

The Nature of Art. The Art of Conservation.

By listening to the non-silence of the desert, we are able to hear it as a non-empty landscape, not a void but rather a profound presence.



Above: *Beyond the Homestead Years*, oil on canvas, 30 x 36 in.

Previous spread: *American Prairie Reserve*, oil on canvas, 20 x 24 in.

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All over the world, people have similar tastes in landscape art: from Iceland to Africa to Asia, people of many backgrounds and ethnicities favor paintings that include a mixture of trees and open areas, water, human figures, and animals. Take a painting from the Hudson River school to Kenya and show it to people. They'll see things they like.

Academics from the Nation Institute documented this phenomenon in the 1990s, but the results shouldn't be so surprising. We are genetically hard-wired for such preferences. For most of human existence, looking at the world in this way was a matter of survival.

Dennis Dutton extrapolates on this theme in his remarkable book *The Art Instinct*, as does Gordon Orions, a scholar of the savannah hypothesis, which proposes that the major divergence between humans

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and great apes came about from moving out of the forests and onto the grasslands. They found, and I agree, that when people, even modern people, choose what they like best among landscape paintings, they do so based on primal, instinctive assessments of what it would take to survive in that landscape. These factors include areas of cropped grass, which indicates that grazing animals can and do live there. If water is not explicitly pictured, its presence will be implied. There will be an opening, a vantage to a distant horizon. There will be evidence of animal and bird life and there will be a variety of greenery, including plants that flower or fruit.

Our reaction to this kind of art says more about us than it does about the painting. A landscape of this type says that, in this place, a person could maybe make a living.

There is food there. Shelter. A place to hide from something bigger and stronger and hungrier than us. It piques our curiosity because it can be explored, and although there are risks, we can evaluate them. If we're careful and smart, we can see and not be seen. We can find food without becoming food.

Desert and mountain landscapes are strong and beautiful, and paintings of those areas ignite our sense of mystery and adventure in a very powerful way, especially since most of us live under roofs and do our hunting and gathering at the supermarket. But the more pastoral landscapes of the Nation Institute's study appeal to a visceral, fundamental part of humanity.

Those are the places where human evolution took place, and to understand how we've evolved in the landscape is essential, even in a technological world. But ironically, people have destroyed a lot of these landscapes, mostly in the past few hundred years.

So it makes sense that when it comes to conservation work in the modern world we often seek to protect or replicate landscapes that both produce and invite. We emulate the savannah everywhere, in city parks and golf courses and in our own backyards. We plant trees for protection. We trim them to enhance our view.

But productive, inviting landscapes are also the ones humans threaten most often. And when those threats arrive, we react, because preservation is necessary for survival. Without stewardship and responsibility, our natural and spiritual well-being is at risk. This is the gist of conservation, though some people are better than others at watching the horizon and noticing losses and threats.



Glacier Park, Prairie Meets the Mountains, oil on canvas, 10 x 12 in.

The most unfortunate human characteristic, observed Dan O'Brien in his essay "Life on the Myopian Frontier," is our "ability to get used to almost any insult to our senses if it comes gradually enough."

O'Brien wasn't the first to point this out. Conservation pioneers like Aldo Leopold and Wallace Stegner also noticed this trend, but I like the way Jared Diamond describes it in his book *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. He calls it "creeping normalcy."

It's a little scary, all of this creeping normalcy, partly because so much of it consists of people just trying to make a living, whether it's farming or mining or building houses and roads. Though we can differ hotly over the details of a new subdivision or highway, most people see these projects as at least an attempt to improve things or satisfy a need. Few people see themselves as ecological destroyers, but we all participate. We're all part of the trend that is filling up the world and redefining, in steps small and large, what is normal.

But the process of redefining normal almost always includes the loss of something, and we've already lost so much, especially in the natural world. Too many people have no idea how to react to nature, let alone understand it. Everybody is so wired-up and plugged-in these days that science teachers have coined the phrase *nature deficit disorder* to describe today's youth. ►

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Above: *Prairie Moonrise APF*, oil on canvas, 12 x 16 in.

Right: *Rabbit Brush*, oil on canvas, 24 x 26 in.

Stegner feared this situation. Without a visceral connection to landscape, he warned, we will go “headlong into our technological termite life, the Brave New World of a completely man-controlled environment.”

This horrifies me. And that is what propels me, along with so many other artists and writers, headlong into conservation work. It’s both an obligation and a passion.

