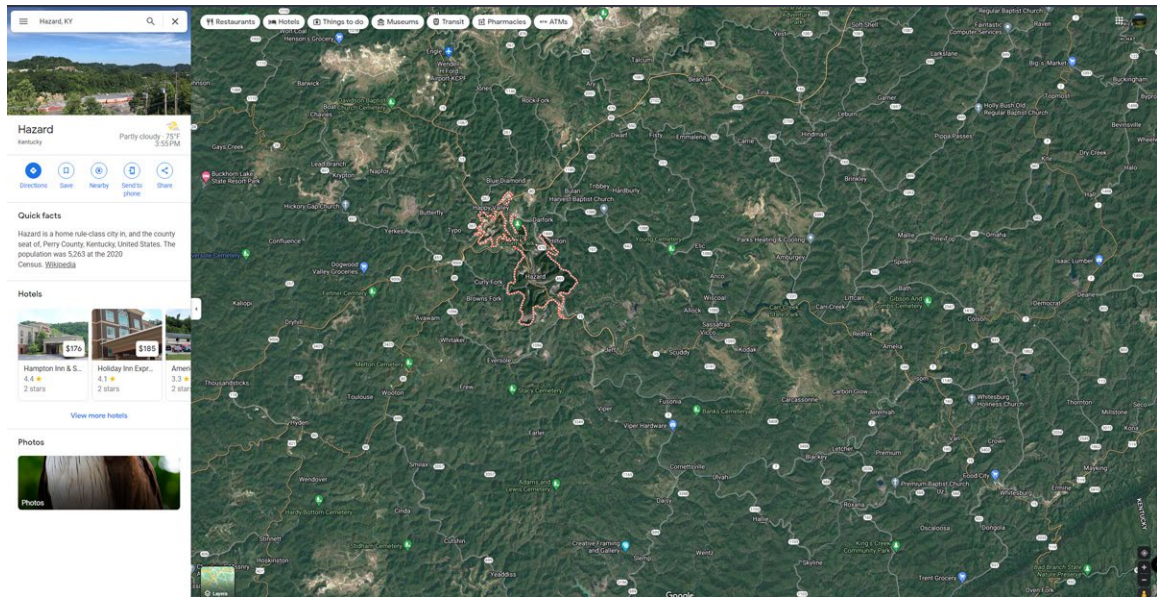


Figure 22 Google Maps. "Results for Hazard, KY" Accessed, March 25, 2023.

<https://goo.gl/maps/Zi6X7fE2YtgVJNGV9>

Nevertheless, most of the time I wanted to go and see different places, where my wandering would lead me. This, in many ways, was like the *Flâneur*, the French term that is most commonly discussed as the act of strolling in the city. While initially it meant the physical act of strolling and observing the city, in my process, I see both my driving and my hiking acting in a similar form. I had some sense of what I might find in some places, but I could not know what exactly I would see, what would become attractive to me, and more so, I did not initially know how all the outcomes from my journeys would come together as a body of work. In many ways, this approach gave me more freedom, I did not try to oblige specific places or aesthetics but instead allowed my unfolding journeys to become an organically connected process.

Traveling in Kentucky and greater Appalachia can be very emotional, especially with the current climate crisis and lack of actions by major stakeholders. However, it can also be a healing process. By grieving what is lost, we can celebrate those who survived. Grief and loss can mobilize emotions, lead us to maintain what is here, and fight for a better future. While Harraway told us to make kin, not babies, Solnit both in her book *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities* (2016)²⁶ and in her recent project *Not Too Late* ²⁷, discusses and urges people to remember that change happen in the least expected moments. Instead of looking at the binary and thinking of Optimism vs. Pessimism, she offers the readers to think about hope as a more fluid state. One can be hopeful when one looks at previous victories in different struggles and remembers that people fought against injustice when all seemed lost.

Personally, I hold a similar view, both as an artist and organizer. I always thought the idea of a singular end of days, a catastrophe vision, is not only very religious but is also false. This is not like extreme acts of war, earthquakes, or other momentary disasters (momentary meaning not as a tragic event, but more so that matters can be identified with a clear starting event or events).

The end of the world is also happening and happened throughout human history. For a person that experienced and survived genocide, their whole world is gone. Those who crossed borders looking for a safe haven became enslaved, worked in mines and of

²⁶Rebecca, Solnit. *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016.

²⁷ At the writing of this thesis, this project was only in a limited web form, with a planned anthology that was supposed to be published soon. Solnit brought together voices from around the world to discuss success and hope in the time of climate crisis.
<https://www.nottoolateclimate.com/>

course all of the other species, entities and places that suffer from human violence and power also faced the end of their world.

