

Art in America

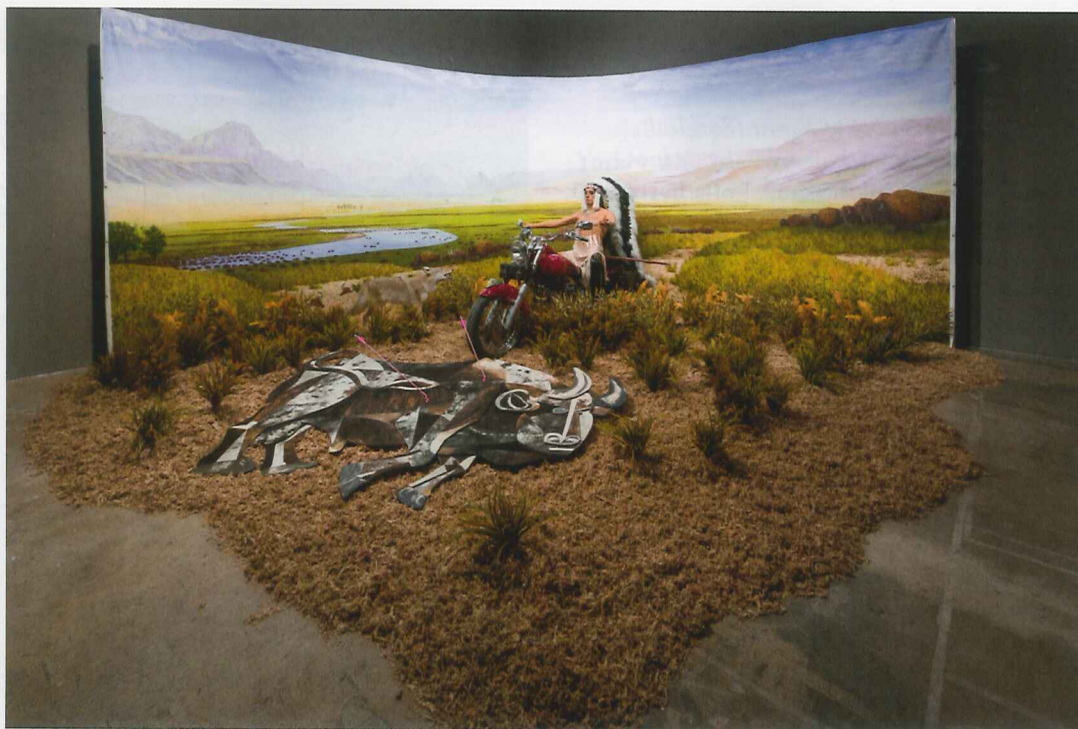
THE POWER
OF ART
COMES FROM
ITS AFFIRMATION!
ITS ~~ART~~ PURE AFFIRMATION!
ITS AFFIRMATION OF
FORM!

WITHOUT
IMITATION.

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View of Kent Monkman's installation *Bête Noir*, 2014; in SITElines.2014 at SITE Santa Fe.



SITELines.2014: Unsettled Landscapes

SITE Santa Fe

The theme of this biennial is “Unsettled Landscapes,” though the work I found most exemplary of the show’s concerns offered more of a pastoral vision. Kent Monkman’s *Bête Noire* (2014) is a natural history museum-style diorama featuring a life-size Native American drag queen—a stand-in for the Toronto-based Monkman’s “Miss Chief” alter ego—sitting astride a beefy motorcycle. Heavily made up and clad in a head-dress and high-heel patent leather boots, Miss Chief appears to be gliding across a fertile plain as a herd of grazing buffaloes stretches far into the distance behind her. There is one moment of violence in the scene, but it isn’t directed at the indigenous animals. Instead, Miss Chief’s pink arrows have taken down a foreign interloper: a Cubist beast that appears to have been extracted from Picasso’s *Guernica*.

In his classic 1950 study of how the American landscape has been represented in literature and popular culture, Henry Nash Smith defined myth as “an intellectual construct that fuses concept and emotion into an image.” The American West, he showed, has been a hotbed of myth-making, often in the service of colonizers. Joining the generations of scholars and historians in Smith’s wake, many of the artists in SITElines take on the persistent myths, deconstructing them or, like Monkman, offering a few of their own. Monkman’s mythical West appears to be a place where queer sexuality, sustainable ecology and badass motor-

cycles can coexist in harmony; the only element out of place is the emblem of European modernism, with its corrosive primitivism and misogynistic gender politics.

The 45 artists and collectives participating in the 2014 edition of SITElines all intervened in the long and contested cultural history of representing the American landscape, broadly defined. Though the geographical purview is vast—stretching from Canadian Charles Stankievecch’s masterful film shot at a Cold War listening post in the Arctic to Argentine Adriana Bustos’s pencil drawings depicting varied scenes from the history of the regional drug trade—the tight thematic focus marks a new direction for the institution, and perhaps a model for countering a bloated biennial culture.

Founded in 1995, SITE Santa Fe hosted a series of well-regarded biennials, inviting outside curators to provide snapshots of global contemporary art every two years. Yet as similarly well-regarded biennials cropped up all over the place, the small Southwestern outpost risked getting lost in the shuffle. At the behest of director Irene Hofmann, SITE took a hiatus in 2012 to recalibrate. What emerged is a plan for a series of three geographically delimited exhibitions, of which “Unsettled Landscapes” is the first. Curated by Hofmann as well as Candice Hopkins, Lucía Sanromán and Janet Dees, this iteration examines, in their words, the “urgencies, political conditions and historical narratives that inform the work of contemporary artists across the Americas.”

ON VIEW
THROUGH
Jan. 11, 2015.