The Next Big Steps

Successes abound in American conservation: creation of our national parks and forests, the recovery of the wildlife of the West after the decimations of the 19th and early 20th centuries, the cleansing of many American waterways, and improvements in the air in our cities.

Still, our most significant challenges remain. Though we have protected many places, by doing so we have created islands of conservation. Although many are spectacular—Yellowstone Park, Yosemite, parts of the Sonoran Desert—none of those in the lower 48 states is large enough to be a completely self-sustaining, functioning ecosystem over the long term. To have that, you need a massive amount of land, where most of the components—the soil, the plants, and the animals that coexisted for millennia—still exist. Then, with careful restraint and some restoration work, nature can do what it does best: restore, rejuvenate, replenish. Wildness can be reborn.



We now have an organization that is trying to help this process. The American Prairie Foundation aims to create an American Prairie Reserve, a completely self-sustaining ecosystem of approximately three million acres in northeastern Montana. The location was chosen after a World Wildlife Fund study examined all the grassland steppes in the world and found that the glaciated plains of Montana—rolling grass and sage vistas that stretch forever—was one of the few places in the world where restoring the full complement of grassland flora and fauna remains both ecologically and economically possible.

People have used these plains and coulees for thousands of years, but only in the past century have they made lasting marks on the landscape. Lured by visions of free land in the homestead era, modern people with machinery began settling there. For a while they endured blistering summers, sour water, and winters cold enough to crack stones, often in sod houses that leaked both wind and rain.

Not surprisingly, most of them went broke or just gave up and moved to town, with their property reverting to the federal government and adding to the vast swaths of public land in the region. Those who stuck it out endure the same conditions today, complicated by

tough markets and a continually dwindling population in the handful of human communities in the area. Life has never been easy there, and more people are calling it quits. Land often comes up for sale, but buyers can be tough to find.

That’s where the Prairie Foundation comes in. It is buying ranches from willing sellers and connecting existing pieces of public land, patching together the pieces, most of which have never felt the grinding of a plow.

The process is pretty straightforward, but the concept is huge. This is the biggest conservation project ever undertaken in the lower 48 states and stands to be a beacon for how this country and the rest of the world perceives American conservation. This land has been waiting quietly, in a kind of time capsule. While so much of the rest of the world has suffered under creeping normalcy, the glaciated plains of northern Montana bucked the trend, blanketed by harsh weather and isolation.

The Lewis and Clark Expedition passed through here more than 200 years ago, lugging boats up the Missouri River and trying to find a water route to the Pacific. They never found it, but if those men returned today, they’d recognize what they see on the Prairie Foundation properties: a place where you can stand on a knob and see for 100 miles, where you see sky and birds, antelope and prairie dogs, where nature still rules, where you can stand there all day long and never see another person.

In Lewis and Clark’s day, such experiences were commonplace. Today, they have grown scarce.

I grew up on a farm a couple of hundred miles west of the American Prairie Reserve, and though my hometown is steadily crumbling into the earth, that prairie still fills me. In the prairie I see a huge landscape, not just of the land but of the mind. I see freedom to roam both the coulees and my own imagination. I see nature, and I see my own chance to function within it. Our reliance on technology has taken from us many of the skills granted by nature. But nature still exists. On the prairie, it still dominates.

When I go there to paint, I let the prairie teach. It’s starting to show me what clouds know. It humbles me with the ancient biomass beneath my feet, the root system that lets a prairie withstand flood and frost, decades of drought, fire that can outrun a horse, everything but the plow. And even that damage, with time, can be fixed.

Given room and time, nature fixes all. Daily, it crushes rock—with drops of water and in the jaws of glaciers—only to carry mud to the sea and create more stone. On a more human scale, it creates seeds and the mechanism to spread them, be it birds or winds or the coat of a bison or wolf. ►



Masters 2010

Opening the first weekend in February each year, the Autry National Center’s *Masters of the American West Fine Art Exhibition and Sale* presents new works by the nation’s leading contemporary Western artists. Stylistically and thematically diverse, their works represent the extraordinary range of subject matter that contemporary, historic, and mythic Western experiences continue to inspire.

Opening on Saturday, February 6, 2010, this year’s juried exhibition and sale will feature 75 artists who have painted, sculpted, and drawn exceptional artworks. Now in its 13th year, this prestigious exhibition challenges these nationally recognized artists to exhibit their very best work.

