

ARTnews

"Andrea Carlson's Frenetic Landscapes Channel Disjointed Histories and Deep Time"

By Jeremy Lybarger

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Andrea Carlson: *Perpetual Genre*, 2024. Courtesy Bockley Gallery, Minneapolis, and the Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, Evanston, Ill./©Andrea Carlson

Andrea Carlson's fascination with landscapes began with a painting her parents hung in her bedroom when she was a child. She describes it as "cheesy" and "syrupy," the kind of deer-gazing-at-mountains scene that numbs the eye. But the painting's atmosphere—its intimation of something ineffable just over the hill—would lull her into a meditative state, and she'd fall asleep imagining herself in that unreal valley. "I'm wondering if it was about the infinity line, where information spills out," she told me, trying to explain the hypnotism of such thrift store schmaltz.

We were sitting in a lounge on the second floor of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) Chicago, where "Shimmer on Horizons," an exhibition of Carlson's work, is on view through February 2. It's a modest show—four paintings, plus a video installation and a sculpture—but so visually torrential and conceptually heady you need an entire afternoon just to get your bearings. Carlson's works are panoramas, comprising individual paper panels that, hung together, sometimes sweep 15 feet across the wall. Although they contain familiar topographical features such as mountains, lakes, and trees, these aren't your grandmother's landscapes. Carlson's images combust with metaphysical abundance. They have a frenetic symmetry. Anywhere your eye roves, there's some seemingly talismanic allusion, exquisitely stylized: hands, masks, birds, petroglyphs, names, patterns. It's as if the land itself is polymorphous and geysering a disjointed history. "If you actually entered these landscapes," Carlson said, "you'd be cut into pieces."

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Her approach is a clean break from the 19th-century tradition of American landscape art, in which de facto propagandists like Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Cole depicted land as radiant and virginal, the birthright of any colonial buccaneer drunk on Manifest Destiny. Their paintings bear little trace of the Indigenous people whose homelands were being stolen, much less evidence of the exploitation and genocide that European settlers wrought.



Andrea Carlson: *Perpetual Care*, 2024. Courtesy Collection Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver, and Bockley Gallery, Minneapolis/©Andrea Carlson

For Carlson, an Ojibwe artist descended from the Grand Portage Band located in northern Minnesota, there's something satisfying in the notion of the earth defending itself, of the ground dismembering interlopers or "consuming" them—at least metaphorically. "The museum is a landscape in its own right," she said. "It's trying to be neutral, but most museums are not neutral. What if I make a space outside of that space?"

Carlson likens her works to decolonized territories that exist in opposition to the institutions that exhibit them. It's an auspicious moment to animate that idea. In addition to the show in Chicago, Carlson is featured in the Prospect New Orleans triennial (which opened in early November and closes February 2,) and will be the subject of a major midcareer survey opening at the Denver Art Museum in October. Taking the long view, however, she's nonplussed by the momentum. "I've been doing this for 20 years," she said, while meandering through the MCA. "I'm like, *where have you been all this time?*"

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THERE'S A CERTAIN IRONY in Carlson's MCA show, at least if you've followed recent Chicago art salvos. In 2020 she published an op-ed titled "Where Are the Native Artists at the MCA?" in the local arts blog *Sixty Inches from Center*. The piece was a scalding rebuke of the museum's lack of Native representation and a critique of how such institutions shirk accountability. Carlson wrote:

One of the potential outcomes of exposing the MCA's scant inclusion of Native artworks in their collection is that they will welcome this criticism, and use the 'underserved communities' narrative to solicit funds from foundations and donors to expand their collection to include Native-made art. Many institutions can't 'fail,' because even when they do, their failure is rebranded and marketed as a worthy cause. In this way, there are no real consequences.

Has she softened her tone now that her name is on the MCA's walls? At an artist talk at the museum this past August, Carlson noted that the MCA occupies a patch of earth historically belonging to the Potawatomi, and proposed an idea to curator Iris Colburn: "Give us our land back." Carlson laughed as she said this—and so did the audience, in the shaky way of witnesses eager to avoid implication in a crime—but the quip had teeth. (It also recalled Carlson's massive installation along the Chicago River in 2021, in which a five-part banner blared in emergency red letters: you are on potawatomi land.)



View of Andrea Carlson's exhibition "Shimmer on Horizons," at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. Photo Robert Chase Heishman/Courtesy Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago

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As if in deference to the gravitas of her themes, Carlson is rarely acclaimed for her sense of humor. But she has an eye for juxtapositions that provoke a kind of queasy comedy. These often involve unlikely cultural mash-ups, as in her "VORE" series, begun in 2008. Many of these paintings reference cannibals in a nod to 1970s and '80s exploitation flicks, like *Cut and Run*, a 1984 curio whose tagline reads "It's the one story you won't see on the 6 o'clock news."

In *Perpetual Genre* (2024), two boys inspired by a statue from the British Museum's collection hover below tools used for land surveying. The statue in question is an incomplete 1st- or 2nd-century Roman sculpture of a boy gnawing the arm of his opponent during a game of knucklebones. The piece is informally known as "the cannibal," and Carlson equates man-eating with colonialism—an analogy reinforced by the painting's choppy sea, evocative of transatlantic migration. But there's something overripe about the image, a self-conscious baroque-ness that troubles the line between humor and horror.

"The landscapes we all walk are full of irony if you look close enough," Carlson said. A prime example: Every pad of her preferred paper brand, Arches, is emblazoned with a crest reading 1492—the symbolically freighted year (in America, anyway) the company was founded. "What took all the land away?" Carlson said. "Paper! It's all abstracted on paper. It's just how everything is carved up."

