



VCU

Virginia Commonwealth University
VCU Scholars Compass

Theses and Dissertations

Graduate School

1988

The Effect of Man on the Landscape and the Effect of Land on the Manscape: Or Contingent Plans for Knowing a Mountain

Taylor Scott Baldwin
Virginia Commonwealth University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd>



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#)

© The Author

Downloaded from

<https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/1353>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.

© Taylor Scott Baldwin 2007

All Rights Reserved

*THE EFFECT OF MAN ON THE LANDSCAPE AND THE EFFECT OF LAND ON THE
MANSCAPE:*

OR

CONTINGENT PLANS FOR KNOWING A MOUNTAIN

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of the Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

TAYLOR SCOTT BALDWIN
Bachelor of the Fine Arts, Rhode Island School of Design, 2005

Director: ELIZABETH KING
Professor, Graduate School of the Arts Department of Sculpture

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
May 2007

Table of Contents

	Page
List of Figures	vi
Chapters	
Preface	1
I. Knowable History	3
II. Knowable Present and the Uncentering of the Centers.....	5
III. Knowable Context and Cultural Zeitgeist	12
IV. Sediment and Unknowing	14
References.....	18

List of Figures

	Page
Figure 1: Busted Butte <i>Or</i> the Evening Deadness in the West.	2
Figure 2: Satellite image of the northwest slope of Busted Butte, Nevada.	3
Figure 3: Richard Misrach, <i>Bomb Crater and Destroyed Convoy</i>	10
Figure 4: Richard Misrach, <i>Dead Animals #1</i>	11
Figure 5: Busted Butte <i>Or</i> the Evening Deadness in the West (detail).	17

Abstract

*THE EFFECT OF MAN ON THE LANDSCAPE AND THE EFFECT OF LAND ON THE
MANSCAPE:*

OR

CONTINGENT PLANS FOR KNOWING A MOUNTAIN

By Taylor Baldwin, BFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of the
Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2007

Major Director: Elizabeth King
Professor, Graduate School of the Arts Department of Sculpture

In my artistic practice, I emphasize personal and pan-cultural anxieties regarding civilization and the environment as an impetus for work in sculpture, video, and drawing. By locating marginal microcosmic subject matter that tellingly exhibits macrocosmic global dread, I seek to capture and distill our overwhelming eco-socio-political anxiety into a portrait of a society at a point in its history when the specter of nameless impending disaster weighs pressingly on the collective psyche.

This thesis is supplementary to my work of sculpture in the Graduate School of the Arts Thesis Exhibition at the Anderson Gallery opening on April 27th, 2007. The work was entitled *Busted Butte Or the Evening Deadness in the West*, and images of it are contained within the text. This document was created in Microsoft Word 2004.

Preface

“His origins are become remote as is his destiny and not again in all the world’s turning will there be terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man’s will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay.”

Cormac McCarthy, Blood Meridian: Or the Evening Redness in the West

Desert metropolises tend to imbue their populations with a sense of perpetually imminent catastrophic entropy. These cities are under constant threat of reclamation by their surrounding landscape, from erosion, sandstorm, flash flood, or scarcity of water. These destructive factors are at work daily in southern Arizona, where I was born and raised. The cultural environment of the western United States’ Great Basin Desert is simultaneously preoccupied with development and conservation, utter desolation and dense urbanization, all settled precariously within a forbidding and lethal ecosystem. These paradoxical influences leave one with a subtle but apocalyptically transient notion of civilization precipitated by a native ecology that regularly imposes itself on daily living. By locating these global peripheries at the center of our frame, we begin to paint an alternate portrait of the current state of the conventional centers. This re-centering also allows for a description of the process through which the very sublimity of the post-human landscape leaves its indelible mark on its people and culture just as they carve their corrosive signature in the same ancient geology.

