

Reimagining hope at the intersection of arts and ecology

by Melanie Moyer, April 17, 2025



How do you capture the enormity of climate change and the complex emotions associated with it? This challenge lies at the heart of [Ryan Pierce's](#) work as an artist, educator, and writer. As Assistant Professor and Chair of the Low Residency MFA in Visual Studies at Pacific Northwest College of Art, Pierce employs a multimodal creative approach to craft narratives about ecology and the resilience of the natural world. Through his work, he encourages students to develop their own unique creative perspectives on these critical issues.

Students in PNCA's low residency MFA program enjoy the flexibility of a three-year hybrid program, which has them creating art remotely and attending intensive summer residencies in person on campus in Portland. These busy working artists benefit from personalized mentorship from faculty like Pierce, who takes a hands-on approach to guiding students to develop their own creative practice.

"I want my students to discover their voices. I want them to adopt a healthy critical lens and form a research practice that can be mutually sustainable with their creative practice," Pierce says. "Grad school is a time of building and exploring habits and then applying those practices."



Pierce's large-scale paintings capture the convergence of humans and the natural world by imagining the world's recovery from human industry. In works such as "Queens of the Night" (2022), luminous datura and cactus flowers are foregrounded by plastic water bottles and old chain-link fences, portraying a familiar and realistic natural scene amid pollution and environmental destruction.

"One of the ways that I was socialized was to understand a binary between people and nature. I've spent much of my life trying to debunk and unlearn that socialization to embrace our problematic species as part of the ecosystems where we live," he says.

Queens of the Night (2022) by Ryan Pierce

This awareness began during his upbringing in the Redwoods of Mendocino County in Northern

California. "I feel nourished by proximity to the natural world. I really enjoy observing nature and forming relationships with the place where I live. That is society to me," Pierce says.

His attention to narrative comes from his work as a reader and writer. "I work in a hybrid space between walking, writing, and image making. I get starting points from all over, from literature, from folk art, from ecological theory and philosophy." He also works extensively in printmaking.

With notable accomplishments, including international exhibitions, prestigious residencies, fellowships, grants, and more, Pierce guides his students with invaluable lessons about their professional creative lives. "I work with my students to help them envision the artist life that they want, and what's exciting to me is that there's not just one path," he says. "Now that I've been an educator for 15 years, it's really rewarding to see students achieve those things."

Before coming to PNCA, Pierce co-founded Signal Fire, which facilitated nomadic wilderness residencies on public lands and invited college students — including some from PNCA — to spend a month in the backcountry in an accredited arts and ecology field program.

As he continues his artwork and teaching, Pierce looks forward to continuing to develop the Visiting Artist Lecture Series and will be working on a large-scale public art piece for the Portland International Airport in early 2026.

Ultimately, he hopes that his evocative work challenges viewers to reconsider their own relationship to climate change and their engagement with the natural world.

“It’s easy to feel pretty hopeless about climate change, but hopelessness about the planet’s future feels like a bit of a cop-out,” Pierce says. “I aim to capture the complexity of these issues through a speculative space in my artwork, portraying a messy evolution.”



The Cultural Landscape: Part 16

Photographer K.B. Dixon continues his series of cultural profiles with portraits of choreographer Jessica Wallenfels, visual artist Ryan Pierce, poet and book editor Valerie Witte, actor/director Isaac Lamb, and choral leader Katherine Fitzgibbon.

