

Between Familiarity and Estrangement:
Making Paintings From Constructed Dioramas

THESIS

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By

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Abstract

This paper examines the value and meaning of my painting process, which begins with the building of dioramas in the studio. Through visual analysis, I contextualize the importance of *looking* in my work, which is further supported by my interest in archiving photographic material. In *Chapter II: The Need to Construct*, I use the work of photorealist painter, Robert Bechtle, to contrast my methodology of searching for images with his, thus emphasizing the importance of the photograph as an object in my practice. This key aspect is further discussed in project *Double Take*, which utilizes my archive and brings forward questions of selective memory as well as what is made familiar and strange through the use of extreme vignettes. In *Chapter III: Landscape and Belonging*, I look at the landscape convention, how it influences the way I build dioramas, and consequently affects the way I paint them. Through the sky studies of John Constable, I question the role landscape plays in forming collective identity, and examine further how my constructed dioramas have become emblematic of the distance I feel towards my native landscape.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Vita.....	iv
List of Figures.....	v
Chapter 1: Visual Analysis.....	1
Looking at a Diorama.....	1
Looking at My Painting <i>Borrowed Skies</i>	2
Chapter 2: The Need to Construct.....	5
Working From Photography.....	5
My Archive.....	7
Source Material for Three Paintings.....	9
<i>Double Take</i>	13
Chapter 3: Landscape and Belonging.....	17
Landscape and Place.....	17
The Skies of John Constable.....	19
My Fabricated Landscapes.....	23
Conclusion.....	25

List of Figures

Figure 1. Diorama for <i>Borrowed Skies</i>	1
Figure 2. Painting <i>Borrowed Skies</i>	2
Figure 3. Archive.....	7
Figure 4. Sources.....	10
Figure 5. Project <i>Double Take</i>	13
Figure 6. John Constable, <i>Cloud Study</i>	19

Chapter 1: Visual Analysis

Looking at a Diorama



Figure 1. Diorama for *Borrowed Skies*, studio, fall 2015, detail to the right.

The diorama is made out of printed photographs, fabric, string, foam core and tape. It spans thirty-six inches across and is about thirty inches high. The top layer is twelve inches off the wall, and gives the structure a box like look. The foam core strips function as frames. Unlike a stretched canvas, the fabric and prints hang a little looser and some warping and bending occurs in “the image”, which in itself is the sum of all the

interior shapes of the diorama, including the shadows cast by its frame. As a three-dimensional object, the diorama can be explored from many angles, but its image holds together only as a picture in linear space. It implies a “correct” viewing position, similar to perspectival space, which is in the middle and center of the object. If observed from any other place, the diorama as an image loses its integrity, and becomes an arrangement of physical planes. The cut edges of each shape become a material boundary in space, which isolates every layer, and prevents the eye from seeing a whole.

If observed from the center, however, the diorama stands as a unified picture, fused together even further by the use of two lights. Each light illuminates the set from a different angle, contributing to the appearance of strong cast shadows, both in-between the layers, and from the foam core frame. These shadows mimic the contour of the interior shapes, thus creating repeating forms that recede in space similarly to a painted landscape. The lights also reinforce the theatricality of the diorama, acting as spotlights, which are reminiscent of theatre and cinema sets.

When constructing my dioramas, I think a lot about the way landscape paintings function: the shaping and placement of different elements across the picture plane. Receding space is often achieved through the use of repetitive forms and shifts of scale, which I utilize as strategies. Although the diorama is made of multiple fragments, I envision ‘the image’ as a unified surface. While cutting and building each layer, I choreograph its placement to respond to the previous layer, and to support the illusion of pictorial space. In this way, the image of the diorama is fragile and contingent upon my own position in space. Unlike a painted surface, which is fixed, the diorama and its image

have a precarious nature. They allow the viewer to move in and out of its “picture”, and explore this object as both physicality and illusion.

Looking at My Painting *Borrowed Skies*



Figure 2. *Borrowed Skies*, acrylic and oil on canvas, 50”x60”, 2016.