Nevertheless, for each world that was lost, a new world grew, and resistance formed in many ways. Not all new worlds are better, but this should not stop us from believing that a better world is possible. These new worlds hold in them new species and places. At times they are hybrids made from the old and new- among them, cyborg trees with wire fences that go through them, entangled pipe and roots on a riverbank, old structures falling apart into a mountain side, an out of commission mine.

This is, of course, not an attempt to dismiss or to not take seriously the threat and current trajectory that humanity is taking us and the rest of the planet.

THE CREATIVE PROCESS

This act of wandering gave me freedom and a much more fluid process. It slowly became clearer and more evident to me what kind of aesthetics I was looking for and how I wanted to present them.

While I knew that the photographic body of work would grow with each trip, I came to the conclusion that I wanted to expand my practice beyond photography, more so beyond common landscape photography. This was not done to “capture” all of the places that I traveled to create an intimate and immersive body of work. To do so I started making field recordings and creating soundscapes and videos. Additionally, along with using my regular camera, I used a 360 degrees camera²⁸, drone photography and video. The use of the varying techniques was approached from my understanding that each camera has the ability to present a different angle or moment of and with the landscape.

My culminating effort resulted in a 4-part exhibition- a multi-channel video and sound installation, a set of panoramas, a short 360 video as experienced via a virtual reality set, and five abstract black and white photos taken with the drone.

Each part of the exhibition can stand by itself or together like the Kentucky landscape (or any other landscape). The works create an assemblage that can be navigated and explored in any given order.

²⁸ A camera that captures a video that is 360 degrees, when is watched in a Virtual Reality headset or a dome, it can bring a wider and more immersive experience to the viewer.

HISTORY OF PANORAMAS

Barringer and Trumpener discuss in their book *On the Viewing Platform*²⁹ the history of panoramas and how political changes in Europe and specifically in England informed the creation of this new artistic format. The authors survey the history of panoramas, starting from painting and on through photography and cinema.

They argue that the appearance of landscape art and panoramic art within it came together with the creation and appearance of the new middle class in Europe. This genre of art helped to support and shape the new social political orders, both the growing cities and new wealth, and to introduce the ‘new world’ of the colonies.

The panoramas themselves took different forms. Examples include huge European romantic paintings of nature, viewing platforms with 360 views of different cities, globe shaped paintings of maritime battles, and more.

With so many uses of Panoramas and landscape art, I wondered if I could make a body of work that held a relationship with other panoramic works? I questioned whether my body of work would reproduce existing social political structures and if the work itself could stand as a counter narrative to colonial and hegemonic narratives.

When creating my images, videos, and sounds, I always considered these previous panoramas. Furthermore, with all my questioning, I had to navigate gently, hoping to offer something the viewers can relate to aesthetically and conceptually to other works.

²⁹ Yale University Press. *On the Viewing Platform: The Panorama between Canvas and Screen*. Edited by Katie Trumpener and T. J Barringer. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020.

While I think my process and thinking are deeply rooted in anti-colonial practice and theory, I find it hard to argue that aesthetics³⁰ can stand alone as anti-colonial. It is the process and presentation of all my approaches that I hope can carry an anti-colonial sentiment.

³⁰ Many argue they create or see some art as anti-colonial. Often this argument falls far from discussing the content of an image. When we look at the world of photography today, almost everyone has a camera, and so much of it ends on social media and the public domain. Many of these are almost identical images. Does the holder make it anti-colonial, the collective use of it, its social-political effect? While I do not think we can easily define anti-colonial aesthetics in photography, I still believe the images can carry enough power to counter colonial powers.

THE ANTI ROMANTIC PANORAMAS



Figure 23 – Shachaf Polakow, *Non Romantic Landscape I*, digital archival print 44"X90", 2023. Kentucky, USA.

The panoramas in this exhibition were made in relationship to few historical landscape artworks, the aesthetics of the Romantic Hudson River painting, American landscape photography such as by Edward Weston and Ansel Adams.

Counter to the common aesthetics of landscape art, I did not want to create another set of images that shows only beautiful mountains, rivers, forests. The approach of the perfect wilderness is not only false, but it is done many times in collaboration with hegemonic powers that use such images to exploit and extract other parts of the land.

Furthermore, the romantic idea of the wilderness, as I already discussed, started as part of the creation of the new American Settler ethos. The need to capture and confine the land into a rectangular canvas, print, and screens cannot be more symbolic. The

restriction of the canvas is metaphorical and representative for the violent restrictions that the Settler Colonial ideology apply to places and communities that it takes over. In my body of work, I tried to break or expand the boundaries of the canvas as much as possible.

The creation of the panoramas in my exhibition was completed with digital tools, first taken with a camera and then processed with Photoshop. In the current digital era, I wanted to leave evidence of this process, something that suggests that I collaborate with the tools that I have. This is a collaboration that I did not want to hide or pretend that it does not exist.

