

Excavating the Layers Under the Landscape

- by [Alexis Clements](#) on September 16, 2016



Katarina Jerinic, "Beautified Landscape" (2013), pigment print on PhotoTex, 40 x 60 inches (all photos by author for Hyperallergic) (click to enlarge)

ARLINGTON, Va. — The landscape paintings that taught me most about the form as a young person were the works of [Albert Bierstadt](#) and [Bob Ross](#). For much of my youth, I lived in the suburbs outside of Washington, DC, and my family made regular trips into the city to visit the National Gallery of Art. As a child, the sheer scale of Bierstadt's canvases and the obvious drama of the scenery he concocted were enough to make a lasting impression. I didn't know then the degree to which his scenes were imbued with fictions, but my overactive imagination whizzed and whirled across his grand canvases.

And, like many others, I knew Bob Ross's work well thanks to my local public television station. Ross's far less monumental depictions held no less interest for me, particularly as a kid who spent a great deal of time outdoors. When I later learned that Ross painted primarily from a basement in the subtropics of Florida, it felt all the more fitting that his works, even more than Bierstadt's, were informed by imagination and longing.

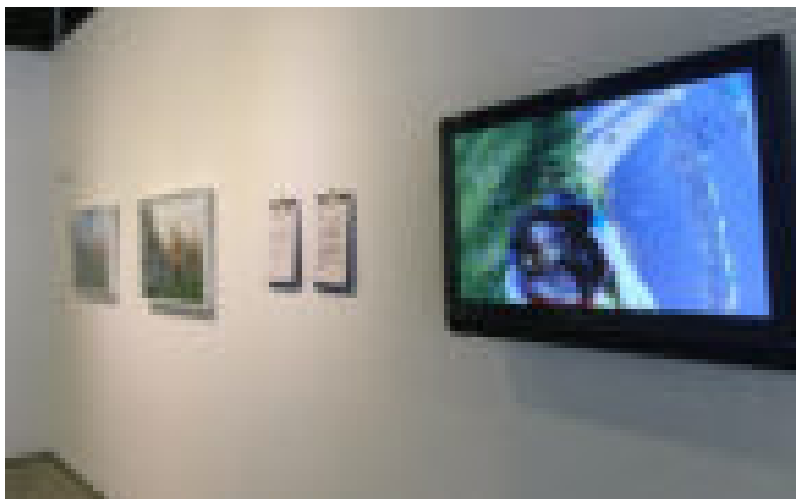
So, for me, the through line of fantasy, fabrication, and divining that runs through the show [Strange Landscapes](#), at the Arlington Arts Center in Virginia, feels both familiar and effective as an approach to the form.

Curated by Karyn Miller and Blair Murphy, this show features work by 11 artists with widely variant perspectives. Often they offer not just a presentation or elaboration of a fiction, but embed within that fiction a critique or twist that counters the purely aesthetic experience landscapes are typically deemed to offer.



Installation view of Edgar Endress, 'Santos' series, in 'Strange Landscapes' at Arlington Arts Center, 2016 (click to enlarge)

Immediately I was struck by the work of [Edgar Endress](#), whose lush printed collages tease viewers with the fetishistic beauty of natural history images drawn from 18th- and 19th-century prints. But something else is going on beyond their easy allure. As many Hyperallergic readers will know, museums and private collections of all kinds began as [cabinets of curiosity](#), where the spoils of wealth were hoarded to reinforce Western dominance and superiority. Even the supposedly objective history of science is marked by the colonialist impulse of European scientists claiming their first experience of a species as its discovery, ignoring or erasing local and indigenous people's knowledge and experience. In his *Santos* series, Endress mixes and matches species in ways that could never occur in the natural world, turning simplistic aggregations of living, or formerly living, things on their head, offering instead a series of [mementos mori](#) — seemingly abundant still lifes that are in fact reminders of their own impossibilities, of pending death and the destruction wrought by such arrangements. A grim but pointed subtext beneath a gorgeous façade.