AUGUST 23, 2024 | **K.B. DIXON**

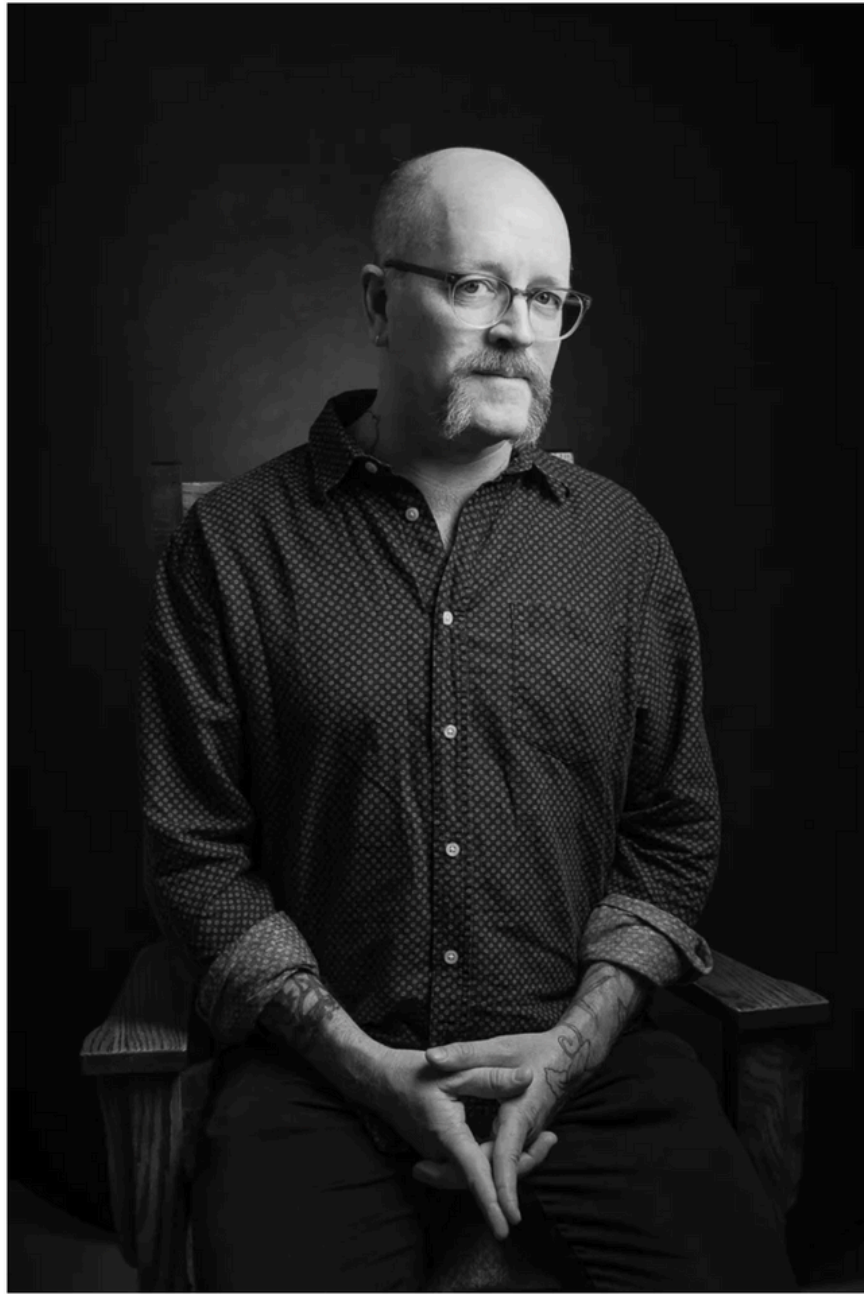
CULTURAL LANDSCAPE, CULTURE, PHOTOGRAPHY

Text and Photographs by K.B. DIXON

As with the portraits in the previous installments of this series, I have focused on the talented, dedicated, and creative people who have made significant contributions to the art, character, and culture of this city and state—in this case a choreographer, a poet, a painter, a director, and a musician.

My aspirations have remained the same: to document the contemporary cultural landscape and to produce a decent photograph—a photograph that acknowledges the medium's allegiance to reality and that preserves for myself and others a unique and honest sense of the subject. The environmental details have been kept to a minimum. The subjects have the frame to themselves and do not compete with context for attention. This provides for a simpler, blunter, more intense encounter with character. It is character that animates the image.

RYAN PIERCE



Ryan Pierce is a painter, printmaker, and educator. He draws on ecological theory, literature, and folk art to create scenes that portray the resilience of the natural world. He has received an Individual Artist Fellowship from the Oregon Arts Commission and grants from the Joan Mitchell and San Francisco Foundations. He has been an artist in residence at the Djerassi and Ucross Foundations and a fellow at the Jordan Schnitzer Printmaking Residency at Sitka Center for Art & Ecology, where he now serves on the Board of Directors. He is the co-founder of Signal Fire, a group that facilitated wilderness residencies and retreats for artists of all disciplines from 2009-19, and the founding director of Wide Open Studios, an arts and ecology field program. He chairs the low-residency MFA in Visual Studies at Pacific Northwest College of Art (PNCA). He has exhibited both nationally and internationally. In 2019 his work was showcased in the Portland Art Museum's inaugural triennial of Northwest Art. He is represented by Elizabeth Leach Gallery in Portland.



OREGON ARTSWATCH

ARTS & CULTURE NEWS

Ryan Pierce's teeming landscapes

"Improbable Springs" at Elizabeth Leach Gallery features large-scale paintings that juxtapose the exuberance of nature with human-made discards.

MAY 31, 2024 | **ABBY MCGEHEE**

VISUAL ART



Ryan Pierce, Cover Crop, 2023, flashe, ink and spray paint, 72 x 96

Ryan Pierce's most recent exhibition at Elizabeth Leach Gallery, *Improbable Springs*, considers the ways in which we move through the landscape and the marks we leave upon it. Inspired by a six-week hike that Pierce completed from Phoenix, AZ to Silver City, NM in 2018, these are imaginative landscapes that speak to the duality of Pierce's practice. As a co-founder of Signal Fire, an arts education and residency located in the wilderness, Pierce is an avid outdoorsman, hiker, explorer, climate and justice activist. As an artist, he devotes extensive time in his studio making paintings inspired by the places he has been. The resultant large landscapes paintings are a product of both these ways of being and the viewer is invited to explore along with the artist.

Pierce describes these landscapes as places of longing: his longing to be out in nature and not in the exile of the studio. They also reflect our desire for the land to heal itself, to return to what it was before our interventions. The paintings suggest but do not dictate a narrative and raise questions about recreation, travel and emergency travel in the American Southwest. Viewers are left to their own conclusions about the politics of climate migration and the potential for optimism in the face of global climate change.

Over the course of his now 20-year career, Pierce's style remains representational although with surreal juxtapositions of man-made objects (both beautiful and abject), plants, and landscapes. The meticulous, detailed manner in which he has painted in the past has opened up to a bold palette and gestural marks. Hot pinks, oranges, purples and blues, almost neon in their intensity, create a sense of superabundance, in nature, in made-made things and in artistic intention.



Ryan Pierce, Harvest the Flood, 2024, flashe, ink and spray paint on canvas, 72 x 72

The scale of these works is cinematic. (The largest of the paintings measures 72 by 96 inches.) We are close up and fully immersed. Human attempts to constrict nature, barbed wire or fences, are overgrown and outwitted by industrious plants. Flowers dazzle, cacti bloom, water pools and feeds rich growth. Fecundity refuses to be constrained. Similarly, Pierce's painting alternates between passages of carefully observed detail and swaths of exuberant washes and drips.

Like the subject of his works, his process cannot be constrained. Their immersive size allows the viewer to travel through these imagined landscapes but facture is evident throughout as well. We can equally imagine ourselves at the artist's shoulder watching the process of stenciling, mark-making and spray paint dissolving into flashe. Pierce has described himself as a craft painter, one who privileges process for process' sake. He has also mentioned how his printmaking has influenced his painting, moving from careful rendering to the misregistration of imagery and a strategy of working in layers. In *Queens of the Night*, a pink spray paint drip contrasts with the tightly rendered cactus in the foreground and the metal fencing beside it. In *Cover Crop*, the flowers of the title alternate between crisp articulation and painterly smudges.



Ryan Pierce, Queens of the Night, 2022, flashe, ink and spray paint, 72 x 96

Pierce delights in manipulating the boundaries between representation and abstraction. These are spaces we can imaginatively place ourselves – there is a foreground, middle

ground and background – but some objects are fully grounded while others seem to float, untethered to their environment. In *Pima Cotton*, books are embedded in the dirt but a plastic water bottle hovers above the ground, unmoored in space. In other works, a flip flop, a vase, and a broken necklace on a blanket also trouble our sense of spatial location. This, of course, is an apt metaphor for the objects' appearance in these places. They remain alien and strange as they were never meant to be there in the first place.

