

***E. COLEMAN MUEHLHAUSEN***  
PORTFOLIO

# THE ROCK HOUND'S TALE

## BECOMING EXTRACTOR

### THE ROCK HOUND'S CAUTIONARY TALE

A car is full  
    abandoned between interstate, railway, sky  
Someone lived  
    among its things: buckets, clothes, fishing gear  
Leaving behind  
    sorting items: a tarp, chairs, beer cans  
Hood up  
    shot out rear window, prescription papers, lures  
Collected work  
    in piles, heavy, dirty, precious  
A lonesome spot  
    left to cattle, flies, mesquite  
  
I began looking  
    for stones unimportant, unassuming, pedestrian  
I sought rocks  
    no one sets in rings, necklaces, chokers  
But pretty  
    in common ways: pink granite, brown jasper, grey chert  
I looked further  
    for something better now green, a stripe, refraction  
I learned vision  
    for qualities now able to see, to find, to dig  
I grew hunger  
    for the special, the rare, unique

Now lying naked  
    in a spring, clear water, pure, glittering  
I swept  
    my hand through current yearning, desiring, grasping  
Now mining  
    for the exquisite: beryl, corundum, gold  
The taste  
    on lips newly minted panning, extracting, wanting  
Growing avarice  
    with every new cavern, deep gorge, dry bed  
Just a little  
    more  
There is always  
    more  
I desire  
    more and  
More brings power  
    and more  
Comes power  
    and more power comes with more  
And more  
    and power and more and more and  
Power takes  
    everything  
    everywhere  
    everyone

*The Rock Hound's  
Abandoned Vehicle,  
Deming, New Mexico  
©2022*





*The Rock Hound's Tale, Unburied Treasures, found objects, sewn moire cushions ©2022*

*Right: The Rock Hound's Tale Display at Land Arts of the American West Exhibition ©2023*

*Details of Unburied Treasures on sew moire cushions ©2022v, left to right:*

*Basalt with quartz veins, Utah*

*Fossilized clam, New Mexico*

*Raw turquoise, New Mexico*

*Sandstone, Utah*



# ASSEMBLAGES AN ACT OF NOTICING

## Construction:

Step 1. Choose a site arbitrarily.\*  
\*Pick based on personal biases

Step 2. Maintain ideal Euclidean geometric <sup>PRINCIPLES</sup> principals as purely as possible. Note: squares are ideal.

Step 3. Using bleached twine, loosely bind one of each specimen within the boundary. Be rigorous: include only those specimens whose roots are within the boundary and completely exclude all border specimens.

Step 4. Note the meaningfulness of your constructed boundary.

## Deconstruction:

Step 1. Gently remove all specimen ties and place used twine in a bag. Label with site and date.

Step 2. Carefully undo the boundary line by wrapping it around its starting object as you go.

Step 3. Retain undone boundaries as a memorial to the site.

Step 4. Leave no trace or consider whether this is possible.

*This Page:  
Instructions: How  
to Make and  
Survey a Border  
Assemblage  
©2022*

*Opposite:  
Assemblage #4  
Constructed  
Boundary outside  
Border Patrol,  
Marfa, Texas  
©2022*



## MAKING & UNDOING THE BOUNDARY

These are assemblages, but not the way you think I mean. I read a book and went to find out for myself what the author\* meant using that word. She said things that live together make worlds, that they live in a polyphonic state. I wanted to see polyphony. To collect it. To make it mine.

Like a good 19th-century naturalist, I would mark it off using proper classical geometry the way I was taught in school. The way it had been taught for centuries. Probably since Euclid.

