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### Maybe Somewhere West

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**Maybe Somewhere West**

By  
Katie Efstathiou

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Imaging Arts

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences  
College of Imaging Arts and Science

Rochester Institute of Technology  
Rochester NY  
May, 2017

*Signature Page*

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## **Abstract**

### *Maybe Somewhere West*

BA Photography, Montana State University - Bozeman, Bozeman, MT, 2014  
MFA Imaging Arts, Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, NY, May 2017

*Maybe Somewhere West* is a photographic installation where a playful landscape is used as a stage to question how the naming of place relates to stereotypes found within the gender binary. Through found materials, photographs, and projections I am examining the interchangeable nature of virtual and material consumption of nature, while omitting any specific locale. The nameless landscape becomes an escape as well as a barrier, displaying the complexities of ingrained gender language. The term “namelessness” describe the unmarked purity of both the landscape and the androgynous self.



*Maybe Somewhere West*  
Front: *My Mother's Nature*  
Back: *Weather Man*



*My Mother's Nature*





*Travel Time*





*Weather Man*





17 Minutes

*Maybe Somewhere West* is a four-part photographic installation that confronts several definitive aspects of how we organize, relate to, and consume the natural. Through a simulated version of the American landscape, I examine the phenomena of the natural world and the inherent features of societal constructs, and specifically, how the naming of a place relates to stereotypes found within the gender binary. By combining found reference materials, photographs, and projections, I have produced a familiar, but a nameless place. This work explores how materiality can be interchanged for the virtual, the public can be mistaken for the private, and the depiction of self is ambiguous and fluid.

The evolution of humankind's relationship to the landscape can be tracked throughout art history, first as a stage for human exploration, and then as a medium. In this installation, I serve as a surrogate for the male figures who have historically determined these perspectives while the landscape stands in for their artistic depictions. I do not place myself on one side of the gender binary, but rather acknowledge historic trends that have continuously defined and redefined humankind's experience with nature. For example, I am an explorer and conqueror like the figure in Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog, 1818*<sup>1</sup>, while also intimately connecting to nature like Henry David Thoreau. Like Carleton E. Watkins, I survey and document new territory, and at the same time designing and organizing it to be experienced by the public in the manner of Fredrick Law Olmsted. I am an activist and environmentalist like Ansel Adams, depicting the grandeur of the West, all the while curating an installation of "man-altered" landscape like William Jenkins's "New Topographics"<sup>2</sup> exhibition. Now I am a skillful

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<sup>1</sup> "Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog, 1818." Digital image. Artble.com. 2017. Accessed April 23, 2017. [http://www.artble.com/artists/caspar\\_david\\_friedrich/paintings/wanderer\\_above\\_the\\_sea\\_of\\_fog](http://www.artble.com/artists/caspar_david_friedrich/paintings/wanderer_above_the_sea_of_fog).

<sup>2</sup> SFMOMA. Exhibition. "New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape." News release, July 17, 2010. SFMOMA. Accessed April 23, 2017. <http://sfmoma.org/exhibitio/new-topographics/>.

tourist, validating my experience with photographs, as many do within our image saturated world.

Perceptions of nature change as modified experiences accumulate. Nature is now advertised as a place we visit, making it a ritual of travel, not an everyday experience. The concept of nature as a spectacle has been so heavily imprinted on society that we in return bring nature back with us, experiencing it daily through second-hand sources such as movies, zoos and museums, computer desktops, and a vast range of consumer materials. The iconography used within *Maybe Somewhere West* references the landscape while omitting a specified location to contextualize nature through the incorporation of numerous consumable forms.

In Alaska's Glacier Bay National Park, Park Rangers use the concept of "namelessness" to convey true preservation of mountain glaciers in the Fairweather Range.<sup>3</sup> By not giving the glaciers a name they are believed to remain wild, seeking to reduce and/or diminish human's impact on pristine wilderness. Geographer, J. Douglas Porteous' essay entitled "Bodyscapes: The Body-Landscape Metaphor" addresses naming the landscape as an act of human intervention and possession.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, the naming of place fits within the gender binary power structure in relationship to body composition. The human form is often metaphorically present in nature—a body of water, a tree limb, or a rock face. While personification is used to describe general elements found in nature, the naming of places is more strongly associated with gender. An example of this are the Grand Tetons mountains, originally named "Hoary-Headed Fathers" by

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<sup>3</sup> Dr. Daniel E. Lawson, "An Overview of Selected Glaciers in Glacier Bay," *National Park Service*, (2004), Accessed April 23, 2017. <https://www.nps.gov/glba/learn/nature/upload/Overview-of-Glacier-Bay-Glaciers.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> J. Douglas Porteous, "Bodyscape: The Body-Landscape Metaphor," *Canadian Geographer / Le Géographe Canadien*, 30 (1986): 2–12. doi:10.1111/j.1541-0064.1986.tb01020.x

the Shoshone tribe. By the 1820s and long before the establishment of the national park, French-Canadian fur trappers renamed the mountains “Les Trois Tetons,” which translated means “The Three Breasts.”<sup>5</sup> While the westernized name implies a male dominance power structure over women, both names relate back to the gendered body. There are over one hundred thousand glaciers in Alaska and ninety-five percent of them are thinning or retreating. Coincidentally, most of the nameless glaciers, remaining invisible under layers of year-round snowfall, exist within the five percent that are stable or thickening.<sup>6</sup> I have used the metaphoric concept of namelessness to represent myself and the spaces I inhabit as idealistic and removed from the binary.

