

Audio tour transcript

Thank you for visiting the Art Gallery of Regina to experience the exhibition *View from the Edge of the World*, running August 18 - October 21. Catherine Joa, Gladys Wozny Siemens, Golboo Amani, Mike Keepness, SpekWork Studio, Vera Saltzman & Sue Bland reimagine how artists can depict the land.

Before entering the gallery, you may wish to use the coat rack in our welcome area or set large bags inside the gallery doors. Please do not touch the paintings or plaster artworks in this exhibition. You are welcome to play Golboo Amani's game, *Unsettling Settlers: Intervention*, sit at Vera Saltzman and Sue Bland's kitchen table, and assemble their landscape puzzle, *Land in a Box*.

Please help yourself to sensory tools for use in the gallery from the baskets under the table at our entrance wall. There are earmuffs for those sensitive to sound, dark glasses for people with light sensitivity and fidget toys for those who wish to keep their hands busy. Please return these items on your way out.

Start outside the gallery doors: I'm Sandee Moore, *View from the Edge of the World* curator. I'm delighted to guide these works that re-think preconceptions of landscape and art, dispelling stereotypes of the Prairie experience with artworks ranging from plaster casts to board games.

Likely, the first thing you'll see

upon entering the gallery is a wall with a table that holds helpful items and gallery information, including self-guided tour pamphlets, two small paintings by Mike Keepness and the exhibition didactic panel. On the didactic panel, you'll see the exhibition title (*View from the Edge of the World*), the artists' names (Catherine Joa, Gladys Wozny Siemens, Golboo Amani, Mike Keepness, SpekWork Studio, Vera Saltzman & Sue Bland), exhibition dates and a short introduction I wrote for this show.

You may wonder why I titled this exhibition *View from the Edge of the World*. Part of the reason is the persistent stereotype of the Saskatchewan landscape as flat and featureless, dropping into nothingness at the horizon; instead, it is full of lives, stories, overlooked beauty and miraculous transformation wrought by humans, animals, weather and time.

I wanted to curate an exhibition about landscape because people imagine landscape to be an innocuous genre of art. However, when we examine how we represent the land, attitudes and beliefs about the land and our relationships to it are revealed. Do we view land as a commodity to be exploited or a living thing inseparable from our human lives? As immigrants, settlers or Indigenous individuals, we need images of this place to understand, respect, and treasure this land.

Photos are allowed and encouraged. If you post photographs of the exhibition online, credit the artist and tag the Art Gallery of Regina.

We'll start the tour by looking at the two small paintings by Mike Keepness on the gallery entrance wall.

Mike Keepness grew up in the Qu'Appelle Valley region of southern Saskatchewan and lived from 1981 to 2021. His art reflects his Saulteux/Plains Cree heritage and his experiences living on the prairies. He incorporates elements of nature, traditional designs, and modern techniques to capture the essence of the land and the historical sites of his culture for future generations. Painting en plein air, surrounded by nature and experiencing it firsthand, was the foundation of all his work.

The two small paintings you see on the entrance wall are likely field studies made in preparation for painting a larger canvas. The smaller of these canvases is titled *Cut Bank*. We can see that Keepness painted it outdoors on the very spot depicted because of the tiny bits of wild grasses embedded in the oil paint.

He depicts spots of significance for first peoples; they may be sites where life-giving water flows or those with spiritual significance. By revealing the beauty of these spots using the language of European landscape painting, Keepness creates ways for non-Indigenous and Indigenous people alike to value these places. Such is the case for his study *Muted Light* on the entrance wall and *Formations* on the other side of this wall. Let's walk around the wall to look at the large canvases by Keepness, on loan from the SK-Arts permanent collection: *Formations* and *Prayer Cloths*.

Notice that Keepness doesn't paint the land under the sky; in this way, he resists reducing the land to an object that we can conceive of owning. In his canvases, the land, rendered in

luscious sandy shades of oil paint, seems boundless, seeming to surround us. Notice the perspective Keepness paints from, then transfers to viewers, one of being within the land, not looking down upon it. It has been observed that Keepness expresses an Indigenous worldview that humans are part of the land through the way he represents land.

Finally, let's turn our attention to Mike Keepness' painting *Prayer Cloths*. *Prayer Cloths* are a form of direct communication between humans and land, offering thanks for the life-giving gifts from the land and Creator. Keepness invites us into this intimate communion that is an antidote to Capitalist ideas of objectifying the land; here, Keepness invites us to acknowledge the land as living and sentient.