The very first change I notice in viewing my paintings once they separate from the dioramas pertains to scale. Not having the sets allows the painted image to exist in a scale of its own, which feels more expansive in the gallery. The top half of *Borrowed Skies* consists of several fragments of painted skies, forming an orthogonal shape in the center. The right and left edges of the canvas include discreet cast shadows, which mark the existence of a possible frame or other physical border. The top edge of the canvas feels like a clean cut into the white space of the gallery wall, and reinforces the potential upward movement of the clouds. The bottom half of the painting consists of seven stacked shapes, which contribute to the strong horizontals that section the composition. The painted sky spans sixty inches across the wall, longer than my outstretched arms, and unlike the diorama, its image fills my whole scope of vision.

The pictorial space of the painting also functions very differently than the diorama. Although it is not a very deep space in comparison to the atmospheric space often associated with landscape painting, it still calls for an inward movement. The repetitive horizontals establish a pattern that leads the eye deeper into the picture space. The painted shadows mimic this movement even further, as they signify both space and flatness. They also imply the existence of an external light source, and make evident that the painting is derived from a collaged surface. Each fragment in this surface has its own sense of light and resolution, and yet all are subjected to the same external light source. Visually this creates a contradiction, which makes the space of the painting appear both fractured and unified. The edges of each fragment allow it to exist independently and also as part of a coherent image.

Another striking difference between viewing my painting *Borrowed Skies* in the gallery verses its diorama in the studio is the heightened sense of ambiguity of the former. Everywhere in the painting there is the feeling of physicality, without any of its presence. The whole surface is homogenous, bound together by the touch of my hand and the material of paint. Unlike the diorama, where no two fragments are fully touching, in the painting everything is sealed on a single surface. Only the illusion of physicality remains, which is supported by the painted shadows and thicker pigment in some areas. In the diorama every physical edge stands for material difference, for space and distance, whereas in the painting all edges function to support illusion.

Chapter 2: The Need to Construct

Working From Photography

In his essay *Photographic Guilt: the Painter and the Camera*, Jonathan Weinberg¹ discusses the working process of Robert Bechtle, and how the artist looks for images to paint from. Bechtle's search starts with exploration of his own neighborhood, while he is driving or taking a walk. He is very purposeful in this pursuit for the 'right image'; there are certain elements of his environment that draw him in continuously like windows and doors, long cast shadows and bright light. In this process, the taking of a picture becomes the first step to making a painting.

Unlike Robert Bechtle, my method for gathering material is not "to hunt" but rather "to scavenge". I do not always know what it is that I am looking for, which is why I accumulate a lot of photographs. Often times I want to work with only part of the image, or I want to see what would happen if I change its scale, flip it, or make it black and white. There is something about this ability to manipulate the picture, that helps me to understand it better. It is similar to making a new acquaintance, and asking them questions, seeing what the parameters are. The photograph is an image, but also a

¹ Weinberg, J. (2005) *Photographic Guilt: The Painter and the Camera*, catalog from *Robert Bechtle: A Retrospective*, p 52.

material. I am equally interested in both, and by testing its physical boundaries, I become better aware of the image itself.

While I am making a collage, I see the photograph as a fraction of something, and its edges become a very important aspect of the image. Sometimes I draw out the information around the edge of the frame, and the missing elements get added on. Other times I will place a new photograph next to it, just to see if the two images can make a new space. In this process I am equally interested in what is inside and outside the photographic frame. The content of the picture for me is about what is not there as well as what is. When Robert Bechtle paints from reference photos, he also crops information out, but never indulges in reimagining the content. The photograph for him is a form of documentation; even as he acknowledges its oddness, he is still very committed to its depiction.

In the photorealist painting tradition, which Bechtle belongs to, the photograph is used as subject because it carries neutrality that freed artists from making formal decisions in the beginning of their working processes. Concerns about composition, color and placement were left to the mechanical eye of the camera, which for Bechtle in particular meant freedom from personal style. Also, photorealism painting is often extremely detailed thus mimicking the sharp focus of the camera and its ability to pick up minute details. This condition of seeing, the blindness of the camera, which unlike our eye cannot filter information, was further emphasized by painters like Richard Estes and Chuck Close. Their surfaces carry the idea of neutrality in its evenness of treatment, which often makes their work appear even crisper than the original photographic sources.

Becoming familiar with Robert Bechtle's work in the context of photorealism made me realize that the single photograph as an image is not enough, not adequate enough to respond to my looking. I am interested in multiple representations, and not hunting for something specific. The looking for and gathering of pictures is a form of research for me, a way of mapping the larger framework. I am searching for what the photograph could give me, but also what it leaves out. Unlike the photorealists, I do not use the photograph for its neutrality and mechanical representation, but because I distrust it, and want to test its meaning. Through collaging I am able to construct an image from multiple sources and make meaning relying on multiple histories. This process uses the photographic image as material, and allows for ambiguity to exist in its construction.