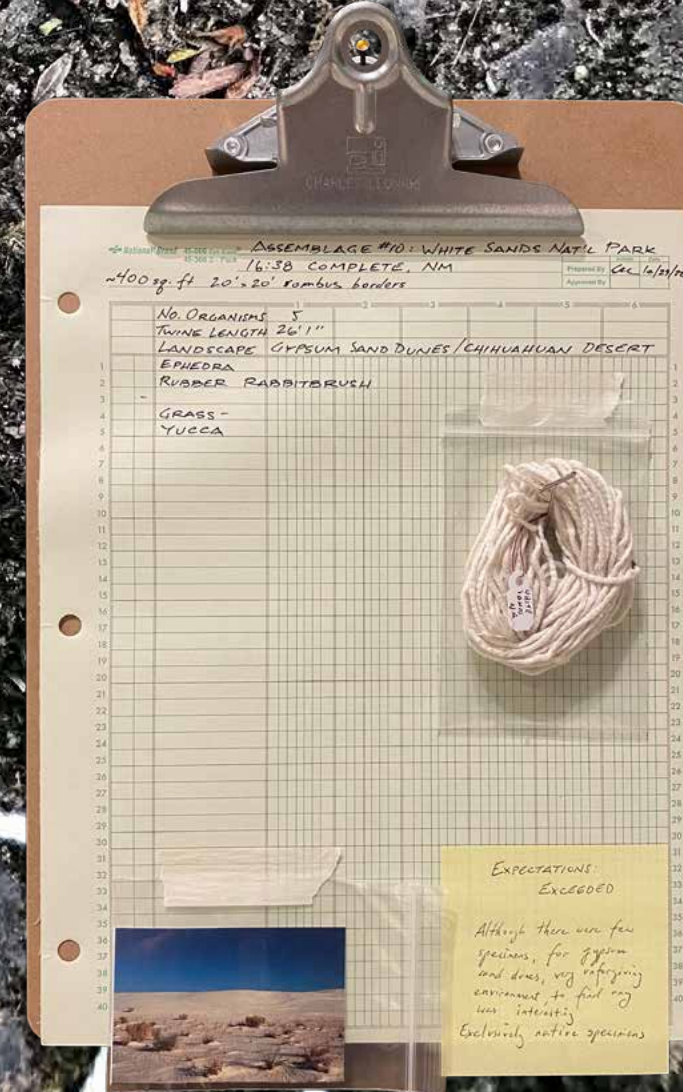
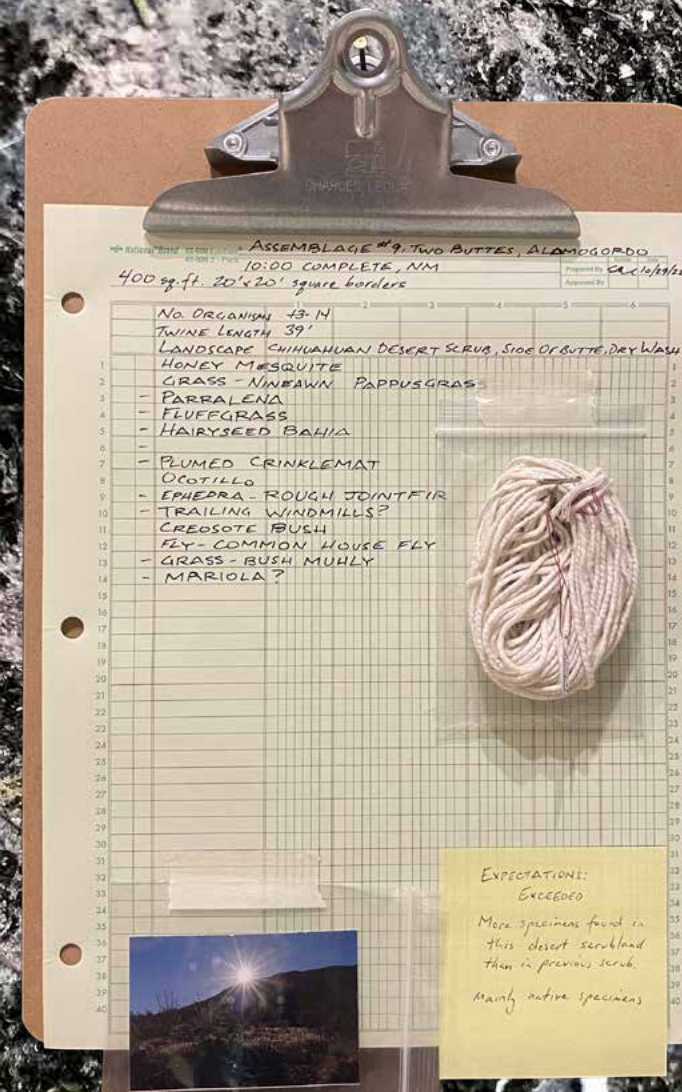
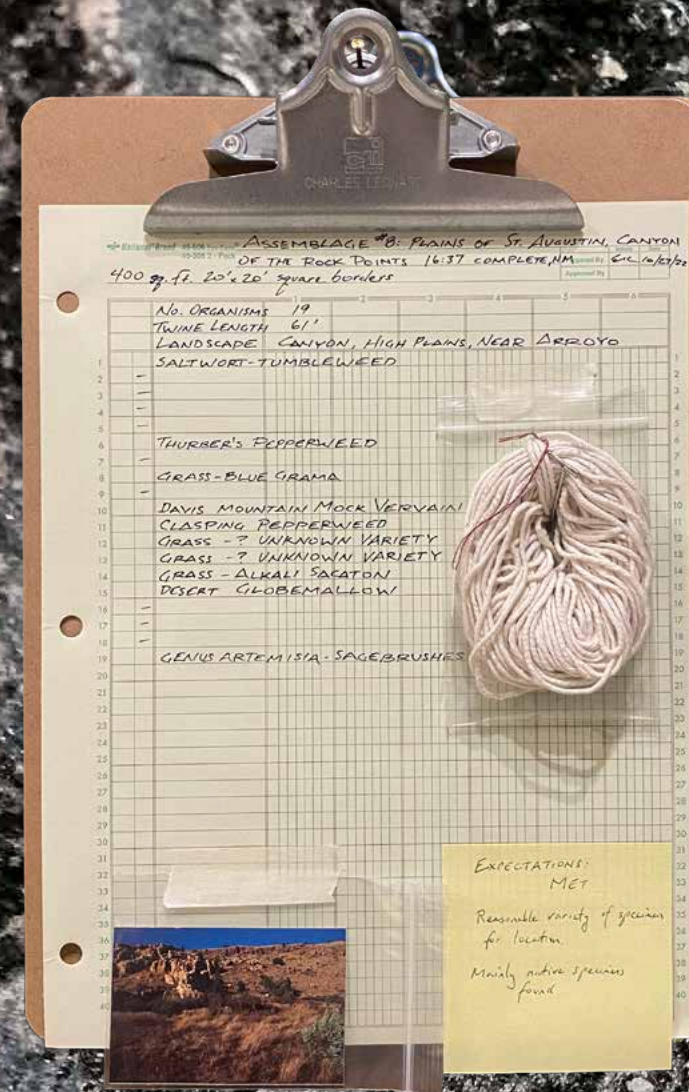
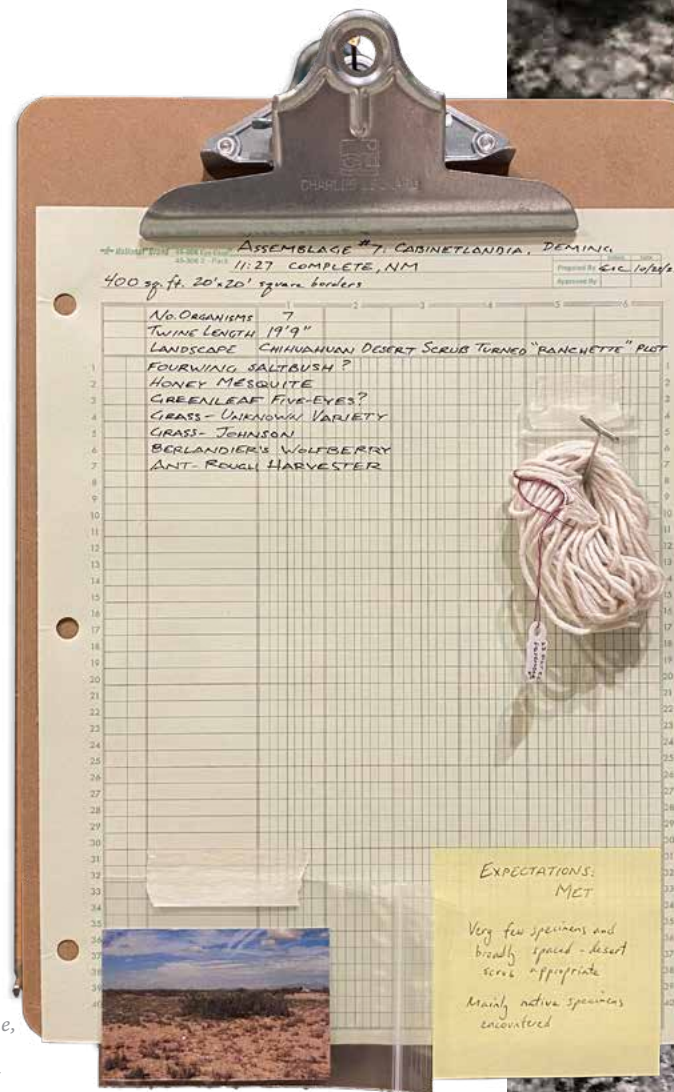
I could pick any spot I like and look there. I like flowers. I chose a spot with the most flowers and roped it off. Not in a serious, painful way, just with twine. I made a twine square, measured 20 feet by 20 feet. I used rocks and sticks to hold my corners in place. I liked making this boundary. It seemed to be a container for things I wanted. Things that belonged to me. Except none of it belonged to me except the twine.

