BOOK REVIEW: Kate Morris, *Shifting Grounds: Landscape in Contemporary Native American Art*

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Some readers of *Third Text* might think of landscape as an outmoded genre. Indeed, we might think of landscape painting in particular as reactionary, a rejection of the history of art in the post-1960 period in which both painting and ‘landscape’ came to be replaced by an expanded field of land art, performance art, photoconceptualism and installation works more directly engaged with questions of sustainability, restoration and urban ecology, and environmental justice. Yet such reactions to landscape are typically informed by Eurocentric conceptions of art history, replaced today by decentralised and global conceptions of art practice in which varieties of what might broadly be called place-based landscape: contemporary Aboriginal Australian paintings, African American landscape artists (like former Spiral Group member Richard Mayhew), a whole range of post-conceptual and post-land art with diverse practitioners – and, as art historian Kate Morris shows in *Shifting Grounds: Landscape in Contemporary Native American Art*, the work of three generations of Native artists who have been active in the post-1960 artworld.

The book is organised thematically, exploring what Morris calls ‘a particularly Indigenous logic or epistemology’ in land-based art practices involving easel painting, installation, performance, sculpture, projected image, and other media (really post-media). At the heart of this logic is what we have now come to call, following Indigenous scholars and artists Jolene Rickard and Michelle Raheja, ‘visual sovereignty’. Sovereignty here is important: like the concept of Indigeneity, sovereignty locates the art in the context of settler colonialism, in which a settler society has sought what Patrick Wolfe describes as ‘the elimination of the native’. The author cites W.J.T. Mitchell and others on the colonial dimension of traditional British and European landscape representation. In this context, visual sovereignty not only engages directly the political conflicts over sovereignty – as with the many artists engaged with the Dakota Access Pipeline protests, or the ongoing militarisation of the US-Mexico border, which cuts across several Indigenous territories and communities – but also develops

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‘Indigenous worldviews’ as a lens for exploring contemporary global issues. And because control of land and territory is at once the basis and aspiration of Indigenous sovereignty under settler colonialism, landscape has proven an enduring subject for politically-conscious Native artists of recent decades.

Morris sets up romantic European and settler-colonial ‘invitational’ landscape painting as a foil to the work of Native artists. This optical painting tradition involves composing paintings to allow the viewer’s eye to access and navigate the land pictured. Rooted in Renaissance conceptions of painting as a window, this landscape painting emerged in seventeenth-century Holland. By the nineteenth century it was very closely linked to colonial expansion in North America, with artists such as Frederic Edwin Church and Albert Bierstadt travelling to paint the Indigenous lands (generally portrayed as empty of people) over which the United States was asserting control. These paintings invited the viewer to access and explore Native land visually, reinforcing the westward expansion of the era and naturalising the United States’ claims to the land. They remain one of the pre-eminent subjects of Americanist scholarship and some of the best-known art of the United States, having long served as artistic representations of the nation and as visually compelling erasures of Indigenous presence.

Alternatively, Morris explains that in the post-1960 period painters like James Lavadour, George Morrison, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, Kay WalkingStick and Rebecca Belmore turned to landscape as a medium for asserting sovereignty and exploring multi-sensory relationships to the environment, particularly traditional Indigenous lands. Their paintings often troubled the invitational conventions of European landscape – recessional space, the organisation of landscape into masses of different values to convey depth, the cooling and desaturation of colour farther into distance – while asserting heavy materiality and rejecting horizon lines or the division of ‘earth’ from sky. Phenomenology, psychology and traumatic history shape much of this work, as well as Indigenous conceptions of the earth as an animate agent. At times – as in the work of Kent Monkman, Jeffrey Gibson and some of Kay Walkingstick’s – the land contains figures and the relational exchange between humans and earth is raised, while Rebecca Belmore’s Speaking to their Mother literally invited Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences to engage with a specific landscape as a listening agent.

While many types of land-based art are covered – from Alan Michelson’s counter-historical installations, to important performance works like those of Rebecca Belmore, to the interventionist works by Postcommodity – most of the book is dedicated to unpacking the works of WalkingStick, Lavadour and Monkman. All three are painters who have engaged with place-based, land-based painting for decades. The eldest and longest working of the three is WalkingStick (born 1935), whom Morris positions as the foremost contributor to decolonising the landscape painting tradition. WalkingStick is well known for her paintings that developed in the 1970s out of an engagement with modernist abstraction, a kind of Indigenous post-minimalism in which the flat surface of the painting was re-infused with expressive brushwork, impasto and external referentiality. The artist was part of a generation of painters emerging in the 1970s and 1980s who were dissatisfied with the limits of
minimalism, and Morris quotes Walkingstick’s memory that the established minimalists ‘had tried to avoid expression. They didn’t want, not only meaning, but emotion, and they certainly didn’t want narrative’ (p 37). There was an obvious political dimension to this, as well: minimalist limits and the famous modernist endgame of abstract painting had no connection to the political movements of the time like second-generation feminism, the environmental movement, and, of course, the Indigenous rights movement.

