



PLAINSONG



THE VIDEO OF MARY LUCIER

Paula Rabinowitz

These days, when you drive through the upper Midwest, you don't see any houses—no buildings, no barns, few cattle and fewer trees—just acres and acres of neatly planted corn, soybeans, rye, alfalfa. Crops replace villages. Obviously, without housing there are no people, but even



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Mary Lucei. *The Plains of Sweet Regret*, a video installation commissioned by the North Dakota Museum of Art, 2004. Installation images in Stereo. Offscreen images: Mary Lucei.

their remnants are rare. Where do the people who manage this manicured expanse live? How does the work get done? I asked these questions of an agronomist a few years ago on one of my first trips through northwestern Minnesota. "Oh, in one lives on the land now," he replied. "The owners live hundreds of miles away; their workers drive into a storage shed for the tractor, which can do 60 miles per hour, and go off at night to a second job."

In the 1920s, Sinclair Lewis savaged the once thriving towns full of petty shopkeepers serving the rural America of his fictional village Gopher Prairie. Driving through Sauk Center, Minnesota, site of Lewis's *Main Street*, you find only a shell, a Hollywood set for Smalltown, USA, kept alive now by cashing in on the local boy who took off. The recent emptying of this already empty space tells a story about both the macroeconomics of

agriculture and the intimacies of private lives: abundance paradoxically means evacuation.

The Plains of Sweet Regret, Mary Lucier's five-channel, 18-minute video installation, was commissioned by the North Dakota Museum of Art in spring 2001 as part of its larger "Emptying Out of the Plains" initiative. *The Plains* consists of four large-screen video projections, two plasma screens and composer Earl Howard's rich surround soundtrack, and invokes classic images of the empty landscapes of America's Great Plains. It's all there: Charles Sheeler's grain elevators, Edward Hopper's lonely farmhouses, Dorothea Lange's photographs and Pare Lorentz's documentary films of the Dust Bowl. Yet Lucier recasts the harsh weather and stark terrain, endlessly blowing winds and the engulfing prairie, into a vibrant and alive place. A place still responsive to human desire, still capable of accommodating human scale despite the ruins she finds standing eloquent guard to lives once lived.

"Leavings" are what remain after an object, or a location, has been used and discarded; they remain after departures. They are departures from someplace to elsewhere, unstable, ephemeral, melancholic traces. *The Plains of Sweet Regret* is full of others' leavings. All those who once built shelter, acquired furnishings and stitched curtains to block out the hard sunlight, the freezing winters: their ghosts haunt the landscape. Their leavings—strange, even perverse, stuff squirreled away in closets and chests. Found by Lucier's camera, framed as evidence that someone once studied arithmetic, bowled a perfect 300, hemmed a tablecloth. Other people's leavings offer palimpsests of incomplete pasts, lives accessible only by remove.

Video, a quintessentially dematerialized medium—its repetitive scan lines a digitized record of disappearance—often appears in contrast to the solidity of the earth and its varied objects. Landscapes, of course, are as evanescent as video. In the Great Plains, the horizon stretches forever, telephone wires stringing along with it; a visual cliché because it's true. Nostalgia leaks out of the very words "great plains," even for those who have never been there, much less lived amid its expanses. Long highways, tires whirring on pitted

asphalt or the packed dirt of two-lane county roads, cosses of trees defying an ever-present wind from the north and west. In the summer the wind blows dust and bugs across the windshield, sways the fields of cornstalks, sunflowers and amber rye, or in the winter blows cold, so cold that snow barely sticks to the ground. And the cattle that must be fed because grazing land no longer exists and there's emptied towns with weatherworn houses and farmhouses and railway depots long abandoned, or, even sadder, still in use but just barely. Places like Devils Lake and Ardoch, just up the highway from Grand Forks. Landscapes of escape, where even the most settled get blown away as the wind strips away surfaces, insects devour crops, the young move on. Leaving.

Playing with the borders of minimalism and its debt to the monumental scale of this huge continent, its reduction of materials to basic elements, Lucier records the minute alterations human presence etches onto the open spaces. In her installation, mesh screens covering four walls convey the repeating constant of endless terrain as the synchronized image travels from one screen to another. It's a rigorous structural rhythm: beginning, repeating, ending in synch, calling attention to the grids of pasture laid out in infinite symmetry. Electronic sounds tuned to mimic ambient noise travel around the four walls, offering volume, like the air, to emptiness. A slow beginning: harmonies from two channels recall slide steel guitars, limiting the five-channelled images. As the images layer, repeat and multiply, overlaying shots of passing grain elevators, railroad tracks, highways, the sounds multiply: an icy shattering, a tinkling of broken glass, noises that evoke memories of other noises. There but not quite there, a sonic presence felt through absence like feeling the wind. The images, sometimes barely visible under layers of repeating structures all weathered to a uniform grey, call forth the ghosts still inhabiting this haunted place.

