

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

Wheat from Chaff
A Messy Intersection of Desires and Fears

James P Barker

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Hi God, it's me...

They say you become a slave to the things you worship.

What about the woman down the road?

The one with the dead chicken,
lying in rot and scattering feathers by the day.

What does she worship?

What does her arcadia look like?

...to her, or to her son.

Maybe she is absorbed by work and utility,
maybe her son watches cowboy movies and dreams of the old West.

The same escapist nostalgia for a time or place
that I long for, that others long for.

I've been thinking about what it means to see a picture, what it is to be present
staring at the moon.

This is the same moon, always the same moon.

-James Barker

Introduction:

It is a curious emotion; this certain homesickness I have in mind. With Americans, it is a national trait, as native to us as the roller-coaster or the jukebox. It is no simple longing for the home town or country of our birth. The emotion is Janus-faced: We are torn between nostalgia for the familiar and an urge for the foreign and strange. As often as not, we are homesick most for the places we have never known¹

-Carson McCullers

I operate under an acute condition of self-induced displacement, illustrative of the cultural homesickness that McCullers refers to. I long for an idealized American countryside; a harmonious veneer of big skies and sprawling rural landscape to escape the discord of daily life. The vision of a pastoral utopia is engrained in my psyche, and I find myself at the paradox of at once longing for these mythical places and being simultaneously aware that this longing is a product of cultural fiction.

I am a product of my environment, but the act of making gives me the opportunity to make my environment a product of me: to realize a vision, to manicure a landscape, to plant a garden, and to mount my own Arcadian fixtures. The goal is to probe at the liminal state between physical experience and utopian sentimentality.

¹ McCullers, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, 122

While this work is presented in a resolute state of finish, I do not intend for it to be conclusive or self-explanatory. It is a body of fragmented questions, or words of questions that encourages a habit of noticing; to witness the utopian customs of our daily environments, to give them meaning, to give them the language that questions who we are, and to probe at the messy manifestation of our desires and fears.

Section 1: Utopia

A human being, a person, many people, a people, will say that their surroundings, their physical surroundings, form their consciousness, their very being; they will get up every morning and look at green hills, white cliffs, silver mountains, fields of golden grain, rivers of blue-glinting water, and in the beauty of this – and it is beautiful, they cannot help but find it beautiful – they invisibly, magically, conquer the distance that is between them and the beauty they are beholding, and they feel themselves become one with it, they draw strength from it, they are inspired by it to sing songs, to write verse; they invent themselves and reinvent themselves ...

- Jamaica Kincaid's *Autobiography of My Mother* (1996)

In its most basic definition a utopia refers to a better place where the problems that afflict the current condition are transcended or resolved². Coined by the ancient Greeks, it originally referred to “no place”, and described a place that was imagined but

² Noble, *The Utopian Impulse in Contemporary Art*, 73.

not realized. There is a dark, sinister quality to utopia indicated by German philosopher Ernst Bloch, which lies in the “contradictions and limitations that drive our will to escape the here and now in the first place”³. The notion of longing for a better place would naturally imply a critique on the existing one. While this critique may ultimately be autobiographic in terms of one’s personal socioeconomic situation, the flow of cultural progress must be at work.

The West:

Americans have an ever-shifting mental compass, which pushes and pulls individuals throughout the vast landscape. The Millennial generation has been said to be plagued by a “Wanderlust Epidemic”, which embodies a societal urge to hit the road in search of spiritual prosperity. This tendency is a lingering effect of the westward migration of New World settlers.

The notion of Utopia for me has always had its toes in the American West. Sentimental packaging of the West runs rampant in contemporary culture. It pervades nearly every aspect of our lives. Take for instance Woody from Toy Story, the Marlboro man, Walt Disney’s Frontierland, the western omelet. Broadly speaking, these tokens are material manifestations of national experience. These sentimental packages are fragments of a cultural experience of longing for place, and of forging a utopia.

