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# Not a country at all

Rachel Kauff  
*University of Iowa*

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**NOT A COUNTRY AT ALL**

by

Rachel Kauff

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Art in the  
Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

May 2017

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Anita Jung

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Graduate College  
The University of Iowa  
Iowa City, Iowa

**CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL**

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Rachel Kauff

has been approved by the Examining Committee for  
the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Art degree  
in Art at the May 2017 graduation.

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*“There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. If there was a road, I could not make it out in the faint starlight. There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made.”*

Willa Cather

*My Antonia*

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## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

The title of this body of work, *NOT A COUNTRY AT ALL*, takes its name from a well-known passage of Willa Cather's 1918 novel, *My Antonia*, in which she describes a first encounter with the Midwest landscape from the perspective from a settler-colonist family in the late 19th century. The main character describes the landscape as "not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made." Using this description as a point of departure, this thesis and corresponding exhibition responds to the implications of regarding land as material, and making or crafting as a claim to national identity. The national myth valorizes making: craft, labor, creativity, and settlement as the strength and unifying fabric of the nation. I propose that it is now our un-making that will bring us together: the point at which material resists artifice, land no longer yields to our desires, and storms of our creation but beyond our control grow strong. The following document consists of images of artworks from the corresponding thesis exhibition in printmaking, sculpture, and a work of prose-poetry that explores themes of nation, land, craft, ancestry, and climate change.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .....	vi
NOT A COUNTRY AT ALL: works .....	1
APPENDIX: NOT A COUNTRY AT ALL .....	17
1. (nothing) .....	17
2. (anywhere) .....	18
3. (country) .....	19
4. (something) .....	20
5. (Americana) .....	21
6. (resistance) .....	22
7. (bodies) .....	23
8. (made things) .....	24
9. (flood) .....	25
10. (not a country at all) .....	26
REFERENCES .....	27

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: A Composition, (1), 2017, woodcut, 45 x 60 inches .....	2
Figure 2: Not a Country at All (1), 2017, photogravure, 22 x 15 inches .....	3
Figure 3: Not a Country at All (2), 2017, photogravure, 22 x 15 inches .....	4
Figure 4: Not a Country at All (3), 2017, photogravure, 22 x 15 inches .....	5
Figure 5: Not a Country at All (4), 2017, photogravure, 22 x 15 inches .....	6
Figure 6: 4 oz. curved claw graphite hammer, 2017, poplar and graphite, 1.5 x 13 x 5 inches .....	7
Figure 7: Prairie Brush 2 (sweeper), 2017, 4x4, prairie grasses, 48 x 4 x 8 inches .....	8
Figure 8: A Composition, (2), 2017, woodcut, 45 x 60 inches .....	9
Figure 9: A Composition (3), 2017, woodcut, 45 x 60 inches .....	10
Figure 10: A Composition (4), 2017, woodcut, 45 x 60 inches .....	11
Figure 11: A Composition, (5), 2017, woodcut, 45 x 60 inches .....	12
Figure 12: To Break (not Scour), 2017, white oak and unfired porcelain, 5 x 75 x 13 inches .....	13
Figure 13: To Break (not Scour), 2017, white oak and unfired porcelain, 5 x 75 x 13 inches .....	14
Figure 14: As if two, 2017, reclaimed chairs, whitewash, shaker tape, cattails, 48 x 60 x 15 inches .....	15
Figure 15: As if two (detail), 2017, reclaimed chairs, whitewash, shaker tape, cattails, 48 x 60 x 15 inches .....	16

## **NOT A COUNTRY AT ALL: works**

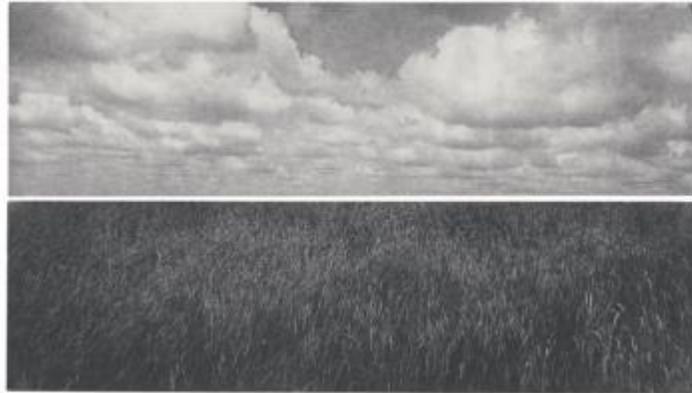
The following images document work that was exhibited from April 9-15, 2017 in the Eve Drewelowe Gallery in the Visual Arts Building at the University of Iowa.



