

Marion Wilson

The Landscape Is Sanctuary to Our Fears





Marion Wilson
The Landscape Is Sanctuary to Our Fears

Installation view of *The Landscape Is Sanctuary to Our Fears*



Cover: **Marion Wilson**
40.9503 N, 72.4052 W (Lake Hopatcong, NJ), 2019
Digital print on painted mylar
25 x 17 inches (framed)
Courtesy of the artist

Marion Wilson
Mulberry Tree and Silkworms (detail), 2019
Oil paint on mylar
38 x 46 inches
Courtesy of the artist

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Installation view, *Marion Wilson: The Landscape Is Sanctuary to Our Fears*, 2020

Introduction

Kristen Evangelista, gallery director

Trained as a painter, Marion Wilson grew up in a politically active family in New York City and later Teaneck, New Jersey. Her father was a New York state senator from 1963 to 1966, and her mother was an activist. This upbringing shaped her socially engaged art; for the past 15 years, she has worked collaboratively across media and disciplines. Wilson connects with undervalued communities and landscapes and interfaces with architects, developers, and scientists as a strategy to tackle social and ecological issues. She embraces scientific methods and apparatuses that facilitate “looking closely and paying attention to what is small and omnipresent and overlooked, while drawing parallels between the natural world and the most fundamental aspects of human presence.”

In her current exhibition, *The Landscape Is Sanctuary to Our Fears*, Wilson builds upon her extensive background partnering with scientists, students, and communities. While an associate professor at Syracuse University, Wilson studied bryophytes, or moss, for a semester with botanist Dr. Robin Wall Kimmerer. Wilson was significantly influenced by Dr. Kimmerer’s approach using Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), which draws on the wisdom of both indigenous and scientific knowledge toward the shared goal of sustainability. Wilson was inspired to examine both the aesthetic qualities and physical properties of moss, an underappreciated plant and important environmental bioindicator. Working in tandem with Syracuse University students, Wilson created *MLAB* (2007), which in 2015 she transformed into *Mobile Field Station*, a roving laboratory for moss outfitted with test tube samples, microscopes, and drawing stations. Visitors of all ages were invited to appreciate the color, texture, and form of moss and learn new ways of knowing.

Wilson first surveyed bodies of water in *The Lake Project* (2007), where she co-taught a Syracuse University course that investigated a sense of place at Onondaga Lake. Located adjacent to Syracuse, it is one of the most polluted lakes in North America due to industrial exploitation. In examining this neglected landscape, Wilson was guided

Marion Wilson

41.066601 N, -74.209260 W

(Bear Swamp Brook, NJ), 2019

Digital print on painted mylar

25 x 17 inches (framed)

Courtesy of the artist



by Lucy Lippard's seminal text, *The Lure of the Local* (1997). This noted art critic and theorist writes, "Place is latitudinal and longitudinal within the map of a person's life. It is temporal and spatial, personal and political."¹ In this vein, Wilson led students to create performances and installations informed by the lake's plants, wildlife, and industrial waste. This project fostered a deeper understanding of Onondaga Lake and its relationship to the history of Syracuse, enabling college students to evolve from tourists in a college town to environmentally conscious community members.

In this exhibition, Wilson investigates the ecology of the Passaic River watershed while creating associations with memory and human histories. During the spring 2019 semester, she partnered with William Paterson University Professor of Environmental Science Nicole Davi and undergraduate students to study macroinvertebrates, important bioindicators for water quality. In subsequent months, Wilson collected local species and water samples from tributaries of the Passaic River and other bodies of water. Wilson also mined the history of Paterson, once dubbed "Silk City," by studying the archives of The Paterson Museum and the American Labor Museum/Botto House in neighboring Haledon, New Jersey. She became fascinated by the pivotal role of water as the engine for industry, immigration, labor, and protests. Wilson interweaves new paintings with historical photographs and artifacts, exploring themes of silk, water, protest, and remembrance. She draws a parallel to her own progressive upbringing in the 1960s, incorporating photographs of her father's political campaigns. Memories of past and present coalesce in paintings of her sisters and her recently deceased father.

Looking beyond Paterson, Wilson examines bodies of water in New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Maine in the photographic series *The Waters of My Childhood*, which documents bodies of water that the artist visited regularly as a child. Northeastern regions share similar histories and ecologies where water played an essential role in the growth of factories and neighboring cities during the Industrial Revolution. Today, these areas are also among the fastest-warming states in the nation, and several of these bodies of water are no longer safe for swimming.