In my artistic practice, I emphasize personal and pan-cultural anxieties regarding civilization and the environment as an impetus for work in sculpture, video, and drawing. By locating marginal microcosmic subject matter that tellingly exhibits macrocosmic global dread, I seek to capture and distill our overwhelming eco-socio-political anxiety into a portrait of a society at a point in its history when the specter of nameless impending disaster weighs pressingly on the collective psyche.

{Figure 1: *Busted Butte Or the Evening Deadness in the West*, mixed media, 11' x 8' x 10', 2007.}



I. Knowable History

{Figure 2: Satellite image of the northwest slope of Busted Butte, Nevada. }



In many ways the factual history of Busted Butte, in the Yucca Mountain range of southern Nevada, is finite, accessible, and knowable. There exists a finely intermeshed series of factual rubrics -geographic, ecologic, climatic, historic, cultural, political, etc.- through which we can access this landscape. In its most primary and essentialized identity, it is a mountain. It erupts unaccompanied and abruptly out of surrounding arid lowlands. This fact defines it scientifically as a butte, rather than a mesa, peak, ridge, caldera, or other specific geologic classification. Technically speaking we know a butte as a conspicuous isolated hill, generally flat-topped and always steeply-sided. The eroded vertical slopes are capped by resistant strata of rock, protecting the softer rocks underneath that compose the mass of the mountain. Buttes usually stand less than one

thousand feet above the outlying plain. This particular butte is located within the Great Basin Desert of the American southwest.

The Great Basin Desert one of seven major arid regions across the globe, and it encompasses a wide spectrum of discreet but contiguous desert ecologies. This continental depression is the west's major watershed, funneling rainfall from between the facing slopes of the Rocky Mountains and the Sierra Nevada's. Lying between these two massive plateaus, the basin itself consists of sunken blocks of the earth's crust interspersed with massive fissures of 'ranges'; relatively uplifted blocks, many of which tilt slightly eastward at their tops. The almost incomprehensible macrocosmic view of the whole region is not unlike a massive dry clay tablet, flattened and sunken into the earth, shattered and compressed throughout so that the interlocking pieces periodically rise and overlap each other in a grinding jigsaw puzzle on a geologic scale. Millions of years ago, a series of large explosive volcanic eruptions occurred to the north of what would eventually become the Yucca Mountain Range. These eruptions produced dense clouds of volcanic ash and rock fragments, which melted or compressed together to create layers of solid rock, forming the stoic mountains, ridges, mesas, cliffs, and hills of the iconic region. Busted Butte is one of these uplifted chunks of crust, a fractured bit of rock brought from the molten center of the planet: the very *stuff* of the earth. Eons ago Busted Butte was thrust skywards through the settled and level soil by the globe's internal combustion engine.

II. Knowable Present and the Uncentering of the Centers

“I sought the finished form of the future catastrophe of the social in geology...”
Jean Baudrillard, America

Busted Butte is also located within the Yucca Mountain Range, a mile or so southeast of the Yucca Mountain Ridge Line in Nye County, south-central Nevada. Four million acres of this now blighted land has been owned by the United States Department of Defense since January 11th, 1951. On the physical and mental periphery of the country’s population centers, the land is uniquely ideal for the outsourcing of the uglier elements of what it is that keeps the country powerful. In a stunningly concise description of exactly how the United States government has managed to value this seemingly resourceless area of desert, one cold war era Pentagon official claimed the Great Basin as a “national sacrifice zone” (former top environmental officer Michael Carricato), presumptively offered by the entire nation as expendable collateral for the cost of the necessity of increased militarization during the second half of the 20th century. Our vast “national sacrifice zone” -known as the Nevada Proving Grounds, White Sands Missile Range, Trinity Test Site, Titan Intercontinental Ballistic Missile Facility, et. Al.- is the epicenter of the military industrial complex that represents the internal engine of the country’s global power.

