

# **The Distance of Horizon**

Catherine Meier

# The Distance of Horizon

By  
Catherine Meier

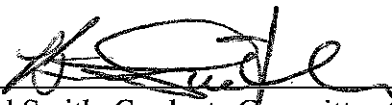
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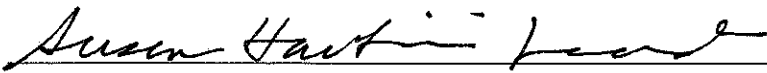
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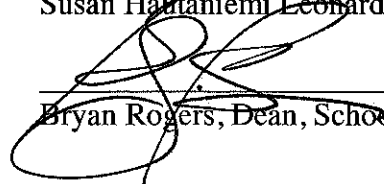
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**Abstract**

“Open Space” is a phrase that describes both an idea and a particular juxtaposition of earth and sky, a state of mind and a state of being. This work addresses several questions about this idea. How is open space experienced, particularly in landscapes such as The Great Plains or the Mongolian steppe? How can the distance between the external, physical landscape of the earth and the internal, intricate landscape of the human mind be understood? How can this understanding be expressed in visual artistic form? How can the personal experience of the artist that is implicitly tied to space, time, place, and scale be recreated and extended so that others can experience it?

Personal experiences and memories of growing up in Nebraska, working as a truck driver on The Great Plains, and a journey to the Mongolian steppe are all explored in this work. The reaction to both interior and exterior open space and landscape are investigated with these personal narratives as the starting point. It is shown how the openness of landscapes can cause one to travel to the smallest and most segmented of places, and then journey back out again. This work also presents other artist’s responses to openness and vastness. It addresses how the simplicity and complexity of openness as experienced in landscape can be expressed visually and extended from the personal to the universal.

**Keywords:**

Art, Drawing, Animation, Landscape, American Landscape, The Great Plains, Plains, Mongolia, Steppe, Openness, Open Space, Memory, Navigation, Place Names, Human Geography, The Sublime, Vastness, Nature

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## Introduction

Open Space. These two words describe for me both an idea and a particular juxtaposition of earth and sky. They describe a state of mind and a state of being. And they lie at the heart of my curiosity for understanding the distance between the external, physical landscape of earth and the internal, intricate landscape of the human mind.

What makes a landscape truly open? Is it the complete and total absence of trees, buildings, and people? Or is it the range and depth of our experience within it? Where lies the human threshold that can cause one person to experience complete and utter disorientation in a place while another may enjoy a sense of absolute freedom in the same location? Where lies the tipping point between ease and unease, known and unknown, familiar or foreign, placed or displaced?

These questions can be applied to a multitude of situations and conditions, but for me, they begin with actual experience in the real and tangible element of the earth's open landscapes. By open landscape I mean vast stretches of land that are largely unencumbered by obvious landmarks, are home to few numbers of people, and whose primary experience can best be defined by the overwhelming presence of earth and sky that is encircled by a vast and open horizon line. In the United States, we do not encounter truly open landscapes until driving west of the Mississippi. The first such stretch belongs to the Great Plains, the second to the deserts found in the West and Southwest past the Rocky Mountains. Beyond, examples of these particular landscapes can be found in the Arctic and the tundra of northern Canada and Alaska, in the plains of Argentina, the outback of Australia, the steppe of central Asia.

Within these specific types of terrain I ask how do we extract a particular place from seemingly homogeneous stretches of earth, or, how do we separate seemingly homogeneous stretches of experience into distinct and varied remembrances? Perhaps these are one and the same question. For these places that I explore carry few traces, few landmarks have been built upon them and fewer have remained. Those that do exist are often subtle and difficult to detect. And once these tracts of openness have been marked and divided, in place or in memory, how does that which divided it fold back into a continuous whole? How does it return from marked place to open space?



My fascination and work begins with the quest to understand how we comprehend and interact with open space, but it does not end there. My desire is to translate both the state of mind and the state of being that is to be found in openness into visual creative work so that others can experience the wonder that I find in it. This generates a difficult problem. For how do I express in visual form understandings that are for me tied to specific instances of space and time, place and scale? How do I extend beyond myself understandings that begin with personal memory and experience? My desire to visualize and recreate my relationship to openness generates more questions. It causes me to continually circle back to pursuing a greater understanding of open space.

## **Part One**



Fig. 1. Standing on the Menengiyn Tal, Eastern Mongolia, 2008.

## *Far From Home*

I stopped. My eyes fixated on the only objects that were interrupting the wide circle of flat earth around me – the Land Cruiser and two tents. It could not be real. What I was seeing could not be real. My heart beat faster and I kept telling myself that it was in my mind. There was movement behind the camp. I could not tell for sure, but it looked like there was another vehicle approaching behind the place where my driver and translator were waiting. This had to be nothing more than my imagination and caution in overload.

I attempted to go back to what I was doing, which was the impossible job of drawing this flat circle around me. The nine by fifteen inch pad of paper, the only one of its kind that would easily fit in my pack, suddenly seemed inadequate for the job. And the drawing was boring. For the life of me I couldn't figure out what to do with the experience surrounding me. I had dreamt of amazing drawings, and all that was happening was that I was discovering that the earth really was curved and that the curve was hard to put to paper.

I couldn't help it and looked back towards the vehicle. My heart sank and my mind raced. Now I was nearly convinced that someone had approached my only place of safety, and that they seemed to be visiting. It was late in the day and that could mean they were staying. I kept telling myself that it was all in my head, I had walked for twenty minutes to get to where I was, it really was a ways away, and I was seeing things. It was just the wind blowing the tarp. I told myself to go back to drawing and enjoy being here.

But I couldn't seem to grasp on to anything, the only things truly present were the millions of grass blades, insects, and the wind. And even were I to start drawing the grass, I soon found it difficult as one turned into a hundred and became a sea so interconnected and similar that the time it would take to draw all of it was beyond my patience. I had spent considerable energy and resources getting myself to this far eastern reach of Mongolia, the area that was supposed to look the most like my home state of Nebraska, and now that I was here I was unable to draw. I was impatient with the grass!

I persisted in attempting to draw the barely perceptible curved line and the grass that filled the lower half of the page, and I worked on calming my nervous mind and reasoning out that things were fine. Still unsure of what was happening back at the camp, I was aware that my imagination was fueled by the stressors of the past two days, and most importantly, the two military check points that we passed through to get out onto the Menengiyn Tal, or “flat steppe”, which happened to be a strictly protected area seven miles from the Chinese Border. I had become increasingly aware as we traveled further into eastern Mongolia, a place that gets few foreigners, that I was a very obvious object of curiosity. Blond, female, probably clearly American, and alone with two male Mongolians – I was hard to miss. The night spent in Choibalsan, a city that so clearly retained the traces of the Russian occupancy of Mongolia, had been a nerve-wracking experience. We stayed in a thirties era hotel only after some difficult negotiations with the woman who ran the place and after two days of a series of events which included being stuck in the mud for hours, getting flooded out in our tents one morning, and having the clutch periodically fail for about two hundred miles in the Land Cruiser. A walk in the city had ended quickly with the approach of a seriously drunk man, when curiosity began to feel more like hostility.

Mongolians of course have a very strict code of behavior, and for the most part I had nothing to worry about. But this far from home, I was hyper-aware of all possible dangers. Only a handful of people in Ulan Bator knew where I was, I wasn't sure that my husband had received the message telling him where I was going, and I had spent a total of about an hour with the two people I had hired to guide me before leaving on this six day adventure. All of this was due to my determination to see a place of truly open and unoccupied land.

