DODGE gallery

15 RIVINGTON STREET
NEW YORK, NY 10002
p +1 212-228-5122
f +1 212-228-5211
DODGE-GALLERY.COM

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Landscapes that live and breathe

Video exhibit captures our changing relationship with earth

by Cate McQuaid

MANCHESTER, N.H. - Among the idyllic 19th-century landscape paintings at the Currier Museum of Art, it's a shock to come across a video monitor. The video shows a quiet, unchanging image of a peak overlooking a lake in the White Mountains. It's Liz Nofziger's "Chocorua,'' part of "Shifting Terrain: Landscape Video,'' a new exhibit up through Sept. 18.

The scene is serene, until you notice black flies dart across the screen and the soundtrack of buzzing insects, traffic, and sirens. Unlike the romantic 19th-century paintings, Nofziger's landscape brings nature down to earth. Albert Bierstadt with his mountainous landscapes and Hudson River School painters such as Thomas Cole aspired to an ideal of what America was, God-given, wild, and ready for the taking. In the 21st century, we may enjoy a hike, if we remember to bring bug spray and GPS-enabled smartphones. Our relationship to the land has changed.

In this century, landscapes are more politicized and more conceptual than ever. Video is a terrific tool to capture it - restless, ranging, sometimes choppy, and in certain installations, immersive. The exhibit, organized by assistant curator Nina Bozicnik, is part of the Currier's "Spotlight New England Artists Series,'' and six of the seven artists are from the Boston area (the seventh lives in Vermont). It's a show with depth, compassion, and wit.

The installations come from veteran Mary Ellen Strom and emerging artist Daniel Phillips. Strom's two-channel HD video "Dead Standing and Selva Oscura: Drawing of Dead Standing'' projects on two giant screens catty-corner to one another, and lusciously bordered in Lodgepole pine. A bench of the same wood is available for sitting. "Selva Oscura'' is the dark forest of hell in "The Divine Comedy.''

One video slowly pans the dead pines in a Rocky Mountain forest infected with beetles, which have experienced a population growth likely due to climate change. The mournful pace is stilling and insistent. The other, shot from above, shows Strom outfitted in stag's antlers, ritually drawing pine trees with charcoal on paper she sits on. The rough stroke of charcoal on paper is the only soundtrack. She cannot save the forest; she can only honor its loss. When she finishes, she stands and walks away, leaving a smudged, empty space in the middle of the drawing - as if a human cannot avoid leaving a large footprint.

Phillips has worked for nearly two years among the ruins of the former Tileston-Hollingsworth Paper Company mill in Hyde Park, which shut down in 2004 and is now the site of a strip mall. He has excavated and photographed the site. His landscape is urban, changing over time.

His gorgeous, flickering "River Street'' features a projection onto a pile of iron shards, paper scraps, bricks, and more, all recovered from the area. The video, a fast-moving montage of still images that trace the recent evolution of the site, projects from an old streetlight looming overhead. Glowing pictures ripple dreamlike over the rubble. I saw images of an excavator, a tower, a small body of water, the rush of cars by houses through day and night. Phillips captures the force of economic reality as it steamrolls over history.

Jeannie Simms's "1974 in California'' utilizes the personal narrative of an emotional affair a young married woman had with a priest back in the 1970s. A present-day actress plays the woman, and we see her against the backdrop of California: brown hills, crisp green lawns, beautifully appointed patios. Memory is a construction as much as landscape is. There's a sense of paving over rough spots to create something more orderly.

Daniel Phillips, *River Street*, Installation view, 2011.

Suara Welitoff's "Red Landscape'' is the most painterly piece, featuring appropriated television footage of cooling towers at a nuclear power plant. The image is grainy, a vaporous blur. Then the tones shift: the red fog that the towers steep in heats up. The 17-minute video heats and cools in hue at a lulling pulse, on an endless loop, full of threat. Welitoff made it in 2008, recalling far-off disasters such as Three Mile Island and Chernobyl. With this year's nuclear crisis at Fukushima, "Red Landscape'' is even more charged.

You have to watch Julia Hechtman's videos carefully before anything happens. In "Convection,'' a steamy scene of the desert in Joshua Tree National Park, the artist slowly appears, then fades into nothingness among the trees. In "Look Out,'' we're watching a sun-striped hill from a distance. Suddenly, the artist appears at its crest, waving her arms triumphantly, like Rocky atop the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Both these pieces call back to the 19th-century American landscape theme of the struggle of human against nature. Only Hechtman isn't here to conquer the wild. She doesn't make a mark in "Convection'' - she vanishes. And it turns out "Look Out'' features a tiny hillock in an urban housing development - not exactly a mountain to climb. She doesn't pit herself against nature; she attempts to understand her tiny, unassuming place in the landscape.

The lone Vermonter Louisa Conrad runs a small farm, where she and her husband make gourmet cheese and candy. "Chores,'' her video, wraps the labor of farm life into the undeniably lovely landscape upon which it occurs. Viewed through the lens of the artist/farmer, it's sweet and cloistered - the falling snow shimmers; a goat is milked; an all-terrain vehicle shudders and roars through the landscape.

Nofziger has a second piece in the show, easy to miss - just a tiny peephole in the wall. "Pore'' uses a live video feed to suggest that you're looking right through the museum wall out to the street beyond. It breaks through the enclosed museum experience to the passing cars and sidewalk outside. These days, that's what landscape art is - as much about our experience as it is about the land itself.