

Leslie Raymond: LANDSCAPES

an essay for the exhibition at Blue Star Contemporary, San Antonio TX

by Emily Morrison

With *LANDSCAPES*, media artist Leslie Raymond expands the repertoire of an ever evolving medium—digital painting. Her manipulation of original footage situates the viewer among this new series of esoteric land studies. Drawing on themes presented by 17th and 18th century Landscape painting, Raymond's work investigates the grandeur of nature, capturing subtle changes in light and texture through time-lapse footage and long take filming.

In *Pontiac* (2001), a non-descript street corner is blanketed in slowly falling snow. Through rhythmic dilation of the lens, the night scene fluctuates in and out of darkness. The combined oscillation of the camera lens and snowfall has meditative effect, presenting the typically frenetic city in longevous cadence. Raymond's re-presentation of contemporary, industrial America draws on 17th century Dutch *vedute* (detailed cityscapes). Though the scene lacks the high detail that typifies the genre, the atmospheric lighting and idealization of the urban environment pay homage to key elements of the tradition. Like *vedute*, the image employs optical effects that allow the viewer to admire the beauty of the city—otherwise dirty sidewalks are bathed in soft light, while a quotidian street sign vibrantly glows in the foreground. Through the specificity of locale, and the softness with which she represents the area, Raymond suggests that while we are not looking at a literal representation of Detroit-area, Michigan, we are looking at an enhanced version of the experience of living in industrial America.

In another city environment titled, *Los Angeles River II* (2008), Raymond uses overlain tracking shots to accentuate various aspects of the Los Angeles River. The layering of imagery, combined with the motion-based field of reference, presents an elongated urban perspective. Additionally, an emphasis on planar relationships and repetition is developed through the careful integration of natural shadows, ambient light, and the neutral glow that suffuses the entire composition.

Though perhaps less associated with the sense of American nostalgia presented by *Pontiac*, *Los Angeles River II*, offers a contemporary, digital version of the classic landscape through its

balance of specific detail and focus on quality of light. The artist idiosyncratically layers two shots, identical in their framing though depicting different points in the geography, to emphasize the atmospheric splendor of the river and its surrounding area. The combination of meticulous bands of graffiti imagery with planar scapes of water expresses the natural harmonies of the landscape. Raymond's unique digital painting, above all, provides opportunity to contemplate the merging of the natural world with the concrete environment.

The vista presented in *Michigan* (2008) most clearly expresses the elemental framework of Raymond's landscapes, focusing on natural beauty, lighting, and texture. The composition, filmed from a static perspective, features a forest scene punctuated by the architectural forms of a wooded house. In this element of the installation the artist activates time-lapse photography, accentuating tempo through the compression of a six hour timeframe. Here, the viewer becomes hyper-aware of subtle changes in lighting, particularly through movements in the foliage. The dynamic fluctuation of focus throughout the foreground of the image emphasizes the density of the forest floor. The concentration of color, form, and texture in the undergrowth compliments the high contrast of the light-filled background. Referencing grandiose 18th century landscapes, Raymond's environment is designed to reflect upon the serenity of the Michigan forest.

In *Michigan (Reflecting Pool)* (2008) vertical framing, asymmetry, and time-lapse videography charge the work with paradoxical intimacy. The scene depicts a series of animals visiting a shallow pan of water situated at the edge of a stone path. Through an unnatural proximity to these watering creatures, the viewer experiences the everyday life surrounding this urban-esque waterhole. Although the digital painting appears to be more closely linked to still life videography, the reflection of the skyscape in the water unifies the composition, completing the landscape. This portal into the world above the vine-laden ground instills the viewer with a sense of the true vastness of the scene. The reflection presents the scope of the natural world in the context of a common theme in 18th century landscape painting—the sublime. This contemporary investigation of the unfathomable power of the natural world underscores limited perspective, drawing parallels to our restricted understanding of biological systems. The movement created by the wind over the water, combined with the reflection of clouds passing above, furthers the sense of unease and the water-portal becomes the central, dynamic element of the composition.

The sublimity of *Michigan(Reflecting Pool)* instills *LANDSCAPES* with a sense of dualism found throughout landscape painting of the 18th century.

In her Blue Star installation, Raymond investigates the complexities of the painterly landscape through videography. In the scope of Art History, video as an artistic medium is still in its developmental stages; *LANDSCAPES*, however, exhibits digital imagery as the contemporary counterpart to traditional landscape painting, furthering the possibilities of the genre. According to Raymond “integrating contemporary tools in artmaking practice enables a level of participation in culture not accessible via “old media.” People have a relationship to computers and television, so using those media to reflect upon our world through art enables different kinds of entry points.”¹ The presentation of this series provides viewers with just that, inviting us to contemplate scenic environments in a new manner.

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¹Quotation from Leslie Raymond in *Mediums*. ArtLies, Spring 2008: 54.