Eventually, I learned to undo the boundaries I had kept on making. I only took the broken stick or rock that held them in place. I wound the boundary line around that first fixed object and in the undoing, made something new.

\*Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, author of *The Mushroom at the End of the World*

This Page:  
Assemblages:  
clipboard, scientific  
note paper, ink, twine,  
plastic baggies, label  
tags, T-pins, drafting  
tape, sticky notes  
©2022

Opposite:  
Detail of moss  
collected in  
Assemblage #2  
Dimond Canyon Trail,  
Oakland, California  
©2022





Detail of ties in  
Assemblage #2  
Dimond Canyon Trail,  
Oakland, California  
©2022

# BOUNDARIES FALSE DELINEATIONS AS MYTH

When I set out to make my first assemblage, the idea was simple enough. After reading one of the essays in [The Mushroom at the End of the World](#), I wanted to better understand Louwenhaupt Tsing’s underlying premise that organisms, in contrast to the typical modern scientific approach of treating species as distinct from one another, are so dependent on their systems of fellow organisms that they should not and can not be treated as isolated.

In the book, Louwenhaupt Tsing focuses on matsutake mushrooms: a species that must grow with pine trees in disturbed forests to live. The best forests for matsutake are the ones disturbed by human interventions like logging. Pine is nurtured through the human clearing of broad-leaf trees for more light and gets nutrients from matsutake’s mycorrhizal growth. Matsutake grow only alongside pine in disturbed conditions. The

individual species exist within an assemblage of three: matsutake, pine and human. Each works together for its own needs while affording opportunities to the others to thrive.

The traditional Indigenous American agricultural practice of growing the three sisters (corn, beans, and squash) together in a small plot is an example of human farming within the same paradigm. This dynamic approach to agriculture has been used for centuries to enhance the soil while producing food and helps all involved species to thrive.

There is a similarly dependent relationship between pollinators, such as bees, and the plants they pollinate: each needing the other. There are plenty of other examples involving predators and their prey.

Finding many examples of these working groups, it is easy to conclude that many living

organisms function together as parts of a system and that individuating species misconstrues this dynamic.\* Assemblages are Louwenhaupt Tsing’s term for the living group growing in concert.

I found this new concept of assemblage inspiring, and decided it would be interesting to see if I could find other living assemblages in my surroundings through careful observation. Perhaps certain plants always grew near one another and if one paused long enough to observe the setting, it would be visible.