Each panorama is composed of a few images that are stitched together via the Photoshop merge function. The software recognizes the overlapping of elements and features in the images and aligns them together. Although I cropped these images in the earliest stages of my process, I found the non-cropped (Figure 4) version of the panoramas to be more powerful and serve as a reminder to the relationship and power that photography and technology have with the land and viewers.

Another aesthetic decision I made was to include existing conditions when I took the photo. I only edit the photos by making some minimal light and color adjustments. While I made aesthetic choices when taking these photos and editing them, I did not try to beautify what I saw, not like previous artists such as Ansel Adams, who created a complex photographic process and system³¹ to reach the image that he envisioned,

³¹ Ansel Adams created a complete photographic system, named “The Zone System” and he perfected for his needs. Every time he went out, he knew exactly how to measure light and take a photo, how to develop the film, and how to print. It was a very rigid but advanced system that became common among many photographers.

wanted, and thought was the best way to represent the landscape he photographed. More so, I create photos that, both in their content and their presentation, brings forward the complex relationship between human, nature, and photography.

IMMERSIVE LANDSCAPE 360 VIDEO

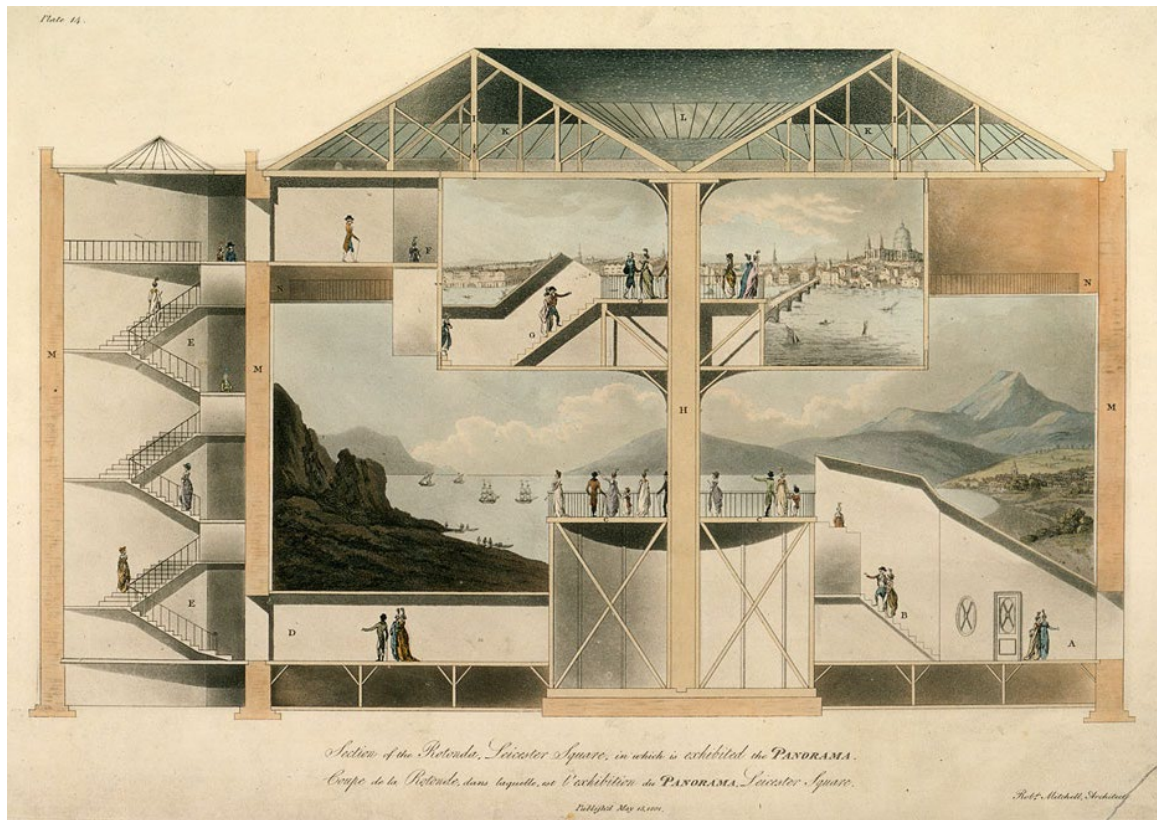


Figure 24 Cross-section of the Rotunda in Leicester Square in which Barker's panorama of London was exhibited (1801) *The Open University*, April 13, 2017.
<https://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/visual-art/virtual-reality-19th-century-style-the-history-the-panorama-and-balloon-view>

While the large, printed panoramas are made to confront one colonial and extractive legacy of panoramas, the 360 VR installation is made in relation to another type of historic panoramas, a response to both the viewing platforms and globe panoramas that were found often in world expos and places that promoted the “New World.”