Wilson discerns overarching connections between the past and present, the personal and the physical, to construct a holistic view of nature and expose the impact of climate change on a personal and intimate level. Invoking the ethos of public service, her artistic practice serves as a new model for advancing societal change and public good as well as ecological justice.

¹ Lucy Lippard, *Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicenter Society* (New York: The New Press, 1997), 7.



Installation view, *Marion Wilson: The Landscape Is Sanctuary to Our Fears*, 2020

Connecting Self to Place, Or Saving Nature to Save Ourselves

Jane Harris

William Carlos Williams described the genesis of his epic poem, *Paterson* (1946-58), as a desire to find “an image large enough to embody the whole knowable world around me.”¹ To that end, the pediatrician-cum-poet personified Paterson throughout the poem, conflating man with the city: “He lies on his right side, head near the thunder of the waters filling his dreams!”² The Passaic River and the Paterson Great Falls take on particular significance, the latter powering both city and poem. The role these waters played in making Paterson the country’s first planned industrial city, and the impact of their subsequent pollution on both environment and community alike, are hauntingly explored in a multitude of voices. Williams’ quest to invent an experimental prose to embody this urban fate underscores this parallel deterioration in potent descriptions where the power of nature still roars above the despair:

From above, higher than the spires, higher
even than the office towers, from oozy fields
abandoned to gray beds of dead grass,
black sumac, withered weed-stalks,
mud and thickets cluttered with dead leaves—
the river comes pouring in above the city
and crashes from the edge of the gorge
in a recoil of spray and rainbow mists—³

Marion Wilson’s exhibition *The Landscape Is Sanctuary to Our Fears* offers a similar vision of Paterson, connecting self to place, and landscape to people through shifting perspectives. Inspired by Williams’ five-part poem, it too tells a cautionary tale embedded in the history of Paterson while remaining paradoxically inquisitive. As Wilson, who spent most of her childhood in New Jersey, explains: “My work questions both implicitly and explicitly whether art can save nature—and whether nature can save us from ourselves.”

The title is derived from a line in Williams' poem that Wilson has strategically altered, exchanging the word "library" for "landscape" to evoke the natural world as a place of refuge. It's a subtle modification that also upends the gendered associations Williams made—"A man like a city and a woman like a flower"⁴—in an effort to reclaim the city from a female perspective and reveal the inextricable relationship of labor to landscape.

In her photographic series *The Waters of My Childhood*, 2019, Wilson presents close-up images of water samples collected from the lakes and rivers she swam in as a child, including New Jersey's Passaic River and Lake Hopatcong. Shot from shaken-up lab bottles and printed on milky mylar, the resulting images have a dreamy abstract quality more reminiscent of painting than scientific data. Their vertical format, which mimics the bottles, adds to their sense of dislocation, aligning them with portraiture rather than landscape. Among the alternately murky and luminous aquatic details one observes toxic blooms of green algae; tentacled insects; dead fish; and tangled clouds of sand aloft with pine needles, seaweed, and maple leaves. Wilson collected some of these samples with a team of AmeriCorps scientists in order to test for levels of toxicity, and the results were distressing. Evidence of extreme pollution and climate change point to dire conclusions.



Installation view, *Marion Wilson: The Landscape Is Sanctuary to Our Fears*, 2020

Processing that information on a personal level, Wilson's transformations of such evidence into eerily beautiful images evoke loss and memory: "The bottled waters were about collecting the spirits of place as much as scientific material."⁵ Their somber ethereal tones call to mind Robert Smithson's 1967 travelogue, *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic*, which documented the entropic, suburban ruins of his eponymous birthplace through photos and writing. Whereas Smithson employed a macro-view in his belief that "wreckage is sometimes more interesting than structure,"⁶ Wilson's aquatic ruins capture a microscopic realm easily neglected. A grouping of the water sample bottles included in the exhibition encourages viewers to physically and emotionally engage with them.

Wilson's commitment to the overlooked is an enduring focus of her career, imbuing her social and environmental practice with the urgency of close observation. Rather than an odyssey into the aesthetics of wreckage, hers has been a journey into the revelations of sustained wonder. Her 2016 project with moss, *Bryophilia*, combined enlarged photographs of various specimens with delicate drawings of plants on repurposed slide cabinet drawer dividers. A traveling botanical lab, which featured selected moss specimens, opened up this miniature ecosystem to the public, providing a glimpse into the world's oldest and least studied plants. *The Waters of My Childhood* mirrors this intimate lab encounter.