³ Karl Marx, thesis IX, theses on Feuerbach (1845), in Marx, *Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan. Oxford: Blackwell, 1977.

For most Americans, especially east of the Rocky Mountains, the essence of the ethno-centric cause-effect quality of the West as youth and new beginnings is best captured by Texas writer William Humphrey⁴:

When a man decides to pull up his roots and set off in search of a new life, he instinctively heads west. No other point of the compass exerts that powerful pull. The West is the true magnetic pole. Ever since his expulsion from the garden to a place east of Eden, man has yearned westward as towards a state of remembered innocence, and human history is one long westward migration.

In *Wheat From Chaff*, I employ western motifs and clichés to transport the viewer to the idea of this landscape. Fake Yucca's sprouting from clay earth, a rotating image of a tumbleweed made of hair, a ceramic cow skull, a billboard of a pinkish-orange sunset over monument valley combine to embody the idyllic western imagery that formulates our cultural understanding of this place. In highlighting these clichés I hope to call attention to the sustaining romance American culture has to the western landscape.

Section 2: Landscaping

Landscaping is defined as improving the aesthetic appearance of a piece of land by changing its contours, adding ornamental features, or planting trees and shrubs. This is an everyday activity that serves as a surrogate for one's own private Eden.

⁴ Humphreys, *Wakeful Anguish*. 140

Directed by pastoral imagery, idyllic landscapes, and at times suburban uniformity, our immediate environment has the opportunity to become a display of utopian sentiment within the white picket framework of the American Dream. Simon Shama states in his book *Landscape and Memory* that “Landscapes are culture before they are nature” and that they are “constructs of the imagination”¹. They are a projection of ideals and mythologies, fictions and words that are the express product of millennia of human perception. We do it all the time; we tote these cultural backpacks and dump them whenever we momentarily pause in awe, to take it all in.

Someone told me to take my sentimental longing and project it on the world; to see what fits, and to relate; to bridge the gap that we create among ourselves. Through my work I have adopted the role of Chief Curator of the Rural American Landscape, and present a cross-section of the ways in which we as a culture define, manipulate, and present our hopes and fear within the architectural packaging of landscape.

Landscape Object:

Wheat from Chaff uses landscape objects as props for utopian fabrication. Alongside the western iconography, I insert objects from my immediate or autobiographic environment and presented as clean sanitized versions of the original. These pieces formulate a visual language of the American countryside that balances between reality and fiction. Fake plants, well-cover rocks, privacy fences are familiar in recognition, but the jobs they perform are more abstract: how do these elements of the contemporary American Countryside operate within the archetypal landscape? Are we

supposed to ignore these objects? Can we find meaning in them? By using these objects to compose a theatrical scenario, I am attempting to answer these questions, and formulate my own fractured narrative. This moment has the opportunity to transport me into a fictional environment born of bucolic nostalgia.

The visual language that I formulate takes references from various regional cultures. Take for instance the cowboy cutout, generally constructed from 7/16-inch-thick oriented strand board, this object is the silhouette of a figure leaned back against a tree or building with boot kicked backwards and hat tipped down as if in a perpetual state of reverent loitering. Almost always coated in black paint, this inanimate figure is the ghostly apparition of some mythical character symbolizing the cowboy machismo. It represents nostalgia for the American West, and the ideal model of manhood.

The fake rock well cover is an object that negates regional specificity but has become a broad element of landscape visual language. It is a typically grey plastic shell of boulder intended to hide or cover an unpleasant element of one's lawn or garden. This object can serve as a metaphor for the hollow transparent nature of utopian longing in its superficial job to beautify and to conceal the undesirable elements of one's current situation. This particular element has the dual purpose of also housing sound bites, which add to the theatricality of the installation. It at once references lawn ornamentation, as well as theme park ambience. The sound that emits from the rock is a compilation of sounds and noises from various western movies. One can vaguely hear the squeak of a rusty windmill, boots walking on wooden planks, the tap of a telegraph, and flies buzzing.

