A Survey of No Place

Amelia Carley

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A SURVEY OF NO PLACE

by

AMELIA CARLEY

Under the Direction of Craig Dongoski

ABSTRACT

A Survey of No Place is a group of paintings that construct a visual representation of an artificial place – a study of an invented land. A fabricated maquette made of synthetic and geological materials visually references spectacular geological sites and is rendered monumental through painting. In this work, I am interested in the disparity between these rudimentary sculptural references and the final seductive imagery.

By re-examining my early memories of desolate, yet curated, landscapes, these paintings unearth a fictional natural beauty intertwined with feelings of loss and inevitable change. Similar to the way memories function, these works shift between clarity and haze, retelling and reimagining. These hyper-saturated and romanticized oil paintings employ photo blur and crisp Photoshopped edges to evoke a feeling of “unreality.” A Survey of No Place serves as an examination of indeterminate time and place through its engagement with ideas of artificiality in landscape and memory.

INDEX WORDS: Landscape, Artificial, Idealized, National parks, Painting, Anthropocene
A SURVEY OF NO PLACE

by

AMELIA CARLEY

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Masters of Fine Arts

in the College of the Arts

Georgia State University

2018
A SURVEY OF NO PLACE

by

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Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Academic Assistance
College of the Arts
Georgia State University
May 2018
DEDICATION

To my loving and supportive spouse, Tyler Beard, and to my parents who always encouraged my artistic and personal growth.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first, and foremost, like to thank my committee members for their many hours in my studio – before and during the thesis planning – talking through my ideas with me. I cannot thank you enough for endless suggestions, hilarious banter, and supportive guidance through this process. Each of my seminars and courses shaped my development in various ways during my time in the program. I owe a debt of gratitude to the superb faculty with whom I worked: Pam Longobardi, Christina West, Radcliff Bailey, Jill Frank, Jess Jones, William Downs, Erica Love, Joao Enxuto, Matthew Sugarman, John Decker, Jennifer Sigler, and Susan Richmond. The impact of my supportive and talented peers was monumentally important. Nuni Lee and Aaron Putt, I could not have asked for better people with whom to spend three years intertwined, growing, and learning from one another. Thank you to Vanessa Jagodinsky for always being there, my siblings for being a phenomenal support team, and Adrienne Gonzales for keeping us all on track. I am appreciative to all my peers with whom I have overlapped in the program. They have all had some influence on my artistic development through studio visits, in-class discussions, late-night conversations, and trips. Lastly, thank you to my kind friends and generous editors: Nedda Ahmed and Michelle Laxalt.
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1 INTRODUCTION

*A Survey of No Place* is the study of a fictitious place, an artificial land of indeterminate time and location. Within a series of paintings, I reinterpret memories through the fabrication of a miniature landscape that is heavily mediated and rendered as an imaginary place. In these canvases, hyper-saturated mounds made of synthetic and geological materials meet seductive fades and invented celestial arrangements. These works loosely reference my memories of spectacular natural places predominantly based on the deserts of the American southwest. The paintings do not attempt to replicate nature but do speak to its most enticing beauty through the presentation of a false reality.

Each summer during my childhood, my family road tripped to national parks and forests throughout the American southwest. Those stunning natural sites, arid and desolate deserts, continue to influence my current body of work. I spend my adult years in cities yearning for the beauty of the desert, visiting whenever possible. As I reflect upon these early travel experiences and recall those early memories of desert landscapes, my memories feel like quant retellings of place, idealized through the lens of time.

As I recall my experiences, they evolve with each retelling. Distortion occurs with each recollection: less accuracy, more an influence from the last instance of remembrance. My interest in the relationship between time, memory, and place initiated this exploration of invented land, *A Survey of No Place*. The work engages with memories of landscape, and taps into my desire for the kinds of sublime natural experiences I felt as a child, while simultaneously acknowledging skepticism for the veracity of those memories and a conflicted sense of our changing world. I will expand on various influences that led to this body of work while connecting those points to
historical and contemporary references that developed into *A Survey of No Place*. As it is in my personal narrative, I will begin with a trip to the desert.