In the recent Venice Biennale (2022), the Nordic pavilion was granted to the Sámi people, the indigenous people of Sápmi, an area that crosses Norway, Sweden, Finland,

and Russia. One part of their exhibition was inside a traditional Sami home, the LÁVVU, inside it was a 360 screen, with six different movies playing one after the other. The artists argued that the use of 360 technology was done to create an immersive experience that can create indigenous storytelling, where past and future meet, and the viewer's awareness is not fixed. Since the Biennale, this project has traveled to other festivals and exhibitions.



Figure 25 ÁRRAN 360°, inside view, Venice, Italy, 2022. <https://isfi.no/arran-360/>



Figure 26 ÁRRAN 360°, the outside view, Venice, Italy, 2022. <https://isfi.no/arran-360/>

While the old or new panoramic platforms surrounded the viewers, I used new technologies in my thesis exhibition. Using a 360 degrees camera playing through the video with a VR headset, extends the viewers' perspective. The experience is vastly different from the older platforms. Instead of walking up and onto a platform, the viewer is immersed and fully surrounded by the footage and the sound. This is unlike the historical panorama in which viewers experience different places and moments.

Both the perspective of the camera and the VR headset were used to intentionally disorient the viewer. The choice to confuse the viewer is created as an opposite or alternative perspective to the colonial point of view. Instead of positioning the viewer in

front of a grand opening of the land, where they feel distant from it, I chose to create a point of view and sound recording that embeds my viewers in the landscape. I choose sites that are places that embody confusing perspectives. While the viewer can look in all directions, they might discover that they are in an abandoned and dark quarry and that far in the distance there are some openings to the outside. Alternatively, they might be in a rock shelter under a cliff looking toward a forest, under an arch that extends over a river or, are situated on the edge of a cliff. All these places have evidence of human history, some hidden and some immense and very visible.

The sound for these videos is composed of field recordings from each site. Each recording contains natural sounds of water, birds, leaves in the wind, and icicle dropping into a stream. When listening carefully, one can hear an eerie unnatural sound, a truck in the distance going up a hill, a plane flying overhead, human voices coming from a trail. I see these sounds as uncanny evidence/specters of settler colonialism. While subtle and not always easily noticed, it is always there, a reminder of the region's history and to the present. Even in places that some see as wilderness or rural, there is always a reminder of the proximity to humans. This is not to say that these places are ruined. My Videos and field recordings are made to reflect on the current state of world. Like other parts of my thesis exhibition, I show that we should attempt to achieve a more accepting and less destructive relationship with those that are not humans.

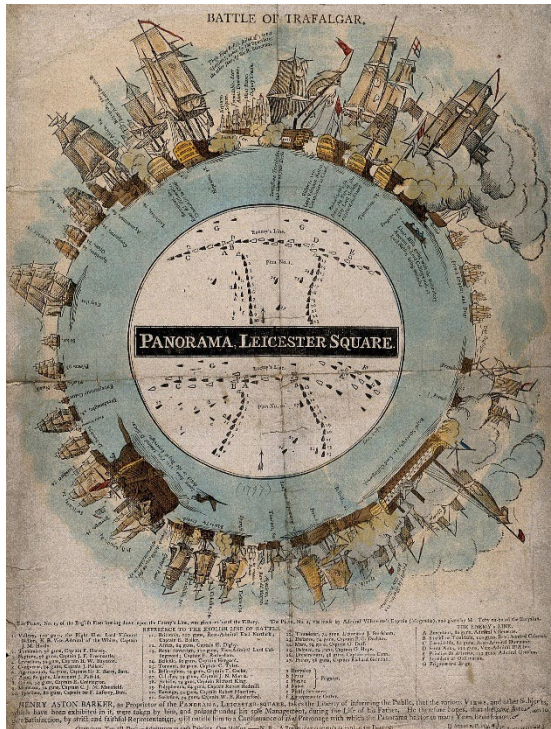


Figure 11 Barker, Henry Aston, Lane, and Magendie. *An Advertisement for the Panorama, Leicester Square, London: Showing the Battle of Trafalgar. Coloured Engraving by Lane, 1806, after H. A. Barker. [1806]. Engraving, with watercolour ; image 33.5 x 30.*

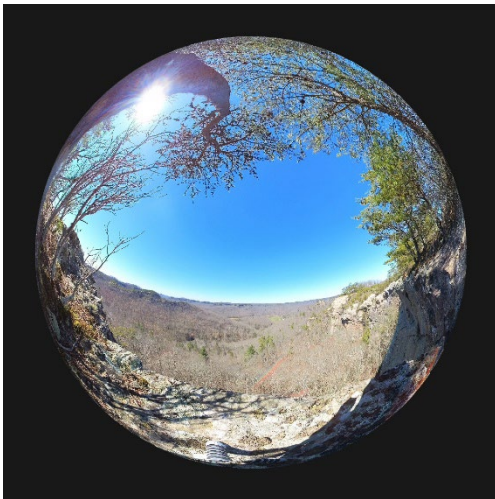


Figure 27 Shachaf Polakow, *Cropped image of a screenshot from the 360 camera. 2023.*