Over the last fifty years of the 20th century, countless tons of nuclear explosives have been detonated across the west, leaving the lunar landscape irrevocably scarred by

cascades of atomic shockwaves ricocheting through the red-rock canyons and arroyos. Streams of corrosive waste expelled from weapons development black sites seep into the eroded fissures of fossil rivers. The clouds of open-air nerve gas releases mix seamlessly with the billowing cumulous formations. This literal warfare by inhabitants on landscape is waged within the national borders, edged to the margins of civilization where it is hyper-localized, yet is in the service of interests and warfare on a global scale: this landscape and its historical use has ominous lineages, both potential and actualized, through the more central political history of the 20th century. The mentally oppressive weight and post-human ominosity of the calcified layers of compressed geology and landscape has been usurped by the much more explosive and immediate doom of the global military landscape.

Encompassing more acreage than the state of Rhode Island, the Nevada Test Site that Busted Butte is located within is one of the largest of the United States' restricted access areas, a sprawling 'Black Site' of sun-bleached desert rock used primarily for conventional, biological, and nuclear weapons testing and storage. While the implications and consequences of these facilities' *product* have a very central global fulcrum (from atomic victory in WWII, napalm massacres in Vietnam, Mutually-Assured-Destruction in the Cold War, biological terrorism employing Anthrax and Smallpox, to the current international arms race spurred in North Korea and Iran), the facilities' *waste* has very local catastrophic implications. As Richard Misrach, the photographer and anti-nuclear

activist who in the 1980's illegally trespassed and documented these Nevada desert 'Black Sites' in his series *Desert Cantos*, described his incursions into the Nevada Black Site:

"It was the most graphically ravaged environment I had ever seen... I wandered for hours amongst the craters. There were thousands of them. Some were small, shallow pits the size of a bathtub, others were gargantuan excavations as large as a suburban two-car garage. Some were bone dry, with walls of "traumatized earth" splatterings, others were eerie pools of blood-red or emerald green water. Some had crystallized into strange salt formations. Some were decorated with the remains of blown-up jeeps, tanks, and trucks... the apocalyptic kingdom that the Department of defense has built in the desert west."

Richard Misrach, Bravo 20: The Bombing of the American West

The radioactive and toxic detritus leftover from the entirety of the atomic era have gradually accumulated in a seeping panorama of marginal sites across the country; the rusted barrels of untreatable waste produced by nuclear energy and weapon production litter the country's in between spaces in the same way that Misrach describes the devastation and waste that litters the Nevada black site. Buried beneath the earth in crumbling concrete bunkers or stowed away in secured above-ground storage facilities, these repositories of cataclysmic potential house decaying waste, waiting out the eons until nuclear half-life has been reached. With the turn of the century, the U.S. Department of energy proposed a new use for our 'national sacrifice zone': The Yucca Mountain Repository, a consolidation of all the radioactive material into one central, decentralized site. In a dryly utilitarian statement, the Department of Energy outlines their intentions:

"Yucca Mountain is the nation's proposed repository for spent nuclear fuel. The U.S. Department of Energy began studying Yucca Mountain, Nevada, in 1978 to determine whether it would be suitable for the nation's first long-term geologic

repository for spent nuclear fuel and high-level radioactive waste. Currently stored at 126 sites around the nation, these materials are a result of nuclear power generation and national defense programs.

On July 23, 2002, President Bush signed House Joint Resolution 87, allowing the DOE to take the next step in establishing a safe repository in which to store our nation's nuclear waste. The Department of Energy is currently in the process of preparing an application to obtain the Nuclear Regulatory Commission license to proceed with construction of the repository.

Yucca Mountain is located in a remote desert on federally protected land within the secure boundaries of the Nevada Test Site in Nye County, Nevada. It is approximately 100 miles northwest of Las Vegas, Nevada.”