The detritus is remnants of some unspecified human activity, some perhaps joyous, perhaps fraught with peril. In addition to the improbable springs themselves, the gas can, plastic bags and bottles, shoes and other clothing evidence lives interrupted, referencing the emergency migration from the southern border. Other objects like the books, pith helmet, pitchfork and shovel reference colonial exploration and our attempts to subjugate nature for our own advantage and to plant that unintegrated knowledge where it can do no good.

Pierce's painting practice has always been in close dialogue with his literary influences and his own creative writing. This current body of work is based on one paragraph stories he wrote as part of his MFA program in Creative Writing. But in these works, Pierce invites us to provide our own narrative rather than cleave to ones provided by the artist. Blankets, candles, and vases in some works suggest picnics and other pleasant outdoor activities while single shoes suggest haste and discomfort.



Ryan Pierce, Lost Pilgrims, 2024, flashe, ink and spray paint, 72 x 84

Is the radiance, the sheer exuberance of the flora on display a sign of optimism? Hard to say, given the human detritus littering the landscape. But there is certainly optimism in our enjoyment of the present moment and Pierce's clear joy in the act of painting.

Elizabeth Leach Gallery is located at 417 NW 9th Avenue in Portland. It is open Tuesday through Saturday from 10:30 am – 5:30 pm. Improbable Springs is on view through June 1st.

VARIABLE WEST

Oregon picks from Christine Miller

Cliff Notes

Each week, our regional Cliff Notes columnists Christine Miller, Rachel Elizabeth Jones, Sam Hiura, and Nia-Amina Minor pick the most exciting events and exhibitions on the West Coast.



Stephan Soihl: Spaces Between

Black Fish Gallery (Main Gallery), Portland, Oregon

May 1 to June 1, 2024

Looking at Stephen Soihl's watercolor paintings in **Spaces Between** at Blackfish Gallery feels like entering into a dream. As someone who paints with watercolors, I'm often asked how I handle medium's challenges. My response remains that the paint doesn't just do what you tell it to do, you have to talk to it and feel it to understand the direction the watercolors want to go and how they want to dry.

These paintings awaken my five main senses—I hear birds, see bright colors, smell nature, taste tomatoes, and feel the wind. Accompanying Soihl's paintings are kinetic sculptures of garden flora and 3D forms, designed as if they are to roam the garden. The watercolor pieces and sculptural works form an unexpected yet harmonious, adding depth and movement to an overall sensory experience



Ryan Pierce: *Improbable Springs*

Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland, Oregon

May 2 to June 1, 2024

I often think about the end of 2020 when the world stood still, stories emerged of nature healing from human overuse. Later, these proclamations were debunked as myths, but it's still heartening to imagine different fish populations restoring and the earth regenerating its protective layers unseen to the human eye.

Ryan Pierce's exhibition ***Improbable Springs*** at Elizabeth Leach Gallery takes me back to that time. Pierce's large-scale paintings expose the tension between nature and man-made, envisioning a world where nature dominates and the remnants of humanity are all that remain. The show initially appears as littered trash—scattered sandals, backpacks, clothing, watches, and books as evidence of the human imposition on nature. However, it's quite the opposite. Inspired by a six-week hike in 2018, where Pierce was immersed completely in nature, the show serves as a powerful reminder that nature existed first and, regardless of human existence, or demise, nature will always endure.



VISUAL ART

A more hopeful apocalypse

Ryan Pierce's lush paintings invite the eye to meander and the mind to contemplate cultural and environmental resilience

MAY 10, 2021 // VISUAL ART // LINDSAY COSTELLO



Ryan Pierce, *Storm-Born Waters* (J.W. Powell, *Forgotten*) (2019). Flashe and spray paint on canvas over panel, 47" x 60".

Images of the apocalypse tend to follow a theme: Dark skies, derelict buildings, smoldering fire. Over the last few years, phrases like “end of the world” and “fascist uprising” have circled around in public consciousness, tense and unyielding. It’s no surprise. We’re facing down the planetary crisis of climate change, another rise of white supremacy in our communities, and a virus killing millions. This is scary. Many of us perceive a world that’s becoming near-cinematic in its bleakness.

Despite these very real threats, Ryan Pierce chooses to envision the potential for worldly change from an optimistic, anti-apocalyptic lens. What if a collective revolution could be celebratory, wild, improvisational? The exhibition at Elizabeth Leach Gallery, *Awake Under Vines*, is the second in a series Pierce calls *Jubilee*. The large-scale paintings depict the confluence of environmental chaos and the end of industrial capitalism as a sort of revelrous feast, full of mayhem and clutter and uniquely human messes. Pierce’s paintings don’t force a new narrative on the viewer, but instead offer possibility: What if the future looked like *this*? What if resistance also meant regeneration? Although his compositions are jumbled and layered and complex, they offer the viewer a breath, a space in which the capacity for human resilience can spark hope instead of dread.

Plants and animals, on the other hand, flourish within the chaos of these paintings. As always, we can trust them and learn from their flexibility. Ceramic vessels are sometimes depicted broken, as though the plants they housed have burst free of them. Snakes, historical symbols of fertility, rebirth, transformation, and even eternity (in **ouroboros** form) are also frequent figures in Pierce's works. In *Flash Flood*, a snake's curvature emulates a crawling vine. In this subtle gesture, Pierce expresses a reciprocity within the natural world that humans could learn from and emulate.

As Pierce explained in his **exhibition tour**, the paintings for *Awake Under Vines* were created in isolated, vigorous studio sessions last year. This intensity shines in the dense, layered quality of the works and their symbolic meanings. Pierce researched societies during the rise of fascism, reading memoirs from those who lived in Italy in the 1930s, for example. He also read about white power movements and specifically cites Kathleen Belew's *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* as an influence. These inquiries inform a sense of latent violence in Pierce's paintings—there are numerous signs of a struggle that has just passed, or that is impending—and drive home how this latency is present in our current lives. For instance, in *The Waterworks*, Pierce uses gardening tools to reference his research on a **Proud Boy working within the Portland Parks and Recreation department**.