Installation view, *Marion Wilson: Bryophilia*, Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education, 2016

By lining the outer walls of the same gallery with works related to Paterson’s social and political history, Paterson’s deteriorating ecology is astutely positioned within the larger context of community. As the artist states, “The exploitation of natural resources leads to the exploitation and degradation of people.” The local history Wilson revives is represented by a variety of sources including archival photographs drawn from the American Labor Museum in Haledon, New Jersey. These documents of Paterson’s early industrialization in the late nineteenth century allude to the flood of immigrants that followed and the role of female mill workers in the city’s 1913 Silk Strike, among other events. Family pictures related to the artist’s early introduction to politics through the work of her father, former New York State Senator Jerome L. Wilson (1963-1966), are intermixed. In a process that echoes the water sample photographs, many of the archival images have been cropped to isolate certain details, and several have been subtly painted over with walnut pigment.

Also on view are a series of bright, expressive oil paintings on large sheets of mylar that imbue Paterson’s textile past and political history with personal poignancy. From stippled renderings of mulberry trees (a silk source), to recreated versions of family photos, old and new, their sensibility is fragile and elegiac. A painting of a large red poppy, positioned between a portrait of Wilson’s father before his recent death and an image of the artist and her three sisters as little girls, symbolizes death and remembrance.



Artifacts borrowed from the Paterson Museum are interspersed throughout the exhibition with a similar mnemonic function, their material history and use still palpable. Among the objects selected by Wilson are spindles for silk thread gathered in a wooden textile factory cart and long, vertical scrolls of punch cards from a nineteenth century Jacquard loom. The two scrolls cascade poetically from the wall onto the floor between a faded black-and-white snapshot of the Statue of Liberty (*Crossing to America*, 2019), and a crisp digital print of the Great Falls (*Paterson Falls*, 2019). It’s a moving tribute to a city poised on the brink of a comeback, perhaps alluding to a new generation of immigrants fueling Paterson’s potential.

Wilson’s exhibition summons us to imagine a not-so-distant future when the lakes and rivers of our own childhoods are no longer swimmable. Like William Carlos Williams’ iconic poem, it invites us to let the roar of the Great Falls fill our dreams with the promise of hope, refuge, and new ways of being. At a seemingly cataclysmic moment, in a time when climate change threatens our planet, these dreams will only be realized if nature—in all her glory—is reclaimed as part of humanity.

Marion Wilson

Crossing to America, 2019

Artist-edited historical photograph

13 x 19 inches

Courtesy of the artist and the Jerome Wilson estate

◀ **Marion Wilson**

Assemblage of artist-edited historical photographs, 2020

Dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist



¹ William Carlos Williams, author’s note in *Paterson* (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), iii.

² Ibid, 6.

³ Ibid, 6-7.