U.S. Department of Energy Office of Civilian Radioactive Waste

This proposal for a single massive repository forces our national government, usually operating on a relatively short political time scale, to attempt to act on a geologic one. Civilization is now being asked to consider what changes the land of the Yucca Mountain Repository, not to mention humankind itself, will go through in the next twenty thousand years, the conservative estimate regarding the amount of time the stored material will take to reach half-life and rendered non-fatal to organic life. Government linguists are currently and optimistically working on a universal visual language they can use to signify the toxic state of the site to a future population that will not likely speak any known language. Under their own parameters, the DOE is attempting to construct a marker than can not only be viewed and understood from the air, but is also made out of materials that will still be in existence and intelligible in twenty thousand years. Government geologists are attempting to predict the future behavior of the stone surrounding and beneath the repository as well. Like all of the Great Basin's geologic formations, Yucca Mountain is crisscrossed by an unknowable spider web of cracks and fissures. Some of these cracks extend from the planned storage area all the way to the water table one thousand feet below. After the

predicted and inevitable structural failure and decay of the waste containers several tens of thousands of years from now, these cracks may provide a route for radioactive waste to drain into the water table, untreatably poisoning the water supply for an enormous portion of the arid west and whatever it is, human or otherwise, that lives there in the distant future. This proposition is being treated with the assuredness of geologic inevitability and natural entropy. The DOE acknowledges that even without cracks the surrounding rock strata is slightly permeable to water, but they contend that due to the depth of the water table it is estimated that by the time the waste enters the water supply it will be safe. This is all supposing that the climate does not alter much in the next several thousand years and raise the water table up to meet the seeping waste. Regardless of whether the specter of catastrophic radiation comes to fruition, this proposed switch of the scope of governmental time, from tens of years into the future to tens of thousands of years into the future, pits civilization against natural entropy in a way that is hopelessly one sided, doomed at the outset as a failing proposition. It also presupposes our own civilization's future non-existence. Our fear and acknowledgement of global extinction as not only a distant possibility but as a probable inevitability, is written in the rocks. It is inherent in our cognition of the sediment fossil strata that betrays the earth's age and its previous dynasties, and results with the epidemic anxiety of the truly post-human landscape of the west: Baudrillard's "future catastrophe of the social in geology."

So as it stands, Busted Butte itself currently exists as a shell, a hollow core waiting to be injected and filled with countless gallons of seeping spent nuclear fuel and

radioactive waste material, waiting for the natural entropy that will ultimately allow the material to be non-lethal to living organisms. But all of this information still does not coalesce into a knowing truth of this mountain, a gestalt reconciliation of landscape, image and meaning. This type of history embodies only one ‘instance’, a minute facet of the whole in the chain of ‘contiguity’ that is this geology’s identity.

{Figure 3: Richard Misrach, *Bomb Crater and Destroyed Convoy, Bravo 20 Bombing Range, Nevada*, 1986}



{Figure 4: Richard Misrach, *Dead Animals #1, Nevada, 1987.*}



III. Knowable Context and Cultural Zeitgeist

Busted Butte does not exist in a cultural vacuum. The factual and political rubric surrounding the butte still fails to adequately describe its own cultural significance and the web of interrelated histories that enmesh it. To dissect this singular landscape's impact on the mind is to parse cultural constructs from a macrocosmic level to a microcosmic one, and vice versa. The romantic notion of the west, the one of man and landscape weathering each other, of manifest destiny and the divine right to a westward expansion to the Pacific Ocean, is at the core of our country's notion of itself and of its own history. At this point, we are so wholly inundated with mythologies of this nostalgic "old" or "wild" west, images of the leathery pock-marked visages of cowmen and their oiled weapons, Conestoga wagons carving a dusty plume and a hard life through the vast red earth between towering mesas, that we cannot accurately *see* the geology of the west with out it being obscured by ourselves and our history.

This construction of the victorious, iconic, and nostalgic west was essentially inaugurated with the end of the frontier, as so inauspiciously declared by Frederick Jackson Turner in his *Frontier Thesis* delivered to the American Historical Association in 1893 at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Turner's conclusion is that the wellsprings of American exceptionalism and vitality have always been the American frontier, the region between urbanized, civilized society and the untamed wilderness.