Let's move toward another set of naturalistic landscape paintings in this exhibition by Catherine Joa, an artist living in Denere Beach, Saskatchewan.

Saskatchewan is often envisioned as a flat horizontal plane devoid of geological landforms and people, a notion strongly countered by Catherine Joa's towering, vertical paintings. At seven feet tall, her canvases are roughly the dimensions of a tall human.

Joa renders her everyday vistas — sublimely jagged outcrops of rock tagged with graffiti and studded with telephone poles and Boreal forests bisected by a ribbon of highway the artist travels daily — without romanticism. Rather than considering pavement and graffiti as defacing the majesty of the Nature around her, Joa proposes that we can't separate people and their actions from the landscape.

Indeed, her paintings celebrate the importance of roads and communications networks for rurally-living people. These marvellous contemporary technologies deserve to be admired alongside the timeless magnificence of rock formations and forests.

We often experience moments of joy when appreciating a landscape. Joa has acknowledged that we can also find moments of joy in frivolous, semi-anonymous graffiti messages, observing events and shared experiences and marking the presence of people on the landscape.

Turning right from Joa's canvases, let's look at the first of Wozny Siemens' direct plaster casts entitled *The Puzzle That Therefore I Am*. I placed this piece by Gladys Wozny Siemens in conversation with Joa's paintings. The dark tones of the work, which, unlike Wozny Siemens' other artworks, is painted black and copper, connect to the dark ribbons of highway and inky silhouettes of jack pine in Joa's paintings.

Further, the vertical and horizontal lines Wozny Siemens impressed into the ground before casting this portion of land are like grid roads, property lines or borders. This simple intervention on the land transforms this small plot of dirt into a map.

Wozny Siemens' inventive and unexpected method of depicting the land of Southwestern Saskatchewan reveals the disregarded in our concept of the landscape. The artist places wet plaster on the mud of a dried riverbed. The dried plaster forms a cast that captures and inverts impressions left in the dirt. Wozny Siemens brings our attention to the traces of animals and weather on the land — the distinctive network of cracks crisscrossing

the parched mud along with animal tracks, bits of dried grass and even tire marks.

The artist asserts her narrative and authorship of her plaster casts in the geometric shapes and letters she pushes into the ground to be integrated into the plaster sculpture alongside marks created by animals and weather climate. For example, the *Puzzle That Therefore I Am* includes the words "You go, and I'll be the way I am."

In the corner to the right of this piece is a plaster cast that Wozny Siemens displays as a sculpture rather than as a painting. It is called *Birdstrike* from Frenchman Valley; it shows marks cleft by a bird's wings brushing against the riverbed silt as it swoops down to capture its prey. A corresponding sculptural slab memorializing the impact of a hunting bird is positioned in the corresponding corner of the other movable wall.

Next, let's focus on *Desiccation II* and *A Desiccation* on the next wall. Desiccation means more than drying out. It means removing moisture; some definitions of desiccation note that it is destructive. These casts of the chapped surface of a dried riverbed document this extreme drying, which could signify disappearing water due to climate change or the cycle of evapotranspiration, which dries bodies of water during hot, arid summers, particularly in prairie regions unshielded by lush plant growth. Unlike Wozny Siemens' other plaster molds of fissured river mud, *Desiccation II* and *A Desiccation* are devoid of the traces of a bustling ecosystem.

Both *A Desiccation* and *Desiccation II* include a frame cast as a single piece with an arid river bed. The artist has decorated the frame of *A Desiccation* with

letters that are redacted or struck through. This crossed-out technique, known as "sous rature" or "under erasure," was developed by philosopher Martin Heidegger and widely applied by Jacques Derrida to indicate a word considered inadequate but to which language offers no better alternative. Perhaps we can all identify with the inadequacy of words and images when considering the sunbaked remains of a river.

The surface of *Shore Triptych* is studded with tiny shells, incorporated into the plaster when cast, and immortalizing a beaver's footprints. Beavers are known to transform the landscape and the environment, primarily through their dam-building activities. They actively create wetlands and drought-resistant pockets on the prairies by stopping the quick flow of water across and away from the land.

We can follow the large rodent's path from one surface to the next, the final panel of the triptych supporting an energetic arc of plaster punctuated by a calcified duplicate of the beaver's foot. This gesture is the artist's nod to her past as an abstract expressionist painter and her admiration for the power of gesture to communicate the inarticulable and unknowable.

Shore Triptych, bordered by the words "shore" forwards and backwards, presents an opportunity to think beyond stereotypes of beavers; these pawprints are much larger than most may imagine and of the prairies with more aquatic life than many would expect.

