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LAWN CHAIRS AND LANDSCAPE PAINTINGS: VISUAL EMBODIMENTS OF
NATIONALISM IN THE AMERICAN DOMESTIC LANDSCAPE

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ABSTRACT

Over the course of several months in 2017, I created three wooden chairs, five acrylic paintings and built one gallery to install in an outdoor, public space on University Park campus. Titled *Front Yard*, the sum of these chairs, paintings, and wall attempted to recreate the space of its namesake. The work 1) prods at the strangeness of the domestic landscape of the lawn as a interstitial place hovering between public and private property, and 2) argues as an American cultural icon, symbol of morality, and site of man vs. nature dichotomy, the front yard offers a potent metaphor and habitat for nationalism. In the following text, I explain the details of the installation, review the relationship between landscape painting and nationalism in the United States, argue for the lawn as the new subject of nationalism in landscape, and reflect on contemporary art dealing in these themes as well as my own work.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

At the outset of this project, my goal was to learn how to build chairs. My last name means “carpenter” in Arabic, and my ancestors built chairs for bishops and other significant church officials in the Christian Quarter of Aleppo during the late 19th century to early 20th century, prior to immigrating to the United States. What started out as an attempt to understand my own identity, and empathize and advocate for the Syrian people amidst a horrifying civil war and broader humanitarian crises, evolved into an examination of my own complicity in the American actions and inactions leading to the destruction of this ancient land and the perpetuation of the ensuing refugee crisis. While my last name may be Arabic, and my heritage may be Syrian, my identity, privilege, and position are as an American, and I felt an inability to make work about a place I had never been. I decided my observations and experiences better allowed me to reflect on the current socio-political movements in my own country bearing hostility towards-- including but not limited to-- immigrants, and particularly Middle Eastern/Muslim immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. Though these conflicts affect people, and bodies, the nature of nationalism is one primarily constructed on the preciousness of borders and the way national identities consolidate around the arbitrary lines we draw around place and land. In my hometown of State College, a locale without border walls or unknown frontiers, I observed front yards and the homes behind them as areas where property lines are drawn and territory asserted-- the original borders --and perhaps sites of germination for nationalist ideology. In time, I realized the domestic landscape of American front yards lends many useful

metaphors to unpacking the both overt and subtle characteristics of American nationalism.



Figure 1 Bishop's Chair by Najjar ancestors in Aleppo, late 19th-early 20th century. Source: Gena Najjar

Figure 2 Folding Chair made by Sophie Najjar in State College, 2017

In the body of paintings that emerged from my thesis, I searched the traditional and sentimental portrait of the facade of the American home for entryways to nationalism (Fig. 3). Does nationalism creep in our hedges, shudders, and lawns? How do specific ideologies subliminally embed themselves in the banality of our everyday? I thought about how the physicality and color of paint itself could convey hostility, fear, and assimilation. It became important to consider how the paintings might both read as a propagandistic enticement to white,

suburban conformity, and also as a warning to outsiders and current inhabitants.



Figure 3 Installation view of paintings from "Front Yard"

The chairs I created became interventions to these painted landscapes. They combine references to informal, transient folding chairs and lawn furniture with the more rigid, ornate, and formal sensibility of the furniture created by my great-great-grandfather in Aleppo (Fig. 1 & 2). In the final installation of my work, I created a pseudo-gallery in the courtyard between the School of Visual Arts and the Palmer Museum of Art, thrusting my pieces into the type of setting they depict and critique (Fig. 4). When most viewers experience my work, they do not have the twenty-something pages of text presented here as a means of contextualizing the installation, so what they extract from these paintings and chairs may be peripheral or wholly separate from my intent. There exists an unavoidable tension between visual art and attempts to formalize visual art through language. Recognizing the dissonance between artist and viewer, and the possible

futility of attempting to explain my work in such an academic space, I proceed with the hope the writing presented here serves less as an explanation of the work itself and more as a way to draw connections between art and other disciplines, and as documentation of my navigation between formal research and studio practice.



Figure 4 "Front Yard", Sophie Najjar, 2017

Chapter 2

Nationalism and Landscape Painting in the United States

In the United States, the relationship between landscape painting and nationalism precedes my work. In the following section, I offer both historical context for the work I created and thoughts on further work in nationalist painting.

