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The Prescribed West

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THE PRESCRIBED WEST

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Thesis

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NARRATIVE

Prior to living in the state of Montana, I was a resident of the Hoosier State, Indiana, the so-called “Crossroads of America.” My relationship with landscape as a Hoosier was much different than my identity as Montanan. Surrounded by private farms and industry, I had very little previous experience with what could be called a wild landscape.

A major term I was confronted with upon moving to Montana was the concept of ‘public land’. Indiana consists of less than 1% public land. Looking back, my experience within that land would have been in a small state park, which receives a lot of visitors on very short mileage trails. Signs were present to inform visitors not to exit the trails, as their footprints could damage the surrounding terrain. At that time of my life, it was safe to say that I had never used my own navigational skills to guide my experience within any substantial landscape.

Indiana has its own unique beauty. Its flat horizon, a result of glaciers retreating north to Canada, is ideal for agriculture. With a central location in the United States, Indiana has remained a hotspot of industry and manufacturing since the 1800s. The phrase “Crossroads of America” implies a strong relationship between industry and surrounding territories. I grew up near automotive factories, manufacturing plants, and products made and shipped across America. My hometown near Indianapolis was an industrial landscape with only buildings giving it a vertical perspective.

Newfound appreciation for land and landscapes came from my time spent in Montana and the American West. I soon discovered that there was much to learn in regards to history and land use and management. The rugged and relentless environment shifted my perspective of any previous outdoor experience. I quickly began researching about western lands in terms of sustainability for human presence, practicality in agriculture, environmental awareness, and enjoyment.

I remember my first hike in the Bass Creek drainage on the eastern front of the Bitterroot Mountains. From the trailhead, I distinctly remember climbing upward. Along the vertical rise, a friend and I were constantly following a running creek, which flowed downhill to the east as we ascended to the west. Constantly in my head, I questioned where we were going and where all that water was coming from. Finally, after asking my friend on the trail ahead of me, he said, “We are going to the lake which is the source of this water.” His reply was my first realization that the landscape of Montana was vastly different from anywhere I had been. To say I was naïve at the time would be an understatement.

In Indiana, much of the terrain is flat. Lakes are typically located at the lowest points within the surrounding landscape, much like a large puddle. With the idea of water settling at the lowest point, I had no idea why this lake would be located so high in the mountains. This confusing realization revealed that I had no clue about anything within mountainous terrain and was the starting point of my interest in gaining more knowledge about mountains.

We never did make it to Bass Lake, but that hike opened my eyes to learning about the new landscapes surrounding me. Less than a week later, I returned to the Bitterroot Mountains for another go, this time successfully reaching a lake below the Bitterroot Divide, a ridge that separates Montana and neighboring Idaho. After an eight-mile trek to the lake’s edge, I noticed something was a bit off, even though the lake appeared to be natural. Upon closer inspection, I noticed there was a man-made dam of rock and dirt, funneling into a culvert at the head of the
creek. I wondered why anyone would want to dam this lake and water source so far away from civilization.

I left full of questions. Talking to friends and colleagues, I learned that damming of alpine lakes was a means to provide a constant water supply in the dry summer months to irrigate hayfields in the Bitterroot Valley down below. My understanding in the way land was managed grew the more I went outside the studio to be within the Montana landscape)

INTRODUCTION

Control of natural resources and the decisions behind land management quickly became the motivating ideas present in the MFA Exhibition The Prescribed West. In order to present the content and visualization of The Prescribed West, many pieces will be discussed individually. This format assists in presenting how the works contribute to the overall theme.

Interests remain in the way 19th Century American landscape paintings shaped our perspectives of homesteading and preserving the American West.

The title, The Prescribed West, stems directly from the 21st century experience in Yellowstone National Park and other western wilds which have become heavily trafficked by tourists. I am interested in the management decisions behind National Parks that prescribe the experience for the visitor. The National Park Service (NPS) claims that all decisions regarding the parks are made with consideration of the words “preservation” and “use”. The NPS wants to manage and preserve lands in order to keep them as close to their original state as possible. “The [NPS] service thus established shall promote and regulate the use of the Federal areas known as national parks, monuments, and reservations hereinafter specified, except such as are under the jurisdiction of the Secretary of the Army, as provided by law, by such means and measures as conform to the fundamental purpose of the said parks, monuments, and reservations, which purpose is to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein
and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.”

