The Lay Of The Land

LOGAN MACDONALD
Dear Logan,

I can feel you through your work. I can see you, and myself. I can see we're kin. I can see the distance and barriers between us, between us. I feel our shared experience, the words you've heard, the land I've touched, our abstract families, our uncertain feet on certain land.

I can see you as you walk these territories; the inquiry, the longing, the confusion, the familiarity. You: “landless,” me: displaced—walking on colonized land with settler and Indigenous thoughts, feelings, and emotions.
Colonial land is comfortable and unbearable. Indigenous land is unfamiliar and all I know. Your work is tactile, it is a body felt, on the ground, in space, in conversation with form and territory. It is a body in its truth, both in and out of place. It speaks to minimalism, poetics of space, sovereignty, and deterritorialization. But to me, most of all, it speaks of abstraction.

How we abstract land to make a map of it; to create or erase territory; to communicate beauty, loss, or hope; to define conflict; to survive. I also see the abstraction of self, of identity, tribe, gender, and rules for belonging. This abstraction is both grieved and celebrated; it is both weapon and tool. Abstraction is a weapon used for displacement, hegemony, twisted universalisms, or erasure of self and difference. And conversely, it is a tool for honesty, specificity, for becoming individual in a collective body. It is a concept that both defies and relies on boundaries.
Boundaries are also violence and tool; they divide us, and bring us together, they are mobile, policed and patrolled. My father calls this “boundary maintenance.” I like this term because it is something that is ongoing; balancing the constructive and dividing forces built into this practice. We are in a strange time for Indigenous folk. I recently heard the director of the Tate Modern say they are acquiring their very first piece of Indigenous art because it is “hot” right now. That’s an ugly, but rather pragmatic sentiment that casually describes a recent shift in colonial mindsets. We are in a new age of romanticism, which incentivizes artists to play Indian—the real authentic kind—while the larger world simultaneously rewards you for supressing any signifiers of Indigeneity. Indigeneity as a concept, is at different times subsumed under competing frameworks of nation, race, culture, people, and history. Indigeneity as an identity is something else—something these other concepts must confront and adapt to in order to exist. Too often the concepts supersede their subject; we adapt our perception of the individual to fit our conception of their container. We do this to others and we do this to ourselves.

I know what it’s like to feel inadequately authentic; I know what it’s like to question the systems and parameters put into place that govern identity and membership; I know what it’s like to resent those systems of boundary policing; and I know what it’s like to respect and honour them as well. In these sentiments, I see you with me, and I thank you for your vulnerability and your honesty. I see truth in your pieced together forms and self, in the study
of resistance and mapping, in a rejection of state power and the confusing comfort in that card. I see your spines of Dolezal, Durham, Shutz, and Boyd, and feel a twisted admiration for those who can confidently claim identities that are not theirs to claim, while you, anxious with respect, fear taking up too much space with who you actually are.

In this new era of romanticism and colonialism, you and I carry both privilege and pain. We are given so much more than those who have had to carry so much more of the racial burden of Indigeneity. We walk in bodies that are both protest and welcomed guest—palatably aberrant. We need to do this work, and think through racial difference as something outside of authenticity, to find Indigeneity within intersectionality. We need to recognize that oppression is not an essential element of Indigeneity; it is an intended outcome of settler colonialism. But even though hardship does not make you
well, but I see a respectful honesty in your search. I don't think you have the grandiose ambition to address the entire world, but instead seek to transmit the abstract complexity of your individual experiences within intersecting collective bodies. Maybe that’s not the intention, but it’s the outcome, at least for me. In this body of work I do feel l truly see you, in an eloquent articulation of anxiety, belonging, and the multiple meanings of land and Indigeneity. I see a delicate balance of difficult and dangerous territory, and feel warmth, comfort, vulnerability, and kinship.

Chokma’shki,
John Hampton
Critical Distance is a writing program of aceartinc. that encourages critical writing and dialogue about contemporary art. The program is an avenue for exploration by emerging and established artists and writers. Written for each exhibition mounted at aceartinc, these texts form the basis of our annual journal Paper Wait.

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aceartinc. is an Artist Run Centre dedicated to the support, exhibition, and dissemination of contemporary art. We do this via an open call for submissions and special projects through which we work with contemporary artists, curators, and art writers, including emerging artists and those from queer, Indigenous, and underrepresented communities. Contemporary art is at its most powerful when engaged with and thought about, and so we actively welcome the public, with all of its nuanced communities.

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