2 JOURNEY TO THE DESERT

*The inhumanity of our ulterior, asocial, superficial world immediately finds its aesthetic form here, its ecstatic form. For the desert is simply that: an ecstatic critique of culture, an ecstatic form of disappearance.* - Jean Baudrillard, *America*

The desert is a captivating place, arid and devastatingly still. Nowhere else the United States does the country feel so expansive as in the deserts of the American southwest. Jean Baudrillard shared a similar sentiment in his text *America*, in which he recounts a cross-country road trip through the United States in short vignettes. Throughout *America*, the desert serves as a central character and metaphor for the insipidity of the artificial paradises offered by American popular culture. Baudrillard describes the “triumph of forgetting over memory” and an “amnesic intoxication” of long car rides through these arid spaces.¹

The cities through which Baudrillard passes are many of the same places my family ventured on trips we took together. On long car rides through Utah, Arizona, Colorado, and New Mexico we collectively escaped into remote landscapes. I have a long-standing fascination with large open spaces and deserts due to the sobering nature of the expanse. Vast terrain that emphasizes our tiny place within the universe, an experience that is both jarring and humbling. Baudrillard writes of the grandeur of the desert arising from its barrenness and describes how it civilizes our humours through “…an aridity that drives out the artificial scruples of culture, a silence that exists nowhere else.”²

² Ibid., 6.
The paintings within *A Survey of No Place* convey an arid quality that reference the potent silence of the desert through an absence of human intervention and an indeterminate sense of time. The deadly isolation of desert landscapes, a main component of their beauty, give us a peek into desolation while remaining captivatingly beautiful. Baudrillard echoes this sentiment: “The silence of the desert is a visual thing, too. A product of the gaze that stares out and finds nothing to reflect it.”

Many artists have described their captivation with the peculiar qualities of the deserts of the American west. Nancy Holt, a land artist, described how the idea for her seminal work *Sun Tunnels* came to her during one of her camping trips: “Being part of that kind of landscape, and walking on earth that has surely never been walked on before, evokes a sense of being on this planet, rotating in space, in universal time.” She goes on to describe how there is something jarring about being in the desert that makes time feel more visible.

The desert has a unique quality of light that feels amplified on the desolate surface of the expansive geological formations. There is a palpable sense of the changing day, of the rising and setting sun. I capture this sense of transitioning light through luscious fades within the paintings in *A Survey of No Place*. Sunrise and sunset, a brief liminal period of each day reminding us of beginnings and endings. Within the canvases, I depict an uninhabited swath of land devoid of organic matter. Nowhere in the works are there any indications of life, only a sense of changing light, hitting rough surfaces as in *Mount Lucent (sunrise anecdote)* (Figure 1). This lack of clear time and location emphasize the oddness of forms found throughout much of the southwestern

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3 Ibid.
United States and speak to the sentiment expressed by Holt: that uncharted earth has never been walked on – could never be walked on – because it is imaginary space.

Figure 1. Amelia Carley, *Mount Lucent (daybreak anecdote)*, 2018, oil on canvas, 84” x 72”.
3 LANDSCAPE PAINTING AND PHOTOGRAPHY

The works that comprise *A Survey of No Place* are, at their aesthetic core, an exploration of landscape painting. Although they approach the genre with fiction and invention at the forefront, the works use typical, familiar perspectives of landscape found in traditional landscape painting and photography. The works in the series reference the history of landscape painting and simultaneously intertwine with the photographic lens. As part of my process, I use photography to document the maquettes before they are used as painting reference. Evidence of this documentation remains within the paintings through rendered depth-of-field, or photo blur. Leaving this lens-based evidence within the paintings emphasizes their artificiality. The range of clarity, from sharp focus to blur from the camera lens, is most apparent in the work *Mount Lucent and Lambent Peak* (Figure 2). A large, panoramic view that starts in a state of crisp, detailed edges on the far left (Figure 3), moves into photo blur in the center (Figure 4), and only comes slightly more into focus within the last panel, although even here the focus remains soft. Through this visual nod to the photographic process I engage in a dialogue on the history of landscape painting and its evolution through the advent of photography.