By the mid-1980s, WalkingStick had hit her stride as a painter engaging both with landscape representation and the land itself. A breakthrough work in this is called *Death of the Elm* from 1985, nicely reproduced in colour in Morris’s volume (indeed, one of the strengths of the book is its many colour reproductions of works that are sometimes difficult to see). The work, consisting of two square canvases painted in thick acrylic, oil and saponified wax, is the first to re-engage landscape representation and to use a diptych format, the format the artist would use extensively over the coming decades and which allowed her to combine her earlier interest with minimalist abstraction with ‘imagistic’ content. The left panel contains expressive brushstrokes representing a leafless tree form with a background arranged into two masses of strokes, split about a quarter of the way up the canvas, like a horizon line in traditional landscape painting. The right panel is completely abstract, a textured surface cut with slashes. The painting is largely off-white and black, reminiscent of minimalist paintings, but also, according to the artist, the colour she thought of as symbolic of death (p 35). Morris reads the work in light of the artist’s intentions: to mourn the loss of the elm tree, a prominent species in the American northeast, where Walkingstick worked, that had been nearly wiped out by Dutch Elm Disease in the early 1900s. Dead elm trees, often skeletal with bark falling off, remain features of the land where the artist lived in northern New Jersey, evocative of environmental loss and the destruction of places where the ‘elm’ remains but where no living elm trees are found, many of them the same places in the northeastern United States that also bear Indigenous names but which no longer include the Indigenous peoples themselves.

Walkingstick continued to develop her diptych paintings, which she conceived as bringing together opposites – landscape and abstraction, specificity and universality, physical and metaphysical. Among her best-known works of this time are those like *Four Directions: Spirit Center* from 1994 (p 49) that combine a landscape motif (rocks or boulders in this case, set against a horizon) with a panel featuring an equilateral cross. Morris describes the cross as a ‘fragment of a grid writ large’, positioning it in dialogue with the artist’s earlier engagement with modernist grid-based abstraction, and also a multivalent symbol readable in traditional Indigenous, Christian and other vocabularies of the sacred. The artist was interested in conveying her experience of land as sacred, a common viewpoint of Native Americans. Later, she would incorporate figurative imagery and other Indigenous symbolism into her engagements with landscape painting – all with an eye toward conveying the simultaneity of the physical and metaphysical in a way that resists reduction of abstraction or illusion.

A generation younger than WalkingStick, James Lavadour paints the land where he lives on the Umatilla Indian Reservation in Oregon. Lavadour’s paintings are characterised by
layers of richly coloured oil paint, built up and partially wiped-out in sometimes a hundred layers. The effect is one that recalls the sedimentation and erosion of geology, an inspiration for the artist. The layering process also resembles the complex surfaces of pre-modernist oil painting, in which dozens of glazes and wipe-out techniques were used by artists such as Titian to enhance the colour and glow of oil paint – perhaps one aspect of their ‘post-modernist’ approach to painting, a moving past the directness and immediacy prized in modernist painting. However, Lavadour began painting this way primarily due to a printmaking workshop, and indeed his paintings have the look of prints created in numerous passes, with processes of erasure and subtraction happening inbetween. Morris contrasts the artist’s focus on macrocosmic processes of creation and destruction with the bounded space and physical objects of European landscape paintings. She also contrasts it with modernist conceptions of painting as an autonomous, self-referential object, saying that Lavadour prefers to ‘focus instead on the generative and untamable forces of nature, a perspective that he considers distinctly Native’ (p 75).

Yet there are very strong connections between Lavadour’s work and the European and Asian landscape traditions that have influenced him, particularly his inclusion of horizon lines and use of a horizontal format. Morris links the horizon line to the artist’s own words about his way of seeing, that he sees paint as landscape – which is obviously influenced by his life on a rural reservation and in an Indigenous community that takes land seriously. She interprets the horizon line as putting the body in the painting, creating an ‘eye level’ (she does not use this traditional term, but it conveys her point) that places the painting’s viewer in a specific spot in relationship to the forms depicted. In this way, there is an element of representational painting tradition to this abstraction, as there is in WalkingStick’s work, and, as we will see, in Monkman’s. Another major connection is the grid format Lavadour employs – paintings have been composed of numerous panels arranged in a grid, resembling the arrangements of some modernist and conceptual artists. Morris draws upon Rosalind Krauss in interpreting the grid format, recalling the way the critic discussed the paradox that the grid was supposed to lay bare a pure and singular surface of the painting, but was a generic and unbounded figure.