SURVEILLED ABSTRACT

From the early days of photography, aerial photography became a core part of its development. As soon as photographers had the opportunity to get a camera in the air, they did so. The French photographer Nadar is probably the most famous for doing this and is often credited for founding aerial photography. An active and successful artist in Paris in the mid-nineteenth century, Nadar was a multi-talented artist whose work included cartoons and portrait photography.



Figure 13 Nadar. Aerial View of the Quartier de l'Etoile. 1860. Albumen print, 23 x 18.7 cm. Musée d'Orsay. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.15671512>.

Today many are using photography and other technologies that are complicit with the violence of capitalism and especially surveillance capitalism. This term was coined by Shoshana Zuboff first in 2015³², as part of a critique of big data and neo liberal politics she identifies how everyday users choose and are mostly aware of the uses of devices and technologies. Choosing to accept terms and conditions that constantly surveille the users and are part of their experience. This is done to control the users experience and lead them to follow a capitalistic and consumeristic pathway.

The other aspect of surveillance in everyday life is security cameras everywhere; we mostly agreed to their use as well. What was done mainly by state agents and security apparatus is now used everywhere. Interactive billboards, self-checkout points of sale, AI in phones and door cameras are some examples.

³² Shoshana, Zuboff. "Big Other: Surveillance Capitalism and the Prospects of an Information Civilization." *Journal of Information Technology* 30, no. 1 (2015): 75–89.
<https://doi.org/10.1057/jit.2015.5>.



Figure 28, DeSieno ,Marcus, 46.979000, -103.538700, Archival Pigment Print of a Still from a Surveillance Camera Feed. <http://www.marcusdesieno.com/surveillance-landscapes/iz2w23ortmu17smp2zm8jwhv780lrk>

Marcus DeSieno's series: '*Surveillance Landscapes*'. DeSieno hacked security cameras across the use and created an eerie photograph from them. As he explains in an interview, the current reality in which the United States became a surveillance state is a reality that we need to constantly question. He edited the footage in a style to reminds early 20th century photography, somehow looks like a dirty and scratched glass plate. I found this use of technology fascinating, especially in relation to how the artist employed it to question what replaces the sublime power of nature, romantic and landscape photographers and what this kind of imagery does to the state of nature and landscape in the United States.

This series consists of five black-and-white photographs taken with a drone, looking down. Before I discuss the aesthetics of these photos, it is important to discuss the use of a drone and why I hesitated to use one for a long time.

The history of drones and other unmanned vehicles is directly linked to militaristic and colonial violence. The normalization of civilian use of drones happened at the same time when American and other armed forces worldwide and in the US increased the use of drones³³, from the surveillance of activists to the killing of militants and civilians.

One of the most recent examples of how these drones can be used, is the war in Ukraine, many of the drone operators/hobbyists, converted their drones to fight Russian forces. Most of these drones are made by DJI, the same company that made my drone. While mine is the smallest drone and cannot drop objects, it is used by some for intelligence and surveillance of Russian troops.

However, the use of aerial photography can also be used as an empowering tool for marginalized communities. Hagit Keysar³⁴ an Israeli scholar and activist, works with marginalized communities, mostly Palestinian. Keysar works with these communities to create Do-It-Yourself maps, using weather balloons and cheap cameras. This form of

³³Since the end of the first decade of the 2000's the US government shifted much of its warfare from troops on the ground to drone and aerial warfare. This shift not only made the war distant for the soldiers that operate the drones, but often to the public. It created a more scrutinized rule of engagement, that often led to the killing and injuring of civilians.

<https://theintercept.com/collections/drone-wars/>

³⁴ Hagit Keysar is part of a group of political geographers that worked in different areas, from disaster zones to marginalized communities, using affordable kits to help these communities map, locate and highlight different issues they suffer from.

To see more of her work - <https://cargocollective.com/hagitkeysar/intro>

DIY mapping is giving the communities agency and space to control their own land that is often restricted and affected by Israeli colonial forces and laws³⁵.

Although my use of the drone is not intended for direct surveillance or non-consented documentation, I cannot avoid the fact that once the drone is thousands of feet high in the air, it can hardly be heard and seen. It would be dishonest for me to argue that my intentions are making the use of the drone less invasive. Similar to other forms of photography, it is almost impossible to escape the fact that good Intentions are not always enough.

