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Essay from Broken Landscape I

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Eighty feet long, seven feet tall at its highest and two feet wide, Broken Landscape, Blane De St. Croix's painstakingly hand-produced miniature reconstruction of a selected section of an American border town along the Rio Grande, slices and curves impressively through the Smack Mellon space in Brooklyn. With an under frame of wood all of the visible natural forms including cliffs, trees, rocks, soil, shrubs, cliffs, stratum, side and ground, macadam are hand-made from both natural and synthetic materials. The tiny fence is constructed from thin wire and basswood. It has over 5,000 vertical pieces. The actual fence that the miniature one refers to is one of many fragmented sections under construction with the largest section ending up being approximately 670 miles long. The fence in real-life terms stands 14 feet high. It is constructed of welded steel imbedded in concrete footing poured in the road and covered after the fence's installation. The road along the fence remains and the border patrol keep the fence-wall under surveillance using vehicles, often with air assist.

At Smack Mellon, Broken Landscape's heft and thrust paradoxically serves as a barrier to the viewer, as if to reiterate the narrative that it bears inscribed on its own body, that of the USA-Mexico border fence and surrounding landscape of Eagle Pass, Texas. Because of Broken Landscape's extension in space, as a road, the observer moves through it as well as above the landscape.¹ Audience participation adds to the drama and grim humor of the piece; visitors speaking to each other from one side of the

piece to the other, that is from the American side of the border to the Mexican side of the border, can, physically and literally speaking see eye-to-eye over the border-line, and joining hands over it, symbolically rendering the limits on Otherness null and void.

As the eye travels along its length in the gallery space it sees the recreation of that locale's Bridge I, part of Highway 57 that cuts into Garrison Street and that goes into Mexico. Following the overpass's road, Ryan Street, which dead-ends at the Bridge, the viewer sees De St. Croix's rendition of the Eagle Pass Golf Course. Despite its monumental ethos Broken Landscape acts as a distended or extended close-up, a hand-fashioned synecdoche for the 3169 km (1969 miles) border situation itself. Broken Landscape, with its documentary stillness and precision, serves to recall a "fragment" of space from which we can extrapolate and project a general or universal picture in our imaginations of the border situation, subtly melodramatized and sensationalized. In great measure Broken Landscape succeeds visually because, as art, De St. Croix's social agenda is palpable while the diorama is curiously discursive and indeterminate, so carefully are the specifics and universals melded together in this work. This is a history piece, certainly, yet it is also a work that appears suspended in time, appearing in some ways as if it exists anterior to time. Broken Landscape's narratological structure allows us to project our own emotional truth through a metaphoric or symbolic equivalency as we move from depictions of foothills of diminishing/ascending heights and perceive shifting terrains along with changing social conditions from rural to exurbia to suburbia. The result is that while we feel an actualized, frozen-in-time environs that refers to the actual locale of Eagle Pass the entire experience takes on added intimations of an evacuated, anthropological, yet, somehow eerily mythic place.

The mere idea or intentionality of delimiting wilderness, in fact or imagination is culturally charged and historically specific. Blane De St. Croix has made models of troubled, contentious hot-spots in the world perfectly convincingly rendered in perfect scale that explore the terms of boundary vs. limits, movement, separation, territorialization. In a strong way De St. Croix's work involves landscape's relation to geography as inscribed by what Foucault has termed an "archeology of knowledge", a memoir-map serving as an instrument of power. The charged subjects of De St. Croix's art since 2007 are the philosophical, phenomenological, cultural and political implications of demarcating and boundary setting.² At its core De St. Croix's current work deals with modeling topological settings that are reflective of geographic, cartographic and social dimensions, that refer to actual time-space realities as well as to what Henri Lefebvre terms the "anthropological stage" of social reality.³ The artist's impulses reflect on what it means in terms of desiring-drives when we set up of boundaries and borders, demarcation points, and limits. His work explores borders as a source of security, as territory invested with heterological space of difference and potentiality, but also as a site of retrenchment and of impasse, of refusal. In its broadest terms the artist's Broken Landscape and others like it explore "them" versus "me" mindset in its psychological and phenomenological dimensions. It has of course a political agenda as it bears down on issues of control and of hegemony.⁴

Blane De St. Croix, forever fascinated with fixity versus liminality has created a body of work that asks the viewer to consider the crucial need for dialectical structures that can accommodate difference and dialog so as to keep communicative breakdown at a minimum. A commentator notes: "To respond is to be engaged with someone else; simultaneously it is to remain different or diverse... To

respond is to pursue further and yet to cross, to mesh but not to fuse, to be inside the interlocutor's discourse and outside at the same time. Not to be absorbed by the other's voice, but not to cease hearing it either."⁵

Blane De St. Croix's new work is a meditation on the possibility and impossibility of intersubjectivity. It's an ode to the need for discourse, a discourse on the relation of the Self to the Other. It attempts to reflect positively on what constitutes an identification towards *communitas*, even a vestigial one, and what it takes for its heart to keep on beating in spite of forces hell bent on denying its existence.

1 "The object in its perfect stasis nevertheless suggests use, implementation, and contextualization... the representative quality of the miniature becomes a stage on which we project, by means of association or intertextuality, a deliberately framed series of actions."

Susan Stewart, *On Longing* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993) 54.

2 Finally we must inquire as to what it means to contain something. Is it merely a matter of "holding" as is implied by the verb *periechein*—in which case, the emphasis is on the act of delimitation, that is, of surrounding? Or is it a question of establishing a boundary—which stresses the surround? Where the former interpretation directs us to what is surrounded, the latter points to what is other than, and beyond, the surrounded object (and perhaps even beyond the surround itself). How are we to choose between these two interpretations—one which stresses the container as limit, the other the container as boundary? And if we cannot choose effectively, are we not confronted with an essentially undecidable phenomenon?

Edward S. Casey, *The Fate of Place* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) 70.

3 We have defined this stage as the stage of demarcation and orientation... Every social space, then, once duly demarcated and oriented, implies a superimposition of certain relations upon networks of named places, of *lieux-dits*. This results in various kinds of space. 1. Accessible space for normal use... 2. Boundaries and forbidden territories... 3. Places of abode... 4. Junction points: these are often places of passage and encounter; often, too, access to them is forbidden except on certain occasions of ritual import, declarations of war or peace, for example.

Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991) 192-3.

4 Foucault lays out in his dissection of cartographic language in his essay-interview "Questions on Geography": "Well, let's take a look at these geographical metaphors. Territory is no doubt a geographical notion, but it's first all a juridico-political one: the area controlled by a certain kind of power. Field is an economico-juridical notion. Displacement: what displaces itself is an army, a squadron, a population. Domain is a juridico-political notion. Soil is a historico-geological notion. Region is a fiscal, administrative, military notion. Horizon is a pictorial, but also a strategic notion."

Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977) 68. [Translated by C. Gordon, et al.]

5 Richard Terdiman, "The Response of the Other." *diacritics* 22.2 (1992): 2-10.