

ARTIST STATEMENT

The Vanishing Landscape

The American West has always figured prominently as a potent, mythological symbol in our collective cultural consciousness. Yet, a radical transformation of this region of the country is well under way as projected developments erode the natural landscape, the urban growth boundaries of metropolitan areas expand into surrounding farmland, and land-use issues pit corporate interests against the individual citizens who once stood in stark contrast to their natural surroundings while admitting an uneasy alliance with the sparse and majestic landscape they call home. *The Vanishing Landscape* project is a series of abstract paintings and prints I am creating that deals specifically with the vanishing iconic landscape that still nostalgically characterizes both, Americans and the American experience as it continues to permeate contemporary popular media, literature and culture.

It is important to address this conceit in the realm of visual art because it will subsequently reflect our cultural concerns in a medium known for celebrating the reality of our shared visual, sensory and intuitive responses to these obvious changes in our individual and collective experiences of the surrounding landscape. There exists an established tradition of landscape painting but this genre offers only a pictorial representation or appearance of the landscape itself and does not adequately depict its disappearance, transformation, nor the changes currently being wrought upon our immediate environment as planned developments, agribusiness and even golf resorts replace small town life, rural communities, family farms and forests. When the actual landscape vanishes, I am compelled as a visual artist to examine more fully the symbolic mythology of the West as its dynamic also undergoes a radical shift in the cultural zeitgeist through this displacement.

At a time when even the vernacular structures representative of our former way of life in the West are threatened by razing, it seems an exercise in futility to simply record the last of them in paint as a nostalgic memory of what was once totemic in this region. It is the rapid, technological changes to the landscape and then what remains in spirit that I am interested in capturing in painted form -- not grain elevators. For this reason, I am creating abstract works of art that reflect my responses to these transformations in the once familiar landscape of the American West. The method of rendering abstract paintings and prints is a celebration of the very act of change since this creative process involves the kind of continual mark-making that generates new sets of problems on the surface of each piece. Combinations of conscious and intuitive decisions are required throughout the process of engagement regarding each mark that is made, removed or covered over. Creating abstract art allows for the latitude necessary to address this concept of the vanishing iconic landscape while mirroring the very qualities of spirit the inhabitants of this region possess in terms of capability, skillfulness, adaptability and commitment as they become active participants in the re-creation of the new West and its inherent mythology.

The Vanishing Landscape exhibition will contribute to the ongoing dialogue and evolution of the landscape genre in art while simultaneously responding to the immediate concerns of citizens in this region of the country facing these significant cultural, social, economic, technological and political changes in their lives as their own surrounding landscape undergoes transformation. In this way, it serves as an important reflection of rural cultural consciousness in the process of profound contemporary change. Elevating these concerns to the status of art is a significant gesture toward honoring the people of this land.

James B. Thompson

