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Reading the land

Eden E. Hall

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READING THE LAND

by

Eden E. Hall

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 2019

Thesis Supervisors: Professor Kee-Ho Yuen
This exhibition, *Reading the land*, does not attempt to inspire through beauty, although I would be happy if it did. It is simply my reaction to reading a land which is suffering. It is my reaction to living with this suffering and a glimpse at how this suffering festers within me. I vacillate between two sides: on one hand I celebrate wildlife animals, their environments, ecology, and the brilliant minds which even attempt to manage conservation or feed the world, and on the other side, I condemn the values, mindsets, presets, and ignorance which compromise wilderness in the first place.
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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Reading the land does not attempt to inspire through beauty, although I would be happy if it did. This exhibition is simply my reaction to reading a land which is suffering. It is my reaction to living with this suffering and a glimpse at how this suffering festers within me. I vacillate between two sides: on one hand I celebrate wildlife animals, their environments, ecology, and the brilliant minds which even attempt to manage conservation or feed the world. On the other side, I condemn the values, mindsets, presets, and ignorance which compromise wilderness in the first place.

Making this work has helped me understand that despite our disproportionately large impact, humans are only one part of the land organism. By the end of his life in the 1940s, the great pioneer of environmental conservation, Aldo Leopold grew to believe that harmony, or conservation, could only exist if humans reinvented civilization to include a land aesthetic based on the ability to truly read the land. This meant “to understand the interactions and functioning of the entire land community, with its "soil, water, plants, and animals." (1 Leopold, Sand Co Almanac) "But learning to read land was not only an end in itself. It was a talent that provided the necessary base for a more enlightened way of living, perceiving, and enjoying.” (2 Warren) Leopold wrote, “If the individual has a warm, personal understanding of land he will perceive of his own accord that it is something more than a breadbasket. He will see land as a community of which he is only a member, albeit now the dominant one. He will see the beauty, as well as the utility, of the whole, and know the two cannot be separated.” (4. Leopold Sand Co Almanac)

Leopold was describing art. That “warm, personal understanding of the land” is more than a revelation or set of facts arranged nicely to promote a cause. I believe that equating reading the land to art means to understand, convey, and express the beauty and utility of the
whole through my own eyes and experiences. In my story, these experiences include living in lands steeped in agriculture, living in a community where wilderness is idealized by representational art while it is simultaneously compromised by farming practices, justification, entitlement, ambition, a blind eye, and greed.

In *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*, Aldo Leopold wrote “conservation is a state of harmony between men and land. By land is meant of all things on, over, or in the earth...the land is one organism. Its parts, like our own parts, compete with each other and co-operate with each other. The competitions are as much a part of the inner workings as the cooperation. You can regulate them---cautiously---but not abolish them.” (3. Leopold, Sand County Almanac). I am interested in the notion of regulation which Leopold refers to. It is a loose term, and used today, can house justification for private agendas. “Competitions” can be construed as a threat to human comfort or safety. My work examines these loopholes and looks at the complexities, strategies, and possible agendas of conservation management, and contrasts these notions with Leopold’s harmony of reading the land.

Leopold called for unity between art and science to bring about the change needed to reinvent civilization to assign value to the land aesthetic and land health. He believed that artists could read the land with their instincts, senses, trained eyes, and their very lives themselves--then express what they read. Leopold called on them to promote the beauty of land health as well as his ideals simply because art sold better than science. People respond to imagery better than scientific reports.

Photographer Ansel Adams is a good example of how a true understanding of land was used to lobby for wilderness protection, and the establishment of national parks: Conservation, harmony, beauty, art, and protection were intertwined. “For science to play its role, it had to
help produce, for widespread use, a realistic overall picture of how land functioned, how humans fit in the natural order, and what it took for land to remain in good condition. And for art to play its role, it needed to incorporate, fill out, and inspire such an understanding. Good science and good art, then, were complexly linked.” (5 Warren)

What happens when art outgrows or veers away from this prescribed duty to incorporate, fill out, or inspire? What happens when art is made for art’s sake, and the artist simply explores the experience of reading the land with no obligations to anything except the experience? I argue that Ansel Adams did precisely that, although his art also inspired environmental activism. Adams has been accused of having a blind eye to human impact; his landscape photographs are idealized, almost painterly, renditions of places which were becoming increasingly popular (largely because of his work) and therefore impacted. The truth may be that art which serves environmental activism and art for art’s sake are interdependent. Adams served on the Sierra Club’s board of directors for 37 years and used his influence as the nation’s top landscape photographer to sway Congress to expand designated wilderness areas. But the act of photographing, the mule trips to the backcountry, living in the mountains—all this was simply reading the land. The wizardry which happened in his darkroom stemmed from the transcendental effect of reading the land.