But it was the two military checkpoints that had unnerved me the most. I was pretty sure that my driver had not meant to get us to the place where we were. He had meant instead to go south and avoid the military zone but had missed the road. My translator wasn't translating much of the interactions. Each checkpoint had taken an hour or more, and the militant and serious nature of the guards (as military tend to be) had put me on edge. When we had finally gotten out onto the Tal and picked a point quite a ways from the road to camp, the wind was blowing so hard that setting up the tents was its own

adventure. Now I was on edge in a place of such sheer openness that both my mind and my body felt fully exposed and I was desperately trying to reign it, something, all of it, in.

Having managed two sketches, I decided to pack up and start walking back to the camp. I was filled with uneasiness at what was happening there. Surely they wouldn't put me into an uncomfortable and possibly compromising situation by letting visitors stay? But the flat steppe is a place of mirage, and as I continued to walk the horizon continued to shift and play its tricks on my mind.

As I approached things became clearer, my fears were replaced with relief, and I was happy to see MK and Gahnbold sitting there alone.

...

That evening we ate a meal together of sausage, bread and cheese, tomatoes and cucumbers, and the wine I had so thankfully stashed in a water bottle. Afterwards, I went the ten feet back to my own tent and tried to find a vantage point of the landscape that shielded me from the wind.

“That is why smooth space is occupied by intensities, wind and noise, forces, and sonorous and tactile qualities, as in the desert, steppe, or ice,” wrote Deleuze.<sup>1</sup> These words had struck a chord in me. They had clinched my decision to make the focus of my art and research open landscapes, and they were coming to life before my eyes. The words had propelled me to go looking for openness, for open landscape, and I had found it on the Mongolian steppe.

The premise of my trip to Mongolia had been based on a claim that I wanted to go there to understand how people of the Mongolian countryside understood, remembered, and passed down information about the places where they lived. I hoped to uncover the stories that they had embedded into both abandoned or unused and active locales. And I was correct; through the time I had spent in the north, I found that this information was there. Stories existed that had nothing to represent them but a slight hill. But the reality of the travel and my own hesitation at taking too much from people who

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1. Deleuze, “The Smooth and The Striated”, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 479. This text was informative to me in terms of conceptual understandings of human interaction with open landscape. However this specific phrase was pivotal in its own right. It created a visual image in my mind that inspired my intentional pursuit of open landscapes as subject matter.

knew little about me, to whom I was an American come to call at my convenience, had gotten in my way. And by the time I had arrived on this flat steppe far from everything, in a place where even my guides seemed daunted, I realized that my reason for coming to Mongolia was completely different.

I had come to Mongolia for displacement.

What I was looking for was not an understanding of place, but for open, blank space. An open horizon reflective of the one I was born to, but one that had no memory or thought tied to it.

I wanted to experience land without constructs, place unplaced. I simply wanted to exist in it.

And I had found it, but the reality of this space, or particularly this place called the Menengiyn Tal, was that I was breaking it up as fast as I could in order to comprehend it and reign it in. Sometime after eating dinner with MK and Gahnbold, I began to count the hours until I could sleep. Eventually, I crawled into my tent and started to write in my journal, but paranoia crept in. I worried about whether someone might come to the camp, and I felt like the dome of my tent barely held its own against the crushing presence of the sky. Inside I felt at once trapped and protected.

In the middle of the night I awoke to a full moon hanging low. It felt so close as to be mine alone, but the wonder of that sight was quickly invaded by a slight panic – I still had hours to go until morning, hours to go until leaving. I put myself to sleep by reasoning out that tomorrow was Thursday, and then I had only to go through that day and it would be Friday, and then it would be Saturday and I would be back in Ulan Bator. Monday I could fly home.

Once when I was a child my mother and her friend Rita piled five kids in a car so we could drive sixty miles across the Sand Hills to see their friend who had recently moved. It is difficult to express just how painful and tediously boring it was to ride in the back seat of '74 Oldsmobile with no air-conditioning through miles of rolling sand and hills and grass on a hot summer day. "How long until we get there?" "Count to sixty sixty times," said Rita. I felt like I had been sentenced to eternal pain. The thought nearly drove me crazy. Sixty, sixty times was forever. But there I was on the steppe, and time was my consoling friend.

Somehow I felt a bit guilty, like I was betraying the land, or myself, or even God by my inability to surrender to this place. Instead I was fighting to gain control of it by breaking the expanse into the hours until sleep, the hours until leaving, the days until returning. This gave me a rock on which to stand. And having exercised this control I started to feel some joy at being there. Through time I had measured and contained it, both the landscape and my existence in it. I had found a way to transform its smoothness and infinity, its openness, by striating it into comprehensible segments, just as mariners of old had found their way to conquer the sea by reducing it to an intersecting mesh of latitude and longitude.<sup>2</sup> By doing so, I gained access to a way to return to a place of mental smoothness, that of the calm realm of mental peace.

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2. Raban, *Passage to Juneau*, 97-98.



## *Somewhere In Between*

It stormed for a stretch of over six hundred miles that evening. Leaving home near O'Neill, Nebraska, in the early evening, the tumultuous clouds hung low over the changing colors of the early October landscape. Uncommon for that time of year, tornadoes were reported in the area. Driving north the wind and rain continued.

It was a route that I had come to know well over the years, heading west to Valentine, north over the Niobrara River and up into South Dakota. Over high rolling hills, again over another river, the White this time, through Kadoka and north through hours of long, open, rolling stretches of highway. At some point, my partner at the time drove, and I slept in the bunk to wake around three a.m. and take over driving. We were headed to Circle, Montana, a small town located in the eastern part of the state where sagebrush takes stage. The town is a central hub for picking up the cattle brought in from the surrounding ranches. From there the animals are taken back south and east to Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas or Oklahoma, to farmers with the corn to feed them. Throughout the night reports of the bad weather continued to come across the CB radio. The empty cattle trailer attached to my semi-truck made for challenging driving as the wind gathered through its hundreds of breathing holes. It pushed and pulled across the road behind me as though struggling for its last metallic breath.

When dawn broke, I was approaching Belfield, North Dakota, an area of land that feels like the term used for it, the high plains. Bluffs are continuously visible in the distance, as the highways tend to skirt around them. They are indicators of the Badlands that we would soon encounter if we continued west. I was tired, the dangerous kind of tired where sleep threatens to remove you from the road. But it was necessary to be in Circle by morning, and the sun seemed hopeful as it rose. Off to the west, dark clouds were still visible.

Arriving in Circle we ate breakfast and prepared to go load only to find out that no such thing would be happening that day. The storms that had raged across nearly all of the plains states the previous evening had rendered the surrounding dirt roads impassable. It would be impossible to bring the cattle in from the ranches that morning. We would have to wait. We checked into a small local motel, the kind that looked to be

decorated sometime in the late seventies yet felt strangely homey and safe like visiting an older relative's house, to wait it out until the next morning. Hauling cattle is a business that although operated on schedules and utilizing large mechanized vehicles, is still at the mercy of nature's whims.

I had traveled this same route to Circle dozen's of times, through all kinds of weather. I knew by heart every river crossing, long hill, scenic point, town, change of direction, and highway number between central Nebraska and Montana. I could wake from sleeping in the curtained off and darkened bunk and locate where we were on the route by listening. But this trip is distinct among the many. I can picture the sky, the green and gold fields near O'Neill as we left, the image of the sleepy village of Belfield and its water tower that morning as the sun started to rise along with my drowsiness. I remember because of a blackened tree with a pair of pants hanging from its bare limb that greeted us at the end of the journey, and a phone call we received at three in the morning as we headed across the South Dakota interstate on the way to a farm in Red Oak, Iowa.

The farmer's house had exploded. The cattle buyer who had arranged the sale of the cattle informed us that there had been a gas leak, and the man's wife had set off the explosion when she turned on the vacuum cleaner. The man to whom we were to deliver the cattle had not been in the house at the time, but it was him who drew his wife's body out of the wreckage. She was taken to the intensive care burn unit in Omaha. They were waiting to see if she would recover.

