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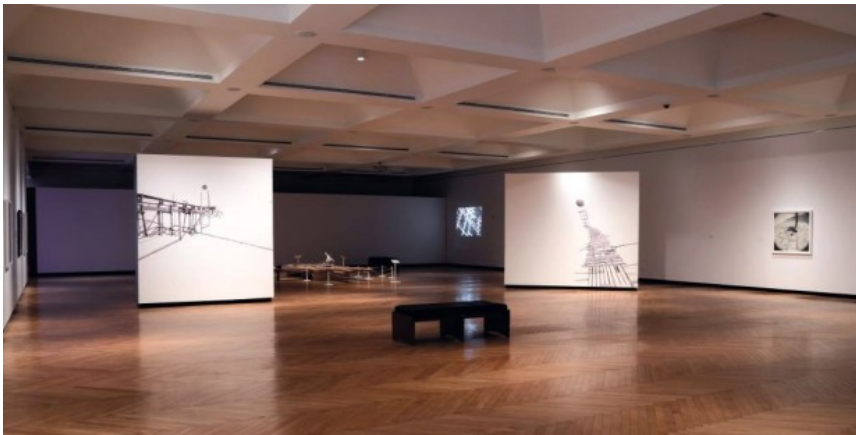
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REVIEW

Earth Pencils

October 2, 2013 by Scott Turri

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Position of Power, Land View. Ethan Murrow. 2013. Installation view. Clay Center. Charleston, WV.

In a progressively complicated network of limited resources, increased populations, and an unquenchable desire for progress — how do we position ourselves in regard to our view of land, place and people? Thirty-five year old, Boston based artist Ethan Murrow addresses these and other related issues in *Position of Power, Land View*, a solo exhibition at the [Clay Center for the Arts and Sciences](#), Charleston, WV, August 17 to January 5. Murrow works in a variety of media, however, this show revolves around seven highly crafted large graphite drawings. He made some of the work specifically for the show and filled in the gaps with work from previous series. In the rear of the space a stop animation film projects alongside a floor based sculptural piece. The same space also contains miniature houses with video projections in their interiors as well as a number of lithographs. Murrow created onsite performative pen and ink wall drawings for the opening night audience, which he plans to complete near the end of October. Lastly, the Clay Center will show his short film, *Dust* in the planetarium near the close of the exhibit.

His work explores the relationship between what is typically considered humankind's advancement and how this impacts the environment, society and Murrow on a personal level. Through the work one quickly ascertains that Murrow is skeptical of these advances, unlike many in his age group who would seemingly sell their souls to

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Much like his peers, however, Murrow has a
science when it comes to evaluating its real
work. He operates in this romantic, perhaps
nostalgic lens, at times embracing with wonderment what humanity has been able to
unbridled enthusiasm for
effects of this so-called progress.

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of *Fog*, entitled after a painting by
re, depicts a slightly modified early
o the birth of aeronautics and the
leap of faith that these early inventors made to bridge the gap from idea to the reality
of a flying machine. It feels like it could be an illustration for a Jules Verne novel.

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Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog, Ethan Murrow. 2013. Graphite on paper, 36 x 36 inches.

A more recent invention, the ocean oil rig appears in *O pioneers!*, also graphite on
paper. Here the viewer sees through an optical device with a circular aperture
depicted as a dark circle around a portion of the drawing, a person who appears to
free fall tethered to a zip line with the aforementioned ocean oil rig in the distance. A
NASA inspired camera device allows the viewer to see the earth's surface from space,
once again, through a circular aperture in *Inkling*, drawn with graphite on paper.

An overhead view of a desolate landscape with clusters of wolves, moose, buffalo and
elk loosely surrounding two human figures working on a structure resembling a
weather monitoring device creates the scene in the graphite on paper piece *Albert
Bierstadt*. Here, unlike the previous three pieces mentioned, Murrow finally seems to
commit to a more pointed narrative than the previous three and clearly addresses the



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relationship of human advancement and its impact on the environment. By illustrating the aggressive nature of the hunter and its prey, the metaphor extends to the role of humans' impact on the environment and that relationship turns adversarial.

