

Ethan Murrow - Monograph Essay Hatje Cantz Publication 2015

Kalaloch Lodge sits on a rough coastline in the Pacific Northwest, part of the Olympic National Park. A decade ago, I was entering the lodge restaurant and discovered a photo of my great grandparents from the exact same site. In the grainy image, they stand among their logging camp kitchen garden, looking stoic and overworked. I began to sand away at the sheen of the story of their American Dream and the camps they worked in, which were filled with labor strife, impoverishment, and bits and pieces of hard won success. The sheer scope of what happened in the West as populations from the East pushed to the margins of North America is a staggering history of discovery, ignorance, reinvention, loss, and the harsh transformation of a landscape and people. This narrative and the factual, idealized, absurd, and uncomfortable ways in which we Americans choose to craft tales about our country has defined what I navigate.

Many of the photographs, paintings, and films that deal with the early history of the United States are saturated with ideas of false hope and impossible perfection. The Country is particularly good at rendering a vision of itself that conveniently edits out the messy, unwanted and uncomfortable truths of our past. The Hudson River School painter Albert Bierstadt, for example, created a grand version of America that was part reality, part heroic invention, and full of a colonial, power-hungry view of the country. Bierstadt has been a frequent target of admiration as well as cynical reference in the drawings. I nod to these masterworks, recognizing that the ambition and possibility of the United States can be seen within these depictions of drama and wonder. Many are resampled and coagulated with individuals and moments that are at odds with the whitewashed sublime. Through a mash up of images, I hope to cut away at the neat and tidy narrative of progress and domination and create moments that deal with the abundant misinformation, deep confusion, genuine absurdity and billowing mass that has always kept this Country on its toes.

As our world leaks and creaks forward, landscape can act as the ultimate term and representation of the joys and foibles of our actions. Landscape is an aesthetic ideal, an edited view of reality that suits the maker—in essence, a fiction. For me, the word has come to define our use of images and stories to convince ourselves of who we are, what we know to be true, and what we wish was fact.

These drawings are re-tellings of histories, past images, heroes, and idiots. They are obsessively detailed puzzles and scenarios intended to honor a lineage of grand gestures and soapboxing and expose the deficiencies and dangers of doing so in the first place.