

A Man Says Wilderness

A Thesis

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Seth T. Spencer

Approved by:

Major Professor: Aaron C. Johnson, M.F.A.

Committee Members: Lauren McCleary, M.F.A.; Scott Slovic, Ph.D.

Department Administrator: Delphine Keim, M.F.A.

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ABSTRACT

When a man from the Western United States says “wilderness” what does he mean? How does he navigate these spaces? How does he relate his domestic settings with the rough land he regularly visits? Where do the borders and edges lie between those spaces? What does it look like when a man brings “wilderness” home? And finally, how do these men share intimate moments, whether violent or tender?

These are the main questions I explore in this body of work. My main source is observing men in the Western United States who regularly make trips into wilderness areas. My goal is to transfigure their behavior and sensibilities into more observable forms which, in turn, gives the viewer opportunities to expand and evolve the notions they hold toward the Western United States and the people inhabiting it. I use watercolor paintings, photography, and cut paper in this effort.

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DEDICATION

Thank you, Mom, Dad, Steven, Ember, and Paul, for being my closest confidants and support during my time here in Moscow, Idaho.

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Chapter 1: When a Man Says Wilderness

Comparing Definitions of Wilderness

The Oxford English Dictionary defines wilderness as an uncultivated, uninhabited, and inhospitable region; a neglected or abandoned area of a garden or town; and, finally, a position of disfavor, especially in a political context.¹ William Cronan in “The Trouble with Wilderness” labels wilderness as something constructed by civilization.² In the documentary series *Myths and Monsters*, Liz Gloyn offers a similar definition: “What counts as wild and what counts as natural is very much a human construct. We decide where the wilderness starts and where it ends.”³

As someone who has grown up on the borders of some of the most famous, legally defined, American wilderness areas, I do not find my definitions at odds with OED, Cronan, or Gloyn. I have seen how attitudes change towards a region once it has an official wilderness designation. I have also observed men and other artists who have an unspoken and broad notion when it comes to places where they experience wilderness, often unbound by legal boundaries.

What I want to explore is perceptions of wilderness and how my male peers know when they themselves are in it and what they like to do. There are so many groups and places one could observe when talking about the idea of wilderness in the United States. I choose to focus on where I live: the middle Rockies of the United States, particularly the land of Central Idaho. In this land, I focus on a certain kind of man who lives and recreates here.

The man in my mind is not necessarily white but is commonly so. He has the time and desire to hike, fish, camp, and hunt. His time off work is usually spent in national forests, national wilderness, or in Bureau of Land Management territory. He is much more likely to take a vacation to hunt a Bighorn Sheep than take a cruise to a tropical place or a flight to Europe. The economic brackets of these men typically range from lower to upper-middle class. Sometimes he goes into the wilderness alone; sometimes he goes with his family, but most trips are taken with other male friends. These men like to hunt, fish, photograph, and

¹ Oxford Languages, s.v. “wilderness.” accessed February 2, 2022.

² Cronan, William. “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature.” William Cronan – Homepage, n.d. Accessed January 31, 2022.

³ Kontur, Daniel, dir. *Myths and Monsters: The Wild Unknown*. 2017. Netflix.com, 2017. 43 min.

collect animal remnants. My observation of these men comes from family, friendships, and following strangers on social media.

I am interested in how these men commonly define wilderness, but I cannot get to these feelings by asking them directly. Many men find it hard articulating them. I aim to reach down and pull these feelings up *closer* to the surface. Through my observation, I propose a man from this group feels like he is in the wilderness when:

1. He can share declarations and appraisals of beauty with himself and his peers without feeling emasculated.
2. He can shrink himself and not feel inferior.
3. He can test his strength and is given opportunities for violence or tenderness.

Appraisals of Beauty

A Western man rarely gives his opinion on the symmetrical pleasure of a building's architecture or the harmony of an advertisement's color story. This changes when he is looking at certain landscapes and natural objects. He will readily discuss the pleasure brought to his eye by a spring storm over a vast river canyon. He can talk about the proportion and shape of an antler and rank them using aesthetic measuring guides. Often, he does not realize wilderness—and the objects from it—give him a place to think and talk about beauty with little fear of being labeled weak or feminine.

Shrinking with no Inferiority

Once a man is in a place he deems as wilderness, it gives him space to feel small without suspicion raised against his strength. He can crouch down and tuck himself neatly behind the large animal he just shot. He can revel in comparing his relative weakness to the might of the raging river. He can muse on his tiny life span compared to the three-thousand-year-old Western Red Cedar he stands under. Wilderness lets men admit their shortcomings. In the wilderness, admitting your own insignificance makes you strong.

Tests of Strength: Violence or Tenderness

In the wilderness, a man's abilities are tested. Whether a man is shooting a deer or shooting a photograph, he must be ready for unforgiving elements and the goals he has set

for himself. Can he hike to that next basin before nightfall? Can he reach and move past that ridge without spooking the herd of elk he is tracking? Both the tests and the rewards come to him as different interactions with nature. Sometimes the man is rewarded with the chance to harvest an animal. Other times his patient path through the bush-whack creek bottom offers up the bones of a natural passing. Many of these tests do not have both a violent and gentle option. They are usually chosen at the onset of the journey.

