

'Strange Landscapes' At the Arlington Arts Center, Reviewed



The history of American painting is deeply connected to the landscape. Ever since the mid-19th century, when a group of disenchanting painters who would come to be known as the Hudson River School took to the wilderness, we've come to associate landscape in art with bucolic images. And for the most part, mass audiences still feel that way, correlating the landscape with paintings and photographs that pay homage to its sublimity. But it's so much more than that. The Earth Art movement that began in the late 1960s and recent large-scale installations and video art like the Renwick's "Wonder" or the Hirshhorn's "Days of Endless Time" challenge experiences of land. The most interesting works in "Strange Landscapes," the Arlington Art Center's latest exhibition, weds its subject to current issues within contemporary art—identity, history, social practice—and often imagines entirely new landscapes in order to explore the importance of those issues in building communities. Engulfing the space of one of the exhibition rooms is **James Mayhew's** 12-foot-tall inflatable sculpture, "The Wave of Mutilation." Inspired by the 1989 **Pixies'** song, in which the song's protagonist drives into the ocean to kiss mermaids and ride El Niño, Mayhew's sculpture is a gesture of resistance to the ever-present fear of the rising waters around our coastal cities. Along the walls surrounding the sculpture are child-like illustrated maps, travel guides, and photographic postcards of Samesies Island, Mayhew's utopia for transgender men. Replete with health care access, education, and housing, the imagined island becomes the foundation for both possibility and mythology. Informed by the strategies of conceptual art, **Katarina Jerinic's** "Beautification This Site" bridges performance, documentary practices, and social engagement. Jerinic became the custodian of a plot of land off the Brooklyn-

Queens Expressway through the Department of Transportation's Adopt-a-Highway program. The artist's laborious maintenance of the small, triangular piece of green is recorded in photos, video, aerial maps, and city documents. Souvenir postcards are available to viewers as though the site were the Grand Canyon—Jerinic's interrogation of discarded spaces, urban planning, and the gap between potential and futility.

The tension between bleakness and hope, loss and recovery are consistent throughout many of the works in "Strange Landscapes." **Jacob Rivkin** imbues his work with contradiction through media and process, using both analog and digital methods to render "Fortunate Isles: Landings," a video filmed on the Bonneville Salt Flats of Utah and the cliffs of Newfoundland. Rivkin then filmed performers in chroma-key suits and, once superimposed into the original landscape film, he drew animated creatures over them. The pictorial effect pits fantasy against reality and—with the actual suits displayed in the space—emphasizes a fascination with land exploration.

Ariel Jackson also combines installation and video, projecting onto the same crafted forms she utilizes in her performance. In "B.A.M. aka By Any Means Necessary," she incorporates ambiguous actions and a collage of found images that communicate disenfranchisement as she narrates between imaginary geographic points. Contextualized against trauma and Jackson's personal experience of Hurricane Katrina, the land is tied to sociopolitical conditions that inform identity.

When most people think of "landscape art," they still think of lavishly detailed paintings, and that's not totally lost in the exhibition. **Edgar Endress**'s whimsical prints of different sizes mimic the illustrative cataloging of species in the Darwinian century. They combine unlikely botanical elements and unrecognizable animals into new fictive discoveries that simulate how colonizing people probably felt encountering such images. **Alejandro Pintado** explores landscape and memory through the history of painting, by copying historical images in charcoal on raw linen, then manipulating them in color with ambiguous, contemporary objects to collude past with present.

But the work that most challenges the traditional landscape aesthetic belongs to **Matthew Mann**, whose bold application of vibrant colors and complicated perspectives merge geometric structures with natural elements. The result is the recognition that man-made structures both interrupt our landscapes while structuring our visual experiences of them.

The landscape artists of the 19th century sought to escape the crowded industrial city into nature. In the present, we are overwhelmed by a progressively eminent sense of nature's loss. Viewers who still imagine nature as a means of escape—and seek its representation within the nostalgia of bucolic landscape painting—may be better served checking out the **William Merritt Chase** exhibition at the Phillips Collection. But if you want to better comprehend how essential nature is to one's place in community—and imagine new possibilities for defining both—you should head to Arlington. *At the Arlington Arts Center through Oct. 2. 3550 Wilson Blvd., Arlington. Free. (703) 248-6800. arlingtonartscenter.org.*