My Archive



Figure 3. My Archive, in the studio between spring 2014 and fall 2015.

Over the past couple of years I accumulated a large amount of images, which I started to think of as an archive. This collection has provided all the sources I have used to make collages and paintings. It has also helped me understand how important the looking for visual material was to my work. When I am scanning for material, I allow for my interests to guide me, but I am also not looking for one thing only. Often I end up with images I do not need, nor know why I selected, but decide to keep because they hold my curiosity. Thus my archive can stay open-ended, which in return helps me to find patterns in my choice of images.

The most important discovery I made through this process changed the way I viewed my images. Archiving made me realize that I am not interested in the photograph as picture only, but as an object that holds an image. For that reason my collection is not digital, but kept in a large binder. Even when I would find source material on the Internet, I would always print it before storing it away. There is something very different about an image on paper, than on the screen: it is less luminous, and therefore more flat, more like a surface. It is also malleable in a direct way: I can bend it with my hands, and cut into it, whereas a digital image can only be manipulated indirectly. I find that the physicality of the photograph provides closeness and an intimacy with the image, which I do not have with it when it is on the screen.

Most of the images I have collected reference the Eastern European housing block. Now that I no longer live there, I see spaces like playgrounds, public squares and neighborhood gardens as both mundane and yet strangely foreign. I use variety of methods to search for source material: I browse blog sites, look at books and family

albums, visit thrift shops and other places. Some photographs I have acquired from friends and family, who know my work and have given me images they think I should use. In this way my archiving is the result of what I have access to, and the place I am living in. If I am looking for references of the Bulgarian landscape, but I live in Columbus Ohio, my access to the place becomes indirect.

This condition, of proximity and distance, is another reason why I collect photographs. It is like having a special power to view a place from both the inside and out. When I am removed from my native landscape, I gather images that describe this condition of distance. Low-resolution Internet pictures taken from blog sites posted by strangers are my primary source. However, when I am in Bulgaria, I have access to the place as a former resident: an experience that comes with memories, history and empathy. I have friends and family who join in my searching, they look with me and for me, and I also take a lot of reference photographs myself. Both conditions, of gathering images from the inside and outside, determine the nature of my source material, the different fabric of each image from its color to resolution and scale.

Sources For Three Paintings

In choosing picture references for my thesis project, I focused on block housing sites and tourist representations of the Western natural landscape. I have been interested in the former as a signifier for my own upbringing in a large urban city in Bulgaria. The latter I selected for the opposite reason- I have no autobiographical experiences in places that represent the grandeur of the American landscape.

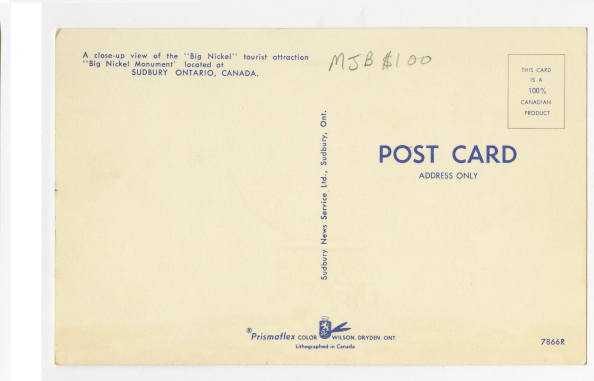
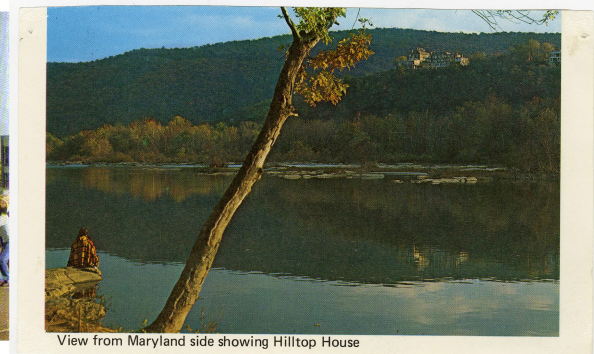


Figure 4. Source material from my archive; top to bottom and left to right: Pair 1- found Internet image and found postcard, Pair 2- found Internet image and found postcard, Pair 3- found postcard front and back.

