Catalogue essay for *The Plains of Sweet Regret,* by Karen Wilkin

MARY LUCIER: THE PLAINS OF SWEET REGRET

 The Prairie is unforgettable and unforgiving, uncannily beautiful, exhilarating, and a little frightening. All the literary and cinematic clichés turn out to be true: the endless space, the relentless bowl of sky, the fierce extremes of weather, the treeless-ness, the emptiness, and – especially for those of us who grew up near salt water – the inescapable inland-ness. People who live there have characterized it as "lots of space, few people, big farms, small towns, good hearts." "Big horizon, lots of sky, grasses, straight roads." "The center and the circumference." "Backyard of the creator." "Freedom personified." "You can see weather and neighbors coming for miles," they tell us. They itemize "the soughing of the wind, patches of rhubarb and lilacs, abandoned churches and cemeteries." "A sense of hope denied."

These terse, loaded declarations, presented in white type against vast, luminous grey screens, begin Mary Lucier's video installation, <u>The Plains of Sweet Regret</u>, a meditation on the current state of the Prairie, commissioned as part of the North Dakota Museum of Art's Emptying Out of the Plains project. The fragmented phrases – responses to Lucier's questions to people she met during the three years she spent shooting in North Dakota – are isolated, repeated, and arranged in a sequence that depends on the viewer's choices and position, so that they become a kind of vernacular prose-poem. Their matter-of-fact acuity sets the tone for Lucier's deeply moving, disquieting work, a multivalent layering of images and sound that is at once a dispassionate record and an expressive transformation of acute observations, simultaneously homage and elegy.

Lucier's eighteen minute, five channel video installation takes as its point of departure the archetypical qualities of the Great Plains; the first images of The Plains of Sweet Regret are vast expanses of ochre and grey fields in early winter, patched with snow, sliced by an endless stripe of empty road. The dramatic, timeless space is mesmerizing, but we are soon confronted with images specific to the present, as Lucier turns her attention to the signs of irrevocable alterations in Prairie life brought about by economic shifts and changes in agricultural practice over the past half century. She notes the traces of a fast-disappearing past and the manifestations of present vitality, and constructs from them a complex visual fugue, defining the shape of her installation with four enormous screens, scaled to the huge spaces of her subject, with a pair of smaller plasma screens placed back-to-back in the center, amid a scattering of wooden schoolroom chairs. An evocative soundtrack by her long-time collaborator, the composer Earl Howard, threads through the work, punctuated by rare bits of ambient sound.

Occasionally, subtle manipulations of the images – alterations in speed, subtle dissolves, judiciously timed overlappings – heighten the impact of particular sequences and prefigure the extravagance of a strangely mournful and exuberant "finale." Some images are repeated, like the continuo of a Baroque concerto. Some appear only on the plasma screens, others only on the large screens, and still others move between the two, serving as a kind of counterpoint and defining not only space, but time; the differences between the images – the resolution of the plasma screens is crisper and brighter, while their proportions are more elongated – add another layer of physical variation. (Lucier, unlike many of her colleagues, treats video not simply as a visual medium, but as a "sculptural" one, often disposing images and objects, as she does in The Plains of Sweet Regret, in both space and time, in ways that

emphasize their literal three-dimensional relationships as well as the metaphorical and fictive spatial relationships of what she captures with her camera; it makes sense when we learn that before she began to explore the possibilities of video, as one of the pioneers of the medium, Lucier made sculpture in welded steel.)

