

Introduction

ON A BRIGHT COLD DAY IN DECEMBER 2016, A DRONE CAMERA FLYING OVER THE confluence of the Cannonball and Missouri Rivers in North Dakota recorded a dazzling sight: an undulating current of light rippling across the landscape. This was neither a natural occurrence nor even a supernatural one but a staged act of resistance. On this day more than 150 protestors holding “mirror shields” (16-by-48-inch reflective boards) above their heads processed in loose formation across the snowy ground of the Oceti Sakowin camp near the Standing Rock Sioux reservation to dramatize their opposition to the construction of the Dakota Access oil pipeline (DAPL).¹ The collective performance, *Mirror Shield Project: Water Serpent Action* (figure 1.1), was conceived and orchestrated by artists Cannupa Hanska Luger (Mandan/Hidatsa/Arikara/Lakota) and Rory Wakemup (Ojibwe), who joined the standoff against pipeline security forces and local law enforcement at Standing Rock, the reservation on which Luger was born.² According to Luger, the *Mirror Shield Project: Water Serpent Action* was inspired by images of Ukrainian revolutionaries using mirrors to reflect back the images of Russian government forces amassed against them.³ Wakemup and Luger’s version advances the nonviolent spirit of the demonstration staged in Ukraine to encompass an even broader scope of sovereign political action and artistic expression; the work is, like all other forms of organized resistance to DAPL, fundamentally an assertion of Indigenous sovereignty.⁴ As a site-specific performance echoing the flow of the nearby river and gesturing to both what is above (a reflected sky, an unmanned camera) and below (the “river” of oil), *Mirror Shield Project: Water Serpent Action* is also, I contend, firmly situated within an emerging and distinctly Indigenous idiom of contemporary landscape representation.⁵



1.1 Cannupa Hanska Luger (Mandan/Hidatsa/Arikara/Lakota, b. 1979)
Mirror Shield Project: Water Serpent Action (2016)
Collective performance, Oceti Sakowin camp, North Dakota
Copyright Cannupa Hanska Luger. Drone image still by Rory Wakemup.
Courtesy of the artists

If drone footage of a group of protestors walking in the snow can be considered a landscape, it may seem that the term has all but lost its valence, that the designation has ceased to function as the coherent category of art that it once was, especially as originally constituted as a genre of European painting. In that well-established tradition, the term generally referred to views of a landscape as “captured” in the eye and depicted in paint through the use of a single-point perspective that positioned the artist and viewer as if looking out to the horizon. This basic definition of the term “landscape” in art held for hundreds of years, until the mid-twentieth century, when abstract expressionism dispensed altogether with mimesis and the illusionistic depiction of space on a painted surface.

By the 1960s the term “landscape” was more likely to be encountered in reference to sculptural forms and nascent installation and performance practices. When land art—including installation-based geological constructions such as Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* (1970)—came into being as a bewildering amalgam of architecture and minimalist sculpture, it caused a category crisis in virtually every established artistic discipline. This crisis provided the

impetus for one of the most widely influential documents of contemporary art criticism: Rosalind Krauss's 1978 essay, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field." In the opening passage of the essay, Krauss described standing in an actual field on Long Island, looking down into a subterranean earthwork construction by Mary Miss. She wrote, "Over the last ten years rather surprising things have come to be called sculpture: narrow corridors with TV monitors at the ends; large photographs documenting country hikes; mirrors placed at strange angles in ordinary rooms; temporary lines cut into the floor of the desert. Nothing, it would seem, could possibly give to such a motley of effort the right to lay claim to whatever one might mean by the category of sculpture. Unless, that is, the category can be made to become almost infinitely malleable."⁶

Krauss went on to describe the efforts made by critics to construct a historical genealogy for such works, one that stretched from Stonehenge through Russian constructivism right through to Long Island, reifying the category of sculpture along the way. "But in doing all of this," she continued, "the very term we had thought we were saving—*sculpture*—has begun to be somewhat obscured. We had thought to use a universal category to authenticate a group of particulars, but the category has now been forced to cover such a heterogeneity that it is, itself, in danger of collapsing. And so we stare at the pit in the earth and think we both do and don't know what sculpture is."⁷