To do this, I planned to conduct an artistic intervention that resembled a scientific or architectural land survey. I wanted to cause as little negative environmental impact as possible and so be close to traceless. I also wanted to easily repeat it in different settings, so I devised an easy method.

I would plot out a twenty-by-

twenty-foot-square piece of land and then use twine to tie, or more accurately, to loosely loop, one of each distinct plant or fungus species to its neighbor within the square. I wasn’t about to tie down fauna, but I recorded the animals I saw within the boundary line.

The practice required careful observation to ensure only one of each organism was collected, and the length of the twine would be indicative of what the area was like: if I found a lot of distinct plants, and the twine was short, it suggested close-knit biodiversity, if I found few plants and had long twine, it would show the opposite. This wasn’t meant to be formally scientific, instead, it was meant to enact a practice of slow observation, and to record the act of careful noticing.

Initially, I also wanted to record the twine in photos from above as if it were an ephemeral drawing

\*Individuation also makes it easier to dismiss the loss of individual species to environmental degradation as an unfortunate but inevitable result of (human) “progress.”

commemorating a lineage of communal ties. This quickly turned out to be unrealistic with the equipment I had, so I scrapped the plan.

My original goal was not meant to critique scientific or land surveys, but as is often the case with artistic practice, sometimes you recognize yourself exploring in unexpected directions.

During the first intervention, I had to choose a spot. The decision was a fairly arbitrary one, and I decided to do it around a place where there seemed to be some variety of vegetation that included attractive flowers. Very quickly I was aware that my choice was not really arbitrary and my biases were immediately involved. I chose what to study based on them. That is true of scientific studies as well. What people fancy is what they study.

As I laid it out, the incongruity of a

square on a piece of land that had no rigid lines, flat surfaces, or corners became wildly apparent. So too did the idea of straight boundary lines. Living things left to their own ways of being do not occur in straight rows. It was impossible not to think about borders and the contrivances required to maintain them.

Contrivances, both physical and mythological, are required to supplant the dynamism of living systems when you decide to delineate a patch of land. I had to make rules when I was laying out my boundary line. Sometimes the plants on the border would be split across it, lying over or under the twine. Was it in or out of the boundary? I decided that if the root system appeared inside the line, I could count it; if it were just the vining tips of the plant, it was outside. This was immediately antithetical to Tsing's concept of the assemblage working with inter-species dynamics.

How could I so arbitrarily call this side within and that side without and count only the interior of my falsely delineated patch of ground? How could I ignore the complete existence of a living system that knew no lines before I came with my twine? The existing system was free and without boundaries excepting the laws of physics. I was creating limits for a thing that already grew under its own will and had no need of my whims. This act was immediately allegorical.

When I performed the fourth intervention in Marfa, Texas, it was easy to choose a broken basketball court across from the border patrol station for the location. In addition to my curiosity about a more urban space, the proximity to border control was too apt to avoid.

I also recalled John Wesley Powell, the 19th century surveyor of the American West and his recommendations to the U.S.

government to demarcate new western states based on watersheds. Rivers make a kind of boundary, and where life gets its water makes an ecosystem. Powell was ignored by the powers in Washington, D.C. Instead, they were determined to follow the "Jeffersonian Grid." They would demarcate land based on squares across the whole continent. Squares larger, but similar to the unfeeling ones I was making in tiny patches of the west. Look at any map of the United States, and the west is awash in straight lines. Watersheds be damned... and dammed... and now nearly empty.

Lake Powell, a man-made lake that gets lower every year on the once mighty Colorado, now a drying river, was named in honor of that unheeded surveyor of yore. It stands as a grave reminder that the act of making a boundary, however arbitrary and mythological, has long-lasting and tangible consequences.

*Detail of tie in  
Assemblage #4  
Marfa, Texas  
©2022*



*Detail of ocotillo in  
survey Collection  
at Assemblage #9,  
Two Buttes, New  
Mexico  
©2022*



*Detail of twine  
roll at Assemblage  
#8, Point of Rocks  
Canyon, Plains of  
St. Augustin, New  
Mexico  
©2022*



Undone  
Boundaries: twine,  
found objects  
©2022







*Line in the Salt  
Flat, Bonneville  
Salt Flats, Utah  
©2022*

# *SALT & TAR* AND SMELL THE JETTIES

**PART I: SALT LAKE**

Along a rocky shore as empty as a trough without rain,  
The horizon drowned in smoke screen  
Mirroring sunlight off salted sand  
In an incandescent luster without end or beginning

The sky and earth became void  
As ethereal as the angel of death itself  
Calling its sea back to air and atmosphere  
Away from water and life.

**PART II: THE FUTURE**

It is not yet written  
    What's to come a wound spring  
        Coiled and ready to strike  
            With venom and fear  
                Sending fever as memory  
Could it be different now?



