

FREIGHT + VOLUME

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FREIGHT + VOLUME

WEST

Eva Díaz : West of Center.

An Interview with Phillip Lopate.

JAMES HYDE

WEST OF CENTER | EVA DÍAZ

“There aren’t a lot of places left you can go without seeing traces of people.”

– James Hyde, conversation with the author, March 2018

In James Hyde’s work *Forces* (2018), two large painted milky pink circles, think Pepto-Bismol pink, each one eighteen inches diameter, are partially eclipsed by two black circles of equal size bearing down on them from above. One black-pink pair occupies the base and the other the summit of the narrow, vertically oriented canvas a little over six feet tall. Between the pairs is a gap in the center of the work that is free of paint. Around the circles and throughout this middle area a panoramic photograph of a desert landscape is attached edge to edge to the stretched canvas, a photo that has been rotated ninety degrees on its side. Because of the rotation of the image, the slender horizon line of a distant pale blue mountain range is now a vertical strip on the far right, and a sun-bleached mesa and tufts of scrub brush in a canyon, the foreground of the desert scene, occupies the left-hand side of the work.



Atop the mesa in the upper right of the image a few tiny structures are evident. This site, which has the characteristic arid look of the southwestern United States without providing any particularly distinguishing landmarks, is Los Alamos, New Mexico, the notorious headquarters of the Manhattan Project and birthplace of the atomic bomb, and it remains the home of the Los Alamos National Laboratory nuclear research facility.

Many of the paintings in Hyde's show "West" contain photographs the artist has taken while visiting locations, like Los Alamos, that have been subject to various human interventions—the dam at Pyramid Lake reservoir in California, for example, or the McDonald Observatory in southwestern Texas. In his Pyramid Lake images the distinctive terraced triangle of the mountain that was cut away to construct the dam figures prominently, though just as often these infrastructures or other kinds of architecture exist as mere traces in the images, as with the small buildings atop the mesa in Forces.

In the case of Los Alamos and the McDonald Observatory, the magnitude of the human alteration to the ecosystem is not immediately perceptible, nor could it be easily captured by any visual representation. The modest size of Los Alamos, a town with less than 20,000 inhabitants, contrasts with the disproportionate consequences of its atomic energy program, an unparalleled technological transformation of the Earth's ecology. In the case of McDonald Observatory the effects of human-created light pollution are compromising astronomical research, as well as the diurnal cycles of many animals.

While manifestations of the human modification of the environment are subtle yet powerful presences in his work, Hyde's use of bold and colorful painted geometric forms generate episodes of visual tension by framing or obscuring the photographs of mountains, valleys and lakes over which they are painted. In addition to the circles in Forces and works like Limits (2016), Condensation (2016), and Vale (2017), other works incorporate ellipses,



rectangles, and sometimes fragmented or torqued elements of these forms in concentric or overlapping patterns. The hybridization of the photographic with the painted geometries, and the radical defamiliarization of vision that occurs when the photographic ground is rotated, turned upside down, or sometimes doubled along a central axis, create complex circuits of topographic restraint and perceptual expansiveness. Various layers of manipulation coexist in Hyde's works; initially, the human alteration of the environment; secondly, his depiction of these sites photographically which are then further estranged from their origin when he doubles, turns, or crops the source images; and, finally, his reworking the images of these places with hand painted shapes that echo, obscure, frame, or otherwise accentuate elements of the landscapes. If we think of painting as an accumulation of countless relays between the mind and the hand, and the hand and the canvas, with each paint stroke a bearer of a daub of colored pigment, then painting is procedurally among the most skillful types of manipulation, a word derived from the

Latin *manipulus*, or "handful." To stay with the metaphor of hand, one can say Hyde wrests (from *wraestan*, Old English for twist or bend, root of the word "wrist" in English) these various forms of manipulation from their separate zones of infrastructure and ecology, photography and geometry, and recenters them in the painting, which has a long and checkered history of rendering the land as an object of visual consumption. In Hyde's hands these inventive rotations and additions that toggle between painting and photography destabilize viewers' customary patterns of seeing the land, reworking the possibilities and responsibilities of these media afresh in the era of the Anthropocene. ■

