

Everything Always-Already Ends © 2017

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## Thesis Abstract

This project is an examination of the roles that visual technologies and history play in the contemporary landscape image. Specifically, the work focuses on using the failures of production and imaging to produce an analogue to 'natural' space, and how this failure can ultimately become a pathway to the sublime or beautiful. Conducted with a hybrid process that combined three-dimensional, digital modeling, photography, and printmaking, the work examines the visual impact and historical expectations that these media possess across a variety of formats and installation strategies.

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1-18 Thesis

My work is primarily concerned with desire and loss in relation to landscape images. Desire refers to our ideal experience of images, a yearning for a pictorial space that has the unique ability to envelope and entrance us as viewers. Edmund Burke's theories on the sublime image explain this sense of desire, in which he posited that we wish to experience immense, overwhelming forces. Of course, this is only pleasurable when something exists between us and a destructive phenomenon, such as a painted image. The notion of 'loss' comes into focus as a function of failure, namely the failure that comes into focus when attempting to create an image that is truly immense and immersive in the Burkean sense. Every time I step out into nature to draw or photograph, I am struck by my inability to adequately capture the enormity of my experience. I always step away with what feels like a crude souvenir of something ineffable and spiritual. This is the essence of mediation: no matter how beautifully considered a sketchbook or photo album may be, it will never be the thing itself. My solution is to embrace the inherent loss of mediation/documentation by constructing my own worlds uninhibited by the scope of our perception and the limitation of media. Based primarily in digital modeling, these 'landscapes' ebb and flow to become meditative spaces where I work to recreate a world from fragmented pieces. Both of these concepts, the desire to capture the ineffable power I feel from nature and the inability to adequately do so, are the impetus for my work. I see the solution to this issue in embracing the technology between myself and natural world, that the path to the sublime landscape can be found in the 'between'. As image-based technology becomes faster and more sophisticated, I seek to use these ever-compounding modes of mediation to construct spaces that challenge notions of history, time, and landscape.

The urge to step away from traditional representation of the landscape to embrace conciliation with imaging technology is something that I trace back the Romanticism of the 19th century. To quote Timothy Morton's essay, *Art in the Age of Asymmetry*:

"So Romantic art must talk about the failure to embody the inner space in outer things. Yet, by failing this way, art ironically succeeds to talk about the inner space. Isn't the inner space precisely what can't be embodied? So the job of art is to fail better, more sublimely."

The 'failure' that Morton talks about is a precondition my notion on loss. It is our inability to convey that which eclipses a human scale, and the necessity for us to pursue avenues that address such an inability. Landscape images are an ideal realm for the pursuit of such failure. After all, what could be more impossible than attempting to represent something that eclipses an individual's lifespan and scale by an ostensibly infinite degree? It is worth restating that an image of the land is never really about the land itself, but rather a manifestation of the desire to encapsulate and convey. Hence landscape image is the perfect litmus test of desire, as it reflects the concerns of the artist and their era more than anything else.

The timeline of desire, failure, and, ultimately, loss is at the heart of the sublime. "In broad terms, whenever experience slips out of conventional understanding, whenever the power of an object or event is such that words fail and points of comparison disappear, *then* we resort to feelings of the sublime" (Shaw 2). The Romantic art of the 19th century was dealing with this very issue. Faced with an increasingly industrialized world where coal-powered machines pushed production to unimagined levels, artists responded with depictions on nature as a vast, god-like force capable of annihilating any human endeavor. This mythic nature can be understood as a need to connect with, and perhaps empathize, the forces of industry that were

rapidly outpacing the comforts of human understanding. The major difference between these representations and ones from previous ages was the desire to produce an awe-inspiring effect that would probe the limits of scale and senses. For this reason I trace the genesis of my work back to this time, citing it as a 'year zero' for art addressing technological concerns and a need for failure.