At other times, Lucier cracks the expanse, and the images break up into a fuzzy rendition of a landscape viewed from a car window. These four mesh walls contrast with the pristine clarity of the plasma screens, whose dimensions draw the eye down toward the floor. Designed to be viewed



from glossy white, old-fashioned penmanship chairs placed in the room's corners, versions of the chairs Lucier details in an abandoned school-room, the plasma screens' precision condenses the interchange between objects of human scale and the enormous space in which they dwell. Echoing the earthworks of Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, whose grand gestures of minimal alteration recognized the transience of stable forms and solid mediums, the camera moves among discreet objects and blurry sequences. Even rock will eventually wear down because wind and water—transparent, fluid, elusive—have off microscopic bits over

time. Lucier's sustained efforts to distill the landscapes of America reframe the continent; the grainy video projections a response to the loss of nature, to loss in nature. The evanescent light passing across the walls brings the exterior inside, a reversal of the role structures normally play—to guard against the outdoors, to shelter from the elements. Instead, the landscape is brought indoors, opening the museum space to its habitat. Lucier's sculptural control of light transforms it into mass. An odd reversal of Michael Heizer's massive installation, *North, East, South, West*, at the Dia: Beacon, which reorients latitudes and longitudes into four,





huge, metal depressions, two circles, two squares aligned linearly, disturbing our sense of geography as metal gives way to open space and caverns emerge from the floor. Perhaps Lucier's installation balances another engagement with natural and artificial light, another refashioning of abandoned structures, this one found at the southern end of the prairie. Dan Flavin's posthumous installation at Richmond Hall on the grounds of the Menil Collection in Houston restores a derelict 1930s grocery store through its three distinctive neon pieces placed in, on and around a building once full of cans of evaporated milk and sacks of

flour and now reverberating with abstract signage and natural light.

Lucier traces the sights glimpsed by those passing through—the proverbial American road saga. But she stops and lingers, exploring the interiors of some of the buildings left without structure, performing an eerie, ephemeral, elegiac venture inside emptiness to discover what gets left when those once living within have gone. An archaeology of wallpaper, of floorboards buckling from leaky roofs, bronzed bowling trophies, a painted blue kitchen table posed exactly as Walker Evans found the Burroughs's table in their Haie



County, Alabama, home in the summer of 1936 when he and James Agee travelled south to detail the harsh conditions of tenant farmers in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Those two were tracking what was to be called by photographer Dorothea Lange "An American Exodus" caused by drought and Depression. Right now, people are also quitting the Plains, but they have been doing so since whites first settled them, since before then, when Kiowa and Sioux passed across on the trail of buffalo. About an earlier piece, *Wilderness*, Lucier remarked (in an interview in *Mary Lucier*, Johns Hopkins Press, 2002) that her "subject has something to do with national identity and personal identity, increasingly expressed in the investigation of landscape and light in landscape."

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Abandoned structures speak to heroic efforts to survive, to break sod and overcome fierce nature, but the elements are defeating. The sun fades colours, muting everything, the wind erodes earth, planing the landscape to a flat surface, the snow covers the rivers and fields and bleaches the earth into the sky. Drought and floods. Still, artefacts of human handiwork are defiant claims of possession and presence. Things remain, perhaps hidden, and Lucier's extraordinary eye discerns them: brooms and buckets and shards of glass. And the evocative signature of those who move on—the road slot in the side-view mirror.

As outside and inside reverse, landscape becomes still life and objects fill space. Lucier dwells on things achingly human: a sunflower shedding its seeds is a marker of a garden now annually self-replicating; volunteers or migrants, they're called. The list: a rusted pickup still showing its orange paint here and there, telephone poles tracking the highways, fractured windows framing others across an empty room. These are the material objects of lives passed and time stretching across space. Repeating and rotating the images around the room,

Lucier avoids fixing any one image as an icon of nostalgia. We keep missing something if we follow the four screens or if we remain fixed and frozen on only one. The twin plasma screens face in opposite directions, emitting the identical image, returning again and again to a close-up of a grasshopper poised in a child's hand, cupped to receive it until it too ultimately moves on. Gone, like the evanescent electronic tracks by Earl Howard synthesizing a series of sounds reminiscent of, but not quite true to, a pedal steel guitar, the whirring tires on the road, shattering glass falling from a broken pane, and ever, the wind, which never ceases to move grasshoppers and grasses, factory smoke, clouds and the weather they bring across the landscape.

Evoking every rodeo song, every rodeo film—Montgomery Clift getting thrown in *The Mistles*—final minutes of *The Plains of Sweet Regret* track the Devils Lake rodeo, where one man after another tries and fails to ride a steer. Like Clift, these cowboys can't master the bucking animals under them. Thrown, they stand up, curse themselves, the bull, and walk back to the corral to await another round, another chance, another moment of exhilaration and possibility and, invariably, another fall. Set to George Strait's "I Can Still Make Cheyenne," Lucier lets go her restrained elegiac tone, reverent even of the smokestacks emitting pollution into the early morning sky, the oil derrick nodding dully, the casino's tacky slot machines, and gives rein to the medium. All along she has slowed down her beautiful shots, superimposing road images over each other, but in this final sequence she slows almost painfully. She doubles and reverses and overlays the action so that for one minute the rodeo ballet becomes a Rorschach, then gives way to a kaleidoscope of prismatic colours symmetrically weaving reds and blues, then the brown earth and hides, into a Navajo blanket, taking on an almost 3-D heft. And it goes on and continues ecstatically as if Strait might just make it before she leaves him for another man, leaves that rodeo man, leaves only leavings. ■

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