

ARTIST SPOTLIGHT: IN SPACE, IN TIME

RYAN HENEL, M.F.A. Candidate, University of New Mexico

The open desert of the Southwest allows access to a unique experience of space, distance, and, consequentially, time. We are constantly reminded of how our existence is relative to the larger order that surrounds us—its scale often beyond our understanding. The experience of space and time inherent to the desert has influenced my work. Most of my installations are created for a specific site, often placed out in the landscape. I try to develop work that relates to a land feature or a human built element on a site. Often the work's function is to isolate a particular perspective or characteristic of the environment. I look to re-frame what is already there.

When I am working with a site, I try to spend as much time as possible experiencing the space through different conditions and frames of mind. This process is intuitive and sometimes arbitrary: walking, reading, sleeping, staring. Sometimes it is necessary to remove one sense in order to facilitate awareness. I might use earplugs to remove sound, for example, allowing a sharpening of sight or increased sensitivity to touch. I try to relate not only to the physical characteristics of the site, but also to its current use or its history. Many times, after “digesting” or living in the space, I have noticed that certain qualities become predominant, at which point I can react to them.

Through my work I try to create experiences that reshape the way we interact with or see the environments around us. I believe that when we develop a spatial awareness, we become more cognizant of how our actions are part of a larger cycle or process that is vast in scale. Working outside the jurisdiction of traditional art-viewing environments allows for a different relationship between artwork and viewer. There are expectations inherent to viewing artwork in a museum or gallery. Outside this forum, the viewer is offered a chance to experience art that can be perceived, even if momentarily, without the anticipation of it being art. This context is a powerful staging tool to allow the spectator to experience a place or event without pre-determined ideas. When coming upon something that does not have an immediately identifiable function or purpose, the mind is afforded a chance to search for

meaning and associations. I look to facilitate this sort of encounter when developing a work for a site.

Perspective chamber was built as a place to stare (Plate 1). It was created during the Land Arts of The American West journey of 2003—a course of field study at the University of New Mexico that offered a group of students the chance to experience significant earthworks and cultural-historic sites, as well as create their own work outside of the traditional studio. *Perspective chamber* was situated in the evaporating shores of Lake Powell in Utah. Here, the shifting volumes of lake water, moving clouds, and eroded sedimentary rock provided the context for creating a work that experimented with our understanding of space and volume. In an attempt to subtly blur the distinction between artwork and site, I used existing stone from the surrounding area to create an intimate refuge. This space, only large enough for one person, situated the viewer in a reclined position, sloped towards higher ground. It provided the visitor a station from which to observe a towering mass of rock formations beyond. From the “oculus” at the end of the structure, I traced a line in the sand to the landmark in the distance. The view from the chamber foreshortened the perceived distance, collapsing the space between viewer and object. This work was an attempt to play with the cognitive dissonance of physically being located in one place, yet allowing the mind to conceive of being elsewhere.

Survey also attempts to draw the viewer to a specific sight line and another place (Plates 2 and 3). Located on the outlying grounds of El Camino Real Heritage Center,¹ I designed this work to act as an upright marker in an open chasm of horizontal space. It was intended, in part, to bring awareness to the desert surrounding the Heritage Center and the conditions migrants experienced when traveling the Camino Real. Two columns, constructed of adobe and framed by a thin steel armature, acted as a landmark, drawing the viewer in from a distance. The dirt columns rose up as if extruded from the earth, yet showed the clear imprint of human presence. The steel triangular projections off of the columns followed a trajectory much like a rectangle drawn in one-point perspective. When situated between the two columns, the triangles directed the viewer's gaze to the sunrise and sunset at the time of construction. Time was indicated not only by the passing of sun and shadow, but the slowly eroding adobe. With *survey*, I was interested in blurring the

distinction between what we consider man-made and natural. My choice of materials was an attempt to visualize and confuse this socially constructed dichotomy. The adobe, a raw natural material, was cast within the order of a steel frame. As the adobe eroded away, the steel frame referenced its pre-existing volume, acting as a reminder of the original intended form. Through the process of decay, the adobe's association transferred from man-made back to natural, illustrating how human intent inevitably succumbs to time.

In *constellation*, I created a piece that related to man-made structures at the Center for Contemporary Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico, employing the same methods I use in a natural landscape (Plates 4 and 5). A plot in the center of a circular roundabout allowed me to experiment with perspective in 360 degrees. I developed a work that offered many different forms, depending on the vantage point. A planer wedge shape was chosen in response to the sloped shape of a pre-existing structure on the premises. The form was constructed out of *latillas* (small wood poles), which are used in traditional United States southwestern architecture. The material related to the vernacular of the location, and the form to its surroundings. The sloped cuts of the poles created a constellation of points. The optical phenomenon created by the poles changed as the viewer moved around the sculpture, the form appearing to shift in mass and volume. Light also emphasized this effect, sometimes drawing out, and other times, camouflaging the piece against a background of trees.

In *depth of field*, I used a similar language to that of *survey* (Plates 6 and 7). Located on a flat plain of land on the property surrounding a casino at Pojoaque Pueblo in Santa Fe, New Mexico, my intention was to draw the stray visitor away from the containment of the casino and towards a distant land feature. Each of the three adobe columns had roughly the proportions of a human being. Each had a set of pivoting, aluminum louvers, which reflected light in accordance with the moving sun and air. This reflection acted as a sort of signal or beacon, drawing the viewer in from a distance. Within close range, the sculpture offered two deliberate lines of sight. Standing at one end of the work, the shifting louvers aligned to create an abstraction of a mirage on the horizon. Looking in the other direction, the columns' arrangement directed the viewer's gaze to a unique, mound-like land feature off in the far distance. Again, as with *perspective chamber*, this

framed perspective created a dissonance between the viewer and a distant object—flattening our sense of depth and scale.