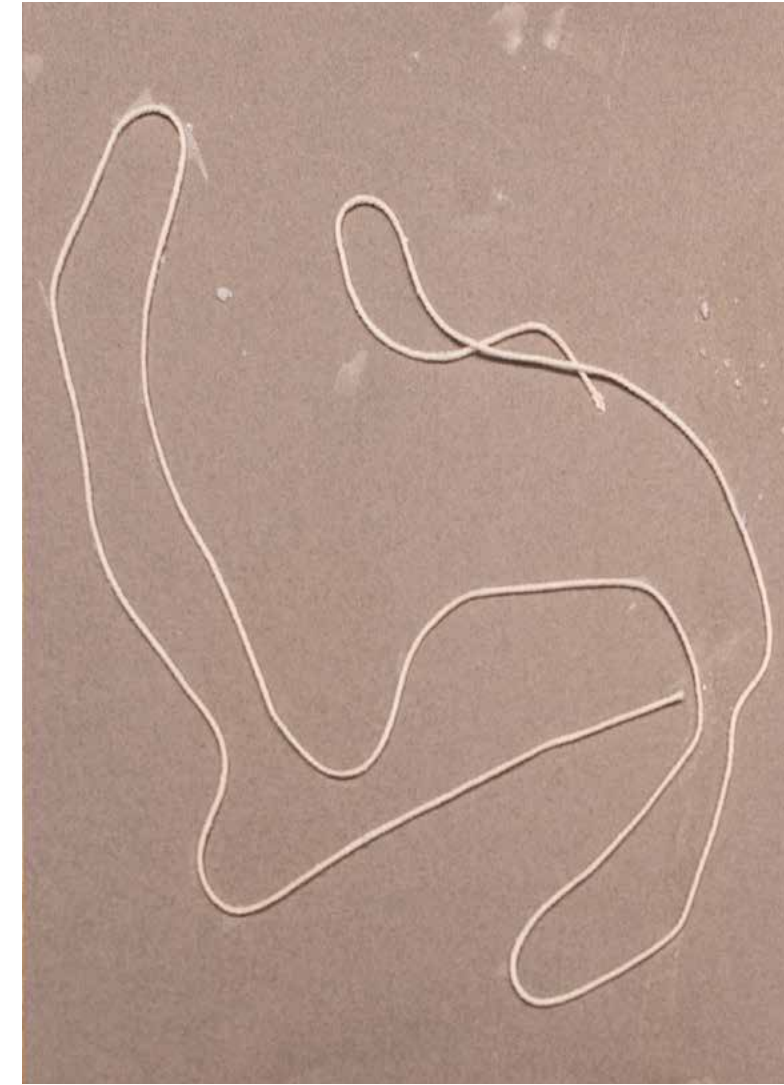
*Salt Paintings  
Drying on  
Terminal Beach,  
The Great Salt  
Lake, Utah  
©2022*

*Salt Paintings #3  
and #5 as displayed  
in the Land Arts of  
the American West  
exhibition at the  
Museum of Texas  
Tech, salt water,  
algae, paper,  
25" W x 9.5" H  
©2023*





*Smell the Jetties,  
Then & Now.  
copper wire, water  
and tar of The  
Great Salt Lake,  
plastic specimen  
containers,  
2 in. DIA x 3 in.  
©2022 - 2023*



*Left:  
Bonneville Salt Flat  
salt on paper  
©2022*

*Right:  
Bonneville Salt Flat  
salt with cotton  
twine on paper  
©2022*



# ON PERMANENCE

## MARKING TIME IN CLAY

Ever since Von Venhuizen asked me the question, “What do you think about permanence?,” I have been thinking about it; both the idea of permanence, and my response to his question. It struck me sideways. I said I didn’t believe in permanence, a reply that felt dissatisfying and possibly even dismissive. Why respond like an evasive politician over a question that isn’t controversial? Also, Von seemed about to make a specific point, but my answer launched the discussion in a different direction. We never came back to where we’d left it.

My response was strange to everyone in the room, even to me. Still, though, it felt true, and led me to a deeper consideration of the question. On a human scale, it is true that something lasting a thousand years, like a well made ceramic object, could be considered permanent, but I am unable to accept that. Even Uranium 238, with a half-life of 4.5 Billion years – BILLION – ends.

So what is my problem with permanence?

After thinking about this for weeks, I found the source of my discomfort with the concept of permanence. Permanence assumes that a thing does not change, that a thing can be impermeable and intractable, that there is an essence that remains the same forever. Therein lies the rub.

The idea of an essentialist world that is not in constant tension and flux is a dangerous fallacy. Even static-seeming systems are evolving. Constancy is an illusion of human perception. Successive changes eventually cause variances to become visible, and when human culture is involved, it gets tricky, because change inspires fear, both in individuals and societies. It’s a reasonable fear; newness brings uncertainty and requires adaptation. Change is hard and uncomfortable, and some people and societies cling to the appearance of something fixed to avoid having to adjust to a new paradigm.

Then there is the matter of the past. It is easy to see the past as unchanging, because it is fixed in our perceptions of time and memory. We can see it as if everything that led to our past experiences was static, and only the current state is in flux, regardless of the changes that led to what became our pasts. We can also construct fantasies of our memories, weaving in emotional recollections that may or may not be accurate. Often the pasts we construct never existed in fact, but were constructed from the emotional impressions of a permanence that never was, a stability that finally emerged as mutable and varied from memory.

Fear of change and newness is found everywhere, from innocuous complaints about fashion trends to nefarious complaints about the changing composition of a neighborhood or nation. These fears can be easily manipulated. It is where we derive nativism, nationalism and xenophobia. The fear of change has turned nations toward demagogues who use

fabulist notions of a mythical and “better” past.