Ryan Pierce, *The Waterworks* (2020). Flashe and spray paint on canvas over panel, 42.25" x 40.25".

The title of Pierce's exhibition references a vision of Gulliver (of *Gulliver's Travels*) awakening pinned under Lilliputian vines. This fairytale idea finds real-world translations in restricted societies, sleeper cells, and resistance movements simmering just out of sight. Pierce's constant weaving of the natural world into his paintings is, in itself, another radical hidden reference. It's a reminder that we are not separate from nature—as humans, we are *also* nature, and thus flora and fauna must be central figures in our plan for regeneration. (Depictions of gardening tools like pitchforks and rakes, which could be either weapons or cultivation tools, further this idea.)

Pierce is disengaged with the notion of apocalypse in the traditional, melancholy sense. Instead, he looks to our capacity for community-building, organizing, and returning to Earth-centered modes of knowledge. The symbolism within *Awake Under Vines* suggests an optimistic, improvisational dismantlement of the capitalism and climate-change-denial that threatens our current world, but Pierce's compositions in themselves are also joyous. His paintings are rife with tangled imagery to pore over, each like a children's seek-and-find book.

Feasts, floods, broken objects. Pierce says, Look at all of these things. What are we going to do with them? How can they be repurposed? What happens next?

Awake Under Vines is on view at Elizabeth Leach Gallery and *online* until May 29, 2021.

VISUAL ARTS

Ryan Pierce by **Laurel Bonfiglio**

ELEVEN: The inspiration of ecology in your work is paramount. How does your perspective of ecology, specifically living in the Pacific Northwest, influence your work?

Ryan Pierce: My perspective on ecology is shaped by firsthand observations from my time hiking and camping all over the American West. I'm a wilderness guide with Signal Fire (signalfirearts.org), a group I co-founded with activist Amy Harwood ten years ago to get artists of all kinds— including writers, performers, visual artists, musicians, researchers, and activists— into wild places on public land. We want them to be inspired by, and fall in love with, those places, and to advocate for public lands through their artwork. We lead backpacking artist residencies, sponsor artists to work on staff with environmental groups, and increasingly situate our work at the nexus of ecology and cultural history, connecting artists to issues of Indigenous land sovereignty, hidden histories of the West, and the ways public lands are being exploited by the rich and powerful. The imagery in my work is all linked to these concerns.

11: From where did this fascination with ecology and the natural world stem?

RP: I grew up in Mendocino County during the environmental protest movement known as Redwood Summer. It's a rural area with a lot of intact natural beauty, but also has suffered the economic fallout from decades of predatory logging and land mismanagement. When I came to Portland 20 years ago, I became more involved with direct action environmental defense, learning from local groups like Bark, which defends Mt. Hood National Forest from the very kinds of unsustainable use that I'd seen growing up. Now I live outside at least three months a year, immersed in the very fascination you mention.

11: There is almost an apocalyptic, or even dystopian feeling to some of your work. How are these pieces conceptualized, and from what are they based?

RP: My paintings depict a version of our world experiencing dramatic climate change. Since I



*Photo by Mercy McNab
Art photos by Dan Kvitka*

All work courtesy of Ryan Pierce and Elizabeth Leach Gallery

started this project twelve years ago, climate change reality has caught up quite a bit, I'm afraid. There's a darkness to the work—floods and droughts, human industry in disrepair—that I think of as "climate noir." My own outlook, however, is rather hopeful, and I believe in the resilience of our species. It's just that our survival is going to mean that many other species are diminished or extinct. I'm also concerned about how climate refugees face xenophobia and persecution from the global north. I don't situate my work as apocalyptic, because the apocalypse is an idea I associate with Christian fundamentalists who believe that, rather than dealing with the problems we've made for ourselves, we get to fly away into the sky. If this were the case, I wish they'd all do that tomorrow. Mike Pence can go first.

