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Essay
Anya Ventura

In the history of American landscape painting, image-making was a tool to contain the unknowable and uncontrollable: the wilderness of a continent not yet wholly colonized. To create the image of the West was in some way to own the West—to tame the plains, the largeness of the world, through the act of picturing, a kind of ocular occupation.

Yet in Jen Harris' *Ghost Prairie*, the landscape never coheres itself, assembles into a whole, a recognizable shape. It never smoothes itself for the eye into the reassuring flatness of two-dimensional representation. Instead, what we see is the continual refraction of the image, folding and unfolding, kaleidoscopic and dimensionally complex. The installation is a shimmering phantasmagoria, wheeling between the figurative and the abstract, light and dark, organic and geometric form. The prairie, or the memory of the prairie, is rendered in a series of modular cubes, ink paintings mounted on woodblocks, that at times appear to be spilling out their lush contents: soft pieces of pattern and bird wing, the spectral stalks of long-dead plants. The vanished landscape, the interlocking tiles of the phantom plains, is a puzzle with no solution. Ghostly, we cannot take possession of it.

Harris has invoked these ghosts through the most delicate of marks, the light tracings of whispery filaments and leaves limned in transparent glaze. The puzzle is also a palimpsest. We can discern, but just barely, the uncultivated prairie that existed before the farmer's plow: the sea of tall grass, milkweed and clover. We can glimpse the land before white settlers broke up the thick sod, unwound the river's curves, drained water

from the wetlands, and unearthed the dark soil that would become the most profitable in the country. The installation calls forth the patchy, teeming countryside before it was paved into the familiar gridwork of agriculture, row upon row of chemical-fed crops, unfurling for as far as the eye can see.

The tiles unfold into an expanse of negative space, a wall of blankness that only the imagination can fill. We long to complete the pattern, to find some sequential order in the repetition of form, but the piece will be forever incomplete, eluding our capture. When the modular form is interrupted, opening out onto nothingness, we experience an important dislocation as if time itself were shifting, fracturing, and re-playing. The formal composition calls to mind Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history, in which he claims there exist small pauses or disruptions that hold the potential to blast apart our progressive, linear sense of time. Harris uses the idea of the ghost—a manifestation of loss that haunts the present—as a way of grappling with this unruliness of history, its strange shapes. The ghost in this work appears as a bad form, a type of sick repetition, an allegory of broken time. We come to realize that time—the fourth dimension—does not proceed along a straight line but instead is multiform, always on the verge of turning in on itself, and cannot be neatly platted.

In *Ghost Prairie*, the eye is pulled to the segment of black tiles along the lower left half of the installation, the line forming an impenetrable shroud that suggests an image that can never fully be known. Amid this darkness is a small eyehole. The eyehole is much like the aperture of a telescope or a 19th

century glass lantern slide, offering a window into this spirit world. It is a shape that insinuates a seeing eye, alluding to the existence of an invisible viewer. The eyehole, an artifact of beholding, is the technology by which the natural world is reduced, framed and transformed into a landscape, an organized field of view that is perceived as separate and distinct from the human spectator. But, importantly, our gaze is not unmet. Further along the picture plane is a fragment of a bird's eye: dark, knowing, uncanny. It is the bird's eye that seems to haunt the entire work. It is nature looking back at us, the trace of ecological trauma.

We are left with the colors and patterns of a vanished world, a world that will never reveal itself in its entirety—a world that, like memory, will only present itself in fragments, blocks of sensation, fleeting and disconnected. These fragments are not unlike those scraps of tall grass prairie we have remaining, forgotten wilds found in road ditches, railroad right-of-ways and cemeteries, the pockets of land somehow excluded from development. What we have is a wilderness in pieces and yet within these spatial irregularities, the uneven edges of modernity, we might find what Benjamin calls “a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past”—the seeds of a different future.

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Ghost Prairie

Sarah Falkner

It is recent news to contemporary people that time is in the eye of the beholder: that, with some varying equations of the relationships between mass, form, and velocity but generally, the smaller the creature and the fleetier its locomotion, the finer is the scale of measurement and perception of time and space passing. Changing scale and scope of focus, zooming in, speeding up your own sensory processing, the closer and more carefully you look at or listen to something that at first seems a uniform flat field of light or sound, the more you can detect it as an assemblage of fractured parts, the more evident are the gaps and pauses and lacunae. So, what is a steady glowing heavenly beacon to a person is a sequence of shooting stars to the serpent, the bird sees wings flapping where a person sees gliding, the fly evades the frenzied swatter because it apprehends its trajectories as if it were a leisurely fanning palm leaf; whereas the tortoise ponders all of this like the glaciers retreating from the landmass that would become what we now call Iowa. The ice sheets left behind the plains that their bulk had flattened as if to make the land rhyme with the seabed it had been epochs before the ice arrived, and the rivulets and rivers of runoff from the glaciers' melting carved and sanded the soil until the horizon was restored to a sea again, a sea of grass; a circling rhythm and sequence.

Tiny eyes sending sensory signals to tiny brains with a rapidity of relay through all circuits makes for a channel of communication that cannot be transmitted or deciphered by the possessors of more weighty and lumbering cerebella, who

would only hear a sustained mournful tone where a prairie chicken detects a Morse code staccato.