Turner, using census data, statistical analysis, and the whole extent of the U.S borders at that time, claimed he had precisely located the boundary between frontier and wilderness upon the 98th meridian, and in defining it finitely limited its actual potential and began the mutant growth of its symbolic potential. In the thesis, the frontier created freedom, "breaking the bonds of custom, offering new experiences, calling out new institutions and activities." Turner first announced his thesis in a paper entitled "The Significance of the Frontier in American History", and in doing so sedimented within the American conscious the notion that in our wild landscapes lays our freedom, the reason America is so self-declaratively unique in the world. It also began the cultural obfuscation of something essential about our landscape's true identity.

IV. Sediment and Unknowing

In one significant and ultimately overriding way, the actual identity of this mountain is completely unknowable, buried beneath the sediment of unobtainable contiguity. What we have access to through the immediate present is merely a single heterogeneous 'instance' of this geology, whose history is composed of an infinite number of 'instances' compressed one atop another atop another, extending ad infinitum in a kaleidoscopic fractal deep into the ooze of prehistory, well past the point where these instances are limited to describing this mountain particularly and begin to describe the constituent processes and elements that bore all geology into existence. This oppressive notion crushes the logic and reasoning of the former modes of analysis. This ocean of intermingled instances obliterates the notion of discreet limits between histories, between organisms, between matter, even disposing of initial or terminal instances, beginnings or endings.

This idea of contiguity, as opposed to continuity, is the root of the inherent power and mentally erosive potential of existing in the sublime landscape and making a work of art. Contiguity is the process of sedimentation; the sequential molecular growth of a microscopic catalytic seed crystal immersed in a saturated saline solution into a complexly organized salt garden. The crystal grows atom by atom, snatching the sodium molecules from the surrounding brine and lodging them within its own structure in a way that is

entirely contingent on the way it is configured in that specific instance. In that moment of sedimental growth the instance of that crystal is changed and the proceeding growth will be contingent on a nuancedly different structure, as will the next growth be, and the next after that. Each new stage of growth is entirely contingent on the very nature and structure of the stage that came before it, which is entirely contingent on the one preceding it as well, and so on. No element of its growth could happen in any minutely different way, or in any slightly different order, and still result in the same present construction.

In that way, each present incarnation is a palimpsest of every single instance, process, history, and atom of that particularly ordered chronology. This process is not only an additive one, as the particular order of discarded, subtracted, or decayed elements define the available structure just as commandingly. Contiguity is the type of growth that allows single-celled protozoa to radiate outward over the course of 4 billion years into every single complex multi-cellular organism that exists or has ever existed; by changing physiology, molecule by molecule of genetic material a generation a time, working with only the available physical matter of the body, until the catalyst of complexity is brought into existence. It is the process through which humans currently exist, sprawled across the globe only because of the massive extinctions that preceded their arrival. In this way, through the process of contiguity, the very existence of our species speaks to the very non-existence of others, the specter of catastrophic mass destruction. As the influential natural historian Steven Jay Gould stated in his essay *Wonderful Life*, on the development of diversity and the role of extinction in evolution: “We are products of a contingent history.

Rewind the tape of life to the early history of multi-cellular forms, and you get a whole different set of solutions every time--most of which, although equally explainable, do not include the origin of any self-conscious creature to have conference like this.” This process of contingent history consists of the binary forces of sedimentation and erosion, accumulation and decay, growth and entropy, and it is the chronologic specificity of these two simultaneous forces at work on a single “instance’ that shapes its idiosyncrasy and welds its material to meaning. It is why Busted Butte can concurrently contain meaning about the histories of itself, of man, of landscape in general, of global warfare, of empire building, of ecology, of how thought is built in a work of art, and also how a sign of a mountain cannot lead to a knowing of a mountain. Man erodes the landscape and landscape erodes the mind. Man submerges the earthly strata under his own, and the landscape will respond in kind.

