

“Tom McGrath: Landscape Redux.” In *Tom McGrath: Paintings 2002-2007*. New York: Zach Feuer Gallery, 2007; pp. 3-13.

Text © Robert Hobbs.

Tom McGrath: Landscape Redux

Robert Hobbs

But what interests me here, looking back from the very different situation of the North American postwar suburb, is how this pastoral tradition continues to have meaning today. . . . By and large, the Western pastoral tradition has been compatible with the idea of nature as a resource to be manipulated by human enterprise.

—Alexander Wilson, *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez*, 1992

The Jeffersonian model of the agrarian, contemplative life is a structural link between the desires that drive individualist liberal classicism and those of today's urban planning. Property ownership, a lawn to which leisure and maintenance become a clichéd desire of middle-class life, private rooms and the attendant configuration of individual and smaller family concerns are all developments of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century political economy and transcendental notions of solitude.

—Tom McGrath, Notes, April 2007

Tom McGrath's art questions the putative death of American pastoral landscape painting while dramatizing its persistent impact on our views of the present-day world. Alongside critic W. J. T. Mitchell's perceptive remark, "Landscape is not a genre of art but a medium" in his book *Landscape and Power*, McGrath wrote, "Landscape is also a verb."¹ He subsequently elaborates on this idea and also critiques the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century pastoral ideal in the following statement:

The naturalist pastoral, in retrospect, seems to have played a number of roles that have led to the sustained denial of origin and history: the pristine wilderness preserves the illusion of untempered savagery; and Manifest Destiny, the illusion of virgin forests, clears the national conscience of genocide, preserving in culture the promise of inexhaustible bounty and mystery. Virtually any pastoral or "back to nature" movement displays the makers of nationalist fantasy and historical amnesia.²

As McGrath's verbs "played," "preserves," "clears," and "displays" readily demonstrate, the American pastoral landscape, first established in works by such mid-nineteenth-century painters as Asher B. Durand and Jasper Francis Cropsey, may have become a consummate *poseur* because it appeared to fulfill contemporary desires for a pure, untrammled nature, capable of surviving the onslaughts of profligate farming practices, encroaching tourism, waves of industrialization, and successive generations of suburbanization—thereby salving the nation's guilty conscience. An ideological construction *par excellence*, pastoral landscape painting has been many things to many people. It appeared to be an astonishingly compliant and wonderfully transitive verb so able to cooperate with lingering views of its resiliency and capacity for renewal that its fabricators often forgot it was a social construct of their own making. Consequently, they often regarded halcyon nature in its pastoral guise as the norm, in contradistinction to the highly dramatic sublime version of nature as wilderness, which Hudson River School painter Thomas Cole invoked beginning in the 1820s.

Becoming mainstream in American art of the 1840s, the pastoral landscape is a well-wrought figment of the country's cultural imagination as well as a mode of seeing so apparently seamless in its lush verdure and apparent irrepressibility that it appeared natural rather than artificial, and self-contained rather than permeable to society's desires and perceived needs. Apropos this situation, writer and horticulturist Alexander Wilson concluded in 1992, "In the broadest sense of the term, landscape [in general] is a way of seeing the world and imagining our relationship to nature,"³ thus viewing it, like McGrath, as a responsive lens capable of being calibrated to changing ideological views. Since the advent of the automobile, pastoral landscape has often been experienced through the windows of moving cars or from highway overlooks intended to perpetuate long out-of-date ideas of the sublime, the beautiful, and the picturesque. When nature is seen through a car's lens (i.e., its windows and windshield), as in McGrath's paintings beginning in 2001, aspects of the public's own attitudes are reflected back to them, becoming mirrors of past and present-day needs and aspirations.

In retrospect it is not surprising that McGrath would make the subject of his art the pastoral landscape viewed from the perspective of the automobile. Brought up near New Milford, Connecticut, the very same rural retreat that was alternately parodied and celebrated in the classic post-World War II film *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House*, McGrath describes his childhood environment as “a hodgepodge of different types of Connecticut, semiurban, everything [was] . . . gauged by the speed of a car.”⁴ For McGrath, Connecticut’s pastoral landscape, like many others in the United States, is tied to automobiles and highways; for this reason they play a considerable role in his art, which rethinks their impact on the American landscape. McGrath initiated his first major groups of works, the windshield and the pastoral series, while still a graduate student at Columbia University; he continued his exploration of views of the changing American landscape in both series, using elements from one to critique and enhance the other and vice-versa. Recently he redirected these interests in his aerial views, which are panoramic scenes from the elevated perspective of Los Angeles’ Mulholland Drive. Although each of these three series is distinct, they are also open-ended, and a great deal of reciprocity exists between the first two, which may eventually come to encompass the aerial views as well.