The yucca plant, which I have fabricated from waxed cardboard and clay, sprouts from implied ground and is situated throughout the stage. This plant is native to the Southwestern United States but is one of the few native desert plants that are hardy in the north. This plant is often used to exoticize gardens and reference the rugged, and arid wilderness of the southwestern United States.

Necessity:

I am also employing objects that are born of necessity. Cattle rubs are long fabric slings often made of thick spandex filled with fibrous paper pulp. These slings are then doused in diesel fuel and pesticide and mounted four to five feet off the ground often near a feeding trough or salt lick. They are intended to passively rub against the skin of a cow to treat them for flies and lice. This is an object that has autobiographical sentiment to my own upbringing, seeing these battered utilitarian sculptures in the pastures of where I grew up, and directly reference the contemporary pastoral.

The Everyday:

Utopia is a response to the quotidian, or the everyday. The quotidian can be thought of as objects, environments, actions, or thoughts that are so deeply embedded into daily life that they become mundane. The emotive response to familiar imagery is an entry point for what Carson McCullers calls the “nostalgia for the familiar”. Further, much of the imagery employed within the work has everyday implications. A sun, ornamental plants, a privacy fence are things one might encounter in an everyday

situation, yet the employment of them in an artwork can urge the viewer to consider their implications. These implications may present themselves in three different ways as stated by author of *The Everyday*, Stephen Johnstone: “a recognition of the dignity of ordinary behavior, or the act of simply stating, ‘here is value’... an unveiling of the accidentally miraculous... [Or to] construct a vaguely ethnographic aesthetic, to be nothing more than the record of simply venturing out and happening across something interesting.”⁵

Vernacular:

Through the act of appropriating the everyday landscape objects I begin to formulate a visual language that is specific and general, foreign and familiar, autobiographic and cultural. This language is less of an invention as much as it is an indication of the everyday, that which exists but goes unnoticed. Many of the objects from which I source imagery are part of the artificial landscape: landscapes that have been fabricated or cultivated to transport the occupant to the idea of a place. This work investigates the ways people cultivate and manipulate their immediate environments to reference their own personal utopias.

Section 3: Fabrication

Contemporary utopias are directed by collective yearnings. There are utopian signifiers throughout America in various forms and at various volumes. Lawrence

⁵ Johnstone, *Recent Art and the Everyday*, 34.

Gieringer constructed an epic indoor miniature village in Shartlesville Pennsylvania titled *Roadside America*. Gieringer's construction is a monumental tribute to a nostalgic America frozen in time with unfathomable attention to detail, but void of the unpleasant aspects of modern life. There is a popular trend among major sporting goods stores to construct massive dioramas within the walls of its store filled to capacity with taxidermy animals in synthetic environments. It has become the high temple of taxidermy and provides a paradise for the suburban sport hunter and fisherman. These fabricated environments can be metaphorically indicative of the façade or artifice of utopian sentiments. While we may long for a better place, these cognitive efforts can only reveal a shallow and warped depiction of this place. In other words, a utopian manifestation does not accurately reflect reality, no matter how desirable it may be.