Ansel Adams has a monumental influence on my art not so much because of the brilliance of his photography, but for his connection to the land, his process of experiencing land through photography, and his willingness to idealize the landscape. (Figure 1) Today, it is almost considered taboo or sub-par to idealize anything in art, especially subjects with complex concerns like landscapes. Are idealized photographs even considered fine art? I honestly believe that Adams sought to make photographs which did justice to what he experienced. It just
so happens that what he experienced was idealized because such intense beauty and transcendent feelings are actually possible in the places he visited. People who condemn Adam’s idealization do not understand the true beauty of reading the land.

Truly great art seems to inherently inspire conservation.
CHAPTER 2. READING THE LAND: ART AND INFLUENCES

The exhibition, *Reading the Land*, consists of many sculptural and photographically sculptural pieces which use metaphor to convey fact, beauty, wildness, environmental conflict, and ultimately, my own reasons for making art in the first place. The ideology of some of these pieces was conceived over four years ago, others as recently as two months ago and this is evidenced by many changes in the delivery of fact and message (or non-delivery), manipulation of materials, perspective on artmaking and science, technique, and inspiration. They are all labor and time intensive and I have tried very hard to allow them, and my reasons for making them, to remain fluid.

*Endgame* is a large scale chess game which explores the complexities and strategies of conservation. (Figure 2) Endangered animals, represented as bronze chess pieces, are cast about in a human game. What exactly is the endgame of conservation as it relates to endangered species? Something must always be sacrificed in chess just as it is in ecology and conservation. The endgame is not for everything to survive. This work is informed by endangered species research carried out on four rivers: the Mississippi river (fresh water mussels), Black river (Lake Sturgeon), Platte river (Piping Plover). I live on the west bank of the Cedar river in Cedar County, Iowa and this has fueled my motivation and taught me about the riverine ecosystem and humans impact and relationship to it. This knowledge has come and will continue to come through the permeating effect of living next to water and over the passage of time.

I embarked on these research trips with specific documentary purposes, but came away with a deeper read of the land. For three summers, I travelled to and on these rivers, worked with biologists, photographed swamps and currents, explored, sought out endangered animals, and learned about Native Americans’ *Traditional Ecological Knowledge*. I began to read the
land, follow tracks of muskrat and otters, discovered old prejudices and new hope. I followed the Platte river from its confluence at the Missouri river all the way to its headwaters in a snowy valley and ice capped lake in the rocky mountains. As I walked the last three miles of this quest in the river, sometimes up to my waist, carrying a Hasselblad camera, I have never felt more connected to the land.

Rivers have always been the hub of civilizations. They support life and can tell stories. In many cultures and religions, they are considered sacred. In agricultural regions of the United States, they have become gutters and reflections of the way we manage the land. But they are still alive. The species represented by chess pieces are indeed pawns of our legislature and agendas, but live in a deep interconnectedness to land, water, wind, rain, and all things alive. While making *Endgame*, I attempted to recreate the world of the river as seen through the plight of those species which are compromised and cling to their very existence, but also as seen through the soul of the river which had somehow quietly meandered to all levels of my consciousness. (Figure 3, Figure 4)

*Shoot the Moon* (Figure 5) was made as a reaction to learning that the amphibian fungal/bacteria epidemic, Chytridiomycosis, which has caused the loss or decline of up to 70% of the world's frogs and toads, was initiated by the amphibian pet trade market and the Korean war. The bacterium, *Batrachochytrium dendrobatidis* (Bd) is carried in the Chytrid fungus and is responsible for the widespread fatalities. It was released from North Korea (where it was naturally contained by genetic resistance and isolation) by shipping during the Korean war, and an American/European desire for pet frogs and toads. Amphibians intended for entertaining in terrariums carried Bd and were shipped overseas where they promptly infected other native amphibians which had absolutely no resistance to the bacteria. This caused widespread fatalities.
We still do not know the long term effect of losing massive numbers of the world's amphibians, but to this day the USDA does not require Bd testing of amphibian imports. *Shoot the Moon* is sarcastic, deliberate, and judgmental. What a wonderful skill we humans have, to be able to shoot the moon--no cost or consequences are too great to justify our quest. (Figure 6) (Figure7, Figure 8)

