

## **Expressing the Landscape**

This essay explores reasons why the landscape in culture is a rich source of artistic expression. Art in all its forms is acknowledged as a reference of cultural identity but that does not presume it is admired or accepted, it merely acts as a visual symbol mirroring the society that the artist lives in. There is a co-dependence between the artist and the viewer, both acknowledging a link through this visual symbolism within their landscape. Three American artists will be mentioned in relation to their use of entropy, gestalt and biomorphic form between the 1970s and 2000s.

Art practice can draw on science, and geography and the imagination for subject matter. Art can rely on science to refine its methods and further its spirit of experimentation. In centuries previous to our own artists and scientists aspired to the study of nature in a literal sense whether it was the study of landscape and clouds like the John Constable (1776-1837) impressions of nature and light like Claude Monet (1840-1926) or intricate illustrations of life created by Charles Darwin (1809-1882) the evolutionary biologist. Contemporary artists reflect culture through expressing and creating their own landscape. With the help of science and imaging, a number of practitioners describe entropy, cell biology and biomorphic forms that are surreal in terms of connecting human organisms to the landscape.

## **Beginning**

Art and visual expression are as old as the first rock painting or chiselled flint. The making of these objects and cave paintings was purposeful, the hand movements and rhythm of the gestures would have followed a precedent, and the laws of physics. “When other species make things like bird’s nests, spiders’ webs, beavers’ dams - order is not optional but inherent in their purpose”<sup>1</sup> Eyes, brains and limbs, themselves evolved under physical constraints, come together to produce what works, what has form, what therefore looks good.<sup>2</sup> Searching for order in landscape helps us to belong and have some ownership of our existence.

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<sup>1</sup> Julian Bell, Mirror of the World. A New History of Art. London. Thames&Hudson. 2007 Pg 9

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Pg 9

In relation to the biological and emotional draw to the landscape, art represents a direct communication of human emotions. In a way art is a self-reflexive response to culture. Humans are co-dependent on so many elements of life as we experience it therefore collaborative or individual art practice through innovation or research has the potential to be a powerful link in any civilization. Organisms will adapt to small amounts of change (disorder) but a large degree of disorder can destroy a landscape, a culture or microorganism. Hence, the sublime connotations and concepts linger in the landscape. For the artist, a new direction in process or materials might happen as a society is altering its course whether industrial or digital. The artist can look to nature, be it human, animal or microscopic organism and evoke a response to describe the evolving landscape. Lucy Lippard suggested that formalist criticism is no more than an analysis of the physical attributes of particular objects which happen to exist in a morphological context.<sup>3</sup> In the 1960s, when land art was new, the expansion of consciousness offered was visual and often aesthetic, perhaps even social, as artists had to leave the confines of isolated studios and walled gallery spaces to interact with the government and local geologists and farmers to realize their goals. Artists were thinking on a grand scale. There were even religious undertones along the lines of the nineteenth-century “sublime.” The process of developing projects on this huge scale in the late 1960s and early 1970s demonstrates a shift in perception. The connection with land and sky is both spatial and temporal.

If one looks at a moss and lichen covered rock one might see a miniature mountain range covered with trees, a microcosm of our larger landscape. Robert Smithson once remarked, ‘look closely at a crack in the wall and it might as well be the Grand Canyon’<sup>4</sup>.

## **Museums are Jails**

In an essay originally published in *Art forum*, New York, September 1968, Robert Smithson (1938-1973) shared his thoughts on (ontology) the nature of being. Smithson was concerned at the ease with which a culture can confine itself to the history of art that lies in Museums. He felt that artists were guilty of colluding with

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<sup>3</sup> Lucy Lippard in *Art In Theory 190-2000* (Ed) Charles Harrison and Paul Wood. Oxford MA. Blackwell 2003. Pg 853

<sup>4</sup> Robert Smithson, unpublished interview. Kastner, Jeffery and Willis, Brian. *Land and Environmental Art*. New York, Phaidon press. 1998, pg.23

this notion and not looking at the culture of their own time. If creative process is dulled then the ability to express an emotion is surely dulled “Artists themselves are not confined, but their output is. Museums, like asylums and jails, have wards and cells.”<sup>5</sup> Smithson suggested that artists were allowing curators to impose a confinement of their creative process. In his essay ‘*Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects*’. Smithson referred to the earth’s surface through the mind’s eye as being an ‘abstract geology’ not an earth project.

