

Reflecting on Water: Romantic Illusion in the Urban Desert Landscape

"I will now speak of another component of scenery, without which every landscape is defective—it is water." —Thomas Cole, in "Essay on American Scenery," *American Monthly Magazine* (January 1836)

Steeped in legacies of Romanticism, the ideal American landscape painting portrays nature as a sublime oasis. Removed from the depravity of urban life, iconic markers of this Romantic view include dense forests, rushing rivers, stoic mountains, and rolling grassy hills, among other breathtaking verdant scenery. Water is central to this perspective of the land as exhilarating escape—each of these celebrated features rely on abundant, natural water sources to shape their desired forms.

The desert, with its sprawling, exposed city infrastructure, arid conditions, and relative paucity of natural water sources, appears antithetical to the fertile landscape. Despite this environmental reality, humans have stubbornly funnelled unsustainable amounts of water into the desert, not solely to survive, but to fulfill an ingrained 19th century fantasy of the land as torrential paradise.

Defective Delusion

Laura Spalding Best's painted installations in *INFERIOR MIRAGE* examine this absurd compulsory desire to inundate a landscape that thrives naturally on little water. Painting on reclaimed metal surfaces, Best's landscapes scintillate with a deceptively dreamy sheen, refocusing the idealized Romantic lens toward water's role in reinforcing a false sense of paradise in the Sonoran Desert. Incorporating the optical phenomenon of the inferior mirage in her work, Best points to the tricky conflation of reality and illusion inherent in the desert landscape.

An inferior mirage occurs when a reflection of blue sky is distorted by hot, dry air above the ground, reappearing as the illusion of a shimmering pool of water in the distance. The term *inferior* describes the position of the illusion below its reflected image, however *inferior* also suggests a sub-par, disappointing mirage. This connotation of a mediocre illusion frames the misguided human manipulation of the desert landscape, inevitably falling short of Romantic expectations for the ideal.

The Waterless View

Embarking on a visual journey of the desert's troubled relationship to water, Best references natural, concealed water sources in 100 miniature landscapes on one inch round metal tags. *25 Mile Companion* features Best's characteristically precise, quick brushstrokes in sequential snapshots of the desert from the passenger's seat. Best renders the sobering greens, ochres, and blues of merged land and sky as reverently as integrated elements of urbanity: light poles, cars and trucks, fences, powerlines, and buildings. These roadside images document the artist's trip through the Gila River Indian Community—home of ancient Sonoran Desert people and engineers of Phoenix's original canal system, which sustainably supported crops and human life for centuries.

Most prominently featured in each hand-held view, a large rain cloud—the road trip partner—lingers over each scene, at once friendly and contentious. These collections of pastoral landscapes imagine an easy coexistence between latent natural water sources and modern infrastructure. Yet, this Romantic narrative omits urbanization's role in desecrating natural and indigenous attempts to tenably water the land, providing a subdued, layered glimpse into original sources of contemporary conflicts.

A Spurious Oasis

Representing the encroaching ideal through urban development in the desert, Best paints satirically glorified images of artificial fountains in *Known Waterfalls of Greater Phoenix!* Positioned conceptually as “waterfalls” near entrances to shopping centers and neighborhoods across Phoenix, these farcical fountains are idealized likenesses of actual stunning landmarks. The illusion of the cascade's false grandeur fades in the desert context, as its concrete chips and plastic fades into purposeless and excessive waste.

While natural waterfalls occur elsewhere in the Sonoran Desert, created by flash-flooding and surface run-off, here the deified urban waterfall floats eerily in an artificially milky blue background—no explanation for the origins of its frothy, bubbling streams. These old-fashioned vignettes, served on vintage platters with embellished frames, are achingly saccharine and out-dated. The kitschy portraits pinpoint human failure to accept the desert landscape as is, critiquing illusions of paradise as antiquated, unsustainable attempts toward idealization.

Engulfed by Excess

Instead of forecasting drought from this overindulgence, Best's series finale imagines a watery future. Appropriating the dramatic compositions and evocative titles of maritime landscapes by Romantic-era painters of the Hudson River School, Best exaggerates desert-dwellers' dangerous obsession with water consumption. In a disastrous situation at once terrifying and darkly humorous, these scenes imagine all extraneous water sources—fountains, pools, cooling misters, golf course and residential lawn sprinklers—overflowing simultaneously into the landscape amidst stormy skies.

As global temperatures increase, contributing to rising sea levels and flood-inducing precipitation, these scenes of billboards, power lines, radio towers, and median islands overturned and submerged by churning bodies of water are frighteningly familiar. While the Hudson River School painters emphasized the sublime power of nature in their paintings of shipwrecks and ocean storms, here the aqueous interruption of the landscape highlights current human disregard for balance, resulting in a paradise lost. Painted on the backs of road signs, including stop signs, the convincing imagery suggests halting this everyday deluge, though Arizonans may have already missed their exit.

Romanticism in an Era of Environmental Concern

American Romantic landscape painters made their work in part to justify colonization westward, propagating Manifest Destiny. The consumable image of a desired landscape purposefully obstructed the inevitable violence and destruction required to control that space, setting in

motion centuries of unconsidered, unsustainable relationships between Americans and the land. However, as the inferior mirage disappears upon increased visual proximity, these fantasies cannot last, as humans are now facing the harmful effects of their inherited illusions.

Best's historically-rooted idealism rendered over issues within the contemporary urban desert earnestly reveals the consequences of this environmental nightmare. The varying scales and repetition of each set of images acts as a subtle house of mirrors: the disproportioned perceptions arouse curiosity, allowing for an extended consideration of human impact on the landscape in an aesthetically-focused manner. While the damage is done and the landscape cannot be fixed, Best's re-Romanticized deserts provide an approachable assessment of these issues, questioning the Romantic legacy and acknowledging the false confidence in the inferior mirage.

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