Nationalism, in connotation and denotation, implicates both the specific and arbitrary scale of the state. In the United States, the geographic scale of the nation encompasses a massive swath of territory, made iconic through cartographic representation. Yet, despite the geographic parameters of nationalism, and the way land, borders, and environment dictate its terms, contemporary nationalism mostly conjures corporeal, cultural, and emotional imagery: American flags, confederate flags, militarized bodies, swarming populist crowds, swastika armbands and white capes. While these associations are clear and potent, they also distract from the subtle and essential ways nationalism exists outside of the body. Nationalism is not just corporeal and figurative; it is architectural, it is environmental, and it is embedded in our landscape. The first tides of American nationalism in the mid 19th century engaged the American landscape as a means to construct and promote nationalism. Today, effective understandings of nationalism must also register the relevance of landscape and environment in its construction. Nationalism may be most readily visible in the gestures of demagogues and trappings of neo-Nazis, but it also burgeons and creeps outside of the human form, into the foundations of our homes and the grass in our yards.

In the United States, the roots of iconic landscape painting and nationalism both find themselves in early nineteenth century, bookended by the War of 1812 and the Civil War. Of the most recognizable landscape painting during this time, the Hudson River School emerges as a clear celebrity. Typified by the work of its most famous member, Thomas Cole, the school depicted the landscapes of its namesake in representational, romantic style. Though the paintings of the Hudson River School seem anything but unconventional, at the peak of their popularity they were innovative in their celebration of American landscape. Prior to the 1820s dawn of the Hudson River School, the United States landscape contended with derisive characterization by European politicians, writers, and tourists alike. Accustomed to cleared forestland and tamed estates, and perhaps resentful of the immense bounty awaiting the young nation, European visitors spoke of a feral, uncivilized, and godless environment. Scottish philosopher Adam Ferguson pointedly refers to a mythological, inhospitable American landscape in his text *Essay on the History of Civil Society*:

The climates of America, though taken under the same parallel, are observed to differ from those of Europe. There, extensive marshes, great lakes, aged, decayed, and crowded forests, with the other circumstances that mark an uncultivated country, are supposed to replenish the air with heavy and noxious vapours, that give a double asperity to the winter, and, during many months, by the frequency and continuance of fogs, snow, and frost, carry the inconveniencies of the frigid zone far into the temperate. (210)

Though the Hudson River School painters acknowledged the ferocity of the largely unexplored American landscape, they chose to revel in the sublimity of their subject, imbuing an almost

religious devotion into their depictions. Thomas Cole, a British immigrant himself, could not speak more highly of the ridges and valleys of his musings:

But I would have it remembered that nature has shed over this land beauty and magnificence, and although the character of its scenery may differ from the old world's, yet inferiority must not therefore be inferred; for though American scenery is destitute of many of those circumstances that give value to the European, still it has features, and glorious ones, unknown to Europe. (1)

This clear divide in opinion shows how individuals might appraise an environment based on their own national identity. An investment in landscape increases when national identity signals a sort of ownership or responsibility over said landscape. In the 19th century, painting became a useful way to express this sentiment. The convenient geography of the Hudson Valley School placed many of its artists in close proximity to wealthy and connected patrons in Manhattan. Thus, their work became an important political vehicle for influential Americans looking for ways to elevate the status of their nation and impart the inherent value of the landscape that birthed modern democracy (Cusack 20). Though Thomas Cole died in 1848, he and his Hudson River peers helped establish an important epoch of landscape painting in the United States, one that gradually became more allegorical and propagandistic as the nation sought to expand its territory westward.

In 1845, arguing for the annexation of Texas by the United States, writer John O'Sullivan coined the term "manifest destiny". The spiritual urgency of the phrase made it the perfect mantra for a country hoping to move past contentious regionalism and sectionalism into a geographically (and religiously) actualized whole. The term also encapsulates the conditions and aspirations of the 19th century style of nationalism: a consolidated national identity, where

Southern sectionalism might be quieted by westward territorial expansion, and Native Americans, Mexicans, and other non-white, non-Protestant groups are effectively erased from the future image of the American national identity.

