

## On Recent Paintings and Other Works

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Here are the long heavy winds and breathless calms on the tilted mesas where dust devils dance, whirling up into a wide, pale sky. Here you have no rain when all the earth cries out for it, or quick downpours called cloud-bursts for violence. A land of lost rivers, with little in it to love; yet a land that once visited must be come back to inevitably. If it were not so there would be little told of it.

Mary Austin, *Land of Little Rain*, 1903

To experience the desert deeply demands a quality of attention akin to prayer.<sup>1</sup> What many perceive as barren is in fact full of life — dwarfed and fragile as it may be under the many burdens of aridity. The landscape undulates with geologic musculature in absence of overgrowth. It bares the forcefulness of its creation. Exiting a mountain canyon or arroyo, space opens suddenly like wings catching a draft. It breathes, expanding and contracting like the lungs inside our own chests: exhaling outwards towards infinite distance and inhaling back towards indescribable intimacy. There is something about the boundlessness of the sky that brings into relief the detail of dry soils beneath our feet.

In truly entering such places, not as a visitor passing through, but as a willing subject equal in vulnerability and agency to the coyote or the centipede, we must accept a certain amount of suffering. To open up consciousness to the happenings of the creosote and the sage, to follow the bunchgrass in search of hidden water or the juniper in search of noontime shade, is to submit ourselves to the necessity of something beyond us. Thirst, heat, and hunger follow on the heels of such pursuits. Boredom, too, perhaps. A toll is taken and in return, a reward is offered: “deep breath, deep sleep, and the communion with the stars.”<sup>2</sup> Incredible, life-affirming pleasure can be purchased in this manner. But if the transaction is made possible through consent to hardship, the currency by which it is bought is attention.

I feel an uncommon sadness from knowing that such moments of communion are necessarily fleeting. That in this world so circumscribed by industry and distraction there must be entries and exits into a state of wholeness. In becoming alive to the desert’s austere offerings, there is something very much at stake that is well beyond a physical positioning on this earth’s wounded surface. A dissonance between two cords twined against each other in diaphony: the structure of human thought, construction, and abstraction; and the organic intelligence of the natural world increasingly incapable of sustaining

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<sup>1</sup> I tend to think of this in terms invariably shaped by the writing of Simone Weil. Particular reference is made to her chapter “Attention and Will” in *Gravity and Grace*, 1947.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Austin, *Land of Little Rain*, 1903.

them. There is a sense in which this tension is horrifying — as shameful as extinction; as hubristic as the razing of mountain-tops; as self-condemning as radioactivity cached in permeable soil. But there is another in which it is an intrinsic, unavoidable, and even elegant hallmark of our humanity. Anne Truitt speaks of a view over the desert from the airplane window: the interplay between the grand sweep of the earth in dialogue with the straight, structured forms of human intervention upon it. She recognizes her positionality between the two: as an artist and a human being whose senses “both mask and illuminate” a recognition of these two forces.<sup>3</sup> The desert offers these contemplations readily.

Here is where the work resides. It is difficult to justify seeking quietude in a world increasingly buffeted by loss and instability, and certainly to do so at the expense of all other pursuits would be an abdication to asceticism without excuse.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, it is difficult to speak of the desert here and now without acknowledgment of lands to which I have no poetic claim and whose endured violences are covered only by a thin layer of dust upon their dry surfaces. It is not lost on me that those who labor most strenuously upon the land, who rely on it most dearly for sustenance and survival in a world of extractive capitalism, rarely have the luxury of seeking in it the spiritual detached from the instrumental.<sup>5</sup> And yet there is a keenly felt danger of forgetting — of losing altogether the quality of reverent attention borne of deep experiences with the natural world. I maintain a conviction that to discover one’s own place in the family of things, natural or otherwise, is to cultivate such a power of attention. That it is essential to uphold its value in the face of the deeply fracturing pressures of contemporary life.<sup>6</sup> I offer that this is primary and antecedent to the possibility of moral behavior towards each other and the living world around us in a time when both are so utterly necessary.