This desire to identify with an image, or to relate to it somehow, has been at the center of many Picture Generation artists' work. Both James Welling and David Salle address this point in *Images that Understand Us* published in *The Journal* in 1980². In it, James Welling explains the difference between understanding images, and recognizing that they understand us, that in a sense "we are their product". This point brings forward the larger question of how complex image culture really is. How the way we comprehend pictures is often formed by the ability to project our own subjectivities onto them. Understanding images is a result of "what we know is possible" as Welling affirms.

Both artists also share the same interest towards working with visual material that is not too over-determined or exciting in its own right. For that reason many Picture Generation artists gravitate towards images that come from popular culture, commercial photographs that have circulated "emitting a low hum" as Salle and Welling would put it. I am also interested in "the hum" because my own source material comes from tourist memorabilia or the Internet (Figure 4). When I search for block housing sites, I look for images that I relate to, but are not necessarily autobiographical and do not depict personal moments or people from my life. Looking at a photograph of my mother in front of our first apartment is too idiosyncratic of a document; it makes me think of her current health, and her past cancer, which brings on many other emotions. I am unable to separate my response from the image, and "the low hum" is no longer there. Examining a found image of a similar situation is not over-determined by my biography and therefore opens up other ways to relate to it. What the photograph represents is not "about me", and yet it

² Salle, D and Welling, J. *Images that Understand Us*, LAICA Journal No.27, June-July 1980, p 54-57.

is “for me”. It captures a place and time I can easily enter into, because the image “understands me”.

In gathering block-housing photography, I would often encounter the playground as a site. With it there would always be children playing around or addressing the camera in some way. I became interested in the children as subjects because they speak of how commonplace such neighborhoods are in Eastern Europe. The presence of children also represents block housing as a lived experiences and not only a sociopolitical construct that is tied to the Communist Regime and its use of utilitarian architecture. Similarly, I find the tourist postcards of grand vistas to be also very commonplace and banal, although for different reasons. The clichéd romantic view of the postcard speaks of places I am not native to; yet as a commercial representation it is meant for me as much as anyone else. The playground and its surrounding blocks is a site I have experienced, and it is tied to memories and a sense of personal identity, but it is no longer part of my present condition. In working with both the landscape postcard and the playground, I am interested in how notions of familiarity and estrangement function in these images, and the nuances in-between.

Double Take



Figure 5. Installation view from MFA thesis exhibition, project *Double Take*, 2016, detail on the right.

Double Take is a project that came out of a need to further understand my archive through a lens of closeness and intimacy. When I first started to accumulate images of block housing sites, I was looking for signifiers I can identify with like playgrounds, boulevards and other public spaces. As my records grew, it started to include images of what I felt was the opposite of my memory of places- large chain stores, billboards and other commercial signs. This made me question my own selective memory. I began to wonder if what I felt had changed, had not always been there? Perhaps I did not look before, or somehow had forgotten. Svetlana Boym speaks of the main danger of nostalgia, as “it tends to confuse the actual home and the imaginary one.”³ It was unsettling for me to think that perhaps that was what I was doing. I also wondered about

³ Boym, S. (2002) *The Future of Nostalgia*, Basic Books, p 12.

the very role of nostalgia in my work, and if the archive I was accumulating was indeed more than a sentimental longing for another place.

For the project, I limited my source material to the Bulgarian landscape. I wanted to only work with images from what I consider to be my first home. I used everything that I could find from tourist brochures, to online archives, and my own photography. The content of the images varied from urban to rural landscapes, and included people only as they populated these places, or appeared on advertisement signs. I did not put any autobiographical pictures in the project; none of my friends or family was included. There was also no time frame or specific period limitation to my choice of sources. Since many of them were found, I could sometimes only guess as to when the picture was taken. Some images “looked” as if they could be from 70’s and 80’s, others were clearly a product of a DSRL camera, or a shiny magazine. The different surface quality implied a separate history to the images, both in terms of how they were produced and also how I came to encounter them. I did not want to lose this complexity but also knew that I needed the same consistent “re-examination”. I had to find a way to frame my looking.