The idea of permanence leads to the belief that some people are permanent residents who belong while others are forever outsiders. It is used to impart more value to some societies over others. In short, permanence contains tribalism, a danger to all humanity.

I believe there is no mark that will not be changed. No idea that will not be used against itself. No entity that won’t evolve or disappear altogether. The concept of permanence is a false impression that easily leads to bad ends. I reject it.



*Left:  
Site recording of  
the Lightning Field,  
New Mexico, soda  
fired stoneware 2in.  
DIA x 12in H  
©2022*

*Right:  
Site recording of  
The Lightning  
Field, New Mexico,  
saggar fired  
stoneware 2in DIA  
x 12in H  
©2022*

*Previous page:  
Untied, Deming,  
New Mexico  
©2022*

*Opposite page:  
Through the  
Broken Window,  
New Mexico  
©2022*





In the ceramics studio during Land Arts, I conventionally fired a group of vessels in case my planned experimental firing shattered the rest. When it turned out that my saggar firing was successful, I shipped the backup works to my parents as gifts, and unfortunately, two broke in transit.

There aren't many options to repair severely damaged ceramics, but kintsugi can be an excellent choice for what is otherwise irreparable.

The Japanese art of golden joinery is perhaps the most beautiful way to reclaim a broken dish. But more than that, it speaks to the essence of the Japanese zen philosophical concepts of mushin, "no mind," or the meditative state of existing entirely in the moment, and wabi-sabi, often thought of as finding beauty in imperfections.

Kintsugi likely began during the reign of Shogun Ashikaga Yoshimasa in the late 15th century, when it is said that he sent a damaged tea bowl back to

China for repair. The bowl was returned repaired with metal staples, leading the shogun to entrust local craftsmen to find a more elegant solution. They chose to use powdered gold suspended in a lacquer resin, resulting in highlighted cracks.

Highlighting imperfections and the damages of time and wear is the essence of wabi-sabi. It is at the core

of the Japanese tea ceremony which is both a Zen Buddhist and aesthetic practice. Kintsugi wares are most often associated with tea ceremony, as every item used must be imbued with its own unique charm. By enhancing both damages and repairs, one readily acknowledges the individuating beauty that comes with age and changes over time.

Wabi-sabi, especially as executed in Kintsugi, is a physical manifestation of the acknowledgment of impermanence.

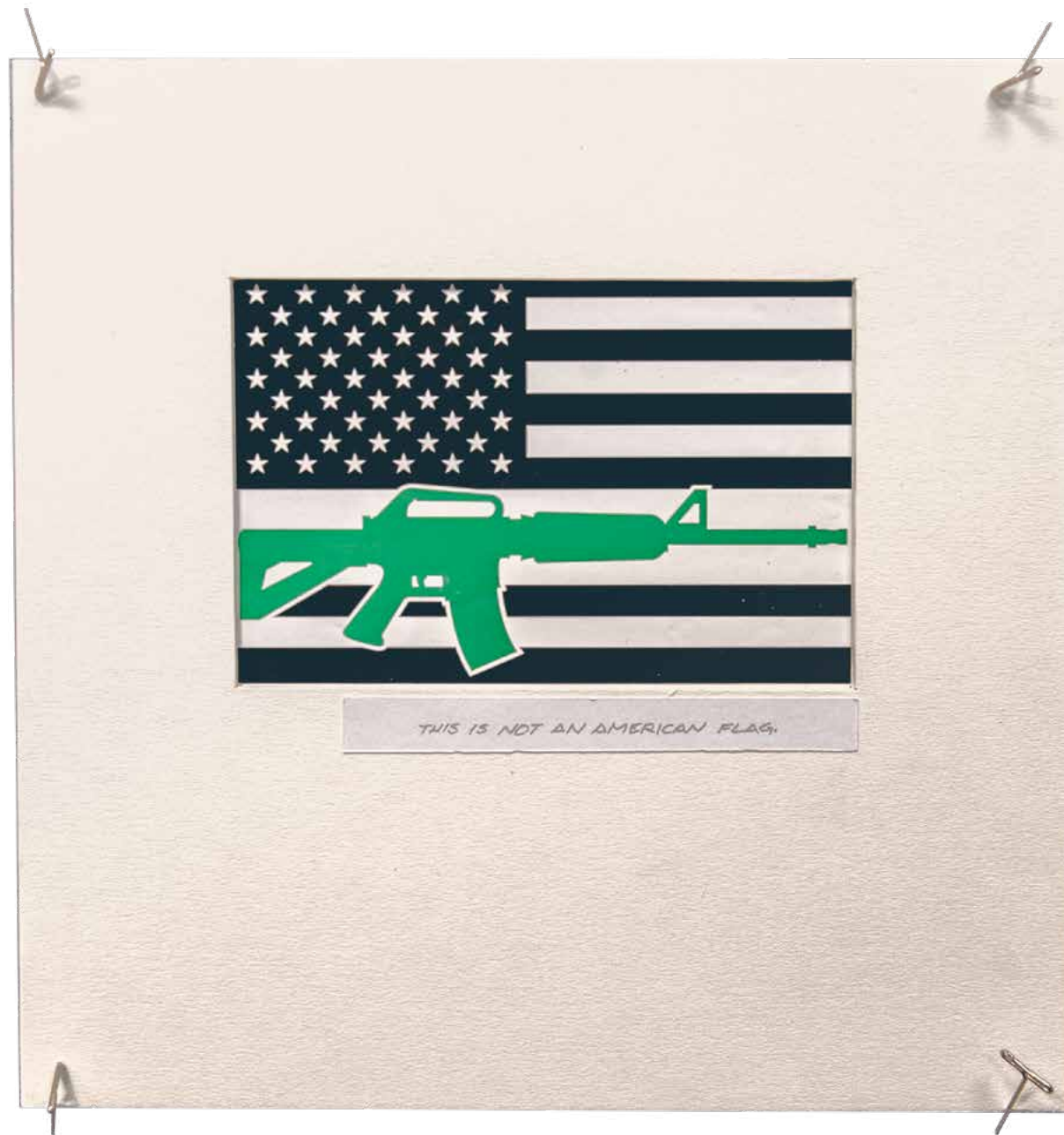
*Left:  
Dusk over Pueblo Bonito, Chaco  
Canyon, New Mexico  
©2022*