The historical narratives offered by New York-based Pablo Helguera in his performance, *Nuevo romancero, Nuevo mexicano/ New New Mexican Romancero* (2014), were nonlinear and highly idiosyncratic. Abstracting the structure of a Three-Card Monte game, Helguera interwove folklore, found stories and traditional songs into an oral history of New Mexico that featured legendary brothel owners and violent native revolt. Several of the New Mexico-based artists in the show also constructed new kinds of personal histories of their home state. Jamison Chas Banks's installation *Stealing Home* (2014) takes baseball as a metaphor—there's a scoreboard tallying the efforts of “away” and “native” parties as well as a ball signed by Napoleon Bonaparte—for examining the effects of the Louisiana Purchase on Native American culture.

Treating the wider Americas as a region, however, requires a delicate balance: suggesting some sort of overarching common ground on the one hand while accounting for the cultural diversity of two great continents on the other. It's not always clear whether or how artists like Blue Curry, a Bahamian based in London who looped real-time video of Nassau's behemoth cruise ship ports into the gallery, is really in dialogue with fellow Americans like Nunavut-based artist Ohotaq Mikkigak, who makes sublime abstract pencil drawings steeped in native folklore.

And this historically rich exhibition also lacked much of a sense of contemporary “urgency.” Andrea Bowers's 2010 video *The United States vs. Tim De Christopher* is one of the few projects that points to the real ways that the American landscape remains unsettled, contested and under threat today. Bowers interviewed an activist who disrupted a Utah mineral rights auction and also filmed herself on the plots of land that were being sold off by the Bush administration at fire-sale prices to oil and gas companies. Here, the American land is presented within the context of a worldwide climate crisis caused by our addiction to oil and gas, and that sense of global interconnectedness is what might be truly pressing.

—William S. Smith

LOS ANGELES ALLAN SEKULA Christopher Grimes

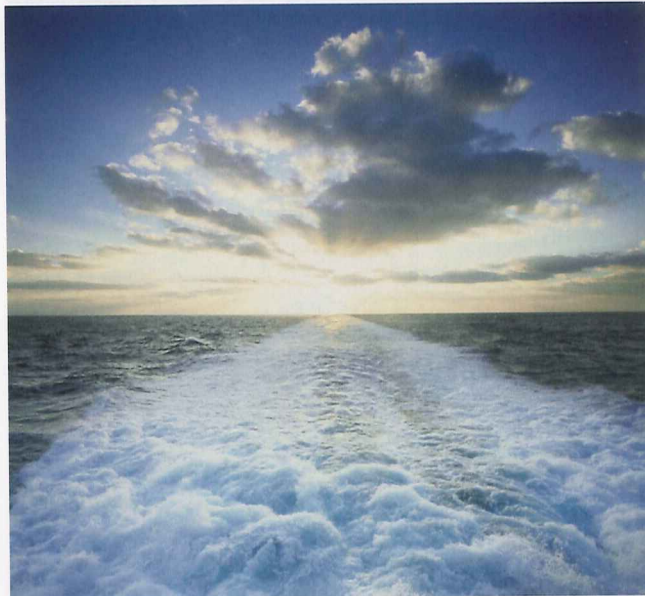
Allan Sekula's career could be tracked as a voyage between tanks of hydrofluoric acid. The artist (who died last year at 62) was introduced to this corrosive substance as a lab technician at an aerospace company in 1968. The second encounter occurred 30-plus years later when he photographed the Frank Gehry-designed Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, near which he found cylinders containing the acid used to etch the museum's titanium skin. Having grown up in the culture of California's defense industry (where his father was a Lockheed Martin engineer), Sekula, by the time he photographed Bilbao, saw the economy of the art world itself as a waste by-product of late capitalism.

Bilbao's fish-shaped museum on the site of a closed shipyard was intended to bring in tourist dollars as compensation for the bankruptcy of the Basques' maritime economy.

Sekula's thoughts about the museum resonated with those he had had a year or two earlier while photographing the set of the movie *Titanic* in Baja, California, which resulted in his 2003 book *TITANIC's wake*. These projects led in turn to his last work, *Ship of Fools* (1999–2010), which was first exhibited at the 2010 São Paulo Bienal. By the 1990s, he had come to see the oceans as the most crucial and revealing site to observe the effects of globalization, since flying “flags of convenience” (registering ships in countries other than those of the owners, in order to circumvent labor laws and registration fees) permits shipping companies to engage in unchecked exploitation of maritime workers and pollution of the seas.

Ship of Fools is unusual for Sekula, in that its subject is one to be celebrated rather than critiqued. That subject is the 1998–2000 voyage around the world by the cargo vessel *Global Mariner*, whose holds had been reoutfitted to contain a documentary display on working conditions at sea (arranged by the International Transport Workers Federation, an umbrella organization for transport workers' unions). As usual, Sekula's photographs, taken on board ships at sea and in ports of call, are accompanied by a text—in this case a revision of one for *TITANIC's wake*. This final project reaffirms what has been true of all his work: the originality, complexity and insight of his critique of capitalism are felt in the words he wrote, while his photography recalls snapshots taken by any tourist.

I believe this was a calculated effect on his part, one that the prints and video excerpt at Christopher Grimes (a small selection in comparison to what was shown at São Paulo) confirmed. Sekula eschewed the art photographer's ambition to create a signature look. “I am not . . . interested in cultivating an ‘individual style,’” he wrote in 1984 in his first major publication, *Photography Against the Grain*. He wanted his photographs to be as approachable as his words are confrontational. He hoped the pictures would help his work reach an audience wider than the intellectuals who have typically honored his prose.



Allan Sekula:
Churn, 1999–2010,
chromogenic print,
49½ by 53½ inches;
at Christopher
Grimes.