![Figure 2. Amelia Carley, *Mount Lucent and Lambent Peak*, 2018, oil on canvas, 48" x 144".](image-url)
Figure 3. Amelia Carley, *Mount Lucent and Lambent Peak (detail)*, 2018, oil on canvas, 48" x 144".

Figure 4. Amelia Carley, *Mount Lucent and Lambent Peak (detail)*, 2018, oil on canvas, 48" x 144".
3.1 Influences of the Photographic Lens

Much of my studio practice uses digital equipment and photography at various points in the process. I have been integrating technology steadily into my work. While making this series, I considered the often pejorative and even dismissive attitude much of the contemporary art world has towards traditional landscape painting. I am intrigued by how this dismissiveness has evolved in relationship to the proliferation of photography. In an 2015 article titled “Is Serious Landscape Painting Still Possible?” art critic Barry Schwabsky opens the article stating, “…the unspoken assumption of the contemporary art world is that landscape painting is old-fashioned, a dusty souvenir of the 19th century.”  

His sentiment is one that I often hear echoed in circles of colleagues, at residencies, and in workshops: that if landscape painting is not “… under the sign of photography in Richter’s case [or] abstraction in Katz’s…” it will be deemed anachronistic and unimportant.  

Within A Survey of No Place, I am interested in the contemporary and somewhat pejorative view of landscape painting and how my paintings engage with that history while integrating digital indications. To Schwabsky’s point, my work acknowledges the photographic lens within the painted imagery, in line with the “sign of photography” utilized by such painters as Gerhard Richter, Marilyn Minter, and Eduardo Sarabia. These artists, known for painting hyper-realistic renderings of depth-of-field photo blur, acknowledge the mediation of photography within their paintings while still using the human figure in their central imagery. Through A Survey of No Place, I aim to fuse landscape painting and digital photography (including the use of related

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6 Ibid.
computer software, such as Photoshop) while participating in the long history of the two genres influencing one another.

3.2 Early Landscape Paintings of the American West

In 1939 Paul Delaroche declared, not for the first or last time, “Painting is dead” after the first public presentation of photographic technology by Louis Daguerre in Paris. Through the early 1830s, landscape painting was “the best genre represented at the salon” in France. Inspired by writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, landscape painting had risen in popularity through the mid-eighteenth century after having held a secondary seat to history painting at the turn of the 19th century. Throughout the 19th century photographers and painters were often working in tandem, sharing imagery and informing one another. Thomas Moran was one such artist.

I first saw Thomas Moran’s work as a kid, on a trip to Yellowstone National Park. Reproductions of his famous work *The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone* (Figure 5) were littered through the gift shop, emblazoned on post cards, posters, coffee cups, and t-shirts. On that same trip I visited the overlook depicted in Moran’s painting. To make the painting, Moran and photographer William Henry Jackson accompanied the U.S. Geological Survey of the Territories on an expedition through the American west to document the newly acquired land. Moran’s colorful, large-scale oil paintings are often credited for inciting the preservation of Yellowstone National Park: “Before Thomas Moran arrived, Yellowstone in the popular imagination was a

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8 Ibid.
harsh, wild place pocked with hellish geysers. After Moran’s paintings toured the east coast, Yellowstone was established as a national park and marketed as a wonderland.10

I learned of Moran’s influence over the creation of the park and was enthralled with the idea that painting had such power to influence public opinion and subsequent decisions around land. Although they are spectacular and beautiful paintings, they have a troubling connection to Manifest Destiny. A belief of “Divine Providence” for white American pioneers to expand westward through their “national domain” to the Pacific Coast, most famously painted by John Gast, Albert Bierstadt, and Alfred R Waud.11 Alongside these artists, Moran’s idealized renderings helped seduce many into western expansion, forever altering the American west.

Moran stayed in the back of my mind over the years. In my mid-twenties, while employed at the Denver Art Museum, Moran resurfaced when the museum had an exhibition of some of his lithographs of Yellowstone. I walked by these works each morning for several months and the old memories resurfaced.