The mood of <u>The Plains of Sweet Regret</u> is melancholy but never sentimental.   If Lucier is alert to the effects of time, to the progress of the seasons, and to nuances of light, she is just as responsive to the less overtly poetic motifs. She is a sympathetic connoisseur of kitsch, devoid of self-congratulating irony, who seems to accept unlovely vestiges of modernity as revealing phenomena, without criticizing or mocking. In <u>The Plains of Sweet Regret</u>, roads stretch endlessly in an achingly beautifully, unpopulated landscape, yet we are reminded that for all its breadth and emptiness, this is not untouched nature, but rather, a man-made environment in flux. Flaking signs for roadhouses and stores, rusted cars with shot-out windows, and an ancient truck bear witness to now-vanished populations. Slow explorations of abandoned buildings ravaged by weather and neglect give way to intimate views of things left behind by the previous occupants. Once tidy farmyards are filled with the brittle, unharvested stalks of escaped crops. Tall grasses fill our field of vision. A food processing plant sends a roiling tidal wave of smoke against the rosy sky of a frigid winter morning. Actors prepare amid backstage detritus. Heavily pregnant cows cluster in a rancher's birthing pens in spring. Bull riders compete at a rodeo. Behind all of Lucier's intensely suggestive images, underlying the elusive narrative hinted at by her sequences and rhythms is not only a celebration of a disappearing way of life but also an implicit questioning of the <u>idea</u> of the West.

The history of Prairie settlement is astonishingly brief, even in the context of the compressed time of the New World. Less than a century and a half separates the arrival of the first settlers on the Great Plains from the exodus that inexorably eroded what once seemed to be a changeless, established way of life – the present day depopulation of the region that Lucier explores. Perhaps that erosion was inevitable. The first settlers came to prosper, drawn by possibility and opportunity, sometimes misled by promises of a more benign climate and more accommodating conditions than they found. The climate was so severe and the weather so capricious that simple survival became an all-consuming task, a task made even more difficult by the endless, deep-rooted grassland that surrounded the new arrivals, a ravishing landscape that exacted a tribute of brutal labor if it was to become productive.

New technology made the settlement of the Plains possible, with the development of the Conestoga Wagon – the "prairie schooner" – in 1815, which allowed whole families, their goods, and livestock to make the grueling journey from the settled East to the new land acquired by the U.S. with the Louisiana Purchase. New technology came to the rescue of the early settlers, in 1837, when the invention of the steel plow finally gave the pioneers a tool that could cope with the heavy soils and tangled roots of the West's grasslands. Starting in the 1860s, the railroad gradually stitched together the Great Plains, and eventually the entire country, collapsing distances and opening up new possibilities for marketing the products of the Prairie, beginning a process accelerated in the mid-20th century by the simultaneous expansion of the interstate system and the growth of a car-culture. But if technology helped to create prosperity on the Great Plains, it ultimately destroyed the world created by the original settlers and their descendants, just as the interstate system spelled the decline of the railroads, Twentieth century mechanized farming, chemical fertilizers, weed

and pest controls, (not to mention America's deplorable eating habits), made it not merely practical to work larger and larger holdings with less and less effort, but an economic necessity, if farmers were to survive. Agribusiness and government support replaced the family farm and self-sufficiency, wiping out entire communities along the way.

All of this haunts the imagery of The Plains of Sweet Regret, as Lucier's camera peers through the clouded windows of empty buildings, cataloguing barns and farmhouses, an abandoned school. At first, ambiguity prevails. Are the golden brown stalks that sometimes fill entire screens or lap at derelict porches escaped wheat, unplowed cover crops, or a reversion to native Prairie? Sometimes they appear to be one, sometimes another. The deserted barns and farmhouses seem timeless, like romantic echoes of a remote past. But as Lucier moves in, exploring the former inhabitants' leavings, we realize we are not being offered remote exotica, but rather, familiar, ordinary things from the recent past. Lucier presents us, for example, with a weathered, grimy window, the winged screws that once held screens still in place, and turns these bits of unremarkable hardware into artifacts of seasonal domestic rituals that once paralleled the rhythm of plowing, seeding, cultivating, and harvesting. Lucier's eye dignifies even the most undistinguished, mass-produced objects. She turns a clutch of small sports trophies, one wrenched and twisted into High Baroque complications, into monumental sculptures. (I kept thinking about Bernini's spiraling David.) She tenderly catalogues an upright piano, tired upholstered furniture, and a mail order catalogue left in an empty schoolhouse, making them suggest both community participation and recent enterprise. It's impossible to date the fantastic wallpaper of a ravaged farmhouse, nature brought indoors as an exuberant swirl of plants that never grew on the Prairie, its tropical lushness an antidote long, cold, dark, leafless winters; whenever

