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Spring 2-8-2011

Erin Payne MFA Thesis Statement

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Artist Statement
Erin Payne

I build Arctic backdrops, modeled after dioramas found in natural history museums and photograph these backdrops in more familiar environments in Southern California. This gives me a greater sense of connection to the polar worlds and allows me to explore my feelings of helplessness and wonder with the impending disappearance of the Arctic. Experiencing a barrage of media images and interpretations of the “vanishing Arctic,” feels to me like a sort of roadside attraction, a selling of multiple versions of truth and fiction. I feel removed from this almost mythical place that is rapidly disappearing because I’ve never traveled to either polar region. It has a certain mystique for me. The only places that I can compare it to are locations I know well that carry this same enchanted feeling. The resulting photographs become a complex, nuanced and sometimes flat-footed documentation of the backdrop’s journey to these localities.

Bringing the backdrop to these places becomes a visual balancing act with the environment around it. The paintings have a presence that both stand in contrast to and integrate with their surroundings. Light, time of day and sometimes the presence of water play an important role in what I consider a narrative. The oil paintings absorb, repel, and reflect light, or are cast in shadow against it. Through the lens of the camera I look for a point where the drama between the landscape and the painting is balanced, a sort of emotional equilibrium. The backdrops become characters in imagined scenarios. They run the gamut from stately to funny, serene to ludicrous, much like actual characters in movies and novels do. Transforming the Arctic backdrops into “vacationers” on various road trips seems to make the idea of global warming almost absurd. It is not my intention to dismiss it or to challenge the science, like some conservative commentators. Rather my goal is to develop a familiar connection with the Arctic stand-in to both ease my feelings of helplessness and perhaps open a conversation in the viewers mind about the precariousness of living with global warming.

The photographs of this experience have also allowed me to explore the complexity of juxtaposing human artifice and nature. Often a portion of the curved backside of the painting is exposed revealing its structure. Footprints or drag marks in the earth near the base of the piece are also visible. The intention here is for transparency in representation. For me the experience of seeing this artifice is like watching an old western movie. I know the backdrop isn’t real, but I am enchanted by it just the same. There is a blurring between the two that is both exciting and silly. My desire is to inspire in the viewer thoughts of their own curious relationship with nature.

Both the beauty and challenge of bringing the backdrop outside is that it’s impossible to have control over the project that I would experience in the studio. If I had known exactly how the painting would interact in the environment ahead of time there would be no point to the project. The process has been subject to weather and changing light conditions, rough terrain, unpredictable wildlife behavior, getting stuck in the mud and on and on. It has required patience, adaptation and a sense of humor. Over time, the actual structure collects residue such as mud, sand, seeds, and bird droppings, creating a history of its presence in these specific places. Similar to a scientific exploration, a transformation through the experience has taken place.