Chapter 2: Where the Devil Lives

A Place to Project Your Fears

On September 23rd, 2021, Gabby Petito's body was found in the Bridger-Teton National Forest in Wyoming, not a day's drive from where I grew up in Southeast Idaho. My ears perk up when I hear the places of my childhood being talked about in nationally focused media. I love to hear perceptions of the rural western United States by outsiders, especially coastal elites. I live in the American West where "wilderness as church" is very popular, but often a city dweller's perceptions of our lands read like a pre-romantic view of wilderness: dark, unknown, untraceable places,⁴ where shadows, interfering with data collection, fall across a surveillance state. Where a young couple goes into the Bridger-Teton National Forest and only one comes out. Gabby Petito and her boyfriend, Brian Laundrie, were devoted to documenting their lives on Instagram. Now when documentation could be the most crucial, there is a big black hole in the record. This morning I listened to one of my regular podcasts and the guest, a comedian named Tim Dillon, had strong opinions on the Gabby Petito case and national parks:

Do not go to national parks. This is a fact. National parks are incredibly dangerous places. People disappear all the time. People will go for a jog or stroll, and they disappear all the time. It is not reported. This idea that we are the most surveilled society in modern history outside of China yet there are these weird places, these sacrifice zones where no one knows what is going on and there is no cellphone service. Something odd is happening there. I do not know what it is.⁵

The humor is not lost on me, but many people from big cities share this sentiment. I remember riding in a car with a girl from New York City on our way to Palisades Reservoir in Southeast Idaho. Throughout the entire drive, one can see vast amounts of land sprawling all

⁴ Cronon, William. "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." William Cronon - Homepage, n.d. Accessed January 31, 2022

⁵ *Red Scare*, "Property Sisters w/ Tim Dillon," performed by Anna Khachiyan, Dasha Nekrasova, and Tim Dillon, aired September 22, 2021, on Patreon.

around them. To the East the tips of the Tetons come in and out of view. To the North lies the Island Park high country. To the South: the hills above Blackfoot, and to the west: at 12,202 feet, Diamond Peak of the Lemhi Range, past the vast Snake River Plain, tops off the desert landscape.

The girl from New York expressed her discomfort concisely: "...too much land all at once." Too many miles she does not know anything about within her field of vision. On top of that, every dilapidated barn or shed we passed along the highway was a potential horror film setting in her imagination. These unknown places gave shadows for her to explore and project her fear onto. Projecting fear onto the landscape is nothing new. Regarding myths and stories Diane Purkiss states: "People will fill the wilderness that surrounds them with what they fear about themselves, what they fear in their own society. The wilderness is the place where we expel all the stuff we do not like in ourselves, in our culture, in our society."⁶

The passing farmland was the wilderness in the mind of the girl from New York. Her predicament was interesting: the enclosed spaces of abandoned buildings, as well as the wide-open spaces scared her.

What a peculiar thing to experience: to have a place where I feel safe, bring out fear and discomfort from others. But then again, I feel scared and uneasy in rural and wild areas all the time. When I am confronted with the unknown, I spook easily. What is making that racket in the brush just up the trail? What just made that long mournful sound in the dead of night? What is that deep musky smell coming from this creek bottom we just dropped into? Oh, the racket was a small band of cow Elk on the trail, not Bigfoot. It was just a coyote howling in the night, not a ghost. But that smell, that smell is a coming from a bear, we need to turn back.

Knowledge and familiarity help people see wilderness as church, but the possibility of encountering a monster still lingers in my mind. For most people to feel they are in wilderness, there needs to be a significant number of unknown things around them. Though Lana Del Rey was talking about Hollywood when she said: "In the land of gods and monsters I was an angel

⁶ Kontur, Daniel, dir. *Myths and Monsters: The Wild Unknown*. 2017. Netflix.com, 2017. 43 min.

living in the garden of evil.”⁷ I think it could describe my perception of wilderness in the American West. Wilderness is the place heavenly light can pour down on the spot where your carcass was fed upon by some unknown hairy beast.

Many a man in the West will feel like he is going to a sacred divine place when he travels into wilderness, but at the same time he will bring bear spray. He will tell loved ones where he plans to hike and when he plans to come home just in case he does not return. The notions of wilderness as church and wilderness as home to monsters and misfortune do not contradict each other—they enhance each other.

Projection During Critique

Wilderness as a receptacle for our projection does not stop at personal experience; I believe it common when we view artwork about wilderness as well. The wilderness is where we project our fears about the unknown. It is also typical for people to behave similarly when consuming art about the wilderness. The viewer will always use their personal collection of knowledge and experience to make sense of artwork, so some projection is inevitable, but often, if they are not careful, their critiques have just as much to do with their personal fears, insecurities, and fixations as they do with anything else. If wilderness is where we stow things from our society we do not understand, it is not a stretch to claim many people reveal their fears and anxieties when assessing artwork about wilderness. I can watch how they approach and behave, and sometimes they fill the work with themselves.

