

New World Ordering Manipulation of the Natural Landscape Is a Common Theme in an East Islip Exhibition

By Benjamin Genocchio

With Al Gore's documentary "An Inconvenient Truth" playing in theaters around the world to an enthusiastic response, it's surprising that more museums have not highlighted the ways in which artists have been attentive to environmental change, or even the ways that technology is complicating the idea of a natural world.

The nine artists whose work is featured in "Landscapism" at the Islip Art Museum explore the continuing dissolution of boundaries between nature and culture, the real and manufactured. But instead of harping on the negative, they have chosen to create alternative vistas and futuristic make-believe environments using a wide range of image creation and manipulation techniques.

Digital media abounds, with its infinite possibilities for image enhancement and manipulation, especially when it comes to new forms of landscape art. Dan Torop, for example, has created a computer program for an artificial landscape that visitors to the gallery can enter and then manipulate with a joystick. The shape of the moon, the volume and density of rain, even the color and height of land masses can be changed with the press of a button.

It's an interesting work, yet I have reservations about it: no matter how much time you devote to building the perfect landscape, with fine weather, even an island all to yourself, it is almost impossible to feel at home in this shifting, anonymous universe. You are alone in there, and the constrained movement of the joystick reflects the limits of human interaction with the brave new digital world, which in the end can seem like little more than just hollow decoration.

While Mr. Torop's computer-generated landscape allows us to play God for a few moments, Oliver Warden takes us to the limits of the ever-expanding digital universe. His photographs, collectively titled "The Edge of the World," depict the final frames or edges of the virtual landscapes inside computer games; more specifically, he captures and enlarges images of the areas on the edge of the gaming grid. He invites us to imagine what comes next.

Other artists depict the natural world in a more straightforward manner, though always as a constructed reality. Karen Azoulay's installation "The Evening Canopy and the Sunset House" creates the impression of a twilight sky, the artist filling a fabric-covered enclosure with thousands of loops of hand-dyed string hung from wooden slats by hue from dark to light. Though not as compelling as a lot of other work here, it is still surprisingly soulful.

Besides Ms. Azoulay, several other artists in the exhibition employ materials and techniques associated more with craft than with art. An example is Rowena Dring, whose works look from a distance like monumental paintings of generic landscape subjects, like streams, mountains, beaches and forests, but which up close are revealed to be dense, detailed compositions of stitched fabric. Here real places become the starting point for constructed, fictitious ones.

Jude Miller's simple, enigmatic sculptures are crepe paper replicas of flowers collected on her

travels. Beautiful and intricately crafted, they repay close scrutiny and patient appreciation, without which much of their delicacy is easily overlooked; her reproductions or facsimiles of nature are so good that they are almost indistinguishable from the originals. The synthetic and artificial seamlessly take the place of reality.

It is interesting to note, finally, that the exhibition's curator, Joseph R. Wolin, has chosen landscape imagery devoid of people. There is not a single person depicted in the more than 30 artworks here, with the exception of a mysterious, obscured figure floating silently downward in water in Adam Shecter's video installation, which is ominously titled "Ghosts" (2006). This work feels like a warning—a nod to Mr. Gore's film and the increasingly uncertain future of our planet.

This review appeared in The New York Times, Long Island and Regional Section, on Sunday, March 11, 2007.