Further along this wall and the adjoining one, we will enter Vera Saltzman and Sue Bland's installation *Where will the frogs sing?*

Saltzman, a photographer celebrated for her sensitive portraits and insightful documentation of rural leisure activities, and Bland, a writer and Parks worker, are concerned about disappearing remnants of wildland. Along with the disappearance of family farms, the artists witness the loss of windbreaks or hedgerows, small wetlands and other remnants of unfarmed land that are demolished and cultivated as farms grow and industrialize.

Noting the pervasive image of Saskatchewan as a single, cultivated field, Vera and Sue observe, "We imagine the land[scape] was always like this."

Some photographs adhered to the gallery wall, a nearly overwhelming mass of images and artifacts that mimic the formidable scope of the problem and demonstrate the depth of the artists' research, show large machinery stripping the land of bush that provides shelter and habitat for innumerable species. You can gain a more intimate understanding of how the landscape has been altered in a short period by assembling and remixing the blocks of land held in a wooden case on a low pedestal. Painted by Bland from aerial photographs of the farm she calls home in the 1940s and current day, one side shows fallow fields, sloos and a variety of crops; flip the block over to see a nearly uniform field of yellow extending to each corner, a picture of mono-crop, industrial farming.

Bits of bone, rusted bits of farm machinery, thorny branches, barbed wire, feathers and bird nests all find a place among the artists' constellation of images (photographic and watercolour). You may spy a dark strip of gravel road narrowing toward the horizon in a circular frame relatively high up the wall.

Saltzman photographed this road, unmoored from the landscape it provides access to, on a day when dense fog erased all landmarks and came to meet the shoulders of the road, likewise blanketed in featureless, white snow. This road, indeed, seems like it leads us to the edge of the world.

A tattered, clay-coloured canvas rectangle is stretched across the corner of the gallery. Several holes pierce the canvas, shaped like the once-plentiful bison that roamed these lands. You may glimpse the same placeless road through the outlines of the absent bodies in the rectangle of cloth. This fabric heirloom Bland inherited became much more than a ground for her to print and incise bison upon; the artists placed the canvas on the land in various places, reconnecting to the spirit of what has been lost.

Absence and nothingness are potent experiences for prairie people, not just when considering the loss of precious biodiversity. A large, black and white photograph shows a person, mitten-clad hands raised in ecstasy or embrace of the world, standing in a snowy field. Saltzman's decisions to print the picture on thin paper and hang it with magnets are purposefully unprecious and approachable. Should the magical force of the rare earth magnets flag, the print would drift to the ground like another snowflake.

Central to Bland & Saltzman's installation, *Where will the frogs sing?*, is a kitchen table that serves as a locus for discussions of our relationships to the land through tradition, loss and the food system. The artists have literally and figuratively set the table for sympathetic and challenging conversations, returning to the gallery at

irregular intervals to serve up things to ponder in person or penned on the plates at each place.

Like Wozny Siemens, Bland and Saltzman know the value of looking at the ground. The artists have crafted a rug that assembles lichen, flowers, grasses, cacti, animal tracks, scat, and other miraculous and overlooked sights of the landscape around us. Not dissimilar to the four-part garden (chahar bagh) of an oriental rug, theorized as a portable garden, the artists' carpet is divided into four seasons. However, their carpet brings the wilderness, rather than a cultivated garden, into the domestic environment.

Where will the frogs sing? includes more unexpected elements, such as zines, blog posts, recipes and photo albums, allowing infinite ways to discover and relate to the changing landscape of our province.

When we think of land, and our relationships to land, the settlement of Canada by Europeans is not far from those thoughts. Golboo Amani's artwork, *Unsettling Settlers: Intervention*, on the low, black table to the West of *Where will the frogs sing?*, reinvents the popular board game *Settlers of Catan*.

The objectives of the original board game, *Settlers of Catan*, are to amass land, pave roads, and extract resources. Amani's project reveals the narratives of conquest and Colonial attitudes toward land and the natural environment embedded in the game. The artists's expansion pack, *Unsettling Settlers: Intervention*, invites participants to play as allies and replaces hoarding and exploitation with dialogue, negotiation, and collaboration.

You'll notice the game board and play pieces spread across the table. There are settlements (little houses) and roads (coloured rods). The gameboard is a hexagon divided into smaller hexagons of five different terrain types, each tied to a resource to be collected by the player: bricks, lumber, ore, grain, and wool. A white token called "the robber" halts resource production on any terrain hexagon it occupies.

