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On Walking in Possible Lands

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On Walking in Possible Lands

by Annie Briard

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About the Artist

Annie Briard's practice (anniebriard.com) challenges visual perception through lens and light-based work by drawing from paradigms in psychology, neuroscience and metaphysics. Her expanded photography and media works have been presented across Canada and internationally including at the Manif d'art Biennale de Québec, the Vancouver Art Gallery, Three Shadows Photography Centre (Beijing), the Lincoln Film Centre and the AC Institute (NYC), the Switzerland Architecture Museum (Basel), among many others. Her work had been supported by the Canada Council for the Arts, the British Columbia Art Council and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Briard is a Lecturer in photography at Emily Carr University of Art + Design on the unceded ancestral lands of the Coast Salish peoples–Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish), Səl̓ilwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) and xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) Nations.

On Walking in Possible Lands

Annie Briard

Long-haul hiking is an important part of my creative process and phenomenological research. Undertaking these journeys offers testing grounds through which to consider how my experience might be re-shaped for an audience. The repetition of walking allows for an eventual disconnection from the apparatuses at play in daily life. Distractions are avoided by means of focusing only on what I am seeing, when I will break, where I might find water, what I will eat, and where I will sleep. In this endeavor, a headspace of increased awareness of the body, its perceptual mechanisms, and its surroundings becomes more readily reached. My brain enters a flow state, daydreaming. Often times revisiting the same locations repeatedly, I notice a shift in their transformation towards an extreme, while imagining what they will become later still.

With the photographic series *Constructions* (2015) (see Fig. 1), I place particular emphasis on land and its relationship to water. In one work from the series, *Fire Lake* (2015), I photographed Lake Edison, a freshwater reservoir in the Sierra National Forest in California.[1] The nearly 2000-acre reservoir was created in the 1950s as part of a system of hydroelectric dams to provide power to Los Angeles. The creation of dams such as these disrupt the natural flow of life, infringing upon ancestral lands, displacing people and animals, and creating cities—sometimes in places that never were favorable to humans. I first hiked a few hundred miles of the Pacific Crest Trail with my partner in 2015. At one leg of our journey, we were aiming for this lake, where we had been told a boat would take us to a resupply point several miles across, on the other shore.

We arrived at the location circled on our map only to find a strange desert landscape, a shadow land, where aquatic-looking plants were reaching up, attempting to survive on dry land. We walked many more miles, finally making it to the water's edge, where we could easily see the opposite shore which was reached in mere minutes by boat. It seemed to us that we could have walked there by hugging the lake's edges in nearly the same amount of time.

Figure 1. Briard, Annie. *Fire Lake*, *Constructions Series*, 2015.

The *Constructions Series* (2015) (see Fig. 1) poses landscapes as structures through which to investigate and pull apart territories of sight—the imagined, the perceived, and the misperceived. In my work, I'm less concerned with the "truth" of an image and more with its affect, combining lens-based images with simulation as needed. These particular photographs are rearranged into stereoscopic anaglyph montages, focusing on viewpoints observed during my expeditions to investigate our inability to accurately grasp the world. These images confront us with paradoxical vision. First, there is the flat, colorful image of a sublime place. Then, with glasses on, there is red, or blue, if one eye is shut. The combined 3D image shows a fourth perspective where the scene's planes appear to jut outwards or recede behind the photographic surface. There are others if the

eyes focus on the geometric symbols pointing to where the construct breaks down. An image can be perceived in many ways and can sometimes become more profound an experience than its physical counterpart. Philosopher Gaston Bachelard in his *Poetics of Reverie* describes this type of experience as a "reverberation to the poetic image in the very sense of phenomenological resonance" (1971, 7).

Figure 2. Briard, Annie. *In Possible Lands VII*. Public art installation view at Place Victoria for Art Souterrain, Montreal, 2021.

My photographs become portals or points of physical re-entry for memories of perceptual experiences that others are invited to enter. I wonder what these landscapes would have looked like in the past. When exactly did the lakes go dry; what industrial activities and political land theft had occurred to transform the environment? What might it look like in the future? I am interested in what the body's experience might indicate for a possible future. For example, a few years back, I was gifted my father's fifty-year-old slides from cross country geological excursions from Eastern to Western Kanata/Canada. I later revisited some of these locations to explore evidence of climate change, shooting my own updated versions of his vantage points. Playing with chance in the studio, I overlapped at random the archival and new images together in multiple layers, and new land compositions came into being. As curator Katherine Dennis writes:

> Each image of *In Possible Lands* compresses the time gap between these two sources. By looking at the changing landscape, the artist meditates on these visible as well as unseen human impacts. The resulting photographic works offer us a medium to see into the future, asking: How do we read the past and understand the present to make predictions about what is to come? (Dennis 2020)

Figure 3. Briard, Annie. *In Possible Lands VI*, 2020.

