



L. Chris Taylor, *Projecting Art Lies into the Void*, near Deming, New Mexico, 11 October 2006.

R. Jenna Price, *Performing Land Arts: The Philadelphia Experiment*, 2009

PHILADELPHIA

Field Reports: Documents and Strategies from Land Arts of the American West Temple Gallery, Tyler School of Art

For those who prefer their art “bite-size,” the exhibition *Field Reports: Documents and Strategies from Land Arts of the American West* is a test of endurance. Funny, that’s exactly how it seems for the students involved, as evidenced in the show’s photographs, journal entries and videos that offer a glimpse into a life-changing semester of study and artmaking.

Begun in 2000, Land Arts is an interdisciplinary field program co-directed by Chris Taylor of Texas Tech University and Bill Gilbert of the University of New Mexico. Over the course of many weeks and more than 8,000 miles, groups of studio art and design students spend the early fall trekking across the rugged landscapes of the American West. They cook, camp and hike together, while studying topography and permaculture, absorbing indigenous folklore, working with natural and environmental features and engaging with local inhabitants. All of this is an effort to understand the land and the impact of humans on the landscape. This semester “abroad” also includes encounters with seminal earthworks like Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* in Utah and Michael Heizer’s *Double Negative* in Nevada.

“A photograph of a site and an experience of place are two radically different things,” writes Taylor. “Land Arts teaches us the value of committing to the energy of experience, of investing time in the subtle reading of site, of understanding a sense of place.” While acknowledging this disparity, the exhibition nonetheless uses documentary photographs and texts to immerse the viewer in the students’ observations, onsite projects and artistic epiphanies.

For example, one student, Julie Anand, writes in 2002 of her encounter with Heizer’s *Double Negative*: “At first I didn’t feel much. I was having that premeditated experience, like when you’re standing at the base of the Taj Mahal—like you’ve stepped into a postcard. Then I started to notice the details...the plants finding shelter in the base...*Double Negative* is integrated into the landscape by processes that use the change that Heizer effected to effect more change.” Or Alexandra Codlin, who writes in 2004 about experiencing Nancy Holt’s *Sun Tunnels*, a 1976 work made of concrete culvert sections placed on the plains near Wendover, Utah: “Out here, your relationship to art changes...there are no guards telling you to keep a comfortable distance...out here, art becomes something else.”

In and amongst *Field Reports*’ various-sized photographs and typed texts are a handful of small video monitors. These present art projects that have taken form over the course of the Land Arts program, including: *Horizon Run* by Veronica Giavendoni, a replicating image of the artist running deep into the Bonneville Salt Flats; *Operation CryptoBiotic* by Grant Davis and Jonathan Loth, where The Flash and The Incredible Hulk duke it out in the cliffs above Monument Valley; and *Muley Rap* by Gabe Romero, in which the artist brings hip-hop to the tight confines of a stone cave.

But the most compelling aspect of *Field Reports* is the gut sense and very real evidence of learning that takes place out there in the wilderness (demonstrated in the well-produced 2006 documentary screened in the exhibition). The students’ abstract pronouncements (e.g., “I was very interested in discovering what is the actual boundary between design



L. Chris Taylor, Exploring *Double Negative* by Michael Heizer (1969), near Overton, Nevada, 5 September 2003.

R. Gloria Haag working on the Bonneville Salt Flats, near Wendover, Utah, 8 September 2003.

and fine arts”) take on meaningful shape when tested in the landscape. For instance, one group passing through New Mexico identifies a slope suffering from erosion. In a sort of conga line, the students process along a surveyed path, dragging one foot to the sound of clicking stones. This performative intervention starts the creation of an arroyo, or streambed, to help slow and control the flow of water. Watching this action, one can’t help but think of the spiritual rituals of the indigenous peoples who once lived in this spot, and how the past and the present connect within the same landscape.

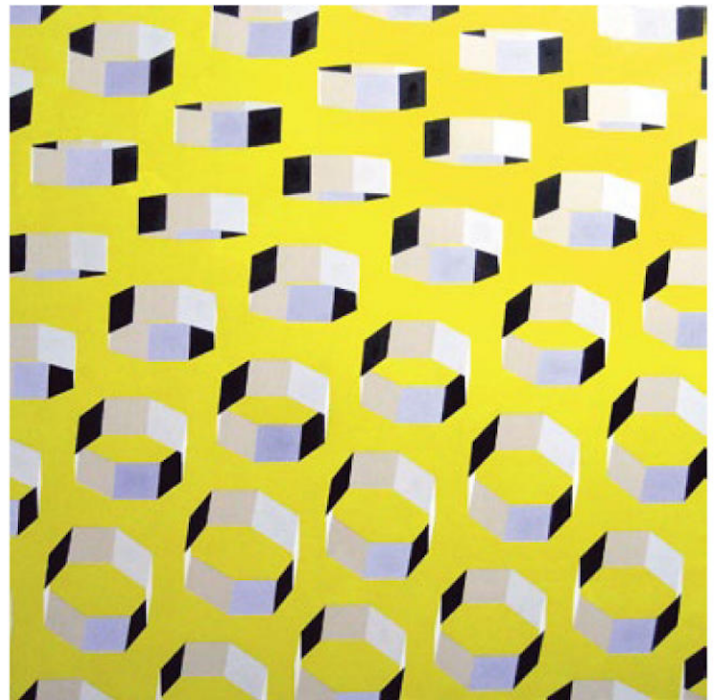
The documentary also helps to explain the significance of some of the exhibition’s photographs, which can be somewhat mute without these insights. The seductive but puzzling images of students lying on their backs with their heads hanging over the edge of the Grand Canyon make sense with Chris Taylor’s explanation: “You can actually frame your view by the limits of the optics of your eye rather than by the landscape you’re in...removing all the foreground allows you to see as far as your eye can see rather than a view framed by a road, trees or objects and buildings.”

