DESERT SUBLIME

SOUTHWESTERN LANDSCAPES BY EMMA STIBBON

13 MARCH–15 MAY 2023

HUMANITIES CENTER GALLERY, SAINTS TEKAKWITHA AND SERRA HALL

CHECKLIST

All works are by Emma Stibbon, RA
(b. Münster, Germany 1962, lives Bristol, UK)
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Lotto Guns Ammo, 2018
Intaglio, 16 ¾ x 36 ⅜ inches
Private Collection, Los Angeles
Photo by Stuart Bunce

Abandoned Cabins, Rhyolite I, 2019
Ink on paper, 11 ⅝ x 16 ½ inches
Courtesy of the artist

Abandoned Cabins, Rhyolite II, 2019
Ink on paper, 11 ⅝ x 16 ½ inches
Courtesy of the artist

Wooden Chute and Small Tin Shack, Saratoga Mine, 2019
Ink on paper, 11 5/8 x 16 ½ inches
Courtesy of the artist

Tramway Upper Terminal, Keane Wonder Mine, 2019
Ink on paper, 11 ⅝ x 16 ½ inches
Courtesy of the artist

Ballarat II, 2019
Ink on paper, 11 ⅝ x 32 ⅞ inches
Courtesy of the artist

Cook Bank Building, 2019
Ink on paper, 16 ½ x 11 ⅝ inches
Courtesy of the artist

Road to Death Valley, 2020
Intaglio, 21 ½ x 26 ¾ inches
Purchased with funds provided
by the Humanities Center
PC2023.03.04

Amboy Crater, Mojave Desert, 2021
Intaglio with hand-coloring
29 ¾ x 19 ¾ inches
Purchased with funds provided
by the Humanities Center
PC2023.03.02

Salt Flats, Badwater Basin, 2021
Intaglio and woodcut, 13 ¼ x 35 inches
Purchased with funds provided
by the Humanities Center
PC2023.03.03

Boom or Bust, 2021
Intaglio and woodcut, 16 ¾ x 29 ½ inches
Purchased with funds provided
by the Humanities Center
PC2023.03.01

Mojave Desert Night, 2021
Intaglio, 25 x 37 ⅝ inches
Gift of the artist
PC2023.03.05

Cook Bank Building, Rhyolite, 2023
Intaglio, 15 ¾ x 22 ¼ inches
Gift of the artist
PC2023.03.06

Abandoned Cabins, Rhyolite I, 2019

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Abandoned Cabins, Rhyolite II, 2019

A CONVERSATION ABOUT THE DESERT SUBLIME

The following transcript captures an interview at the artist's studio at Spike Island Artspace in Bristol, England which took place on January 14, 2023. That conversation has been lightly edited for purposes of readability.

Fig. 1 *Amboy Crater, Mojave Desert*, 2021

Derrick Cartwright: Let's start with your creative commitment to extreme environments: Whether it is glaciers, icebergs, volcanoes, fire-ravaged forests, or deserts, this interest seems nearly total. What draws you to such places?

Emma Stibbon: In analyzing works I've made, I see that there is a definite pattern of interest in landscape as something always in transition, something that is massive and solid yet, astonishingly, always on its way to becoming something else. If we think about the seismic landscape, for instance, the very ground we stand on is not to be trusted. Of course, with climate warming, this basic observation seems all the more poignant. I've always been intrigued by the geology and geography of places, but also, obviously, this has a particular relevance today.

There is a history in England that ties artistic practice to place going back through the Romantic Sublime to our earliest cultural symbols of earthworks and stone circles. Being British, I suppose, some of my references to landscape have to be seen through this lens. Artists have tended to identify themselves with specific locales and have shown deep attachments to those places. I can identify with that in that my approach is based in research done in the field. In the 19th century artists were immersed in representing landscape from direct observation. There is less idealization in this British tradition than one finds in, say, the American Sublime depictions of nature. Thomas Cole and Frederic Church were interested in dramatic effects and often idealized place, whereas John Constable or John Ruskin were committed to close observation and nature 'truthing'. In his book *The Elements of Drawing* (1857), Ruskin encouraged people to draw in order to understand nature: 'I would rather teach drawing that my pupils learn to love Nature, than to teach the looking at Nature that they may learn to draw.' I can really identify with that sentiment. It seems natural to me to want to make a drawing as soon as I arrive at a new place, as a way to begin to understand it and perhaps become part of it.