In the main current of my work, paintings offer themselves up in this spirit of austere quietude. They create for their viewer the possibility of a prayer-like attention that is clearly in conversation with the natural world. Pared down, stripped of excess flesh and unnecessary complexity, they evoke without overt description feelings of stone, wood, earth, and sometimes bone. Their colors are drawn from the ground: from minerals and soils in a range of ochres, umbers, siennas, and duns. Seen as a group, they converge

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<sup>3</sup> Truitt writes: “Looking down at these facts, I began to see my life as somewhere between these two orders of the natural and the abstract, belonging entirely neither to the one nor the other. In my work as an artist I am accustomed to sustaining such tensions: a familiar position between my senses, which are natural, and my intuition of an order they both mask and illuminate.” *Daybook*, 1982.

<sup>4</sup> The desert as a locus of ascetic activity is no accident nor is it entirely removed from the work I am discussing here. It would be difficult to speak of attention and the weathering of ‘noble’ hardship in the manner of Simone Weil without invoking these rich wells of historical meaning or without some risk of wandering into the territory of mysticism.

<sup>5</sup> For one such discussion, see Lucy Lippard, *The Lure of the Local*, 1997, especially Chapter 3, “Landbase: Mountains and Arroyos, Grandmothers and Uncles”

<sup>6</sup> Let me here nod in the direction of Mary Oliver’s poem *Wild Geese* from which the phrase ‘family of things’ is borrowed, and whose admonition against a certain desert asceticism is directly in conversation with the conversation here.

into near monochrome, yet viewed as individuals, they assert themselves as unique in both chroma and composition.

They describe forms that could be as near as the exquisite surface of metamorphic rock or as distant as an arid expanse seen from a satellite. In the same picture they are alive with both detail and spaciousness. In this sense, the scale implied in the work is unstable. It expands and contracts at different distances to the surface of the painting, implicating the viewer and the circumstances of her physical presence. It operates bivalently in the same way that one's awareness of the landscape can toggle between the minute and the gargantuan almost simultaneously. In the same way the currents of blood in vasculature and water on the landscape chart the same meandering yet sedulous path, the macro- and the microscopic are mutually implied.<sup>7</sup> From afar, the paintings feel robust and richly articulated. Close up, they begin to dissolve, revealing a fragility that is recognizable only upon near inspection.

Through repetition of size and shape, a system is established. Each work is an individual understood as a part of a possibly innumerable whole. Their diminutive size pushes against a sense of the sublime as something to be carefully avoided. (To recognize the sublime is to feel something necessarily beyond our own reach—to feel alienated in the face of an enormity that is impervious to our activities or influence.) The square shape of the work presents itself with a certain air of neutrality—neither the horizontal nor the vertical is privileged, defying conventional depictions of landscape and related associations with the picturesque. The contents of each linen surface read more as excerpts from an expansive whole than as privileged vistas.<sup>8</sup> And yet the repetition of squares carries with it its own host of associations — from the scientific use of square quadrats in ecological sampling to the alien imposition of Jeffersonian survey grids across the North American landscape. The square is a quiet structure all its own, undergirding the quietness of the paintings with a nod to factors that hover outside of their direct reach.

The sense that the work is pared down, distilled, and crystallized into something capable of any kind of transformation is hard won. It occurs as the synthesis of many different conceptions of the land and the possibilities of an artistic relationship with it. From his familiarity to his native countryside, Courbet insisted that “to paint a land you have to know it.”<sup>9</sup> But know it how? Through the accumulations of the eye, filing memories like postcards in the back of the mind? Through the soles of the feet and the feeling of the breath as you walk? In the names of the species you encounter or the understanding of their

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<sup>7</sup> Thoreau comes to mind: “He who sits still in a house all the time may be the greatest vagrant of all; but the saunterer, in the good sense, is no more vagrant than the meandering river, which is all the while sedulously seeking the shortest course to the sea.” *Walking*, 1851

<sup>8</sup> A notion articulated in Donald Judd's *Specific Objects*, 1964

<sup>9</sup> See Dominique de Font-Réaulx, “Reproducing Reality” in *Courbet and the Modern Landscape*, 2006

tendencies and interactions? In the sustenance derived, directly or indirectly, from labors upon it? In the form of the land as seen from the sky, taking in its whole shape at once?

Following an upbringing in the drylands of California and Wyoming, I spent my summers across the American West fighting fire for the United States government. These months on my feet in the sun were bookended by winters in the graduate study of ecology, poring over maps and datasets to decode the insidious markers of ecological collapse and devastation. The summers were inherently itinerant, traversing large swaths of the continent on two-week deployments to wildland incidents, working and sleeping upon the terrain intensively yet with rare opportunity to “wait the occasions” of any given place for more than a few weeks at a time.<sup>10</sup> The winters were desolate in weather and in connection to the places I had witnessed ravaged.