Installation view of Katarina Jerinic, 'Beautification This Site,' in 'Strange Landscapes' at Arlington Arts Center, 2016 (click to enlarge)

In the same gallery, [Katarina Jerinic's](#) *Beautification This Site* offers a glimpse of a highly temporal landscape. The work mixes photographs, video, documents, and postcards to depict Jerinic's adoption of a small, fenced-in triangle of grass and asphalt just off the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway in New York City. For a year, the artist, through the Department of Transportation's Adopt-A-Highway Program, performed the duties of a volunteer, regularly clearing this isolated patch of vegetation of ever-accumulating garbage, trimming the grass, planting flowers, and occupying what otherwise is an inaccessible green space amid rushing cars and industrial buildings. Though not quite as dark as Endress's work, Jerinic's project also contains layers of meaning beneath its surface. There's both a sense of hope and of utter futility, of overwrought bureaucracy and the extremely limited but potential challenges that citizens can offer in the face of it. More than anything, *Beautification This Site* left me with a sense that the artist was pushing viewers to be far more curious about the space around them — who controls it and what role they play in shaping it.



Installation view of Ariel Jackson, "B.A.M. aka By Any Means Inc.," in 'Strange Landscapes' at Arlington Arts Center, 2016 (click to enlarge)

[Ariel Jackson](#)'s "B.A.M. aka By Any Means Inc." and [Jaimes Mayhew](#)'s *Samesies Island* bring their critiques more directly to the surface. Jackson's piece doesn't incorporate any traditional landscape imagery, but instead uses soft sculpture, projection, and audio narrative to suggest a landscape of the mind. A woman's voice speaks: "My five sons can't make it outside their house without being stopped." The voice goes on to speculate about "building an underground railroad" so that they can travel safely from point A to point B. Projected onto an upturned mattress in a dim gallery, the dreamscapes of the animated video evoke a playfulness that contrasts with the lived reality described in the audio, as well as in media headlines and images today.

Mayhew's work also offers a fantasy, one that both incorporates and subverts reality. Comprised of a large inflatable sculpture, postcards, a hand-drawn map, and text, the work takes on the experiences of, along with clichés and stereotypes about and within, trans male and genderqueer or gender non-conforming narratives. It places them in the imaginary context of the titular island, replete with locations such as "Neck Hair Bear Beach,"

“Academic Crossroads Station,” and “New Man Land’s Desert.” In one way, the project feels like a fun concoction among friends; in another, it reads as a clear send-up of the assumption that there is a single trans male story shared by all who carry that identity.



Installation view of James Mayhew, ‘Samesies Island,’ in ‘Strange Landscapes’ at Arlington Arts Center, 2016 (click to enlarge)

There are many other artists in *Strange Landscapes*, all of whom offer critical and compelling takes on the theme, and the show is joined at the center by two additional exhibitions that complement it. Upstairs, [Austin Shull](#)’s *Reconciliation* comprises an installation of images, video, and objects unearthed during the excavation of an 18th-century privy, or outhouse, behind a tenement in New York’s Lower East Side. Downstairs, elaborate dioramas depict mythological scenes, every object within them knitted, crocheted, or sculpted by the artists Stacy Cantrell and [Erika Cleveland](#), along with a group of community members who took classes and contributed work and labor. All three exhibitions highlight the complex desires present in the depiction of any landscape, challenging viewers to see more than benign natural scenery and drawing out the fantastical and sometimes problematic narratives that underpin the vistas before them.



Austin Shull, "Reconciliation/Reconstitution" (2010) face mounted on lambda print, 40 x 60 inches



Installation view of Erika Cleveland, "Baba Yaga/Mother Earth" (2016), sculptural needle felted and mixed media

[Strange Landscapes](#) continues at the Arlington Arts Center (3550 Wilson Blvd, Arlington, Virginia) through October 2.

• Get Hyperallergic in your Inbox!

Subscribe to our email newsletter. (Daily or Weekly)