DC: But, unlike Ruskin, you seem to pull back from minute observation. Your compositions tend towards the panoramic. Is that correct?

ES: That's true, scale is important in the way I want to pull the viewer into the image. Whilst this historical context is really the background to where I find myself today. I may fictionalize what I observe, but that fiction is deeply rooted in what I've seen out there. Doing preliminary work in the field is essential to making the finished image in the studio. Once back in the studio the work might mutate from its original source and I feel free to alter elements according to my ideas and composition. I assemble a landscape that is not an exact topographical transcription of a place, but hopefully suggests a sense of being there.

DC: The very first time I encountered a solo-exhibition of your work was, I think, in 2015, at the Scott Polar Research Institute in Cambridge, England. In that show, called *Ice Limit*, your drawings and prints were paired with scientific instruments from the Institute's permanent collections. Do you always welcome that kind of interdisciplinarity?

ES: Very much, yes. Whenever I embark on a project, I tend to seek out the expertise of others such as the curator of historic collections or, at the Polar Museum, there were also glaciologists and other scientists who were extremely helpful. These conver-

Fig. 2 Mojave Desert Night, 2021

sations served not only to advance that one project but encouraged me to seek out cross dialogue with all the research I've undertaken since. The dialogue with scientists gives my research a better grounding, I find I am more rigorous about what I set out to accomplish in the field. I guess it helps me to understand the processes by which a landscape has been shaped through geological time and the impact of current climate warming - it's like putting on a pair of spectacles.

A lot of my research takes place in archives too. A good example of this can be seen in the sketch and print of the Rhyolite Bank building in *Desert Sublime*. My first encounter with that building came in the form of a photograph glimpsed in an archive. When I visited Rhyolite and saw the actual bank in its ruinous state, I could conjure the image of its glory days when it was thriving and peopled. This cross-referencing forced me to question my assumptions about the relatively brief time within which a landscape can change. I guess this confrontation with ruination and extreme nature faces us with our frailty and even existence as a species. It is a folly to think about our surroundings as unchanging and permanent.

DC: *Desert Sublime* is focused on your investigations of the American Southwest and will be nested in a Humanities Center that happens to be in that very region. Does that coincidence interest you?

ES: Yes, I welcome the chance for my work to be seen in an academic environment of earth sciences, humanities and philosophy. I am also thrilled and not a little nervous that the exhibition will be on show to audiences who are familiar with this landscape. I'm not from these places and I am interested in how it will be received. Obviously, my native geographical horizons of the UK are much smaller. My thinking about California, Nevada, Arizona and Utah has always been mediated by the films and books that I grew up with. Authors like Jack London and Zane Grey really made an impression on me. Their accounts about the human endeavor of trying to survive in extreme environments, whether those are in the Yukon or in the desert are extreme. Their accounts sparked my imagination and when I came to actually witness these landscapes, I was amazed by the sense of the familiar.

Witnessing the scale and almost infinite horizon of the American Southwest was something completely unexpected for me — it was a totally new experience and I think has changed me. The unpolluted night sky was incredible, in a print like *Mojave Desert Night* (fig. 2) I wanted to capture something of that deep space. This image traces back to a road trip that my partner Andrew [Johnson] and I made together. We knew roughly where we were but once we stopped, it was a realization of the vastness of our surroundings, simultaneously quite beautiful and terrifying. In the darkness one felt like the cacti might actually advance on you like gothic creatures on the side of the road. It was an extreme experience and I've tried to capture that sensation in the image.