A similar thought may occur to us today as we watch the video of *Mirror Shield Project: Water Serpent Action*, confront the torn and mended canvases of Nadia Myre's *Scar Project* (2006–13), or stare at the slab of concrete excised from an art gallery floor in Postcommodity's *Do You Remember When?* (2012) and try to make sense of them as *landscapes*. Yet if in "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," Krauss was able to assert that "we know very well what sculpture is" and follow that with an exposé of the "internal logic" of sculpture as a form of monument, so too can we begin to explore the "logic" of contemporary Indigenous landscape representation.

I stress the word "Indigenous" here to call attention to the fact that while much of the logic that undergirds the forms of representation discussed in this study—drawn from a range of contemporary media, including painting, sculpture, site-specific installation, video, and performance—may be congruent with more broadly mainstream postmodern art practices, the logic I am interested in is a particularly Indigenous logic or epistemology. In the pages that follow, I explore themes of presence and absence, connection and dislocation, survival, survivance,⁸ memory, commemoration, vulnerability, power, and resistance that surface again and again in reference to the Native landscape, and I situate these within a larger discourse of Indigenous visual sovereignty.⁹ In the broadest terms, Indigenous visual sovereignty describes the visual expression of Indigenous knowledge, and I am particularly attentive to what Tuscarora artist and theorist Jolene Rickard refers to as "place-based knowledge."¹⁰

My conception of contemporary Indigenous landscape representation is to some extent also informed by an understanding of what landscape art was (and meant) before the field expanded into the multiple dimensions and media of the postmodern era. In other words, just as Krauss had to return to the logic of the monument to discern the logic of contemporary sculpture, so I begin this study with a brief return to the history of landscape art in an era when that term was still restricted to painting—back to when “the landscape” was easier to define and easier to read. Landscape historian W. J. T. Mitchell is instructive here: in his revealing history of the genre, *Landscape and Power*, published in 1994 and substantially revised in 2002, Mitchell asked not just what landscape is but what it *does*. Taken together, the essays assembled in Mitchell’s volume demonstrated that the formal characteristics of European landscape painting (e.g., the illusion of recession into space, and the constant reiteration of pictorial tropes such as deforested lands and roads leading from the foreground to the background) reflected an ideology of habitation, occupation, and domestication. Moreover, Mitchell posited the intriguing notion that all of the world’s “originating movements in landscape painting—China, Japan, Rome, seventeenth-century Holland and France, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain”—coincided with periods of imperialism, the literal expansion of empire.¹¹

That Mitchell discerned a causal relationship between colonialist ideologies and landscape painting traditions bears directly on interpretations of Indigenous landscape art, which refuses to reproduce the “invitational” tropes of the European landscape tradition. Contemporary Indigenous landscape art is largely *anti-invitational* in character, in the sense that even the most seemingly representational paintings by Native American artists such as James Lavadour and Kay WalkingStick employ devices to block the imaginary entrance of a viewer into a scene, and sculptural works such as *Do You Remember When?* tend to insert themselves into the space of the viewer rather than the other way around.¹² Performance-based art practices are especially adept at achieving an anti-invitational stance, as the body of the artist literally intervenes between the spectator and the land: Mandan/Hidatsa/Arikara photographer Zig Jackson’s series *Entering Zig’s Indian Reservation* (1997) demonstrates just how effectively the presence of the Indigenous artist can decolonize the landscape.

