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Unsettled Exhibiting the Greater West

Lily Brewer

Exhibition Review

Exhibition schedule: The Nevada Museum of Art, Reno, Nevada, August 26, 2017—January 21, 2018; Anchorage Museum, Anchorage, Alaska, April 6, 2018—September 9, 2018; Palm Springs Art Museum, Palm Springs, California, October 27, 2018—February 18, 2019

About the Author

Lily Brewer is a PhD student at the University of Pittsburgh, where she studies modern and contemporary landscape and aerial photography. Based in Chicago and Pittsburgh, she is the editor-in-chief of the forthcoming journal Sedimenta, which investigates environmentalism in the arts and humanities.

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The Nevada Museum of Art's exhibition *Unsettled* provides us with a new grammar called the Greater West, which invites artists to take back the frontier narrative from colonizing currents. In its companion triennial conference, contemporary art curators William L. Fox and JoAnne Northrup define the Greater West as a super-region surrounding the Pacific Basin, "from Alaska to Patagonia to Papua New Guinea to Australia." In turn, the exhibition visualizes artistic practices within larger global, planetary conditions, making (re)appropriation the

new anti-colonial Western motif.



Figure 1

Lily Brewer, Gallery view of (L-R): Sonia Falcone *Field of Color* (2013), Guillermo Bert *Mapuche Portal #1* (2014), Andrea Zittel *Prototype For Billboard at A-Z West: Big Rock on Hill Behind House* (2011), and Ed Ruscha *Lost, Empires Living Tribes* (1984), Nevada Museum of Art, 2018. All rights reserved.

In *Unsettled*, Alaska Native, First Nations, Latinx, and Black artists represent this consequential super-region from a dynamic and seismic vantage that ties their practices to the earth's surface and its geopolitical tensions. The gallery space is a microcosm for these tensions, conceptually expanded. *Chocolate Room* (1970–2004), by U.S. artist Ed Ruscha, comprises over three hundred panels of chocolate silkscreen and occupies an entire room, defamiliarizing the Hershey brand, which has a contentious and genocidal history in Central America. On a wall outside the galleries, *Which Way Does the Arrow Point* (2017), by Colombian multimedia artist Minerva Cuevas, observes and flips the visual rhetoric of advertising through parody. The cultural icon Smokey the Bear, who relayed the dangers of forest fires through public service announcements in the 1990s, breaks an arrow in half whose end is the Chevron petroleum logo. The two icons parody the relationship between petrol-

imperialism in the Nevadan forest systems and its impact on neighboring First Nations communities. Bolivian installation artist Sonia Falcone's *Field of Color* (2013) consists of eighty-eight clay bowls filled with spices, centering the hostile history of the spice trade within the space. This constellation of works within *Unsettled* is the sharpest in terms of considering material histories.

Unsettled's contemporary artists revise the sublime yet threatening frontier narratives perpetuated, in part, by the exhibition's twentieth-century artists, such as U.S. southwest painters Georgia O'Keefe in *Road Past the View* (1964) and Gerard Curtis Delano in *Navajo Camp* (ca. 1930s). "The theme 'shifting ground' tells the story of the epic collisions of the tectonic boundaries that create the physical landscapes of the greater west," writes Northrup. The twentieth century's hackneyed narrative of idyllic yet treacherous *terra nullius*—no one's land—contributed to representations of a perfidious mother nature. Drawing their own histories out from the horizon-heavy landscape painting traditions from the mid-twentieth century, these artists take up the aesthetic tools of colonization, through technology, design, and constructions of race and gender.

Nuclear anxiety and themes of destruction resonate through the exhibition and join with the unsettled motif. Patrick Nagatani imagines altered landscapes in *Uranium Tailings, Anaconda Minerals Corporation, Laguna Pueblo Reservation, New Mexico* (1990). His collages mark imagined geographies in the arid and semi-arid southwestern region, formerly (but in the not-too-distant past) subject to violent nuclear testing. In particular, his photographs of World War II-era Japanese internment camps mark largely forgotten sites of humanitarian duress in his collages. In another geographical (re)marking, Nicholas Galanin photographs actual signposts. *Your Inane Perspective: Haa Aaní Haa Kusteeyí Sitee (Our Land is Our Life)* (2015) is a highway sign reading "No Name Creek" with the addendum "Watlachéix'k'í Héén" underneath, which reclaims the whitewashed creek bed and surrounding land. Da-ka-xeen Mehnor reclaims formerly prescribed identities in *Da-ka-xeen, the Thlinget Artist 2005*, from the series *Reinterpretation* (2005–07). He takes back a critical tool of colonial science—the ethnographic photograph—and manipulates it with his own image mirrored against a nineteenth-century member of his Thlinget tribe. These photographers' works refuse white Western appropriation and reclaim lost titles. Their presence scaffolds other attempts to decolonize museum spaces.

Allison Warden, whose stage name is AKU MATU, uses Twitter as a platform for poetry, reappropriating language through this digital, social medium. Her 140-character poems interject intermittently through the exhibition, most often higher than eye level. Her poetic tweets uphold Iñupiaq domains of experience within the museum space.

Addressing issues of gender, performance photographs by Guatemalan artist Regina José Galindo show the artist buried up to her neck in pine timber sawdust, the shaved remnants of an exploited natural resource in her home country. This abuse brings to bear human rights violations as well as the imperial, industrial infrastructures that incite violence toward indigenous Mayans, especially women. Her works resonates with Ana Mendieta's *Siluetas* series, shown as well, whose voids left in the ground, dusted with red powder, also tempt readings of environmental and corporeal violence. Ana Teresa Fernández's performance of *Erasing the Border (Borrando la Frontera)* (2012) depicts her painting the border wall between Tijuana, Mexico, and San Diego, California. Using Martha Stewart's brand of sky blue paint, Fernández blurs the boundary among the nations, the border wall, and the sky.

New York artist Frohawk Two Feathers's 2012 *Map of the Pyramid Lake Region* extends his mapped mythologies through the fictional kingdoms of Lemuria. As in other works, he imagines long, speculative regional histories wherein seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France and England combine to form a colonial superpower. To this end, he arrogates early modern cartographic methods, sometimes replete with mythological imagery.

By contending with and reperforming histories of colonialism, the artists in *Unsettled* recover lost landscapes, and their works serve a metonymic function that reclaims settler

taxonomies, land use, and modes of expression. The West is ordinarily resonated powerfully with Western imperial ideology, an ideology that traversed the Atlantic with one mission: to colonize, modernize, and capitalize on seized land. If *Unsettled* successfully redefines the boundaries and borders of the Greater West, then the works offered from this super-region change the rules of Western imperialism's larger disputes on its own stolen soil.

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