

Unromantic: Matt Garrison's Earthscape

Dr. Sarah Mills

In the 1960s, the world began to worry about the Earth. The United States took political action, creating the Environmental Protection Agency in 1967 and an annual Earth Day celebration in 1970. Artists followed suit. With a self-conscious absence of expressionism, they: sculpted with sunlight (Nancy Holt), illustrated dirt's textures (Robert Smithson), presented lightening as chance performance (Walter de Maria), and exploited the architecture of cliffs (Michael Heizer). It was a romantic time if a little dire as artists attempted to make sensitive the world's dulled sentiments to Earth's elemental wonders. In some sense, Matt Garrison wants the same thing. In *Nothing Left of Time*, Garrison recreates the natural world with sky, clouds, sun, grass, deer, rain, and a fishing hole. He places you – the viewer – in the center of it. But an unease ensues, one does not feel awed by the monumentality of nature – as in 1970s Earth Art – nor charmed by it. Instead, an energy drainage like online fatigue is palpable in ironic, purposely artificial representations of nature.

As a graduate student at Hunter College, CUNY and later professor at Albright College, Garrison studied Earth Art and earlier precedents of artists who represented nature as examples of refined, cultivated beauty. For example, the 17th century landscape architect André Le Nôtre, who designed King Louis XIV's palace gardens at Versailles, trimming and taming hedges to match the right angles of try-squares - or so it seemed. In the 19th century, the Hudson River School offered other equally majestic views of nature. Albert Bierstadt, in particular, revealed "wildernesses" in the Americas with precision and optimism, evoking equal measures reverence and timelessness. Such examples have stood out to Garrison as something to admire but also call into question.

Indeed, one feels perplexed with nature in *Nothing Left of Time*. The organic shape of clouds, made with paint-soaked cotton balls, look too circular, too flat, and funnily intersects with right-angles of the sky as if cardboard puzzle pieces. Their monochromic color gives them greater cartoonishness. (Garrison himself calls them "chromatic constructions.") On closer inspection, a bite mark in one corner of the sky reveals this skyscape is not a skyscape at all but instead a big sky-cookie! The surreal play continues in *Quarantine Piece*. Look—you caught a fish, you're reeling it in. But no—you're standing on artificial grass with a pole line permanently suspended in a taut arch above a PVC pipe hole, as if frozen in a Wii game played indoors during quarantine. In *Smokestack*, the sky appears in permanent purple caused perhaps by smoke, suggested by the silhouette of a looming smokestack. Also note the sun is square in *Yellow Sun*; its red rays replicate the palm creases of Garrison's friends, family, and colleagues. They are sources of life. We are not left to forget our connection to nature as to each other. But we are also not relieved of the distortion in which we now find ourselves in our relationship with nature.

In *Night Life*, neighborhood deer graze at night under the gaze of Garrison's outdoor video camera. I like watching deer move unaware of my presence. Garrison does as well. Like a camera operator, he captures footage of the unsuspecting deer from different angles and distances at all hours of the night for many nights. Does nature's look of unawareness turn back time; make us feel as if living in the past before humans (over)populated the planet? The circular frame, however, through which we see the deer is suggestive of binocular lenses, triggering associations of more contemporary modes of viewing nature undisturbed, such as hunting, surveillance, and webcams of zoo animals. In these instances, humans harness the power of technology-enhanced vision to exert further control in the

natural world, for better or worse. Garrison avoids commenting on such activities and instead reflects thoughtfully on the potentialities of our visual desires.

In our pursuit for documentary comes data overload. For *Be Right Back* Garrison arranges multiple photographs of empty chatrooms, taken at random over the last five years in a colorful, mesmerizing photocollage. Unlike *Night Life*, where technology allows us to grow our affections for animals which we might not otherwise see, access to others who are not there plunges us into a panicked stricken state of existential loneliness. Like *Night Life*, the empty spaces of *Be Right Back* amplify our own voyeurism.

*Nothing Left of Time* is a momentous exhibition surveying major themes of loss/control and man/nature in Garrison's oeuvre. It's timely presentation in 2022 makes it even more significant. With many of Garrison's works, we are as if removed not once by the representation of a thing – the image of sky, a fishing hole, empty rooms – but twice by the representation of representations – the sky that is a sky cookie, the fishing hole that is a simulation of a game of fishing, the empty rooms digitally projected by their dwellers and then photographed. Is Garrison suggesting we've lost the original thread? Or rather is his perspective one of dry humored jest on society's conflicting attempts to get it "right" with the world. The important thing is we are left to reflect on ourselves looking at nature instead of hypnotized by its glory or paralyzed by its destruction.