Landscape painting, starting with the Hudson River School, articulates many of these nationalist sentiments through content and composition. One of the most cited instances of explicit nationalist messaging in landscape painting comes from the exclusion of indigenous figures-- the original inhabitants of the Hudson River Valley --in the renderings of the Hudson River School (Cusack 42). Though Cole identified trees and water as the key elements in his paintings, when he did include figures, they most often appeared in the form of white settlers, paradigms of pioneer masculinity or bucolic femininity (Daniels 165).

Thomas Cole's student, Frederic Edwin Church, also avoided representing Native Americans in favor of Protestant, New England characters. His paintings tend to showcase nationalist themes more overtly than Cole's, possibly a result of the mainstreaming of manifest destiny and increased westward expansion occurring at the height of his career in the 1850s (Miller 167). His works specifically speak to the political goals of Northerners and Republicans, who wanted to nurture a more unified national identity that would take priority over regionalist loyalties, mostly as a means of deterring burgeoning sectionalist tendencies in the South. To illustrate this, Church painted landscapes in the same sweeping and romantic style of Cole, but without the same geographic specificity. In his 1850 painting misleadingly titled *New England Scenery*, Church compresses three distinct but equally American climes into a single horizon. In

the foreground, farmers, trees, and a modest river suggest true “New England Scenery”.



Figure 5 "New England Scenery" Frederic Edwin Church, 1851. Source: George Walker Vincent Smith Art Museum

However, in the middle ground, rocky outcrops and elevated terrain emulate southwestern geologies, possibly sourced from images of Colorado or Utah. Finally, in the background the viewer catches a glimpse of what looks like the Pacific Ocean. By summarizing various regions of the nation into one image, he engages Americans from all parts of the country, and implies a continuity and unity throughout them all. Historian Angela L. Miller keenly describes the way image served as a potent rhetorical tool for nationalism:

Political nationalists, perhaps influenced by the language of art, envisioned nation building as a form of picture making--a synthesis of parts in which individual elements would give up their refractory local character in exchange for participation in a larger community, although the nature of this community often remained frustratingly vague. Nationalism was described as a panorama or a

composition that required, like any good painting, the proper relationship between part and whole, detail and broader narrative, in which local experience provided the raw material for a synthesis larger than the sum of its parts. (198)

However, the nationalist appeals of Cole and Church are subtle compared to the illustrative messaging of artists like John Gast, Francis Palmer, and Emmanuel Leutze. Whereas Hudson River School representations of the American landscape might have been used as prideful ammunition in confrontations with European naysayers, newer landscape painting spoke more directly to the American people. John Gast's painting *American Progress* is a direct, patriotic plea to Church's New Englanders to move west and realize their manifest destiny (Aikin 78).



Figure 6 "American Progress" John Gast, 1872. Source: Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress

In this later variety of landscape painting, figures begin to overwhelm and saturate the compositions. Though bodies might detract from the emphasis of the actual landscape in these landscape paintings, the up scaling of the human form in relation to the silhouettes of the ridgelines and valleys also shows a conflation of the American identity, and the patriotic body, with the landscape itself. Look no further than Mount Rushmore to see how imprinting icons of American history unto the environment condenses into a powerful symbol for loyalty to nation and land.

Whereas mid 19th century American nationalism defined itself through conquest and manifest destiny-- colonizing and controlling land like their European forbearers --contemporary nationalism navigates a much different geography. Today, in an interconnected and less roomy world, assertions of nationalism manifest as confrontations to outsiders. Instead of plundering land and surveying new territory, Americans are building walls and sitting in their towers, cautiously tending to their moats. How can this change in nationalism be addressed through painting? If the nationalist paintings of the mid 19th century represented the outward, expansionist trend of nationalism through specific compositional choices, then contemporary nationalist painting might engage the same sensibility. In the works of mid-19th century artists like John Gast, paintings about pioneers and westward expansion utilize a right-to-left compositional structure, guiding the viewer into the horizon line with an infinite westward gaze (Aikin 80). In these compositions, west and east are aligned as right and left respectively, mimicking the cardinal orientation of a traditional map projection. As intermediates between evocative art objects and instructional maps, these paintings empower the ordinary American as an actor in the destiny of the nation, reading both as an inspiration to move westward and as a guide to do so.

