

Meaning

“Industrial Pastorale” is an exploration of the liminal edge between rural and urban landscape. I grew up traveling between two radically different worlds, a sprawling horse ranch at the foot of Mt. Rainier, and a house in Seattle’s Central District that was the center of political activism. It has been a life-long puzzle for me to integrate those two experiences, one shaped by the epic and silent beauty of rural landscape, and the other by a complicated urban life fraught with violence and confrontation. To be in the middle of extremes, and to hold two truths equally, is not an easy thing. In my art I am always looking for ways to reconcile the friction of difference and to make sense of it, whether by harmonic blend or by juxtaposition.

“Landscapes” are not just the horizon and its interrupting verticals, but the emotional sub-text embedded. Cityscapes are not just buildings, they are the pentimento of surface, of billboards, steel, concrete, graffiti, that we see at eye level as we travel through. For me the commonality between the rural and the urban is the experience of dislocation and the desire for home. Walking the fields and forest I read the grass and the sky and the birds, looking for word back. In the city, I fall into the surface of walls, those unconscious paintings etched by weather and time, vandals and the accidental spill of diesel. Always I am looking for a healing sense of place, the *thereness*. In this kind of looking it’s not necessary to make judgement about what belongs. At its best, there is a form of witness that finds harmony in conflict and beauty in dissonance itself.

Although rural life is not an Arcadian paradise, its iconic structures still carry the powerful echo of another time. A barn, a windmill, a bridge, a simple truck, these things blend utility with beauty in ways that are unironic, stoic, and filled with grace. The structures may be industrial, but they do not intrude on the natural arc of the land. Instead they become the necessary interruption that allows the sweeping curve of the field to be more itself.

Method

As a longtime student of music I often look to musical forms to guide my visual work. The definitions of “*Pastorale*” vary but they include “a play based on a rustic story, a movement of a melody in thirds over a drone bass, suggestive of traditional shepherd’s music and idyllic rural life.” When at a loss compositionally in this series I always turned to that: what would the shepherd do? Where is the drone? What if I played this in D minor or added a third movement? I consider myself a mixed media artist, and that means opening my mind to music and words as much as images for inspiration.

My art process is improvisational and based on a blend of design and intuition. For this series I started with extensive photoshoots of the Skagit Valley, roaming back roads and marshes with my camera to immerse myself in the landscape. In the studio I then created ink and watercolor paintings that attempted to evoke the emotion experienced in the fields. Next I looked through hundreds of photographs to intuit what image of “the real” might create an interesting new relationship with the imagined. When I found what felt like good possibilities I began the process of improvisation, going deep into photo blending and the magic of digital printmaking, where I see each layer in Photoshop as a “plate,” imprinting with a near-infinite choice of effects on the one beneath it.

I am always looking for something I haven’t seen before, that has the subtleties of old-world etching and lithography juxtaposed and blended with the language of modern photography. I know I am “done” when I step back and feel completely at ease. That is usually when the title comes, with a sense of a story I have never heard before.

Iskra Johnson March, 2019