*The Prescribed West* addresses perspectives about the outcomes of western expansion in the mid 1800’s; the ways in which land was divided, managed, and preserved are all topics of discussion. This exhibition utilizes historical techniques of representing art. Themes within the exhibition are that of western expansion, history of the railways, tourism, land management, and the role of 19th century landscape artist shaping perspectives of eastern Europeans in America.

### EXHIBITION: EVALUATION OF ART WORKS:

#### PART I. *Predictable Sunset*

*Predictable Sunset*, a wall-based sculpture containing slip cast objects, is visually and formally distinct from any other work in the show. *Predictable Sunset* (Fig. 1) is a diorama of objects disusing current trends of rural residential properties within the American west. There are two distinct slip-cast objects: a tractor whose origins are a common yard sprinkler purchased from a hardware store and a fence post driver for a standard T-post. In addition, located in front of a line of nine ceramic fence post drivers, rests a rectangular strip of artificial turf that is the base for the tractor.

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Figure 1, Predictable Sunset, porcelain and turf, 24" x 39" x 18", 2017

The arrangement and surface color of the objects are rooted in the depiction of a stereotypical farm at the end of the day: a tractor in a field, silhouetted and back-lit by the sunset sky. Pop Art and Kitsch are the main influence for Predictable Sunset, with its use of recycled cultural material. This tableau is based on lasting romantic notions, which both encouraged and accompanied the populations of the American West.

The piece portrays a physical transformation of the landscape, meanwhile critiquing a particular subculture of residential properties known as “ranchettes”. Ranchettes are properties, both developed and undeveloped, whose primary land use is listed by the county assessors as residential.² Ranchettes range in size from 1.5 – 20 acres. Exurbanite’s who live on these properties are often not professional farmers, but those who enjoy many aspects of rural life

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² Tim Dunbar, Ranchettes: The Subtle Sprawl (American Farmland Trust), 3.
including farming and ranching.³ Ranchette culture raises questions about the impracticality of expansion and the impact of poor or inefficient use of land. When translating a fence post driver to porcelain it removes its function and places it in a material that is more relatable to figurines that are representable. It is reasonable to question the dichotomy of using rich agricultural land for a personal home with a view.

PART II. Cast Cooler Lids

The itinerary of a stereotypical tourist within Yellowstone starts before entering, when they fill their coolers with drinks, sandwiches, and ice. Such was my Midwestern approach to visiting Yellowstone prior to living in Montana. The notion of a “prescribed” experience is shown in the form and content of a Styrofoam cooler.

*The Prescribed West* consists of five cast iron and 25 cast porcelain Styrofoam cooler lids. Both materials, iron and porcelain, relate to the expansion of the American West and/or mass-produced industrial entities. Iron, for example, is a metal inherently tied to the history of the American railways. The ability to mine and produce this material made for swift expansion. Prior to 1871, approximately 45,000 miles of track had been laid. Between 1871 and 1900, another 170,000 miles were added to the nation's growing railroad system.⁴

³ "An *exurbanite* prefers residential locations at greater distances from the metropolitan fringe, where "developments are comprised of large lots and the number of homes is generally *less within any* given tract. Incomes of this group are higher than those of typical suburbanites. This group has been shown to be attracted to a rural lifestyle by reduced property taxes, more control over the levels of public services, increased open space, large lot size, privacy and natural surroundings." Dunbar, *Ranchettes: The Subtle Sprawl*, 7.

⁴ *Rise of Industrial America, 1876-1900* (Library of Congress), online available
The growth and efficiency of railways influenced the rapid rate at which the West expanded. *Receding Landscape*, (Fig. 2) presents a grid of four cast iron cooler lids. The work's purpose is to spark reflection and speculation in order to recognize that iron’s influence for mass transportation to the American West. The creation of railways led to pristine preexisting landscapes being scared\(^5\). Rail companies were granted land and timber rights to every other square mile within ten miles of either-side of the tracks when going through public lands\(^6\). The expansion of the railways promised a rise in homesteading as well as the beginning of nature tourism to the American West.

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5 “According to Peter Stahl, an anthropologist at the State University of New York in Binghamton, “lots” of researchers believe that “what the eco-imagery would like to picture as a pristine, untouched Urwelt [primeval world] in fact has been managed by people for millennia.” Charles Mann, *1491* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 306.