Another early dawn arrival at another sleepy town mirrored the ominous tone that accompanied us as we left Nebraska three days before. All things seemed hushed, and the neighbors that came to help unload the cattle were somber. I sat in the cab and waited for the cattle to be unloaded, unable to take my eyes from the tree in front of me and the empty, black, shell of basement where a house had once stood. I was stunned, both because of the sight before me, and because we had found out that the house had exploded late in the afternoon, at almost the exact time when we would have arrived had we loaded on schedule. Rural hospitality combined with the fact that I was the person handling the bill made it customary that I would often be asked into the house for conversation and something to eat while the truck was unloading. Strangely, I do not

remember the year that this happened. But I can recall every detail of earth and sky of the nearly two thousand miles traversed.

Always on the plains, you are traveling into and with the horizon. It is before you, and passing you by. Towns, ranches, and windmills dot it, but cannot compete. One of the most interesting things about hauling cattle is where you must go to get them. I visited a few 'exotic' stops over time like the ranch deep in south Texas where we were 'led' by a Mexican ranch hand in an expensive white pickup. We passed over a cement slab serving as a bridge in a rapidly flowing river, past stands of marijuana that looked entirely too healthy, and to corrals where the owner stood by in English riding boots and pants and a pristine white shirt, flicking his tiny horse whip as though he might actually use it. Most often, the destinations were either sale barns or ranches to which we were given cryptic, sometimes poetic directions. The running joke was, 'go by the fencepost that the bird is sitting on, then when you get to the school that used to be there, turn left'. The whole business involved keeping one eye on the road, and another peeled for the subtle indicator that represented the directions written down on the page.

Navigating the plains by truck also relies on understanding the Jeffersonian grid that segments the land so that it can be contained and owned. The map by your side is evidence of this grid, as are the perpendicular roads. That rigid segmenting that relies on the cardinal directions makes its way into your psyche.

Yet this grid system is continually broken and subjugated. The river cuts the grid, or rather the grid cuts the river. When settlers planted their roots – their ranches and farms – their first priority was the location of the river or water source. So although we can follow the grid, or the map, to get to an approximate location, once again in seeking our destination we must forego that system for another more applicable. We must stop then and read the lyrical words of the landscape, look for the colors of grass and the trees that are waiting to tell us that a ranch is nearby.

Navigation of the Plains constantly shifts between the words of man, the language of the land, and the system placed upon it. Each of these describes and defines the journey, illuminating the depth and quality to be found in the seemingly smooth and open landscape. These systems and the experience of them transform emptiness into open

richness. Over time journeys becomes repeated, known, and retraceable. The repetition eventually segments and structures the open space of unknown landscape into a known system of time and place.

My experience became measureable. The Plains were transformed from a new and open expanse of land yet to be learned, contained, and measured, to one that could be systematically checked off as each part was returned to. Along the way, new information was continually collected to add to the complex web of knowledge, and sometimes, a trip occurred that stood out clearly from the rest. The trip from O'Neill, to Circle, to Red Oak played out like a great drama upon the land, where the weather set the stage and foretold of the approaching disaster. A trip such as this served to reinforce memory and knowledge. Its drama and narrative provided a way for me to remember all of the other parts of the journey and land that were connected to it.

For generations, the Aboriginal people of Australia sang their way across the land. Their Songlines were a map, a narrative, and their creation story. According to their history the whole of the Australian continent was sung into being, sung into navigation by their ancestors. Information in the form of lyrics was tied to specific details of the land. Singing was linked to looking. Awareness of the land was implicitly tied to the realm of memory and knowledge passed down through generations. No place was empty or blank because the rock beforehand was likely the remnant of an ancestor learned of through the song. Each Aboriginal group held the song that was the key to their territory, and travel across the whole land was only possible by having other tribes share their portion of the song.

When I began the job of driving a truck, only about one hundred square miles of the plains was actually known to me; therefore every trip was a grand adventure. I gathered information from other drivers, from ranchers, and from time spent watching the road. Over the course of time, it was my own creation story that arose, a formation of my history that was set against the backdrop of an entire region. Each new trip was the collection of a story that began upon leaving and ended upon returning. It was the story of the interval, of the journey. It might consist of a human narrative, or it might be that of grass or wind or clouds. But the new routes eventually became cyclical, ingrained into

memory. And finally, over the course of several years, entire stretches became so known to me that in my own way, I could sing my journey across the land. I could translate stretches of road into the narratives that accompanied them. I could listen, and the road would tell me where I was.

## *Home*

“Wisdom?” “It’s in these places,” he says. “Wisdom sits in places.”

Everywhere they went they did like that. They gave their daughters place names and stories. “You should think about this,” they said. “Don’t forget it,” he said. “I want you to think about it. Someday it’s going to make you wise.

It was like that. The people who went many places were wise, they knew all about them. I’ve been all over this country. I went with my grandfather when I was a boy. I also traveled with my uncles. They taught me the names of all these places. They told me stories about all of them. I’ve thought about all of them for a long time. I still remember everything.<sup>3</sup>

...

Most people, when asked about Nebraska, tend to think of it as the eight-hour monotonous drive they have taken at some point in their lives along Interstate 80 to get from one side of it to the other. This is not my Nebraska.

My Nebraska looks like this: for nearly three hundred miles, starting on the far western side of the state after the high plains come down from the Rocky Mountains, drift the great dunes of sand that were once the bed of an ancient sea. They are now covered in fine small grasses and wildflowers, once an excellent place for buffalo, now home to cattle. Called the Sand Hills, this delicate ecosystem of sand and grass covers two thirds of the state’s width, and nearly three-fourths of its height, bordered on the north by the Niobrara and Missouri rivers, on the south by the Platte. It is at once a place of gentle beauty and harsh extremes.

On the eastern edge of these hills where the Elkhorn River has sprung forth and begun to flow, the last of the dunes occasionally trails out onto flat stretches of fertile hay meadows and pastures – this is where I was raised. The flatness of the meadows is striking, interrupted only by the great stands of old cottonwoods that guard the edges of rivers, streams, and wetlands.

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3. Basso, “Wisdom Sits in Places”, in *Senses of Place*, 67-68.

Although my parents were not farmers, for most of my childhood we lived on a farm place north of Orchard, Nebraska. My grandmother's house was ten miles from ours, and every inch of this drive is ingrained into my memory. Mother would load my sisters and me into the car and drive down the quarter mile of our lane, then a mile east, two miles south to town, five miles west on Highway 20, five south on State Spur 45B, and then another three-quarters of a mile east and we would arrive at their farm located on the north bank of the Elkhorn River. Besides the town, there were twelve farm places dispersed along this route, and each one was observed and monitored over the days and months, seasons and years, for external changes that indicated personal shifts in a family's life.

It seems that much of my childhood was spent either walking through pastures or riding in a car as my parents took us on what seemed to be their favorite pastime – driving for hours down miles of gravel roads, exploring and re-exploring our little area of the world. How many sunny afternoons in spring, summer, or fall did we spend driving around the countryside in northeast Nebraska, getting out occasionally to investigate some abandoned house or grove of trees, to play next to Grove Lake or climb Chalk Mountain, to cross numerous bridges over the Elkhorn River, and then climb back in to slowly drive the gravel roads that surround almost every square mile of that territory? All the while, my parents would be talking – about any number of things really, but usually there would be a story tied to some point of land along the way. And quite often, that *was* the point of the drive, to go by a place where something had recently happened, or see a place connected to some story passed on to and around in the community.