Finally, Morris discusses at length the work of Kent Monkman, the youngest painter of the three (born 1965). While the other artists engage critically with the ‘invitational’ landscape tradition of settler colonialism largely by departing from its compositional strategies and techniques, Monkman dramatically appropriates them as a way of challenging our perception of them. Works such as History is Painted by the Victors (2013) recreate Albert Bierstadt-like romantic landscapes of the Rocky Mountains, but the artist inserts human figures and other elements that disrupt the received way of seeing them. He generally includes a figure he calls ‘Miss Chief Share Eagle Testickle’ (a name meant to evoke Cher, known for her ‘half-breed’ performance, and the word ‘egotistical’), a campy Indigenous transgender or ‘two-spirit’ artist figure Monkman describes as a diva and resembles a queer pastiche of George Catlin’s romantic paintings of Plains Indians. In History is Painted by the Victors, Miss Chief is painting outside in the foreground of the scene, surrounded by many nude male figures appropriated...
from the work of Thomas Eakins, an artist known for studies of the male nude that have been described as homoerotic. Motivated to challenge the ‘missing narratives’ that are ‘covered up’ in the romantic depictions of Native Americans and the American West (and perhaps academic figure painting), the combination of the modern, seemingly out-of-place figures with the romanticised wilderness is like crossing wires and short-circuiting our expectations.

I appreciate that Morris does not reduce Monkman’s work to a corrective historical narrative. While she acknowledges the way they point to the ‘erasure of alternate forms of gender and sexuality in Native cultures, including two-spirit and berdache traditions’ (p 130) in dominant representations of Indigenous people and the West, Monkman’s combination of modern, queer figures and meticulous renderings of nineteenth-century-style landscapes is complex. It is not always clear what we are supposed to take from his work. Jonathan Katz, for example, describes how Monkman’s work elevates the figure to a higher status than landscape: despite being marginal they ‘triumph over’ it (quoted on p 139). Morris questions this anthropocentric reading, interpreting the relationship of the figure and land as ‘unresolved’ and shaped by historical trauma, in which perceptions of both humans and nature are shaped by ‘the trauma of colonization, cultural compression, and historical amnesia’ (pp 139–140).

It is difficult to write a book like Shifting Grounds, which bridges an often wide divide between Indigenous and ‘mainstream’ art discourse and does so within the declining conditions of labour in American universities and the financial struggles of university presses. I will offer several questions, however. One wonders if there is any difference between Indigenous artists working in Canada and the United States? At times, the construct of ‘North American’ can elide significant differences in the meanings attached to land and landscape. Secondly, to what extent should books like this engage with modernist landscape painting – the whole tradition of landscape painting that emerged after Impressionism and would include the Canadian Group of Seven and the various American and European modernists? While this work never replaced the hegemony of the romantic landscape in North America, at times the author’s contrasting of Indigenous and romantic settler landscape traditions can raise questions about the similarities between artists like WalkingStick and the modernists. Finally, I have always felt that Monkman’s work demanded more attention to its materiality. While Morris does an exceptional job of responding to the affective qualities of paint in WalkingStick and Lavadour (she accurately describes them as ‘pure painters’ whose work is fundamentally engaged with the liquid, tactile aspects of painting), she mainly reads Monkman’s work in terms of semiotic references to the history of painting and visual culture. Yet, for the book to be complete I would like to have seen more attention to how Monkman has chosen to work, with his use of acrylic paint to create pastiches of the glazed oil paintings of the romantic painters. Acrylic is an intrinsically ‘plastic’ medium that never fully approximates the oily richness and translucent ‘glow’ of the oil glazes used by the landscape painters he mimics. When examining these works in person, there is a subtle artificiality to the surface, the feeling
of being a conscious imitation of a historical style employing a technique of oil painting seldom used today that is more than semiotic.

I will conclude, however, with several major accomplishments of Morris’s book. Her treatment of Indigenous artists’ professional development is helpful in a field in which artists have often been portrayed monolithically as members of a group, either a tribe or the generic ‘Native’. In this way, it contributes to the maturation of Native North American art history as a field, with many recent books providing new benchmarks for sophisticated and sensitive scholarship. Secondly, her framing of the complexity of contemporary landscape art – which ranges in the book from sensuous oil painting to performance, to post-conceptual installation art, to site-specific and politically-charged interventions such as Postcommodity’s Repellent Fence – in terms of the ‘anti-invitational’ and in terms of developing ‘place-based knowledge’ is extremely helpful. Contemporary art criticism risks losing sight of common problems engaged by artists working across the expanded field of media, but Morris helps us stay focused. Finally, the book contributes to the ongoing reconsideration of painting’s importance in the post-1960 period and in traditions other than those of white men. Lavadour, WalkingStick, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith – as well as younger artists like Kent Monkman and Jeffrey Gibson – have remained committed to the medium throughout the period and have developed singular projects of visual sovereignty and personal expression in a medium once deemed outmoded. There is perhaps an appropriateness that Native North American artists, members of cultures long represented as ‘dead’ and ‘in the past’, would be unfazed by the ‘painting is dead’ art criticism that retains a good deal of influence.


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