

Gallery 2+3

July 30 -
August 27
2006

RESPOND!

In the RESPOND! Series, the Art Center asks visitors to tell us what they think about the work in the exhibition:

*From a distance
landforms loom
amoeba-like
out of pastel opacity*

*Beyond orientation tools
maps grounded
in rivers and roads
reveal in details,
drawn sweet yet menacing,
nodding blooms and roadside shrines*

*The peculiar patterns,
layered humor and discomfort,
travel
uncovering the particulars
of place*

Kelly Rider

Book and Paper Artist living in Chicago. Rider is also a Teaching Artist for the Creativity Camp program at the Art Center.

Mel Watkin: Reclamation



Waterworks: Red Seas (detail)
2006
Pen, pencil, acrylic on map
20 1/8 x 31 inches

Hyde Park **ARTCENTER**

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The exhibition title “Reclamation” refers to the process of land restoration enforced by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency that requires strip mining companies to turn land into nature parks once it is expended of its natural resources. The work by Mel Watkin on view illustrates nature taking back the landscape that has been overrun by concrete and asphalt. Highways morph into vigorous water canals, entire states are seized by wildflowers, and national parks become creviced islands in an empty sea where there once was urban and rural development. Nature’s aggressive side showcased in the artwork reminds us that the environment is not just to be worried about and protected, but also to be feared.

Reclamation includes drawings from four consecutive series of work created by Mel Watkin between 2001 and 2006: *Compass Rose*, *Roadside*, *Waterworks*, and *Sprawl*. All of these works are made with pen, pencil and acrylic paint on

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maps that were either given to the artist by friends or used by her in her travels. The vegetation in the composition is both invented and derived from the savage flora and fauna that surrounds the artist’s home in Southern Illinois.

The artworks in the exhibition have been arranged in an order that emphasizes patterns in the visual language Mel has developed throughout the series rather than chronological order. In the *Compass Rose* drawings the artist left the navigational compass (in the shape of a flower) intact and saturated the composition with daffodils, daisies, or other wildflowers. The maps that include sketches of memorial crosses, slatted shacks, and even a beached shark, are a part of the *Roadside* series, appropriately named for objects that were frequently seen (or imagined to have been seen) by the artist during her many road trips across America. The fact that water covers nearly 80 percent of the earth’s surface and similarly constitutes 70 percent of the human body indirectly inspired the *Waterworks* series, which often converts roads into swollen veins of water on the earth’s skin. The more recent *Sprawl* series examines the spontaneous growth of cities and populations by relating the process to shelf mushrooms or yeast spores growing rampant. Throughout the artwork, Mel has built up consistent imagery of water, vegetation, and fungus to place the ecological within the human condition—both suffer when not given proper care.

Many of the artworks were made with particular current events in mind, including the Iraq War, urban sprawl, and global warming to name a few. The imagery is very bold and clear, such as Saudi Arabia being divided by a raging blood red river in *Waterworks: Red Seas* (2006). Other works are humorous personal responses to episodes in popular culture. For instance, *Compass Rose: Great Plains* (2001) is Mel’s answer to a *New York Times* editorial that recommended the Midwest be evacuated and turned into a refuge for roaming buffalo. In the drawing, the artist submerges both the East and West coasts leaving only the Midwest to be inhabited by flourishing blossoms. Solid blocks of pink, yellow, green, and blue liken the drawings to a weather map predicting a changing political or social climate rather than conveying meteorological information.

In addition to the twenty-one works on paper, the Art Center also presents a new site-specific wall drawing. Wisps of bright green first seen from a distance compose lush branches in a summer time garland draped over the doorway at the end of the gallery. The austere white flowers bob and float among the seaweed vines like bubbles. Under closer inspection, the green strokes more resemble a worm or marine organism’s tentacle than a plant. The artist, also an avid organic gardener, describes these figures as derivative of tomato worms that eat her produce. The larger-than-life scale of these menacing creatures heightens their threat from crushable insect to a biological hazard of human proportion.

Tsunamis, hurricanes, earthquakes, flooding, all prove nature’s power to move politics and impose grave danger on people all over the world. Mel Watkin activates her compositions with thriving vegetation and entwined bodies of water, while animating our concern for the environment-gone-wild. Straddling the line of beneficial and destructive, the viewer is asked to challenge the passive definition of landscape and reconsider its use or suffer serious consequences.

Mel Watkin has been working in painting, book, collage and drawing for over 30 years. Past work includes drawing on lace, pillow cases and other unlikely textiles that offer an additional layer of memory to the drawing that can’t be achieved by using plain white paper. *Reclamation* is the first exhibition of Mel Watkin’s work in Chicago since 2000.

Allison Peters
Director of Exhibitions