Clearly aware of the paramount role that automobiles and highways have played in recent American culture, McGrath readily discusses a number of relevant studies on the topic, which have helped him structure his art in a cogent and up-to-date manner. A favorite is Alexander Wilson’s *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez* in which the author notes the preponderance of the automobile in American life:

While the population of North America has roughly doubled in the past fifty years, highway travel has increased almost tenfold. The private car accounts for more than 80 percent of all travel—75 percent of all tourist travel—in North America.⁵

Because of both the pervasiveness and the persuasiveness of America’s romance with the open road, McGrath has at times acknowledged the undeniable charms of picaresque narratives on this subject. Expounding on this fascination, he writes:

The notion of the road trip is a situational device that generates individualist tension with teenage bonding, fight or flight, the classical and medieval epic or pilgrimage, a rite of passage rife with notions of the primacy of experience, collegiate entitlement, and impotent transience. All that and the romance still holds: from high school favorite Kerouac to movies like *Easy Rider*, *Five Easy Pieces*, etc., the trope of the road trip provides the notion of driving as a transformative experience, the patronizing conflict with local cultures, the oppositional construction of regional identities and the excitement of not having to commit to local culture. . . [Road trips allow the] possibility to play different roles, be different people, shift identities between towns.⁶

McGrath’s reference to the road trip as “situational device” is an acknowledgment of Guy Debord’s mid-twentieth-century situationist strategy called the “*dérive*,” which countered the pernicious effects of what he called “the spectacle,” a view in which the world becomes a representation of itself. A *dérive* involves a purposeful letting go so that one can move through a city guided only by one’s desires and whims, thereby assuming a “psycho-geographic” relationship to it.⁷ While Debord recommends walking as the ideal way to enact a *dérive*, McGrath considers how driving can also achieve similar results. However, because of roads’ relatively limited ingresses and egresses, he quickly abandons this idea in terms of driving, only to pick up aspects of it in his paintings.

The difficulty of conducting a *dérive* in an automobile is made abundantly clear in Wilson’s description of landscape designer Stanley Abbott’s aspirations in the 1930s to construct the Blue Ridge Parkway so that it would be “a museum of managed American countryside.” Key to this project was Abbott’s desire to orchestrate drivers’ experiences of the Blue Ridge Mountains so that their views would tally with the aesthetic ideals of the Hudson River School painters, who wished to celebrate the American landscape as either untouched virginal wilderness or idyllic pastoral countryside. According to Wilson, Abbott recognized that

control over the verges allowed the landscape designers to organize the vistas. [In order to accomplish this] they screened inappropriate views. They designed

curves that restricted speeds to thirty-five or forty miles an hour and placed those curves in a way that organized the long looks. Since the road follows mountain crests for most of its length, distant views tend to be views down over deep valleys and countless ranges receding into the blue distance. Motorists feel like they are at the top of the world, and they share this new universe with the car. The designers have organized this national public landscape around the private car and the private consumption of nature.⁸

Gently coercive in its efforts to persuade drivers and their passengers that this highly artificial construct is Eden regained, Abbott's parkway was part of the same tradition that includes works by members of the East Coast Hudson River School, nineteenth-century Western photographers like Carleton Watkins, and adherents of the West Coast-based f.64 group of photographers such as Ansel Adams. True to its designer's aspirations, the carefully choreographed spectacle comprising the Blue Ridge Parkway has elicited little criticism and also offered few opportunities for automotive *dérives*.

While Abbott's work attempted to transform the Hudson River School pastoral landscape into parkways amenable to the automobile, thereby demonstrating a symbiotic relationship between the two, it avoided the related problem of tourist stops because Abbott excised them from his project. But unlike Abbott's limited-access highway, which was an exception to the normal U.S. thoroughfare, American pastoral landscapes, even in the nineteenth-century, were characterized by close alliances between contemplative and commercial activities. Recent scholars and others have become acutely aware of the fact that Hudson River School painters' early idealization of pastoral landscapes was a major factor in tourists' eventual colonization of them. Their analyses have shown how these painters also served as preeminent tourists and helped to transform the very sites they hoped to document and preserve in their art. McGrath, who is clearly aware of this shift in historical research, refers to "a landscape painter . . . [as] the worst kind of tourist."⁹ His conclusion correlates with Gail S. Davidson's recent essay "Landscape Icons, Tourism, and Land Development" in *Frederic Church, Winslow Homer, and Thomas Moran: Tourism and the American Landscape*.

At the beginning of her essay, Davidson cites the conclusion drawn in 1883 by Edwin Lawrence Godkin, editor of *The Nation*, that artists and families seeking a close relationship to nature initiated the resort phenomenon, thereby aiding in transforming such sites as Niagara Falls into spoiled tourist havens, which they had wished to enjoy in their sublime purity.¹⁰ She adds that seventy-four years later the concept of the artist as taste-making tourist continued to be regarded as the norm. "The cultural historian Hans Huth," she writes, "also articulated a three-phase development of resorts, which starts with artists and writers exploring a place and locals creating boarding houses to serve [them]."¹¹

Concerned with escalating tourism in the second half of the twentieth century, Alexander Wilson has noted its dramatic impact on the way we view the world and its many landscapes. Working within a structuralist and Marxist framework, he points out that tourism "has extended the commodity form both out into the natural world and back into our imagination."¹² Expounding further on this concept he opines,

Sightseeing was no longer an individual activity, at least not in the eyes of those in the business. It was the organized mass consumption of familiar landscapes. Facilities had to be standardized and the "tourist object—in this case an idea of nature—transformed into recognizable terms."¹³

In this new structure, automotive tourism, the primary form of vacationing in the United States, has had a major impact on the way this nation's varied landscapes are understood, and they in turn have affected the concept of American tourism as no longer just a conjunction of mode of transportation and sights seen, but a new entity that substantially transforms the two into an overarching commodity.