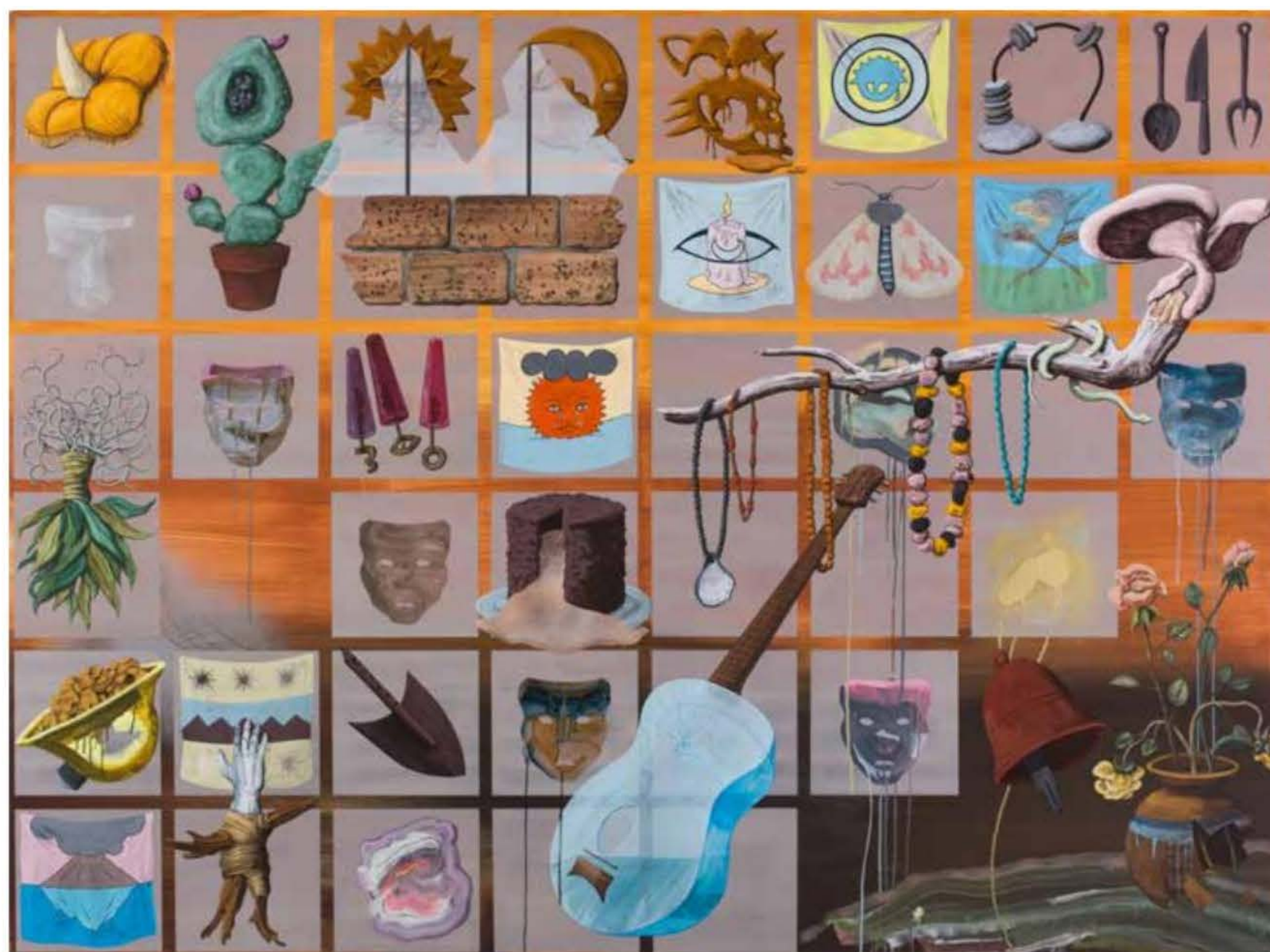
11: There is an appreciable layering of subject matter in much of your work. How do the dynamics between the elements come to be?

RP: I have a restless curiosity that draws associations between visually disparate things. I work my paintings up from

full-scale drawings, so when I'm at the drawing stage, there is some fairly frenetic, whimsical world-making going on. The imagery comes from a mix of research and imagination, as well as formal improvisation, and my graphic and arduous way of working gives it sort of an urgent specificity that is not always easy to look at. Other times, I try to tell a story through the objects I depict. From the *Pockets of the Wanderer*, for example, alludes to the life of conquistador Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, who shipwrecked in the New World and became a wandering faith healer, eating grubs and rats while traversing what is now the Southwest.

11: You cite literature as being a well from which you draw inspiration. Is there a recent piece that has been of great creative influence?

RP: I could go on forever here. Eduardo Galeano's *Memory of Fire* trilogy, which is a sweeping history of the Americas told in short passages and from a Latin American perspective, was the impetus for my last series, *Terra Incognita*. The books



Revisionist History, 2016

Flashe and spray paint on canvas over panel. 72 x 96 inches

are vivid and unsparing, and encyclopedic in their scope. I also enjoy reading fiction about resistance movements, living underground, and the toll of political repression on the life of the mind. Roberto Bolaño and Margaret Atwood are perhaps my most beloved writers, and lately, I've been dwelling in the literature of underground resistance movements, occupied Europe, and anything that attempts to describe the impact of state repression on the creative spirit.

11: What draws you to create such large-scale pieces?

RP: Working large is fun and feels physically satisfying.

11: Where can our readers see some of your art locally?

RP: I have work at the Portland Art Museum, in a show called *The Map is Not the Territory*, February 9- May 5, 2019. It's the first in series of triennial surveys of Northwest Art, curated by Grace Kook-Anderson. My work can also be found at Elizabeth Leach Gallery; my next solo show is scheduled for September. Lastly, I have an illustrated artist book buried in component parts in parks and forests all over the region. So, you know, dig around (details on my website: ryanpierce.net). »

Image in Table of Contents (p.3): **Sun Scorched**, 2011
Flashe, ink, acrylic, and soot on canvas over panel. 47 x 34 inches