*Figure 1: A Composition, (1), 2017, woodcut, 45 x 60 inches*



*Figure 2: Not a Country at All (1), 2017, photogravure, 22 x 15 inches*



*Figure 3: Not a Country at All (2), 2017, photogravure, 22 x 15 inches*



*Figure 4: Not a Country at All (3), 2017, photogravure, 22 x 15 inches*



*Figure 5: Not a Country at All (4), 2017, photogravure, 22 x 15 inches*



*Figure 6: 4 oz. curved claw graphite hammer, 2017, poplar and graphite, 1.5 x 13 x 5 inches*



*Figure 7: Prairie Brush 2 (sweeper), 2017, 4x4, prairie grasses, 48 x 4 x 8 inches*



*Figure 8: A Composition, (2), 2017, woodcut, 45 x 60 inches*



*Figure 9: A Composition (3), 2017, woodcut, 45 x 60 inches*



*Figure 10: A Composition (4), 2017, woodcut, 45 x 60 inches*



*Figure 11: A Composition, (5), 2017, woodcut, 45 x 60 inches*



*Figure 12: To Break (not Scour), 2017, white oak and unfired porcelain, 5 x 75 x 13 inches*



*Figure 13: To Break (not Scour), 2017, white oak and unfired porcelain, 5 x 75 x 13 inches*



*Figure 14: As if two, 2017, reclaimed chairs, whitewash, shaker tape, cattails, 48 x 60 x 15 inches*



*Figure 15: As if two (detail), 2017, reclaimed chairs, whitewash, shaker tape, cattails, 48 x 60 x 15 inches*

## APPENDIX: NOT A COUNTRY AT ALL

### 1. (nothing)

*"There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. If there was a road, I could not make it out in the faint starlight. There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made."*

*-Willa Cather, from My Antonia*

Traveling in the backseat on the interstate after dark, my first passage through Iowa might not have been so dissimilar from the experience of Cather's pioneer first encountering the landscape of late nineteenth century Nebraska. With a faint dusting of snow on the ground, the rolling hills were barely darker than the sky, and there was little to break the infinite rows of corn and soy. The landscape foregrounded nothing, which in Cather's Nebraska sat vast, and in mine lay empty.

That Nebraska is long gone, but its void of a landscape is familiar. Though it makes me uneasy, each time I read this passage I find myself complicit with the pioneer's vision. A roadless, tractless land that only feeds the longing to see clear to the advancing horizon; a not-yet country that seems to promise unlimited supply. It is a faint, hazy nothing, ready to be made specific in our hands. Touching it to claim it as ours before it can be proven otherwise.

This is also the fantasy of the craftsperson: the state in which an idea unrealized in raw material is perfect: all potential. A moment before the material has had the chance to push back against our advances. A solid piece of wood, ready to carve before me produces a sensation not unlike hunger. The tool in hand is not unlike teeth and the first pass in its shaping is not unlike conquest. Still, I have become increasingly ambivalent about this effort to persuade a material to accept my designs.

I am an artist-craftsperson working with materials whose origins in land are plainly visible: wood comes from the trees, grass from the earth, ink from the bones of its mammals. In an analogy that can so easily be made literal, taking material to craft it and claiming land to settle it become uncomfortably close.

## 2. (anywhere)

*"The wagon jolted on, carrying me I knew not whither. I don't think I was homesick. If we never arrived anywhere, it did not matter. Between that earth and that sky, I felt erased, blotted out."*

—*My Antonia*

All my life, I've wanted to know: why I get to live here, or anywhere. I want to know: do I get to claim it as my home? By what right can I claim it? If a thousand other towns in a thousand other regions are full of people who have made their lives in much the same way, can I say that I am from somewhere at all? What good is it to belong to a country, if the country does not belong to the land?

### 3. (country)

Though they take part in different legends, the craftsman/ frontiersman/ pioneer figures traipsing through most tales of American origin share much of the same manifesto. With dogged bravado, they assert a right to land that came not from knowledge of countless generations of ancestors living in the same place, but from the the erection of a few fences, roads, and cabins. That it did not matter so much that land might have been seized from others not very long ago, but that something was made of it since. That materials needed to make a nation could be purchased, even if the word meant nothing to those who held them. That a nation might be crafted from nothing.

#### 4. (something)

I am told that like Cather's characters, my ancestors immigrated then wandered, looking for a place where their skills could be of use. They moved around and eventually set up a store (Kauf-German for *to purchase*). Then their son became a contractor and built suburbs. His son, in turn, lived in one and engineered oil refineries. Out of somewhat raw materials, they made something.

They were not subsistence farmers growing their country out of the dirt, but as makers they understood that there is no such thing as an entirely man made [sic] material. All materials come from land, and vary only in the depth from which they are mined and the extent to which they have been worked.

The pioneer rests his claim on the idea that the more something has been developed, the more it has been earned. To pitch your tent is one thing; to build a log cabin another, and to dig long shafts clear through to the ores is something else entirely. There may be no limit to what can be earned.

This might be where the craftsman's manifesto differs, for the craftsperson knows that at a certain point, the more something is worked, the more it starts to get away from you.