⁷ Rey, Lana Del. “Gods and Monsters,” Recorded November 2012. Track 6 on *Paradise*. Interscope and Polydor, compact disc.

Chapter 3: When a Man Brings Wilderness Home

Cross-Pollination

There is no sure separation between wilderness and civilization in western men's minds; few of them can point to a definitive line. I would like to take this blending further and cross-pollinate the sensibilities western men have towards different kinds of landscape. Can our concept of wilderness benefit from our acceptance of a farm or city regularly changing? Can farmland and cities benefit from our desire to preserve and hold “natural” lands sacred? I think yes. The idea of cross-pollinating wild and domestic sensibilities came from observing what men choose to bring into their homes from wilderness areas: animal mounts, found animal bones, crystals, driftwood, etc. Wendell Berry, in “Getting Along with Nature,” states that humans cannot live in nature without changing it.⁸ I would add that the opposite is true. Humans also cannot spend time in nature without going back and changing their home.

I also see how men depend on the small towns on the edges of wilderness to support their adventures. In William Cronon's and my own observations, men depend on the human settlement to enjoy what is deemed wilderness.⁹ From my experience, time spent in one helps us appreciate the other. I have never met a man who was not happy to sleep in a bed after weeks spent in a sleeping bag with just a thin foam pad underneath.

Where are the Borders and Edges?

As mentioned earlier, Dr. Liz Gloyn in *Myths and Monsters* states: “What counts as wild and what counts as natural is very much a human construct.” She explains: “We decide where the wilderness starts and where it ends. So that question makes it a very fertile place for stories to happen as human cultures work out where those limits are.”¹⁰ Wendell Berry is also interested in the borders between wild and domestic:

⁸ Berry, Wendell. *Home Economics*. (Berkeley: North Point Press, 1987) 7.

⁹ Cronon, William. “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature.” William Cronon - Homepage, n.d. Accessed January 31, 2022.

¹⁰ Kontur, Daniel, dir. *Myths and Monsters: The Wild Unknown*. 2017. Netflix.com, 2017. 43 min.

This is the phenomenon of edge or margin that we know to be one of the powerful attractions of a diversified landscape, both to wildlife and to humans. The human eye itself seems drawn to such margins, hungering for the difference made in the countryside by a hedgy fence row, a stream, or a grove of trees.¹¹

I see this body of work to be a part of our cultural impulse to figure out where the borders between wilderness and civilization lay. No matter where they fall in a single person's mind or in a larger group, Wendell Berry, Liz Gloyn, and I agree the edges between wild and domestic are teeming with things to explore. At the borders, each place's qualities can combine or stand out in higher contrast.

My work pays particular attention to the borders between the agrarian and wilderness, but this is not to say similar connections and bonds could not be made between wilderness and urban areas too. I would like to cross-pollinate the popularly held feelings we have for wilderness and particularly farmland. I see room for other artists to do this for the city as well.

¹¹ Berry, Wendell. *Home Economics*. (Berkeley: North Point Press, 1987) 13.



Image 3.1. and 3.2. *Landscape Scroll No. 1* and *Landscape Scroll No. 2*. 2020



Image 3.3. *Storm over the Salmon and Canal Water*. 2020

I enjoy the juxtaposition of farms with rugged wilderness referenced within one another. In the landscape photo collages, the transitions from wilderness to farmland can be subtle, and the viewer must take a second glance to spot the borders between them. Sometimes, only after the viewer has traveled significantly into the next photo do they realize they have transitioned into a new scene. In other places, the photos hold greater contrast but still link up the rough places of Idaho with its farmland in ways that do not feel forced or synthetic.

The digital photo collages also reference how much the Snake River Plain, where I grew up, depends on the rain and snow from the surrounding mountains for cultivation. In the collages, man-made and natural water ways combine and flow into each other. The frothy rapid becomes the glossy canal water.

In “Getting Along with Nature,” Wendell Berry explores the relationships between the borders and edges of civilization and what we deem to be wilderness. These borders are rich in biological diversity; through his experiences, he finds animals and humans alike are drawn to the edges and margins between different landscapes. Humans are especially drawn towards the ones that represent borders between domesticity and wilderness.¹² Even though Berry identifies these borders, he does not see them as separate: “...wilderness and

¹² Berry, Wendell. *Home Economics*. (Berkeley: North Point Press, 1987) 14.

domesticity are not opposed but are interdependent. Authentic experience of either will reveal the need of one for the other.”¹³

Oh, how fun it is to read passages as if they were plucked from my own head! While making the art for this thesis, I sensed what I needed: I need to connect these domestic and wild places. In my mind it is not paradoxical to say: yes, these places have borders and edges between each other, and yes, they are one. Reading ideas like Berry’s reinforces my desire to uncover linking sensibilities underlying practices of men who enjoy the wilderness. I needed to find visual connections to help the viewer travel through the steep river canyons into rolling wheat and lentil fields. To fully appreciate land like the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness, you also need a love for the soft pillow fields of the Palouse.