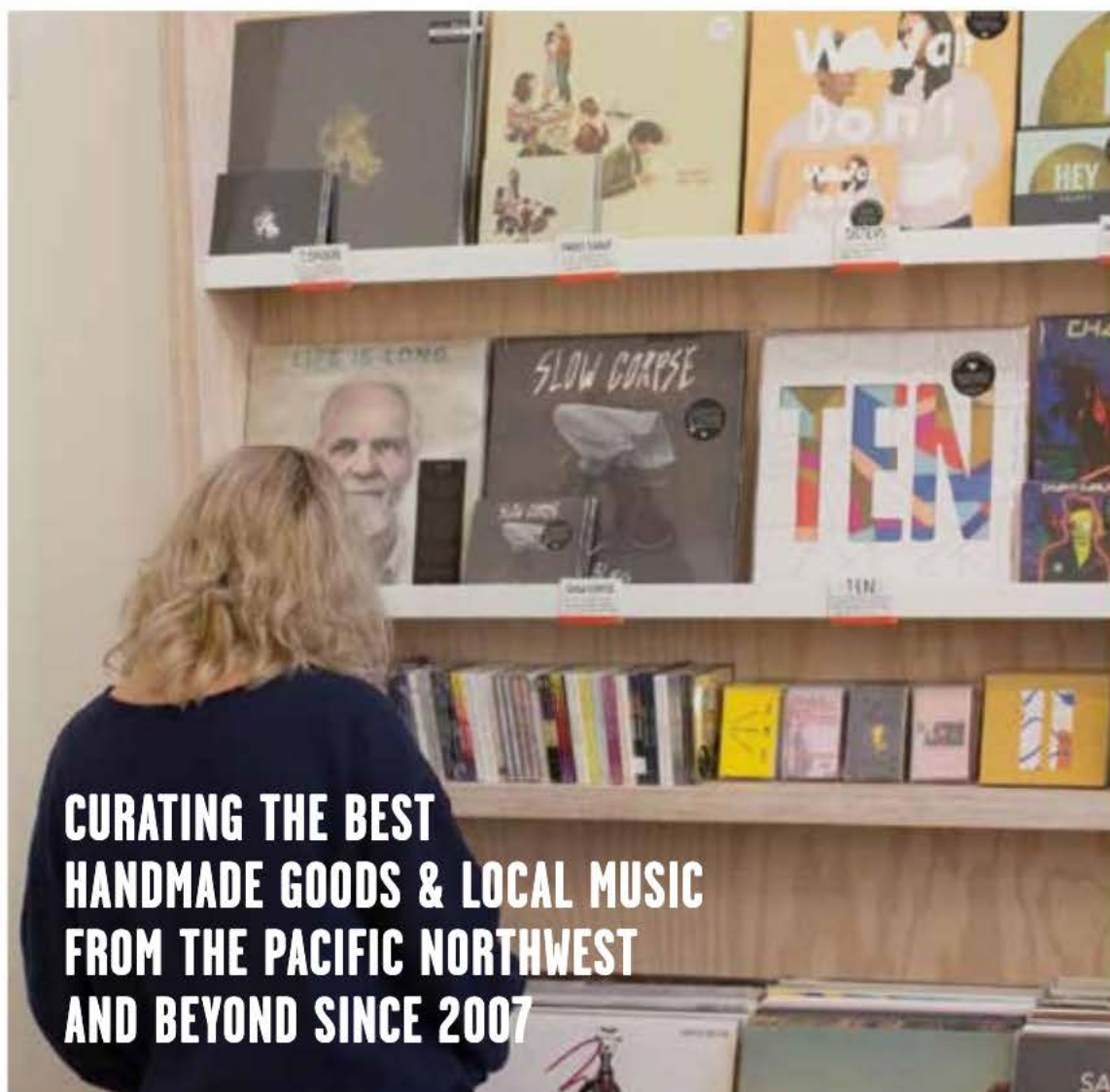


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ELIZABETH LEACH GALLERY: *Hot Hex*, Ryan Pierce.

Welcome to the September 2019 edition of *Critical Viewing*, compiled by Lindsay Costello.

Pierce's latest large-scale, vibrant paintings feature allegorical scenes of chaos and beauty. The artist creates psychologically captivating pictures set in a dystopian future. Abandoned sites scattered with broken vessels; face masks and pieces of clothing hint at some kind of bacchanalian revelry, secret ritual, spiritual rebirth, or the political activism of underground societies. This body of work began with Pierce's research while in residence at the Joan Mitchell Center in New Orleans; he learned about the rich culture of resistance and resilience in that community, civil rights, secret societies, rituals, and masquerade.

September 5 - 28, 2019.



Hot Hex, Ryan Pierce.

Portland Art Museum's the map is not the territory: Location, Origin, and the Threats of Climate Change

<https://www.portlandmercury.com/visual-art/2019/03/28/26222837/portland-art-museums-the-map-is-not-the-territory-location-origin-and-the-threats-of-climate-change>

VISUAL ART MAR 28, 2019

Portland Art Museum's the map is not the territory: Location, Origin, and the Threats of Climate Change

by Suzette Smith



Fernanda D'Agostino

Don't try to catch *the map is not the territory* during the last 30 minutes of the Portland Art Museum's hours. You need time. The inaugural exhibition—which will repeat every three years—displays work from eight Pacific Northwest artists and addresses relationships with region, climate change, and (quoting curator Grace Kook-Anderson) “a time of reckoning where we need to embrace indigenous knowledge.”

Kook-Anderson organized the exhibition and invited artists, all of whom are currently Pacific Northwest residents: Fernanda D'Agostino and **Ryan Pierce** are from Portland. Mary Ann Peters and Rob Rhee are from Seattle. Henry Tsang and Charlene Vickers hail from Vancouver, BC, and Annette Bellamy and Jenny Irene Miller are from the far-off reaches of Alaska.



Charlene Vickers, *Hybrid New Style with silk flowers*

Beyond their respective residences, their backgrounds scatter even further: Tsang was born in Hong Kong. Vickers is an Anishinabe artist whose work explores her Ojibway ancestry. Miller is Inupiaq and a lifelong Alaskan, while Bellamy was born in Seattle. Even D'Agostino and Rhee's New York-area origins are important in understanding this installation's star chart of origin and perspective.

It's compelling to see PAM, one of the largest forces in Portland's art community, taking on something of this scale. D'Agostino's "Borderline" swathes the museum's foyer in massive, interwoven projections of flaming forests and dancers. Cameras in the square record the real-time movements of viewers and project them onto screens too. D'Agostino expressed a desire to make people see themselves in the effects of climate change, from which many feel disconnected.

Adjacent to the foyer, Tsang's piece occupies a projection room, which affords it a feeling of quiet solemnity as it retells the injustice of the 1851 Tansy Point treaty—where treaties between the Chinook Nation and the federal government were not ratified, despite the Chinook signing them in good faith. The rest of the exhibition shares one large room, which allows pieces to interact with one another—Vickers' crafted moccasins converse with Peters'

satchel of refugee possessions. Bellamy's hollow stoneware, hanging from UV-resistant wire, interacts with Rhee's gourds, grown within the constriction of steel. (Like I said, there's a lot here.)



Ryan Pierce, *Finder Keeper*

My recommendation for a way into the exhibit is this: Go all the way to the back and start with Pierce's paintings of cataloged wildlife and preservation methods. It feels very Portland and, in the spirit of the exhibition, why not start with your own backyard? Then move out, through Miller's photo series of modern-day First Nations Alaskans. Find yourself in the D'Agostino projections at the end and see that you are part of the map. Your actions are leaving a record.

At Autzen: Mysteries in the wilderness

 orartswatch.org/wendy-given-and-ryan-pierce-mysteries-in-the-wilderness

Oregon ArtsWatch

By GRACE KOOK-ANDERSON

Eyeshine is the first of a series of exhibitions that Wendy Given and Ryan Pierce are presenting around the subjects of wildness and the night. In the bright and airy Autzen Gallery at Portland State University, the artists reflect and touch upon these and other interests that stem from the natural world.

