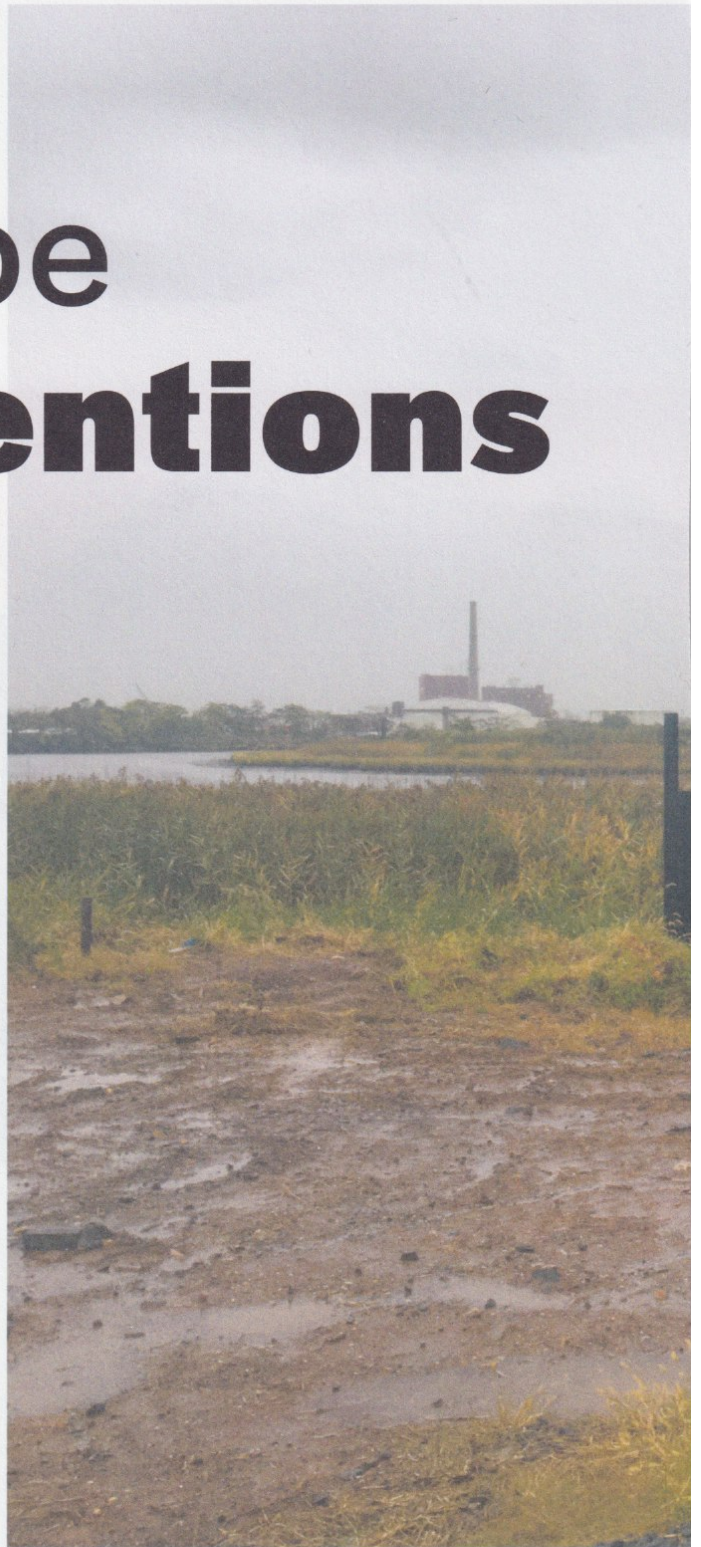


# landscape **interventions**

Legacies of the  
Anthropocene in  
the Garden State

Text and images by  
Julie Langsam



Julie Langsam, *Linden, Three Objects*  
(*Pink Curve*), 2021.  
Ink on photograph. 11 x 8.5 in.