One’s mind and the earth are in a constant state of erosion, mental rivers wear away abstract banks, brain waves undermine cliffs of thought, ideas decompose into stones of unknowing, and conceptual crystallizations break apart into deposits of gritty reason<sup>6</sup>

## Geometry of Nature

Smithson writes in exquisite metaphors describing land and nature using the body as a reference. He suggests organising this mess of corrosion into patterns, grids and subdivisions. This notion of patterns conjures up imagery of fractal patterns and self-similar structures in the landscape and in turn the human body. This thought process was happening in a similar time frame as Benoit Mandelbrot published ‘A fractal Geometry of Nature’ 1975 in which Mandelbrot deduced that biological systems like the bronchial and circulatory systems within, fit a similar model to the landscape.<sup>7</sup> Through intuition and observation the landscape would be expressed in a new way. This energy suggests to the reader his deep biological draw to the landscape and his sensitivity to the nature of entropy.

Robert Smithson took a view that earthworks had little to do with conventional notions of landscape or nature but simultaneously he was deeply drawn to the concept of entropy. Smithson was fascinated by conceptual relationships between viewers and

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Smithson ‘Cultural Confinement’ in (Ed) Charles Harrison & Paul Wood. *Art in Theory*. Oxford. Blackwell Publishing, 2006. Pg 970

<sup>6</sup> Robert Smithson ‘A Sedimentation of the mind: Earth projects’, in Charles Harrison & Paul Wood, (Ed) *Art in Theory’ 1900-2000. An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. New Edition, Oxford UK, Blackwell Publishing, 2006. pg 877

<sup>7</sup> John Briggs, *Fractals, The Patterns of Chaos, Discovering a new Aesthetic of Art, Science, and Nature*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1994. p 17

boundaries, inside and outside, central and peripheral spaces. He felt that it was an important concept to study a complete system versus the parts of a system as a means of informing ourselves of innate patterns or blueprints in our landscape, nature and universe. One of the most famous works of art created in America was ‘The Spiral Jetty’ 1971, by Smithson.

## **Vietnam**

At that time, there was an essential crisis of faith in the USA. There were many social issues such as the Vietnam War, conscription, the civil rights movement and presidential elections which were contributing to social discord. As a result, the culture was ripe for change and artists were at the forefront of this cultural upheaval. For many artists who started to experiment outside of the galleries and studios for inspiration, earth art became a vehicle.



Figure 1.,  
Robert Smithson ‘Spiral Jetty’ 1970

Robert Smithson did not perceive himself as being a land artist per se but more a person who felt strongly about reconnecting with the earth, which in of itself was a subliminal gesture. Figure 1 is an Ariel photograph of ‘Spiral Jetty’ 1971. It is in a remote area in Utah called ‘Rozel Point’. It is made with 6783 tons of rock, earth, salt crystals (which Smithson had a specific interest in), algae, and water. The rocks and boulders are black basalt bulldozed in to a line that jettisons out 1, 450 m into the

Great Salt Lake and ends in a whorl of three spirals. It appears to symbolise a state of entropy, a dissipation of energy, a reference to land as an object and as an organism in motion. It is not easily accessible by land and over the years has been submerged only to re emerge at times covered in salt crystals. It has an elusive quality which is poignant. New York artists were looking for a new way of seeing their world, and reconnecting with land was one way. Smithson was talking about sensation and the primary process of making contact with matter<sup>8</sup>As Smithson explained “Following the spiral steps we return to our origins, back to some pulpy protoplasm, a floating eye adrift in an antediluvian ocean ”<sup>9</sup> This demonstrates an artists primordial draw to the energies of the landscape.

## **Cultures Fashion Landscapes**

Robert Smithson’s notion of a dialectical landscape presupposes that the idea of a landscape is a culturally constructed entity. This spiral in its time seems to represent a new age symbolism. Nature defined by culture or culture eroding nature to its own end. Therefore, in a time of political change in America the young artists in New York and elsewhere expressed concern over the stark divisions between a contemporary expression of culture, the landscape and the symbolic preciousness of a bygone era. The dialectic between central or peripheral experiences in relation to civilization and an artist’s role to create visual references continue. We aspire to leave our mark on a world that will be here thousands of years after we are gone and dust remains. Necessity and nature can coexist. Smithson felt that human intervention in the landscape is natural and through time predictable. A society can rebuild, reclaim and renew or let earths cycle evolve.

