

How has eastern landscape painting been an influence on your work?

My parents have many Korean landscape paintings around their house, so I grew up surrounded by them. I appreciate their lack of compression between form and ideology/philosophy. And even though the aesthetic of traditional Asian paintings has been somewhat uniform or conventional through the ages, each painting expresses the energy of the artist, and this transparency allows the works to transcend “style.” Particularly in the aerial landscapes, the paintings embody the experience of the artist in that space (or even Mindscape?) as a form of respiration—the images become the product of the compelling forces behind the surface. I also love that the gesture in the brushwork extends beyond the emotive toward a form of praise by carrying a sense of reverence toward scale (both internal and external).

Theorist Paul Virilio has frequently written about landscape in the context of war. In several cases, your paintings refer to land as a contested place as well as a construct of memory that is defined by war. Have current events (for example, the war in Iraq or the Palestinian/Israeli conflict) influenced your approach and/or thinking about place and what you have chosen to depict?

This project was chiefly inspired by Paul Virilio’s writings. Virilio’s idea of considering duration as a union of simultaneities spurred on this body of work. Traditionally, duration is understood in a linear sense—through measuring an event, which is marked by a distinctive beginning, middle, and an end. Intuitively, this new idea of duration felt right, but I wanted to understand it by visually experiencing it. By creating visual manifestations of discrete velocities which mark the events in various landscapes, the sense of time became more palpable and visceral. A wave breaking over a rock, a river flowing through a canyon, or cumulus clouds drifting over a gorge display multiple tempos and reciprocally exaggerate each other.

Added to this mix are the speeds of the particular acts of humans in certain environments, which extend these temporalities into consequences.

The notion of surveying the land is revisited in a

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different way in these works. In my previous works, it played with the idea of the frontier, or more specifically, the Mindscape being the final frontier as the shift in ontology embraces a state of physical inertia. In this project, I approached it with Virilio’s idea that time has overcome space as our main mode of perception. This influenced my reconsideration of the idea of the frontier—that it is no longer tied to the notion of space, but to the possibilities of events, and how these events define the particular space.

The images of war, most recently of Iraq, are poignant illustrations of how events materialize the space in which they occur. The question seems to be how seemingly foreign places can reside in our psychic landscape without being sites of war or occupation, or if there are events other than war, terrorism, or deterrence that can articulate the presence of other places.

Viewing your paintings from afar, I get the sense that I am looking at the images through a monitor—the images are flat, colorful, glossy, and reflective. However, upon closer inspection, one notices that they also have a wonderful facility to them—they are not as slick and polished as I first thought they would be. In a way, with the evidence of your handwork in them, the paintings defy a one-dimensional interpretation (i.e., that they’re just cold and digitally produced images). Instead, they assert themselves as proof of human touch and human interpretation. This internal juxtaposition—I might even say “rupture”—seems extremely important, especially since I see it surface in other elements of your work. How do you see the formal ruptures in relationship to the conceptual or topical ruptures in your work?

The mimicking of the digital aesthetic is very much about speed. With the reduction of information (as objects and space become organized into flat shapes and color), there’s an increase in the sharpening of the edges. This makes an image more aggressive—it literally propels toward the viewer. From a distance, this makes the work look cold and mechanical/digital, and this rupture you mention happens when the viewer approaches the work more closely to find that they’re painted. It disrupts expectation—and this specific problem is what I find essential to the work.

I believe that the reality of information is entirely contained in the speed of its dissemination. The digital aesthetic embodies the semblance of information.



passage 10, 2005

It approaches the viewer at a constant rate, but as the “rupture” occurs, there’s a moment of hesitation. That is what interests me. In the 21st century, the developments in commutation insist that we orient ourselves in a whole new framework, one that is ridden with decisions. It’s kind of like playing a video game—we’re not enveloped by space, but we re-create space through a new conception of time. The moments of hesitation are the redeeming opportunities for thought, if not survival.

That seems so pessimistic, yet timely, especially when so much of the information we receive (at least through certain news media outlets) does not seem properly vetted, researched, or unbiased. It may lead us (or others looking at us) to make instant decisions that have serious repercussions which, had we waited to digest information in a thoughtful way or not jumped to conclusions, could have been avoided. (I’m thinking, for instance, of the deadly riots in Afghanistan following *Newsweek’s* story about the desecration of the Qur’an—a story they later apologized for as potentially unsubstantiated.) Does that factor into your work in any tangible way?

Regarding the incident over the Qur’an and *Newsweek’s* retraction of the news—the idea of “retracting” something is very strange to me. Not all information exists as separate and isolated components. There are definite consequences. The story about the Qur’an being used as bait in interrogations may or may not be true, but the actual production/printing of the story reveals truths about the media. How does one move from production and ingestion of mere spectacles/sensations to a level where consequences are considered? Why don’t we hesitate more?