His perhaps least highly crafted work, the projected, looped, three scene stop motion film *Mojave Plain*, once again stations the viewer above the scene with an aerial view. We see a wood plank floor painted grass green with a few trees and a smaller white house like structure. Eventually, a large pile of sand begins to move across the landscape from right to left with a toy bulldozer meandering through the set, knocking over trees and eventually the white structure. In the next scene, after sand has covered over the landscape, a larger more elaborate 60's ranch style wooden house like building is erected and a toy car pulls up and humans enter the site. In the final scene, the sand and structure are wiped away and black paint now covers the wooden floorboards. A loosely structured grid made of white strips sections off this black surface (pavement). Then the same wooden tract housing model eventually fills in around the space to create various homogenized subdivisions. Unlike his drawings, where the medium and Murrow's technical virtuosity can overshadow the concept, here the medium's inherent ability to manipulate time seems a natural fit for the exploration of narrative and the quirky animation melds seamlessly with the subject.



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Murrow also explores time based imagery in his small scale sculptural houses *Structure I*, *Structure II* and *Structure III*, where close-ups of his face, choppy water, and the artist swimming appear as tiny video projections within these models. This combination of technology and traditional mediums creates an interesting bridge, artistically and conceptually. The intimate nature of the work makes it more personal and provides a closer connection between the viewer and Murrow's positioning of himself within the larger body of work and its conceptual framework.

In his site specific performance based wall drawings, which Murrow started before a live audience on the opening night of the show and will complete near the end of the exhibition, the artist allowed much more negative space to counter the intricate work of his drawings. In two of the drawings bridge like structures appear to push back into the vast space of the floating walls they were drawn on as if bridges to nowhere. Here Murrow has the space to really stretch out. In the drawings, at this stage anyway, he

avoids setting up a real clear narrative of any kind and allows the viewer to literally enter the work because of its human scale. The viewer does not feel directed by the maker who allows them to create their own experience within the work. The structures seem precarious yet usable, but enter at your own risk.

This uncertain predicament fuels the work. A longing for the past or tradition gets personified in the medium that Murrow chooses to make his work. He clings to the traditional by using an antiquated method of production, the pencil. Drawing signifies Murrow's belief in his view of the artist and their role within contemporary culture. The graphite drawing is Murrow's comfort zone, his artistic home, so the rest of his production spins off of this traditional training and he wanders into more contemporary modes of making with video projections and installation based work. This ability to work with one foot in the past and one foot in the present reinforces the tenuous position he finds himself in when attempting to solidify where he stands on the issues of human advancement and its consequences and relationship to the role of the artist in this new world. He aligns himself with the romantic landscape artists of yesteryear, who, also examined the relationship between human expansion, encroachment, and human advances and who like Murrow made work which glorified the past or the old way of life and yet also at times questioned the impact of the adulterated expansion of humanity on the environment and itself.




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When depicting these new gadgets and machines Murrow's vision is often blurred. In these cases he chooses to look with awe, yet not fully understand or document these so-called devices of progress with any type of accuracy. In fact, he often invents his own devices to portray this distance or lack of understanding of the real thing. He creates a fictionalized or idealized version of the truth as if to suggest a child's' perspective or perhaps even something like how the fictional character Peter Pan would envision the world. This aerial perspective on the world is key for the exhibition and literally was the starting point for Murrow. When flying into Charleston, WV from Boston, MA to see the sight for his exhibition, he looked down over the Appalachian Mountains. On that flight Murrow, a native of North Carolina, decided to examine how this view from above shapes his and our vision of the world. He clings to the past, with his romantic visions of invention and his drawings with tradition but also willingly plunges into a more pointed dialogue with urgent issues of the day and uses more

contemporary modes of art making to do so. Murrow is at his best in this ambiguous intersection.

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