

THE LAY OF THE LAND

This vision is *mine*.

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty

This student exhibition brings together three video works by Mackenzie Legg, Daniel P. Lopez and Noah Birch that were produced during experimental film and video classes in the Department of Art over the past few years. The content of each video was left entirely up to these young artists, which is what consequently brought them together thematically for this exhibition. Each video is framed upon landscape from a region of Oregon — it is well known that the reputation of Oregon's terrain precedes itself, especially before Oregon became an official State in 1859. In light of this history, also included in this exhibition is an artist's rendition of this area from the 19th century — a small oil painting titled *Sunset, Mount Hood* (n.d.)* by Eliza Barchus, (1857-1959). Barchus gained



Eliza Barchus - *Sunset, Mount Hood* (n.d.) oil on board

recognition as a painter in Oregon working in a style more or less typical of traditional American romantic landscape painting; she produced thousands of works in a formulaic, repetitious method and had her work reproduced on commercial color postcards and brochures—a prolific, almost mass-produced output that verged on kitsch. Yet the near endless forms kitsch are as powerful as they are immersive; Barchus followed the mainstream style of the day, emulating earlier American romantic landscape painters that envisioned life in America as a fresh start within an undisturbed nature, away from the overrun landscape and oppressive class systems of European society. But if American romantic landscape painting had its roots in earlier European romantic painting, it held little of the original European resistance to Rationalism and the so called laws of nature discovered during the age of enlightenment. In contrast to the sensorial acuity of the great naturalist writers of the time such as Henry David Thoreau, American romantic landscape painting seemed to replace the daunting forces and emotions of indeterminacy, apprehension, and awe in European Romanticism with fanciful visions of paradise. The resistance in European romanticism was mostly forgotten, and perhaps unnecessary, but these painterly representations of a new American ideology resulted in nothing less than a pictorial fantasy: painters like Barchus chose to strain their gaze past a perilous wilderness and social antagonism towards an innocuous view of peaceful, distant mountains and blissful sunsets. Barchus along with many earlier painters of her era, became the aesthetic descendants of a violent frontier society that held little interest in high-culture; perhaps her paintings of soft edges, still waters, and big mountains in filtered rosy light provided a momentary escape — wistful visualizations of Eden-like scenes that attempted to erase the violence from their world retroactively.

In contrast to the kind of idealism found in some American Romantic landscape painting, Daniel P. Lopez's stark video opens up with a view from a car moving along an icy mountain road. Impenetrably beautiful frozen forests rise up on either side as Lopez's casual camera work also records his and the driver's conversation during the trip. As the car winds its way along the road in what seems to be a fairly uneventful winter road trip, one begins to sense fear and apprehension in their voices as they realize the instability of their car on the verge of skidding off the icy road. Towards the end of the video they see a dark tunnel ahead; just as the car approaches the entrance Lopez suggests to the driver that they hold hands before they enter. The camera glances down briefly on the two hands together — a small act of affection and consolation between the two young men in the car that together, with his rather evocative title *I.D. Politics* reveal Lopez's advance: this moment of intimacy, and presentation of this video is a small act of defiance — not only to a forbidding world outside, but perhaps also to some conventional identity-politics art that falls into self-important forms of demonstrative socio-political message-making. Lopez's title reveals what are modestly embodied within the events of his video and his self: he lets the politics of his subject position surface almost unnoticeably, which recalls Felix Gonzalez-Torres' affirmation: *all art is political, but not all art is about politics*.