My favorite place was one that held special magic for me – it was called Oak View. The Schluesner family owned it, and it was an abandoned resort from the 1920s and 30's. The house was too dangerous to walk in, but I remember doing so anyway once when I was really young. My dad had a curiosity and daring that would not allow him *not* to go in and check it out. It held that funny smell that comes into old houses, something of a mixture of old, musty, and abandoned. There were many rooms, and still present was the remnant of a once exquisite staircase. But best of all, and I do mean the best of all, was the empty concrete shell of an Olympic size swimming pool on the grounds. Seeing this was like finding buried treasure. Hidden back in the overgrown

trees, a single tree had grown directly in the middle of its deep end. Nothing can be said to adequately describe my joy and delight at finding this pool, the delight that discovery makes to this day. After all, this place was over twenty miles from any town. Lawrence Welk was said to have played there. This fact combined with the existence of the pool provided my imagination with endless hours of fun.

Although not all so eventful or amazing, there were many places like this which held fascinating stories. And I soaked in all of them as my parents drove and talked. But it was not only my parents who did this, for I remember sunshine and pickup trucks. These were the times that I would get to ride around with my grandfather or one of my uncles. My mother has six brothers. Although all of them still live close, only one of them is now a farmer. Every one of them is a storyteller. When they gathered, laughter reigned! As long as they would let me I would sit with them and take in everything they said. From their stories I learned more of our history, more of our place. One time, about seven of us piled into the back of grandpa's pickup, and he drove us over to the hay meadow that they were haying that year. Presumably, some discussion or decision needed to be made about the place. It was a picture perfect day, so one of my uncles decided that it would be most appropriate to break out into song – although musical they were not. *Amazing Grace* was begun and laughter took over again.

My family and the community that I grew up in handed to me a way of understanding my place in the world. Everyday life provided countless instances for them to dispense the narratives that belonged to each section and mile of land around which I lived. With this as an anchor, I started at a very young age to strike out on my own. I began to take solo walks across pastures, ride my ten-speed bike down gravel roads for as far as I could. But always my mind was tethered to home, both because I had an innate sense of the cardinal directions and because I held the narratives that connected the routes I was taking. Rarely did I experience disorientation. And the only time that I was ever nervous was when I was doing something that I either wasn't sure how to do or which was illegal. Like the time I borrowed my dad's '65 Chevy pickup with a three-speed, that I had only watched him operate, to drive the two miles to Mrs. Schluesner's house so that I could mow her lawn – before I had a driver's license. My only fear was that I would stall the vehicle and then either the county sheriff or my dad would catch me.



My childhood was far from idyllic. It was not always sunny, not always an adventure to be had on a Sunday afternoon. Many parts of it were far from it. But I grew up linked to the land around me, a landscape that although cordoned off into mile sections of a grid, became an inter-connected web of place. My familiarity and knowledge of that place allowed it to open up wide. For even when land is owned and occupied, when parts are the private territories of many, deep familiarity ingrains in us which places are free for us to cross and which are off limits. Rather than being a gathering of places where we cannot go, the mind recognizes the places to which it can go. Hence this land, and its web of place and history, returned itself within my mind to the physical reality of what it started as – a stretch of wide open landscape, dotted by the occasional tree and residence, each of which was continually subdued by the overwhelming presence of horizon and the infinite and eternal blue sky.

## **Part Two**

## Navigating Openness

### *Openness Divided*

It felt as though the world shifted beneath my feet the first time I visited Japan. The small amount of language training and cultural study that I had undergone in no way prepared me for the utterly disorienting experience of being unable to read, speak, or negotiate my surroundings with ease.

Fortunately, Osaka's Kansai International Airport, where I landed, is equipped with bi-lingual everything – signs, recordings, but this was not the case in the small city of Hikone where I was staying. Going out of my room everyday was a venture into a world that superficially appeared to be known by me. There were typical streets, shops, and houses like at home, but it seemed as though someone had altered them just enough so that I couldn't recognize them. Sitting down to dinner was its own bewildering experience, as nearly everything put in front of me was unrecognizable. I spent half of my time playing the guessing game of “vegetable or animal?” Nebraska is a long way from the sea and no amount of imagination can prepare one for the difference in edibles that a sea of grass and a sea of water will produce.

Almost every system of communication that I had learned at that point in my life had been stripped away. It was pointless to carry a translation dictionary, as I was unable to distinguish between the hundreds of Kanji that formed most of the words I tried to read. Before I knew it, I was having the time of my life. Once I let go of the frustration, let go of the need to pretend that I understood, the world around me opened along with my senses. I had to use every available sensation, memory, and clue in order to make my way, in order to navigate my surroundings. This was an adventure into the unknown, and what is the unknown, other than another form of openness?

Negotiating openness activates our perceptive senses, makes us wholly aware of the present moment. In finding our way through it, we search deep into the well of our own memory and experience, looking for the information that can aid our passage.

But eventually, are we not bound to divide openness, break it apart for our own purposes? Can we even help ourselves?

In open landscape, this activated awareness brings us into touch with the richness of subtle details that are present. Open landscape environments such as the plains are unique because of the work that it takes to understand them, the work that it takes to separate their spaces into distinct places. The effort is returned in the serenity and sense of freedom that they are able to provide.

In 2008 I made a series of woodcut prints, each depicting a location spaced approximately one hundred miles apart along the five hundred mile drive from my hometown in Nebraska to Ft. Collins, Colorado. An east-west drive that cut directly through the heart of the Great Plains. The prints were each twenty feet in length and thirty-six inches high, the result of printing a unique woodcut block on a roll of Japanese Mulberry paper. The block was printed five or six times across its length, with a slight seam evident at each repetition. I positioned the horizon line at the same point, nine inches from the bottom of the page for each print. The details of carving the image of each place visited and the subtle differences in coloring were the qualities that distinguished one print from another.

Only one print was installed at a time, but often it was assumed that I kept hanging the same print over and over. The prints asked for viewers' participation in looking. The size and coloring of the print might be the first feature to captivate passersby, and then as they continued to look, they would begin to see the details – the earth formations and grasses represented through very delicate carving of the wood, the seams that indicated it was a repeated scene. Viewing these large prints caused the eye to go back and forth between the contained whole of the paper and the particular details. Each print could be explored. Eventually, three prints were installed together, emphasizing the differences between them. This expanded the experience from observing one print to comparing the three. Now the prints could be viewed in their entirety as a group and they could be studied individually.



Fig. 2. *It Happened Here... 17 Miles West of Burwell*. Woodcut print on mulberry paper, 20 ft. w x 36 in. h, 2008.

Fig. 3. *It Happened Here... Chimney Rock*. Woodcut print on mulberry paper, 20 ft. w x 36 in. h, 2008.



Fig. 4. Detail image of *It Happened Here... 17 Miles West of Burwell.*

Fig. 5. Detail image of *It Happened Here... Chimney Rock.*

Open landscapes, particularly, require that careful attention be paid to their subtle information in order to see them fully. The openness of the unknown requires the aid of our senses, insights, and instincts to help us navigate through them. Herein lies the exquisite beauty I see in the open, its ability to reveal much more of both the world and ourselves than we can think or imagine.

Once we start to perceive, to look, examine and observe, we then take the collected information and start to categorize and divide. We assert our control over openness through sorting and separating, through the abstract systems we apply.

The Jeffersonian grid establishing township and range was cast over the Plains and all of the American West like an invisible net that allowed for white settlement to capture its land. Latitude, longitude, and the compass enable ships to glide across the ocean without recognizing the vast complexity of information that it contains.<sup>4</sup> In Japan, I worked industriously to detect the locally established systems belonging to trains, streets, restaurants and shops. Although for the most part, I applied my own words and meanings to the information I found. In this way, I made the unknown readable to me.