In the natural world, symmetry and geometric patterns are apparent at the microscopic scale. Strong geometry in nature is often invisible to the naked eye. With *field divisions*, located at The Land/An Artsite in Mountainair, New Mexico, I created a work with strong geometry to emphasize an existing pattern in nature (Plate 8). As the viewer approaches the piece, an inlaid stone triangle in the path designates the vantage point for the work. From this point, a series of reflections trace a triangular gap in the juniper trees, their source not readily recognizable. These reflections are generated by rectangular mirrors on steel armatures refracting the shifting daylight. Depending on the angle of the sun, the color changes from a full spectrum of red, orange, and blue to invisible. When the mirrors match the color of the sky, it looks as if holes had been punctured through the hillside.

In conclusion, my installations are not only intended to be signs that point to other places or features, but also markers in and of themselves. I attempt to work in the universal tradition of land marking. I am intrigued by its continuity throughout history and cultures. Landmarks, such as the specific arrangement of stones, are reinterpreted over and over throughout time, each new generation overlaying its own understanding of the signs of the past. Although I have specific intentions with my work, I try to maintain a level of ambiguity, which allows space for the viewer to assign his or her own meaning. I appreciate that my intentions could become just another layer in the landscape, a scratch on the surface of time.

RYAN HENEL, M.F.A. Candidate, Art and Ecology,
University of New Mexico.

NOTES:

¹ El Camino Real Heritage Center is a New Mexico's State Monument that presents the history and cultural significance of the Camino Real trail, the emigrant trail that brought Spanish and Mexican colonists to New Mexico in the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries.



PLATE 1. Ryan Henel, *perspective Chamber*, 2003, Lake Powell in Utah, stone.



PLATE 2. Ryan Henel, *survey*, 2005, Socorro New Mexico, adobe and steel.



PLATE 3. Ryan Henel, *survey*, 2005, Socorro New Mexico, adobe and steel.



PLATE 4. Ryan Henel, *constellation*, 2006, Santa Fe New Mexico, wood.



PLATE 5. Ryan Henel, *constellation*, 2006, Santa Fe New Mexico, wood



PLATE 6. Ryan Henel, *depth of field*, 2010 Pojoaque Pueblo, aluminum.



PLATE 7. Ryan Henel, *depth of field*, 2010 Pojoaque Pueblo, aluminum.



PLATE 9. *Man's Tunic (Uncu) with Tocado and Stylized Jaguar Pelt Design* (double-sided), Bolivia, Lake Titicaca, mid- to late 16th century CE, tapestry weave (cotton warp; camelid, silk, and metallic weft), 38.5 in x 30.75 in (97.8 cm x 78.1 cm). Courtesy of the American Museum of Natural History, Division of Anthropology.



PLATE 10. *Figure of Eagle Warrior*, Mexico, Aztec culture, 1440–69 CE, clay, 46.46 in x 66.93 in x 21.65 in (118 cm x 170 cm x 55 cm). Courtesy of Conaculta, INAH, Mexico.

PLATE 11. *Hanging or Mantle*, Peru, Inca culture, 1450–1532 CE, cotton (discontinuous warp and weft), 72 in x 72 in (182.9 cm x 182.9 cm). Courtesy of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

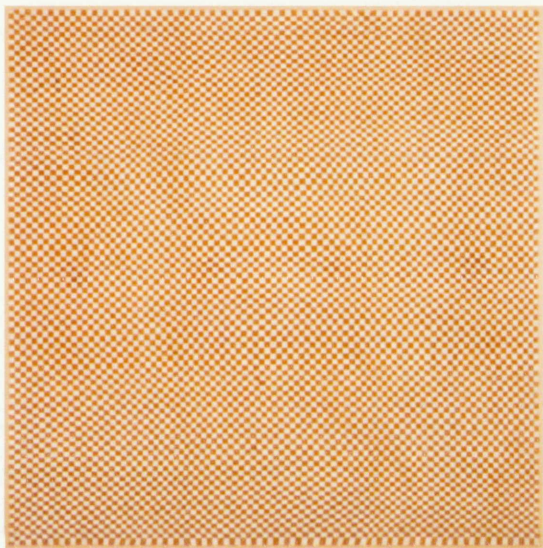


PLATE 12. *Man's Tabard*, Peru, South or Central Coast, Inca culture, late 15th–16th century CE, feathers knotted and sewn to plain-weave cotton ground, 25 in x 55 in (63.5 cm x 139.7 cm). Courtesy of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.





PLATE 13. *Bishop's Feather Work Miter and Infulae*, Mexico, ca. 1559–65 CE, feathers glued on handmade (amate) paper and textile with embroidery, mitre: 16 in x 12.5 in (41 cm x 31.7 cm), infulae: 17 in x 4.2 in each (43.7 cm x 10.6 cm). Courtesy of The Hispanic Society of America, New York.



PLATE 14. Morlete Ruiz, VII. *From Spaniard and Morisca, Albino*, c.1760 CE, oil on canvas, 41.3 in x 49.6 in (104.9 cm x 125.98 cm). Courtesy of Los Angeles County Museum of Art.