Focusing on perception and the real-time experience of the landscape over preconceived project ideas guides the students toward ever-more relevant work. As the documentary reveals, the students converse fluently and collectively by the end of the semester, easily weaving theoretical concerns into their encounters with specific sites and drawing upon the accumulated wisdom of the preceding weeks. In their interventions, they create art from experience, from observation and reaction, or the “art of life,” as one participant calls it. For example, after many failed adaptations

to a difficult site, their project in Deming, New Mexico—*Projecting Art Lies into the Void*—comes off elegantly and simply, a broadcast tower mounted on a van that traverses the terrain, broadcasting “culture” back into the landscape.

In January, students from the Tyler School of Art took up the working methods of Land Arts and applied them to the landscape of Philadelphia. As a companion to *Field Reports*, a charette of their efforts was installed in the basement of Temple Gallery, with projects conducted in the surrounding Old City. Notable among these were David Rueter’s abstract map of *Toxic Release Sites of the Mid-Atlantic* depicted in soil from beneath the Benjamin Franklin Bridge mounted on translucent acetate; Gretchen Batcheller’s blind contour drawing of neighborhood features on a paper scroll that stretched many feet around the room; and Jenna Price’s displaced trash and found ephemera. *Field Reports* was also accompanied with a series of lectures by Thaddeus Squire, Matthew Coolidge of the Center for Land Use Interpretation, Kate Wingert-Playdon, Chris Taylor and Winifred Lutz.

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L. Paul Henry Ramirez, *CHUNK 16*, 2008; acrylic on canvas; 72 x 72 inches
 R. Geka Heinke, *Design for Wallpaper (Octagon) 6*, 2008; acrylic on canvas; 53 x 53 inches

NEW YORK

Quietly
 Luxe Gallery

Quietly takes the temperature of current abstraction by packing a quick, neat visual punch. Including new works on canvas, a wall painting and a mobile, the tight show features seven pieces by as many artists—more of an *amuse-bouche* than a full meal, but all the better for its brevity.

Paul Henry Ramirez's *CHUNK 16*, a large acrylic-on-canvas work, contains the El Paso native's signature trippy-drippy blob forms but none of their typical sexual innuendo. Here, wedged between massive blocks of black, these colorful shapes suggest an energetic force prying open a space within established formal orthodoxies.

Geka Heinke's equally recognizable motif—the geometric plane figure—is a subtly shifting element in her large acrylic-on-canvas painting *Design for Wallpaper (Octagon) 6*. Repeated in diagonal rows across a throbbing field of yellow, her black-, gray- and white-sided octagons oscillate slightly with each iteration, frustrating the typically fixed nature of decorative patterns with the sensation of passing time.

Also related to broken patterns, Rita MacDonald's *A Fixed Line*, a wall painting placed in a narrow hallway, delights the eye as it frustrates its own decorative rhythm. Descending from the ceiling, the rigid, candy-colored expanse of pink, white and yellow lines registers rippling waves of distortion near the floor, activating the pattern like mused wallpaper or pulled taffy (Roy Lichtenstein's iconoclasm is evident here).

The largest work in the show, Amanda Church's acrylic-on-canvas painting *Day for Night*, is crisp and busy, like an action-figure comic strip, but the cumulative payoff is slight. Two masses of organic forms—one predominantly white, the other red—collide on contrasting fields of black and purple. The whole is shot through with fingerlike or spiky tendril forms

in bright orange, yellow and pink, some forms outlined in darker hues, others matte flat. The influences of painter Inka Essenhigh and Dr. Seuss seem pertinent here, but too many passages feel aimless, a potential *bête noire* when working abstract AND large.

Quietly's more difficult works are smaller in scale. In the acrylic-on-canvas painting *Untitled (Vacant Angle)*, Phil Argent buries a mottled, dark-hued atmosphere beneath a layer of graphic-design elements, zip stripes, liquid drips and other forms silhouetted in white and blue. The dissonant underpainting peeks out compellingly from between these inscrutable, surface elements, thanks to Argent's meticulous tape-n-paint technique. Perhaps just as complicated (but, to my eye, less satisfying) is Claire Corey's *Blue Snow*, a pigmented ink and varnish on canvas work that appears to mimic paint-on-canvas picture-making through digital processes.

Stefan Saffer's *Suspended Grace* is the show's odd, welcome grace note—a simple but satisfying mobile of crayon-color cutouts, whose geometric and organic shapes interrelate and interpenetrate. More Matisse than Calder, the work emphasizes how important notions of dimensionality have been in the development of abstraction. Overall, *Quietly* is more interested in contemporary takes on (or reactions to) hard-edge and post-painterly abstraction, while suggesting that artists continue to hew toward two, well-worn Pop grooves—graphic design and comics.

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