Loss is born out of this failure. It is an anxious condition radiating from the speed and scope of information technologies, and how those technologies mediate our experiences. I view loss as a much more recent condition stemming not from an inability to convey, as in the 19th century, but an inability to absorb due to over-saturation and over-stimulation. A contemporary example of this being the overwhelming abundance of photographic images made available through the hyper-multiplicity of internet/smartphone based platforms, all subject to increasingly sophisticated modes of digital manipulation. Our experience of places becomes rapid, fractured, and multiplicitous. This is in part what Marc Auge uses to distinguish a 'non'place', a place marked by a certain commodified, transitional nature in which one can never feel at home in (gas stations, highways, etc.), from a 'place' that holds a significant human history with regards to its locality and purpose. I seek to isolate and suspend this moment between 'place' and 'non-place' by weaving together fragments of digitized spaces within formats referencing the history of landscape depiction.

In 'The Great Deformity' I combine inkjet printing with drawing in a manner that is as seamless as possible along the nine feet the work encompasses. Echoing the tradition of the hand scroll, the undulous vista cycles through passages of digital modeling, photography, and drawing. 'Scrolling' also refers to the act of rapidly cycling through information on a computer, a modern manifestation of visual movement considered when choosing this format. Due to both the

transitional nature of the image as well as its extreme format, the work requires longitudinal movement to experience it. The viewer must experience the sprawling trajectory of the work while questioning the nature of its execution, namely the amalgamation of fragmented information. There are no points to rest, yet the abundance and variety of visual information triggers the desire to see. By making my audience aware of their bodily experience through a format which eschews a certain ease of viewing, I aim to engage technological movement through physical movement.



The Great Deformity. Inkjet and mixed media on paper, 20” x 116”. 2017

Within my work I assimilate historical conventions of depicting the landscape as a foil to my digital methods of execution. This bolsters the effectiveness of my constructions by calling attention to our expectations of the landscape picture from a historical perspective. Modes of representation are imaging technologies in their own right, tools to evoke something beyond the empirical. The conventions I examined were the Eastern tradition of the scroll and the screen, and the Western tropes of sublime painting.

In the Western tradition of the 19th century, landscape painting contained an almost bombastic grandiosity used to evoke awe, nationalistic pride, and a burgeoning reticence towards the technological encroachment of the Industrial Revolution. Foreshadowing the issues of 20th century media, painting began vying for audience’s attention by depicting nature with cinematic



enormity. In Great Britain, painters such as William Turner and John Martin used swirling, nebulous compositions to portray the land as a malevolent force. It could be theorized that the upheaval of Martin's "The Great Day of His Wrath" had a relationship to the billowing smoke and mining practices of a nascent coal industry. Turner's "Rain, Steam, and Speed, The Great Western Railway" depicts technological anxiety in no uncertain terms. Their pictures were the stuff of Timothy Morton's 'Romantic failure', pushing pictorial space into an uneasy and, at times, abstracted world, one that acknowledged burgeoning technologies and responded accordingly. The work of Hudson River School artists in the United States, while more subtle in their distortions, certainly strived to "fail better" by pushing the sensibilities of light and space in their pictures to solidify a mythologized image of American wilderness. Most notably may be Albert Bierstadt, whose depictions of the American West bear striking similarities to Martin's apocalyptic images.



*Albert Bierstadt, Storm in the Rocky Mountains, Mount Rosalie (1866)*



*John Martin, The Great Day of His Wrath, c. 1853*



*J.M.W. Turner, Rain Steam and Speed the Great Western Railway, 1844*

What I find most dramatic about the works of these artists is their compulsion to distort the landscape for a dramatic effect. There needed to be an interjection on their part to evoke fear and wonder within an audience becoming at odds with the pace of their daily lives. Combining intense detail with a cinematic use of light, they built entrancing, spiraling compositions. What is important to recall is that painting was the premiere visual technology of the age, and these inventions were boundary-defining in the Western canon. Equally important was that the innovations in painting closely followed the advent of aforementioned advances in industry; the

factory system, railway systems, and the telegraph. This was no coincidence, and as Charlie Gere stated, “I suggest that the history of modern art can be read, at least in part, as a history of various artistic responses to the increasing speed and accelerating evolution of technology in the modern era” (Gere 13). I find these works to be tremendously influential for this reason, and view them as early reckonings with the desire, failure, and loss brought about by the technological sublime.