6 37th Congress Session II, *Pacific Railway Act 1862*, Ch. 120 pg. 491-492.
Styrofoam cooler lid that has been nickel plated to give it a mirror finish. This piece represents the factor of automobile-based tourism within nature. The formal properties and surface of this object are seductive. The mirror-like quality of the finish allows the viewer to see their own reflection, placing themselves in the work for a brief moment of introspection.

*Figure 2, Car Tour, nickel plated cast iron, 21" x 13" x 3", 2017*

**PART III. “Preservation & Use” Series**

The bulk of the exhibition in porcelain cast Styrofoam cooler lids. Porcelain as a material allows me to create objects of permanence. Creating permanence of form allows for the recording of culture at that specific time. In this case, it is recording the consumerism culture within outdoor recreation.
In the series *Preservation & Use*, the viewer confronts replicas of famous 19th century American landscape paintings fused to the tops of cast porcelain cooler lids. Gold leaf on the borders alludes to the gilded frame of the Romantic painting.

*Figure 3, Preservation & Use (Yellowstone Falls by Albert Bierstadt)*, porcelain and gold leaf, 15" x 11" x 2.5", 2017

The *Preservation & Use* series is descending from the influential role of art in romanticizing the American West. Euro-American artists, Thomas Moran and Albert Bierstadt, traveled from the eastern United States to the West in order to depict vast and newly-discovered landscapes. The artistic intentions behind the painting include exploration, self-notoriety, and national
diplomatic goals. Moran and Bierstadt played an influential role in decisions within the landscapes in question, and helped shape how other Americans on the East Coast perceived it. Such as Moran’s depiction of Yellowstone through his watercolors and paintings to help Congress establish this location as the first national park.

Western expansion and discovery was too great a temptation for Albert Bierstadt to ignore. Bierstadt, a German artist was well-known for his sweeping paintings of the American West. He was able to capture the mystic nature of the land and presented the West as a land of promise. His work could be viewed as propaganda, for it undoubtedly made the wild, unseen landscapes inviting to the public.

It is important to state that the American West is documented to have been inhabited as early as 12,707 and 12,556 years ago in Montana. These 19th century painters (along with myself as a 21st artist) have fallen into the trap of the romantic myth of the west. When traveling to the west for the first time it is easy to imagine the landscape without the impact of people. It should be noted that although these artists (along with myself) believe we are having a one-off experience; this land (Montana) has been influence by man for over 12 millennia.

Preservation & Use (Buffalo Trail: The Impending Storm by Albert Bierstadt) (Fig.5) depicts a bison herd crossing a stream in the middle of sage-covered ground. In this painting there is little human presence, allowing the viewer to fantasize a land that has been unaltered and able to be homesteaded. Buffalo Trail reveals a trail of bison and the somber image of a storm approaching. The latter appears powerful, but somehow not threatening. At the time of the painting, bison were still present in the West, though their numbers became increasingly

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7 Tina Hesman Saey, Genes & cells: Native American ancestry unveiled: DNA from skeleton shows tribes come from one population. (Science News, 2014), Vol. 185, Issue 6
devastated by hunters, who killed them by the thousands for their prized hides. “At once [the buffalo] is a symbol of the tenacity of wilderness and the destruction of wilderness; it's a symbol of Native American culture and the death of Native American culture; it's a symbol of the strength and vitality of America and the pettiness and greed of America; it represents a frontier both forgotten and remembered; it stands for freedom and captivity, extinction and salvation.”

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Figure 4, Preservation & Use (Buffalo Trail: The Impending Storm by Albert Bierstadt), porcelain and gold leaf, 11” x 15” x 2.5”, 2017

Bierstadt’s paintings have a reputation of portraying romantic spaces, with mountains nearby as a backdrop for an easy Western Expansion. With no evidence of the often unpassable rugged terrain that exists within the Rockies, Bierstadt’s paintings depict the grasslands at the base of mountains as places of endless promise and opportunity.