## 5. (Americana)

In musty junk shops run out of old houses where rot is charming, my mother and I fall in love with rusting tools and furniture with the paint flaking off like snow. It is the utilitarian objects that hold my attention: the implements of making, the craftspeople's tools. At a certain level of entropy, objects 100 or 1000 years old appear equally capable of summoning ancestors.

The power of these objects seems to be that you can refute every premise of their appeal, from any possible reason we might have for patriotism to the idea that "the good old days" were good for anybody other than the privileged. Yet the attraction remains. We can reclassify them as antiques, historical ephemera, kitsch, but their forms still emanate potent nostalgia.

I don't think even my noble aims toward study and subversion of such articles can excuse my attachment to them. The one thing I can say for my nostalgia, is that given the state of things and their likely future, it is not unreasonable to long for a time when there were more, not fewer plants and animals. When the world was more, not less alive to the senses. It is possible for well-placed nostalgia to be sensible.

## 6. (resistance)

*"Have you reckoned a thousand acres much? Have you reckoned the earth much?"*

—Walt Whitman

Once it has been determined that a particular material is for use, it can be safely assumed that every part of the process centers around accommodating the way that material will resist us. As I saw, the gullet of the blade shovels wood dust away from the teeth. A slightly widened set to the teeth keeps the saw from binding in the channel of the cut. Every blade on each tooth are balanced of rake and fleam to divide a dense forest of fiber. The circumstances of this design beg the question, what is doing the shaping: the material or the saw?

Where the grain runs out of the board, or a knot chips the blade; when I have failed to account for shrinkage as the material dries, or the cracks of checking surface as I carve, these things are considered a failure of craft. It is almost always disappointing, but I also see it as some form of relief: proof that there are hard, material facts that cannot be circumscribed. That there are limits to machines, and my own human mechanism. A craftsperson of previous times might take the opportunity to express humility and reflect on the human limitations before God. But I wonder: what is god here, and what if it is asking us to stop?

7. (bodies)

*"The body is a formal constraint. It has this one life with which to make eternity."*

—Elizabeth Willis, from *"Steady Digression to a Fixed Point"*

I once relied on the idea that it was enough to know that I lived in a body, and that in turn, my body also lived somewhere. I trusted in what was sensible to the body to tell me about this place I lived in, to understand my own presence. But now that it seems that Iowa's February might never again see snow, and the birds have stopped migrating, I know that there is more than what appeals to my senses. There are forces acting on the material world insensibly, for which I am partly responsible and completely enmeshed.

## 8. (made things)

*"The ship moves*

*but its smoke*

*moves with the wind*

*faster than the ship"*

*-William Carlos Williams, from "4th of July"*

The philosopher Richard Sennett describes Pandora, the goddess of invention, as a myth about the dangers of making: a warning to the Greeks, that "a culture founded on man-made [sic] things risks continual self-harm<sup>1</sup>." By now it is evident that harm extends also to the material world itself. Since few believe that polar vortexes, rising ocean levels, or decimated fauna come as punishment from the gods, we would do well to understand that harm *begins* with invention, and ends with its consequence.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 6.

## 9. (flood)

*"You cannot fold a Flood-  
And put it in a Drawer-  
Because the Winds would find it out-  
And tell your Cedar Floor-"  
-Emily Dickinson, F583.*

Another philosopher, Timothy Morton, uses the word *hyperobjects* to describe mechanisms that have far reaching material consequences, but whose functioning has become nearly disarticulated from the actual cogs of any machine. Petroleum, weather, the internet, nuclear bombs, global warming, all exhibit a "radical split between the object and its appearance<sup>2</sup>."

This might mean to see the flood, but not the prairie that would have stayed it, to consume the river's poisons but not the corn at their source. The systems that produce these effects might not be directly sensible, but it does not mean we cannot trust the gut-sense, that tells us that all of this is very wrong. That materials will continue to put forth an ever fiercer resistance that no machine can accommodate.

---

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 3.

10. (not a country at all)

*"I do not want the constellations any nearer,  
I know they are very well where they are,  
I know they suffice for those who belong to them."  
-Walt Whitman, from "Song of the Open Road"*

I would like to coax objects away from the forward motion of their uses; to let them sit for a while, to rot and rust. Not to prove that surrender would be simple, but to let their materials talk back.

It is difficult to explain to my father and my grandfather, who have spent their life developing things to be more useful, my dedication to making things that are insistently useless. For them, making is a process of overcoming material resistance, while I try to make things that acknowledge our greatest formal constraints: dependence on a body, the physical, the material.

The material world is all we've got. To take in air is to be dependent on it, but to take up the broad axe, plow, oil rig, hammer, table saw, or keyboard is to alter and claim it at great risk. Pandora's warning extends to nation-building: a country that is made can un-make us.

Where Cather declares the potential of what could be country, I would use her declaration to affirm the end: that we could encounter a place as if it were *not a country at all*.

## REFERENCES

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