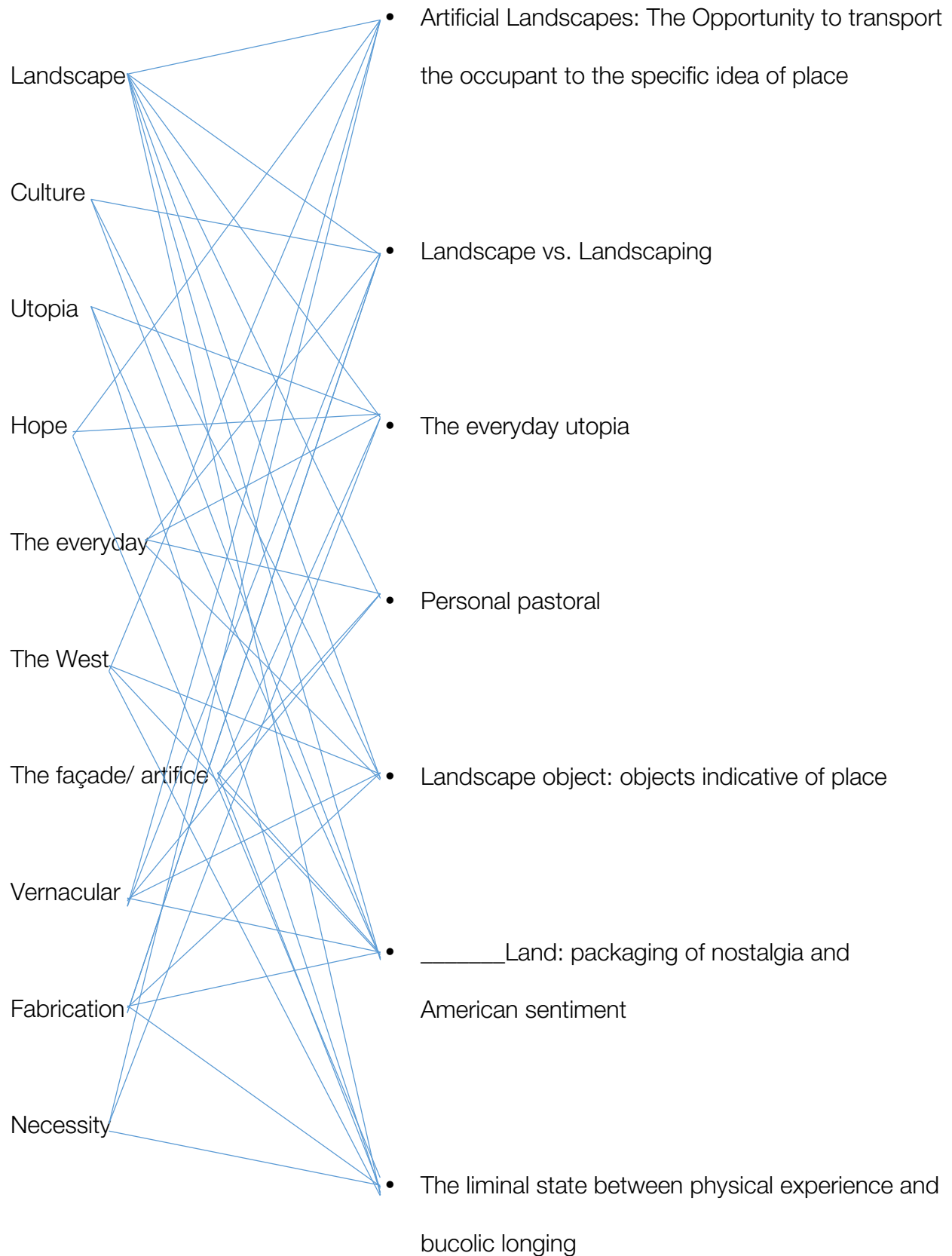
Material:

In Gieringers *Roadside America*, a miniature environment is fabricated from the very materials used to create an actual town; wood, nails, glue, concrete, and paint. These are the vernacular materials of this culture. Major box stores today supply everything to construct an entire house or small village which further validates that these are the materials native to contemporary life. I employ many of the same construction grade elements to maintain the readability of this material language.

Theater:

The most powerful mythmaker and culture shaper of our time, Walt Disney merged his childhood memories with a long tradition of frontier nostalgia to build *Frontierland*, a bucolic theatrical park of the western frontier. *Frontierland*, with its convincingly “natural” fake environments, mythical narratives, and choreographed experiences has proven to be a profound product of pastoral longing. Through the architectural packaging of the mythical west Disney created his own “Golden Age” that the Greek poet Hesiod spoke of over two thousand years prior.