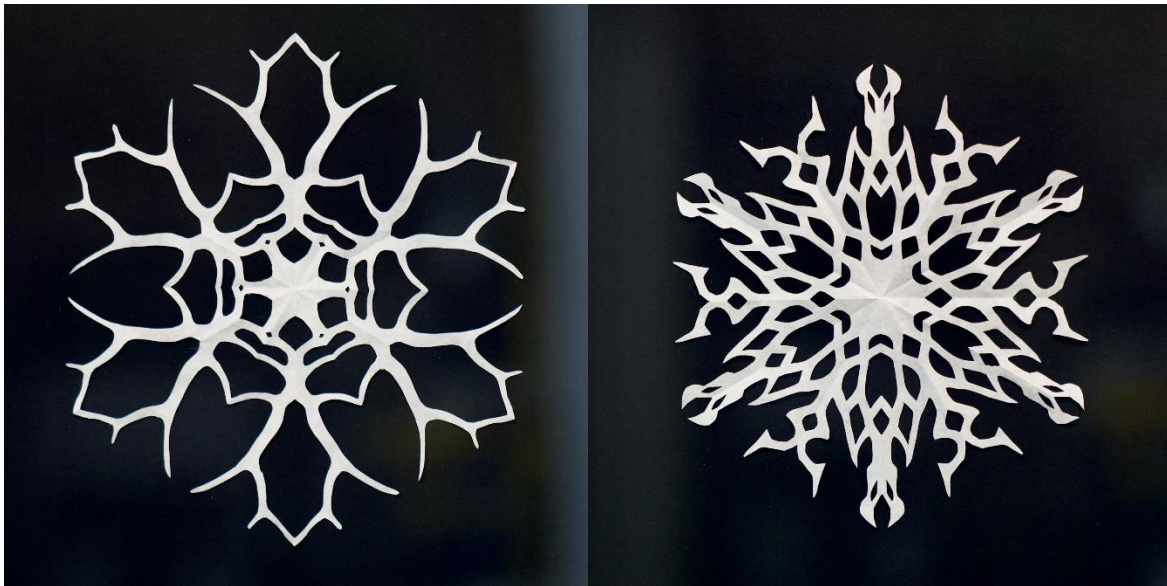


Image 3.4. and 3.5. *Antler Snow* and *Goat Horn and Nasal Tissue*. 2021

Wild Brought into the Home

In the crystal still lifes and cut snowflakes, the wilderness blends with and enters domestic settings. In the snowflakes, wild-animal motifs of bone, horn, feather, and antler appear. I heavily associate the cut paper snowflakes with family activities of cutting and hanging them in the window during late fall and early winter.

¹³ Berry, Wendell. *Home Economics*. (Berkeley: North Point Press, 1987) 14.

The snowflakes in the exhibition act as the in-between of the outdoors and the final works. Like when they are hung in a window, my snowflakes are positioned at the transition, or border, between spaces.

What does it look like when men bring “wilderness” home? The snowflake room begins to answer this question. The snowflakes are cut from hexagonally folded Kozo paper in a manner identical to how my father taught me to cut them when decorating the home windows in the wintertime. To me, snowflakes in windows were always about highlighting the contrast between the winter cold and a warm domestic interior. At night, a viewer from the outside sees them silhouetted against warm light, while the inside viewer sees them bright against the blue light of a snowy winter. Both the inside and outside viewer could feel the contrast of cold and warm. My snowflakes push the contrast between wild motifs in their design and the domestic implications of the medium.

In the snowflake room, I wish to evoke the passage from outside to inside, from wild to domestic. The snowflakes are flat cut paper. The visual interest is carried on the remnant folds and on the edges of the cut paper: the negative and positive spaces they create. The viewer is exploring the edge of the wilderness and home on a domestic window decoration.



Image 3.6. Quartz Still Lives: *Giant Smoky Quartz*, *Quartz Cluster*, and *Bear and Cougar Claw*. 2021, 2019, 2020

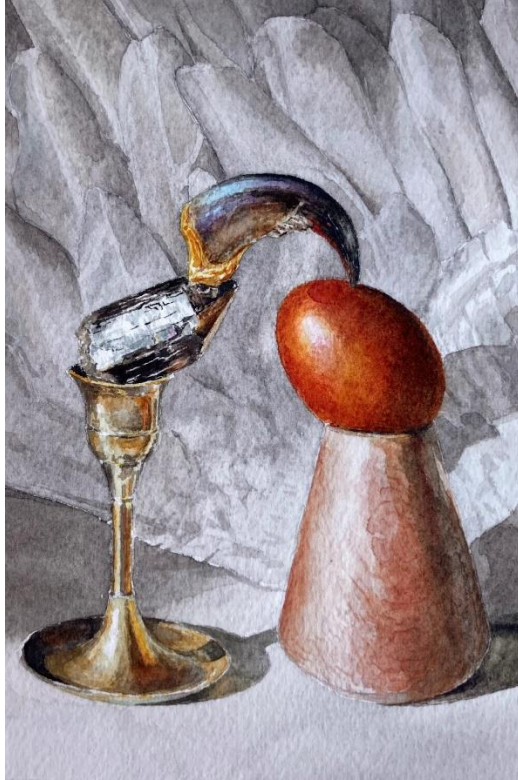


Image 3.7. *Swan Wing Still Life*

Natural Objects in Man-Made Settings: Elided Violence

Past the snowflakes, the crystal still lifes' small natural objects like smoky quartz and animal claws are posed on simple white backgrounds. In some still lifes, they are joined by objects one may find around a farmhouse. A chicken egg, candlestick, and a carved stone cup join a black bear claw, a smoky quartz crystal, and a trumpeter swan wing in one specific still life. These works isolate objects from noisy environments.