The idea for *Eyeshine* came together as Given and Pierce hosted this past summer's Signal Fire Outpost Residency—an intensive residency program set on public land. Their discussions, usually at night after full and active days, wandered around such topics as wilderness, animal and plant imagery, nocturnal life, and the embodiment of mysticism.



'Eyeshine' features the work of Wendy Given and Ryan Pierce at Autzen Gallery, PSU/Photo by Matt Blum

Though both artists are inspired by nature, their work doesn't idealize the natural world, and neither takes on romantic notions of the untrammelled landscape. Rather, both Given and Pierce are concerned with nature in its present condition through an historic lens—a contentious landscape, rife with the consequences of modernity.

Three of Pierce's paintings in the exhibition are outdoor still lifes. Their suggestion of beauty is entangled with the threat to the landscape—natural, invasive, and manmade objects, side by side. Using flashe acrylic and spray paint, the paintings' flat quality emerges.

Even the light source appears harsh, as if under direct noon light, unforgivingly exposing all surfaces.

Pierce's sculptural works focus on the image of the conquistador—an antagonist recently a focus in the artist's body of work—with haunting mask-like faces. *Invasive #7* is installed like a museum collection of culled objects from deep under sea. The metallic glaze outlining the marks of where they have broken or cracked emphasizes their museological preciousness. Just like the tradition of kintsugi—the Japanese art of showing the object's history of breakage and repair—the breaks in *Invasive #7* seem to symbolize broken marks upon the lands the conquistadors encountered, marks of colonization, still evident today.



Ryan Pierce's paintings show landscapes in less than pristine condition, and his sculpture is often about the conquistadors/Matt Blum

As Pierce touches on the Age of Discovery as a parable for our contemporary moment, Given also looks to the past in this exhibition—the Romantic era touching upon nature with a gothic mood—oval shaped photographs, nocturnal sightings, imagery of crows, and peacock feathers. Unlike Pierce's brightly lit subjects and artifacts crushed by time, Given's sculptures and photographs emphasize the night, shadows, reflections, and the ethereal realm of alchemy.

The most striking visual element in the exhibition is Given's hanging sculpture *Cauda Pavonis*, made of long peacock tail feathers with the eye of the feathers radiating out, hanging from the ceiling. The blackened feathers create a soft, yet dramatic silhouette. Their original bright colors are subdued in blackness, but with slow movement from a breeze, subtle shifts of color can be seen. In the alchemic term, the cauda pavonis (peacock tail) is

when an array of colors appears through various stages of transformation. Given begins with blackening—a decomposition in alchemy—but the inherent colors of the feathers remain evident. Their transformative colors endure.

Given's three photographs set in individual oval frames with a convex Plexi-mount give the illusion of eyes. In these landscapes, wiry branches appear like retinal blood vessels. Similar to the eye imagery in the peacock feathers in *Cauda Pavonis*, these photographs emphasize the presence of the eye, not only as a physical presence in the space, but underlining moments of inwardness from viewers. Similarly, *Starshine* is a mirrored octahedron reflecting the interior space of the gallery and the people who walk nearby, slightly altering our visual cue of space, and ultimately directing the viewer inward.

Though the approaches in the practices of Given and Pierce are rather different, *Eyeshine* creates an engaged conversation between works and subjects, with space to breathe and reflect upon shared ideas.

Eyeshine is the first in a series of exhibitions Pierce and Given will work together on. *Eyeshine* closes Friday, January 29. Their next exhibition, titled *Nocturne*, is scheduled to open at [whitespace](#) in Atlanta, Georgia, on April 1, 2016.

OtherPeoplesPixels Interviews Ryan Pierce

 blog.otherpeoplespixels.com/otherpeoplespixels-interviews-ryan-pierce



Revisionist History, 2016. Flashe and spray paint on canvas over panel. 72 x 96 inches.

RYAN PIERCE's large-scale paintings operate more like pictorial diagrams of the interconnectedness of nature and culture than representations of the physical appearance of our world. In his most recent solo exhibition, *Dusk is the Mouth of Night* at Elizabeth Leach Gallery (Portland, Oregon), he continues his ongoing investigation of the "the historical links between natural history exploration and conquest." Ryan earned his BFA in Drawing at Oregon College of Art & Craft in 2003 and his MFA in Painting at California College of the Arts in 2007. In 2016 he was the Keynote Speaker at the Thin Green Line Conference (Oregon State University) and an Artist-in-Residence at the invitational Crow's Shadow Institute for the Arts (Pendleton, Oregon). He also had two shows with artist Wendy Given: *Nocturne* at Whitespace Gallery (Atlanta) and *Eyeshine* at Portland State University. Ryan is a

cofounder of Signal Fire, a non-profit that "builds the cultural value of the natural world by connecting artists to our remaining wild places." Ryan's home-base is Portland, Oregon.

OtherPeoplesPixels: The relationship of nature and culture is a primary theme in your work. How do you see this relationship?

Ryan Pierce: Dominant society tells us that nature and culture are separate and perhaps even mutually exclusive. It may sound simplistic, but I think this is at the root of so much injustice in our world. Judeo-Christian creation myths teach us about being cast out from The Garden, and capitalism builds on that binary to encourage the plundering of the Earth. Everything the European settlers of this continent associated with wildness (Native Americans, women's bodies, predators, intact ecosystems) was simultaneously romanticized and denigrated to allow for its exploitation. Now climate change, in the form of more extreme and unpredictable weather events, is forcing the messiness of nature right into our lives and living spaces, breaking down our walls against the outside in very literal ways.



Retrospective, 2016. Flashe on canvas over panel. 72 x 96 inches.

OPP: In paintings like *Retrospective* and *The Free Museum*, tree branches seem to have grown

through the walls and floors. Is nature reclaiming cultural spaces, returning them to the wild? (Or do the trees just want to see the art?)