We recognize that art galleries are safe spaces for difficult conversations. Likewise, the artist understands that the framework of a familiar recreational game provides non-threatening opportunities to learn, discuss and dismantle harmful notions transmitted by popular culture and systems of knowledge.

Through playing *Unsettling Settlers: Interventions*, we may come to understand the fault in our society's celebration of pushing people off of their land and stripping the land of resources to turn into commodities. Likewise, we can develop a deeper understanding of cooperative, anti-Capitalist strategies through Amani's expansion pack, which includes Treaty cards that propose diplomacy as a concrete step toward social justice or, on the other hand, roadblocks as a strategy of direct action.

The aesthetics of Amani's expansion pack — white space, pastel graphics, and simple, bold text — contrast the illustration-filled, sepia-hued cards of the "base game" of *Settlers' of Catan*. The openness of Amani's design presents a visual analogy for the openmindedness with which one should approach the game and the lightness that the game can impart to us.

You can sit down and play right now or return on Friday, October 6, at 3:00 to learn and play the game at a table hosted by a trained artist.

In partnership with Common Weal Community Arts and Comic Readers, this gameplay session is open to ardent gamers and novices alike. Through gameplay, participants confront biases that games such as *Settlers of Catan* strengthen and understand the real effects and stakes of protest strategies to create change.

Finally, let's move to the screening room formed by the two movable walls.

You'll see *GAN of Living Skies* by SpekWork Studio, a large video projection on the wall and a wagon between the bench and the side wall. SpekWork Studio are Cat Bluemke and Jonathan Carroll, who often create their technology-based artworks as the collectives SpekWork Studio or Tough Guy Mountain.

The video is a series of highly pixelated fake sunsets generated by a generative antagonistic network or GAN, a type of machine learning. The GAN learned from a dataset of genuine Saskatchewan sunsets and then generated new data resembling the real data. You'll notice that the landscape moves like wallpaper inside a rotating box. The artists dubbed their video *GAN of Living Skybox* in reference to this box illusion; a skybox is how a videogame designer creates a sky that appears behind or above all the objects in a video game scene.

SpekWork Studio's wagon, equipped with a solar panel and rugged orange wheels, holds a computer, webcam and other electronics comprising the GAN.

It is also an active part of their artwork. It is a sculptural object and a solar-powered machine. We often hear about the environmental impacts of energy-hungry digital technologies, particularly artificial intelligence. By creating a solar-powered device, SpekWork Studio addresses their concerns about their immaterial artwork's effect on the land and environment while creating an amusingly absurd solar-powered machine to make fake sunsets. The GAN can be wheeled into our courtyard or the surrounding park to soak up the sun and learn from a dataset of sunsets outside our doors.

In the not-so-distant past, landscape paintings were crafted as symbols of national identity used to unify a population. SpekWork Studio has transformed Saskatchewan from the Land of Living Skies into the *GAN of Living Skies*. Their playful skewering of a provincial point of pride contains more profound questions about place-based identity in the digital age and our notions of natural versus artificial.

Thank you for visiting the Art Gallery of Regina to see the group exhibition *View from the Edge of the World*.

I invite you to return to the gallery to participate in experiences of art and learn about our relationships to the land through our Culture Days activities and other free events. (Sponsored by Culture Days and SaskCulture, all ages are invited to reinvent their thinking about landscape and how they value the land and art.)

- Saturday, September 23 - Kitchen Table Conversations with Vera & Sue
- Sunday, September 24 - 'Zine-Making PLAYshop & Exhibition Tour
- Thursday, October 5 - GAN of Living Skies Sunset Bathing & Sound Bath
- Friday, October 6 - Golboo Amani Artist's Talk
- Friday, October 6 - Unsettling Setters: Intervention Game Play Event
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Thank you to SaskCulture, funded by SaskLotteries, for allowing us to offer these free experiences. We are also presenting a free talk by SpekWork Studio on Saturday, October 7, addressing their concerns about digital art's environmental impacts.

I wish to thank our core funders SK-Arts and the City of Regina, through their Community Partner Grant program.

I am grateful to Casino Regina for sponsoring our opening receptions.

And I am delighted to recognize SaskTel for making this audio tour possible with their sponsorship that connects people to experiences of art through communications technology.

I especially thank YOU for taking the time to listen to this audio tour and attend this exhibition. You can support the Art Gallery of Regina by becoming a member, donating, or both. Visit our website, www.artgalleryofregina.ca, for details on becoming part of our gallery's community and more about *View from the Edge of the World*.