While the sea change in national politics in the United States has lent new urgency to strategies, acts, and discourses of resistance, the NoDAPL protests and Idle No More treaty rights movement (as well as the Occupy and Black Lives Matter movements) and all of the works in this study that were produced before the 2016 elections should remind us that for Indigenous people in the United States and Canada, the colonial era has never ended. The coercive power of the settler state is as persistent as the Indigenous resistance to it.¹³

Nevertheless, these forms of artistic expression should not be considered exclusively oppositional; to define them only in reference to the European landscape tradition or the politics of decolonialism would deny the richly generative and vitally compelling aspects of Indigenous landscape representation. This is a crucial distinction, considering that even Mitchell concluded in 1994 that the European landscape tradition was an “‘exhausted’ medium.”¹⁴

By the time Mitchell revisited *Landscape and Power* in 2002, his thinking on this matter had shifted perceptibly. While downgrading the power of the landscape from a more coercive form of real power to a softer, subtler form of persuasion or affect, he nonetheless observed, “Whatever the power of landscape might be . . . it is surely the medium in which we live, and move, and have our being, and where we are destined, ultimately, to return.”¹⁵ What accounts for this change of heart? Several possible answers to this question are discussed in chapter 1, but the most germane proposes that as Mitchell’s attention turned toward ever more contemporary—and not, incidentally, non-Western—forms of landscape representation, his approach to the subject gravitated away from ideological discourse toward phenomenology, a philosophical approach that considers how individuals experience space in a more fully embodied, multi-sensory way.

The works of art that form the basis of this study—evocations of the landscape created in the last thirty years by Indigenous artists from North America—are rarely if ever primarily visual representations. Rather, they evoke all five senses: from the overt sensuality of Kay WalkingStick’s tactile paintings to the eerie soundscapes of Alan Michelson’s videos and Postcommodity’s installations to the immersive environments of Kent Monkman’s dioramas, all of these landscapes resonate with a fully embodied, one might even say *embedded*, subjectivity. Ideology is not replaced but joined in these works in an expression of what Stó:lō sound and performance scholar Dylan Robinson has termed “sensate sovereignty.”¹⁶ All of this is on display in *Mirror Shield Project: Water Serpent Action*, a work of art that emanates from, takes place on, and moves through the Native landscape, proclaiming, like all of the works in this book, the ongoing presence—and vigilance—of Indigenous peoples on an ever-shifting ground.

This volume is not by interest or necessity an exhaustive survey of the innumerable works by Native American artists that evoke a sense of space and place; it is instead an exploration of contemporary art as a vehicle for the expression of place-based knowledge. Loosely organized by medium, the first three chapters of this book are primarily concerned with painting, not only as the genre most closely associated with landscape representation, but also as a material process. The discussion centers on the work of two of the most prolific Native American painters of the contemporary period, James Lavadour and Kay WalkingStick, who have both been deeply engaged with landscape

imagery for nearly four decades. Both artists' innovative approach to the physical process of painting precipitated the emergence of landscape on their canvases. While this approach is not specific to Indigenous painters (including George Morrison and Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, who are also discussed here), the repositioning of the artist as an insider—a conduit for a subjective experience of landscape rather than a disembodied spectator—joins the discourse of decolonialism in destabilizing forms of representation that traditionally figured both the artist and the viewer as potential “investors” in the landscape.

The final two chapters of this book consider a wider range of postmodern media and art practices, including site-specific sculpture, installation, video, and performance art. The three-dimensionality and literal emplacement of these artistic media present unique possibilities for shaping space and marking place, and many of the works discussed here assume a kind of monumental stature, asserting Indigenous presence in culturally contested landscapes from blighted urban centers to highly charged border zones. Because these media directly involve or invoke the body, themes of vulnerability and trauma are also addressed—especially the trauma of dislocation and dispossession. Again, the discussion centers on a few well-established artists who have turned (and frequently returned) to the land in their work, including Alan Michelson, Kent Monkman, Rebecca Belmore, and Postcommodity. What binds all of the works in this study is the sustained engagement of the artists not only with land and landscape but also with the history of representation itself. Their efforts to reclaim history and establish connection to place *on Indigenous terms* constitutes a powerful rejoinder to the invitational tropes of the European landscape tradition.