The other element of surveillance that I found while using the drone was that when I aimed the camera down 90 degrees, the land transformed into an abstract image. While some features can be recognized, some created a total new imagery. I decided that black-and-white emphasized the features and shapes of the land. A state park that suffered from flood damages appeared as a skeleton of a pre-historic (figure 15) creature, a valley with wetlands and beaver dams turned into a giant bed of moss and lichen (figure 16).

³⁵In this project, she worked with youth from the Palestinian neighborhood of Silwan in Jerusalem. Located outside of the Old City, this community is under ongoing threat of ethnic cleansing, often suffering from eviction and house demolition. Using weather balloons, Keysar, and the community bypassed the no-fly zone restrictions that ban flying vehicles. More about the project can be read here, <https://graylit.org/blog/community-satellites>



Figure 15 Shachaf Polakow, Surveilled Abstract IV, digital archival print, 13.5”X13.5”, 2023. Kentucky, USA.

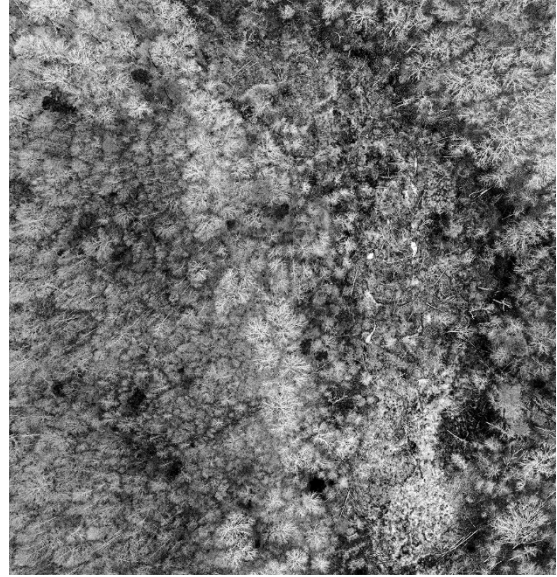


Figure 29 Shachaf Polakow, Surveilled Abstract III, digital archival print, 13.5”X13.5”, 2023. Kentucky, USA.

This choice of angles and aesthetics brings a different point of view that shows the transformation of land, either by human activity or forces of nature and time. This choice also helps to disguise the presence of people in these images, giving those who are there some anonymity.

I could not resolve the conflicted feelings I had with using the drone, and the images I made. I believe that like any other technology, a drone can be used more responsibly. However, even when one genuinely understands the danger of using a drone, and uses it for a greater change, it is still an invasive act.

I see these images carrying these contradictions while some see how these images are a reminder of military drone footage that look, at first glance, as screens in an army control room. Another possibility is that the images can entice the viewer to be curious rather than threatened. Perhaps the images make them think about the places they were

taken, and once features are recognized they might feel that drones can be used in less harmful way, including bringing critical images to the public from areas that might be hard to reach.

THE LANDSCAPE DOES NOT CARE IS A LANDSCAPE

VIDEO AND SOUND INSTALLATION

This installation brings together all the other parts of the exhibition. Through it the viewer can make connections between my various approaches. The sound of the VR experience is used here as well. High-in-the-air videos are related to the panoramas, and the central channel is a top-down view. The videos travel between different places and include the sites that I also printed in black-and-white.

This installation can be experienced fully from start to finish, but it does not have a beginning or an end. I invite the viewers to sit down at any part of it. This is a long installation is 20:23 minutes long. The installation's sound carries through the entirety of the gallery space. If one decides to sit down, they can decide if they want to listen to any recording through the speakers that are included in the gallery. This experience amplifies the tension and disorientation the visitors experience through the space.

A choice I made is that the videos on all channels do not have to be in the same place; each channel creates a sequence that can stand alone but seeing them all together creates a more expansive immersive experience. Some might think I created a narrative, even a false one, but I see my choices more similar to the wandering I did throughout my journeys. The memory and experience of each trip and places, continue to exist even after I was back home. The existence of each one of these places, exists at the same time. I wanted to bring them together through the visual and sound choices I made.

At first when one looks at the installation, one might think that the only movement is the central channel; the video moves slowly over different sites. The left

and right channels have a more direct angle. Some of the videos on the side channels are high in the air with a wide landscape spreading from side to side, while others offer a closer look to places in the same region.

Some of the side videos look, at first, like a still image. This is not the case. I did not alter the speed of the movies; these are in real time. This is another attempt to break out from the traditional stills landscape photography, expanding the moment and not trying to find a perfect video. It was important for me to alter as little as possible; I only made minor exposure edits.

Other videos have more movement with them, but the camera itself is standing still. A stream going under a rock ridge, a tree chewed by beaver on the side of stream, icicles slowly dripping, old pipes and roots coming out from the ground.

