

## OBSERVER

### "How Artist Andrea Carlson Heals Landscapes By Dismantling and Reassembling Them"

By Noah Berlatsky

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Andrea Carlson, *Exit*, 2019. Screenprint; 33 1/2 x 47 3/4 in. (85.1 x 121.3 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Bockley Gallery. © Andrea Carlson. Edition of 20 screenprints published by Highpoint Editions

Her first solo exhibition at a Chicago museum, "Andrea Carlson: Shimmer on Horizon," is on view at MCA Chicago through February 2.

Arguably the most famous American landscape artist, Ansel Adams, is known for photos that are notably absent of people and, in many ways, absent of time. The sweeping mountains, rivers and outcrops in his black-and-white images of national parkland depict an awe-inspiring absence. The land appears empty and eternal. It is an immensity whose only inhabitants are artist and viewer, who wander in sole possession of America's wonders.

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As an indigenous Grand Portage Ojibwe and Anishinaabe artist, Andrea Carlson's approach to and understanding of landscape is very different from that of the tradition represented by Adams. Her first solo exhibition in Chicago, "Andrea Carlson: Shimmer on Horizon" (on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago through February 2), presents work that show landscapes not as empty, but as full: of history, of trauma, of memory, of reverence, of time. Carlson's imagery is sometimes dreamlike and private, resisting immediate interpretation, apprehension, or possession. But it's also intimate and welcoming, asking you not to enter and take hold but to relate. "Sometimes," Carlson told Observer, "I think about land, or landscapes, as portraiture, because we [indigenous artists] believe in the livingness of the land."



Carlson's work presents landscapes not as empty but as full of history, trauma, memory, reverence and time. Courtesy of the artist and Bockley Gallery

One way that Carlson conflates landscape as portraiture is by creating images that are segmented and multiple. The 12-foot-long by 3-foot-high *Cast A Shadow* is made up of eleven smaller 1-foot by 2.5-foot segments. The painting(s) use multiple mediums—oil, acrylic, gouache, ink, colored pencil—to create a collage-like vista in which ambiguous human-ish figures float against a background of mountains. Two large fragments of mysterious documents are painted as if pasted over parts of the foreground.

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The painting is organized around a central monument that references a drawing of a tombstone (never built) by Grand Portage Ojibwe artist George Morrison. Text at the center of the piece reads, "Neverending Monument Please Spare the Garden/But If You Must Let This Be the Place Where You/CAST A SHADOW."

*Cast a Shadow* is in some ways a depiction of or a comment on how colonial power and colonial imagination chop up, compartmentalize, and break apart the land. The tombstone is a signal or symbol of mourning. The fragments of what seem to be legal documents dominating and obliterating part of the image suggest the ways that the landscape has been expropriated or turned into (someone else's) words.



Andrea Carlson, *Cast a Shadow*, 2021. Oil, acrylic, gouache, ink, color pencil, and graphite on paper; each: 11 1/2 x 30 in. (29.2 x 76.2 cm), overall: 46 x 182 in. (116.8 x 462.3 cm). Forge Project Collection, traditional lands of the Moh-He-Con-Nuck. © Andrea Carlson. Courtesy of the artist and Bockley Gallery

The painting evokes tragedy and loss. But it is also a celebratory or aspirational response to the Western landscape tradition—a jumble of images and figures and whorls and patterns and that odd slogan/poem, suggesting private and communal meanings that cast a nonexclusive, sideways shadow on landscape and on landscape painting. Rather than thinking about land as "static and processable," Carlson said, she strives to think of it as "alive and ever-changing or ever shimmering."

This simultaneous critique of and embrace of a fragmented vision of the land is even more pronounced in some of the other pieces in the exhibit. *Perpetual Genre*, for example, is a striking 4x5-foot painting of two statues. The statues—both based on actual European sculptures—show a man and a woman gnawing on human limbs while above their heads float surveying instruments.

For Carlson, the idea of cannibalism is linked to the idea of "consuming the other" and "assimilating native people into the colonized body" through boarding schools, forced assimilation, and forced language. At the same time, she pointed out that colonizers often accuse native people of "cannibalism and savagery."

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Andrea Carlson, *Perpetual Genre*, 2024. Oil, acrylic, gouache, ink, color pencil, and graphite on paper; overall: 45.5 × 61 in. (115.6 × 154.9 cm). Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, Block Board of Advisors Endowment Fund purchase, 2024.2a-d. © Andrea Carlson. Courtesy of the artist and Bockley Gallery

The title *Perpetual Genre* is printed upside down on the image. That's appropriate since the painting reverses and inverts the gaze and the imagery of colonial dominance by locating cannibalism in European traditions of art and land apportionment. It is a work about how landscape painting dismembers and consumes native people and the land.

Carlson's alternative, though, isn't an integrated view of the land as uncorrupted, integrated or whole. Instead, the statues float or sit atop a swirling, jagged land which could be mountains or sea, with a horizon line amidst dramatic clouds/waves/rocks. A horrifying distortion (humans delimbed) is juxtaposed against an exhilarating perceptual disjunction. "I see the horizon as the future; it's this thing out of reach we can't quite make out, almost a projection of the future," Carlson explained. The nightmare disorder of a land possessed by and ingested through violence is set against a disorder that has a hopeful potential. In looking at *Perpetual Genre*, you look past the genre of horror into a space that is not clearly defined or trapped by genre—a space that might open onto a different vision or a different way of living in the world.

The most visually chaotic image in the show is a collaboration between Carlson and Romanian artist and activist Rozalinda Borcilă called *Hydrologic Unit Code 071200—Nibi Ezhi-Nisidawaabanjigaade Ozhibi'igeowin 071200*. The piece is a five-channel video installation that serves as a critique of Chicago's wetland offset trading market.

In wetland offset trading, developers who destroy wetlands can offset the damage by purchasing credits from other developers who have built or managed new wetlands. As an informational booklet explains, Carlson and Borcilă visited wetland banks including Indian Creek, Squaw Creek and Neal Marsh, filmed them, and then arranged the film in a long landscape-painting-like video collage in which footage of grass, of water, of road traffic, flickers and shifts and repeats,

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creating a visual space in which the trading, monetization and manipulation of natural resources are visualized as a distorted, fractured natural world. "Sanitized and docile wetland banks, emptied of undesirable stenches, of Indigenous political and legal orders, simulate an imagined future that recycles imagined pasts," the booklet concludes.

The critique of capitalist and colonial damage and of hypocritical mitigation is pointed. But as with all of Carlson's work, the imagery of critique is also, in many ways, a delight. The city and state destroy wetlands and Indigenous heritage through hypocritical extraction and manipulation. Then Carlson and Borcilă take that damaged landscape, and that warped imagination, and they turn it into a breathing, changing art, in which trucks rumble over grasslands that are magically restored, as reversed mirror text scrolls past broadcasting messages that are almost but not quite understood. The representation and refutation of damage is in part an expression of grief. But the emotion it elicits isn't mainly grief. It's more like joy.

"Indigenous artists working with the landscape... there's a different positionality towards the land," Carlson said. "There's more loss, there's more ideas of how do we strategize to regain the land; there's a deep respect for it." Part of the respect in Carlson's work is a refusal to make the land into one thing, defined by one perspective—even an oppositional one.

For Carlson, the landscape tradition mutilates the land by separating it from its multiplicity, while Adams' sweeping uniform vision is a colonial imposition that devours disunity. Carlson restores the scars to the landscape in part as a record of trauma. But she does so as a way of giving the land back its fractures, its divisions and its people.

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