



DECONSTRUCTING THE AMERICAN LANDSCAPE
OCT 7, 2016—JAN 29, 2017 | ROCKFORD ART MUSEUM

Exhibition Teacher Guide



SARAH KREPP + JOEL ROSS



THE
AMERICAN
LANDSCAPE
OCT 7, 2016 -
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CURATOR STATEMENT

Using the American landscape as a map—rode-hard highways, blown-out tires, gritty miles traveled by millions of people—Sarah Krepp and Joel Ross draw inspiration for their distinctive, visually challenging works that explore socially complex themes in dynamically different ways.

Krepp's intricate paintings pulse with the familiar colors and patterns of the highway. Mixing strong gestural marks, layers of text, grid marks, and gobs of gorgeous paint, she exquisitely manipulates delicately shredded tires and scraps from the road into beautifully abstract paintings and installations. By taking what is used, destroyed, and dead, and effectively breathing life into it, Krepp's magnificent pieces serve as powerful metaphors for survival and rebirth.

Ross's work, on the other hand, offers a subtler approach to the landscape that is just as compelling. Featured in this exhibition are text-based sculptures, mixed media installations, and photographs documenting his hyper-temporary public art installations. Ross frequently forces the viewer to become a part of his work – inconspicuously placing sculptures-turned-roadside signage in public spaces ranging from farm roads to major highways. Most are typically removed by authorities or taken as trophies by citizens within 24 hours, “so the work's encounter with its initial audience, travelers on the road, is often rather brief,” Ross said. “A series of photographs of these installations and works on paper become a record of these events as well as the primary point of engagement with their second audience, the art-going public.”

We are deeply grateful to exhibiting artists Sarah Krepp and Joel Ross, Chicago gallery owner Monique Meloche, and The James Hotel for lending artwork, as well as to Klaus Voss for sharing work from his private collection. Special thanks to Jerry Franklin and Nancy von Lugossy for assisting with production throughout the installation and to Rick Zillhart for his countless hours painting the gallery. Many thanks to the Rockford Art Museum Board of Trustees and especially to staff members Linda Dennis, Denise Glasenapp, Sarah Bursley McNamara, Nancy Sauer, Sarah Axelson, Miranda Lindvall, and Dillon Coulahan for help preparing this exhibition.

Support for *Deconstructing the American Landscape* and its related educational programming is partially provided by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council Agency and by the Armer Ahlstrand Charitable Foundation. RAM education programs are supported in part by Women's Art Board. Lastly, hearty congratulations and heartfelt thanks to the brilliant and creative forces behind this exhibition, Sarah and Joel. Your work is inspiring and captivating, and I'm honored and humbled to know you both.

Carrie Johnson

Curator, Rockford Art Museum

Deconstructing the American Landscape is organized by Rockford Art Museum, curated by RAM Curator Carrie Johnson. This exhibition and related educational programming are partially supported by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council Agency and by the Armer Ahlstrand Charitable Foundation. RAM education programs are supported in part by Women's Art Board.

COVER: Left: Sarah Krepp, *Rip Current III*, Courtesy of the artist
Right: Joel Ross, *Failure to Communicate*, Courtesy of the artist

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SARAH KREPP

ARTIST STATEMENT

Utilizing massed materials I look to create an energetic impact where a poetic dynamic is felt before the content is understood. With these visually complex works, I strive for a physical and metaphysical experience. Through layered yet lyrical assemblages of everyday materials (tire shreds, paint, bits and pieces of communicative systems), the works play between the boundaries of painting/sculpture/drawing/choreography – works that consider the edge between 2-D and 3-D.

I seek to set up an interplay between the brute/force of the road and the chaos, confusion, and instability of our daily lives. Our ability and disability to understand the fractured world around us I set against the natural vigor and exuberance that we find in life itself. Part of this is aesthetic, part positive energy, part horror, danger, and death.

The visual pleasure from the abundance of massed surfaces and explosions of black conglomerates can also become metaphoric for the danger of engulfment – individual, as well as, ecological. Retread blow-out tires are representative of the all-American landscape and uniquely American. I seek to question our indulgent contemporary society, as well as, present an aesthetically dynamic experience.

BIO

Sarah Krepp is an accomplished artist, exhibition curator, and founding director of DIALOGUE Chicago. A professor emeritus and former chair of the painting program at the School of Art and Design at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, she received her BS from Skidmore College in New York and MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Learn more about her at sarahkrepp.com.



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JOEL ROSS

ARTIST STATEMENT

Joel Ross collects voices. He travels American roadways seeking personalities and voices to lift, adapt, modify, edit, repair, and embellish. After he has lifted and renovated the strange and the familiar, he invites those fictional agents into his studio practice, and there, he gives them a platform to tell their stories. These characters take over, and their voices—their stories—become the work.

Ross' sculptures and interventions often take place literally at the edge of the road, but the locations and subject of the work also include the parking lots, alleyways, buildings, and signage that feed into or off of the intricate web of pavement that blankets the American landscape. The distinction between the actions and words of the characters in the stories and those actions and declarations of the artist himself are not always clear. Sometimes the artist is playing the character, and sometimes the character is playing the artist.