Speed, as we just discussed, has some very negative implications. At the same time, however, it also can be a very positive element or force. How do you reconcile that in your work?

At any given moment we are surrounded by discrete velocities. Michael Heim has written that the role of art is to place the viewer back in his/her own body—in essence, giving the gift of “presence.” I think a way to do this is by finding

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something that is symmetrical to your own being, or even mode of being. It’s done in many different ways, but the way I experience it the most is through velocity—a certain tempo in music, a certain conversation, or a certain flow of traffic. Or sometimes, you immerse yourself in a whole different speed just to remember or rearticulate your own speed. But I’m wary of the production of accelerated speed. The military has always been the compelling force behind the think tanks that developed speed (both Bletchley Park/computer and Los Alamos/bomb), and they’re not particularly concerned about ensuring the most humane uses of technology.

The 20th century saw unprecedented progress and speed in all areas—technology, science, communications, transportation, and on and on. And this rapid development has been most concentrated within the past decade or two. Do you see an end to this breakneck pace anytime soon? I may be a pessimist, but it seems that our “cult of speed,” as Carl Honoré has called it, is bound to implode at some point.

The production of accelerated speed is synonymous with progress. One can see it as a quest to find the limits of our control—a search for truth, but not at all a search for meaning. With the increase in pace, the time available for thinking/discernment diminishes. I wonder whether this would inevitably lead to machines becoming our prosthesis for survival where they would define the parameters of our conscience? This implosion that you talk about—could it be that the trajectory of progress is actually a circle? So that we, having left primitivism behind, encounter a whole new form of savagery where machines have colonized our nature of empathy into isolated intellect?

Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* comes to mind. Marlow, the narrator, says, “There was a sense of extreme disappointment, as though I had found out that I had been striving after something altogether without substance.” Technology, like imperialism, uncovers human vice hidden under the guise of civility. In the end, what is progress without the production and retention of meaning? ■



passage 5, 2005



STRANGE PASSAGES

AN INSTALLATION BY MARIA PARK

JULY 15–OCTOBER 9, 2005

KEMPER MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

Maria Park was born in Munich, Germany in 1972. She received her B.F.A. (1995) and M.F.A. (2003) from the San Francisco Art Institute. A recipient of the Joan Mitchell Foundation M.F.A. Award and the Korea Arts Foundation of America Award, Park has exhibited her works nationally and internationally. *Strange Passages: An Installation* by Maria Park is her first solo museum exhibition. Park is a visiting artist at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art.

The following is excerpted from a May 2005 email interview with Maria Park by Elizabeth Dunbar, curator of the Kemper Museum.

Elizabeth Dunbar: Your installation, *Strange Passages*, collapses a series of “virtual experiences” into one space, giving us an opportunity to zoom from era to era and place to place, just by turning our bodies. For me, the installation reads as something similar to a filmstrip. Is this something you had in mind while working on the paintings and envisioning how they would be installed?

Maria Park: Yes, its organization is like a filmstrip, but one that is a continuous loop. To talk about simultaneity, it was important for me not to direct the sequences, but to allow the viewers to construct their own. In terms of the separate images, I tried to emulate Stanley Kubrick’s films by scaling and placing them like the jump cuts, the long extended takes next to rapid takes, and the short pans.

In addition to film, what other sources are you drawing from for the imagery in your paintings?

I’m using a combination of photographs that I’ve taken while traveling, pictures from travel brochures/magazines, and photographs from news journals.

Are all the images contemporary, or do some of them come from the past? Or does it even really matter?

I chose each image for its specific velocity. Most images are of nature, which offers

a sort of timeless quality. This helped isolate the event (and its speed) being portrayed. I tried to stay away from images that had a distinctively past-tense quality to them, because that would make the speed of the event secondary.

You have traveled and lived in many different places—Asia, Germany, England, California, Kansas City—which has exposed to you to multiple cultures and a host of different landscapes. The episodic nature of your painting installation seems suggestive of your peripatetic experience; would you agree?

Very much so. I did move around a lot as both a child and adult. The experience of living in the Middle East during my sophomore year in college helped shape my work. I remember the horizon line being so much clearer, both physically and mentally. The line between my former experience and its culture was just as conspicuous as the line between the sand and the sky. In a way, these landscapes are about creating that line. What makes a viewer want to separate or merge with a particular place/ experience? And the surprises that come with finding familiarity with the strange and the new or, in turn, being startled by the prosaic and the known.