And then there are the green nations, who present their aerial plant parts aboveground in a public mode to be witnessed and sometimes eaten by the two-legged, four-legged and winged creatures who flourish in the light of the sun—but who also, under the cover of soil, conduct the majority of their activities, exchanging only between themselves phosphorus and carbon via vast thickets of filament and fungus. The webs and nets of rhizome and mycelium enmesh tightly beneath the surface of the soil, making a sod of up to fifteen feet deep under the plains. The mineral currencies exchanged by the plants are given in gifts of varying molecular denominations and repeating patterns clear enough even modern people have grasped in them a grammar conveying cooperation, pain, and warning.

Some of the first peoples of the landmass which in this moment we call Iowa—a name that one of the peoples of the region used for themselves—built monumental mounded earthworks, shapes of animals and plants most clearly seen and read from a position up in the sky, their curves and markings aligning in cycles with the movements of planets and stars. In the same era other peoples at great distances from one another across the globe also rallied immense resources to create their own similar structures, everyone seeming to demonstrate sufficient understanding of the celestial syntax to know that there are many modes of time, perception and communication accessible all at once. The early people of Iowa built effigies of Bear, Bird, Deer, Bison, Lynx, Turtle, Panther, and Water Spirit, and sited their

constructions within the Driftless Area, a place that is a rough edge to the flat prairies, a syncopated terrain erupting into outcrops and sinkholes demonstrating it is one of the places that escaped the procession of the glaciers. The first people seemed to have chosen this site the better to send their messages to the stars, to us in the future, and to whomever else we in this moment do not see or know but who they did, perhaps because it is a place outside of flattened linear time.

When European settlers arrived from the east what they sought to build seemed to require more destruction than construction. The plows broke the plains and tore even patterns of furrows into the seas of grass, the settlers cut the rhizomatous sod into bricks in order to make the grim houses they wished could have been made of logs instead, they killed the bison who would have grazed the grass which killed the first people who would have eaten some of the bison and, not satisfied with all that, they further directly killed and displaced the people who were there before them, whose hand had always been light upon the land though they had been well-nourished by it for millennia. The settlers delighted in making everything flat and straight and regularly-spaced, proffering razed emptiness as a virtue, and so they did not hear or see or sense at all the symphonies of messages the resistance was channeling to their allies in the past, present and future.

And then came the railroads and then came the tractors, then came the mines, then came the nitrates, the herbicides, the

pesticides, and the foul-brew rivulets and rivers of runoff from livestock incarcerated too densely and fed wrongly.

But time is in the eye of the beholder, and so when we gaze with an eye other than human it can be seen that it is in fact but a tenuous influence the settlers have had on the plains. The land, people today sometimes observe, within a very short time of abandonment of active human interference seems to “restore itself” to prairie. People wonder at this and, as humans so often do, in perceiving their own absence see only an emptiness—but there is in fact a multitude present: the tiny, the quick, the underground, the mounded, the enmeshed, the meandering; even the cyclones and wildfires that speed across the plains have their roles. The prairie returns home and takes back its territories safeguarded by the coalition of the willing in the restoration of the land, whose members have been summoned together again while all the while the settlers remained deaf, blind and impervious to the liberation songs and clarion calls all around them, hypnotized by their own evenly-spaced rows, their straight lines, their flatness.

The works in *Ghost Prairie* were conceived in response to the Iowa landscape, which is by many measures the most radically altered place in North America. Imagery in the paintings references the lost expanse of Iowa tallgrass prairie. All plants depicted are native to this state.

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Notes / Plants
Jen P. Harris

Blue vervain *Verbena hastata* L.
Showy tick trefoil *Desmodium canadense*
Milk vetch *Astragalus canadensis* L.
Rattle box *Crotalaria sagittalis*
Spreading dogbane *Apocynum androsaemifolium*
Partridge pea *Chamaecrista fasciculata*
Pale gentian *Gentiana alba*
Germander *Teucrium canadense* L.
White sage *Artemisia ludoviciana*
Wild licorice *Glycyrrhiza lepidota*
Flowering spurge *Euphorbia corollata*
Rattle box *Crotalaria sagittalis* L.
Hairy four-o'clock *Mirabilis hirsuta*
Butterfly weed *Asclepias tuberosa*
Bottle gentian *Gentiana andrewsii*
New England aster *Aster novae-angliae*
Flodman's thistle *Cirsium flodmanii*
Big bluestem *Andropogon gerardii*
Rattlesnake master *Eryngium yuccifolium*
Indian hemp *Apocynum sibiricum*
Sand milkweed *Asclepias amplexicaulis*
White sage *Artemisia ludoviciana*
Prairie Indian plantain *Cacalia plantaginea*
Field thistle *Cirsium discolor*
Ox-eye *Heliopsis helianthoides*
False dandelion *Krigia biflora*
Black-eyed Susan *Rudbeckia hirta*
Compass plant *Silphium laciniatum*
Rosinweed *Silphium integrifolium*
Field goldenrod *Solidago nemoralis*
Eastern prickly pear *Opuntia humifusa*
Little prickly pear *Opuntia fragilis*
Sleepy catchfly *Silene antirrhina*