Even though McGrath continues to enjoy Hudson River School painting, he has joined the ranks of scholars and others who are taking a far more objective look at the values such landscapes invoke. They have found traditional views of pastoral landscapes out-of-kilter with twenty-first-century attitudes toward land use, which no longer perpetuate land

reclamation as a way of returning to an Edenic world. Instead changes are accepted, and damage is ameliorated whenever possible. A concomitant of the pastoral landscape, nationalism in the past two decades has been rethought in terms of globalism and the permeability of its social, economic, and political boundaries. To those who have seriously thought about the relevance of the pastoral landscape for contemporary practices, it is apparent that an updated view of it is long overdue. Wilson provides a promising historical reconsideration of this category when he writes:

Mobility is the key to understanding contemporary landscape design, because in the last forty years planners and builders have organized most land development around the automobile. This has had enormous effects on how most of us see the landscape. It has also changed the look and feel of the land itself. The car has encouraged—indeed, insisted on—large-scale development: houses on quarter-acre lots, giant boulevards and expressways that don't welcome bicycles or pedestrians, huge stores or plazas surrounded by massive parking lots.¹⁴

Although mobility in this passage is considered literally in terms of the automobile and its enormous effects on the land, this perspective can also be considered figuratively in terms of Spinoza's *natura naturans*, letting nature and the force behind it remain dynamically self-creative and open to change. Even though Wilson articulated his analysis of the automobile's impact on nature a decade and a half ago, it remains relevant in terms of viewing the contemporary pastoral in terms of discrete borders of lawn, which define and separate transitional areas bordering architectural and engineering structures. Channeled into adjunct and largely contingent roles, the pastoral landscape in recent years demarcates limits and either covers over or bears the telltale ruptures human constructions necessitate, making it a compelling updating of the picturesque, a concept that earth artist Robert Smithson championed.

A particularly memorable example of the pastoral landscape downgraded to a gap in a motorway intersection is found in one of McGrath's favorite books, J. G. Ballard's haunting

science fiction novella *Concrete Island* (1974). In Ballard's allegory the main character Robert Maitland, no doubt a homonymic play on mate, coupled with the word land to imply a natural affiliation between man and nature, wrecks his Jaguar while driving in the rain. This apparently unfortunate act jettisons Maitland off society's literal and figurative mainstream highway into a triangular wasteland, a crack along its edge, thereby enabling him to fulfill his destiny at the story's end by coming to terms with the land itself. The hemmed-in no-man's land in *Concrete Island* can be construed as a fissure in the dystopian universe this character inhabited before careening off one of its major thoroughfares. Referencing his own childhood in a Japanese-run, China-based detention center during World War II and yet speaking generally so that his point can be applied to his own fiction, Ballard reflected:

The reassuring stage that everyday reality in the suburban west presents to us is torn down; you see the ragged scaffolding, and then you see the truth beyond that, and it can be a frightening experience.¹⁵

Setting the stage of the modern pastoral landscape so that its cracks and fissures are not only represented but also among its key distinguishing features is also a crucial aspect of McGrath's pastorals. Regarding *Concrete Island* as seminal for his work, McGrath has regularly plumbed aspects of modern and postmodern art, particularly modernism's collage aesthetic and postmodernism's reliance on mediated imagery and its understanding of reality as a social and historical construction, as he creates images of a present-day dystopian world with its fragmented and meagerly parceled-out pastoral landscapes. He continues to be amazed by the cinematic *tour de force* of such extraordinarily long tracking shots as Alfred Hitchcock's six-minute spellbinding drive through the countryside of northern California in *Vertigo* (1958) in which the camera, assuming the role of Jimmy Stewart's character, looks over the car's dashboard. And he is equally awed by Jean-Luc Godard's ten-minute trek in *Weekend* (1967) through a dismal country road south of Paris punctuated by a series of wrecked, burning cars and mutilated bodies. But he has wisely decided not to attempt to create equivalent panoramic views in his pastorals. Instead he

relies on his digital camera as a sketching tool and takes a series of shots while driving or sitting in the front seat of his parked car. He is partial to shooting these photographs in the rain. Like the inclement weather that caused Maitland to wreck his car, water makes the windshield itself visible both as a lens and a surface on which views can be adhered. Looking at a scene through a wet windshield refracts the light while distorting those elements composing the scene beyond it, so that the emphasis of McGrath's pastorals and related windshields moves away from the idea of an unencumbered view of a particular scene to the way that the image is distorted and changed in the process of seeing it.

This integral connection between seer (in this case the artist) and scene/seen¹⁶ (the distorted image) comes close to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology that underscores the act of seeing as a Gestaltist unity. In this situation the viewer's actual vantage point affects the contents of the image, and the image in turn has an effect on the viewer, almost as if it were looking at the observer, even though the two are ostensibly separate and independent entities. Merleau-Ponty describes this type of cohesion and division in terms of a resultant dehiscence in which viewers' bodies open up to touch and can be touched by the scenes before them even though both they and the scene are separate elements. As a prelude to McGrath's emphasis on the windshield as a mediating device that presents the outside world as inside his car, one is well advised to consider the following visual proposition Merleau-Ponty makes in late essay "Eye and Mind":

When through the water's thickness I see the tiled bottom of the pool, I do not see it *despite* the water and the reflections; I see it through them and because of them. If there were no distortions, no ripples of sunlight, if it were without that flesh that I saw the geometry of the tiles, then I would cease to see it as it is and where it is—which is to say, beyond any identical, specific place. I cannot say that the water itself—the aqueous power, the syrupy and shimmering element—is *in* space; all this is not somewhere else either, but it is not in the pool. It inhabits it, is materialized there, yet it is not contained there; and if I lift my eyes toward the screen of cypresses where the web of reflections plays, I must recognize that the water visits

as well, or at least sends out to it its active, living essence. This inner animation, this radiation of the visible, is what the painter seeks beyond the words *depth, space, and color*.¹⁷