If paper suggests the bureaucratic chicanery of deeds, treaties, and proclamations, it also foregrounds its own perishability. The lights in Carlson's MCA exhibition are kept dim in an effort to conserve the art, and Carlson mentioned that institutions will loan her works on paper for only three months at a time to mitigate potential damage.

Related to such fragility is what she calls "memory work." During the Covid pandemic, she lost people close to her and began to incorporate their names into her art, personal tokens whose significance viewers may not register. This practice expanded to include the names of ancestors and other artists who were formative influences, such as the late Ojibwe modernist George Morrison. "I'm starting to realize I have a stage and some power," Carlson said. "I can do memorialization work, and the museum will take care of it forever—well, until the lava flow takes it out."

When I remarked that she seemed blasé about posterity, she said, "future generations will make their own work to see and admire. They don't need mine hanging around. The loss of my art is not that big a deal."

MEMORY WORK is a subterranean route into Carlson's private life. She is visibly uncomfortable talking about herself and has a politician's knack for deflecting. "I feel like sometimes I spend so long in the studio that I get almost socially studio-ized," she said, noting that she often spends 12 hours a day making art. Gradually, a sparse biography emerged, as if in bullet points. She was born in Nebraska and grew up in Minnesota. She attended the University of Minnesota and then the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. In April 2016, the same week that Prince died, she moved to Chicago.

Aside from occasional teaching gigs, making art is all she's ever done. (A brief stint at Walmart ended with her being fired, though she claims not to remember why. "The lady said, 'You'll never work for a Walmart again,' and I'm like, 'That's the point! I also would like that for me.'") Last year, Carlson bought her late grandmother's house and moved back to Minnesota. She converted the

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garage on a hill behind the house into a studio. "You can see [Lake Superior] from our house," she said. "There's something about the energy off of that horizon—you always know where it is. You can always feel the moods, the weather that comes off of the lake. It's very specific. It's something I want my work to have, too."



Andrea Carlson: *Cast a Shadow*, 2021. Courtesy the Artist and Bockley Gallery, Minneapolis/©Andrea Carlson

Horizons suggest the unencumbered immensity of the Midwest. ("The Midwest is so cool. Let *Art in America* readers know," Carlson said, joking that she wants a hat inscribed *Midwest Princess*.) But Carlson's neck of the literal woods in Minnesota is also a shoreline. It's a transitional space, neither entirely land nor entirely water. Carlson sees such in-between places as the psychic origin of all poetry and music.

In "Shimmer on Horizons" (the show's name inspired by a 1995 song by the alternative band Throwing Muses), the horizon line in her works is constant, a paradox hinting at both futurity and closure. Above and below are layers of landscape that simultaneously double as strata of time.

Ink Babel (2014), a large-scale work in the MCA's collection (though not included in the show), is a monochromatic grid of 60 panels that function like filmstrips. It's a work of discombobulating scale and density, and it exemplifies a hallmark of Carlson's technique: the desire to overwhelm. "That was definitely an intent," she said. "You're in its landscape."

These are landscapes without the operatic vistas and ostensibly untrammelled serenity of Bierstadt. You can't project yourself into Carlson's spaces; they're conquest-proof. Symbols and objects hover in a frozen maelstrom that seems to emanate from the center of the picture—an almost synesthetic overkill that Carlson calls "hallucinat[ing] on the surfaces of paper."

Relationships between objects are often obscure, dissonant. In *Perpetual Care* (2024), Carlson re-created a horse that her great-grand-aunt drew decades ago. In *Ancestor and Descendant* (2023), she drew black ash baskets based on those made by the contemporary Native artist Kelly Church (Potawatomi/Ottawa/Ojibwe). You wouldn't necessarily know the provenance of such references without Carlson's guidance, but she isn't concerned about legibility. In fact, she worries that too many annotations could become a "codex of meaning."

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Andrea Carlson: *Ancestor and Descendant*, 2023. Courtesy Bockley Gallery, Minneapolis/©Andrea Carlson

"Refusal is beautiful witchcraft," she said, describing a tenet of her aesthetic strategy. In this case, refusal means denying an obvious point of entry into her images. When you first behold one of Carlson's works, there is an initial disorientation akin to vertigo. It's like opening a door to careening floodwaters. Once your eye alights on specific motifs, further refusal is enforced by not being able to take in an entire work at once because of its expansiveness. And there's the ultimate refusal of fixed meaning. The works change depending on how you approach them, from what angle or in what state of mind. They are windows onto landscapes that are seismic and haunted, at once tumultuous and static, bent into prisms yet flatly declarative.

Carlson is sometimes grouped with artists affiliated with Indigenous Futurisms, a term the Anishinaabe scholar Grace Dillon coined in 2003 to denote artists whose work offers a Native perspective on the future. Inspired by technology and science fiction, artists such as Cannupa Hanska Luger, Star Wallowing Bull, and Skawennati create alternative cosmologies in which Indigenous people were never colonized. Carlson's work is adjacent to this movement but is also decidedly introspective and explicitly enmeshed in history. She has recently started thinking about "deep time," as made manifest in objects like fossilized trilobites. The concept of the earth as archivist resonates through the work she's making now.

"Images survive us," Carlson said. "They sometimes get past us. They also get destroyed." On the state of such things, she added, "it's very vulnerable, as it should be." By way of example, she cited her ancestor's drawing of a horse—a relic of another time now preserved on paper for whatever passes for eternity these days. "We don't get to necessarily select the winners and losers," Carlson said. "Who gets to decide who becomes a fossil?"

She paused for a moment, then smiled. "Wouldn't it be cool to be a fossil, though? It could happen to any of us."

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