In my hours on the open landscape of the Menengiyn Tal, the abstract system of time was the treasured tool by which I could transform the overwhelming emptiness and solitude surrounding me. In my frantic negotiation of that space, subconsciously I searched for a means by which to gain control. Already I had distinguished the characteristics and variety of plant life that was there, the force and direction of the wind, but those particulars merely increased my perception of the place as beyond my control. It was necessary for me to pull from existing knowledge in order to find a way to manage. I used one of the first and most basic concepts that I had learned as a child, counting time.

Counting time allowed me to see the vastness that was there as part of my own personal narrative. The sun as it rose full, bright, and warm was the backdrop to my morning, a morning in which I told myself that I had just so many hours to sit and draw and absorb this far removed place. The evening before became a few hours of time to sit

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4. Raban, *Passage to Juneau*, 93. Raban writes of Polynesian sailors that once sailed the ocean without the aid of navigational instruments. They could gain their bearings and direct their course by reading the colors of the sea, feeling the shifts of waves through their bodies, smell the air for scents that revealed proximity to land.

and reflect on the effort it took to get there, my thankfulness at making it. Even though I did this, I continually waivered on the brink of despair at my lack of control and vulnerability. But by employing a framework upon which I could hang my story, I had a means by which to find solid mental ground.

This is what we are prone to do – make known the unknown by dividing it. Chaotic space or empty space, we want the blank made readable. To navigate our way we perceive, detect, divide, and then use what we find to make things understandable. We negotiate the world by the understandings we develop; we make openness readable for ourselves.

### *Openness Made Readable*

Over time, the vast region of The Great Plains unfolded into a large and beautiful book to be read by me. But it was also written by me because I found it, I made it into my own creation story; I developed a personal history that was wedded to the miles and miles of roads and highways that I drove within those plains. Bruce Chatwin's book *The Songlines* describes the Australian Aboriginal songlines that were and are their creation story and their mode of navigation. I see connections between this tradition and my own experience. My knowledge of roads and markers became ingrained into my thinking, part of my habits. It became a type of song or story that I could follow to gauge physical progress through the landscape and through the personal realm of understanding and emotion.

I began my negotiation of the region using the maps made available to everyone, maps that divided its largeness into states, counties, towns, and highways. But soon it became a complex story overlain with multiple tracks. As time passed, staring out the window of the truck revealed more and more geographic details that became ingrained. I could no longer see the area as one big grassland. As directions to ranches and farms were given and followed, as roadside breakdowns occurred and diners and restaurants were found, as wind, rain, and snowstorms made miles unbearably treacherous, a deep bank of memory was deposited. I became curious about other lives and histories as I found evidence of them either in the information placed on historical markers, the



artifacts and remnants of their passing left by the road or in fields, or by the homes and ranches that people built and maintained. I imagined all of the varying books and songs that could be written by the many who had lived and were living there, the many who had passed through. The transient nature of the region allowed it to retain the quality of a place open to being read, interpreted, and reinterpreted. My own transient existence in its boundaries gave me the freedom to do this as I wished.

Other times, we inherit our means of managing the openness of our landscapes from our family or close community. These inherited forms are often deeply cultural, providing a starting point for all that we encounter in our life. This was how my perception of home, or of the thirty square miles or so located at the edge of the Nebraska Sand Hills that I associate as home, was formed.

The narratives and events that form the history of the community in which I grew up are linked to places upon the land, to locations that are unique in their attributes and scattered among the fabric of the grid. Told to me by my parents and grandparents, by my uncles and aunts, friends and teachers, the stories passed on to me illustrated all kinds of information. Sometimes it was the stuff of gossip, but much of it was told and passed on as a way of passing the time, sharing life, and as a means to remember important information. Farmers that lost their land, either due to hard luck or bad decisions, kids that went astray for much the same reasons, new babies, church affairs, and politics, curiosities such as trees that managed to stand themselves back up after being blown down, all were included. All of it was placed and located.

The stories could be stacked in any number of ways and separately recalled in any sequence of time. They could be systematically traversed by mentally navigating the neatly laid network of roads and section lines that connected the places to which they belonged. But by the time I was young, often little else remained in tact to represent the stories that I learned. My homeland was gridded emptiness, dotted with a few established homes, farms, and towns. It was a complex web of history that through its telling shaped my perspective, perception, and outlook. That landscape with its big sky and expansive horizon, its open fields and gridded underlying structure would forever shape my moral

and personal landscape, distinctly forming my sense of self and my interpretation of the world.<sup>5</sup>

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We are bound to divide openness – openness of experience or openness of land. The means by which to do this is both given to us, and found by us. Abstractions such as the grid or time, concrete particulars of places and things, cultural systems of history and narrative – each can be sought and employed on its own, but most often they are blended together transforming emptiness into richness, blankness into occupied territory. With this, in even the most void of physical landscapes our memory is rarely still, rarely is our vision absent.

Once we begin to see and to participate in openness, it ceases to be vacant. Open space instead becomes place, transformed by our attention to detail, or by the abstract or cultural segmentations that we apply to it. Once open views become filled with our knowledge, in a breath images and memories are recalled, projected, and then vanish again, mediating the distance between external and internal landscapes. Through these images, memories, and segmentations we make the world around us navigable, negotiable, and readable.

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5. Basso, *Wisdom Sits In Places*. Basso discusses the Western Apache system of Place Naming, its linkage to land, and its importance to the formation of their culture's identity. Place-naming was/is integral to the functions of everyday communication, and was also used as a tool for guiding and teaching. Ultimately it was a means of gaining wisdom.

## Openness Revealed

Openness, open landscape, is a place of seemingly clear opposites that contradict one another in their interplay – the miniature and the large, absence and presence, complexity and simplicity. Through the primordial experience of encountering the world as living, breathing, and active, through noticing these traits of openness, transience is made recognizable.

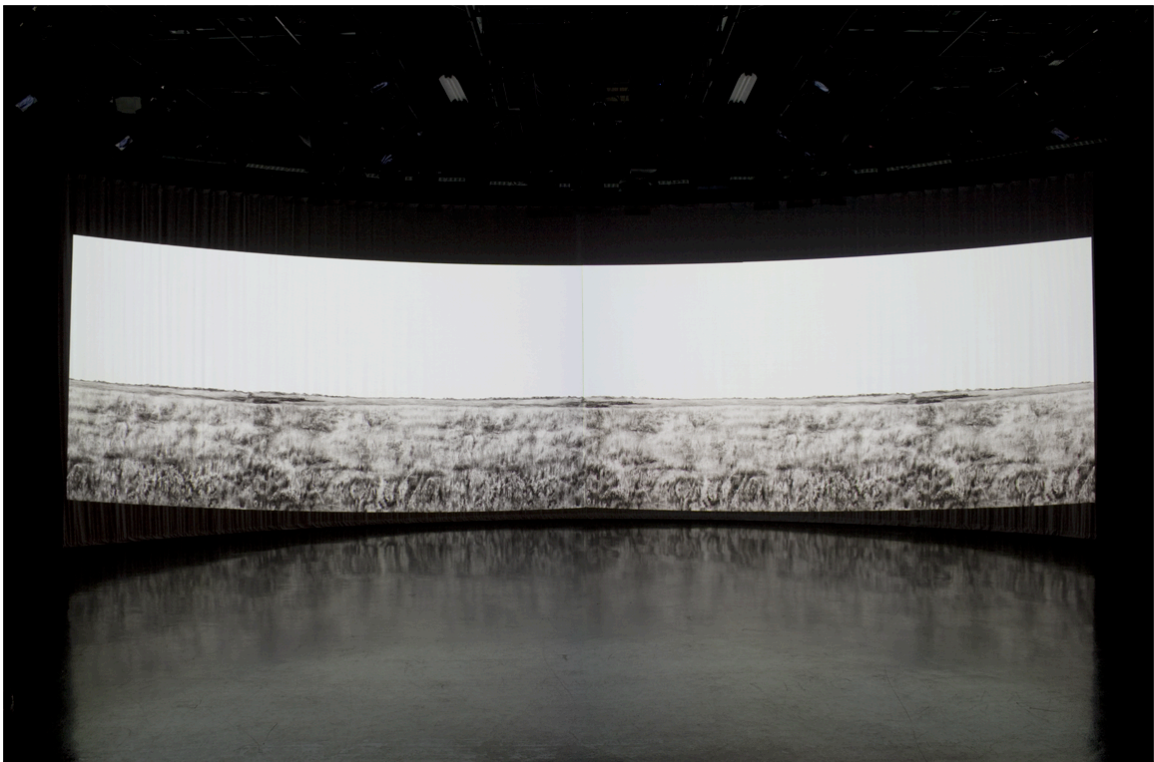


Fig. 6a. Installation view of *The Distance of Horizon*, 2009.