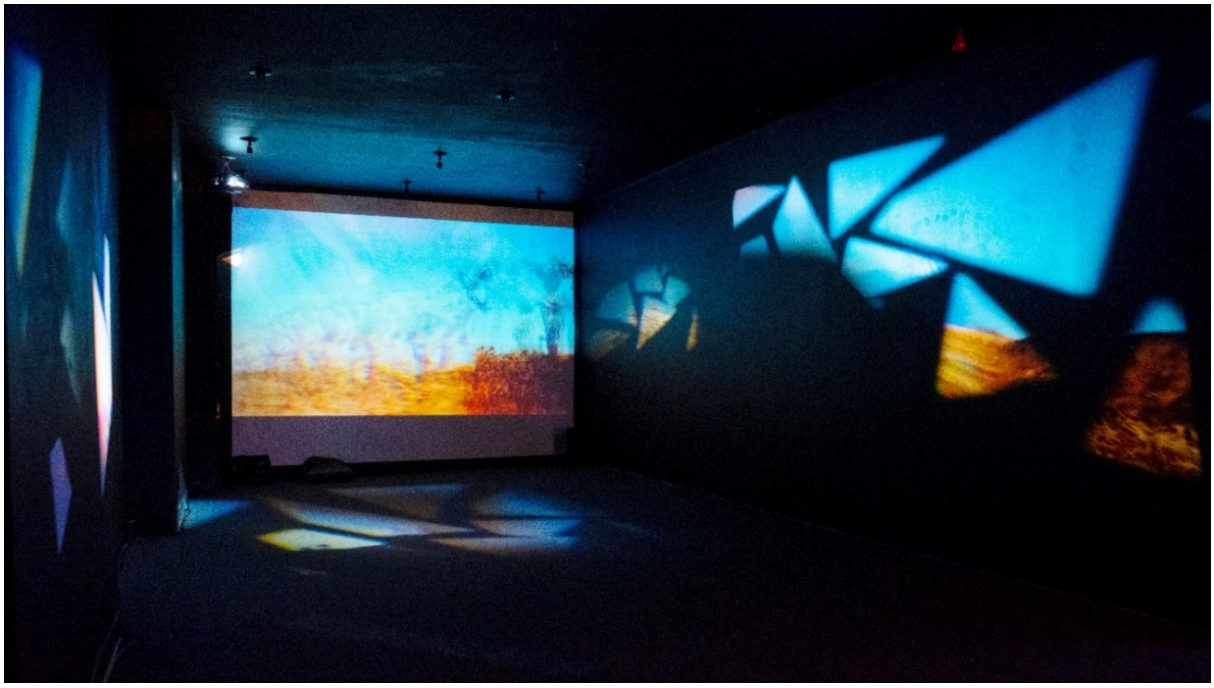

Figure 4. Briard, Annie. *Second Sight*, 2019. Installation view at AC Institute, New York City.

Another landscape-based project dealing with predictions is the five-projector installation *Second Sight* (2019) (see Fig. 1). This project reflects on the problematics of perception by taking the viewer on a road trip through the high desert, where the seen eventually breaks apart and the limits between physical reality, head trips, and visions from beyond become blurred. Joshua Tree is seen through disused military optics or prisms, responding to an ancient theory claiming that we see the world as a result of minuscule crystals within our eyes. As military optics frame perspectives towards specific ends, so too might the eye and its crystalline components. Art critic Cori Hutchison speaks about her experience of the installation as follows:

> In the much-discussed opening to *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard presents a reading of the Borges cartography fable, which concludes with "the desert of the real itself". Briard plays on the punned ending: both a departure from the real and the only landscape that might host shreds of metaphysical beauty . . . Through cracked windows or torn sails on a road trip in the hot, high desert, the viewer begins their journey in seeing the natural world for what it is and isn't. The exhibition leaves the lingering sensation of a psychedelic trip: with some feeling and few words. (Hutchison 2019)

Figure 5. Briard, Annie. *Horizon RGB II & III*, 2019–2021.

Land explorations sometimes turn to more distilled examinations of our environment and how this introspection might help us better understand perceptual phenomena. *Horizon RGB* (2019–21) (see Fig. 5) are color-changing photographs that compare natural and artificial light in full spectrum while exploring horizon gradients. These photographs "present ways in which our experience of light affects our perception of the environment" (Wilson-Sanchez quoted in Wilkinson et al. 2019).

Here, an image of the sun setting over the edge of the coast fleetingly appears and disappears while its colors change slowly. Writer, historian, and activist Rebecca Solnit has shared many a poetic image about walking, and her words about the horizon line are particularly resonant with this project about pinning down its color and the slipperiness of our perception. She describes the horizon in *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* as "the blue of distance," a "light that does not touch us, does not travel the whole distance, the light that gets lost, gives us the beauty of the world" (Solnit 2006, 1).

The horizon acts as an in-between, a place that we can see and from which we derive so much knowledge; it has formed a baseline for countless human creations, from art to architecture. And yet, it's a no-place, never to be fully encountered. To reach it would be to efface it. It is a specter, a sight we will into being. Perception is a creative act of color mixing and imagination.[2] How much of the world around us is as we see it? We have centered it on ourselves, to well-intentioned but perilous effects.

Notes

[1] Though renamed by settlers, this territory within Sierra National Forest is part of the traditional lands of the Chukchansi, Me-Wuk, Monache, and Yukuts Nations.

[2] Our senses are fallible because they are at times imprecise and can be subject to errors. An in-depth exploration of these ideas is well explained in Neuropsychologist Richard Gregory's volume on vision, where he demonstrates a large number of illusory perceptual phenomena such as blurs, pattern creation, inversion of depth, and size miscalculation.

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