*Stump People, Infestation* also delves into the realm of deliberate and judgmental. It is my response to the sickness of the land I read. (Figure 9) When the Cedar river water levels are low, I walk and swim in the river collecting wood which lies in the bottom mud. This mud is both a metaphor and direct effect of our land management: It is fairly toxic sludge containing excess nitrogen, E Coli, pesticides, factory waste, livestock waste, human waste. I feel around for wood with my feet and use the current to pull “treasures” up to the surface. Sometimes I put a rope around the wood and pull it in from shore using my truck, other times I simply try to muscle it out of the muck. Always, I find wood which contains the texture of a past infestation of insects. This texture is modified by years in the river’s current. *Stump People, Infestation* is made of root balls found in the river and represents the metaphor of the texture of human infestation. (Figure 10)

While sculpting the human form as an infestation, I was somehow inspired by Alberto Giacometti’s soul rendering human forms. (Figure 11) Giacometti’s humans remind me of seeds of a fruit--the flesh is stripped away and the leathery seeds remain towering and haunting, complete in their soul forms. The texture he achieves speaks to the human condition, history, fragility, and wear. His sculptures are complete, deliberate, ethereal, and evocative all at the same time. None of this could be achieved by any other medium than bronze. (Figure 12, 13, 14,
15) *Stump People, Infestation* implies that humans are larval infestations, which like insects, cannot be stopped.

*Keystone* is a departure from judgement implied in the previous two pieces. It simply celebrates beaver and their abilities to transform the land. It does not expose opinions, although beaver certainly bring out opinions--both negative and positive. I recognize that their work ethic and obsessive compulsive tendencies can pose problems for our own land management agendas. But I celebrate beavers anyway. They are the true artists of ecology and I respect them. One of my favorite things to do is spend time at a beaver dams, dens, and slides and examine their impact. I have come to know a beaver family at my home on the Cedar river and have mourned the loss of the patriarch--the largest beaver I have ever seen. The title, *Keystone*, refers to their status as a keystone species--a species with a disproportionately large effect on their surrounding ecosystem. It references the anchoring stones in a stone archway---those which bear the weight and support the structure of all the rest. (Figure 16, 17, 19)

In making *Keystone*, I often thought of land artist Andy Goldsworthy and his sublime dedication to understanding materials as part of a whole. Goldsworthy spends time with materials such as leaves, rocks, or sticks, to understand them in ways which transcend dimensional properties. As he builds his sculptures on site or into the land, the materials *become* the art, just as the art *becomes* the land. Although this exhibition, *Reading the Land*, exists within a gallery, it is my dream to someday install these pieces in a river, therefore returning them to the land. (Figure 18)

*Snapper* also deviates away from judgment. It simply celebrates the ancient fossil-like qualities of snapping turtles. This work, as with all my bronze work, can only exist as a bronze. To me, *Snapper* is about permanence, survival, and resilience --both in subject and material. I do
not worry about the survival of snapping turtles, and consider them to be a formidable force in the river ecosystem. In fact, they may fall under the category of needing to be “regulated” to achieve Leopold’s balance and harmony in conservation. This piece carries my own narratives of river life--stories and memories which are perhaps only important only to my family and me. As a piece of work, *Snapper* is content to spend time in the incredible structure, strength, and resilience of the snapping turtle. It is also a celebration of bronze; although Snapper is displayed as an installation with grass and mirrors, I believe that the sculpted bronze legs, replicated shell, and simple traditional patina make it a stand-alone piece and wish to explore this simplicity more in the future. (Figure 20)

*Cornfish* is a story about agricultural runoff and water contamination. The fish is the corn and the corn is the fish--literally. Since my family farms on the banks of the Cedar river, I am painfully aware that our livelihood directly affects fish habitat. Beyond the obvious potential for agricultural chemical runoff, I think about the fact that all organic matter which enters the river can be absorbed into the fish through their skin. For instance, GMO corn stalks are washed into the river, broken down and remain, even at a cellular level, as part of the aquatic habitat.