*Maybe Somewhere West* takes form across four faces of two floating walls. Each face is a unique standalone piece. In the context of this installation, the positioning of the walls builds upon a relationship that contributes to the work, both visually and conceptually. Upon entering the installation, the viewer confronts a wilderness landscape that is created through materials affixed to the wall faces. Without a horizon line for reference, the land rests in the front and sky in the back. The land titled “My Mother’s Nature” is an expansive pine forest created with a grid of purchased 12” by 12” scrapbook paper. The 9’ by 9’ wall holds a meta self-portrait where I exist within the paper forest and is pinned next to mountain scene created with printed fabric. Large puffy clouds in the sky and a small glimpse of trees that rest along the bottom of the fabric give context for the paper forest and the wall of sky in the background. While referencing the natural environment, the title “My Mother’s Nature,” is derived from my mother’s quilting career and her great efforts to excite my interest in anything crafts related. This stereotypical

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<sup>5</sup> "Cultural History," *U.S. National Parks Service*, Accessed April 24, 2017.  
<https://www.nps.gov/grte/learn/historyculture/cultural.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Dr. Daniel E. Lawson, “An Overview of Selected Glaciers in Glacier Bay.”



gendered projection placed on me is depicted through the material mediation of the landscape. The employment of the grid references the layered repetition and piecing of a quilt, while also covering a wall like the historic context of wallpaper, bringing public territory inside to the domestic space.

In the self-portrait, I am humorously posed to mimic how I imagine Carlton E. Watkins once stood experiencing the sublime first hand. My hat is playfully tilted up encouraging the viewer to perceive me as optimistic even though I am masked by the landscape. Watkins often employs small, nameless silhouetted figures within his scenes to give scale to the pristine landscapes. Not in the distance, and disproportionate in scale, I inhabit a space that becomes both private and claustrophobic. This tight composition makes the landscape both an escape and a barrier referencing how I view societal projections of gender within a binary.

Roni Horn also employs ideas of nameless gender identities in her work. Identifying as androgynous in a 1995 interview with Claudia Spinelli for the *Journal of Contemporary Art*, Horn discusses how growing up androgynous with a name that does not reference any specific gender influenced her work. The unanswerable questions addressed in her drawings, sculptures, photographs, and book work mimics the feeling of not fitting into singular identities. "To identify the gender of an artist is a way of diluting identity. Androgyny is the integration of difference as a source of identity. When you combine the one with the other you come towards a synthetic identity, one that is not so nameable."<sup>7</sup> This unnamable identity represents the glaciers and where I situate the land and myself within this installation.

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<sup>7</sup> Claudia Spinelli, "An Interview with Roni Horn," *Journal of Contemporary Art* (June 1995), Accessed April 23, 2017. <http://www.jca-online.com/horn.html>.

As the viewer moves further into the gallery, the next wall encountered is the sky backdrop for the trees. “The Weather Man” is a 12’ by 9’ wall that is entirely covered with a projected video of animated gray clouds. This piece, inspired by the AccuWeather Forecast iPhone App, moves across a four-minute time span. Clouds move slowly across the wall in one direction. Once the cloud reaches the end of the wall, a new cloud takes form and crosses in the opposite direction. This eight-minute cycle of looped video juxtaposes the materiality of the scrapbook paper tree and addresses our consumption of the landscape through digital means. Historically wallpaper was specifically designed decorative paper affixed to a wall. Today this concept extends to images placed on computer desktop and cell phone home screens. In both contexts wallpaper is used as an escape from the mundane world and becomes a stationary way for the viewer to experience the landscape. This parallels my intimate experience with nature as seen in the self-portraits.

The cloud projection overlays three photographs pinned to the on the wall. Two of these images are almost invisible representations of the landscape, and the third is a self-portrait of my exposed back in front of a western landscape, resembling those of 1970s Marlboro Cigarette Ads. Like the self-portrait on “My Mother’s Nature,” I take a presence on the wall as an explorer of a motionless landscape. This time the title, “Weather Man”, implies a connection to the construction of the masculine identity often found in the representation of the western United States<sup>8</sup>. My branded Red Sox hat and bare skin highlight my distance from the landscape and confuse the viewer of my position and identification within the gender binary. To extend this confusion, I have allowed the projection of the video to interfere with the audience’s ability to

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<sup>8</sup> Deborah Bright, *Of Mother Nature and Marlboro Men*, (Essay,1985), Accessed April 23, 2017. <http://www.deborahbright.net/PDF/Bright-Marlboro.pdf>.

view the photographs clearly. Much more abstracted than the portrait, the visibility of the translucent images depends on where the clouds are within the video sequence. The white light projected from the moving clouds at times reveals a melting glacier and clouds that are at other times experienced as ice cubes and bubble wrap. This obscurity becomes a metaphor for the inability to correctly assess someone's gender based on a first glance. This visual trick can be seen on many walls throughout the installation.