the paper was first installed, the flamboyant pattern of the peeling décor now bears witness

to domesticity, to a desire for embellishment, to choices made, not all that long ago, by the

people who once lived in the crumbling house.

When Lucier's searching camera moves into the interior of a sod house, we are suddenly

moved back in time, to the 19th century or the early years of the 20th. The house is clearly

not inhabited, yet the setting seems peculiarly intact, the gingham curtains only slightly

stained, the remaining assortment of portable furnishings too good to be true. Homemade

wooden toys – a crude clock with a drawn-on face, and a miniature chair – fill the screen.

It's all a little too picturesque and rather puzzling, but charming enough that we are almost

willing to accept it. Lucier never explains the anomaly, but simply allows the images to tease

her viewers and nag at them a bit. In fact, the sod house was constructed and furnished as a

movie set, but preserved as though it were a historic monument, so the images stand

simultaneously for both present and past, fact and fiction. Lucier includes, too, an authentic

sod house that turns out to be somewhat less photogenic than the simulacrum, but its

presence encourages us, perhaps subliminally, to revise our ideas about its more decorative

counterpart; this kind of complex, but casually presented layering of perceptions is typical of

Lucier.

Typical of Lucier, too, is the essentially musical structure of <u>The Plains of Sweet Regret</u>.

Repeated images recur like leitmotivs throughout the piece, now dominating one or more of

the large screens, now appearing on the smaller plasma screens. The changing relationships

of these repeated motifs bracket and order a range of rarely repeated or even unique images

and sequences. We slowly become aware that a low shot of grasses repeats, with slight

variations, to provide a kind of continuity, punctuated at times by more urban, industrial

images – a factory and a grain elevator, for example – or by different kinds of rural emblems

– sunflowers or a grasshopper crawling on a sturdy young hand – always seen from an

unpredictable point of view. The repetitions and their variants gradually make their rhythm

felt, measuring time, as they move through the prescribed space of the screens, just as the

plaintive harmonies of Earl Howard's score of slow, plangent chords gradually resolve

themselves as a coherent construction. We come to recognize the recurring images,

welcoming them as familiar landmarks, whether they loom above us on the large screens or

appear more discretely on the plasma screens, yet they seem to mean something slightly

different each time they return. These recognitions are, in fact, crucial, since the spatial

complexities of the installation force us not only to shift our focus from screen to screen,

but also to change our viewing position completely, if we are to take in all of Lucier's slowly

accumulating motifs; even then, we must rely on memory, and we always risk losing

something by fixing our attention on particular images or combinations of images at the

expense of others. The awareness of the effects of the passage of time that forms the

subtext of the work is literally embodied by the fugual relationship of the various parts,

which makes repeated viewings of The Plains of Sweet Regret both pleasurable and essential,

as we discover more and more subtle interrelationships of its imagery, its implied narrative,

and its form.

At unpredictable intervals, Lucier disrupts her visual orchestration with subject matter that

seems at odds with what has preceded it. At other times, she inserts surprising crescendi

after pianissimo sections, in the form of manipulated sequences that contrast notably with

more neutrally observed images. At one point, for example, three of the large screens

suddenly fill with inexplicable images of brightly colored fabrics and a jumble of objects. A

young woman gazes at herself. A rapidly glimpsed sign advertising ticket sales makes us

realize that she is an actress making-up, which, in turn, makes us look a bit differently at a

uniformed young man and a florid older woman who loom in the other screens. They begin

to perform head rolls, each completely self-absorbed. On the fourth screen, the images of