However, in the current geography of nationalism, the Midwest plains, Rocky Mountains, and Great Lakes no longer represent the frontiers of manifest destiny. They have been fully claimed, explored, exploited, and integrated into the American brand. Today, geographic conquest and land ownership for most Americans extends to the meager acreage of the average suburban yard. Thus, the lawn becomes the new prairie, awaiting subjugation and assimilation into the American brand by the American homeowner. New nationalist landscape painting might emphasize lawns as sites of burgeoning or fully formed nationalist and/or protectionist sentiment (Fig. 6). Similarly to mid 19th century landscape painting, artists might consider how to direct the viewer to the geographic conclusion of nationalism.



Figure 7 Installation shot of "The Frontier" and "Kentucky Blue 2" Sophie Najjar, 2017

Chapter 3

The Lawn and Nationalism

For the current nationalist painter, lawns seem like a useful visual metaphor for contemporary conquest, manifest destiny, and nationalism. Luckily, lawns seem to reference the formalities of painting in of themselves. American landscape architect Samuel Parsons, Jr. (1844-1923) was fond of describing the lawn as a canvas:

When one thinks of the true function of the lawn, the vision arises of a masterly painted canvas, whereon are depicted moving cloud shadows, waving grass, rich patches of dark and light green, studded with the starry radiance of the humble flora of the grass, and the hundred incidents of blazing or subdued colour and form that appear on the surface of an open meadow. (Teyssot 100)

Examining the evolution of the lawn in American popular culture and economy offers clues as to how lawns might operate as tools of nationalist subscription. To understand the cultural, political, and economic role of the lawn today, it is important to revisit their history in the Western world.

Turf grass landscaping became popularized in Europe in the 17th century, when wealthy landowners began paying displaced agrarian workers to cultivate and manage acres of turf grass on their estates, for the purpose of various leisure and sporting activities. The sheer amount of labor required to maintain a lawn at this time meant the presence of lawns indicated wealth. However, whereas the lawns in Europe occupied private, elite spaces, the first lawns in the United States arrived in the form of public spaces, as the commons of New England towns and

the malls of Washington D.C. Not until the Industrial Revolution and the expansion of the American middle class would lawns begin to appear as the buffers to the American home (Robbins 25).

Landscape architect Andrew Jackson Downing was one of the first Americans to advocate for the use of the lawn in the domestic landscape. To Downing, the ideal landscape bridged a divide between the industrialized cities of the Northeast and the bucolic beauty of rural America. His 19th century imaginings of harmonious, symmetrical neighborhoods cushioned by manicured vegetation were predictive of the first suburbs that would arrive later in the 1940s. He constructed nature as most aesthetically and morally valuable when subdued by the civilized, Western hand. The lawn embodied the perfect example of how the lush wild of the natural world might be better made by the mediation of the human hand, into a pure, homogenous landscape. Downing's ideas about landscape were influenced not only from his observations of English estates, but also by his ideological insistence on the inextricability of landscape and morality. He believed proper landscape design uplifted republican ideals and furthered the goals of a democratic, civil society (Wall). However, he also believed certain people, and particularly Native Americans, posed existential threats to his enterprise of the puritanical, turf grass utopia. In his 1835 essay to *The New York Mirror*, he articulates these resentments in a racist rambling celebrating the demise of indigenous people:

The wigwam is gone, and in its place are a thousand cheerful houses gleaming in the sunshine... We, who have long forgotten, or who have never heard the savage yell of the Indian, are prone to think of his character only in such lights as the poet and the writer of fiction have depicted him. Courage, fortitude, and valour, shed such a glow around some few of their chieftains, that it is apt to cast into the

shadow the evil and malignant passions which form the groundwork of the Indian character. (117)

He goes on to specify the intellectual and biological failings of Native Americans in greater detail, all while emphasizing the new paradigm of beauty brought to the Alleghenies by the erasure of an Indian presence. Downing's dismissal of Native Americans from his vision of a "correct" American landscape occurs adjacently to the exclusion of Native Americans in landscape painting by his artist contemporaries Cole and Church.