It is difficult in this installation to detect where the material ends and the virtual begins. Translucent photographs reference the same spectacle of nature, mimicking the awe inspiring natural forms that they represent, while simultaneously being distanced from it, creating an entirely new fabricated reality. Taiyo Onorato and Nico Krebs use a similar method in their book *The Great Unreal*. The book navigates the American West using a singular road as an icon within a vast landscape, an image made famous by Robert Frank. Onorato and Krebs, however, made a road from a piece of cardboard. This obvious play of manipulation, both aesthetically and conceptually, addresses the construction of the west while absurdly removing it from any specific sense of reality. *Maybe Somewhere West* relies on photographic reference, humor, and playful integration of materials to influence the viewer's experience. Humor is one of the entry points into the work and becomes a way to communicate complex ideas of consumption and gender. The awkwardness of being both the photographer and the model, searching for reference materials in a craft store, an emulating an app interface on a gallery wall are examples of how the playful process of making can be seen through humor within the work.

Turning 180 degrees the viewer will notice they are positioned between two wall faces that reference the sky. On the opposite side of "My Mother's Nature" and adjacent to "The Weather Man" is a blue wall pierced with map pins titled, "Travel Time." Using 417 pins, the

pins track a nameless landscape. The quantity of pins is important as it represents the number of official units (i.e. National Parks, forests, seashores, battlefields, monuments, etc.) run by the national park service as of January 2017.<sup>9</sup> The concentration of pins and the way they are dispersed creates an energy that depicts an aerial perspective of the earth. The shadows formed from the pins and paper mimic the harsh flash used to capture many of the photographs made within the studio. The title “Travel Time” is a reference to the time it would take to get from one pin on the map to another. Travel time often seems like a mundane daily commute. By twisting the words to time travel, the title implies the way places can revisited through photographs, maps, technology, and a wide range of materials.

Additionally, the pins support photographs that hold together many of the qualities seen within the installation. Each image addresses a level of materiality consumed through the virtual experience of viewing a photograph. This becomes another place where humor and trickery are apparent within the installation. An image of my legs stepping up onto out of proportion rock steps that are made from fabric, a cell phone reflecting the sky through a blank screen, and a quirky self portrait of my face hidden within a jacket, become a way to poke fun at the idea of these various levels of consumption.

The images in “Time Travel” function in pairs, allowing the viewer to develop both aesthetic and content connections between the images. There is an allusion of the images being relevant to one another in location, but with the inclusion of the light source the images remain fragmented. Images are double sided prints with the back side matching the blue of the wall. The paper curls away from the pins over time revealing this other side. This idea of separation,

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<sup>9</sup> "Frequently Asked Questions (U.S. National Park Service)," *National Parks Service*, Accessed April 24, 2017. <https://www.nps.gov/aboutus/faqs.htm>.



created using light, double sided prints, and curling photographs, becomes a way to remove the specificity of named place.

The final piece of *Maybe Somewhere West* is a wall titled “17 Minutes.” This wall is consists of a seventeen-minute looped projection of snow covered trees and their shadows taken from an aerial perspective. This aesthetic form builds a relationship with and from the shadows cast by the map pins found on the wall behind. Like the concept of wallpaper as a connection to nature, the image is masked to mimic light entering a space through a window over the course of a day. This piece, projected down the wall and spilling onto the floor, is located on the backside of the wall furthest from the gallery entrance.

Why 17 minutes? The National Park Service has calculated that the average amount of time people spend looking out over the south rim of the Grand Canyon is 17 minutes.<sup>7</sup> In many ways, I am making fun of this behavior. In thinking of the parks I have visited and reading multiple travel guides regarding of how to spend one day at the Grand Canyon I struggle to understand how anyone could put such little time into a place that is so magnificent. Much of the travel information suggests going to the 3D nature documentary made within the canyon at an IMAX theater outside of the park, which at first I thought was absurd, but it is just another way to consume nature. Ironically, this piece is adjacent to a covered window, blocking the viewer from the outdoors. On a sunny day, light will shine through the breaks in the curtains and spill onto the projected wall. The projected light and the sunlight compete and depending on the weather and time of day, one experience will overpower the other. In the end, light and time become both the materiality and virtuality of this piece.

*Maybe Somewhere West* is a stage to explore and escape the ingrained language of gender within an unspecified landscape. The work itself questions this view through playful depictions of the wilderness. Both the material and virtual qualities of the installation question how we consume nature and mediated experiences into our contemporary lives. *Maybe Somewhere West* further questions and pokes fun at the historic exploration between gender and landscape, as it is always cast into a specific side of the gender binary.

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