As a result, I created a light sensitive, pinhole type of filter that attached to my DSLR camera. It is made out of neutral density paper, which is used to control the amount of light that enters into the sensor. A traditional pinhole camera can create various vignettes, but it also carries the grain and aesthetic of film. I did not want to change the look of my images; I only needed to limit my access to what was visible. Using a DSLR camera allowed me to preserve the original fabric on my sources by still leaving a very small “light” spot on the image. In that way what is made visible in each

of the photographs is to an extent a product of chance. I re-photographed all the selected images one at a time, placing them in front of the lens without controlling what fell in focus.

My made-up filter became a mechanism for seeing that was both about getting closer and more focused but at the same time being limited and displaced. It both revealed and concealed information leaving a sense of unease. The “light spot” created on each photograph was like a gaze, a single restricted glance that illuminated a part of the image and left everything else almost black. This darkness was equally important as the space framed by the light because it brought attention to what was no longer visible. The physical edge of the photograph started to function differently: it was more than the place where the image was cropped because the image felt much more expansive than its physical frame. The dark spaces in adjacent photographs merged together to form a unity and a sense of continuity. In *Double Take* I did not have the urge to imagine what was outside the photograph, because I did not feel cut off from a larger reality, simply focused. What was left outside “the light spot” did not register as hidden from me, but rather unavailable. And as I walked through the line of photographs, I got to see something new revealed in each one, and the experience of looking was fluid and constant. I felt reassured in knowing there will always be “another light spot” in the line of images, and that what I saw was less important than the fact that I could see something, even if it was incomplete.

This project together with my growing archive really helped me clarify what the role of photography is my work. The gathering of images, both relatable and unfamiliar, gives me a chance to question my own selective memory, and even further, my own

identity as an expatriate. Thus the photograph to me is the opposite of a “truth document”: it is a malleable material that I can manipulate physically. Unlike Robert Bechtle and the photorealist tradition, I cannot make a commitment to a single photograph. Archiving allows me to work with multiples, which is how I am able to “test” the content of photographs through various methods like building dioramas or creating vignettes. In this way, I see the photograph is both an object and an image: as referential to a place and time, but also limited in terms of what is visible through its depiction.

Chapter 3: Landscape and Belonging

Landscape and Place

Before I began building larger dioramas I was working off of small-scale collages which I would light using flashlights. Making these images out of layers of photographs was a way for me to practice my interest in the convention of landscape: its pictorial devices and sense of space. I do not see landscape as nature, and I do not think of its content as raw material devoid of human subjectivity. There is nothing natural about our desire to make landscapes out of places; it is a gesture that has symbolic meaning and complex cultural dimensions. To me landscape is convention even before it becomes an image. We take a walk in a landscape, not a space or a place, because the experience implies a “picturing” of our surroundings as we move through them. Even if we are the first person to ever make that walk, our experience of it is not unaffected, but rather mediated by our aesthetic sensibilities and cultural background. In this way, the landscape we are encountering is already an artificial construct of our own, even if it seems “natural” and simply given to us. W. J. T. Mitchell starts his introductory essay in *Landscape and Power* with nine thesis points on what is landscape, the first being:

“Landscape is not a genre of art, but a medium”⁴. This implies that the term could be considered not only as a noun but also as a verb *to landscape*. For Mitchell “landscape is something to be seen, not touched”, and *to landscape* means to “turn site into a sight”: a visual image of a place⁵.

This process is not neutral, but encoded and has the potential to serve many agendas. When it comes to images of what Mitchell calls “the holy landscape” he considers erasure and forgetting as intrinsic to its representations; in this case landscape has power to produce feelings of dislocation and exile for certain cultural groups. Collective memory plays a key role in this process: memory is malleable according to Edward Said⁶ and thus useful in creating national narratives, which are often accompanied by representations of belonging. For both Said and Mitchell, landscape in places like Israel is central to the national imagination, and it imprints itself on the collective consciousness of people through fantasy and myth.

In my own work, I see the landscape convention as a framework, which allows for all my varied sources to come together. Through pictorial devices I am able to subvert and question some of the relationships between my images. Using the logic of landscape establishes a special hierarchy that I could work with or against. This structure is a necessary starting point because it gives me something to respond to as I scavenge for source material. Apart from its formal value, landscape as an idea and a reference to place, is what I think about while constructing collages and dioramas. It is also present in my archive, most of which references sites from my place of birth and the larger

⁴ Mitchell, W.J.T (2002), *Landscape and Power*, p 12.

⁵ Mitchell, W.J.T, p 13.