In past works (I’m thinking of the installation at the Belger Arts Center [2005] in particular) you have appropriated scenes and/or elements from science fiction movies. In *Strange Passages* you also reference film, but in this case it’s a western. Both of those film genres romanticize travel and exploration, but from vastly different perspectives. They also suggest



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how we, as viewers, no longer have to physically travel to places to experience them—we now can experience them through film, literature, popular culture, and the Internet. You’ve referred to some of your works as “Mindscapes”—is this what you were relating to?

For the Belger installation I used elements from Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968); for *Strange Passages*, Sam Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch* (1969). Although one projects the future and the other the past, both films bring to the foreground the ways in which humankind objectifies a problematic relation of the past to the present while inhabiting ambiguous worlds that exist somewhere under fact and over fiction. Kubrick’s astronauts and Peckinpah’s cowboys uncover questions regarding contemporary pertinence and presence as they find themselves in worlds in transition (in 2001, man vs. machine; and in *The Wild Bunch*, the vision of the dying West in the early 20th century). Although we are very much at a point of transition not unlike these examples, the use of tropes provides a bit of a relief where we can encounter these terrifying moments as viewers.

I see the Mindscape as a place where all of the images from our experience reside, where multiple realities that are in transit collide and create ruptures (sometimes embodied as explosions/ flashes in my paintings), and where appearance and reality are leveled to one plane.

Like much of your previous work, *Strange Passages* focuses on the landscape, perhaps one of the most clichéd genres of painting today. What about landscape imagery appeals to you and makes it a vital course for exploring in the 21st century?

In the 21st century, the framework of our participation in the world has vastly shifted through the implosion of the virtual and empirical worlds. The projections of science fiction of the past are slowly becoming our real experiences as new innovations in technology hurdle past our collective capacity to comprehend their implications. Landscape is a device I use to show how technology mirrors the primitive experience of nature in its force and pervasiveness.

I’m also interested in the notion of perception. I once read that Edgar Degas refuted Henri Amiel’s statement that “Landscape is a state of mind” with, “No, it’s a state of eye!” A landscape can be described as all of the possibilities of focus that exist within a field of vision. The very act of seeing is inherent in the idea of a landscape—along with the notion of surveying or a “totalizing” vision.

It’s interesting, too, that you phrase it as a “vital course” because indeed that describes its appeal to me. Vitality comes from its invitation for us to position ourselves in relation to it. Many things are responsible for shaping our orientation in the world; certainly, the manner in which various landscapes resonate in varying degrees with different people is an immediate way to measure our existence.

Can you speak more about the landscape elements you have selected to describe (palm trees, canyons, etc.)?

I was looking for a specific visual appeal in these landscapes that incorporated ideas of camouflage and how speed obscures information into patterns (as the images project towards the viewer). Within this dynamic, a certain amount of distance from the scene was necessary. Except for *passage 7*, all allow the viewer to experience the places from a fixed distance.

Palm trees are fascinating to me for many reasons. Visually, they embody the form of the flashes/explosions or ruptures—like bursts of pure energy, immediate and conspicuous. They are also simultaneously symbols of paradise and war (from resort postcards to posters of films depicting battles on tropical fronts).



passage 8, 2005

Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, and Skeet McAuley in your work. How do you feel about being linked with these divergent histories? Are you consciously responding to the history of landscape painting and photography?

It’s interesting that you mention American artists. Both western and eastern landscape paintings have influenced me, but it’s true that this particular project has a distinctively American look and feel to it. Some friends who visited my studio while I was working on this project mentioned that the work expressed the sense of manifest destiny. Like Skeet McAuley and Robert Adams, I’m interested in images that contain a slippage between nature and culture. The new experience of living in the Midwest has informed this work. Here, there is a different physicality to the sense of land due to the absence of mountains that give scale to distance. It’s a whole new way of orienting oneself—one that becomes entirely dependent on time. Scale is internalized and the boundary between self and place become somewhat blurred.

continued on reverse



above: reprising trajectories 5, 2003; front cover: passage 4, 2005

Works in the Exhibition Dimensions in inches; height precedes width.

strange passages, 2005
acrylic on expanded PVC
Courtesy of the artist and
Toomey Tourell Fine Art, San Francisco
passage 1 (a–b), 39 x 25 1/4 each
passage 2, 39 x 46 3/4
passage 3, 39 x 66
passage 4, 39 x 30
passage 5, 39 x 30
passage 6 (a–b), 39 x 27, 39 x 33
passage 7, 39 x 60
passage 8, 39 x 36
passage 9, 39 x 55
passage 10, 39 x 40 3/4
passage 11, 39 x 40 3/4

reprising trajectories 4 and *5* (of 7), 2003
acrylic on Acrylite
24 x 48 each
Collection of Joby Pritzker, San Francisco

Maria Park is a visiting artist at the
Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art.

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