Another common theme in the still lifes is elided violence. The presence of claws suggests the dead animals they were ripped from. The crystals are pried from the earth. Chaotic history is alluded to but not on display. These works display how many degrees of separation I want between the work and violence. I make work that uses death and killing, but I do not show killing. It has been transfigured. In *Coyote Hunt*, the youth holding the coyote has undergone minimal transfiguration, but it still is a painting of a photograph taken after the actual killing. The death is not hidden, but it may be out of reach for the mind not yet ready to process it.

The violence is removed by at least a few degrees in all the work. This is not to hide it. I enjoy art with buffers so a viewer can glean more once they are ready to process the information. A small child can look at the crystal still life with a bear claw and swan wing and just be interested in an object's shiny surfaces. Once they are older, they can begin to realize the death necessary for the contents of the image. I do not personally hunt animals, but I love to look at remnants of them. I need animals to die in order to fit pieces of them into my work. A viewer will eventually have to confront the implied violence and death of the.

Wild Death vs. Man-Made Death

When someone finds an animal skull with signs of predators feeding on the body, it is not hard to make connections to a violent ending. When an animal dies of natural causes, it bears the signs of aggression on its bones from scraping, piercing, and crushing teeth. When an animal is shot by humans and the hunter displays the skull, it is in pristine condition and perfectly bleached—no crushed eye socket, no chewed off nose, and no rodent teeth marks on the antlers. The body was whisked out of the environment and preserved. Many hunters have their taxidermist dispose of the skull and stretch the hide over premade forms. They want to remember a living animal.

Virtually all found skulls will show the signs of death. There is no suspending disbelief when one sees remnants of tissue dried and stretched across bone plates or a smashed-in brain pan. Found skulls do not lie. Mounts are, in a way, a performance. The audience is asked to suspend disbelief and see an animal frozen in time. It is a creation, and the mediums are hide, horn, and hoof. I am intrigued by hunters who will readily kill an animal but attempt to remove any sign of death.



Image 3.9. *Buck Mount*, Taxidermist: Unknown

One taxidermy trend that goes counter to the typical animal mount is the mounting of an animal on a replica antique wood-frame backpack, as if the hunter just skinned the body, neatly folded the hide like a blanket, and lashed it to the pack with the head fully intact. This way of displaying the animal body no longer conceals the killing, yes, but now the viewer cannot escape the fact that this animal's flesh was peeled off the body. Instead of the hunter trying to replicate life, he has now frozen the mutilation and mounted it on an object signifying nostalgia for a time most likely never experienced.



Image 3.10. *Backpack Buck Mount*, Taxidermist: Unkonwn

Chapter 4: Watercolor Medium and Style

Technique in Watercolor

Every time I begin a piece, it feels like I am re-learning how to paint. I need to figure every painting out on its own terms. I rarely find formulaic approaches helpful towards elements like trees, rock, or water regarding the final state of a painting. I am not telling anyone they should not study or develop quick recipes for getting close to their final target. I am saying: if I see the quick recipe clearly, there probably was no final target. It was painted mindlessly.

The most common paint brushes I use range from an inch wide to just a couple Sable hairs in width for the narrowest. My brushwork is not tight, it is precise. Zoom in on the small brush strokes and you will see calligraphic strokes swiftly applied. When someone says my paint application is tight, they have not bothered to take a closer look. Like Wyeth, my painting process is a struggle against my naturally messy state.¹⁴ I am constantly testing myself and setting goals for skill development in each painting. In the past, some have interpreted this as an insecurity, like I am not satisfied with my skills. I do not see it that way. The artists always testing themselves are the ones with paintings I typically want to look at.

I treat watercolor like a stain rather than a pigment that sits on top of the surface. All my whites are from the white of the paper showing through the thin layers of paint. I work in translucent layers, building up the color and value: glazing. One way I look at glazing in watercolor paint is making a microscopically thin topographical map: the darker and more saturated the area, the higher it is. Depending on the area, the number of layers can range from zero for the whitest whites to ten in the darkest areas.

