



Your Margins, Your Rivers, Your Diminutive Villages

work by Patte Loper

HANDWERKER GALLERY

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The Thin Crust of the World: Patte Loper's Dismantled Landscapes by Leah Modigliani, 2014

Set the foot down with distrust upon the crust of the
World— it is thin.
Moles are at work beneath us; they have tunneled the
sub-soil
With separate chambers, which at an appointed knock
Could be as one, could intersect and interlock. We walk
On the skin
Of life...

Underground System, Edna St. Vincent Millay, 1939¹

Today when our aspirations have been reduced to a desperate
attempt to escape from evil, and times are out of joint, our obsessive,
subterranean and pictographic images are the expression of the
neurosis which is our reality. To my mind certain so-called abstraction
is not abstraction at all. On the contrary, it is the realism of our time.

Artist Statement, Adolph Gottlieb, 1947²

Spoken only eight years apart by two very different American
artists, a celebrated bisexual female poet and a Jewish
American Abstract Expressionist, Millay and Gottlieb's words
describe artists' ongoing struggle to reconcile the real with
the surreal. For many artists who lived through the trauma
of World War II life seemed untethered to anything concrete.
Millay's image of solid feet walking on the thin "crust of the
world," a "skin of life" that might collapse into subterranean
tunnels at any moment syncopates with Gottlieb's pragmatic
acceptance that neurotic abstraction was the new reality for
his generation after the war.

Now, in the midst of an electronic information age barely
imagined six decades ago, the notion of a neurotic abstraction
or an alternative underground network of passages takes
on new currency. Human behavior seems unable to keep up
with the pace of our own technological developments, and

as Marshall McLuhan so presciently theorized, the price paid
for such technological precocity may well be trauma and
anxiety— like a doctor who is forced to operate on himself
without anesthetic, to use one of McLuhan's vivid examples.³
Many contemporary artists are creating works that express the
anxiety of this brave new world, one in which all identities are
contingent and the boundaries between natural and unnatural,
biological and machine, digital and analog, real and fake are no
longer easy to distinguish.⁴

Patte Loper's *Your Margins, Your Rivers, Your Diminutive Villages*
is a sprawling group of objects and images constructed out of
oil paintings, drawings, found-object assemblages, and short
videos that reflects and revels in the collapse of such boundaries.
The work was initially inspired both by Loper's interest in
Surrealist automatism and her recent experience as a resident
artist at the Millay Colony, where she no doubt unconsciously
retraced Millay's steps around the Steeplechase Estate. In an
interview with me Loper recounted a walk through the forest,
and how she suddenly became aware of a coyote standing still
watching her, and then her disquieting realization that she had
been watched for some time.⁵ For many urban-dwellers who
are increasingly distanced from the wilderness, the sudden
awareness of oneself as human in the natural environment can
be both empowering and terrifying; the rational mind looks for
a way to control nature in order to protect the body, but the
body becomes animalistic with a heightened sensitivity to the
immediate environment that eschews reason.

Indeed, the sense of sight plays a privileged role in Loper's
installation, even as she tries to subvert it through Surrealist-
derived automatism. Andre Breton and others associated with
Dada and Surrealism in the 1920s used automatism as a tactic
to create more authentically subconscious imagery. By writing
or drawing without pre-planning, such artists embraced free-
association, chance and accident in their compositions with the

goal of liberating man’s libidinal desires from society’s confines. Vision was demoted in the search for the unconscious since it had long been associated with Cartesian rational observation, and the goal was to find a deeper truth than that which could be seen through the eyes alone. Perhaps because of this, the image of the eye reoccurs frequently as an important symbol in Surrealist art, such as in Rene Magritte’s painting *The False Mirror* (1928) and Salvador Dali and Luis Bunuel’s savage eye-slicing close-up in the beginning of their film *Un Chien Andalou* (1929).

In Loper’s *I Have Scarcely Left You* two sets of eyes float inside two black sign-like shapes reminiscent of Adolph Gottlieb’s early head-shaped pictograms. The smaller sign hovers over the larger, which stands on two improbable stick legs in the midst of a wooded landscape. This small oil painting is arranged in a group with others that also contain pictogram-type forms layered on top of quickly brushed forest scenes. Because the paintings are placed along the floor, sometimes overlapping each other, it is clear that Loper intends them to exist as one material of many; they do not hold any privileged status as paintings within the greater installation.

At the Residency also reckons with the privileging of optic experience as it relates to landscape painting. In this relief sculpture, a small oil painting of a grassy clearing surrounded by trees is sandwiched between another canvas with its face turned backwards and a small model of a house supported by a rickety scaffolding of hot-glued cardboard and wood. The scaffolding, which also resembles the tripod-mounted easels used commonly by plein-air painters, rises out of a larger and more abstract pile of construction materials (paper, cardboard, wood, tape, glue, plastic) assembled on the floor. The classic window on to the world of representational painting, historically a symbol of the authority of man’s objective vision, is recast as a duplicitous prop; one artificial landscape of many that are available and exchangeable.

