

# TO TRAVEL LIKE CLOUDS: JULIE LANGSAM'S LANDSCAPE INTERVENTIONS

Indra Lācis, PhD

[Leave a comment](#)



*Julie Langsam, from Landscape Interventions: 500+ Drawings. 2021, ink on photograph, 8.5 x 11.*

*Photo credit: Bellamy Printz*

Today's highly choreographed, plastic, bifurcated world (and all the concerns keeping us up at night) grants renewed meaning to the phrase, open road. It's there we find freedom and a sense of escape, but also greater connection, and the inclination to understand identity—one's own and that of others. A selection of [Julie Langsam's Landscape Interventions: 500+ Drawings](#), on view at [Deep Dive Art Projects](#) in Waterloo through August 13<sup>th</sup> ignites and visualizes this yearning for routes less traveled, and for that feeling of solace we seek.

Captured as photo stills on the artist's iPhone, Langsam's images of nearly 30,000 miles of landscape from the continental United States will ultimately be compiled and edited into a forthcoming feature length experimental/documentary film. Currently, however, for the ongoing project of *Landscape Interventions: 500+ Drawings*, Langsam has printed a selection of stills from two cross country trips (in 2018 and 2021) and overlays pigmented forms with an acrylic pen, a gesture representing her own presence within the landscape as well as human intervention or interference on land more generally.



*Julie Langsam, from Landscape Interventions: 500+ Drawings. 2021, ink on photograph, 8.5 x 11.*

*Photo credit: Bellamy Printz*

In these solid, contoured forms we see what might be half-moons and ovals, tents and calligraphical letters, pylons and bulbous bodily-based formations, and tracings or shadows of mountains, rivers, and clouds that have long since moved on; and yet the forms also read as purely abstract. The artist's process of making marks feels formal, as so much of Julie's work is, but in this instance, the forms she draws on these photographs seem to levitate; they recede and move forward, like subtle animations. They amputate the landscape even as they add to it.





*Julie Langsam, from Landscape Interventions: 500+ Drawings. Installation view. Photo credit: Bellamy Printz*

Installed cheek-to-cheek in a tightly arranged modernist grid, this body of work appears to be as much about sky as about the road. The dramatic, foreboding atmosphere made famous by Hudson River School painter Frederic Edwin Church comes to mind, especially knowing Langsam admired Church's 1860 painting *Twilight in the Wilderness* at the Cleveland Museum of Art while teaching at the Cleveland Institute of Art between 2000 and 2009. In many of Langsam's photo/drawings, sunsets, blue skies, and clouds—nimbus, cumulus, cirrus, or dark, ready-to-burst storm clouds—dominate the composition as the picture's presumed subject. At Deep Dive, the photo/drawings are stacked six high and four or five deep in a tight framework abutting three corners; here the grid (long an anchor in Langsam's work) imposes order on images that feel vast and ever expansive. As art historian and curator [Paula Burleigh pointed out in 2020](#), the grid assumed new meaning during the pandemic. Consider, for example, our repeated interactions with colleagues, family and friends on the ever-present Zoom grid, or the tidy plexiglass dividers that remain commonplace in the public spaces of our post-pandemic era.





*Julie Langsam, from Landscape Interventions: 500+ Drawings. 2021, ink on photograph, 8.5 x 11.*

*Photo credit: Bellamy Printz*

In these photo/drawings, the rounded, linear (sometimes jagged, wispy, or sprawling) forms Langsam adheres with acrylic pen to the surface of these works summon the likes of Ad Reinhardt and Ellsworth Kelly, or such Land artists as Michael Heizer or Robert Smithson, who used the earth as their sculptural medium, carving or building directly in the landscape. More to the point, perhaps, the content and subject of Langsam's *Interventions* echo the sentiments Smithson expressed in his three-part work, *Monuments of the Passaic*, an ode to the unexceptional, tired industrial landscape of Passaic, New Jersey (incidentally now Julie's home state since 2009, where she works as Associate Professor at the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers). For Langsam as for Smithson, the most banal of places—an abandoned industrial lot, a roadside powerplant, a muddy stretch of field, lines of haybales, or junkyards—are, in fact, *the truest of monuments*, the most sincere of ruins. Langsam's recent experimental film, *Garden State* (2022), capitalizes on just such tendencies, giving voice to the landscape and letting the land's historical, social, industrial, and physical realities speak for themselves.





*Julie Langsam, from Landscape Interventions: 500+ Drawings. 2021, ink on photograph, 8.5 x 11.*

*Photo credit: Bellamy Printz*

The concept of mapping and surveilling also informs this work, primarily, it seems, as means to create a collective portrait of the United States. During previous centuries, many (predominantly male) writers and artists (from Mark Twain to Jack Kerouac, Thomas Cole to Robert Frank) traversed the United States in search of, well, its soul. Today, Langsam, isn't alone in her quest to probe essential questions about land and who makes decisions about it, or how it is (ab)used. New York and Los Angeles-based artist [Cynthia Daignault](#), for example, likewise embarked on a 30,000 mile journey in 2018 to create [Light Atlas](#), a multi-panel painting installation [currently on view at the Akron Art Museum](#) (courtesy of the Art Bridges program). Installed in a floor to ceiling grid, the 360 paintings comprising the work result from Daignault driving the borders of the United States, stopping every 20 miles or so to capture the scene and later, paint it in her studio. Filmic and temporal at once, Daignault, like Langsam, positions the United States—its land—as the leading character in this story. Thinking back on her road trips, which, despite their magnificence and revelation, were not all unicorns and rainbows, Langsam admits she “needed to feel the distance, the endurance, in my body.”





*Julie Langsam, from Landscape Interventions: 500+ Drawings. 2021, ink on photograph, 8.5 x 11.*

*Photo credit: Bellamy Printz*

Julie has long since stated that she would have studied film instead of painting if she'd been ten years younger and attended art school in the 1990s, just as the indie film movement began and so much about film started changing. (During the 1980s, it was all about painting as the medium searched for its *raison d'être*.) Yet, Langsam doesn't see her recent turn towards film as one away from painting. "It's all connected," she says without hesitation. Abstract and representational at once, Langsam's *Landscape Interventions* invest in the idea that images take time, that images both represent and abstract past and present time, and not least, that the landscape is continually changing. More than just about wandering the United States, this work is about listening to the land, to hear what it has to say, and see what we stand to learn.

*Julie Langsam's Landscape Interventions is on view at Deep Dive Art Projects through August 13, 2023.*