Once I decided how to use and edit the videos, I had to decide how I would manage my sound editing. The fact that the videos are not from the same place created a challenge at first, regarding which sound from which site I would use. Instead of trying to synchronize the recording to at least one of the sites, I edited the sound in a more conceptual manner. While most of the sound is actually from the same sites in at least one of the three video works, it was more important to me to listen to the sound and choose recordings that added depth to the videos. Wind going through the treetops, owls conversing at night, a distant truck going up the hill, a stream of water going through a beaver dam, a high pitch from a distant old oil pump.

As I mentioned when I discussed the 360 video, there is always some sound related to human activity. The sound itself is an element of the landscape, a layer that is often ignored in visual art.

It is important for me not to romanticize these places, instead, I created a body of work that never lets go and reminds the visitors and viewers, that what many see as pure nature is more complicated, especially in this region with its history and present. One might get lost in a forest but will hear a jet plane flying 30000 feet in the skies, the voices of people hiking travel through the valley around, farm dogs bark in the distant.

Regardless of the viewer's decision whether to sit down and watch the entirety of the video or walk around the gallery, the presence of the sounds and videos, accompany and surround them.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, I would like to go back to the beginning of this journey. As it says from the title and as I hoped to achieve both in the exhibition and the thesis, there is an ongoing tension between the state of the world, art, and the future. Probably the best way to better understand this tension is to go back to the Utopian Pessimist. At this point, one might ask, “What is a Utopian Pessimist?” For me, as I hope my viewers and readers understand by now, a Utopian Pessimist is a dynamic ever evolving point of view. The Utopian Pessimist is motivated by a Utopian belief that another and a new world is possible, but always aware that the stakes are not high. The magnitude of the crisis and the reality can paralyze us and create fear and anxiety, but we should find ways to find inspiration amid this crisis. While we mourn and grieve all that are lost, we can celebrate victories from the past and present. We can also focus on smaller achievements.

Through the exhibition, I tried to show that we can and have to imagine a better future, a mountaintop mine that is slowly transitioning to have plants and other species on it, a valley that is coming back alive with the help of beavers, streams, and trees that are still around against attempts to destroy them and other intimate moments.

It is not an easy or straightforward task. The work in this exhibition and the experience of walking through the gallery space carry a great deal of tension. Walking through the gallery, one cannot help but notice that all the works reveal the unsettling presence of human activity, such as the sounds coming from the video installation and

expanding through the space. These sounds move from natural sounds, such as owls, insects, and water, to the sounds of oil pumps, airplanes, and humans. The scars that the land has in both photo series are likely a result of mining or even impact at a designated state park campsite.

The photos present a continuation of this tension both with the content of the images and the choice of how to present them. For example, I intentionally framed *Non-Romantic Landscape III* (Figure 16), a large-scale print taken on the side of the road, looking toward a mountaintop mine, to include an orange traffic cone in the bottom right corner of the image. The visitor's gaze moves back and forth from one to the other, examining the large-scale destruction of a mountain and the orange object that looks very foreign. This control and effects of the land continue to the edge of the image, where the non-cropped image and pixelated border create another layer of tension, a reminder that this complex relationship between humans and the land continues in art and photography.

The relationships we have with technology cannot be escaped. All the work in this exhibition was created with digital tools, which, even if I wanted to create a more ethical use of them, are still carrying some level of complicity to the negative use of technology. The same tension is derived from the "...Utopian Pessimist" notion. While I try to create more hopeful work, I cannot escape the dire current state of the world, or more specifically Kentucky.



Figure 17 Shachaf Polakow, Non Romantic Landscape III ,digital archival print 44" X 70", 2023. Kentucky, United States.

When trying to imagine and think about what is to come, we should start with our current reality, where photography is in a precious state, a point in time where it is more popular than ever before. The exponential growth of the photographic archive will only be fully realized in the future.

The appearance of AI-generated photography was not discussed much in this thesis. This thesis was written at the beginning of 2023, when AI advancement started to shape almost every aspect of our lives. It cannot be taken lightly. While most people discuss text-to-image engines or text generators, AI-based processes exist in many other forms around us. As many have already pointed out, AI and other technologies have inherent biases imposed by the people that make them. It is not the technology itself that is problematic but how it was designed and used.

Throughout the process, I wanted to see what bias existed on different image-to-text platforms. As you can see in both images below, the colonial landscape exists in the AI archive as much as it exists in other archives.

Using different prompts including the Cumberland Gap, these images are very similar to Romantic painters. While figure 17 included a prompt to make a romantic painting, figure 18 did not.



Figure 30. Image of the Cumberland Gap rendered from a prompt: 'The Hudson River School style oil painting of the Cumberland gap, 1820 American painting', generated by DALL-E, September 22, 2022.