Perhaps the most important thing I learned in all my river research is that river water contains memory in a language understood by fish, but not by humans. The Little River Band of Ottawa Indians (LRBOI) of northern Michigan have observed that lake sturgeon which are taken from the Black river just after hatching and raised in a nursery in water pumped directly from the Black river, will return to the exact spot where they were captured to spawn when they reach sexual maturity. The LRBOI claim that the river has a memory which is shared by the sturgeon. This is known as Traditional Ecological Knowledge, and has been used by LRBOI (and many
other tribes) to increase the lake sturgeon population levels. *Cornfish* attempts to convey the existence of memory in river water, and call for carefulness in farming practices. (Figure 21, 22)

Tree Skins (Figure 23) is a series of silicone skins which appear to be birch bark. They are the result of a brush-on silicone applied to chunks of cherry wood without a mold release. Since no mold release was applied, the silicone removed and retained pieces of the cherry wood. This resulted in a textured, half-wood half-silicone skin. I inverted the skins onto plaster forms which I shaped as the structure of a horse’s back. The plaster bodies contain chopped up hay and rise from the flat back where one might sit a horse, to a higher withers. Instead of vertical legs such as a horse would have, these forms are supported by long cherry branches which are then suspended from the ceiling or the wall. Optimal installation involves suspending them from the ceiling at an angle of repose. In this configuration the forms almost appear as a flock of geese preparing to land. In Reading the Land, the forms were hung on a white wall, since no structure existed to hang them from the ceiling. This piece is about spontaneity, adaptability, and the inverse and converse as a new modality of form. The forms are somewhat haunting and cast shadows which are as much a part of the effect as the pieces themselves.

The archival silver-gelatin medium-format prints found on the wall in this exhibition represent the process of translating exploration into concept and art. They are remnants of my river research trips and serve to ground the viewer in place, location, and physical reality. Although they do not claim to be stellar examples of photography, I believe they are important components to the exhibition as a whole. They are the raw iterations of reading the land. (Figure 24) They document my journey up the Platte river inspired by the midstream nesting habits of the endangered Piping Plover on the Platte River. This small wading bird insists on building its nest on the midstream sandbars during May and June when the Platte river floods
with snowmelt from the Rocky mountains. Inevitably, their nests and eggs become flooded and lost, but they keep trying until late July. This questionable reproductive system has made them a likely candidate for extinction even before the Platte river became a system of dams, irrigation ditches and water rights. But the Piping Plover’s story is about hope. The states of Nebraska and Colorado have redesigned water flow systems and regulations to attempt to save this species. It is recorded as the most organized, effective, complete, and far-reaching conservation efforts enacted in north America. Ironically, because of its flawed reproductive methods, the Piping Plover is probably a bird destined for extinction, but its conservation story makes for a happy ending to this chapter of reading the land.
CHAPTER 3. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, Reading the Land, is about understanding that life, land, and art are all the same thing. I explore this through the most accessible channels I know: rivers. As an artist, I have worked through and (hopefully out of) the compartment of metaphor to express a subconscious understanding of wilderness, the unity of the whole, concern, celebration, and condemnation of human activity. In the pieces Shoot the Moon and Cornfish, I came as close as I want to be to didacticism. My more recent work (Stump People, Infestation) excites me because I can actually set down the burden of “duty to incorporate, fill out, or inspire.” In the process of making this entire exhibition, I have often had to step back and consider why I was making the choices I made, or what I was hoping to achieve, who I was making this for? I never completely answered all those questions, which sometimes caused me great stress. The last thing I want is to put a disproportionate amount of time into a piece which doesn’t mean anything to me or probably the viewer either. Working in bronze takes a bizarre work ethic, and blind faith in my own art. I work intuitively in this technically heavy and long-term process but I am still searching for answers for what drives the intricacies or hidden motivations for work. During the initial stages of a piece of work, I allow myself to work completely intuitively and rarely consider my audience. I am simply seduced by clay, wax, bronze, and patina, as well as my quest to live in a state of reading the land as intensely as I can. Later stages of the work are laden with decisions about how people may view or interpret my work. It is important to me to combine intuitive process with deliberate or conscious decisions about interpretation and therefore impact. I believe that all humans have a duty to make a positive impact on the land organism. My call to action is limited to asking the viewer to feel and think about themselves as an element of the land organism. Retiring Leopold’s duty to
incorporate, fill out, or inspire what science has established or explored, has freed me to express
more than I could while I carried the burden. I am inspired now, more than ever, to dive back
into clay and make more work and allow the intuitive reaction between my hand and materials to
carry me further in my understanding of how to read the land.
REFERENCES


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