Loper dismantles the painted landscape even further in the largest sculpture in the show, which is provocatively titled *Structure for Ruining Paintings* (2014). Three tentacle-like conduits grow out of one larger slide-like form mounted high on the wall, and descend to the gallery floor on skinny wooden supports. The artist activates the piece in a performance by pouring paint down the highest chute. The viscous fluid travels down through the three delicate channels of cardboard and paper to drip, or pour, onto three canvases placed at the bottom of each conduit on the floor. Each canvas is already painted with a forest scene, so the dripping paint, now pure material, works to deface the painted representation of nature with flat blots. Even as this handcrafted Rube Goldberg sort of machine works to ruin Loper’s own paintings, it succeeds in looking much like a branch hanging down and into the gallery space. This irony is perhaps not lost on the artist, who recently expressed her awareness of the absurdity of reinventing the wheel again and again as an artist; “I cannot make an original brushstroke, everything looks like something I’ve seen before.”⁶

Even when creating new works that are authentically all her own, the overwhelming sense that every gesture has already been made remains a burden, as it must for all contemporary artists. This unshakable knowledge of the history of art also finds representation in a series of small monuments titled *Prototypes for New Heads* (2013-2014). These half-dozen sculptures are made of scrap materials like putty, tape, foam core, wood, and paint, and each rough head form sits on a low pedestal. They also reference early twentieth-century utopian architecture like Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International* (1920), geodesic domes, and sets from 1960s science fiction movies. As monuments they are too small, too delicate, too insubstantial; as heads they are blind, not focused, irrational. They seem like children’s models of Brancusi’s birds in flight, somewhat broken, abject in failure, but willing to delight if one overlooks the imperfections.

Indeed there are tiny surprises to be found in and amongst these sculptures. In one of the *Prototypes for New Heads* a small video screen is nestled into the top of a “head” that looks more like two satellite dishes exploding into each other. Savvy art viewers will recognize the image of American writer Susan Sontag. We hear Sontag telling us that in her view a good life can only be good if it includes doing something for others.

French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, arguably one of the darlings of twenty-first century art school education, is found in a small video screen at the top of *We Are All Only as Old as Each Other*, a large beehive or hoop dress shaped sculpture. Deleuze has, however, been robbed of his lectures on difference and creativity, and is instead heard mouthing the abstract sounds of whale calls. The beehive form indicative of busy work, in conjunction with a title that implies we are all in this together, is provocative when paired with an appropriated image of Deleuze. The sculpture seems to say, “we make, we think, we make, and still we are animal.”

These small videos require viewers to stoop down, put on headphones, and peer into the sculptures that contain them, while other small details in the greater exhibition, like tiny drawings in a corner of the gallery, draw viewers into and around the space. The big windows that line the gallery also work here to remind us of the centrality of our own vision, and over time visitors may realize that from a certain perspective, they too are part of the show. Loper’s small canvas of painted eyes is steadfastly watching, silently whispering, *I Have Scarcely Left You. Your Margins, Your Rivers, Your Diminutive Villages* as a title most resonates with meaning after walking through the installation and experiencing it from different angles; the artificial landscape offered to us is a reflection of our need to possess and control the uncontrollable. Like Millay, Gottlieb, the Surrealists and countless others who came before, art is

an expression of defining and controlling that which is beyond the artist’s limits of understanding. Our margins, our rivers, our making of villages is a symptom of the human neurosis that is our reality; the desire to create a world in an image that makes us feel like we are the ones doing the watching. We are safe; the coyote is not in the forest with us unless we want to see it.

¹ Edna St. Vincent Millay, “Underground System,” ed. J.D. McClatchy, *Edna St. Vincent Millay Selected Poems* (New York: Library of America, 2003), 179.

² Adolph Gottlieb, “The Ides of Art: The Attitudes of Ten Artists on Their Art and Contemporaneity,” *The Tiger’s Eye* 1, no. (Dec., 1947). Accessed online on Jan 7, 2013: <http://gottliebfoundation.org/the-artist/selected-artists-writings/>

³ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London: Routledge, 1964), 6.

⁴ Acclaimed American video artist Ryan Trecartin may be the poster-child of this kind of work.

⁵ Patte Loper, interview by author, Brooklyn, NY, Jan 5, 2014.

⁶ Ibid.











Images

Front and Back Covers	<i>We Are All Only as Old as Each Other</i> , 2013 found material, paint, foam core, wood
Inner Cover, Page 13	<i>Structure for Ruining Paintings</i> , 2014 found material, paint, wood
Page 5	<i>I Have Scarcely Left You</i> (detail), 2013 oil on canvas
Page 6	<i>You Swallowed Everything, Like Distance</i> (detail), 2013 oil on canvas
Pages 7–8	Studio shot, group of paintings, including <i>I Have Scarcely Left You</i> and <i>You Swallowed Everything, Like Distance</i>
Pages 9–10	<i>At the Residency</i> , 2014 oil on canvas, found material, paint, wood
Page 11	<i>Prototypes for New Heads</i> , 2013-2014 found material, putty, tape, foam core, wood, paint
Page 12	<i>Prototypes for New Heads</i> (detail), 2013-2014 found material, putty, tape, foam core, wood, paint

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