## **Gestalt**

Robert Morris (b. 1931) is an artist, writer and theorist who researched Minimalism through sculpting. Within the cultural environment of the 1970’s he experimented with conceptual art, land art and performance art. Morris was fascinated by the Gestalt theory of analysing space, shape and form and the human perception of our relationship to this. The perceptual mode seeks clues out of which wholeness is sensed. The idea of Gestalt has its roots in theories by Immanuel Kant and Von Goethe. Its principal theory proposes that the brain and mind are one, holistic and

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<sup>8</sup> Smithson. ‘A Sedimentation of the mind: Earth Projects’ op.cit., p. 878

<sup>9</sup> David Bjelajac. American Art, A Cultural History. New Jersey. Pearson press. 2005. P. 423

analogous with self-organising behaviours.<sup>10</sup> Morris was an engineer before becoming an artist and art critic. He was not impressed by recent art within the galleries. “It seems a truism at this point, that the static, portable indoor art object can do no more than carry a decorative load that becomes increasingly uninteresting”<sup>11</sup> Morris felt the notion that work as an irreversible process ending in a static object no longer had much relevance. In other words, in the culture of this period, art should be changeable and need not arrive at a point of completion with respect to time and space. He loved the concept of being within the space and surrounded by the space so the experience would allow the observer to perceive him or herself in existence. He believes that the art of existing is a behavioural process and that the artist plays an integral role engaging the viewer in a sensory experience. Energy is released on a perceptual and physical level. This reaffirms the biological draw of the landscape and the artist’s intention to provoke an emotion and awareness within the creators own culture.



Fig. 2. Robert Morris ‘Observatory’

Size: diameter - outer circle: 91.2 meter, inner circle: 24.0 meter.

## **Art as a physical experience**

‘The Observatory’ by Robert Morris (figure 2). “The observatory is different from any art being made today....the work provides a physical experience for the mobile human body”<sup>12</sup> The observatory was made in Holland and consisted of two concentric

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<sup>10</sup> [www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/430413/optical-illusion](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/430413/optical-illusion)

<sup>11</sup> Robert Morris, in “The Art of Existence, Three Extra-Visual Artists: Works in Progress,” *Artforum* 9 (January 1971); p.28

<sup>12</sup> Robert Morris in *Land and Environmental Art* (Ed) Jeffrey Kastner, and Brian Willis. Phaidon press. 1998 P. 100

rings of earth. The inner ring was made of wooden stockades with earth piled up against the wood. The outer circumference was made up of embankments with two canals. The entrance on either side was cut into the embankment. These marked the sunrise on the summer and winter solstices. ‘Observatory’ was first planned in 1965 and realised in 1970. It makes reference to Neolithic monuments which fascinated Morris and inspired his work. The ‘Observatory’ revisits a prehistoric era when man was directly reliant on the bounties of the landscape and built the physical artefacts of his culture with available natural materials. ‘Observatory’ was designed to be experienced both aesthetically and in relation to its physical and temporal existence. The act of walking around it and being ‘in’ it, completely immersive.



Alexander Ross

Fig 3. Natural Artifice.

Oil on canvas - 228.5x381cm

## Lifeshapes

Alexander Ross (b. 1960) is a New York based artist that has grounded his practice to date on biomorphic type forms. These artistic forms resemble living organisms however they are conceived through the imagination. Biomorphism was a term coined by the art historian Alfred H. Barr Jr. (1902-1981). Barr characterised the word biomorphic as being an abstraction that is both intuitional and emotional.<sup>13</sup> Barr referred to these forms and abstractions as a type of elementary perception. Ross develops a physical process by manipulating plasticine models that suggest cellular structures, plants, scientific specimens, and landscapes. These hand-sculpted forms

<sup>13</sup> Alfred H. Barr. Cubism and Abstract Art Museum of Modern Art, New York., 1936, p36

are essentially “blobs” of clay with crevasses and protrusions that have been shaped into various morphing forms. He paints these biomorphic sculpted forms then photographs them as documentation within his process. Finally, he renders them as large paintings (Figure 3) above thus removing them from their original form.