I draw upon the uncanny formalism of 19th century Romantic painting to build a historical bridge between my work and theirs. Their work combines the comforts of traditional pictorial space with strange inventions that push that space into a new realm. What makes something truly uncanny is a liminal quality, where something rests between the recognizable and the alien. Martin’s seemingly weightless boulders, are one example of uncanny contradiction. An example of this within my work is the computer generated landscape. One is simultaneously aware of its artificiality yet it also embodies a visual/photographic language that calls that artificiality into question. On the timeline of desire/failure/loss this would be the point of between failure and loss, when the transcendent begins to manifest paradoxically through the intentional failures pictorial logic and recognition. The work of the Western landscape painters of the 19th represent a crucial point where the loss to adequately depict the world around us is acknowledged, and intuition, invention, and intervention bleed into the picture.

The tradition of Eastern landscape painting utilizes another logic to address the limitations of perception. I am specifically interested in how these pictures use format and multiple points of perspective to engage space in ways atypical of the Western cannon. Formats such as the screen or the scroll require a corporeal engagement from their audience. Rather than presenting a singular vantage point, moments of space are strung together in a logic dictated by

the dimensions of the paper. Thus the technology of the composition reveals itself: we understand that the landscape has a reciprocal relationship with its media and we ourselves must engage in a particular, temporal movement predicated on format. I sought to use these formats to bring an engagement of time and the body into my work by presenting my audience with a format that demands a physical engagement to two-dimensional spaces.



Nephelococcygia. Two-way window panel installation, inkjet and wax on paper.  
65"x130" (3/5 panels)

Often different perspectives are arranged along a path that guides the viewer through the composition in the Eastern tradition. The use of multiple vantage points in a single landscape presents a dilemma. They necessitate movement through the image space and, through perspectival incongruities, a feeling time passing or multiple points in time. I incorporate a similar approach in my process by constructing images from fragments, allowing ostensibly disparate vistas to ebb and flow into one another. A key distinction is my use of different visual technologies in the fragments. The goal is to incorporate a strangeness to the movement, a

feeling of being on edge, unsure of whether you will encounter a moment that feels natural or artificial.

I further the uncanny nature of my work by pitting historical reference against the execution of my images. A certain nostalgic recognition is reserved for art objects that speak to conventions of the past, a phenomenon I actively exploit. As previously mentioned, my primary influences are 19th century landscape painting and Eastern scroll painting. While effecting these historic tropes, my process is firmly rooted in digital construction and manipulation. My desire is to underscore the intrinsic effects of certain 'historical' compositions by generating spaces through the computer with these formats in mind. To paraphrase a central idea of Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media*, a given medium possess its own history, effect, and expectations that rival or surpass content. The historical references in my work thus become an anchor for my work, allowing for anachronistic departures in the work's execution. For example, in the substantial panel piece, E.A.-A.E. 1, I constructed the image using large inject prints made from digital models. These prints were then affixed to a panel and significantly reworked with various media to achieve the surface and effect of a painting. I do not see this as merely an exercise in trickery, but as a means to confuse the artificial source of the imagery by further referencing Romantic-era painting.



E.A.-A.E. 1. Inkjet and mixed media on panel. 80"x96". 2017

My foremost concern with visual technologies lies with how they mediate our experiences, and how that mediation can become compounded beyond a human scope in service to the sublime power of the image. Any depiction of the landscape, regardless of specific medium, occupies a middle ground between us and the world. The image is a flawed facsimile in this way; it will always fail to be that which it represents. For this reason, I have chosen to focus on the mechanics of representation rather than attempt to draw a connection to any real place. Printmaking and photography become important because they each embody a specific mechanical means of embodying the infinite. A print is defined by its ability to be replicated,

which is why I choose to only use prints in this project. Though none are represented in multiple, the effect of inkjet printing is present in the eery exactitude of forms and tones on paper. Many of the digital components used to construct the images echo themselves, either within one work or across several, creating an interior multiplicity. While a photograph is just as reproducible as a 'print', I am more interested in its multiplicity regarding time. For my purposes, I loosely define a photograph as a two-dimensional image of something dimensional from a vantage fixed in time and space. The photographic multiple has the potential to show infinite perspectives from infinite times. This reveals itself in my process via the documentation of three-dimensionally constructed digital landscapes. Perched at the computer's screen, I am able to 'photograph' any moment I see fit within the model. The screen is effectively my camera, the mechanism coming between me and the 'world'. A finished piece may contain dozens of these photographic moments fused together, building an image that is not fixed, but a continuum.