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It was around this time that I began my first series of works that engaged with the history of the national parks and the power of narrative on the perception of land. During this time, I created a series of false historical narratives in which I invented my own accounts of fabricated history. I trompe l’oeil painted the fictitious narrative onto signs, then placed these signs directly into the landscape. One example of this early work is *Lost Miners of Dream Canyon* (Figure 6). Often after the signs had existed in the land, I would subsequently install the signs in a gallery setting as an installation shown alongside tightly-cropped paintings of the coveted geological material that drove the westward expansion (Figure 7). *A Survey of No Place* is a culminating fusion of these older practices, allowing me to concurrently engage with landscape, painting, and narrative fiction.
Figure 6. Amelia Carley, *Lost Miners of Dream Canyon (outdoor installation)*, 2013, acrylic on wood, 47” x 23”.

Figure 7. Amelia Carley, *Lost Miners of Dream Canyon (installation shot)*, 2014, mounted photograph, acrylic on wood, rocks, gravel, sand, oil on canvas, dimensions variable.
As with my interest in landscape painting, I wanted to engage with historical narratives while simultaneously questioning their veracity. The mode through which I chose to engage and scrutinize these traditions was through fictional narratives. In recent years, invented narrative and imaginary place has become a central theme in my work.

4 FABRICATED WORLDS

*But the past is not only recalled; it is incarnate in the things we build and the landscapes we create. We make our environment comfortable by incorporating or fabricating memorabilia, and we feel at home with new products when their camouflage evokes the old.* - David Lowenthal, *Past Time, Present Place: Landscape and Memory*

The miniature formations I created and use as reference material in *A Survey of No Place* recall some visual attributes of the national parks and deserts of the west through which I travelled as a child. Yet as completely fabricated landscapes, these forms are detached from reality. The invention of place is rooted in my interest in fictionalization as a method to draw attention to reality in new and potentially profound ways. Although many artists engage with fiction and invention within their work, I often look to writers as sources of inspiration. Italo Calvino, an acclaimed author of both fiction and non-fiction, has written excellent examples of fabricated worlds. Calvino’s text *Invisible Cities* was a major influence on the invented world within *A Survey of No Place*.

*Invisible Cities* imagines a dialogue between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan, intermittently dispersed through various chapters which contain vignettes of fictional urban spaces. Calvino’s writing has influenced my work for several years. His poetic and exquisite descriptions of dreamlike cities has stuck with me as a way to describe longing and indeterminate time. Calvino
explained the diaristic way in which *Invisible Cities* captured his moods and reflections, stating, “everything ended up being transformed into images of cities,” a book which “…was discussing and questioning itself at the same time as it was being composed.”

Calvino creates his ‘invisible cities’ through literary means that are similar to the way I produce my invented landscapes. The process of making the sculptural maquettes evolved over a period of months during the summer before my second year of graduate school, slowly developing through small experiments. I had been painting tightly cropped depictions of geological material before and during my first year of graduate school and had transitioned from the surfaces of gold, silver, quartz, amethyst, and anthracite coal to a painting and installation series involving Georgia clay (Figure 8). During some experimentation over the summer months, I had a dream that catalyzed a shift in the direction of my work. While asleep, I relived a memory, or a version of that memory, in which I was visiting the Great Sand Dunes National Park in Colorado. In the dream, as in real life, sand was everywhere. I remembered sliding down the mountains of sand that seemed to be dropped out of nowhere in the Colorado plains. I awoke with a desire to replicate the sensations from my memories. I envisioned an art installation in which I filled a gallery with sand. From this moment, I began making work involving sand and reinterpretations of my memories.

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After I made a few sand paintings, I started to play around with sculpting the material. The dripped sand-castle form (Figure 9) came after a trip where I played on the beach with my then 2-year-old niece. Watching her handle wet sand, I wanted to capture this early gestural impulse
many of us have had while near a body of water and sand: an intuitive act that makes miniature mounds reminiscent of land formations found in the desert. When I returned to my studio, I quickly and intuitively started mixing sand, water, glue, and acrylic paint together. I built an armature out of aluminum foil to offset weight, over which I dripped these strange mixtures. They floated in this uncanny valley between being recognizable as geological material but so brightly colored, with bits of glittering aluminum foil peeking out, that they felt a bit unnatural and unsettling. I enjoyed this play between seeming natural and artificial, recognizable and foreign. I made the first model and subsequent painting *Ooze (sand blob with Photoshopped sunset)* in the middle of my second year of graduate school (Figure 10).