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8 Steven Rinella, *American Buffalo: In Search of a Lost Icon* (Random House Publishing Group, 2009), 256
Thomas Moran made a breakthrough in his artistic endeavors when he joined geologist Dr. Ferdinand Vandeveer Hayden in 1871 on a geological survey to explore and document the region that later became Yellowstone National Park. Although the project itself was federally-funded for the geologist, Moran had to pay his own fare for the expedition. He was able to do so with a couple $500 dollar loans, for which he placed artwork as collateral. The loans were granted by Roswell Smith, publisher of *Scribner’s* magazine, and Jay Cooke, financier to the Railroads in the Northwestern United States. Moran’s 1871 expedition to Yellowstone proved to be a milestone in his career.

Another notable artist to join the geological survey of 1871 was William Henry Jackson. Jackson has a history of being a painter, but is most notably known for his photographs. Jackson and Moran had a collaborative relationship during their days in the Yellowstone region. Moran and Jackson documentation of locations would consist of Moran sketching and using watercolors while Jackson would take photographs.

“Moran’s field sketches, along with the nearly four hundred remarkable photographs taken by Jackson, the corps’ official photographer, would make up the chief pictorial assets of the 1871 season and provide impeachable evidence for doubters [of Yellowstone’s landscape].”

Moran and Jackson’s field sketches, paintings, and photographs were invaluable in educating and persuading Easterners about what the American West looked like, as well as informing them of possibilities within the landscape. Many 19th century painters who depicted the American West returned to show their works in galleries in the East and Midwest. They were displayed either salon-style, with many paintings filling an entire wall, or in a format known as “The Great

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9 Thurman Wilkins, *Thomas Moran Artist of the Mountains* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 80
10 Wilkins, *Thomas Moran Artist of the Mountains*, 85
Picture,” where one massive painting would be displayed by itself. The latter provided viewers a
grand experience of a “wild” landscape, as explorations of nature were becoming ever more
popular with the general public in post-Civil War America.

The installation of *The Prescribed West* emulates the salon-style viewing of art, while at the
same time alluding to the “The Great Picture”\(^{11}\). Importantly, I wanted to critique how these
paintings are experienced today within the museum setting of the 21\(^{st}\) century. References to
museum art can be seen in multiple elements, such as the use of gilded frames and velvet
stanchions. This exhibition emulates the way 19\(^{th}\) century paintings were displayed at the time
of their creation and now.

In the installation *Preservation & Use #2* (Fig.6), the grid structure of cooler lids was in
reference to the Western landscape that has been divided and gridded throughout past centuries.
The size of the image, approximately 4’ x 5’, is reflective of the grand scale of 19\(^{th}\) century
landscape paintings. The work was displayed on a wall that was painted a rich blue in reference
to the jewel tone paints that is popular in museums. The use of brass stanchions and a red velvet
rope dictates the viewing of the work. This display gives the work value by making it able to be
seen, but untouched. Rather than a modern gallery bench, I placed a standardized park bench in
front of the work. The particularly rustic bench evoked counter parts in public parks and rest
areas and allowed the tourists to have a quasi-authentic experience within the gallery.

Visitors to Yellowstone continue to be awestruck by the beauty and unique nature of this wilderness, much like Moran and Jackson were. With its geysers and bison herds, this “wild”
location allows modern visitors to transport themselves in comfort into an unparalleled environment that seems almost prehistoric.

Figure 6, Preservation & Use #2 (Teton Range by Thomas Moran), porcelain and gold, 46" x 62" x 2.5", 2017

CONCLUSION

Today, a visit to a National Park visit can be considered “prescribed”. Many tourists have a somewhat predictable experience that they are able to sum up with magnets and huckleberry products from the gift shop nearby. The land may appear natural, but in reality it is not in any original state. Wildfires are suppressed if they threaten human life and property within the park, wildlife is managed, and there are designated sidewalks for wandering tourists. Visitors are required to have permits in order to camp in the backcountry. Considering that the modern
tourist’s experience is different from the Hayden expedition, today’s experience is still authentic to the individual in spite of the regulations. The visitors of today leave these parks with either a sense of joy for the adventure experienced, satisfaction to see something so unique, or the spiritual cleansing the outdoors can provide that continue to make visiting these parks a worthwhile venture. The regulations present are to protect the visitor as much as to protect the wildlife.

My romantic notions of Yellowstone mirror the paintings made by Moran and Bierstadt. The way in which the paintings were executed express the experience within this land as nothing short of magical. Yellowstone provides an experience for any number of visitors whether they are looking for a spiritual escape or that of site seeing along the boardwalks that approach any number of geysers and springs. Although the experience is under the management of the park the wildlife and land is still considered wild with their instincts still intact.

