



REFRAMING LANDSCAPE

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My introduction to the study of landscape began in three places that could hardly be more distant from one another: England, New Zealand, and Israel/Palestine.¹ Despite their geographical distance, these three sites are united by that long historical process known as the British Empire. England was the home of the Picturesque Movement, influenced by the transference of values inherited from landscape painting in both Europe (Claude Lorrain, Salvator Rosa, Nicolas Poussin) and China (see Yue Zhuang and Andrea Riemenschmitter, *Entangled Landscapes*) into gardening and landscape architecture, as well as by the internal colonization of the English countryside by the Enclosure Movement.² New Zealand was the idealized colonial outpost of the empire's Anglican bourgeoisie (in contrast to Australia, with its status as a penal colony for Irish rebels). Israel/Palestine is, of course, a product not just of Zionism, but of the British Mandate and the long history of European crusades to conquer the Middle East. It did not take long for me to find myself turning back to my "home landscape," the American West, particularly the colonizing settlements of the Mormons

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- 1 See "Imperial Landscape," in *Landscape and Power*, 2nd ed., ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 5–34.
- 2 *Entangled Landscapes: Early Modern China and Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017). See also E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1991).

in Utah and of the American military in Nevada.³ When I have tried to uncover the deepest roots of my fascination with landscape, my image of the “home” or “dream” place I ask students to revisit in their own memories, I find myself firmly planted in Carson City, Nevada, named after the “mountain man” Kit Carson, famous for both killing and marrying Native Americans. My formative habitat was thus shaped by the Sierra Mountains (where I hiked), the Paiute Indian reservation (where my best friend lived), and the local newspaper (which I delivered), founded by Mark Twain (whose books I devoured).

What have all these influences added up to for me? First, a love of travel, especially of the delights of rural and urban landscapes. Second, a feeling for places as historical palimpsests, overlaid with sediments of memory and imagination. Third, a sense that every site is haunted by conflict, violence, and erasure, and that the task for artists and writers is one of de-sedimentation and a “sounding” of places that goes well beyond visual apprehension. If Octavian Esanu is right in his Introduction that “landscape . . . is a Western (or even Atlanticist) phenomenon,” it is also the case that this phenomenon is often disrupted, resisted, or contradicted, from within as well as from without. Since landscapes, in contrast to places and spaces, are generally *framed* in Western aesthetics by visual and pictorial considerations (hence, the centrality of the picturesque), one of the key tasks is to watch for ways to *reframe* whatever perspective seems to have been embedded in the landscape as the “natural” way to see it.⁴ The remainder of this short reflection on landscape describes a few of the ways artists have done this.

Consider Augustus Earle, who stepped off Captain Cook’s ship during its 1838 landfall in New Zealand and spent a year among the Maori, faithfully depicting their masks, totems, and tattoos. As a picturesque traveler, he also took in the landscape; in one memorable composition, he portrays himself as dominating it, at the center of a procession of Maori bearers atop a mountain overlooking the Bay of Islands, raising his walking stick like a scepter to assert dominion over the whole scene.

And there is a visible—or rather, an invisible—trace of that dominion in what the picture does not show. The landscape is bare, with scarcely a tree. Probably this is a direct result of the British Empire’s

3 “Holy Landscape” in Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*, 261–90.

4 Francis Pound, *Frames on the Land: Early Landscape Painting in New Zealand* (Auckland, NZ: Collins, 1983).



Augustus Earle. *Distant View of the Bay of Islands, New Zealand*, ca. 1827. Watercolor, 26 × 44 cm. Image courtesy of the Rex Non Divell Collection, National Library of Australia.

need for spars to support the sails of their men-of-war, resulting in the deforestation of New Zealand's north island.⁵ This nakedness works against the picturesque aesthetic, which rewards sylvan “refuges” and woodlands to protect the beholder from exposure.

This feeling of exposure is redoubled by a trace of the Maori's attitude toward woodlands, which provided material for their impressive sculptures and totem figures, many of which Earle sketched during his sojourn in New Zealand. On the right side of the landscape, a totem figure glares back at the beholder in exactly the place where the picturesque tradition would provide a “side screen,” or *repoussoir*, to shade the tourist. Probably a sign of a tribal border, the statue provides a warning to the unwary traveler that she has reached the boundary of taboo or sacred territory, a sense that is reinforced by the location of the figure on a summit, reached by a pathway that comes up on the left side of the prospect and descends on the right side. In the distance, one can make out the faint traces of the same trail snaking its way toward the distant sea. This serpentine line evokes one of the key conventions of the picturesque cult of “variety,”⁶ while reducing it to a minimal reminder of an aesthetic that is firmly resisted by the composition as a whole.