6b. *The Distance of Horizon*, Video, 7 minutes, 2009.

**[Click Here To View Video](#)**

### *Complex Simplicity*

Standing before the projected image viewers may be uncertain. Is anything happening? Is this nothing more than a large projection of a graphite drawing? And then gradually, small shifts and movements become noticeable, change is happening.

The imagery of landscape is drawn in tones of black, white, and gray. This subdued palette reinforces the stark difference between the vacant sky, the detailed ground, and the solid line that divides them. The white and empty sky holds its own against the subtle textures and shading of the now visibly moving ground.

In this animation it is dirt and grass that are the characters of the piece. They are the event, the minutia en masse that balance the immense sky and breathe animate life into the otherwise inanimate image. The movements transfix viewers, causing them to pause and notice the hundreds of tiny movements that occur simultaneously across the wall before them.

Called *The Distance of Horizon*, I created this animation in order to evoke the feeling of standing in the middle of a wide-open field, and to communicate my understanding and fascination with vast, open landscapes. I desired to reveal the complexity that is found in the rich tapestry of plants and soil, and the simplicity of the overall composition of earth, sky, and horizon line. These are the landscapes that I recognize as home.

The landscapes of the Plains are anything but simple as their definitive descriptor would suggest, and at the same time they are precisely that. Within them there is a continual balance between the vast and the minute – between subtle yet rich ecosystems of small grasses stretching over miles of clearly visible land that holds the illusion of emptiness, between the minutia of the life that is present and the immense canopy of sky covering it. The physical, personal encounter of these oppositions causes a shift in perception.

This perceptive shift is one where the eye, or the ear, must adjust to noticing very small things. In these larger-than-life spaces this is an act that requires the settling of our mind, a patience and willingness to be still and consider elements that are less than dramatic. We begin to realize that the field before us is not just grass, but hundreds of varieties of grasses and flowers. If we listen, we will realize that there is a cacophony of sound that seems to have no locatable source. Insects, small animals and birds settle into the grass and come together invisibly to fill the space with sound. Engaging in this perceptive shift reveals the complexity that is there. Our perception transforms the land

into landscape.<sup>6</sup> But this complexity is continually at odds with the overall simplicity of an environment that is minimalist in its overall structure – unobstructed sky covers unimpeded earth, appearing to meet at the rarely interrupted horizon line.

### *Places Best Defined by Absence*

It would be incorrect to state that places such as the Great Plains are places of absence, that they are empty. Landscapes like the plains are full of life, albeit life often found in miniature. However the feeling remains when encountering these landscapes that there is a void, an unmistakable absence that is present. This can be attributed to two central causes. The first is that there are few human inhabitants to temper the overwhelming scale of the environment. The majority of towns that are to be found in these places are small in population, and when viewed from a distance even they are dwarfed in comparison to their surroundings. But this is a matter of scale. The main reason that these environments carry the feeling of emptiness is due to the fact that open landscapes are transitory in nature; they are territories of migration and transient life. Detectable in the rich details to be uncovered are the traces of people and animals that have journeyed through. Available to the discerning eye are the artifacts that are remnants of fleeting habitation and passage.

The Great Plains region is a central flyway for multitudes of northern migrating birds. The most notable of which may be the Sand Hill Crane that has used this route for more than a millennia. It is a prehistoric bird following an ancient path. Every year, sections of the Platte River fill with these graceful birds while they make a pit stop on their way to Northern Canada, Alaska, and Siberia. Their presence fills the air with raucous noise for a time, their feeding picks clean the nearby fields, and their mating dances attract the attention of hundreds of people. There and gone again, they leave their tracks in the sandbars of the Platte, and a noticeable silence in their wake.

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6. Fox, *Mapping the Empty*, 14. Fox writes of the American Southwest desert, “land, as it is transformed by us into landscape through perception, history, and physical manipulation, is the most compelling physical feature of the region.”

In the U.S. cattle graze their way across the land, monitored and moved from pasture to pasture by the ranchers that tend to them. Their presence is valuable in that their hooves churn and aerate the soil; their manure provides rich fertilizer so that plants can thrive. In Mongolia nomadic herders semi-annually move their herds of sheep, cattle, yaks, goats or camels to new grazing areas on the steppe. As with the cattle on the Plains, there is evidence of where they have been; there are places where grass is grazed close to the ground and others where it is tall and lush. Close inspection of the ground reveals their actions and presence.

Although seemingly harmless and gentle in their makeup, open landscapes such as the North American Great Plains or the Asian Steppe often defeat human intrusion. These ecosystems do not support hordes of people, and the powerful forces of summer heat or winter storm can quickly, often, and without warning set back human efforts at domination. Those most successful in their attempts at long-term occupation of these places are those who are mobile and flexible such as the herders of Mongolia or the American Indian tribes who for centuries inhabited the Plains.

My family arrived in Nebraska approximately one hundred years ago. Aggressive settlement of the region had begun not more than fifty years previous to that. Westward expansion dispersed white settlers onto 160-acre parcels made available to them by the Homestead Act. These parcels were soon absorbed into larger farms and ranches as the reality, hardship, and struggle of taming this region into manageable farms and ranches became apparent and people left to pursue other lives. Railroads were built and towns sprang up along their tracks, only to disappear with the trains that used them. The latter part of twentieth century brought the absorption of family farms and ranches into larger corporate entities. Trees and shelterbelts planted in response to the dust and wind of the 1930's now disappear to make way for large irrigation pivots.

The same land that was so fervently settled in the attempt to fulfill the collective agenda of a nation and the private dreams of many has won out. It remains, as it always has – sparsely inhabited. Within one hundred and fifty years of the Homestead Act and the arrival of European farmers, many of whom turned ranchers, the land is heavily depopulated, a trend that began as early as the 1930s – overall a short history in the grand scheme of time. Often, the culture and society of states such as the Dakotas, Nebraska,

and Kansas is best expressed by what was. This is due to the fact that the remnants of that brief burst of human activity still remain. Old barns and houses, weathered to dark brown and gray, can still be found in the middle of fields. Unused train tracks become foot trails. A walk through any pasture nearly guarantees an encounter with an abandoned tractor wheel or metal part left to rust in the elements.

The land is formidable, and those who wish to inhabit it must be resilient and flexible. In these places that which is absent – families, memories, and dreams – is keenly felt and visible to those who remain.

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Fig. 7. Right panel of *Bull and Elephant*, Rosetsu, Nagasawa, Edo Period, 18<sup>th</sup> century. Six-panel folding screen. Ink on paper. 155 x 359 cm. Source: *Japanese Masterworks from The Price Collection*. 95.

The right panel of Nagasawa Rosetsu's eighteenth century painting titled *Bull and Elephant* is an exquisite example of illusionary emptiness. Nearly two thirds of the painting is without mark, and yet it is a painting of a large, hulking elephant. The lines creating this elephant are sparse, elegant, delicate strokes of gray that shift subtly in line weight. Two birds rest in the upper right hand corner, their heavy blackness balancing the overall lightness of the picture.

