Unsettled Landscapes

By addressing land as culturally meaningful as well as simply a place to look at or settle, or exploit, artists can point the way both back, toward lost historical lessons and forward, recalling Marshall McLuhan’s description of art as an early warning system.

—Lucy R. Lippard, “Invasive Species, Restlessness, Disturbances, and Other Events,” from the catalogue for Unsettled Landscapes

The Very Idea of Casting a Net Over the Americas and Extricating

An integrated set of meanings from the enormity of these spaces makes my head swim. The North and South American continents are like the proverbial iceberg that we can only hint at in terms of its true size because of all the submerged histories, politics, economies, ecologies, and cultural practices. Putting together an exhibition like Unsettled Landscapes—with its forty-six artists representing multiple viewpoints and methodologies—was a huge curatorial undertaking, to say the least. Add to that the fact that Unsettled Landscapes is only the first installment of a whole series of related biennials called SITElines that will unfold over a period of years.

Kevin Schmidt’s A Sign in the Northwest Passage was intended to function as a kind of evil eye against the development of natural resources in the Arctic. He constructed a huge sign out of wood and carved into it biblical text from the Book of Revelations as a warning about the ecological catastrophe that could result from gas and oil exploration in that region. Schmidt positioned his slab of wood on a section of the still-frozen Northwest Passage, yet when the artist went back to check on his sign a year later, no trace of it could be seen anywhere, either by air or by boat, in the open water that he found. This piece casts a long shadow over the drama of climate change and the implications for the development of the Arctic as a result of the melting ice.

If Schmidt’s piece points a finger at the indifference with which a big corporation meddles in the fate of an ecologically sensitive region, Melanie Smith’s extraordinary video Fordlandia—a work filled with gorgeous images shot in the Amazon jungle and judiciously edited into a visual tapestry full of wonder and melancholy—steeps itself in an historical event. Fordlandia addresses not only current signifiers of life in the Amazon, with its insane riot of flora and fauna, but a segment of past corporate tinkering as well. In the early 1920s, Henry Ford attempted, but ultimately failed, to set up a factory there. Smith uses no narrative text in her critique of Ford’s dreams of mechanization in the steamy tropics. She relies instead on the juxtaposition of stunning visual sequences to allude to the reasons why Ford was not successful in producing the world’s largest supply of rubber; he failed because he was never able to grasp the bigger geographical picture with its literal and figurative Amazonian complexity.

The idea of a sense of place—the deeply held belief in it or the reverse, its unimportance in a person’s or a corporation’s life—broods over Unsettled Landscapes. The artists in this show interrogate aspects of a place whose true nature can never be fixed, can never be unequivocally signed, sealed, and delivered to the great maw of history. I’m thinking now of Luís Camnitzer’s fascinating piece on the construction of the Panama Canal, Amanaplanacanalpamona. One could say that the epicenter of historical reckoning about our collective sense of destiny is right here in New Mexico, and only a scant thirty-five miles and seventy years separate SITE Santa Fe from Los Alamos and the nail on which Robert Oppenheimer hung his hat.

In addressing the charged history of our relationship to nuclear energy and the weapons industry, the group Futurefarmers constructed a work called Forging a Nail, its relative simplicity acting as a curious mirror to the paradox of modernity itself and humanity’s fraught position within its continuum. The group fabricated three nails: one from an ancient meteorite that fell to earth about fifty-thousand years ago; one made of steel pennies used in place of copper ones during World War II; and the third nail made from Tritinite, a residue of the first atomic bomb test that took place in Southern New Mexico. The fourth nail in this work was only referred to in a copy of an interoffice memorandum from Los Alamos, dated October 18, 1943. In it is a request from Oppenheimer for a nail on the wall that he could use to place his now-iconic fedora. This piece casts a long shadow over the drama of climate change and the implications for the development of the Arctic as a result of the melting ice.

In this dense but eminently rewarding exhibition, art is placed in such contexts as deep time, geographical uncertainty, toxic byproducts, cultural backlash, or historical revisions, to name only a few of the issues with which the artists grapple in Unsettled Landscapes. In spite of the uniqueness of each vision, all these projects are related; they are conceptually nested inside each other, their themes coiling and uncoiling from within, sharing echoes, shadows, and reflections of knowledge, speculation, interpretation, and imaginative thinking. Yet not all of the projects are recent—Agnes Denes’s seminal ecological intervention Wheatfield—A Confrontation, once situated in lower Manhattan, is from 1982. Such thoughtful, probing, and critical work takes time to unpack in a viewer’s mind, but the rewards are many in terms of visual impact and the artistic integrity behind the making of any given piece. Keep this in mind—an iceberg’s true dimensions cannot ever be adequately determined and the coordinates of a journey around it are always subject to adjustment because every iceberg slowly undergoes its own erosional process as it drifts, like this exhibition, from the Arctic Circle to Tierra del Fuego and beyond, calving as it goes along.

—Diane Armitage

Agnes Denes, Wheatfield—A Confrontation: Battery Park Landfill. Downtown Manhattan—With Statue of Liberty Across the Hudson, two acres of wheat planted and harvested by the artist a block from Wall Street and the World Trade Center, 1982. Commissioned by Public Art Fund, NYC. © Agnes Denes. Courtesy Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects, NYC.