A loaded term for the late Merleau-Ponty is *flesh*, which he uses in this statement to refer to his basically ontological approach toward perception, predicated on the belief that seeing involves a permeable Gestalt-type structure, which is part of the vital ambiance that individuals project around themselves. It is also the intertwined chiasm involving touching and being touched / seeing and being seen / subject and object / self and world, in other words the ways that an embodied subjectivity is physically immersed in its environment. Taking Merleau-Ponty's example of the flesh of seeing as akin to looking through a pool of water as a cue, McGrath has created his own aqueous equivalent. However, in his paintings he differs from Merleau-Ponty's purely human physical embodiment by replacing it with the ubiquitous robotic that the automobile represents and the prosthesis that it has in fact become for people in the past century. This substitution of car for self is amply justified by the fact that people's primary relationship to the landscape is through the windshields of their automobiles.

It is tempting to suggest that McGrath's equation of the car's windshield and the human eye is akin to the *de rigueur* eighteenth- and nineteenth-century picturesque contrivance known as the Claude Glass. This device was an essential instrument for framing pastoral views and giving them the special tint of a particular time of day or season. Either through specially colored lens or darkened mirrors, Claude Glasses enabled artists and amateurs to reexperience a specific natural view as if it were a wonderfully classical landscape on a par with those painted by the Glass's namesake Claude Lorrain, the seventeenth-century expatriate French artist known for his idealized Italianate pastoral landscapes. But the Claude Glass is an idealizing medium, which permits a disembodied view of selective spectatorship, particularly its mirrored version that necessitates the persons using it to turn their backs to the landscape at hand in order to see a miniaturized mirror version of it. Instead of participating in a Merleau-Pontian type of reciprocity between viewer and view, the Claude Glass reinforces

analytic and distanced perspectives on a par with Descartes' preeminently mental approach and Kant's aesthetic judgment. Picking up on Kant's imagination while alluding to the Claude Glass, the English Romantic poet William Wordsworth is credited with observing:

Imagination is a subjective term: it deals with objects not as they are, but as they appear to the mind of the poet. The imagination is that intellectual lens through the medium of which the poetical observer sees the objects of his observation, modified both in form and colour.¹⁸

Similar to Kant's imagination, which Wordsworth describes in this passage as an "intellectual lens," the Claude Glass frames a landscape and at the same time excludes unnecessary details so that the scene can be reconceived in Claudian terms.

McGrath's windshields, which are both subject and object and a means of seeing as well as a manner for characterizing a particular type of viewer—usually the driver of an automobile—differ from the type of spectatorship dictated by Claude Glasses. Instead of being predicated on this distanced and objectified form of viewing, they can more productively be rethought in terms of the close descriptions that the leader of France's post-war Nouvelle Vague (New Wave) Alain Robbe-Grillet so carefully delineates in his fiction. In particular, McGrath's views from his car assume an analogous situation to the Venetian blinds through which the narrator of Robbe-Grillet's novel *Jealousy* is able to see the apparently casual, yet to him highly significant scenes he closely describes. The book's title characterizes the predominant emotion of this jealous and obsessive narrator, who attempts to record as objectively as possible, again and yet again, a series of episodes involving his wife, identified as "A," and a neighboring plantation owner named Franck. In addition, this title serves as a homonym for the *jealousie* or blind that permits narrow openings for the narrator to see and slats that obstruct his vision. Robbe-Grillet's seemingly objective descriptions in *Jealousy*—recorded by a character whose obsession undermines the veracity of his careful enumerations—reflect his familiarity with Merleau-Ponty's early writings. Although McGrath is not an aficionado of Robbe-Grillet's fiction per se, his works

parallel this French writer's carefully plotted descriptions, particularly in terms of the artist's characterizations of his windshields as "straightforward paintings of distortion."¹⁹

In contradistinction to Robbe-Grillet's interest in Merleau-Ponty's general studies of phenomenology such as his important *Phenomenology of Perception*, McGrath's artistic focus rests primarily on this philosopher's essays on art. Apropos this philosopher, McGrath has noted:

Maurice Merleau-Ponty [is] a favorite of painters . . . for his essays "Eye and Mind" and "Cézanne's Doubt": that perception is a phenomenological extension of the mind through the senses, past the fingertips and the retina into surrounding space. One of the few "experiential" theories that leaves the senses open to the social politics of space, open to the poetics of feeling as they might be conditioned by cultural a priori. Just past your fingertips, as far as you can see, as softly as you can hear it.²⁰

This statement indicates McGrath's intense interest in an optic/haptic mix that is evident in the richness of his paint surfaces and in his emphasis on the car's windshields as transactional surfaces.