Opening weekend activities include an exclusive artists’ dinner with *Masters* sponsors, the traditional chuck wagon lunch and awards ceremony, special presentations by *Masters* artists, a cocktail reception, and the official evening sale. All the artwork in the show will remain on exhibit through Sunday, March 7, 2010. Works not sold the first evening can be purchased during the remainder of the exhibition’s run.

For additional information on *Masters*, including a list of this year’s artists, ticket prices, and scheduling, please visit TheAutry.org/Masters/2010/.

Above: *The Evening Show*, oil on canvas, 40 x 36 in. This painting will appear in the 2010 *Masters* exhibition.

Right: *Montana Hi-Line*, oil on canvas, 20 x 24 in.



Land Snorkeling

Sometimes this fast-paced, complex world overwhelms my brain, and I snap awake at 3 a.m., thinking about all kinds of stuff I can't change. The neurons crunch away while I toss and turn, stewing over my duties to solve the financial crisis, save the planet, or mend a friend's marriage.

Plus I've got problems to solve in my painting, kids to worry about, and a water pump to insulate so it won't freeze when the mercury hits 35 below.

When this happens, I usually wake up crabby and focused on my condition, not on the world around me, which is where I'd rather be. Walking the 50 yards to my studio, I likely won't even notice the golden eagles that live on the rise to the east, the smell of the river, the shape of the clouds.

As a landscape painter, this is not a formula for a productive day.

It's time to make an adjustment. It's time for land snorkeling, something I've done all my life but only recently found a name for.

It's fairly simple.

Go outside. Walk slowly. Pay attention. Listen. Smell the air. Taste it. Look at the soil and see how it responds to your step. Notice which grasses shine brightest in the morning dew. Compare birds, the differences in wing and shape and flight pattern. Maybe kick over a rock, see what's under there.

Think of it like snorkeling a reef. You drift over mysterious turf, in no particular hurry. You keep your head down, mostly. Everything is cool, so you look it all over, and you wonder. And you come back smiling.

Land snorkeling isn't power walking, or even hiking. It isn't about exercising your body. Rather, it's a conscious method of exercising your curiosity. It's not so much about finding answers as it is about finding questions.

For me, it's a vital tool, and has been since my youth on a hardscrabble farm in Montana's wheat country.

I grew up on a tractor, and that's where I started looking at landscape, because that's all there was to look at. And like most teenagers, I could easily find an excuse to turn off that noisy machine.

My favorite thing was to go down into the coulees, where the monoculture of wheat hadn't replaced the native plants. Because it was just so much more interesting, that's where I grew the attachment to looking closer at things, both at hand and in the distance.

I learned how colors change depending on distance, how shadows, like plants, change colors in the seasons: blue in the spring but purple in the fall.

I like to look at how water clings to plants and think about the tensile strength of grass, how it reacts to wind and water and sunlight.



For me, knowing these details is incredibly valuable. If I understand these things, or at least observe them, I can make a better painting.

Land snorkeling can be done anywhere. I've done it from Africa to Alaska, but I do it most often in my own backyard, in the morning shadows of Montana's Crazy Mountains, a range as remarkable as any in the world.

Spending an hour or two focusing my curiosity does wonders, even after one of those nights when my failure to solve the world's problems has stolen my sleep.

When I smell the earth, watch the ravens and magpies pester the eagles, taste the coolness of the morning, and listen to the breeze, my senses come together, coalescing into a brain I can use.

Land snorkeling is about turning sensations into a process, about learning to embrace nuance and trying to understand the connectedness of life: soil, plants, people.

When I get it right, I can almost hear the trees breathing. And later, when I approach a white and empty canvas, my mind is where it belongs.

I'm ready to paint.



Above: Clyde Aspevig, painting on location. Photograph courtesy of artist.

Below: *Land Snorkeling, No. 1*, oil on canvas, 40 x 50 in.

"In the prairie I see huge landscape, not just of the land but of the mind. I see freedom to roam both the coulees and my own imagination. I see nature, and I see my own chance to function within it."

Bison are back on the prairie now. The Prairie Foundation has purchased a few dozen animals and, with their offspring, they now number more than 100, all genetically pure.

When the Prairie Foundation began its work in 2002, bison and wolves and grizzly bears were the only native species that had been eliminated. Now the bison are back. Wolf numbers in western Montana are growing, and they are claiming new territory in all directions.

And grizzly bears, creatures that inspire both horror and marvel, are looking homeward, too. Like the wolves, their numbers are growing and they are staking new ground.