Watercolor is indiscrete: it will tell the viewer your weaknesses. With watercolor, there are few places to hide an amateur hand. With just a little guidance, anyone can spot places where the artist ruined the paper's texture, improperly diluted pigment, or left masking fluid on too long, resulting in a yellowing of the whites. Mistakes easily covered up in acrylic and oil stick out clearly in watercolor. I agree with John F. Carlson when he ponders the value of watercolor as a medium. Typically, many people see it as the paint for quick

¹⁴ Corn, Wanda, Brian O'Doherty, Richard Meryman, and E. P. Richardson. *The Art of Andrew Wyeth*. (Greenwich, Connecticut: New York Graphic Society Ltd, 1973) 55.

sketches and studies, but Carlson thought it was a master's medium. He believed that only after students had practiced with oils should they be allowed to work in watercolor.¹⁵

Watercolor has a natural mystery to it. Its properties and characteristics are the most nebulous to the untrained eye. Even when they can see the weak points of a poor watercolor, it is hard for the average person to wrap their mind around how anyone even begins to bend watercolor towards a desired outcome. There are still little things about watercolor that remain unpredictable to me. I know how much water should be loaded in my brush and how to paint smooth transitions, but final forms of drying paint are never known until they evaporate. Watercolor will never tell you all its secrets. Just as every snowflake is unique, every thin layer of pigment suspended in water will shift and re-arrange in ways never truly predictable. I like the unknown in my work: something present but not quite in sight, something influencing the work just off the image plane. Watercolor is the perfect medium to carry a sense of mystery to the viewer.

The Style Trap

I remember when I was encouraged in undergraduate painting classes to find a “style.” I would nod along but ultimately shrug it off. I could not articulate why at the time, but this encouragement never resonated with me. It felt futile to strive for something that seemed to come naturally to the artists I admired. I felt vindicated when older artist friends said finding a style was not difficult, especially when—according to them—unlearning a style would be the hard part. Now a few years later my viewpoint has formed even more against having a “style.” I identify greatly with the Russian American painter Alex Kanevsky:

I do not know how to describe my style; I do not think I have a style. In fashion, people have style. They are making a product — pants, for example. These pants enter the field where there are many other people making pants. Fashion designers have a problem: how to stand out in the crowded field where everyone is making, more or less, the same thing. So they try to come up with a set of

¹⁵ Carlson, John Fabian. *Carlson's Guide to Landscape Painting*. (Garden City, New York: Dover Publications, 1973) 17.

recognizable signature traits — style. Being an artist, I am not really in the business of making a product. Like everyone else, I have my own unique view of the world. As an artist I try to arrive at the extreme clarity of that view and then try to find visual means, capable of expressing this clarity. So, if my work has any recognizable traits, they are mostly a byproduct of always trying to be very clear and concise about my personal view of the world.¹⁶

Eureka! An artist able to put to words what I felt about finding a style. I do not try to form a style. I am trying to get to deeper truths about how men behave in wilderness areas of the Western United States. Of course, I have an individual way of painting. People familiar with my work can pick out my painting mannerisms. In that way, I do have a style, but I am not approaching a painting practice like I am making a consumer product that stands out on a rack against competitors. Like Kanevsky, I believe the manner in which I paint is a byproduct.

¹⁶ Kanevsky, Alex. *Huffington Post: Culture and Arts*. By Huffington Post. December 6, 2017.

Chapter 5: Inspiration and Resonation

“Western” Artists

I grew up going to Jackson Hole and Park City art galleries. There, oil landscape and figurative art reigned supreme. Every destination Rocky Mountain town will have galleries exhibiting artwork with technical excellence few could critique. Yet, as I grew older and completed a bachelor’s degree in art, I wanted to see artwork made in and about the West, particular landscape and paintings of time-trapped people, to evolve. I must say: I do not exclude the faux modern artists in this critique; those artists who are re-hashing Fauvism, Cubism, Pop Art, etc. just with Western motifs are some of the most stagnant. While I strive to make work with the same level of skill and polish as the work I saw in those galleries, I also wish to look at the west from vantage points which feel familiar but open new ways of viewing wilderness and the people who recreate in it. I notice that people my age are not interested in buying the kind of art in a Jackson Gallery, yet they surround themselves with aesthetic objects related to wilderness areas. I wonder if I can make work that carries on technically skilled painting traditions and appeal to people my age.

My Father and Music

Apart from my father, I do not see other artists’ painting mannerisms as influential in how I apply pigment to paper. When it comes to inspiration for a concept, I am often moved more by artistic people working in other fields, especially songwriters. One key example is the previously mentioned musician who goes by the stage name Lana Del Rey. I admire her ability to traffic in low-brow reference to reach deep down and pull out my innermost feelings on love and loss. She can identify potential in the mundane and fill the ubiquitous with a unique artistic perspective; a perspective that quickly becomes bigger than her. I do not try to copy Lana or make art about the same subjects, but last January I saw her purview begin to overlap with mine. In an interview with Annie Mack, Lana spoke on her desire to have outlets where she could feel wild: “We do not know how to find a way to be wild in our world. At the same time our world is so wild.”¹⁷ This quote answers a question about a lyric in her song “Chemtrails over the Country Club”: “I’m not unhinged or unhappy, I’m just