In his windshields, McGrath is focused less on sustaining the tradition of American scene painting through the distorting lens of his automobile and more on this glass surface as an abstracting and distilling mode of seeing. McGrath has described the process employed for creating the windshields in the following manner:

In 2004 to 2006, photographs were used in a process whereby I would drive to a specific site or type of place. Using the windshield as a larger lens, I would pour water over the glass from the sunroof, creating larger fluid distortions in [a] more lyrical, mannered space. In effect, I had made the car into a larger optical machine, but only to take the deliberately altered results back to aid in the studio construction of landscape. I could edit and collage, cutting [photographic] images up by the contours of their fluid distortions, rather than the hard reality of their subject.²¹

Referring to these works as “essentially studio-constructed landscapes,” McGrath has also stressed the fact that he has never used Photoshop software for any of these paintings. Unlike Photoshop’s subtle means of altering photographic images, McGrath has pointed out, “The filters [I employ] are crude and task oriented.”²² Once McGrath creates a collage of different photographic perspectives of his car’s windshield under inclement or simulated rainy conditions, which he has likened to highly romantic stormy scenes of the British artist Joseph Mallord William Turner and the type of mental turbulence such paintings suggest, he paints an enlarged version of it. He enjoys being able to improvise on aspects of his collage, particularly, the fluidity of his combined representational and abstract elements. [figure 1]

The process of using collaged photographs as a basis for both the pastorals and windshields reflects an understanding of the internalized dynamism that Merleau-Ponty perceives in Rodin’s sculpture and analyzes in the following manner:

Movement is given, says Rodin, by an image in which the arms, the legs, the trunk, and the head are each taken at a different instant . . . The [overall] picture [created by the sculpture] makes movement visible by its internal discordance. Each member’s position, precisely by virtue of its incompatibility with that of the others (according to the body’s logic), is dated differently or is not “in time” with the others; and since all of them remain visibly within the unity of one body, it is the body which comes to bestride duration.²³

Continuing his discussion by comparing Géricault horses with a photograph of a galloping horse, Merleau-Ponty notes, “The photograph keeps open the instants which the onrush of time closes up forthwith; it destroys the overtaking, the overlapping, the ‘metamorphosis’ . . . of time.” Then, he concludes, “This is what painting, in contrast, makes visible. . . [a] painter searches not for the outside of movement but for its secret ciphers.”²⁴ In addition to creating a sense of inner dynamism, through cutting and collaging parts of slightly different camera angles of the same windshield panorama by observing the flow of the water

poured on it, McGrath’s multiple perspectives suggest the type of environmental surround that is crucial for Merleau-Ponty’s ontological understanding of vision. Moreover, a number of them play off the subject of car wrecks that in turn can be regarded as metaphors of McGrath’s collaging process as well as its



Fig 1 Tom McGrath, Study for *Untitled*, 2004 (illustrated on page 31)

implicit references to the ongoing destruction and reconstruction of the pastoral environment in which they play such an important role.

In 2006 McGrath initiated the new series of paintings he refers to as aerial views. Unlike the earlier windshields, which developed in tandem with the pastorals in terms of distinctly emphasizing these automotive viewing screens as both subjects and objects, the aerial views represent a significantly different type of shift. In the aerial views McGrath enacts a series of changes that include moving from day to night, natural light to artificial illumination, and East Coast suburbia to Southern California urban views. His extemporaneous remarks about this series provide an excellent basis for analyzing and assessing it:

The year 2006 to 2007 has been about the construction of nocturnes as they might be approached from a contemporary, urban grid. No photos would work for source material; by necessity, this work is invented on the canvas. The method of painting changed slightly to accommodate the idea; after making a few studied attempts at constructing a nocturne à la Remington, Whistler, L.A. set design and illustration, and Ed Ruscha, I decided on a method that simulated the optical remove and perceptual shifts of the naked eye at night, given light pollution, the looming super structure and sprawling urban space, and a strange take on distortion and rational

linear perspective. Like the original windshields, at any point in the painting there is some deferment of resolution. The overcoded subject of the scenic overlook at night, and its iconic teenage make-out potential, provides a link between the dazzling opticality of vision and the other senses; there is a physical perceptual and sensate dimension to the work for what otherwise might come off as purely retinal.²⁵

Although McGrath does not mention the specific locale that these paintings represent, it is the spectacular view of Los Angeles that one can espy from several places on Mulholland Drive, a nighttime parking spot frequented by teenagers and tourists for obviously different reasons. In addition to depicting L.A.'s urban grid, McGrath explains that there is a great deal of slip-page in his overviews of Los Angeles, so that they refer to this city even as they inscribe portions of other metropolises and even backdrops of movie sets within its overall parameters:

As for the Mulholland views, the grid began as a loose approximation, using a matte painting from *E.T.* as a springboard. The first in the series, *Night Grid*, 2007 . . . was the most faithful to the view, featuring approximations of Van Nuys (the diagonal on the left-hand side), Studio City in the foreground (the large, empty grid that appears to be taken up by warehouse lots a quarter mile wide), and in the middle ground a part of the San Fernando Valley that one studio exec nostalgically told me was “where they make all the pom.” Naturally, I was more interested in his specific association with this place in relation to the generalizations I had made in the grid—like a false recognition. Subsequent grids have mixed patterns from other cities—Houston, even Miami (even though they all look like L.A.), but elaborated on those grids as sections to sort of “web” out from. The specific sense of place is, like the new-growth arcadia of the American Romantics on the Hudson, not always drawn from a specific topography or neighborhood, rather the reflex of the viewer to perform those associations in the face of something that looks iconic in a generic or modified way.²⁶

“The grid—like a false recognition”—can be construed as a Merleau-Pontian play on Descartes’ Cartesian system by playing on two ways of seeing, the second (Cartesian) sepa-

rate and analytic, and the first (Merleau-Pontian) intertwined so that even urban grids can no longer appear as rational as they once did. In addition, the mixture of generality and specificity that McGrath mentions at the end of his statement as an important characteristic of the aerial

views is no doubt a reference to Jasper Francis Cropsey’s *Autumn-On the Hudson River* (1860) [figure 2], which was painted from memory when the artist was living in London. Definitely idealized, the painting assumes a high vantage point looking southeast at the Hudson River and Storm King Mountain in the distance. The sun remains high in the western sky; the landscape is still available for farming as well as, Cropsey notes, for “the abodes of commerce and seats of manufactures.”²⁷ And the season indicates the great harvests still to be reaped in the New World, making this work a preeminent updating and relocating of Claude’s stereotypical pastoral views with the utilitarian goals for productive land use clearly in mind.