*Below:  
Repaired site recording of Two  
Buttes, New Mexico, soda-fired  
stoneware, metal powder, epoxy  
©2022 - 2023*

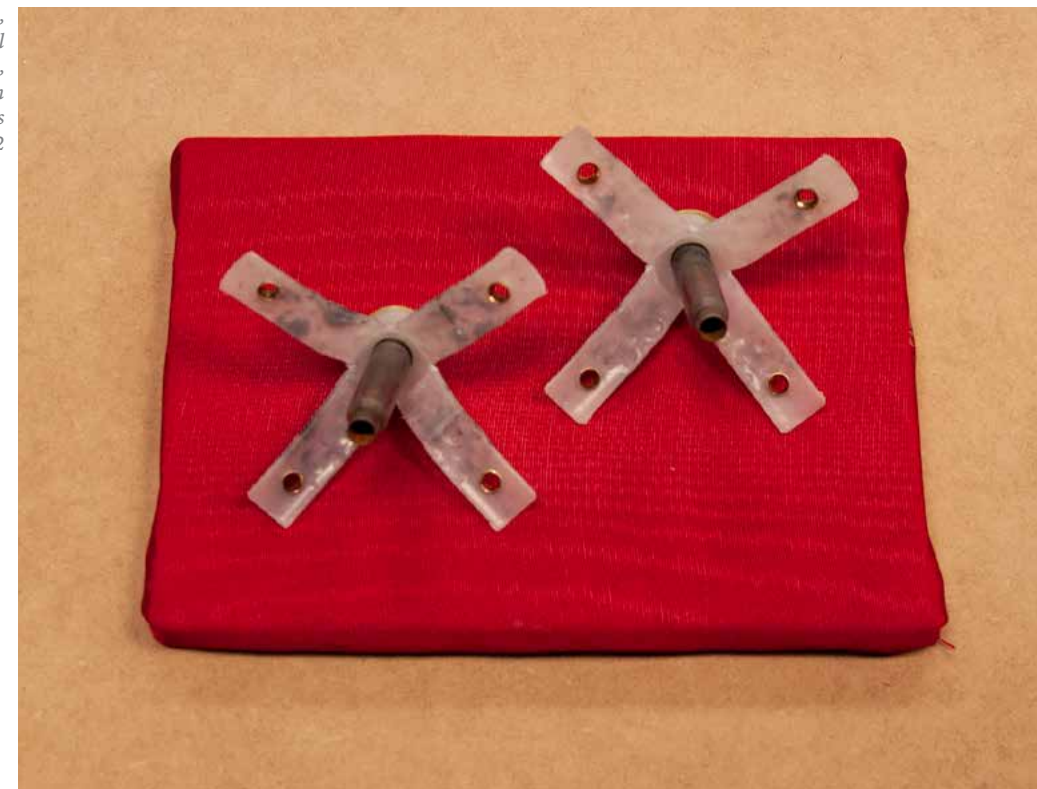


## AMERICAN SEDUCTION

1. Tiny hands from low vantage point, something hard and cold and metallic beneath satin and pretty lace. A drawer of forbidden things. A heavy object never found again.
2. Hands less small, still soft, placed over ears. A furious snap and crack steel explosion piercing stale air. Practice shot into homemade target. Suburban basement, wooden crate, magazines stacked 2 feet thick, a smoking hole most of the way through.
3. Curious hands rummaging. A rusty metal chest in a laundry room. A small paper box of brass cylinders. "38 SPECIAL" embossed in the ends.
4. Supple hands strumming guitar with friends. Rumors of dead schoolmate's wrong place wrong time notorious city public transport. Didn't want to give up his guitar.
5. Roughened hands in a college art studio. Two boys shoot dead 12 classmates, 1 teacher. Themselves.
6. Lean hands on a keyboard in an office. A young man shoots dead 20 small children, 6 teachers, his mother, himself.
7. At the keyboard several years later. A young man shoots dead 17 high school seniors, is arrested, convicted for life. Dry hands swipe a metrocard. Join streets full of marchers.
8. Two years more, 1800 miles southwest. 4 colleagues at a range. A .44, two 9mm's, a .22 rifle. Taut hands load a chamber. Pull a trigger. Hit a paper target.
9. Chapped hands making school lunches. A young man shoots dead 19 school children, 2 teachers, his grandmother who survives. U.S. Border Patrol shoots him dead.
10. Sun-burnt hands collecting cartridges across the desert. Rusted steel, cracked plastic, dirt-filled aluminum, verdigris patched brass.
11. Sunny cloudless afternoon. Ranging cattle shooed away. Calloused hands pulling triggers. 20 gauge, 12 gauge, .22, .308. Deafening bang, kickback, recoil, smoke, bad aim, flying dirt, snapped tree branch, exploded cans.
12. Lined hands typing: 72 year old man shoots dead 11 dancers, himself. Days later, 66 year old man shoots dead 7 farmers. Police arrest him. He confesses. Trial date determined.
13. Head in hands, awaiting future statistics \_\_\_\_\_.