The techniques that I employ to generate my spaces echo the notions of loss and the role that technology plays in mediating the landscape. All of my images begin with models that are small-scale constructions within the studio or digital 3D renderings. Models require that something come between them and myself to make an image just as the physical landscape would, be it a screen, camera, or drawing. The situation is designed to fail, as no image could replicate a dimensional experience regardless of the source. To this extent, I gravitate towards constructions of my own design since they are a direct embodiment of my desire for the sublime due to a purposeful fabrication. Failure still remains inescapable, just as it did for the painters of the late 1800's. The key difference is that my spaces remain completely malleable in their digital realm, capable of infinite combinations, permutations, and revisions. The possibility that these spaces hold becomes an unfortunate, yet necessary, albatross. The 'loss' within my modeling

process is the inability to capture the enormous possibility of the process; every image is akin to seeing the tip of an iceberg, not knowing what is left unseen beneath the surface.

The output method is equally as important as the models and their subsequent manipulation. My choice of substrate is dependent on being able continue that manipulation by hand, further suspending the feeling of fluctuation. I choose to work with prints on paper, both to reference the history of prints as information technology and also because paper is capable of moving between a variety of digital and tradition modes of working. I utilize inkjet printing on a thin kozo paper capable of being printed and drawn on with a variety of additional techniques. This malleability permits me to confuse the history of the image while revealing layers of physical process. The ink from an inkjet paper rests upon the surface of the paper differently than the oil-based ink from a woodblock or the smokey marks of charcoal. Reworking the inkjet prints adds another level of mediation from my hand, one that reveals my own continuing desire for something beyond the surface. Reworking of the prints is an act of mourning, a way to revisit the sublime loss of the image's finitude.

With this body of work I aimed to achieve a liminal, sublime experience of the landscape by embracing a process culled from forms of technological mediation, past and present. To achieve this end I used a three-part methodology to move each work through conception, inception, and execution.

Stage 1. Desire:

Envisioning a specific effect that the work should embody and the form it should take.

Examining images from the past that possessed similar attributes and taking them into formal consideration with specific regard to the function of format.



### Stage 2. Failure:

As the work progresses, the realization that the effect envisioned is unattainable except perhaps through acknowledging the limitations of the given medium.

### Stage 3. Loss:

The sublimation of failure by embracing infinite qualities of technology and process. Loss can only be realized in moments of mourning, the proverbial 'tip of the iceberg' stage when the work is able to obliquely acknowledge infinite qualities.

The work began with a rigorous use of three-dimensional modeling software, bearing consideration for historical and formal traditions of imaging the land. Google Sketchup and Autodesk Mudbox were employed to construct uncanny spaces meant to echo the language of natural spaces in a dimensional mode analogous to direct, visual experience. No one model proved adequate, and models became compounded and combined. These digital compositions were then realized as large-scale prints that embraced formats that engaged issues of movement and history. Finally, the prints were all reworked by hand to establish a physical continuation of the work that points to further fluctuations and revisions within the images.

I see this shifting, multiplicitous, and heavily mediated approach to landscape as a metaphor for contemporary interactions with technology; we find ourselves locked in an anxious overstimulation on a daily basis, one that renders the static image a fleeting consideration at best. This is the truest loss, that the very media we have constructed to facilitate an extensive, global understanding has outpaced our senses and pathos, leaving all the information we collect

to sit on the surface of our collective psyche like an oil slick on the ocean. I do not see this as contrary to nature but a manifestation of it, a means of return. The likes of Bierstadt and Martin made images not to document what they saw, but to match pace with the technology of their time by exploiting landscape for metaphoric ends. I draw influence from these artists because I perceive the same core dilemma, albeit with very different circumstances. The sublime of our age lies within the speed and scale of our technology, and can only be glimpsed through the language of limitation. The ineffable exists in the maelstrom of technology, only through embracing loss and our own finitude can we experience the wondrous.

Everywhere we remain unfree and chained to technology, whether we passionately affirm or deny it. But we are delivered over to it in the worst possible way when we regard it as something neutral; for this conception of it, to which today we particularly like to do homage, makes us utterly blind to the essence of technology.

-Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*

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