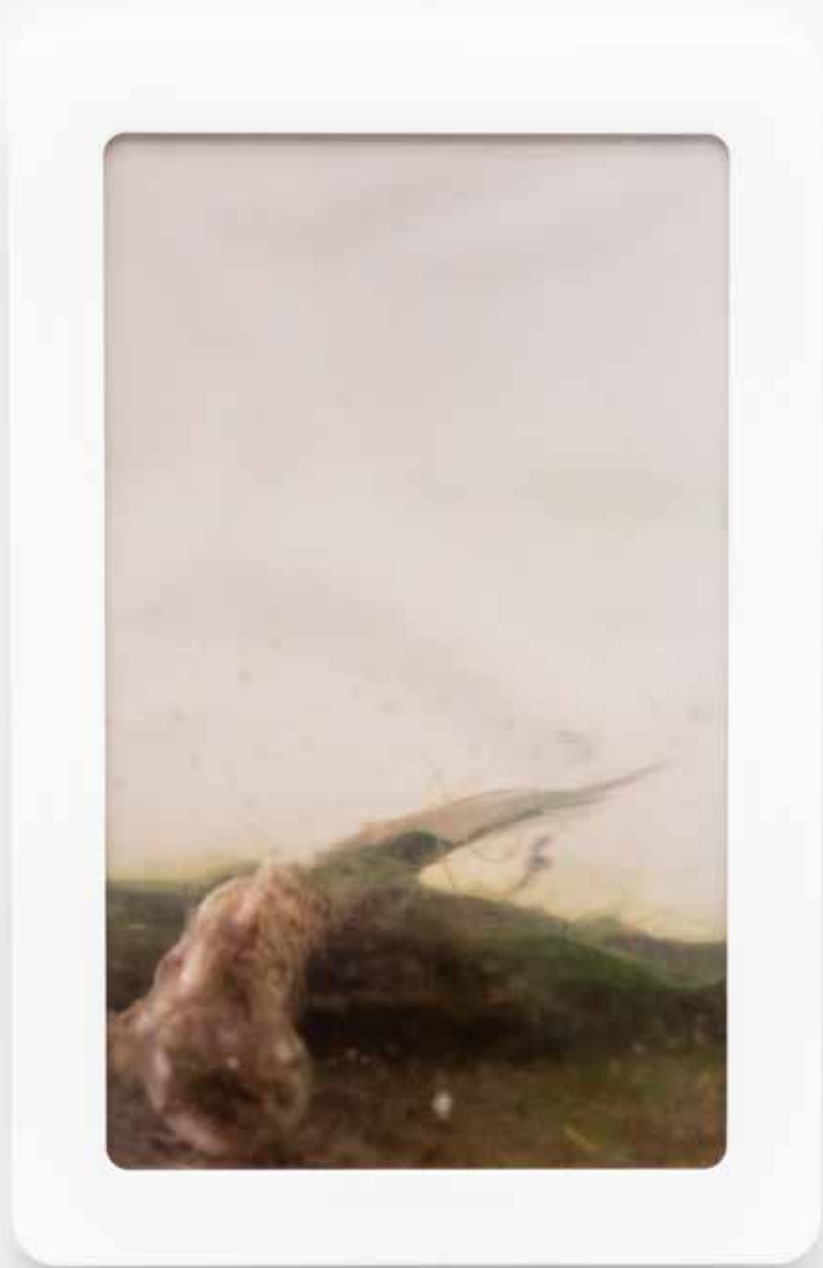
⁴ Ibid, 7.

⁵ Interview with the artist, January 29, 2020.

⁶ Robert Smithson and Jack Flam, eds., *The Collected Writings* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 256.

Illustrations

Marion Wilson
41.3334456 N, -70.704739 W
(Aquinnah Beach, MA), 2019
Digital print on painted mylar
25 x 17 inches (framed)
Courtesy of the artist



Marion Wilson
42.9652 N, 76.0699 W
(Jamesville, NY), 2019
Digital print on painted mylar
25 x 17 inches (framed)
Courtesy of the artist

Marion Wilson
41.3504 N, 72.4052 W
(Essex, CT), 2019
Digital print on painted mylar
25 x 17 inches (framed)
Courtesy of the artist



Marion Wilson
Flag of 1917, 2019
Walnut ink and reclaimed
earth pigment on mylar
51 1/4 x 29 3/4 inches
Courtesy of the artist



◀ **Marion Wilson**
She said..., 2019
Oil paint on mylar
61 ½ x 42 inches
Courtesy of the artist

Marion Wilson
Red Mulberry Tree, 2019
Oil paint on mylar
33 ½ x 41 inches
Courtesy of the artist



Marion Wilson
Family Portrait, 2019
Oil paint on mylar
30 x 24 inches
Courtesy of the artist



Marion Wilson
Poppy - Remembrance, 2019
Oil paint on mylar
60 x 44 inches
Courtesy of the artist

Exhibition Checklist

Marion Wilson

The Waters of My Childhood, 2019

Digital prints on painted mylar

Each 25 x 17 inches (framed)