¹⁷ Rey, Lana Del. *Hottest Record*. By Annie Mac. BBC Radio 1. 2021

strange and wild.”¹⁸ The potent drive I identify with is Lana’s urge to carve out space to feel wild, but without any sign she needs unspoiled wilderness. Later in the year, Lana released a new song describing the circumstances of a woman leaving a poor relationship behind for the arms of friendship in an earthy domestic setting:

Now when weather turns to May
 All my sisters come to paint my banisters green
 My blue banisters grey
 Tex and Mex are in the Bay
 Chucky’s makin’ birthday cake
 Chickens runnin’, bare feet, there’s a baby on the way
 And now my blue banisters are green and grey¹⁹

The overall theme of this song is forsaking a previous relationship with a man and finding contentment with friends who paint her banisters—her support—green and grey. The song portrays the willingness to go through winter for the pleasure of finally experiencing summer. She evokes images of agrarian land with edges of terrible chaos: “I’m scared of the Santa Clarita Fires. I wish that it would rain” I wonder if Lana is describing a place she can feel wild. And if so, she shares a position similar to William Cronon who states he has felt the most connected to wild things in places close to his home.²⁰ Cronon, and perhaps Lana, have been able to experience the wild in settings usually deemed insufficient for a true wilderness experience.

The Male Nude in Nature

I have the desire to convey meaning using objects as symbols for greater ideas. One of those is the nude male form. I resonate greatly with František Kupka’s early symbolist work like *Meditation* (1896). The painting features a nude male figure kneeling at the edge of

¹⁸ Rey, Lana Del. “Chemtrails over the Country Club,” Recorded 2019. Track 2 on *Chemtrails over the Country Club*. Interscope and Polydor, compact disc.

¹⁹ Rey, Lana Del. “Blue Banisters,” Recorded May 2021. Track 2 on *Blue Banisters*. Interscope and Polydor, compact disc.

²⁰ Cronon, William. “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature.” William Cronon - Homepage, n.d. Accessed January 31, 2022.

a mountain lake. It captures the viewer's attention without any affectation: the drawing has everything it needs and nothing else. I point to this work when questioned about the nude or semi-nude male figure in my artwork. I reject that it is always sexually suggestive. I would even argue that many people in the arts today are too indulgent when it comes to assumptions they make about the nude male figure. Yes there are overt compositional choices that lead to sexual insinuations in some of my paintings, but there should be room in adult minds for the male form to be nude, relaxed, contemplative, and even intimate, without it necessarily leading to sex.

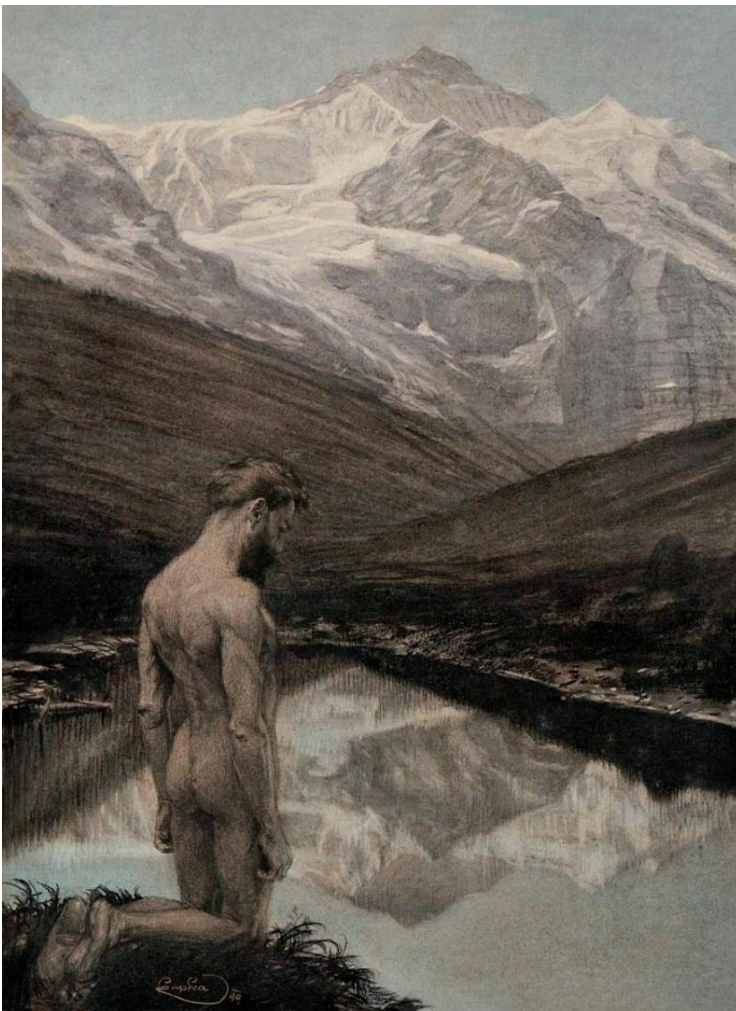


Image 5.1. *Meditation* by František Kupka, 1869

Remnants: Vestigial Structures

I remember talking to my brother, a foot surgeon in Indiana, about the patients who seek out surgery because they do not like how their feet look. My brother described taxing surgeries undertaken just for vanity which led to actual chronic negative effects in the body. He was adamant that if something was not hurting a person or posed an immediate threat, then the risks of surgery should be avoided.