⁶ Said, E. (2002), Invention, Memory, and Place, *Landscape and Power*, p 245.

landscape of Eastern Europe. As an expatriate I see these images, whether found or taken by me, as examples of what Svetlana Boym describes to as collective memory. For the Russian born, New York based writer, collective memory is “a playground, not a graveyard, of multiple individual recollections”⁷. One can only discover this framework, according to Boym, when removed from one’s community, and reflecting on it from the outside in. In this way, the photograph is not about truth or reality, but refers to selective and malleable memory: the kind of memory that is pertinent to the formation of collective consciousness and national myths of place and belonging.

The Skies of John Constable



Figure 6. John Constable, Weymouth Bay, cloud study, 1816.

In considering the effect of landscape on identity, John Constable’s work has for a long time excited equally passionate praise and scrutiny for being “quintessentially

⁷ Boym, S. (2002) *The Future of Nostalgia*, p 54.

English”. The paintings of his native Stour Valley in Suffolk have been studied countless times as representations of nationhood to the point that the region is often referred to as Constable country. Although this is a real geographic place around Flatford and Dedham in Suffolk, it could also be viewed as a place of the mind and the imagination according to Peter Bishop. In his book *Archetypal Constable* he discusses the complex ways that the artist’s work has come to be associated with issues of ecology, patriotism, nostalgia, health and even social justice⁸. For Bishop Constable country is “less of a unified place than a plurality of imaginative processes”. I am interested in how these processes work especially when it comes to representations of place, which become sources for personal and cultural identity. What is it exactly that urges viewers to identify with Constable’s landscapes? Is there something specific to the image or is it in our desire to project our own subjectivity? In asking this I am not interested, and very skeptical of, ever finding an answer. My question is rhetorical and only meant as a prompt to engage with *the need* for such a question. I wonder about our wish to identify with representations of places, and how landscape, being the image of place, could somehow embody such desire.

Amongst the many works John Constable made during his career are a voracious amount of sky studies, which he is well known for. Just between 1820-1821 he painted well over 50 studies of clouds in oil, and did them not only from observation, but also with the knowledge of a popular system of meteorology developed by Luke Howard in 1802. This scientific classification helped Constable to filter the tumultuous sky-scapes he would encounter into intelligible objects and not mere masses of billowing fluff. The

⁸ Bishop, P. (1995) *An Archetypal Constable, National Identity and the Geography of Nostalgia*, p 5.

artist was so diligent in his studies that he developed affection for a particular type of cloud, known as the cumulus cloud (Thornes, 1999)⁹. The unpredictability of the local weather produced many of these clouds, and one could recognize them because they would pass by in less than an hour. It was this exact condition of constant change that arguably gave John Constable's skies their "English character". In *Mapping British Earth and Sky*, Marilyn Gaull¹⁰ sees Constable's sketches as important records for the location and duration patterns of clouds that mark English space and English time. The artist painted his sky studies not only as formal exercises, nor as illustrations of meteorological systems, but as a way to record the shifting nature of the local weather. He believed that the problem of clouds is essential to the representation of his native landscape, and since it rained almost every day in Stour Valley, he thought of clouds as an important "material" to depicting the places he loved intimately.

My curiosity for John Constable's skies is caused by the same reason that makes me keep an archive: as I wonder about how images of the Bulgarian landscapes relate to my sense of self, and I am intrigued by Constable's conviction that in his work he represented his own "dear England". I do not question the artist's motives or means; on the contrary, I too see his work as a deep and genuine expression of his devotion to his native land. The sky studies in particular show the intensity with which he painted time and time again the conditions he witnessed all around him. However, these conditions were of the local geography, of Stour Valley. How does a local landscape come to

⁹ Thornes, J. (1999) *John Constable's Skies: A Fusion of Art and Science*, p 491.

¹⁰ Gaull, M. (2002) *Mapping British Earth and Sky*, The Wordsworth Circle, Vol 33, No 2 (Spring) p 74.

embody all of national identity? And even more pressingly, how does something as ambiguous, and as capricious as the sky, hold any form of collective identity?