The theatrical format of *Wheat from Chaff* provides moments of suspended disbelief, where the viewer can be fully immersed or transported to place directed by visual and sensory stimulus. Installed within the walls of a re-purposed church, the environment I create can become a place of worship: *Wheat from Chaff* becomes a surrogate environment of my own personal utopia.



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Technical Statement:

Most of the material and processes I employ in the studio are project specific. The following is an abbreviated list of current materials and processes used in the creation of thesis work.

Materials:

- Cardboard: Templates are made from lauan ¼ inch plywood. The templates are then placed over cardboard and marked with sharpie marker and cut on a band-saw. To achieve rigidity, I layer multiple pieces of cardboard laminated with contact cement.
- Print Cutouts: Hi-Resolution images are generated with a Canon 5D DLSR camera and imported to a computer. First I edit them in Adobe Lightroom for a quick curves adjustment, and subsequently Photoshop for more detailed alterations. The file is then sized appropriately and sent to the designated Canon printer loaded with corresponding printing media (Canvas and watercolor paper are used most for their durability in mounting and cutting). The printed images can then be cut and registered on either lauan or ¾ inch finished plywood cut on either a band-saw or scroll-saw. I use 3M Super 77 spray adhesive, applied to both sides of material to be adhered.
- Fabric: I am currently using two different kinds of fabric. For the cattle rub slings I use heavyweight pink sweatshirt fleece, cut by hand, and sewn with a Brother XL-2610 sewing machine. These objects are stuffed with Comfort Research UltimaX Bean Bag Refill, roughly 100 liters per sling. The other fabric used is a

found-as-is work table canvas, cut by hand and machine sewn. The filler is a plastic bag of approximately 25# of sand.

- **Plaster Rocks:** First I purchased a new fake rock well-cover from Lowe's. I made a rubber mold of the exterior of this plastic rock out of Smooth-On Brush-On 40, brushable mold rubber. A 2-part mother mold is then cast over the rubber, made of plaster gauze. Once the prototype is removed and returned to Lowes, a positive can be made. To make the positive, I mix pottery plaster and begin to trowel it on the inside by hand. To achieve uniform thickness, I do a second or third coat of plaster sprayed on through a pneumatic popcorn sprayer. For colored plaster I use dispersed pigment with the highest possible tinting strength purchased from Guerrera Paint and Pigments.
- **Paper Mache/ Paper Mache Pulp:** My ingredients for paper mache are flour, wood glue, salt to taste, and water to workable consistency. These ingredients are blended and adjusted based on the needs of a specific project. The same ingredients are used for the pulp, with the addition of all-natural recycled paper insulation. Consistency should mimic a moist clay, and should not be overly saturated with water. This can be tinted and colored with the addition of ceramic oxides or paints.
- **Wood Stain for Fencing:** 1 gallon white vinegar, 2 super-fine steel wool pads. Wait two days and brush on wood to achieve weathered appearance.

Exhibition Statement:

I operate under an acute condition of self-induced displacement, indicative of the cultural experience of longing for place. Bucolic literature, films, media, and artwork have served an important role in the creation of the mythological American west: depictions of lush meadows, endless plains, and big skies. This romantic notion is engrained in my psyche, and I find myself at a paradox: at once longing for these mythical places and simultaneously aware that this longing is a product of cultural fiction.

I formulate a visual language that is both specific and general, foreign and familiar, autobiographic and cultural. Through the act of appropriating everyday objects, I create a vernacular language of western sentiment and the cliché of prosperity and freedom. Many of the objects are a part of the artificial landscape; landscapes that have been fabricated or cultivated to transport the occupant to a personal utopia.

I am a product of my environment, but the act of making gives me the opportunity to make my environment a product of me: to realize a vision, to manicure a landscape, to plant a garden, and mount my own Arcadian fixtures. The goal is to probe at the liminal state between physical experience and utopian sentimentality.