

## *Through Difficult Terrains*

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The artist's in *Wider than High* portray cognitive environments – emotional, perceptual, remembered, and dreamt – to investigate identity politics, personal histories, pains and frustrations. The landscapes in *Wider than High* represent a broader definition of what landscape art could be in comparison to landscapes that solely focus on depictions of natural or environmental scenery, particularly those that have been romanticized.

In visual art, romanticizing can occur when an artist alters what they see in order to express an interpretation of aesthetic beauty. For instance, they might choose to depict, or highlight the subjectively beautiful in hopes of inducing a positive affective response from the viewer. Affect theory is traditionally understood as a psychoanalytical classification of reactions one can experience. Cultural theorist Ben Highmore asks,

*“How does a form of inquiry that was once aimed at the entire creaturely world end up as a specialized discourse about fine art? How did an ambitious curiosity about the affects, the body, and the senses end up fixated on only one tiny area of sensual life - beauty and the sublime? What happens to fear, anger, disappointment, contentment, smell, touch, boredom, frustration, weariness, hope, itchiness, backache, trepidation, and the mass of hardly articulated feelings and moods that saturate our social, sexual, political, and private lives?”<sup>1</sup>*

The work within this exhibition does not romanticize existence, rather the work questions and attempts to better understand it. These landscapes often take on the exploration of affects and emotions, which are difficult and uncomfortable. The representational and abstract works within this exhibition are saturated with each artist's unique perception and experience of the world around them.

The audience confronts a sculptural artwork by Laura Brandreth titled *Bulwark* (2018), which is centrally located within the exhibition space. In Brandreth's work, sculpted figures are suspended within resin bricks. 'X' markings protrude from their bodies, a symbol commonly used to communicate negativity and incorrectness. Overall, the vertical stature and colouring of the sculpture references a traffic light; it is an object representing a force that controls and influences ones movement along a travelled path. Brandreth creates her work through the use of commonly understood symbols in combination with images from her dreams. In doing so, Brandreth manipulates the

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<sup>1</sup> The Affect Theory Reader, Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth. *Bitter After Taste: Affect, Food, and Social Aesthetics*, Ben Highmore, p.121-22

generalized understanding of these symbols and creates an artificial landscape. This work explores feelings of being trapped, personal vulnerability, and the anxiety resulting from constantly questioning one's own actions and choices.

The works of Agata Derda illustrate a post-apocalyptic landscape. Achromatic works on paper using processes of photography, linocut, and drawing depict hanging stumps, rope, withering trees, planks, and backgrounds filled with dark threatening clouds. There are structures, or alterations that appear to be man-made within these barren environments. Examples of such alterations include tree stumps, planks, rudimentary scaffolding and supports, and objects tied together with rope. These attempts to maintain control over a volatile environment represent a futile attempt in a conquest over nature. It looks as if this land can hardly sustain itself, let alone a species as needy as humankind. Derda's works explore fragility, the potential for self-destruction, and more specifically, civilization's not so distant dystopic futures.

Tess Visser, then, offers us small moments to dwell with her abstract, expressive landscapes. Made through the use of mixed media, her works implement labourious, time intensive processes of layering, material exploration, and repetitive mark making. Visser grows to understand her work through the process of making it, and uses her intuitive processes of creating as an attempt to alleviate some of the anxieties and worries of the everyday. Visser also has an interest in myth and relates experiences and people in her life to tales and figures from Greek mythology. The pearlescent materials within this series represent opal, which Visser uses to symbolize Rhea. Rhea herself is not considered to be a goddess, but is the mother of gods and goddesses. Giving birth to power, beauty, and awe, Rhea herself remains overlooked in comparison to her creations. Visser's repeated depictions of Rhea mimic how she feels about her purpose as an artist, exemplified in her series *Are You The Destroyer?* (2018), arranged in clusters throughout the exhibition.

Landscapes are not required to focus on capturing the beauty of natural scenery. There are other environments of importance and intimacy that extend beyond realms of physicality. Life and the lived environment are not always romantic, nor do they induce solely positive affective responses. The artists in *Wider Than High* share their pain and express negative affects of living through their unconventional landscapes. In doing so, they create an opportunity to expand our notions of empathy, vulnerability, and connection as we navigate through difficult terrains.