the three are superimposed and reversed into kaleidescopic symmetry, the layered heads

fusing and separating with the rhythm of their relaxed movements, slightly slowed down to

make each turn of the head seem both important and voluptuous. (Lucier often plays with

the speed of her images, slowing down real-time sequences just enough to make fleeting

expressions seem important or extract the maximum eloquence from small gestures.) In a

more extended passage, we drive rapidly by an abandoned town, glimpsing its buildings,

signs, playground equipment, and rusted vehicles in snatches, as if we were simply passing

through and not paying close attention. The only sounds are car noises. Soon, we become

aware that we keep passing the same buildings. Image is superimposed upon image, as

though we were simultaneously seeing reflections in a car window and looking through that

window at the derelict buildings outside. Everything becomes suffused with a blurry

whiteness; combined with the sense of speed and the ominous car sounds, which could be

howling wind, the slurred images become a metaphorical winter storm, highly abstracted, but

convincing. The layering and movement of the sequence, like the superimposition of the

slowly moving actors' heads, prefigure things that will appear at the end of The Plains of

Sweet Regret. At the same time, they call attention to the artifice and willfulness of Lucier's

use of her medium, reminding us that what we are witnessing is not an unmediated record of

things seen, but a deliberate, thoughtful, and meticulous crafted construction whose

evocative power is inextricably bound up with the possibilities of its medium.

If the shots of objects left behind, the peeling signs, the rusting cars, and the movie set interior call up the presence of vanished inhabitants, the actors announce that the Prairie is still home to a living culture, albeit one unlike our notion of the traditional West. An extended cattle ranching sequence even suggests that something of that imagined culture does exist, that there is continuity and perhaps even some hope for the future. Or perhaps not. On the plasma screens, a man rides through fields, on horseback, to speak briefly with a man in a truck. Their conversation is inaudible, but in closeup, the man in the truck looks troubled by what he has heard. In counterpoint, the large screens fill with "portraits" of massively pregnant cows. One bats enormous eyelashes; another looks bored. The troubled man in the truck, in overalls and rubber boots, moves among his cows, as massive and ponderous as they are. Once handsome, he is now a lumbering bear, weighted with flesh. From another screen, his carefully coiffed blonde wife smiles a little self-consciously. On all four screens: a burst of yellow liquid and a calf, a compact, caul-wrapped purplish bundle, slides on the thick straw. Lucier zeros in on the pulsing, enigmatic mass. The mother nibbles at the membrane, pulling some of it loose, but fails to free the head. The bundle heaves, without much effect. Has Lucier slowed time again or is the moment as fraught as it seems? The massive farmer's booted foot enters the frame; a huge gloved hand pulls the caul off the calf's head and the mother takes her newborn's scent. Then, on all sides we are surrounded by the image off a wet, wobbly, very new black calf, testing the possibilities of standing. A blunt brown nose appears and the calf slowly turns his head to look for the first time at his mother. It's a magical moment, but Lucier delicately undercuts its poignancy and implied hopefulness with an astringent reminder of reality. One by one, the images disappear, leaving the giant screens blank; on the plasma screens, we see a tiny town, a

handful of small buildings in a limitless Prairie, sliding into the distance in the rear view mirror of a truck.

What follows is, in musical terms, a last movement that conceptually and, to an extent, formally sums up the themes, both explicit and implicit, of what precedes it. Lucier explores rodeo as phenomenon, paradigm, and metaphor, first moving among tense men as they prime themselves for the event, offering one another encouragement and advice. She peers over their shoulders, as though she, too, were a potential participant, apparently unnoticed or ignored. But Lucier – and we – quickly become pure spectators, as a gate is drawn back and a bull rider explodes towards us. The entire rodeo sequence is fused with a George Strait country and Western song, "I Can Still Make Cheyenne," all driving rhythm and sorrowful lyrics, that turns the struggle between the insecurely perched man and the enormous, plunging beast into a kind of dance without compromising either the drama or the mournful tone of the event. (By the second verse, we begin to suspect that some of Earl Howard's stately progressions of synthesized chords, which underline earlier portions of The Plains of Sweet Regret, have anticipated the harmonies of Strait's pulsing tune.)