Like Cropsey’s elevated view of the Hudson and its environs, both the vantage point and time of day of McGrath’s paintings have been carefully considered, and their similarities and differences from Hudson River School work can be regarded as critiques of long-held attitudes toward the American pastoral landscape as well as an assessment of contemporary attitudes toward the L.A. region that have given rise to the urban sprawl depicted in these aerial views. In his paintings of Los Angeles, McGrath veers away from a number of Hudson River School assumptions and commonplaces, including a frequent reliance on a commanding view that is presented to the observer as the divine sanction for western expansion known as Manifest Destiny, an unwavering belief in nature’s resiliency and innate purity, and a transcendent radiant light that transmutes and ethere-



Fig 2 Jasper Francis Cropsey, *Autumn-On the Hudson River*, 1860. Gift of the Avalon Foundation, Image © 2007 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington

alizes the scene being recorded. Differing from these practices, McGrath dwells on the beauties of urbanization as he trades the Hudson River School's spiritualized light for artificially illuminated night scenes. In these works he achieves an almost science-fictional eeriness when he indicates the multitudinous streetlights marking L.A.'s urban grid. McGrath regards the grid's vanishing point on the horizon in the first painting in the series as highly symbolic:

The vanishing point is an elusive staging ground, like the desert for philosophers or the sea for epic poets, or the sky for the consumers of jet-set managerial speak. It is a metaphor for total inescapable disappearance; degree zero where urgency and patience become hallucination and longing, endless desire and deferment. The vanishing point is by its very definition elusive, unreachable, always moving at equal distance on the horizon. ²⁸

The vanishing point in this and some other aerial views can be interpreted as reinforcing the loss of the American dream of limitless promise that was often acknowledged in nineteenth-century pastoral paintings by a late-afternoon or setting sun, casting its attentive supernal glow over the land.

McGrath's choice of Los Angeles as a subject for his urban views was in part predicated on his reading Mike Davis's trenchant essay "How Eden Lost Its Garden: A Political History of the Los Angeles Landscape."²⁹ This extended essay forms a backdrop to McGrath's work and enables us to understand his decision to paint nocturnal views of this city even though he wisely refrains from trying to illustrate this chequered history in his art. In his forthright critique of L.A.'s desultory expansion, Davis begins in 1930 with the far-reaching plans made by the East Coast urban design firm of Olmsted Brothers and Bartholomew and Associates to control flooding in the city's vast drainage area, beginning in Pasadena and continuing through the Los Angeles basin, by converting floodplains into parks and parklike motorways that, together with the natural waterways, would constitute a vast 440-mile network of green areas. Although L.A. had succumbed to land speculation in the 1920s, it was

hoped that the city and its environs would be able to measure up to Southern California's mythic reputation as a paradisiacal realm and adopt Olmsted and Bartholomew's plans. The city's inability to do so was followed by an increasing number of environmental disasters over the following seven decades, resulting in the imprisonment of its waterways in concrete passageways; the burgeoning communities of the San Fernando and San Gabriel Valleys came to exemplify for the entire nation the dangers of urban sprawl; citrus groves in these areas, which represented the greatest concentration of such trees in the world, were cleared at the rate of one thousand daily for over a decade in the 1950s and '60s; farmland in the San Gabriel Mountains, once hailed as the richest in the United States, was reduced in the mid-twentieth century from 300,000 acres to under 10,000. "By 1970," according to Davis, "more than one-third of the surface area of the Los Angeles region was dedicated to car-related uses: freeways, streets, parking lots, and driveways." This writer continues with the dire conclusion:

What generations of tourists and migrants had once admired as a real-life Garden of Eden was now buried under an estimated three billion tons of concrete (250 tons per inhabitant). (This last was calculated in 1994.)³⁰

Given these statistics, it is not surprising that one of L.A.'s most important artists, Ed Ruscha, would publish in 1974 an artist's book of thirty-four photographs of the city's parking lots and in the 1990s would embark on a series of paintings and prints of its asphalt streets. Although Mike Davis's disheartening estimation of L.A.'s failure to live up to its reputation as a Mediterranean-type paradise is tough historical reportage that might serve as a wake-up call to Los Angelenos regarding missed opportunities and the tremendous need for social and political interventions to stop the wanton destruction of its land, McGrath's objective is neither as direct nor as politically motivated as Davis's polemic. Even though McGrath is an ardent admirer of Davis's essay and certainly decries the changes in the L.A. landscape, he cannot help being fascinated with the many beauties of pollution and urban blight. Moreover, he recognizes that conservation in such vastly altered landscapes as those of L.A. and other American metropolises can never be returned to earlier concepts of the

pastoral ideal but must work with present-day limits and the possibilities they permit. "The irony [is] that in [Hurricane] Katrina's wake, much of environmentalism still uses the conservative, preservationist approach," McGrath notes, "and that the motives of many leading environmental organizations are steeped in transcendentalist or naturalist rhetoric such as design, the leisure-time use value of national parks, and the idea of 'saving' resources for future consumption by industry in a pinch."³¹