Although the land within the Yellowstone region has become developed and managed by the NPS, a visitor of the 21st century can still have an inspiring experience. The Yellowstone landscape has a way of making a person feel satisfied, content, at home, and grateful for the experience. It is easy to believe that the moment after paying the $30.00 entrance fee for a single vehicle, that Yellowstone has become yours inviting you to explore every animal and geyser in the area. The entrance gate to a national park can alter a mindset upon entering. The iconography of a front gate, meaning that you have entered, implies a false notion that you belong here or have the right to be here. Landscapes such as Yellowstone are inviting to the eye, but the harsh environment does not provide a suitable landscape for habitat. The creation behind The Prescribed West is a reaction in the way man wants to overcome and tackle lands whether for its preservation or use.
Growing up in Indiana, I had a strong relationship with industry, perhaps by default. While an undergraduate, I accepted my first professional art job as a mold-maker in a bronze foundry. My job expanded quickly from creating molds to working with all processes required to produce large-scale bronze artworks. My relationship with replication and multiple objects began there.

Porcelain is a material that when slip casted has the ability to capture immense detail. This translation ability allows subtleties, such as the dotted surface of Styrofoam, to become a discovery upon closer inspection of the work. The shortness in the porcelain along with the tension of the clay when casted into a fluted edged form like the cooler lids allows myself to exploit the materials defects creating the cracks on the cooler lids. These cracks can further my content in pairing alongside the way we as humans have deformed the natural world in which we live in.

The ceramic decals used within the Preservation & Use series are a testament to the ability of replication and manipulation through the use of technology within the arts. These decals allow me to directly reference a specific artwork and time that is relevant to the ideas I am conveying through the end product. My use of 19th century landscape paintings changes the way in which a viewer approaches this work, because of the paintings direct relationship to the translated surface of Styrofoam, a material that did not exist in the times these original paintings were created.

The porcelain cooler lid forms are fired three times before gold leaf can be applied. Casting the form is executed by pouring liquid into a plaster mold of the original Styrofoam lid. Once removed from the mold, it is laid out to dry for 24-48 hours. After air drying, the mold seam lines on the form are sanded down and removed. In order to achieve a stark white surface, white underglaze is sprayed on the entire form. Next the form is fired it to bisque temperature (roughly
1830° F). Upon removal from the kiln, a clear glaze is brushed to the front rectangular face where the decal of the painting was applied. The form is then again fired, but to cone 5 (roughly 2175° F).

After firing to cone 5, ceramic decals are to be applied to the surface of the glaze. The color decals printed in high resolution using pulverized over-glaze material on a water slide transfer paper. I placed the decal directly on top of the glaze. After removing all water and air from under the decal, the form is fired again to 1625°F.

**Porcelain Recipe**

Grolleg__________50
Silica__________25
Nepheline Syenite__25

**Bisque program**

Ramp 1: 75° per hour up to 185°, hold for 3 hours
Ramp 2: 75° per hour up to 205°, hold for 3 hours
Ramp 3: 85° per hour up to 1000°, no hold
Ramp 4: 75° per hour up to 1400°, no hold
Ramp 5: 108° per hour up to 1830°, no hold
Ramp 6: 125° per hour down to 1400°, no hold
Ramp 7: 95° per hour down to 1000°, no hold

**Glaze program**
Ramp 1: 75° per hour up to 185°, hold for 3 hours
Ramp 2: 75° per hour up to 205°, hold for 3 hours
Ramp 3: 108° per hour up to 1000°, no hold
Ramp 4: 85° per hour up to 1400°, no hold
Ramp 5: 125° per hour up to 2175°, no hold
Ramp 6: 125° per hour down to 1400°, no hold
Ramp 7: 95° per hour down to 1000°, no hold

Decal program

Ramp 1: 50° per hour up to 180°, hold for 2 hours
Ramp 2: 125° per hour up to 850°, hold for 15 minutes
Ramp 3: 125° per hour up to 1000°, no hold
Ramp 4: 85° per hour up to 1400°, no hold
Ramp 5: 125° per hour up to 1625°, hold for 15 minutes
Ramp 6: 150° per hour down to 1400°, no hold
Ramp 7: 125° per hour down to 700°, no hold