Courtesy of the artist, framing by Mario Mohan

42.9652 N, 76.0699 W (*Jamesville, NY*)

40.9503 N, 72.4052 W (*Lake Hopatcong, NJ*)

41.3334456 N, -70.704739 W (*Aquinnah Beach, MA*)

43.4344 N, 72.0024 W (*Little Lake Sunapee, NH*)

42.9652 N, 76.0699 W (*Jamesville, NY*)

40.9503 N, 72.4052 W (*Lake Hopatcong, NJ*)

43.9773 N, 69.3596 W (*Floods Cove, ME*)

41.3504 N, 72.4052 W (*Essex, CT*)

41.066601 N, -74.209260 W (*Bear Swamp Brook, NJ*)

41.3334456 N, -70.704739 W (*Aquinnah Beach, MA*)

41.066601 N, -74.209260 W (*Bear Swamp Brook, NJ*)

43.4344 N, 72.0024 W (*Bucklins Beach, NH*)

Marion Wilson

Water Bottles of My Childhood, 2020

Wooden table designed and built by Zach Seibold

Bottles: various dimensions

Table: 4 x 8 x 4 feet

Courtesy of the artists

Marion Wilson

Red Mulberry Tree, 2019

Oil paint on mylar

33 1/2 x 41 inches

Courtesy of the artist

Skein of purple silk

Twentieth century

Courtesy of the Paterson Museum

Marion Wilson

Mulberry Tree and Silkworms, 2019

Oil paint on mylar

38 x 46 inches

Courtesy of the artist

Marion Wilson

Crossing to America, 2019

Artist-edited historical photograph

13 x 19 inches

Courtesy of the artist and the

Jerome Wilson estate

Marion Wilson

River, 2020

Jacquard machine punch cards

Courtesy of the artist

Marion Wilson

Paterson Falls, 2019

Digital print

21 x 15 inches (framed)

Courtesy of the artist

Spindles of silk thread,

wooden textile cart

Twentieth century

32 1/2 x 35 x 17 1/2 inches

Courtesy of the Paterson Museum

Chain of lags for a doobby loom

Twentieth century

68 3/4 x 9 1/4 inches

Courtesy of the Paterson Museum

Marion Wilson

She said..., 2019

Oil paint on mylar

61 1/2 x 42 inches

Courtesy of the artist

Marion Wilson

Assemblage of artist-edited

historical photographs, 2020

Dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist

Marion Wilson

Flag of 1917, 2019

Walnut ink and reclaimed earth

pigment on mylar

51 1/4 x 29 3/4 inches

Courtesy of the artist

Marion Wilson

Stop Hurting Me While I'm

Laughing at You, 2019

Oil paint on mylar

31 1/2 x 24 inches

Courtesy of the artist

Marion Wilson

Poppy - Remembrance, 2019

Oil paint on mylar

60 x 44 inches

Courtesy of the artist

Marion Wilson

Family Portrait, 2019

Oil paint on mylar

30 x 24 inches

Courtesy of the artist

Marion Wilson

Untitled, 2020

Artist's work samples

Variable dimensions

Courtesy of the artist

Wooden textile cart

Twentieth century

33 3/4 x 48 x 19 inches

Courtesy of the Paterson Museum



Marion Wilson

Untitled, 2020

Artist's work samples

Variable dimensions

Courtesy of the artist

Artist Biography

Marion Wilson accesses individual expertise and works non-hierarchically through her art practice to build collaborative partnerships with botanists, architects, and urban communities. As an associate professor at Syracuse University from 2007 to 2017, she institutionalized an art curriculum called *New Directions in Social Sculpture*. This curriculum draws upon her belief in the revitalization of urban spaces through the arts, often involving recycled materials and unlikely collaborations. Wilson is the founder of *MLAB (Mobile Literacy Arts Bus)* and *Mobile Field Station* (a mobile eco/art lab in a collaboratively renovated RV), and *601 Tully*, an abandoned 1,900-square-foot residence on the west side of Syracuse that was renovated into a neighborhood art museum. Wilson holds a BA from Wesleyan University, an MA from Columbia University, and an MFA from the University of Cincinnati. Her individual studio work uses artifacts from the photography industry in sculpture, painting, and printed photographs to explore industrialized landscapes and useful, stress-tolerant botanics with a special interest in moss.

Wilson has exhibited at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, NY; Frederieke Taylor, New York, NY; Herbert Johnson Museum at Cornell University, Ithaca, NY; Kasia Kay Art Projects, New Orleans, LA; Dorsky Gallery, Long Island City, NY; Exit Art, New York, NY; Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center, Buffalo, NY; and SPACES, Cleveland, OH. She has been awarded residencies at Millay Colony for the Arts (Nancy Graves Award), Austerlitz, NY; International Studio Program (NYSCA and Elizabeth Foundation), New York, NY; Sculpture Space, Utica, NY; and, most recently, McColl Center for Art and Innovation, Charlotte, NC.