Andrew Jackson Downing's writings illustrate that at its inception, the introduction of the lawn into American culture stood as a symbol of colonization, whiteness, and exclusion. Though he never lived to see the dominating presence lawns would later hold in the United States (now 23% of urban land is estimated to be covered by lawn), his politically guided sentiments on the relationship between people and landscape predicted the way lawns would eventually become an obsession for the American cultural conscience (Robbins and Birkenholtz 181).

The real explosion of lawns in the United States coincided with the emergence of suburban housing after WWII. With the advent of the automobile industry and federal housing subsidies made available after the war, families- and particularly white families -began leaving urban centers in search for new real estate. Developers converted farmland into neighborhoods of prefabricated homes, and used turf grass to cover empty space in between. The economy of automobiles and real estate development gave birth to the economy of lawns. Agrochemical companies started marketing formulas to ward off pests and weeds, and fertilizers to enhance growth and verdure. Many of these chemical agents were not dissimilar to ones used in warfare during World War II. The lawn becomes militarized; chores like mowing the lawn, spraying the lawn, raking leaves, and applying fertilizer turn into key tenets of responsible home ownership

(Teyssot 136). In the 1970s, in the wake of the environmental movement and enactment of environmental regulations, industrial use of pesticides and chemical agents declined. However, use of agrochemical agents for lawn application only continued to increase (Robbins and Sharp 430). Neighborhood associations and municipalities enshrine specific regulations about the appearance of yards and lawns in their bylaws, and the absurdity of these rules manifests in strange legal contests.

In 1984, the Village of Kenmore in Erie County, New York charged resident Stephen Kenney for failing to comply with the municipality's codes regarding grass height. The code itself failed to specify a height, instead stipulating the grass must "conform to the desirable residential character of the property". When Kenney argued the appearance of his lawn was a matter of freedom of speech, the court disagreed: "Just because Kenney intended to express an idea, it did not constitute 'speech' subject to First Amendment protection... The lawn says nothing, it represents nothing, and it symbolizes nothing" (Teyssot 206). But clearly, the lawn must represent something if its aesthetics make it worthy of legislative description. The court ruled in favor of the Village of Kenmore.

Ultimately, the lawn becomes a private space managed for public consumption. The conflation of public and private property is striking in a country where a premium is placed on the rights of property owners and the freedoms entailed in owning private property. Paul Robbins and Julie Sharp highlight this conundrum:

Unlike many conspicuously consumed goods, such as automobiles, the lawn carries the moral weight of participating in a greater community or polity, touching on the relationship of the consumers not only to their families and

neighborhoods, but to the broader natural world, over which high-input lawn managers express an explicit sense of stewardship. (443)

The peculiar economic and political role of the lawn offers the first suggestion of a cultural relationship with nationalism, where allegiance to an aesthetic, homogenous, ideal of what a national identity should be preempts the actual philosophies of free speech and the other civil liberties enshrined in the constitution. Caretakers of lawns (“Lawn People” as Robbins describes them) do not see themselves as ascribing to a certain ideology of lawn maintenance separate from the monoculture. Rather, they intuit certain moralities and responsibilities in the appearance of their yard as a result of cultural and economic conditioning.

As it turns out, the process that turns Americans into Lawn People may not be so different from the processes that render them into nationalists. Nationalists are born not from explicit appeals to white supremacy, militarism, and misogyny, although explicit appeals to white supremacy, militarism, and misogyny certainly are effective in galvanizing an angry, nationalist, electorate. Rather, the foundations of nationalism are wrought on the subliminal messaging of institutions implicated in the preservation of these insidious systems; the government, the military, the education system, religion, the media, etc. People do not spend obsessive amounts of time manicuring their lawns because someone shouted at them to do so; they do it because they have grown up surrounded by those same lawns, seeing them representing in film and advertisement, because they can not conceive of a landscaping alternative more valuable or acceptable than the traditional lawnscape. As all homeowners then find themselves complicit in the agrochemical industrial complex, consumers buying into the narrative of neighborly gestures and suburban bliss, all Americans are complicit in nationalist behaviors by virtue of indoctrination into nationalist institutions.