I borrow this outlook when it comes to vestigial structures in my own art. Instead of an appendix in the body, there are visual motifs I developed for other concepts that no longer directly serve my current purposes. If I do not see them doing harm or countering my thesis, I will not cut them out and run the risk of mutilating the work. I let them live on.

Chapter 6: Male Bonding

Father and Son

Recently I have noticed a certain blueprint for an artist: a male painter whose primary instructor was their father at an early age. I fall under this category, as does Picasso, Wyeth, and a few of my professors. As a child, most of my memories of time spent with my father involved either drawing or hiking together. Once I hit puberty, people would comment on the striking resemblance. I notice how strangers will look at us while we pass on a hiking trail as if they are seeing the same person at different times in their life.

I am left to wonder how much my painting practice started because it was a form of bonding with my father. If that is the case, it probably had a significant impact on the subject material I choose for myself; since my father also paints people and landscapes. This current body of work could be described as me trying to relate to and understand my male peers by using the tools I developed in order to bond with my dad.

I open the show with a young male holding a dead coyote because it is expected. When people think of men in the West they expect to see photos like the youth with the coyote. It may also be what a man in the west expects of himself. I want to play with the audience and let them rest in cliché and maybe jaded judgment. I then take the understood image of a man with his kill and progressively reveal the deep currents underneath these common images.

In *Mouflon*, the image at the end of this chapter, the figure relaxes on a floral-print couch with a domesticated sheepskin flung over the back while he touches and gestures toward a Mouflon ram skull resting at his side. The suggestion is not completely sexual; it is relaxed intimacy. Once the viewer sees this overt bond between a man and an animal's skull, perhaps they can look at regular hunting photos in a more profound manner. I believe the potent suggestions of *Mouflon* are present in everyday hunting photos as well.



Image 6.1. and Image 6.2. *trophy hunt photo posted on public bulletin board and Coyote Hunt. 2022*

Appropriating the Trophy Hunt Photo for Found Remains

I wonder if the killing of an animal allows men the excuse to be close and intimate with each other. When they feel like they cannot say, “I don’t know man, I just wanna spend time with you,” they can ask each other to join in on a hunt. My own father does this. He does not enjoy hunting, but he accompanies family friends on their trips so he can spend time with them in the Salmon River Wilderness.

I wonder if that desire for closeness influences the interaction these men have with the animal’s body and how they pose for the photo. In some hunting photos the man is posing like he has vanquished an enemy, but there are also the photos where the pose seems like an interaction between two close friends. Then again, for most of humans’ time on earth, the harvesting of an animal has been a very intimate activity. How often did my ancestors stand above a deer and watch the eyes glaze over while the chest heaving slows to a stop? I feel something tell me there are countless kills in my epigenetic memory. Did my ancestors’ friends stand there with them? I think yes.



Image 6.3. *Mouflon*. 2021

Chapter 7: I Will Tell You the Truth, Not What Happened

In the artwork, I want there to be evidence of individual unique experiences as signs of authenticity. In the watercolor paintings *Father and Son: Steven with the Antelope Creek Doll* and *Antelope Creek Doll Above the Palouse*, I chose a doll my father found in an abandoned squatter's cabin up Antelope Creek, Idaho. Since I can remember, the humble sock doll has rested among prized family possessions, and my father has painted it in several cornucopian still lifes. I always associated the doll with bountiful harvests and childhood on the farm. I have never seen anything quite like it, and yet, it is surely a child's toy. When my sister's children grew into their first school years, I noticed how they too were captivated by the little doll. My nephew, who is usually rambunctious and a little clumsy, handles the doll gently. He sits on the couch quietly holding it. Once he is done, he sets it down nicely, then goes back to pretend car crash scenes and hunting games. Something about this doll captivates me, my father, and my nieces and nephews.



Image 7.1. *Antelope Creek Doll above the Palouse*. 2022



Image 7.2. *Father and Son: Steven with the Antelope Creek Doll*. 2021

A few paintings use the doll, but are not about my father finding it, nor about my nephew holding it on the couch. In *Antelope Creek Doll Above the Palouse*, the doll is used to get to larger truths of fathers who raise their children in domesticated and agrarian settings using the power and strength they could easily employ in a drive to dominate other men. Instead, that strength, symbolized by the sheep horn, acts as the resting place for the doll. This imagined father is using his strength to raise his children. In *Father and Son: Steven with the Antelope Creek Doll*, the story is taken a few more steps: the child has passed through puberty and is now a strong, ruddy young man. The young man, who has sprung forth from his father's foundation, now holds a common object a man may find in the wilderness: a deer skull with signs of death from wild predators. The original idea of re-interpreting hunting photos borders on vestigial. A new western man rises into the bright evening light shining through a spring thunderstorm over the Salmon River. His father and the memory of his safe childhood descend into a night sky.

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