

Emerging fields like cultural geography, Indigenous studies and place-based education raise questions of what it means to occupy land in public, academic and legislative discussions. The exhibition *Turf Wars* engages such conversations. The artists use genre-bending techniques to investigate what it means to occupy space and place today. Working in different styles and mediums, Eryn O'Neill, Atticus Gordon, and Violeta San Juan each push the boundaries of landscape painting to acknowledge the complex entanglements of people in their environment. The artworks foster understanding — and even reimagining — of presence in place.

The exhibition presents several large-scale landscape paintings and one extensive installation. A multitude of materials and sculptural elements draw the viewer to Atticus Gordon's installation, *A painting dispatched for a dim future* (2022). Painterly logic extends into three-dimensions in an intricate composition of sculptural collage. Gordon combines elements that he has collected over the years, including a log from a forest he played in as a child, rocks, paint samples, and plywood blocks. At first glance, dominant bright colours and whimsical cut-outs convey a sense of playfulness. Upon closer looking however, idyllic landscapes transform into images of conflict and violence that become darker in colour lower in the installation. These contrasting scenes encompass the complex and contradictory feelings of existence in the present moment.

Eryn O'Neill's large painting, *Barrier* (2018), presents a familiar construction scene filled with fences, traffic cones and urban infrastructure. It was created during O'Neill's MFA at the University of Waterloo where she studied urban spaces in transition and the under-appreciated obstacles that they create¹. Mirroring the gritty quality of her subject matter, *Barrier* is painted on unstretched canvas stapled to the wall. With visible drips, and quick, loose brush strokes, the painting evokes a sense of temporal urgency. Focusing on objects that are often considered barriers, O'Neill reimagines them as objects that create paths to navigate the chaos of widespread urban development.

The bustling energy of the previous artworks is offset by more subdued pieces: Gordon's *Homeland* (2022) and O'Neill's series *Desire Path* (2019). In Gordon's large oil painting, a vibrant teal streak enlightens the surface of an otherwise sombre scene. Gordon uses the Canadian Image Archive to construct a mythology of Canadian landscape through a collage-like process² that is most evident in a mechanical form in the centre of the composition. Although decidedly human-made, the strange machine is not recognisable, as it is stitched together from numerous archival images of agricultural machinery. Using dark blues, Gordon reframes the narrative of heroic land development into an eerie, melancholic scene. His strategic composition

¹ Atticus Gordon, in discussion with the author, August 4, 2022.

² Atticus Gordon, in discussion with the author, August 4, 2022.

creates a spatial tension —mirroring the very tangible tension in conflicts surrounding colonial impositions on land in Canada.

To its right, O'Neill's series *Desire Path* is displayed in a grid. Although similar to *Barrier* in style, *Desire Path* is more contemplative and evokes a slower pace. The four paintings are on panels — more contained than the raw canvas of *Barrier* — with an even, consistent application of a predominantly green palette. Their mellow quality matches the process in which they were created: through months of walking where the artist mapped alternative routes around construction sites³. A downward-looking perspective mimics a walker's point of view. While Gordon's *Homeland* displays figures altering the landscape, *Desire Path* looks for traces of absent people through the marks they leave behind. This depiction of absence creates a sense of spatial tension, reminding viewers of their lasting impact on the land through which they travel. Although the paintings reference walks in Waterloo, O'Neill avoids recognisable landmarks, focusing rather on the mundane features of urban spaces that often go unnoticed such as sewage grates, sidewalk edges and chain link fencing. As a result, she creates spaces for viewers to recognize their own 'desire paths' and relearn their own cities through this new perspective.

Violeta San Juan's vibrant triptych *The Story of Water* (2002) grounds the exhibition. Each painting depicts an abstracted landscape in bright colours. And yet, despite their vibrancy, they are not optimistic. Red scenery creates a threatening atmosphere, while verbal calls to action written clearly on two of the paintings announce the harms of gold mining and the necessity of water as a human right. These paintings can be understood as a response to the water crisis in Latin America caused by gold mining⁴ in the early 2000s. They also protest the ongoing privatization of water occurring in Chile⁵ (the artist's home country). While Gordon's artworks reframe the present through imagined worlds and O'Neill's paintings navigate ever evolving urban environments, San Juan's paintings remind us of the urgency of climate change. Her textual 'calls to action' are didactic because that is exactly what calls to action should be. San Juan depicts vibrant landscapes that must be protected.

Together, the artworks in *Turf Wars* reflect different implications of entanglement in and with place. While O'Neill's paths encourage viewers to look at the urban developments around them under a new, critical light, Gordon's collaged worlds reframe the present and imagine alternatives. San Juan advocates for change to create and protect a liveable environment. These artworks encourage viewers to rethink our relationship with the places that we occupy and urge us to act in ways that ensure their future.

³ Eryn O'Neill, in discussion with the author, August 4, 2022.

⁴ Violeta San Juan, in discussion with the author, August 4, 2022.

This essay is published on the occasion of the exhibition *Turf Wars*, on view in Hamilton Artists Inc.'s James Gallery from July 20 – August 13, 2022.

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