Lucier remains fascinated by the spectacle, shooting bull after bull, but only the first rider is dispassionately recorded. The bull, in this round, is the star. He is shown at the end of the sequence in iconic profile, apparently savoring his victory over his unseated rider. For the rest, Lucier superimposes images as she did in the "winter storm" section in the deserted town, and reverses them, as she did the "portraits" of the actors, to create a symmetrical, curvilinear, near-abstraction of the ritual of rodeo. Where the images overlap, everything becomes momentarily, tellingly clear. The reversal and doubling (and slowing of time) turn

even horrifying moments or banal occurrences into visual poetry; an unseated rider, hung up

in his bull rope, swings beside the rocking monster in slowed-down graceful arcs that cancel

out his evident danger. A barrel rolled across the arena to distract the bull becomes elegant

punctuation, seeming to slide in from both sides, because of the doubling and reversal; the

rodeo clowns' diversionary movements become a playful pas de deux. Bulls charge at

themselves, forming paired, curving shapes that meet in the middle, close up, pass each

other, and open up once again, the manipulation of the film turning raw animal violence into

a paradoxically sinuous, controlled movement.

The George Strait song that drives the images appears to have been manipulated in similar

ways, so that it becomes a kind of canon whose overlappings and repetitions echo the

blossoming, unfolding images. The song, with its irresistible beat, insistent melody, and

elaborated harmonies continues, full strength, but the rodeo sequence ends, diminuendo,

with a steer-wrestling event and a very young man in a Stetson walking slowly out of the

arena, head down, looking boyish and vulnerable. He and the calf he successfully downed

have just rolled over and gotten up at the same moment, moving off in opposite directions.

The young cowboy's heraldically doubled profile under his white hat briefly becomes an

emblem of an imaginary, idealized West. We wonder about his future and that of the calf.

Lucier's transformation of the testosterone-charged spectacle of rodeo into a series of

sensuous, symmetrical images, unfurling smoothly, folding onto themselves and unfolding

into each other, is, in a sense, a metaphor for the transforming role of rodeo itself. (That

some viewers have seen vaginal allusions in the overlappings is yet another kind of

transposition.) Rodeo is both an affirmation of the new culture forged by settlers in the

West and a witness to the decline of that culture. It celebrates skills originally essential for

everyday survival and prosperity on the ranch, turning them into autonomous virtuoso

performances that were once demonstrations of practical prowess, but are now pure sport,

with little application to the mechanized world of the modern West. This assumes, of

course, that the glorified cowboy, the heroic, agile, white-hatted rider of the movies and

literature really existed. Lucier's haunting, "balletic" rodeo leaves the question open, but its

eerie images and its unexpected reinvention of those images as abstractions take on a

compelling life of their own, almost independent of the rich, unstable meanings of what

inspired them. Yet, at the same time, the still-recognizable, specific events unscrolling

before us read as elusive emblems of a perhaps non-existent, certainly idealized West – the

Prairie of our collective imagination, which steadily grows as remote and irrecoverable as the

vanished life of the abandoned farmsteads and deserted towns of the earlier portions of The

Plains of Sweet Regret. Strait's song about a wayward "rodeo man" and his long-suffering

lady reduces a curious way of life and its complicated ramifications to a throbbing,

unforgettable tune. Lucier's clean-cut young steer-wrestler momentarily fulfils our image of

the young cowboy; then we start to wonder what he does in his "real" life, surrounded by

those treeless, endless expanses, those food processing plants, those empty roads. "Freedom

personified" or "a sense of hope denied"? Perhaps some of both.

Karen Wilkin
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