Director's Acknowledgments

This exhibition and publication yielded meaningful interdisciplinary exchanges through extensive collaborations across and beyond William Paterson University. It has been invigorating to work with artist Marion Wilson: to learn from her immersive research in the landscape, people, and history of places, then experience her rich creativity across the media of painting, photography, and installation. This project was conceived and realized through dialogues with William Paterson University Professor of Environmental Science Nicole Davi. Her research and expertise provided the foundation for the investigation of watersheds. Professor Davi and her undergraduate students conducted joint stream studies of the Passaic River watershed during the spring semester of 2019. Wilson received substantial research assistance and artifact loans from Paterson Museum director Jack DeStefano and curator Heather Garside. Evelyn M. Hershey, education director for the American Labor Museum at the Botto House in Haledon, New Jersey, offered valuable guidance and historical photographs. Artist Tattfoo Tan provided plant-based pigments for several of Wilson's paintings, and Zach Seibold generously loaned his handcrafted table.

In regards to this publication, I would like to acknowledge essayist Jane Harris, who thoughtfully considered Wilson's work and revealed intricate layers of meaning. Graphic designer Matthew Barteluce produced this elegant publication, and we are grateful for his attention to detail, cooperation, and creative vision.

The University Galleries gratefully acknowledges support from William Paterson University including Dr. Richard Helldobler, president; Dr. Joshua B. Powers, provost and senior vice president for academic affairs; Dr. Sandra Hill, associate provost for academic affairs; Daryl Joseph Moore, dean of the College of the Arts and Communication; Loretta McLaughlin Vignier, associate dean of the College of the Arts and Communication; and Claudia Goldstein, interim chair of the Department of Art.

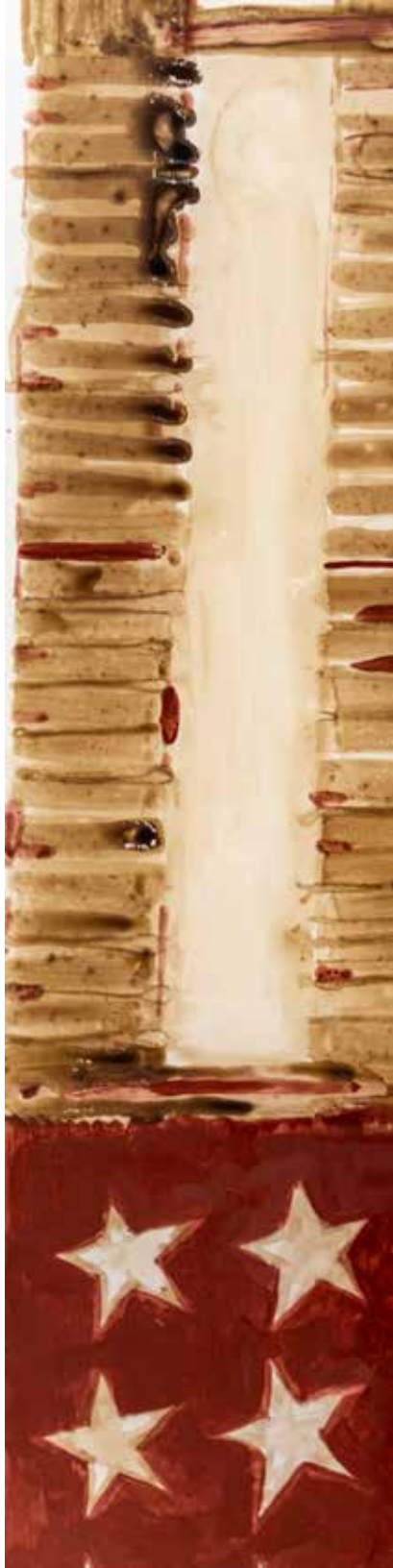
Gallery staff worked conscientiously to make this project possible, assisting in all areas from the initial grant application to the final installation. Emily Johnsen, gallery manager, diligently promoted the exhibition across multiple platforms and contributed to the production of this publication. Casey Mathern, collections

manager, expertly guided the loan, care, and display of historical artifacts in the exhibition. Graduate assistant Taylor Cacici and intern Kara Kovach provided pivotal behind-the-scenes support to both the artist and staff.

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Emily Johnsen, Gallery Manager
Casey Mathern, Collections Manager



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Large
Print



Installation view of *The Landscape Is Sanctuary to Our Fears*

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