I am drawn to the simplicity of this painting, to its nothingness that conveys so much. Artworks such as this one have been influential to me as I have sought to refine

my drawings and prints and visualize abstract concepts regarding landscape and human interaction. In doing so, my images have undergone an exercise in absence – a reduction from the visual plane of all unnecessary objects, people, and information. Landscape was once the backdrop and canvas on which to depict events or stories. Now it is the subject and event itself.

Still important to me are the inhabitants and histories of land. However the overt insertion of those images, be it a barn, a house, or a person, is not necessary in providing viewers with an experience that will allow them to imagine an entire history or narrative. Just as the Japanese painter Rosetsu could suggest to us an elephant with a few delicately crafted lines, much can be suggested in presenting the differing minute details of a specific place.

Jane Hirschfield writes, “Because they [Japanese Poems] are utterly attentive, each to its moment, each to its part, the best of them do have...a way of including the wholeness of life within a brief glimpse. These poems show us that a single moment’s perception is more than enough to hold a world.”<sup>7</sup>

The sparse lines of Rosetsu’s painting are a brief glimpse that encapsulates the whole of the elephant. My careful drawings of particular locations and moments within the seeming homogeneity of the Plains and Mongolian steppe were made to convey much more than the moment and place drawn. Omitting excess or unnecessary information focuses viewers’ attention. It allows them to imagine a whole world of events. Even if that world is represented by something that at first appears to be entirely empty, or absent.

### *Encountering Scale and Undeniable Visibility*

Truly open landscape is a place of mirage and deception, hidden behind the illusion of openness. Standing on the Menengiyn Tal in Eastern Mongolia, the only things in my view were the hazy, quickly moving clouds, the grasses and wildflowers that bent in submission to the wind, and the shifting position of the sun. The curving line of the earth felt very near, near enough to walk to. But once I started walking, I realized

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7. Hirschfield, *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry*, 106.



that I could do so for hours and it would continually tease me with its false nearness. As I walked I also became aware of my clear visibility. Not that I could see – but that I could *be* seen. Alone, it felt as though I was the object in view. I was completely exposed and vulnerable.

These are two dualities that are confusing to encounter. Tangible closeness and infinite distance to the curve of the earth is the first duality. To feel as though very near something, but have it always remain beyond grasp causes us to question our certainty and sense of reality. This questioning is amplified by a continual mirage that hovers on the horizon of open landscape, a phenomenon that is present due to the unobstructed openness and light. The uneasy mind will let the imagination transform this mirage into every possible fear or desire, causing even greater uncertainty.

The second confusing duality is being able to see clearly yet feeling as though it is you that is clearly seen. There is tremendous power in this experience. Our sense of complete being is continually disrupted by a call that seems to say, “You are but a fragment. I see you, but you are nothing.” Ultimate visibility can bring forth ultimate vulnerability, and our own temporality is brought into full view. I was incredibly aware, standing on that grassy plain, of just how susceptible I was to any force stronger than myself, to any force that desired to end or disrupt my brief existence. The grass around me seemed to have more permanence than I did, for the tactic of grass is to die and be reborn again and again, quickly and in great number. This strategy for dealing with the immensity of scale and exposure in which grass grows seems to directly contradict its fineness and delicacy of form. Repeated temporality is its eternity. My singularity and solidness was fragile by comparison.

In our current time the physical experience of scale on the Great Plains is similar, though not nearly so raw, even for a person unfamiliar with this landscape. Some remnant of humanity – an electrical pole, fence line, or the shape of a distant ranch building or town is quite often visible. The evidence of human presence minimizes the isolating nature of the experience. But it does not diminish the fact that even the large metal transformer towers that march their way across the land appear small in relation to the land and sky surrounding them. The smallness of our human scale is inescapable in wide-open spaces.



Fig. 8. *Monk by the Sea*, Friedrich, Caspar David, ca. 1809-10. Oil on canvas. 43-1/3 x 67-1/2 in.  
Source: *The Abstraction of Landscape*. 163.

This grappling with openness that so engages me would most certainly have been considered an encounter with the Sublime during the age of the Romantics. The Sublime represented that boundlessness that could strike awe or terror within the heart and mind of the beholder.<sup>8</sup> For Romantic painters, writers, and thinkers, the interaction with landscape became a spiritual experience. Theirs was a time of movement toward a secular world, and the purpose of art no longer resided in the need to honor religion or the church. The encounter between nature and human was its own religious or spiritual experience. Nature was bigger than human beings; it represented a power far greater than humanity.

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8. Rosenblum, “The Abstract Sublime”, 163. Rosenblum refers to the following quote from Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* when discussing the Romantic encounter with natural phenomena. “The Beautiful in nature is connected with the form of the object, which consists in having boundaries, the Sublime is to be found in a formless object, so far as in it, or by occasion of it, boundlessness is represented (1, Book 2, 23).” Rosenblum calls this experience “a breathtaking confrontation with boundlessness in which we also experience an equally powerful totality”.

Casper David Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea* is a simple, sensuous representation of this philosophy. The power and boundlessness of the sea can be felt, evoked by the dark blue and gray hues that form the water and heavy clouds, and the small, quiet, singular shape of the monk. It looks to be near nightfall, and the light colored beach leads a viewer's eye, and the monk, to the edge of this balance between human and nature. The monk seems to waver between disappearing into the scene, into nature, altogether, and standing firm against the powerful forces before him.

Vast scale and the rawness of nature are achieved in this image through subdued color, texture, and careful composition. The size of the painting is not so large (43-1/3 x 67-1/2 in.), but through subdued, heavy colors and careful composition Friedrich enables us to imagine all that it suggests.

*The Distance of Horizon* was projected in a black box video production studio, where its width spanned nearly seventy feet and its height twenty. This size was meant to dwarf and encompass viewers. It demanded and focused their attention, inviting them to be still and watch. It was an effort at mimicking, within a gallery context, the experience of standing at the edge of vastness, and confronting openness.



Fig. 9. Installation view of *The Distance of Horizon*, 2009.

## Openness Returned

### *Open Space becomes Open Richness*

Openness is powerful. It encompasses all descriptors greater than human scale. It is replicated in the expansive landscapes of the earth. Undeniable is that places like the Great Plains or the Mongolian Steppe have an unnerving quality that can only be described as immeasurable, empty. Such places emphasize the relative smallness of our human existence.

Also powerful is our ability to transform openness. A will and desire to establish order and control is at play when we meet the open. This need is reactionary and primal; our ability to surrender is a practiced art or a forced action. The details and specifics that transform open spaces into knowable places are dominant in their defiance. To count the sands of a desert, the grasses on a plain, or the water molecules in the sea – any of these would become an eternity unto itself.

Openness entails a series of distinct oppositions that can be distinguished one from the other. Always on the one hand is the open, and on the other is the quality by which we differentiate it. However to know openness, to experience it, to surrender to it, is to realize that the oppositions continually intersect one another. Each shapes, forms, and fuses into the other.<sup>9</sup>

Standing on the Mongolian Steppe, the flat boundless earth that surrounds you is simultaneously the site of an extensive network of delicate plants and scattered rocks that can be separated and inspected closely. But allow the eye to blur, attention to become unfocused, and these distinctive details return to a smooth covering on an endless expanse of land. The farms and families, hay fields and highways so neatly scattered across two townships in Northeast Nebraska becomes the singular entity that I call home. Distinctions of place form the richness of what I consider home, but home is for me a unit without border or division. In each case two realities exist simultaneously, each comes

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9. This is essentially the point that Deleuze makes in “The Smooth and The Striated”. He sets up a series of seeming oppositions, and then continues to reveal how when it seems that the distinction is clear, the boundary between the two fades or overlaps. An entity may seem to be primarily smooth or striated in quality or nature, but inevitably, one transects the other.

into play according to the time and need of our attention. Each is the same. Each is the other.