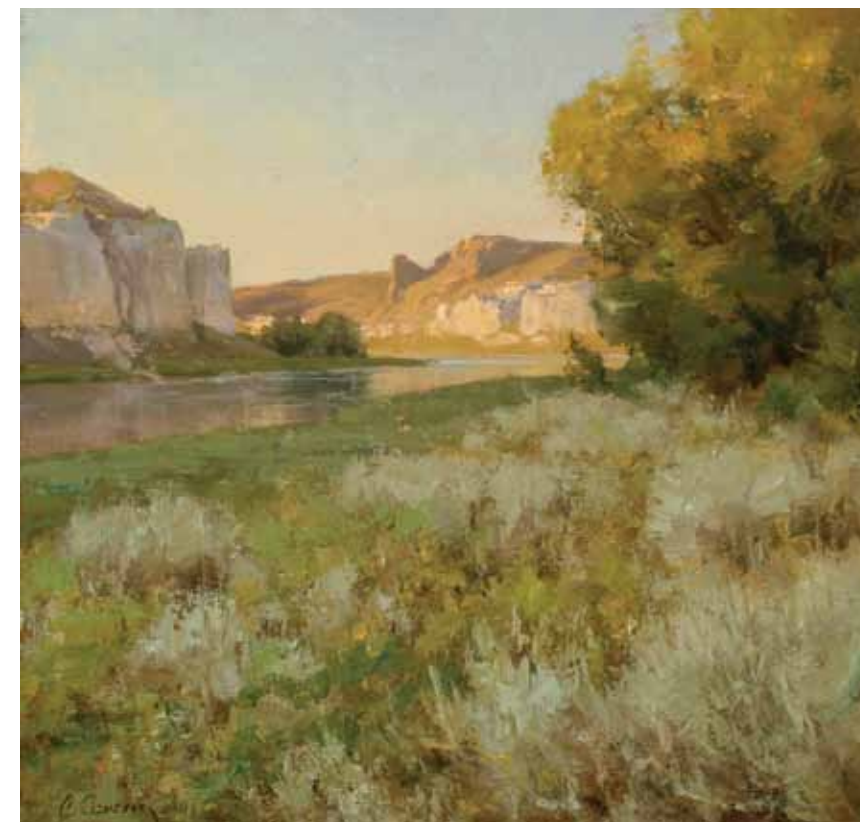
Last summer, one was captured near Loma, Montana, 175 miles from the mountains that flank the Continental Divide—the great bear's last refuge for many decades—and only 65 miles from the western edge of the Prairie Reserve. No grizzly had been seen there for many, many years.

The mountainous parts of Montana, where grizzlies have become more numerous in recent years, have their own problems—most of them linked to the influx of people, with new roads and the traffic they carry, the houses and dogs and unnatural foods that create peril for bears, the creeping normalcy that drives the bears to new habitat or death.

That grizzly at Loma, a hamlet at the mouth of the Marias River—named by Meriweather Lewis for his cousin—was wandering away from the crowds of western Montana and heading for his ancestral homeland, the prairies where his species evolved those long claws and big shoulders for excavating roots from deep in the prairie.

The grizzly, as an idea, symbolizes both our fears as individuals and our aspirations as a culture. As living, breathing animals, they can be dangerous. You need to pay attention when they're around, just like our early ancestors did. If you know there are grizzlies in the area, you have to figure out, again, how to live in that landscape.

Grizzlies provide the gift—an unwelcome one for many—of making us open our eyes and ears and minds. But as a culture, we're not yet ready for the idea of grizzlies in places they haven't prowled in decades. So that bear at Loma was captured, drugged, and hauled back to the mountains—carried from a place that is steadily losing human population and taken to an area where more people go all the time.



White Cliffs of the Missouri, oil on canvas, 12 x 12 in.

I find this a vexing irony. But I wonder, too, if that bear, as he wandered, may have looked east from some tall place? Could he have looked and seen the savannah, the combination of sagebrush plains and timbered washes that make up the prairie? Did he smell the memory of bison?

Maybe not. Most likely, he was looking for new turf, avoiding bigger bears, and exploring the horizon, the one he could see through the trees.

But maybe, like us, he examined the landscape and something resonated, something deep.

I'd like to think so.

I'm on the bear's side.

Inspired by the sagebrush and wide open horizons of Wyoming and Montana, Clyde Aspevig is a landscape painter who does sketches on location and finishes the work in his studio. He participates annually in the Autry's prestigious Masters of the American West Fine Art Exhibition and Sale, where his paintings have won many awards.