Sometimes the resistance of landscape to the colonizing gaze can

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- 5 It turned out that the Norfolk pines were too brittle for masts but perfect for spars. See June Slee, *Crime, Punishment, and Redemption: A Convict's Story* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2014).
 - 6 Hogarth's *Analysis of Beauty* (1753) had already canonized the serpentine line as the emblem of British “Liberty” and the aesthetic values of variety and curiosity.

be exposed simply by reframing the perspective, as in Miki Kratsman's photos of a notorious "security wall" that separates the Israeli settlement of Gilo from the Palestinian village of Beit Jala. The wall was erected to protect the Israelis from Palestinian snipers, but at the cost of blocking out the beautiful view of the neighboring village. The answer was found in a large mural that replaced the real view of Beit Jala with an image of a thinly populated village, a kind of "Arabian pastoral" that pacifies the threatening prospect. Kratsman photographs the mural from two angles: one photo is "askance," revealing the Gilo wall as the instrument of division; instead of a picturesque serpentine pathway or winding brook into the distance, the undulating line is a wall. The other photo might be called "frontal," aligning the painted landscape with the real thing, most notably at the level of the horizon line. These two angles both reinforce and expose the *trompe l'oeil* character of the mural, making uncomfortably visible the construction of an illusion to comfort the settlers. If Augustus Earle shows us how the presence of a sculptural figure and the "presence of absence" in a deforested landscape can expose the ideological significance of that landscape, Kratsman does something similar with a landscape mural reframed by photography.



Miki Kratsman. *Wall at Gilo, Side View*. Chelouche Gallery, Tel Aviv. Image courtesy of the artist.



Miki Kratsman. *Wall at Gilo, Frontal View*. Chelouche Gallery, Tel Aviv. Image courtesy of the artist.

More recently, Antony Gormley's sculptural work *New York Clearing* reframed the view of lower Manhattan and the entrance to New York Harbor within a perspective of turbulence.

Composed of eleven miles of high-tension aluminum tubing coiled like a giant collapsed slinky, the work stood not so much as an "object" (much less a sculpture) in the landscape but as a form of dynamic motion, a vortex of energy that (in contrast to the serpentine line) evoked the aesthetics of the sublime storms and whirlwinds that have sprung up throughout Western painting, from Blake to Turner to Pollock. *New York Clearing* erased any trace of the human figure from its curves while inviting human bodies to enter its wild structure. It also had the effect of reframing the panorama of New York City, from the welcoming figure of the Statue of Liberty to the towering grids of lower Manhattan.

Installed on Pier 3 in Brooklyn from February through March 2020, in the midst of the onset of the greatest pandemic to arrive in New York since 1918, it seems now a perfect metaphor for the global plague that had the effect of clearing the busy streets of New York. Gormley could not have intended this, of course, any more than he

could have predicted that those empty streets would soon be packed with demonstrators protesting police violence against people of color. In the spring of 2020, two plagues ravaged the world, one of them temporary, the other enduring and systemic: the coronavirus and the endemic cultural/political virus known as racism. The coincidence of these plagues had the effect of amplifying both, most notably in the lived contradiction between the biomedical mandate for social isolation and the political urgency of rushing together in solidarity against racial discrimination. The masks worn by protestors became an image of the words “I can’t breathe,” merging the effects of the biological virus on the lungs with the last words of George Floyd as he was smothered to death under the knee of a police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Similarly, Gormley’s installation is what Walter Benjamin called a “dialectical image,” springing up at a moment of danger to capture history at a standstill. It became, for a brief historical moment, the frame of the iconic landscape of American freedom and capitalism, the Statue of Liberty and the skyscrapers of Wall Street, caught up in forces beyond their control. The work has been dismantled, but its images survive to sustain a reframed perspective on a landscape of global threat and promise.



Antony Gormley NEW YORK CLEARING, 2020 Approx. 16 km of 25.4 mm square section aluminium and steel spigots 1250 × 2860 × 2620 cm Installation view, Brooklyn Bridge Park, New York, 2020 Photograph by Scott Rudd © the artist.