Openness, either in the form of unknown personal territories into which we descend, or larger than life landscapes through which we pass or inhabit, has the capacity to reflect to us that questioned realm of the eternal, the infinite. That ultimately unknowable space that extends before us and behind us, that space of which we instinctively realize we are but a fragment.<sup>10</sup> In recognizing this, reflected to us is our own capacity for the eternal, our ability to stretch ourselves beyond the moment. Reflected to us are the parts of ourselves we were unaware of.

The outcome for such inquiries varies from person to person. Just as some individuals need concrete plans to proceed comfortably with the week ahead and some prefer to leave it unscheduled. Just as some can encounter a vast landscape and find they are facing adventure, while some see nothing but complete emptiness. And just as some never see anything more than the tiny grasses in front of them and miss the magnificence of the spacious sky above, each interaction with the open is different, reveals different aspects, and generates different outcomes.

But whether it is the personal unknown that extends as an open reach before us, or a physical landscape, internally or externally, openness returns. It may be the peace achieved once we have mastered the seemingly unknowable, or it may be that the immeasurable prevailed. Hopefully, the disparate parts of experience become one continuous whole, and the external landscape that we take part in melds seamlessly with our internal ability to undertake the unknown.

Openness is the ultimate space for discovery; it is a playground for the imagination and investigation. Open landscapes with their rich complexity of fine detail and traces of absence and history invite inspection. Unknown realms of human experience demand introspection. These two, inspection and introspection, are key

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10. This in many ways was the Romantic vision of the sublime. Vastness that was boundless, that one must stand in awe of.

elements of exploration, each invites further looking and inquiry. And certainly for me, any chance to explore and discover is the ultimate open space of freedom.

Openness is never empty, never blank, but rather, it is richness waiting to be uncovered. Openness becomes Open Richness.



Fig. 10. *Floating Iceberg*, Church, Frederic Edwin, 1859. Brush and oil paint on paperboard. 7-3/8 x 14-3/4 in. Source: *The Abstraction of Landscape*. 120.

### *The Work of Art*

Few sights remain unseen, but the sight of an open horizon line ignites my creativity and sparks my imagination. My fascination is intrinsically linked to landscape, specifically open landscape.

I like to imagine what it must have been like to be an artist during the age of exploration, in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries when the earth was to the Western world a place waiting to be discovered – to be the artist aboard a ship whose responsibility it was to record sights previously unseen. Frederic Church's *Floating Iceberg*, a small image painted 'in the field', is a painting that feeds this imaginative thread. Balanced on the page the iceberg interrupts the flatness of the dark sea's horizon. The light and color in the painting take viewers to another place and time,

yet feel as fresh as though painted today. Deeply influenced by naturalist writers and artists of his time, Church traveled throughout the United States and to remote locations such as Labrador to record the world through paint. <sup>11</sup>

*The Distance of Horizon* lets viewers make their own discoveries. The immensity of the landscapes from which I made the drawings, the Great Plains and the Mongolian Steppe, are contained in manageable segments due to the limits of the space in which the animation is projected. The work holds quietness. It has no sound and is hypnotic in its subtle animated movements and silent shifts from one landscape to another. These qualities combined with its repetitive loop provide a safe space to sit and consider, and to reflect. The seeming emptiness, or lack of human or animal activity, provide a space for viewers' own projected imaginings. *The Distance of Horizon* is intended to reveal that openness is rich, seductive and inviting.



Fig. 11. *Plains Projections: Van Horn Hill North - Sunrise*, 2009.

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11. Gallati, "The American Landscape and the Mutable Sublime", 104. The writings of German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt were an influence for Church. Humboldt wrote, "of the landscape painter, whose mission he believed was to record direct impressions of nature that would then be distilled in a and manifested on canvas as a fresh and independent image."

*Plains Projections* is an extension of *The Distance of Horizon*, a satellite project meant to connect the work of art with a tangible place. It is a means by which to connect the distant world of the studio and gallery to the physical land that drives the creation of the work. Intended largely for myself, it was a way for me to connect my two halves – the one that longs to be outside and having adventures in the world and the one that needs to draw and think and create things. But it was also an artistic experiment, as I am continually searching for new ways to connect the realm of memory with that of tangible experience in landscape.

For this project, I added figurative imagery to the animated landscapes drawn from my family and from personal memories of the Plains. These drawn images fade in and out of the videos in the way that memory jumps to life and then disappears in the mind in just moments. I reduced the landscape represented in these animations to a single location, the location from which it was drawn and to which I would drive to project it. (In contrast, *The Distance to Horizon* contained six separate locations that transitioned from one to another.) I then drove to Nebraska and projected animations at three of the locations. One evening, I also projected on the side of my uncle's machine shed so that my family could see and participate in the work. The black and white projections were miniscule in comparison to the land around them, yet they became the object of focus. It was fascinating to see a representation of actual places projected onto the place itself, to see a moving image within a moving world, to see the horizon line in the drawing melt into the horizon line of the earth.

Photographs and video serve as the documentation and record of this project's occurrence, and indeed become secondary experiences themselves. The work was fun, an adventure that included climbing over fences, getting up at dawn to catch the ideal light, and driving for hours and miles in open landscape. But because so much of its success depended on a short window of time in the day and because it was bound to locations far removed, the question that it leaves me with is how do I expand it so that others can directly experience it? How do I extend it beyond myself? And indeed, this last question goes to the heart of my question of how to convey openness in visual artistic form to begin with.





Fig. 12. *Plains Projections: Van Horn Hill North 1*, 2009.

Fig. 13. *Plains Projections: Van Horn Hill North 2*, 2009.



Fig. 14. *Plains Projections: Uncle Dan's Shed*, 2009.  
Fig. 15. *Plains Projections: Setting Up*, 2009.

## Conclusion

Each artist's role varies. As Rebecca Solnit states, "It is the job of artists to open doors and invite in prophecies, the unknown, the unfamiliar; its where their work comes from, although its arrival signals the beginning of the long disciplined process of making it their own. Scientists too, as J. Robert Oppenheimer once remarked, "live always at the 'edge of mystery' – the boundary of the unknown." But they transform the unknown into the known, haul it in like fisherman; artists get you out into that dark sea."<sup>12</sup> For each artist, the job is to navigate their unknown territory, discover what it is that they have to depict to themselves, and to the world.

The question that remains for me, that I will continue to tackle in my work as an artist, is how can I express in visual, artistic form, my relationship to landscape, and my relationship to openness? How can I create a reflection of experience that is continually shifting and moving, that is not static, that is the stacked accumulation of multiple memories and visual experiences that reveal themselves randomly and in correspondence with movement through space, place and time? How can I reveal images that are there and gone again in an instant? How can I provide viewers with a window to information that is intrinsically mine and must be because each memory bank is different, but still expand that experience so that it can belong to others – so that they can encounter openness for themselves? How can I condense a multi-volumed, deep well of imagery, thought, and emotion into visual artistic form, and in a manner that retains the vital integrity of openness – namely simplicity?

I have no absolute answers to these questions – they are the motivation that propels me to make art. Indeed, the questions are what I have discovered.

As the horizon line encircles the open landscape, I shall continue to circle these questions. As it appears to contain and capture the land, I will strive to encapsulate my experience and understanding of openness – both internal and external – into works of art. And as my distance to the horizon appears to shift depending upon my location and position, as that distance feels very near and sometimes very far depending upon my

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12. Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, 5.

familiarity with the ground that lies between, so will my own understandings shift, and the resulting visual expressions. I will continue to search for discoveries in the rich terrain of openness.



Fig. 16. *Plains Projections: Barlow's, Evening*, 2009.

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