The metaphor of the lawn as a site of nationalism becomes even more compelling when related to Tricia Cusack's definition of nationalism. In the context of her art historical research, she defines nationalism as, "a masculine militarism and adventurism, supported by religious convictions" (Cusack 28). Based on her definition, findings in recent research on human-lawn dynamics offers supporting evidence for the lawn as a space reinforced by these qualities. For one, the American lawn is a traditionally masculine space. In the breakdown of domestic responsibilities, lawn maintenance typically falls under the duties of the male figure in the household; a father, husband, or local teenage boy looking to make money over the summer (Latshaw 261).

The "militarism and adventurism" of the lawn may also develop from the breakdown of domestic activities. In the context of Cusack's nationalism of manifest destiny, militarism and adventurism come from the opportunity to explore and conquer a huge continent, largely uncharted by Western civilization. However, the modern man finds no such uncharted territory in his suburban habitat. For him, the only opportunity to express domination over landscape and interact with a "natural wild" arrives in the form of the lawn (Robbins & Sharp 442). Lawn chemicals and the whirring blades of mowers also contribute to the militancy of the lawnscape.

The religious undertones of the lawnscape manifest in the cultural, moral implications of maintaining or neglecting the lawn. A failure to comply with culturally agreed upon lawn aesthetics can become an indictment of one's character; American homeowners reported feeling less favorably about neighbors who failed to cut their lawns regularly, or who let their lawns brown (Robbins 110). Marketing material for agrochemical companies peddling fertilizer and pesticides also shows how the lawn acts as a religious and masculine entity. Advertisements for lawn products, on average, almost always depict nuclear families or heterosexual couples,

referencing both patriarchal family organization and a “traditional”, church-going demography (Robbins & Sharp 15).

The lawn originated as a nationalist emblem in Andrew Jackson Downing’s first colonialist, racist imaginings of suburban America. As it flourished and became an extension of the American home and the white middle class, it deepened its role as a nationalist symbol, as an indication of subscription to a larger cultural ideal intertwined with the political economy of turf-grass. Today, the environmental implications of the lawn further problematize its role in the future domestic landscape of the United States; it impedes ecological diversity, run-off from pesticides and fertilizers infiltrate clean water systems, and it erodes quality of soil over time (Robbins 71). Despite the negative realities of lawns, they remain more powerful than ever; with 23% of urban area occupied by lawns, and 675,000 hectares of land converted to urban area every year, the presence of the lawn only continues to grow (Robbins & Sharp 426).

Chapter 4

Considering Nationalism and Landscape in Recent Art

Whereas 19th century artists and thinkers celebrated the natural landscape as both a muse and a means to construct a national identity, contemporary artists must address how a collective failure to protect the same environment resulted in degradation of those horizons, and what that means for the future relationship of national identity and landscape. Can national identity still be constructed through landscape in an age where environmental well-being faces major human obstacles, often at the behest of the federal government and American corporations? In the past fifty years, art addressed the intersections of national identity and landscape in several ways of varying success; presenting a complete survey of all of relevant works is out of the scope of this thesis. Instead, this chapter discusses work influential to my thesis work: Land Art, the project *Docket* by design studio Diller + Scofidio Studio, and Ai Wei Wei's *Fairytale*.

The Land Art movement, also identified as the earthworks movement, began in the 1960s and 1970s off the back of conceptual art, and is recognized for artists like Robert Smithson, Robert Morris, Michael Heizer, Walter de Maria, Alan Sonfist, and Christo amongst others. Elusive in definition, Land Art describes work of elemental media (earth, water, wind, fire), often large in scale, and ephemeral in nature. For many of its disciples, the media of the Earth offered a form of resistance to an art market overrun by capitalism, the commodity-oriented treatment of art objects, and an escape from the confines of the gallery. Though these gestures to anti-capitalist ideals and primitive art-making suggest something outside of the American tradition, Land Art reveals itself to be a very American enterprise. Antonia Rigaud investigates Land Art as a specifically American art movement:

