

## *M/Taking Place: Contemporary Western Landscapes*

Car passengers gaze idly through bug-splattered glass as desert hills flash past. A vacationing family eats at a National Park picnic bench and then visits the nearby flushless toilets. Administrators determine the location of new roads and utility lines at the edge of an expanding city. Tourists turn-backed to a spectacular view, taking selfies to prove that they were there, had experienced it. Surveyors determining and lawyers disputing the landscape's partition as alienable private property. Museums exhibiting the artifacts left behind by people dispossessed of the same lands now divided with fences, powerlines, roadways, and pipelines forming the connective tissue of a modern society.

This show is about the complex ways in which we create, experience, and represent contemporary American landscapes. Landscapes are both external, environmental realities and representations participating in a host of particular artistic conventions. As environment, landscapes do not exist apart from human agency, and even our most ostensibly natural wildernesses protected in national parks are constructs of legal, social, and cultural frameworks. As representations, my paintings participate in a long history of American landscapes. While picturesque conventions seek to idealize the material environment and conceal the social implications of places, I want to foreground roads, fences, electrical poles, architecture, and street signs as manifest traces of the legal, social, and cultural norms structuring the landscape.

Some are intimately familiar, often overlooked places from my own personal experiences as a child of the midwest/west and a student of colonial history in the southwest. Some are family lands while others are personal memories, and on one level, these paintings are about my subjective perception of place. They explore beauty in the mundane, a sensibility arising from knowing a place intimately and appreciating its everyday qualities. But they are also ambivalent—even as I am invested in the perception of beauty, I am also conscious of their histories of dispossession of Native peoples and implication in social inequities.

American popular culture frames the west as a mythic place, and the genre of western painting typically confers a heroic timelessness. This mythology masks the dynamic social histories of places, and reduces the landscape to a backdrop perceived from the seat of a car, outside a plane window, or a cursory scenic overlook. My paintings seek to engage and critique these contemporary practices of viewing through the technological mediation of cars, highways, and cell phone cameras, in a range of techniques, including *plein-air* study, photographic mediation, and even Photoshop reshaping. I intend that my naturalistic technique will draw viewers into a deeper contemplation of the making and taking of American places.