DC: How do you go about planning your field trips?

ES: I might plan the logistics of a trip around something that I've read or heard about that sparks my interest. I have been fortunate to benefit from two fantastic residency opportunities from the NPAF (National Park Arts Foundation), one in Death Valley in 2019 and another which took me to Volcano National Park, Big Island Hawaii in 2017. This allowed me to really investigate the landscape over a long period of time.

DC: That sounds fantastic. Tell me about a day in the field in Death Valley. You have to get out early, right?

ES: Yes, rising early is not my natural inclination but the dawn light in Death Valley was not to be missed. As the sun rises it slowly illuminates the mountains and dunes like a curtain of light and the colors are amazing. In terms of planning, I usually do some weather and map checks the night before and pack up my drawing materials and photography equipment for the day ahead. In Death Valley it's critical to always check the weather, particularly in the slot canyons as in heavy rains you could become trapped by flash floods. The National Parks service has mapped out extreme trails that traverse remote locations. Although we had a four-wheel drive vehicle some of the roads quickly became sketchy. I do the navigating and Andrew is the intrepid driver, he's really good at traversing rock strewn tracks with me gripping the dashboard with white knuckles.

Another example, at Amboy Crater we trekked out to the crater and I made several quick drawings, also using my camera along the way. I was fascinated that around the crater the terrain was strewn with volcanic rocks that appeared to be graded by size and weight. I guess the eruption had thrown them out in this vast

Fig. 3 *Tramway Upper Terminal, Keane Wonder Mine*, 2019
Fig. 4 *Wooden Chute and Small Tin Shack, Saratoga Mine*, 2019

Fig. 5 *Salt Flats, Badwater Basin*, 2021

scattering of lava. When we arrived, the light was just highlighting each stone and backlighting the crater. It made me think of the work of Vija Celmins, whose imagery of deserts has always fascinated me. I gathered some volcanic ash from the crater floor and once I was back in the studio, I incorporated it into my artwork for the print *Amboy Crater* (fig. 1). It lent a gritty texture to the image that suggested the volcanic terrain. But I also liked the fact it bonded the subject with matter.

DC: Maybe this is a good place for us to pivot to your printmaking practice and for me to ask you to explain how a drawing, done as a form of field research, makes its way back to Bristol and ultimately becomes a print?

EM: I see my printmaking as an extension of my drawing process, although there are differences in my working approach. When I'm drawing from observation in the field I am working quite quickly and trying to get my response down on paper. The challenges of weather and terrain tend to make me less self-conscious. Back in the studio making a print everything has to be a bit more planned. Printmaking involves a staging of the image, a separation of the different plates and colors. All of the images in this exhibition are made by a polymer gravure process. To make a print I start by drawing on a transparent film, usually in an Indian ink. It's at this stage I add any earth materials or ash to the drying ink and it becomes a physical part of the drawing. This artwork is then exposed onto a light sensitive aluminum plate that has the effect of transferring the drawing, with all of its nuances, to the printing matrix. The plate is then inked and put through the press, just like an etching plate. My editions tend to be fairly small, usually around 35. I make and proof the plate to the BAT stage [*bon á tirer*—ready to pull] and then the edition is completed by master printer Amy-Jane Blackhall of Ink on Paper Press in nearby Wiltshire.

DC: That's slightly more complicated than I had imagined. How long would you estimate it takes you to produce a print, start to finish?

ES: Drawing the artwork for a print can be quite spontaneous, I try to retain the feeling of my sketchbook drawings. However, the process of print is more involved. Once the plate or plates are made there are so many variables of inking and adjustments to the image it takes time and patience. Many images have to be abandoned along the way but if I'm lucky I can create a finished work in a week.

DC: How do you reconcile your role as an observer of desert landscapes with the experience of indigenous peoples, for whom these landscapes are home?