Rather, looking back, we can see how much these artists belong to a larger American tradition that endows the land with a mythic presence. Indeed, Smithson referred to the land as a “left over arcadia” in a phrase which evokes very clearly his sense of belonging to a tradition where the land is considered both as real and mythical space. (Rigaud 2)

Land artists often intended to critique the degrading, industrial treatment of land brought to the popular social conscience by the environment movement of the 1960s. But in their own excavations and moldings of dirt and grass, they often reflected the same idealized and entitled perspective of their ancestors who sought to usurp land from Native Americans and make it in their vision, inevitably subjecting it to resource exploitation. Of the land artists highlighted by the Western canon, most are male and white. As Rigaud points out, “These artists rely on the sense that space must be discovered and inhabited” (10) and as a result, “Viewers are made to experience physical or cognitive disorientation, which transforms them into explorers of the land, navigating between orientation and disorientation” (9). The land artists evidence the impossibility of approaching the American landscape with the same formal, minimalist, objective intentions of their artistic predecessors. Excising one’s identity from landscape proves futile; too much baggage is brought to bear by an American identity to the American landscape.

In *Docket* by Diller + Scofidio, the designers compile textual and photographic summaries of court cases involving lawns as sites of crime in one large document, accompanied by a special lens viewer to perceive the photographs with 3D texture. In close company to the research of aforementioned human geographers and historians, these designers separate their text from the academic by avoiding analysis or judgment; they only present the facts of the case. As the viewer soon realizes, analysis is unnecessary: the peculiarity of legislating the minutiae of the

lawn is obviously ridiculous. However, by quoting the prosecution, defense, and judgment of the cases, the designers also make obvious the ornate, arbitrary, and confusing ways our relationships to land and property are inscribed in the legal makeup of our towns. While land artists might resist discussing the intermingling of identity and land so frankly, Diller and Scofidio plainly expose the legal inextricability of land and people.

Ai Weiwei ponders the ability of humans to transcend nation and borders in his extensive 2007 installation *Fairytale*. Situated in Kassel, Germany for Documenta 12, he transported 1001 Qing Dynasty era wooden chairs to the site of the exhibition, along with 1001 fully sponsored Chinese visitors over the course of several months (Fig. 7). The chairs acted as a placeholder for the foreigners, asserting a space for them to sit in once they arrived, an invitation of sorts. Documenta curators Melissa Lam and Aaron Levy articulate the dissolution of place caused by an exodus such as *Fairytale*: “Diaspora, traveling, and leaving home suggests that home is no longer a closed and familiar place, rather an open system of crossroads. One finds that there is no beginning or end, and also no home to go back to” (Weiwei et al). Home is a fraught, personal topic for Ai Weiwei: in 2011, the Chinese government detained him in a jail on ambiguous charges for three months. Perhaps dissolution of home is something he experienced himself. When so much of home is constructed around nation, leaving your country becomes commensurate to leaving home. When one leaves home, they leave not only the physical structure of the house or apartment but also the trappings of home itself: furniture, appliances, decorations, and other personal touches. I see Ai Weiwei’s gesture of 1001 chairs as a means to navigate the material loneliness of leaving home. Offering someone a chair, especially of a specific culture, serves as an act of not just hospitality and friendliness, but recognition.



Figure 8 "Fairytale" Ai Weiwei, 2007. Source: The Fairytale Project



Figure 9 "Lawn Chair for the Infinite Front Yard" Sophie Najjar, 2017

When I built my own chairs, I thought about gesture of recognition, and how it might serve as an effective intervention to the hostile nationalism of most homes in my immediate landscape.

Front yards appear austere and withholding, how does placing an explicit invitation to a human body change their accessibility?

Chapter 5

Reflecting on *Front Yard*

My thesis show *Front Yard* took place October 16-20, 2017 in the courtyard behind the Visual Arts Building on University Park campus. The installation was installed everyday at 10 am and de-installed everyday at 4 pm. The installation was comprised of three main parts: the paintings, the chairs, and the partial gallery wall (Fig. 4). The artwork and wall were constructed over the course of four months.