When you build fireline you create a clearing stretched across landscape which breaks the fire from new fuel. It is simple in its execution. Fell trees and cut them into pieces just small enough to carry across the cleared line. Clearcut brush and cactus. Back and forth: pick up, carry, throw. The trees are live and heavy with water, and the desert growth is prickly and unyielding to your rude handling. The hours are long as you mark with your footsteps the new, aspirational boundary between what will be blackened and what can remain unscathed.

When the path is clear you can begin to dig, scraping the organic material down to stone and mineral sediment that no ember can light. I used to think of days spent this way as a form of penance. It was a stripping away of my own soft layers of duff and soil, searching for bedrock, if such a thing can exist in either the soul or the body. It was a hardening—not so much transforming the self into something different than it was before—but revealing a hardness that was there all along. A discarding of the soft tissue that prevents the shape of the thing beneath from being glimpsed and perhaps even known. A honing of attention.

If the primary body of my painting invites a viewer into a sensitive phenomenology evocative of primary experiences on the land, there is vast territory at the peripheries of this kind of attention — in its prologues and epilogues — where the rest of the work comes in. Attention and reverence provoke a search for understanding; understanding provokes renewed attention and reverence.<sup>11</sup> In drawings, maps, and sculptural constructions, the material evidence of weathered and found objects is levied against the informational and spatial structures central to the governance of land, most explicitly through the grid.

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<sup>10</sup> See Austin (Footnote 1)

<sup>11</sup> Aldo Leopold famously notes that “One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds. Much of the damage inflicted on land is quite invisible to laymen. An ecologist must either harden his shell and make believe that the consequences of science are none of his business, or he must be the doctor who sees the marks of death in a community that believes itself well and does not want to be told otherwise.” *Sand County Almanac*, 1949

Organic shapes and gestures vye and tumble within straight-edged confines, obfuscating what is subject and what is ground. Handwriting in varying degrees of legibility finds a tenuous equilibrium between its referent and the formal linearity of its gesture. The logic of the work is one of juxtaposition. In bringing to bear such specific content in the work I have never been capable of maintaining the fiction of painting entirely on its own. I require the real world to creep in and assert itself, to sublimate the painting not as a world in itself, but an object in this one.

Rosalind Krauss may insist that the grid achieved visual ubiquity following its artistic discovery in the early part of last century.<sup>12</sup> Virginia Woolf famously points to a fundamental change of human character that coincides with this revelation.<sup>13</sup> But can we reconcile such claims within the cloisters of the arts with the grid's appearance in ideation construction since ancient times? Despite its formal affinity with the rectangular structure of painted or paper surface, can we release it from its intimate association with property and oppression unfolding spatially?<sup>14</sup> In an undeniably human tendency towards both geometry and greed, square homes first became storehouses, a private hoard protected against communal need. In North America, square miles became property lines, an efficient way to carve space and distribute resources amongst a class of invaders. Despite my love for the paintings of Agnes Martin and the kinship I feel to many trajectories of her visual thought, I side with Martha Tuttle in questioning the innocence of the grid.<sup>15</sup>

At the junction of experience and understanding lies attention. It is a serious demand made by my paintings that they do not loudly entertain — that they do not announce themselves brazenly or attempt to compete with the clamorous cacophony of digital images or virtual realities. They stubbornly have to be noticed before they reveal themselves on their own terms. In closing these remarks on this work, on the significance of attention, and on our obligations to the natural world, I turn to Mary Oliver: “Attention without feeling, I began to learn, is only a report. An openness — an empathy — was necessary if the attention was to matter.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Rosalind Krauss, “Grids” *October* (9) 1979

<sup>13</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown*, 1924

<sup>14</sup> In many independent ancient civilizations, the transition from round or ovoid communal dwellings to linearly arranged square houses coincided with the transition from communal village life and property to insular family groups with private food storage. See Kent V. Flannery, “The Origins of the Village as a Settlement Type,” 1972. I am very grateful to Harvey Weiss at Yale for allowing me to audit his graduate seminar on Environmental History which has given me access to this, and many other, insights about the history of human interaction with the environment.

<sup>15</sup> Martha Tuttle, “I question the innocence of the grid” in *Agnes Martin: Independence of mind*, 2022

<sup>16</sup> Mary Oliver, *Our World*, 2009.