*Killer Studs,  
found steel  
7.62 cartridges,  
polymer shotgun  
wads, brass  
©2022*



*Cross Your Heart  
Choker, found  
brass .22 and .308  
cartridges, suede,  
brass findings  
©2022*





*Count Your Lucky Stars Three-Tiered Statement Necklace, found 12 gauge, 7.62, 9mm, .308, .224 cartridges, brass findings and wire ©2022*



*The Old Ball & Chain bracelet, hammered brass ball 3in DIA, found brass chain and findings ©2022*

*This is Bomb, found shrapnel, crater flora, chicken wire, plywood ©2022*



*Double Barrel Ring, brass, found 17mm cartridges, size 6 ©2022*



*Hole in the Ground, Love, US, or Where I Collected Bomb Test Shrapnel, Wendover, Utah ©2022*



# FRAME IS FORM FORGING LANDSCAPES

What defines landscape? Webster's dictionary states that the word's first known use was in 1598 as a *noun*: *a. a picture representing a view of natural inland scenery or b. the art of depicting such scenery.*

In the most traditional sense, it is a grand vista seen across broad distances from a great height: light and shadow defining peaks, valleys,

low sun stretching bands of colors over the sky. Instead it could be an image to sell tropical destinations; tranquil azure waters reflecting breezy leaves and glowing clouds, glittering sand and foam as far as the eye can dream. Then again, it may show the majesty of ancient trees rising black and contoured against a pale grey rock face imposing, disconcerting, striking both awe

and desire. Rarely, when we think of landscapes, do we include people. The closest it comes is in the work of old Dutch masters painting peasant farmers and their cows in far off fields: faceless, nameless, happily harvesting potatoes and cream for wealthy burghers. The urban paintings of the same time are not usually considered landscapes.

Since the era of Manifest Destiny and robber barons, the American West has been both defined and mythologized by landscape art as a vast, wild, and entirely empty place made for the taking of humans who could get there to tame it and claim it as their own, as if it did not already include human civilization for thousands of years. Every black and white photo of the Sierra Nevadas, screen print WPA illustration of the Grand Canyon, and Hudson School painting tells that story. The 19th-century mythology of colonial imperialism continues

today and is easily found in contemporary photo books.

This mythology enables people to carry on as if the West is too vast to be at risk of over-development, and also fosters a nonchalant attitude toward the exploitation of its resources: if no one lives there, isn't this area consumable without consequences? And a good place to dump the trash of outsiders who want to send their waste away from their own homes and neighborhoods?

In the long distances between National Parks (kept to preserve the American Wilderness for tourists who are enchanted by the mythology of the Western landscape) there are vast mines, wells, ranches, logging enterprises, and military test sites with bomb craters and secrets, undoing and poisoning the very wilderness that seems so important to protect.

There are no places on land where humans haven't lived, and no places on Earth without something living in it, even in the most seemingly forbidding

environments. So it feels important to complicate the artistic depiction of landscape. Rethinking landscape could enable broader thinking, if not a broader view, and undo the mythology which appears to be its own undoing.

What is outside the frame is often as important as what is within it. The frame offers one view alone, chosen by its maker. Sometimes, what is there tells one story, but what is left unsaid and unshown tells something else.

When Walter Benjamin started criticizing art through the lens of reproduction technology, he was focused on the removal of the need for an artist to interpret and record scenes, but lost sight of the fact that while the camera doesn't exactly lie, it can tell a pointed story, and because it appears to tell only the truth, one has even greater responsibility to aim it with care. Vision and interpretation are as important as ever.

Following the 19th-century model of field research, I

brought watercolors and set out to paint in plein air. I painted some traditional landscapes, but quickly was struck by the colors I was seeing: they were distinct. I started painting the landscape as its color palette. It was not quite minimalism, but close to it. I wanted to see how much I could cut without losing the thread, and boiled things down to color alone.

As I continued to make palettes at every stop, it became apparent that each place had a distinct tonal range. So distinct, that when I showed them to my companions

without any leading information, they could correctly guess where each was done.

The palettes are plein air paintings as visual poems: spare but telling and allowing for multiple interpretations.

*One Photo, Three Landscapes.  
Chiricahua Mountains, Arizona  
©2023*





Left:  
Painting in Plein  
Air, Mimbres, NM  
©2022

Opposite page:  
Mimbres,  
plein air  
watercolor on  
paper  
©2023





Left:  
Sandstorm in  
Chiricahua  
©2022

Right:  
Goblin Valley,  
plein air  
watercolor on  
paper  
©2023



Goblin Valley, Utah 9 Sept 2022  
E. Coleman Murbhawan



Right: Sky, Smoke,  
Salt, Spiral  
©2022

Left:  
Spiral Jetty, plein  
air watercolor on  
paper ©2023

