

Essay from *Mountain Strip*

Everyday we walk the earth. We travel across roads that stretch through flat lands and hills. We even attempt to engage either rural or forested settings in search of the romantic pastoral. However a monolithic mountain range usually brackets all human activity, leaving most of the minute details belonging to the landscape as visually and physically inaccessible, stunting the growth of an ecological awareness. Beauty is seen first and then experienced as peace, leading anyone to set aside concerns caused by man-made disasters. Blane De St. Croix's *Mountain Strip* takes a site previously encountered in West Virginia and makes it specific to Black & White Project Space. In doing so, De St. Croix merges interior with exterior and uses both the environment and human ignorance as his muse to investigate the various complexities underlying geopolitics. By presenting the inverted fragment of a mountain top, the artist elicits questions surrounding the continued viability of landscape itself.

Nature has historically served as metaphor for the chaotic, the uncontrolled as well as the blissful idyll that one can always escape to. It has functioned, additionally, as a symbol of human consciousness while carrying a sense of mystery due to its controlled, static representation. The contemplation of nature has become equivalent to the process of personal meditation, placing reason against contradiction. But many are remiss to consider the danger of nature until a tragic event strikes: "The fundamental desire could be described as the desire for paradise, or perhaps the demand for it – for the city on a hill; for a more perfect union; for getting to the mountaintop." Blane De St. Croix reveals that we are in a new era of enlightenment, one that involves a subjective evaluation of everything that is seen and experienced, setting the stage for a much-needed practical response. Moreover, the artist's attempt to visually unify human kind with something so gigantic, undeniably arouses feelings of fear and awe. However, the artist is not a romantic but, instead, a pragmatic who suggests the need for a detailed dialogue about our lived, physical relationship to the world.

In the past, the representation of sweeping landscapes astoundingly captured human vulnerability, as industrial civilization migrated further away from nature, toward the urban center. We no longer live in the era of Romanticism even though landscape and nature are ironically viewed in the same, detached manner. Theodor Adorno defined the individual's association with society as, "the relationship of the particular, the particular interests, the behavior of the individual, particular human being and the universal that stands opposed to it...it would be quite wrong and a crude mistake if in this conflict between the universal and the particular we were to place all the blame on the side of the universal from the outset, and attribute all the good to the individual." Nature is once again the muse of human reason.

Blane De St. Croix complements his monolithic sculptural installation with a highly detailed drawing process that sustains the flair of landscape's overwhelming seduction. By creating a series of small depictions, the artist renders different facets of his experience with the site itself, in this case the strip-mined landscape of West Virginia. However the paradox exists in nature's loyal beauty, which always appears pristine when seen from areas that the public is provided access to. Usually experienced as either a broad vista or an extreme detail, a sense of urgency is not sparked, leaving an unanswered question which, to many, locates itself a distance away from daily life.

Landscape has also signified the future, the frontier and the realm of the unrestricted. Even though early naturalists like Henry David Thoreau believed erosion to be an extension of the earth's evolution, "the

presumption was that the wilderness was out there, somewhere, in the western heart of America, awaiting discovery, and that it would be an antidote for the poisons of industrial society. But of course the healing wilderness was as much the product of culture's craving and culture's framing as any other imagined garden." When the environment is combined with the fourth dimension, time, life continues on.

Blane De St. Croix was strongly affected by the strip-mining industry in West Virginia and makes one wonder if there is a way to look at landscape and remain critical of the histories that have played out upon it. Can one feel the state's political endorsement of permanent environmental destruction along with the economic hardships felt by an under-educated class of miners, who know not of their union's history but only their immediate present? Ken Casey's beat-era novel *Sometimes a Great Notion* from 1964 first exposed the paradox of freedom and independence. But Casey's narrative gets lost within the intricate details of landscape, leaving the rift between a logging family and its laborers as something slightly less significant. De St. Croix's *Mountain Strip*, however, effectively addresses the drastic ecological alterations made by the entire strip-mining industry, the equivalent of a mountain turned upside down.

—Jill Conner, art critic and curator based in New York City