By studying McGrath's paintings, we can discern how they pull together information from different sign systems and thereby demonstrate the overlap and lack of sync as well as the strange amalgam that constitutes the ideological universe comprising the category of artistic landscape today. In the aerial views McGrath begins with a perspectival grid that veers away from the ideal realm envisaged by fifteenth-century Italian artists; he emphasizes that

the grid should not be perfect, it should be freehand, and it should be taped, so that whenever it appears to waver, it attaches itself to a depictive ground in point perspective. Where it violates this perspective, it reaffirms the painted ground of the painting . . . each line attaches itself to a pictorial vector, only to emerge at the other end as material and surface in the service of process.³²

Vacillating between illusionism and the flat canvas on which it is painted, McGrath's lines of perspective unravel even as they delineate L.A.'s urban grid and question the urban sprawl they appear to be confirming, thereby undermining the rationality that the city's grid, and, for that fact, any grid, may seem to be ratifying. In terms of its ability to undermine stable entities and reinscribe within them oscillating openings and closures, McGrath's querying line and overall interrogative approach is close to Merleau-Ponty's observation:

Whether it be representation or nonrepresentation, the line is no longer a thing or an imitation of a thing. It is a certain disequilibrium contrived within the indifference of the white paper; it is a certain hollow opened up within the in-itself, a certain constitutive

emptiness—an emptiness which, as [Henry] Moore's statues show decisively, sustains the supposed positivity of things. The line is no longer the apparition of an entity upon a vacant background, as it was in classical geometry. It is, as in modern geometries, the restriction, segregation, or modulation of a pre-given spatiality.³³

The disequilibrium of lines in art is similar to Merleau-Ponty's flesh, the structural composite of seer and seen, that makes perception both an individual and contingent situation. In McGrath's aerial views, this contingency is played out in terms of an on- and off-registration between realizing a perspectival system and deviating from it. This approach correlates with Merleau-Ponty's description of Cézanne's work as "the impression of an emerging order, an object in the act of appearing, organizing itself before our eyes."³⁴

In addition to deconstructing perspective so that it participates in an ongoing game of representing and abstracting L.A.'s urban grid, McGrath enacts a hand-painted version of the Hollywood cinematographer's texture mapping that has become an important component of computer-generated special effects.³⁵ However, instead of attempting to give his nocturnal views realistic textures, as a cinematographer would do and as his above reference to one of the set designs for *E.T.* suggests, McGrath intentionally sets out only to approximate this approach so that he can also become involved in developing a range of painting techniques, utilizing such tools as wood-graining decorator's brushes and atomizers, which give the surfaces of his aerial views a pointillist look. He describes the formal challenges of employing an atomizer as a painting implement and demonstrates at the same time his commitment to painting as ongoing improvisation as opposed to mainly representation:

Try to develop different, unlikely vocabularies using one single method that comes with its own preconceived limits; how many different kinds of dapples, drops, mists, and other effects can I make with a single atomizer? What different registers of opticality do these seem to create, and, in turn, how do these breakdowns and atmospheres engender the kinds of resolutions and anxieties that might bolster our

expectations of place, painterly language and mood? How do they complicate the implicit calm of the pastoral, how do they fend off or accentuate the sublime fragmentation of old Romantic painting models? ³⁶

Considered in terms of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, the atomized particles of color in the aerial views resemble the "sparks from a fire" used by this philosopher as an analogy for the incarnation of consciousness in the world:

Reduction does not withdraw from the world toward the unity of consciousness as the world's basis: it steps back to watch the forms of transcendence fly up like sparks from a fire; it slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world, and thus brings them to our notice. It, alone, is consciousness of the world, because it reveals the world as strange and paradoxical.³⁷

Deliberately abstract, these techniques reference aspects of the landscape being depicted at the same time that they call attention to themselves as well as their strengths and limits, thus undermining in part the illusionism that they have also helped to realize.

Besides redirecting the cinematographic technique of texture mapping, McGrath plays with the related, older tradition of matte painting, which was developed at the beginning of the twentieth century to create backdrops for films. In his aerial views he both affirms and destabilizes aspects of this approach. Although his nocturnal scenes are definitely imposing stage sets, they do not segue directly with the assumed viewer's elevated approach. In these paintings McGrath disconnects this viewer and his or her august perch, which Los Angeleno art historian Albert Boime calls the magisterial view,³⁸ from the landscape itself. He does so by gathering together in the foreground of these paintings discrete painted registers, marking the beginning steps of constructing them, thereby underscoring the fact that these landscapes are constructed stage sets that are successively composed of quickly brushed imprimatura, atomized layers of texture, and taped-off sections for subsequent spray painting.