ES: I am acutely aware that I am not from many of the places I represent and indeed this makes it hard to reconcile my presence as an outsider. Indigenous communities are profoundly connected to their native landscape provoking me to think about our all too often problematic relationship with nature in Western societies. Whilst I was in Death Valley, I visited the Timbisha reserve. There is a wonderful small museum there and I was shown artifacts that revealed the strong connection with their lands. Similarly, when I was on Big Island, I met many Hawaiians who talked about the landscape as a living being, with spiritual, historical and familial meaning. That sense of the landscape's inherent strength, its animism, includes the idea that every element, a cloud for instance, is imbued with spirit and meaning. That's how nature is. If you are living in an extreme environment, you had better pay attention to what is going on. If you don't you won't know when to conserve, when to stop, or even when to bail out. I think in many societies we've completely lost our perspective on that.

DC: Have your experiments with materials led you to any discoveries about these environments?

ES: Yes, when I incorporated sand and earths from the desert into some of my drawings I discovered the gritty texture as it dries out on the page is determined by its natural properties and I liked the physicality of that. I want to relate the materials I've gathered to the subject I'm representing—to impart something of the physical experience of place to the viewer.

DC: Let's return to the question of why the Southwest? You could have picked other deserts to explore, right? Was it just a matter of nostalgia for familiar representations, or was there something more that drew you to that particular environment?

ES: It is hard to find such incredible landscape features and vistas that are as impressive as the Southwest. Those amazing rock formations, mesas and buttes which are such vivid features called to me. In some respect, I wanted to finally see the places that were familiar to me through cinema; backdrops to the films of John Ford or I really remember a film called *Duel in the Sun* (1946) that I think was made by David Selznick. Their vision of the landscape was emotive and a bit melodramatic. At some level, I suppose I wanted to see if the actual place lived up to those imaginative depictions that I knew from childhood. And I was amazed that in addition to the sheer beauty of such extreme places what really came alive for me was the human endeavor, and the human failure, that went alongside existence there.

Rhyolite, for example, is to some extent an unimaginable place for most people. As a town it had a brief life, 1907 until about 1910. But during that time people succeeded in building this massive, complex infrastructure, some of which still remains as a ruin (fig. 7, *Boom*

Fig. 6 *Lotto Guns Ammo*, 2018

or Bust). When I was there in January it was reasonably comfortable while I hiked around but in midsummer it is unbearably hot. Other locations such as Keen Wonder Mine you have to hike a good part of the day just to get up to some of the old workings. These places were built around mining gold and extracting toxic minerals from the earth. Prospecting must have created a truly hideous environment for these people who were breathing in dust in the intense heat of summer. An individual would go there, against heavy odds, hoping to make their fortune. Just as easily they might die there from exposure to the elements. Desperation and hardship went hand in hand with great dreams. In a funny way, that dreaming sums up America for me.

I think that people who live in these places are made of strong stuff. Ballarat is a ghost town today, like Rhyolite, but in the early 20th century it had everything that it needed: a bank, several bars. It was just as quickly abandoned and then, darkly, in the 1970s, it was a hangout for Charles Manson and his Manson followers. There is one resident in Ballarat today, I think his name is Rocky, who lives out there pretty much by himself. He showed me some of the ruined buildings and Manson's abandoned truck that sits by the side of the road, the ceiling of which is painted with stars. Manson was not the only celebrated resident of Ballarat, however. In the town's cemetery there is a gravestone marking one former hard-core resident "Seldom Seen Slim." For his part, I am sure that Rocky thought I was the nutty one, sitting in the dust drawing.

DC: What about a work like *Lotto Guns Ammo* (fig. 6)? How did that come about?