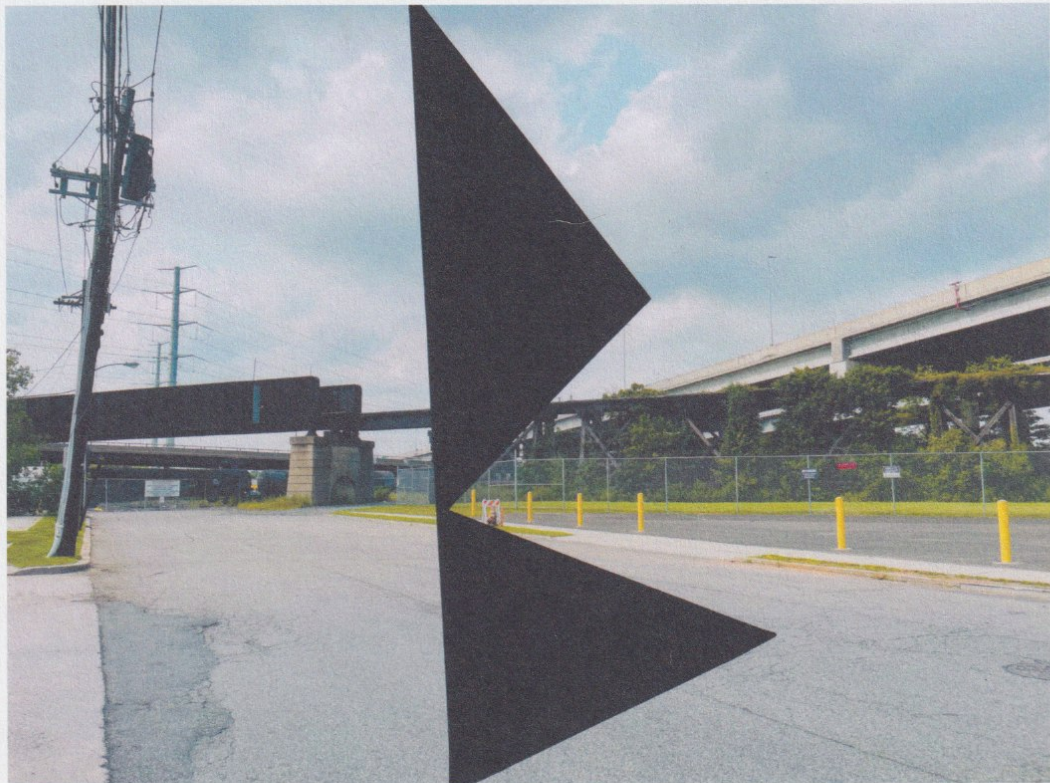
Growing up in Queens, New York in the early '60s, my family often drove the Turnpike to visit my grandfather in Princeton, New Jersey. We all dreaded the trip—the acrid sulfur stench from the chemical plants, refineries, and landfills was overwhelming for a good 15 miles between Newark and Carteret. We held our breath (unsuccessfully) only to end up gagging and nauseated for the rest of the drive. Fast forward 50 years: there is still a distinctive smell when driving these same portions of road, but it is no longer the unbearable, overwhelming stench of millions of rotten eggs. Thank you, President Nixon.

Julie Langsam, *Linden, Double Tanks*  
(*Yellow Sheet*), 2021.  
Ink on photograph. 11 x 8.5 in.

At about this same time, artist Robert Smithson's photo essay *Monuments to Passaic* was published in *ArtForum*. A prescient work in 1967, over a half a century later it retains its currency 'as the ongoing story of industrialization and suburbanization competing for the ever-scarcer commodity—land. I thought about this essay when I found myself traveling the same route I did as a child after relocating from the Midwest to New Jersey a decade ago. The absence (mostly) of noxious fumes allowed me to see these structures through Smithson's lens—as

monuments to mankind, monuments to progress, monuments to capitalism. But I also saw them through my own lens as a painter with a deep interest in artists such as Frederick Church whose paintings advertised westward expansion and manifest destiny. His "nature" glistened in an explosion of color, sumptuous scenery, and immaculate, highly detailed paint handling—all to create the overall sense that god (as nature) is all-powerful, and to remind us that white men (still, mostly) rule the earth by divine right.

Julie Langsam, *Linden, Overpass (Black Triangles)*, 2021.  
Ink on photograph. 11 x 8.5 in.



Over the next ten years as I drove the Turnpike back and forth, I found myself drawn to the hulking Bayway Refinery, the largest of its kind in the Northeast. It is one of the most toxic sites in New Jersey, and, like many other places across the country, there is a substantial residential population living nearby. At night, the structures are lit up and silhouetted against a painful, brilliant sunset. I imagine it as the sprawling Ilium Works

factory in Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Player Piano*, set in a vast, mechanized future where machines have replaced human labor, rendering most citizens useless, creating the pervasive two-tiered system of power and powerlessness. But I also feel immediately, simultaneously, a deep pain—a cut into the fabric of normalcy and complacency. These cuts, these interventions of thought, shape, subject, and mood pierce the landscape.





Julie Langsam, *Linden, Fence*  
(*Silver Rectangle*), 2021.  
Ink on photograph. 11 x 8.5 in.

This summer I spent 95 consecutive days driving 14,678 miles on roads and highways looking at the country through the lens of the landscape. Smithsonian forced us to look at our everyday surroundings and consider our human interventions as soon-to-be (if not already) relics of our battered civilization. But I look at the spaces in between those monuments—to the landscape—for glimpses of our future. &

Julie Langsam, *Linden, Pink Pipe*  
(*Pink Stripe*), 2021.  
Ink on photograph. 11 x 8.5 in.