In conclusion, in his 1836 "Essay on American Scenery" Thomas Cole implies that an elevated, magisterial gaze for viewing this country's landscape is an important feature of its ideology, a fact Boime emphasizes in his enlightening study *The Magisterial Gaze*, and a stance that McGrath's aerial views affirm and deny. In his essay Cole predicts that "looking over the yet uncultivated scene [before him], the mind's eye may see far into futurity. Where the wolf roams, the plough shall glisten; on the gray crag shall rise temple and tower—mighty deeds shall be done in the new pathless wilderness; and poets unborn shall sanctify the soil."³⁹ Beginning with his own paintings created in the 1820s and '30s and this statement on the American landscape's future productivity, Cole reinforced the belief that this country's ideal perspective is an elevated one. This concept has been perpetuated in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in scenic highways with their carefully planned overlooks, and it has been transposed into the world of business, bureaucracy, and wealth, where it has assumed the form of the proverbial C.E.O.'s corner office with generous windows permitting commanding outlooks⁴⁰ and penthouses with their awesome views. Looking back at the American pastoral landscape while making observations about its present-day effects, McGrath's art indicates that its questionable ideological position vis-à-vis the land has not only been an elevated one but also is an ongoing dynamic, particularly in terms of the automobile's dramatic, far-reaching effects. In addition, McGrath's work connects both the magisterial and the dynamic approaches to the American landscape with Merleau-Ponty's mode of seeing in which the seer and the seen, which becomes a scene, enter into a dialectic so that each in turn affects the other. In this way the grand prospects constituting the nationalist ideology that Cole describes and Boime details are intertwined with the deconstructed views McGrath permits his spectators. In McGrath's interactive form of seeing there fortunately exists the hope that some of this country's long-dominant encumbering ideological ties with the world, including the magisterial gaze and pastoral view, will be loosened, and in seeing how we see and not just what we see, we may see anew.

Robert Hobbs is the Rhoda Thalheimer Endowed Chair in the Department of Art History at Virginia Commonwealth University and a regular visiting professor at Yale University. He is the author of many books, including monographs on Alice Aycock, Edward Hopper, Mark Lombardi, Lee Krasner, Robert Smithson, and Kara Walker.

Published on the occasion of the exhibition

Tom McGrath

November 29, 2007 - January 6, 2008

Zach Feuer Gallery

530 West 24th Street
New York, NY 10011
Tel: +1 212 989 7700
Fax: +1 212 989 7720
www.zachfeuer.com

Publication © 2007 Zach Feuer Gallery

Tom McGrath: Landscape Redux © 2007 Robert Hobbs

Here in My Car/Where the Image Breaks Down/Will You Visit Me Please
© 2007 Kevin Zucker

All works © 2007 Tom McGrath

Produced by osp catalogs

Edition of 1000

PRINTED IN CHINA

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission from the copyright holder.

ISBN: 0-9768533-7-X

Footnotes for Tom McGrath: Landscape Redux by Robert Hobbs

1 Tom McGrath, Marginalia on Xeroxed copy of W. J. T. Mitchell, *Landscape and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 5. **2** Tom McGrath, Notes Sent to Author, 18 April 2007. **3** Alexander Wilson, *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez* (Cambridge, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 14. **4** Tom McGrath, Interview with Author, Brooklyn, 19 April 2006. **5** Wilson, *The Culture of Nature*, p. 28. **6** McGrath, Notes, 2007. **7** Guy Debord, "Détournement as Negation and Prelude," trans. Ken Knabb. First published in *Internationale Situationniste* No. 3 (1959), <http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/display/315> (accessed 3 April 2007). **8** Wilson, *The Culture of Nature*, p. 36. **9** McGrath, Notes, 2007. **10** Gail S. Davidson, "Landscape Icons, Tourism, and Land Development in the Northeast" in *Frederic Church, Winslow Homer, and Thomas Moran: Tourism and the American Landscape* (New York and Boston: Bulfinch Press in conjunction with Smithsonian, Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, 2006), p. 3. **11** Ibid. **12** Wilson, *The Culture of Nature*, p. 20. **13** Ibid., p. 42. **14** Ibid., p. 91. **15** D. B. Livingston, "Crash: Prophet with Honor" (1996?) <http://www.spikemagazine.com/0899ballard.php> (accessed 10 July 2007). **16** Timothy Andrus has suggested this homonym, and it does elaborate and clarify Merleau-Ponty's concept. Timothy Andrus, Conversation with Author, 26 July 2007. **17** Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind" in Galen A. Johnson, ed., *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, trans. Michael B. Smith, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology & Existential Philosophy (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), p. 142. **18** Malcolm Andrews, *The Search for the Picturesque: Landscape Aesthetics and Tourism in Britain, 1760-1800* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), p. 70. **19** McGrath, Notes, 2007. **20** Ibid. **21** Tom McGrath, Letter to Author, 18 May 2007. **22** McGrath, Notes, 2007. **23** Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," p. 145. **24** Ibid. **25** McGrath, Letter to Author, 18 May 2007. **26** McGrath, E-mail to Author, 21 July 2007. **27** Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting 1825-1875* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 5. **28** McGrath, Notes, 2007. **29** Mike Davis, "How Eden Lost Its Garden: A Political History of the Los Angeles Landscape" in Allen J. Scott and Edward W. Soja, ed., *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 160-185. **30** Ibid., p. 176. **31** McGrath, Notes, 2007. **32** Ibid. **33** Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," p. 144. **34** Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt" in Galen A. Johnson, *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, trans. Michael B. Smith, Northwestern University studies in Phenomenology & Existential Philosophy (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), p. 65. **35** McGrath's source for texture mapping is Thomas G. Smith, *Industrial Light and Magic: The Art of Special Effects* (New York: Ballantine Books, Del Rey Book, 1986), p. 208. **36** McGrath, Notes, 2007. **37** Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London and New York: Routledge, 1962), p. xii. **38** Albert Boime, *The Magisterial Gaze* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991). **39** Thomas Cole, "Essay on American Scenery," *American Monthly Magazine*, new series, 1 (January 1836), p. 12. **40** Boime, p. 7. An important source that helped Boime crystallize his thinking is Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1985).