Figure 31 Image of the Cumberland Gap rendered from the prompt: 'Painting of The Cumberland gap in the 1700's', March 26, 2023.

With these kinds of results, we must change the familiar aesthetics and infiltrate new ones, creating more diverse archives. I do hope that my work will somehow create movement in this direction.

The decolonial process is a never-ending process or will continue to be, at least as long as the American Colonial project exists. It is our responsibility to de-learn and

reconstruct a better narrative. My work for this exhibition as a first step, while some of my future works might not always offer hope, they will always try to activate viewers and listeners, even it is for a brief moment.

Even if we will fail, and the earth will go through a catastrophic era, something new will come with evidence of our era. Fossils of trees made of plastic, canyons that used to be highways, machines that lost their operators but still move or work, lonely AI entity stuck with themselves on a remote server farm in a cave, a rhizomatic blob of plastic bags, seaweed, and shells floating through oceanic streams, many of these new creatures and species will roam between all the ruins and the relics, and maybe a few of them might wonder what was before them. It will be the end of the landscape because the landscape does not care it is a landscape; it will be something else that is not confined by human imagination.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME: Shachaf Polakow

ADDRESS: Hite Art Institute
104 Schneider Hall
2301 S 3rd St Walk,
Louisville, KY 40292

DOB: November 13, 1979

EDUCATION

2020-2023 MFA in Studio Art and Design, University of Louisville, KY, USA

2016-2020 BA Sociology & Cultural Studies, Open University of Israel

2001-2003 AA, Geographic Photography College, Tel Aviv, Israel

AWARDS

2023 Outstanding Graduate Award, University of Louisville

2022 Artist in Residency, Hållnäs Konstkoloni, Sweden.

2021-2023 Graduate Teaching Assistantship, University of Louisville

2021 Photography workshop led by Shana and Robert Shana and Robert ParkeHarrison, ARAC Scholarship Award – Full Tuition, Anderson Ranch, Snowmass, CO, USA

2021 Graduate Assistantship, University of Louisville

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

Solo

- 2023 *The Landscape Does Not Care It Is A Landscape:
A Utopian Pessimist Journey In Kentucky*, MFA Gallery. Hite Art
institute, University of Louisville.
- 2021 “*Farmworkers in South Africa: 2013-2014*”. Documentary project about
the life of farmworkers in the Western Cape province in South Africa.

Group

- 2023 “*In Plain Sight: Sites of Memory and Rituals*”, curator and contributor,
Hite Art institute, University of Louisville.
- 2022 “*Asia in Motion*” - Cressman Center for Visual Arts, Louisville, Kentucky.
- 2021 (un)common ground photo festival, Activestills group exhibition, Street
exhibition in multiple location in Lisbon, Portugal.
- 2021 Juried Exhibition Prospectus SECAC 2021, Lexington, Kentucky.
- 2021 “*From the West End to the West Bank: Oppression, Racism and
Resistance*”- Curator and contributor. A group exhibition looking into the
similarities of systemic oppression in Louisville, Kentucky and the West
Bank
Cressman Center for Visual Arts, Louisville, Kentucky.
- 2020 “*Push comes to shove*” a group exhibition of the first MFA first year
students, a response to these times we live in. MFA building, UofL,
Louisville
- 2019 “*The Image-Event: A Joint Struggle.*” Activestills group exhibition.
Contributor and Panel speaker. Slought Gallery, University of
Pennsylvania, USA
- 2013 “*The Wall and the Popular Struggle Israel & Palestine.*” Activestills
group exhibition. Angkor Photo Festival, Cambodia

- 2010 Activestills group exhibition. Visa pour l'image - International Festival of Photojournalism, France
- 2009 Activestills group exhibition. Visa pour l'image - International Festival of Photojournalism, France
- 2008 “*Silence Over the Abyss.*” Group exhibition organized by The Public Committee Against Torture in Israel. Artists House Tel-Aviv, Israel

PUBLICATIONS

- 2021 Al-Bazz, A., & Polakow, S. (2021). *When colonised and ‘Colonisers’ cooperate to decolonise: Activestills Collective of Palestine/Israel*, *Critical and Radical Social Work*, 9(2), 307-309.
- 2016 “*Activestills – Photography as Protest in Palestine/Israel.*” Book published by Pluto Press. Photos and essay contributor.
- 2003-19 Photos published in various international news media and NGOs, including: Mail & Guardian, Vice, YNET news, WALLA news, Daily Maverick, Truthout, +972, UNRWA, Btselem

TEACHING & WORK EXPERIENCE

- 2021-2023 Graduate Teaching Assistant, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY

Three semesters teaching Intro to Photography (Art 351) with a focus on black and white film photography, including course development.

Two semesters teaching Studio Art & Visual Culture (ART 200) course for non-majors, including course development.