{Figure 5: *Busted Butte Or the Evening Deadness in the West* (detail), mixed media, 11' x 8' x 10', 2007.}



Literature Cited

Literature Cited

Baudrillard, Jean, America, New York: Verso, 1988

Davis, Mike, Dead Cities and Other Tales, New York: The New Press, 2002

Gould, Steven Jay, Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History, New York: W. W. Norton, 1990

McCarthy, Cormac, Blood Meridian: Or the Evening Deadness in the West, New York: Random House International, 1985

Tucker, Anne Wilkes, Crimes and Splendors: The Desert Cantos of Richard Misrach, Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1996

Turner, Frederick Jackson (author) and Faragher, John Mack (editor), Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" and Other Essays, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999

VITA

Taylor Scott Baldwin

Born in Tucson, Arizona on August 7th, 1983

Education

MFA Sculpture, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA, candidate 2007

BFA Sculpture, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI, 2005

Liberal Arts studies, Brown University, Providence, RI, 2002-05

Selected Exhibitions

- 2007 VCU Graduate Thesis Exhibition, Anderson Gallery, Richmond, VA
WE and US, PLAYSPACE Gallery, San Francisco, CA
- 2006 *Multiplex*, Onebeta Gallery, Outdoors Video Installation, Lincoln, NE
Debate Team, FAB Gallery, VCU, Richmond, VA
4th Annual Student Triennial, Marmara University, Istanbul, Turkey
Like Dowsing, Corrugated Box, Richmond, VA
Not Psychedelic, Building 16, Providence, RI
Baldwin & White, Flat International, Richmond, VA
W/E Trade, Peggy Phelps Gallery, Claremont McKenna College, Claremont, CA
- 2005 *Scurvy Picnic*, Locker 50B, VCU, Richmond, VA
VCU Sculpture Presents..., FAB Gallery, VCU, Richmond, VA
RISD Senior Invitational, Woods-Gerry Gallery, Providence, RI
RISD Sculpture Department Exhibition, 191 Westminster St., Providence, RI
Red Door Group Show, Red Door Gallery, Providence, RI
RISD Sculpture/Ceramics Thesis Exhibition, Woods-Gerry Gallery, Providence, RI
- 2004 *RISD Sculpture Department Exhibition*, 192 Westminster St., Providence, RI
Metcalf Open Studio, Metcalf Building, RISD, Providence, RI
- 2003 *Body of Work*, Gallery Agniel, Providence, RI
Risk: Art and Politics, Red Door Gallery, Providence, RI

Awards & Honors

- 2006 Graduate Teaching Assistantship, VCU, Richmond, VA
Marmara University 4th Annual Student Triennial, Marmara University, Istanbul, Turkey

- Graduate Travel Grants to Providence and Istanbul, VCU, Richmond, VA
- Graduate School Research Grant, VCU, Richmond, VA
- 2005 Graduate Teaching Assistantship, VCU, Richmond, VA
- Graduate Scholarship, VCU, Richmond, VA
- Outstanding Senior Award, RISD, Providence, RI

Teaching & Related Experience

- 2006 Co-Instructor, “Club Synesthesia: Survey of Music and Art”, VCU, Richmond, VA
- Instructor, “Introduction to Sculpture for Non-Majors”, VCU, Richmond, VA
- 2005 Teaching Assistant to Kendall Buster, “Basic Sculpture”, VCU, Richmond, VA
- Studio Assistant to Ara Peterson, Providence, RI (assisted in fabrication of work for 2005 Armory Exhibition in New York)
- 2004 Metal Shop Instructor, Sculpture Foundry and Metalworking, RISD, Providence, RI
- 2003 Teaching Assistant to Jack Massey, “Two Dimensional Design”, RISD, Providence, RI