ES: We were on a remote road in Arizona, driving to the North Rim of the Grand Canyon. It had snowed the night before and the feeling of that big landscape was pressing on all sides. Very few cars were on the road and even fewer buildings, so when we saw this lone garage with a swinging sign on the side of the highway it caught my attention: "Lotto, Guns, Ammo, Beer, T-Shirts, Tow". We pulled in and filled up and when I went inside to pay the attendant, I saw that behind him was this wall completely filled with boxes of different calibers of ammunition. It was incredible. The idea that you could fill up your car and, while you're at it, just buy some bullets is completely alien to someone from England. My sense was the sign was a kind of menu of what's possible, or maybe what's necessary to get by in the desert. It was written without irony. It was an assertion; this is what we are. In the final print, to be fair, I made it bleaker than it actually was. By placing the sign separately from the garage building, up on a bank, silhouetted against the night sky, I made it starker, more like a film still.

DC: You aren't known for depicting people, can you tell me more about that?

ES: That's a good question and difficult to answer. I tend to want to set the scene as a space outside of time, I'm not so interested in setting up a narrative. As soon as you see a person in a landscape, or their belongings, it begins to fix the place in time. If there is any narrative to my images, I want it to be the viewer that is implicated within the frame and for them to project their own meaning. What I am trying to achieve is maybe different from the traditional mechanisms of the sublime where a viewer is often depicted from a position of safety within a scene, looking at some sort of awesome, threatening or catastrophic event. If you think about Caspar David Friedrich's figures in his paintings, they are always poised on the brink of the scene, beholding. I am hoping to tip the viewer into the frame and force them to become that figure (figure 5, *Salt Flats, Badwater Basin*).

DC: What's your biggest hope for audiences in San Diego to come away from their encounter with your desert imagery?

ES: I would be pleased if the work provokes audiences to go out and explore. Maybe people will be intrigued by my response—or be repelled. That's ok, too. We are here for such a relatively short period of time, both as individuals but also probably as a species. I'd really like my work to capture a moment of wonder at the beauty and drama of this planet.

Fig. 7 *Boom or Bust*, 2021

Ballarat II, 2019

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Emma Stibbon's relationship with the University of San Diego is deep. Her large woodcut *Aqueduct Rome* (2011) was perhaps the first original print to enter the Humanities Center's collection. After that, in February 2019, Stibbon delivered a marvelous talk at the Center. Since then, her works have been included in several exhibitions, including *Ruskin at 200* (2019) and *Some Bodies: The Oceanic Imagination in Contemporary Art* (2018). *Desert Sublime: Southwestern Landscapes by Emma Stibbon* is the first comprehensive public display of the artist's work done in the American west. As such, it counts as a survey of the past four years of Stibbon's environmental research and creative practice. First and foremost, therefore, I want to thank the artist for her immense effort and significant friendship.

EMMA STIBBON IN HER STUDIO

The artist would like to thank the National Parks Arts Foundation and Death Valley National Park for the opportunity of being Artist in Residence based at Stove Pipe Wells in 2019. Also her thanks goes to Derrick R. Cartwright and Brian R. Clack for organizing this exhibition at the University of San Diego.

At the University of San Diego, I wish to express appreciation, first and foremost to the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Noelle Norton, for her steady leadership and support of dynamic programming in the Humanities Center. Lindy Villa, Assistant Director of the Center has provided substantial administrative support of this, and all other projects undertaken by the Center. Derrick R. Cartwright curated the exhibition and contributed an interview with Stibbon to this brochure. As part of a multi-year investigation of "human landscapes," *Desert Sublime* suggests the importance of interdisciplinary perspectives that drive so much of our public-facing efforts. We depend upon the talented team in University Galleries for the installation and care of these works. In this regard, I hasten to acknowledge Suzie Smith and Sarah Bane for their thoughtful, thorough contributions to this project's success. Leah Roschke, principal at Studiografik, designed this handsome publication and the graphic identity for this ongoing series. We hope that sharing these works with the campus community, and beyond, will focus attention on the beauty, and fragility, of deserts both nearby and distant.

BRIAN R. CLACK
A. VASSILIADIS DIRECTOR OF THE HUMANITIES CENTER
AND PROFESSOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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COVER *Road to Death Valley*, 2020

All images are photographed by Chandler Hubbard, unless otherwise noted.