When I lived in Glasgow Scotland I remember thinking how different the sky looked than in Bulgaria. Similar to Constable country, it rained every day, and sometimes several times a day. The clouds always hung over me, and they felt so close, as if I could reach and touch them. We never have skies like that in Columbus Ohio. Still, even though there is something so very particular about the Glaswegian sky, I find the very phrase to mean more than just location. It is in our language that we express a desire for ownership over spaces and places. By claiming an image of land or clouds to belong to a collective us, we imply more than a familiarity with it, but a bond of mutual dependence. This is not any different than David Salle and James Welling notions of *Images that Understand Us*. It refers to the very way we engage with representations, and how they act upon us through what feels familiar. If we accept that a particular representation of place is a marker for our collective identity, as in an image of a tumultuous sky, then it also becomes personally ours like a type of property. This sense of belonging can manifest itself in many forms, from intimate connection to nationalistic chauvinism and everything in-between. What makes John Constable's sky studies so very interesting, I believe, is that they are a clear example of how the local could become national, and the particular could be seen as collective. For the English painter, the problem of clouds was emblematic of a much bigger issue: how do we identify with places? This question is also at the center of my own inquiry, as I often work with found images that I relate to, and which "understand me" and my condition as an expatriate. The difference is that unlike

Constable's English skies, my process begins from a pool of multiple sources, from the collective, to ask where and how the personal could reside.

My Fabricated Landscapes

As I looked at the history of landscape painting, and the artists who influenced me, I realized that even if landscape is an artifice from the start, a picture before it becomes one, painting it from life was still an experience that felt real and concrete. For John Constable, who worked often on site, the speed of the passing clouds made a real impact on the way he painted skies. For Rackstaw Downes who always works from life, being in the landscape determines his curved pictorial space, which he believes is closer to an actual experience of looking. But in my work, I did not have an experience in a place to help me understand better why I wanted to paint these particular things. What I had was a growing stack of pictures, which were mostly not my own, and not always of places I had been too.

On the other hand, I also looked at artists who worked strictly from photography like Gerhard Richter, Robert Bechtle, and Vija Celmins. They used projectors or grids, and were really interested in what photography could give them and how it influenced their perception. I identified with these issues and artists, because my own work always began with looking at and searching for pictures. The problem was that I did not have a single photograph like Bechtle, Richter or Celmins- I had many. The times that I tried to paint from one source I felt like it was not enough, not adequate enough to get at what I was interested in. Looking at a single photograph makes me think about what is not there,

what got cropped or left out. The image inside the frame is interesting to me only as I am able to manipulate it, to add other content, and displace it somehow.

Understanding this was something of an epiphany, and forced me to stop using a projector, and start making my small collages into larger constructions. This is how the dioramas come to be, and their presence in the studio made me feel grounded. Even though this is not the same as being in the middle of a real place, it appealed to my body and senses in a way that felt so much more concrete and tangible. I realized that I needed this physical response, because I was looking for a way to dwell inside my fabricated landscapes. I could not get that with my small collages because of their scale, and I could not get it from the projected image because it had no physicality. The diorama provided a way for me to engage further with what I was making: it created an experience, and even though it was not of an all-encompassing landscape, it grounded me through the process of looking at an object.

Realizing the importance of my dioramas, brought the very natural question of why paint them at all? In their making I am already addressing my interest in landscape, and in the photograph as an object. The answer is that I need to paint them because I need to look at them. Not just look for ten minutes or a half an hour, but really look, and study, and scrutinize in a way that painting from life can do. There is insistency in the slow and methodical observation and mixing of color that produces real intimacy with the image I am making. As working from life requires time, I find myself a lot more engaged with the object of the diorama when I am painting it, than when I am only looking but have no way of giving form to what I see. This process of slow observation makes it possible for me to dwell inside the diorama, and see it as both object and an imaginative process.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have laid out the need for constructing sets, and how they have come to substitute my lack of a real relationship to the places in my archive. In this case I mean real as in direct, since most of my archive references the Bulgarian landscape, to which I am native. Because of the physical and emotional distance I feel, looking at my dioramas becomes another way for me to be intimate with places from which I am estranged. It also gives me a chance to question how I relate to them, and how they impact my sense of personal identity. Through painting I am able to give form to these reflections, even if I do not arrive at any conclusions or answers. The painting provides a way of processing what I have made, and it allows me to see it again, but differently. In *Double Take* I re-photographed my archive with a similar intention: I needed to see it differently too. It is this impulse to look and then to look again, that asks me to paint my dioramas, and to keep an archive. In themselves my constructed sets and archive both provide a lot, but are somehow not enough, not sufficient to satisfy my need to look.

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