Figure 9. Amelia Carley, *untitled (sand blobs)*, 2016, sand, acrylic paint, aluminum foil, 11” x 14".
These forms evolved as I made many more of them. I began to incorporate new materials such as powered granite, broken car window glass, and cellophane into the models as I began to contemplate what fusing the geological and the synthetic might foreshadow. With the evolution
of the sculptural forms, my paintings changed as well. I made several works painting directly from a diorama-like set and other works by painting from digital photographs on my computer screen. I remembered the captivating light of the desert and began playing around with colored gels, casting dramatic light onto the forms before making photographs.

The summer before my third and final year of my graduate studies, I constructed a national park-like miniature in my studio (Figure 11). This was much more expansive and involved than the previous one-off mounds or ‘sand blobs’ as I affectionately call them. This process gave me an unparalleled level of control compared to previous works: where I could now act god-like in creating an elaborate and entirely fictitious set prior to the documentation process and far before the painting phase. As I developed the reference material for *A Survey of No Place*, I often imaged specific experiences of unique light or color that I would attempt to replicate in the models and subsequent paintings. Often these were interpretations of memories.

![Figure 11. Amelia Carley, photograph of maquette in studio, 2018, sand, acrylic paint, aluminum foil, cellophane, broken car window glass, 16" x 22".](image-url)
Thomas Demand and Sascha Braunig are both artists who use constructed models to create final works. German-born Thomas Demand began his career as a sculptor and took up photography to document his paper constructions. Around 1993, he shifted the focus of his work towards photography-based final presentation. Demand begins with an initial, preexisting image that he then turns into a 1-to-1 scale model made of colored paper and cardboard (Figure 12). He uses imagery of both manufactured and natural environments and he destroys the models after her photographs them.

Figure 12. Thomas Demand, *Clearing*, 2003, chromogenic color print, 6’ 3 9/16” x 16’ 2 7/8”.

There is a fascinating and disquieting effect when looking at a Demand photograph. Often the scenes look like they could be inhabitable but then you notice small peculiarities that slowly unveil their miniature and engineered origins. This slow unraveling of a fabricated reality is something that I seek to achieve within my paintings as well. Some of the works have more

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indication of their odd material construction such as *Thinking about Forgetting* (Figure 13) in which the aluminum foil armature glitters along with the fictitious stars.

![Figure 13. Amelia Carley, *Thinking about Forgetting*, 2017, oil on canvas, 32” x 36”](image)

Sascha Braunig also uses elaborate models that take her lengthy periods of time to construct although her final pieces exist as paintings. She builds models out of things like modeling clay and thermoplastic (Figure 14) that can be reused and repositioned to use as references for her painted works (Figure 15). When discussing her use of the figure with Samuel Jablon in *Hyperallergic* in 2016 she states, “These paintings started out as a direct attempt to contribute to
a portrait tradition in painting, but rather than depicting real people, they were only provisionally sentient people-shells— their vacancy was derived from fashion photography, as was their artificially hypertrophied surface.”

![Figure 14. Sascha Braunig, model in studio, 2014, clay over a mannequin head,](https://hyperallergic.com/295873/a-painter-on-the-entangled-relationship-between-figure-and-frame/)

I enjoy Braunig’s desire talk about a rich history within painting but utilize a fresh interpretation of the subject through fabrication and material exploration. I think of my work in a similar way: engaging the history of landscape painting but through artificial versions of landscape such as in *Iris and Elba (before the storm)* (Figure 16) and *Iris and Elba (after the*
dawn) (Figure 17). As a painter, I love Braunig’s luscious deployment of color and trompe l’oeil surfaces but feel a unique kinship to her inventive interpretation of a classic painting genre with elaborate models as reference.