During this particular week of October in State College, the weather was clear, warm, and sunny; maybe the perfect conditions for a series of work depicting idyllic, suburban moments. As the sun rose and fell throughout the day, the changing light and shadow caused the installation to shape shift. At times the direct sunlight made the white wall reflect a harsh glow, and the polyurethane-treated chairs turned gold and orange. Other moments cast rippling soft shadows from surrounding trees and shrubbery onto the paintings. Though we staked the gallery wall into the ground, it swayed in the wind, causing the paintings to move in and out from the wall. A sense of instability hesitated over the show the entire week; would it rain? Would the work be stolen or vandalized? Would the wall tip over and hurt a person or an artwork? The chaos of the public, outdoor space posed many threats to the installation. The act of surrendering my art to such exposed conditions caused a concomitant surrendering of the work into new meaning and public interpretation.

The installation occurred in a place on campus with considerable foot traffic, caused in part by a neighboring Au Bon Pain and the use of the Visual Arts Building as a shortcut from Curtin to North campus. As a result, many of the viewers were not part of the traditional demography for shows at Penn State. The School of Visual Arts community is the normal

audience for my work. During the time I spent at my installation, I spoke to architecture students, theatre students, faculty from different backgrounds, OPP staff, business students, people who worked at Au Bon Pain, and visiting parents and alumni (Fig. 9-11).

People approached the exhibition in different ways. Some merely took a double take as they walked by on their way somewhere else (my work caused a slight disruption in their routine but not enough to change their path). Others stopped and stared, but acted unsure if they were allowed to be in the space, and came no further. Many people came up to the paintings and treated the space as a traditional gallery, keeping a polite distance from the art objects, hands clasped behind their backs, nodding thoughtfully. Then there were those who interacted with the installation as a more casual space. They sat down in the chairs without hesitation, drank iced coffees and scrolled through Instagram feeds, totally comfortable and not at all self-conscious.

Not dissimilar to the threshold of public and private straddled by actual front yards, my installation *Front Yard* and the myriad ways visitors interacted with the space revealed the same confusion as to whether it was public, or private, or both. As a public university mostly funded by private means, Penn State also inhabits this muddled in-between. The bureaucracy involved in obtaining permission to put my installation outside suggested a more public infrastructure, but the concern expressed on behalf of Penn State staff for the possibility of theft or vandalism to my work echoed the sentiments of private citizens concerned for private, personal property.

At the end of the week, the work remained undamaged by both human and environmental elements. My intuition to trust the public and the landscape paid off. I tore down the wall (Fig. 12), deconstructing it back into plywood sheets and 2"x4" studs. As it turns out, tearing down a wall takes much less time than building one.



Figure 10 Front Yard visitor



Figure 11 Front Yard visitor (2)



Figure 12 Front Yard visitor (3)



Figure 13 Front Yard exterior installation view

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ACADEMIC VITA

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Major(s) and Minor(s): Art (B.F.A.) and Geography (B.A.)

Honors: Art (B.F.A.)

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Work Experience

Studio Assistant to Stacy Levi // April-August 2017 // Spring Mills, PA
Assisting with construction, packaging, and final installation of various projects for artist Stacy Levi; conducting materials research and tests

Intern Artist in Residence // Salem Art Works // Summer 2016 // Salem, NY
Participating in studio practice in conjunction with intern responsibilities such as: creating a web map of the sculpture park, assisting in sculpture restoration, giving tours, maintaining studio spaces, and helping with workshops

Grants Received: Erickson Discovery Grant, Student Engagement Network Grant, Schreyer Ambassador Travel Grant, Schreyer Internship Grant

Awards: Gerald Davis Painting Award

Solo Exhibitions

Front Yard, Arts District Courtyard, University Park, PA. Oct. 16-20, 2017

Day & Night, The State Theatre, State College, PA. Sept. 1-30, 2017.

Hedges, Patterson Gallery, University Park, PA. Jan. 23-27, 2017

Group Exhibitions

Now. See. Here., Zoller Gallery, University Park, PA. Nov. 6- Dec. 1, 2017.

Rough Intent, Zoller Gallery, University Park, PA. Nov. 7-18, 2017.

Saw Summer Residency Group Exhibition, Salem Art Works Barn Gallery, Salem, NY. July 16-23, 2016.