BIO

Joel Ross received his MFA from Cranbrook Academy of Art in 1992 and his BFA from Tufts University in 1990. He was once a house dick for a large hotel in Boston, but much preferred an earlier stint as a freight inspector at a refrigerated warehouse in Dallas. He still has the nametag he was issued at his first job, and he doesn't spend a lot of time on his hair. He lives in Urbana, Illinois, with his wife and two daughters, where he is currently an Associate Professor in the School of Art and Design at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. He is represented by Monique Meloche Gallery in Chicago. Learn more about him at pleasechaseme.com.

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EXHIBITION VOCABULARY

INTERVENTION ART. An interaction with a previously existing artwork, audience, venue/space or situation.

APPROPRIATION. The action of taking something for one's own use, typically without the owner's permission.

DOCUMENTATION. Documentation: material that provides official information or evidence or that serves as a record.

ASSEMBLAGE. A work of art made by grouping found or unrelated objects.

ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM. The varied work produced by the Abstract Expressionists resists definition as a cohesive style; instead, these artists shared an interest in using abstraction to convey strong emotional or expressive content.

GESTURE. Motion of hands or body to emphasize or help express a thought or feeling.

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CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY #1 | FINE SIGNS

Inspired in part by artists such as Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, and Ed Ruscha, Joel Ross takes everyday words and phrases and places them in unexpected locales, only to abandon them there. There is always a question behind Ross's wordplay signs and the photos that document them: Where is it? Whose voice is saying these words? What happened to it once it was left?

Materials

cardboard
wooden dowels or craft sticks
paint
markers
letter stencils
camera (optional)

Instructions

Have students examine Joel Ross's work (see following pages for large images). Do these phrases mean anything? How do they make the viewer feel?

Have students think of a phrase that means something to them – maybe it's something their parents or grandparents say, maybe it's a line from a quote, song or book they love. Once students have decided on a phrase, have them create a sign on cardboard, using text in whatever way suits the phrase; text can be drawn or painted by hand, printed and cut out or stenciled.

Once the sign is complete, have students sketch a scene in which they would place the sign if they could leave it somewhere. Would it be somewhere in their neighborhood? In your city? In a city where they have travelled? If students were to actually place that sign, and then document the sign in that particular place, what time of day (or night) would be ideal? Optionally, have students actually place the sign and take a photograph for documentation. By placing the sign in a public space, it becomes a form of intervention art, interrupting the normal routine of a passerby. Consider how the environment or placement of the sign becomes embedded in the meaning of the work. Words, images and context can and often do work together to evoke an emotional response from a viewer.

ISBE Standards: 25.A.3e, 26.A.3e, 26.A.4e, 26.B.3d, 27.A.2a



ABOVE: Joel Ross in collaboration with Jason Creps, *Quiet Voices (Installed and Abandoned, Champaign, IL)*, 2012. Archival pigment print, 56 x 80 in. Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago

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Joel Ross in collaboration with Jason Creps, *In the Future (Installed and Abandoned, Bradley, IL)*, 2012. Archival pigment print, 42 x 55 in. Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.



Joel Ross, *Bad Directions*, 2003. Archival pigment print, 11 x 16 in. Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago

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ACTIVITY #2 | THE PERSONAL MADE PHYSICAL

An artist's personal narrative often adds depth to the understanding of their art. Sarah Krepp's use of blown-out tire shreds is grounded in her desire for energetic forms and shapes, but is made so much richer by knowing that she witnessed a horrible car accident that severely injured her son. No matter what physical form an artwork may take, the art is found in the experience.

Materials

organic materials (dried grasses, sticks)
embroidery thread
wire
acrylic paint
found objects
pencils

Instructions

Have students examine Krepp's work (see following pages for large images). Consider how the different materials come together to create each piece. What do the materials have in common? How are they different?

Along with so many artists following in the Abstract Expressionist tradition of Franz Kline, Jackson Pollock, and many others, Krepp's work is centered around mark-making. The gestures, movement and rhythm of the artists' mark – be it in paint, wire or blown-out tires – create an emotional experience between the work and the viewer; according to Krepp, this relationship is where the art truly exists.

Using a variety of materials, have students create an abstract assemblage that they believe evokes an emotional response in the viewer. Pay special attention to color and form. Students can draw on their own personal history to inform their creation, even including written words to strengthen the complexity of the work.

ISBE Standards: 25.A.2d, 25.A.3e, 26.A.2e, 26.A.3e, 26.A.4e, 26.B.3d



Sarah Krepp, *White Noise: Riptides IV (#508)*. Oil and acrylic on linen, 35 x 35-1/2 in. Courtesy of the artist.

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Sarah Krepp, *White Noise: Interference (#614)*. Oil, mixed media on linen, 48 x 60 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Sarah Krepp, *Rip Currents III (#112)*. Mixed media on panel, 84 x 120 in. Courtesy of the artist.

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WEBSITES

Rockford Art Museum
rockfordartmuseum.org

Sarah Krepp
sarahkrepp.com

Joel Ross
pleasechaseme.com

Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE Standards)
isbe.state.il.us



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