Figure 16. Amelia Carley, *Iris and Elba (before the storm)*, 2018, oil on canvas, 36" x 24".
As with Demand and Braunig, I decided to withhold sharing my maquette in the final exhibition of the paintings (Figure 11). Demand is extremely private with his constructions and destroys the models once photographed, while Braunig will allow her models to be photographed
though they are rarely seen by the public. Although I have shown some small versions of the ‘sand blobs’ in the past, I never paint the forms that are shown as sculptures. In the final layout of the thesis exhibition, there were no physical sculptures or photographs of the reference material on view. My reasons for excluding this material are two-fold: first, so that viewers could feel free to interpret the work in their own way; and second, to maintain an aura of mystery around the final painted works.

5 A SURVEY OF NO PLACE THESIS EXHIBITION

A Survey of No Place is an exhibition examining a fabricated world consisting of thirteen paintings depicting an indeterminate time and place. These works reflect intense natural beauty through saturated color, dramatic changing light, and forms that recall natural environments. Playing off stereotypically beautiful, somewhat cliché visual components such as rich fades, these works monumentalize a small, somewhat strange, maquette. I am interested in the transformative power of painting to shift and create perspective. As I made the first few paintings, I had conversations with visitors in my studio about the small model (Figure 11). I enjoyed the disconnect between the somewhat feeble, child-like model that seems at first glance like an elaborate elementary school project contrasted with the final, grandiose paintings. Using tropes of beauty through my multi-stage process, I delight in the control of monumentalizing a strange, fabricated world into something powerful and captivating. As with pathways and signage that prescribe a visitor’s movements through a national park, each work is a specific vantage point crafted through careful crops that direct the viewer’s experience. My ultimate authority throughout the process gives me full reign over the viewer’s encounter of my fabricated world.
The first work, *Chill loss, icy bite* (Figure 18), on the center wall is one of the oldest in the exhibition, made in October of 2017. Because it is the only piece in the show that uses a different model, *Chill loss, icy bite* seemed a good choice for the title wall. On the front-left wall, there is another of my older works, also made in the fall of 2017, *Thinking About Forgetting* (Figure 13) which is one of two paintings with a starry sky. This work, and *Saccharin Hindsight* (Figure 19) were the first two works made using the maquette from which I based the rest of the works in the exhibition. These works both have active skies and are images of the same mounds from slightly different views. They begin the visual representation of the idea of travelling through this imagined place, as if the viewer is a tourist in a new land.

Figure 18. Amelia Carley, *chill loss, icy bite*, 2017, oil on canvas, 24" x 36".
On the front right side of the exhibition, I grouped warmer paintings with hues of red and magenta dominating the corner (Figure 21). *Amaranth Spires* (Figure 22) occupied the front right wall, one of the few images that exists predominantly in soft blur, with only a small portion of a mound in the front middle in focus.
Figure 20. Amelia Carley, *Survey of No Place* (Installation Shot), 2018.
On the long left wall hung two of the newest pieces made for the show, *Elba at nightfall* (distant Iris) (Figure 22) and *Mount Lucent* (daybreak anecdote) (Figure 1). These works share similar compositions with a majority of each canvas containing large fades of color and only a small bottom portion depicting the fictional landscape. As the work evolved, I wanted to create
pieces that would evoke overwhelming color and light, works at human scale that would allow for the viewers to get lost in hue but stay grounded with the landscape forms.

Figure 22. Amelia Carley, *Elba at Nightfall (distant iris)*, 2018, oil on canvas, 84” x 72”.
Many of the works allude to their digital origins through my choice to leave a crisp edge between the land formation and the background. This edge is a result of the Photoshopping process where I extract the foreground, land content digitally, insert a background reference of my choice, and often digitally alter the original maquette imagery to suit my current aesthetic goals. This unusually crisp edge is an unsettling element to the composition, since a traditional landscape would likely show atmospheric perspective. This “tell” reinforces the fabricated reality of the forms. Withholding the maquette from the exhibition allows the scope and scale of the reference material to remain ambiguous and allows imaginative reads of the work’s origins.