His work conveys a variety of associations while at the same time remaining abstract. Ross’s images are perceptive with biomorphic clusters of cells, coiled shapes of organic greens on large canvases often with a limited colour palette of blues greys and greens. The result is juicy and organic giving way to reductionism. They evoke a science fiction type of quality by distorting scale and varying the depth of perspective within the images. These large scale ‘organisms’ on canvas are of visually expressive universes. His imagery conjures up organisms from the depths of the ocean or space. Ross plays with images caught between representation and abstraction. Ross’s works are layered with multiple references to organic and biological forms, science and nature. Ross transcends his interpretations of the models from their three-dimensional form to two-dimensional representations on canvas and paper. In an article by Robert Storr in ArtForum, September 2003, Storr writes in relation to Alexander Ross’s work

There is a place on the continuum of visual experience where the distinction between natural and geometric form dissolves. One can speak of a multidimensional matrix at the core of which the macrocosmic and microcosmic, the organic and the geological the living and the dead are confounded<sup>14</sup>

This notion in conjunction with his images, tend to summon thoughts of the sublime. A new wonder draws the viewer to his images but an old fear reminds the viewer of the unknown. The most figural anthropomorphic green forms initially bring to mind Yves Tanguy (1900-1955), with biomorphic personages whose eccentric yet convincing growth patterns relate to inner longings and phobias. Like symbolism his paintings have a surreal quality and reference our biological connection to the landscape.

## **Visceral Response**

Ross does not have the same narrative agenda as the French Surrealist Tanguy. His biomorphic forms are more self-absorbed, following growth patterns in seeming

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Storr, ArtForum. ‘Warts and all’ September 2003



indifference to their effects on the spectator and yet the juicy colours and paint work invite the viewer in to his world. He has created a universe that is both private and impersonal. His forms are weirdly present yet utterly synthetic and linger simultaneously between life and artifice. Intellectually the viewer knows they are synthetic yet the image is powerful enough to evoke a visceral response through the sensation the idea has aroused.



Fig 4

*Percolation 2002*

Oil, acrylic and resin on canvas, 214x274cm

Similarly, Mark Francis (b. 1962) is a contemporary artist who is fascinated by macro and microscopic structures within the landscape. Francis like Ross expresses these universal worlds through paint. He has an intuitive attraction to the connections between the landscape that the viewer sees and the invisible landscapes within organisms. Through mono printing, drawing and painting Mark Francis's practice has found an avenue to describe biomorphic forms that reference the world of science and microbiology.

## **Order and Disorder**

Mark Francis examines order and disorder within the context of both man made and natural structures. His process appears complex as he creates thin layers of paint and resin blurring aspects of form to suggest movement, clusters of cellular patterns,

spores and sperm dancing in micro worlds. The modernist use of the grid in some of his painting practice gives them an underlying geometric structure that allows the artist to play with patterns. Monochromatic white, grey and black in early paintings permit Francis to become intimate with these biomorphic arrangements, which is comparable to how Alexander Ross (figure 5) below uses a limited palette of lush greens to create depth in his organic images.



Alexander Ross

‘Untitled’ 2005, Oil on Canvas 212x288cm

Francis introduces vibrant colour perspective in more recent works alluding to depth yet they avoid immediate recognition, instead concentrating on the tension created between abstraction and figuration. The viewer can float through these visual worlds by virtue of the fact that Francis’s canvases are often life sized and dominating. The paintings draw out the consequent ambiguity of enlarging such a tiny area of space, to the point where the scale makes the pictorial elements artificial yet intriguing.

### **Seeing the sum of the parts**

With the landscape the essential quality of expression must be the experience and process of living. This implies that we accept ourselves, our ideas and in turn our nature. “An artist’s main contribution to society is a vision of the culture in which he

or she lives.”<sup>15</sup> Expression is self-perpetuating. Humans have the capability of perceiving a wholeness of a thing when parts are all that is visible. One of the principle ideas behind Gestalt perception is a need to find order in elements that reference an overall form and space, as mentioned earlier. Art in all its forms can be acknowledged as a reference of cultural identity. Art acts as a visual symbol mirroring the landscape that the artist lives in. It is expression. Creative art practice can draw on history, anthropology, science, geography, digital media and the latest forms of imaging for its subject matter. Contemporary artists comment on their landscape as they see it and respond to its nature.

Essay by Ann Armstrong Artist 2010

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<sup>15</sup> John K. Grande, *BALANCE: Art and Nature*, Black Rose Books, New York, 2003. p. 99