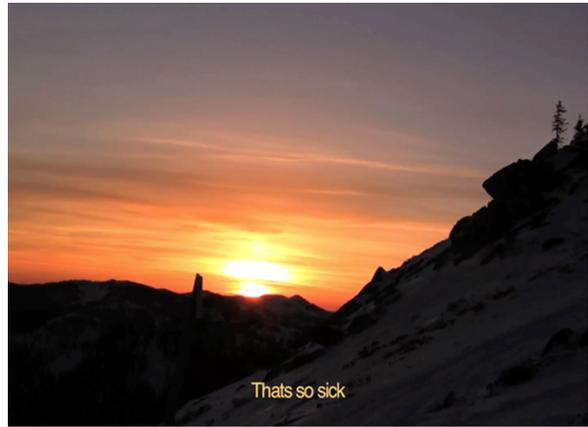


Daniel P. Lopez - *I.D. Politics* (2014) single channel video

* Special thanks to Jill Hartz and JSMA for generously loaning this painting.

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When Mackenzie Legg arrived at the top of Mount Ashland with a friend to shoot her video *We Are In It* (2012), she decided to mount her camera on a tripod for the shot and began recording. The first few minutes of the video seems to capture a special kind of moment shared between friends — we hear gleeful laughter, followed by an apprehensive pause as Legg and her friend begin to take in the surrounding mountainous scenery sharing their comments on the view. But beyond Legg's initial impulse to bring the camera equipment to the top of the mountain, her plan quickly unravelled. After presenting the video for the first time, Legg admitted that after she had originally set up the camera to record, she and her friend became so distracted by the spectacular sunset, that she forgot all about her camera and eventually wandered off into the distance and returned down the mountain, leaving the camera overnight. Fortunately the camera survived a night on the mountain and Legg was able to retrieve it the next day. The resulting video recorded Legg and her friends conversation off camera, but it quickly becomes difficult to hear as they slowly drifted out of range of the microphone. For a short time, we can hear them pass comments back and forth about the picturesque vistas bathed in golden sunlight such as: *that's so sick* and other more inaudible phrases. Realizing the humor that the slang like tone of their commentary contributed to the majestic vistas of her video and to compensate for some loss in the low audio, Legg decided to subtitle their conversation. This gave the resulting video image an added graphic dimension; reading words such as *sick* pasted over a scene that would be fitting



Mackenzie Legg, *We Are In It*. 2012 single channel video

for a tourist postcard, complicates the final image of the scene — humorous and sarcastic in a certain way, but also a little melancholic as well; the over laid text seems to dislodge a reverence for the image and truly appreciate it simultaneously. In contrast to the endless multitude of trite, attention seeking, selfie videos that saturate the internet, Legg's twenty-five minute long take of still, distant mountains under a sky that changes almost imperceptibly, doesn't take itself too seriously, yet achieves a durational *vision* seldom encountered.



Noah Birch - *Barriers*, 2014. Single channel video

Noah Birch's *Barriers* (2014) is the most structured of the videos in the exhibition. Birch's plan was to shoot a series of short scenes around mostly rural areas of the region. Each scene begins with a fixed view of a typical, pastoral landscape with a fence, gate or wall running through it. Shortly after the scenes begin, a young man (Birch) wanders into the frame, climbs or jumps over the enclosure and walks casually off camera. A series of similar scenes are repeated as the young man casually makes his passage unobstructed by the territorial markers. As the video unfolds, not only issues of territory and ownership surface, but also Birch's apparent desire to free

himself from the rules and confines of public and private space. By casting himself in the role of protagonist, one also can notice his disposition: he pauses and seems to confront and absorb his surroundings, almost as if the fences, walls and locked gates are of no consequence to him at all on his journey, making the symbolic conditions of public and private space equivocal, regardless of law. The imagery of this particular video of a young man walking through the landscape without any apparent destination, conjures thoughts of some early romantic literature. The images and themes of all three of the videos in this exhibition sidestep fantasy by accomplishing a strong consciousness of the phenomenon of a body-world relationship, recalling well known lines from poets like William Wordsworth: *How exquisitely the individual Mind (And the progressive powers perhaps no less of the whole species) to the external World is fitted :—and how exquisitely, too— Theme this but little heard of among men—The external world is fitted to the mind.* (from *The Recluse* 1888). -E.M.