Along the back wall Mount Lucent and Lambent Peak (Figure 3), the largest work within the exhibition, showed a range of photo blur and clarity, highlighting the relationship these works have to my memories as well as a reference to digital processes. The two smallest works within the show, Crevasse of Lambent Peak (Figure 23) and Edge of Lucent (cool and calm) (Figure 24), hung adjacent. These two works are tightly cropped, taken from the same reference image as the large panoramic work. They are small snippets of the larger work, specific echoes with different color palettes, as if the viewer is visiting the form at a different time of day. Mount Lucent (auroral cascade) (Figure 25) along with the four works just mentioned are paintings of the two mounds within the maquette that are made using predominately cellophane and broken car window glass, along with some aluminum foil and colored sand. These materials’ refractive qualities accept the light from the colored gels in more dramatic ways. These works subsequently feel more luminous and bright, but with the additional synthetic material, the conversation around the work shifts to a slightly darker tone.
Figure 23. Amelia Carley, *Crevasse of Lambent Peak*, 2018, 24" x 18".
Figure 24. Amelia Carley, *Edge of Lucent (cool and calm)*, 2018, oil on canvas, 18" x 24".
Figure 25. Amelia Carley, *Mount Lucent (auroral cascade)*, 2018, oil on canvas, 72" x 48".
The incorporation of these additional materials foregrounds the maquette’s synthetic qualities while continuing to evoke the sense of a landscape. With the manufactured materials more pronounced, the conversation around the work evolves into a philosophical debate around fusing the manmade and the natural. As someone who grew up active in the outdoors, I was raised with the environmentalist mantra “Take only pictures and leave only footprints.” This phrase is meant to instill the value of nature and to teach how not to pollute or destroy it. In contrast to the ideal of preserved or “untouched” wilderness, a portion of the maquette is made of manmade detritus – broken car window glass picked up off the street. The physical blending of artificial and geological material reflects the increasing change of the earth’s surface and engages in an emerging dialogue around the Anthropocene.

The Anthropocene Epoch is an unofficial interval of geological time characterized “as the time in which the collective activities of human beings (Homo sapiens) began to substantially alter Earth’s surface, atmosphere, oceans, and systems of nutrient cycling” estimated to have begun in 1950.15 The integration of non-biodegradable, artificial materials combined with geological material can easily raise questions about a future world where manmade materials are not only visually ubiquitous but irreversibly integrated with the natural world.

This dystopian interpretation of the work might feel in contradiction with the intense beauty of the final paintings, but there is an interesting tension in this dichotomy. The paintings can provide an aesthetically appealing entry point into a potentially difficult conversation about our changing planet. The saturated color palettes rendered within the paintings exists in few places on earth, but occur frequently in environments that are extremely toxic and hostile towards plants

and animals, including humans. Both the materials used in the models and the hyper saturated color palette give an apocalyptic air to some of the pieces. As with my interest in painting’s ability to transform a viewer’s understanding of place, I enjoy this interplay between seductive beauty and disquieting environmental themes.

6 CONCLUSION

These works stem from a place of personal resonance through the interpretations and reimagining of my memories and experiences related to magnificent natural spaces. With these works I hope to contribute to the rich history of landscape painting and create a visual connection to the influences of both photography and digital technologies on the genre. Through the fabrication of a maquette, I have ultimate control over artificial versions of naturally occurring elements, such as geology, geography, color, and light. A process that gives me complete and utter control in an otherwise chaotic world. The resulting paintings are satisfying to look at due to their rich color palette and aesthetically pleasing compositions while engaging in a difficult dialogue about our changing world.

I will end this journey where it began, in the desert with Baudrillard: “The unfolding of the desert is infinitely close to the timelessness of film…”16 Walking through the exhibition A Survey of No Place there is a cinematic quality to the succession of images, as if maybe the paintings are stills from a tourist film that never was; a visit to a strange world of breathtaking color and bizarre, possibly disquieting, geological formations. They are a journey through an invented land: A Survey of No Place.

REFERENCES