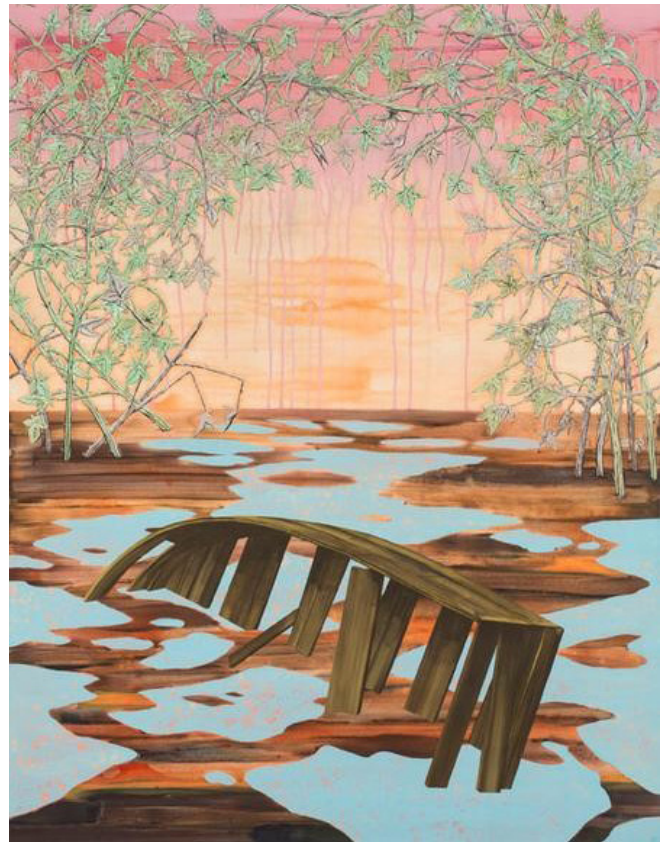
RP: In these paintings, the floods and fallen tree branches have ruined the gallery's climate control, but they've also possibly liberated these stuffy spaces. I often think about Marilynne Robinson's 1980 novel *Housekeeping*, in which the eclectic aunt Sylvie allows weather and animals to move through the open doors and windows of the home, the sort of radical embrace of natural systems that eventually compels CPS to intervene. *The Free Museum* addresses an additional idea: What if all the sacred objects that were never intended to be "art" in a Western sense— objects stolen from their cultures of origin and housed in museums— what if they are all just sleeping, and the storm that destroys the museum walls and floods the galleries allows these things to become re-enchanted and primed for magic in the present day?

Portland Wild Life: The Work of Ryan Pierce

by Melanie Flood

The ecology of the place we live in helps define who we are, and it can either enrich or degrade our sense of purpose and security in the world. Portland artist and ecological activist Ryan Pierce grew up in the majestic redwood forests of Northern California amid the political violence surrounding the Timber Wars of the 1990s, when environmental activists went head-to-head with loggers and timber companies in an attempt to protect the habitat of the endangered northern spotted owl. A car-bombing attempt on the life of environmentalist and activist Judi Bari, the mother of one of Pierce's friends, set the tone for his interest and involvement in environmental justice and activism. When Pierce moved to Portland in 1999 to enter the undergraduate program at the Oregon College of Art and Craft, he began volunteering with groups defending Mount Hood National Forest. Through these experiences, the major themes of Pierce's paintings and installations began to emerge: human resilience, our relationship with nature, and the lost balance of our ecosystem. A prolific artist, Pierce has exhibited his work in thirteen solo exhibitions in the United States and abroad over the past ten years; he has two upcoming exhibitions in Portland in 2016.

Pierce's work vividly reimagines the world in the aftermath of cataclysmic climate change. Influenced by intensive research into environmental theory, his large-scale paintings depict complex new "natural" landscapes. Neither as apocalyptic nor as hopelessly dark as one might imagine, Pierce's work expresses faith in human resilience, and his hope for a world in which humans live in harmony with Earth's flora and fauna. In his painting *Los Angeles* (2013), the remains of a wooden rowboat extrude from the last puddles of water in an evaporating riverbed. The viewer is left to wonder what happened to the people in the boat: Where were they venturing, and did they make it there? Behind the boat, a thorny mint-green vine forms a trellis framing a sherbet-colored sunset; the background melts away in pink inks that drip down toward the horizon like car-wash foam coating a windshield. These iconographic elements become symbols as Pierce repeats them throughout his paintings, building a visual vocabulary that evokes the migration caused by global warming and the ravages of human industry.



*Ryan Pierce. Los Angeles, 2013. Ink and Flashe on canvas over panel.
Courtesy of the artist and Elizabeth Leach Gallery*



Ryan Pierce, *From the Pockets of the Wanderer*, 2014. Flashe on canvas over panel. Courtesy of the artist and Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland

Pierce's 2014 exhibition at Elizabeth Leach Gallery, *Sad Gods*, was inspired by the journals of explorers and conquistadors. *El Dorado* (2014) is a grid of nine blank panels that were activated by gallery visitors. Pierce invited visitors to "experience exploration" by following a set of elaborately written directions that guided them along challenging nature hikes in search of hidden treasure—his painted panels. Visitors retrieved the paintings and brought them to the gallery. Ryan positioned each painting in nature as generous bait to encourage people to spend time in Oregon forests unprotected by wilderness status; each visitor who retrieved a painting from the woods was allowed to keep the painting at the close of the exhibition. The project was designed to build viewers' awareness of the need to preserve the forests, while also offering them a rich aesthetic experience and a unique opportunity to complete Pierce's exhibition and collect his work. Pierce's exploration directions were both pragmatic and poetic:

Begin where Quartz Creek enters the Lewis River and hike north along the Quartz Creek Trail. You'll pass a broken bridge at the first tributary. The grade gets steep and you might be breathing hard by the time you reach Straight Creek. Admire the smooth varicolored rock surface beneath the water. The water is delicious.

There's a rumor—difficult to substantiate—that the world's second-largest Douglas fir grows somewhere in the Straight Creek drainage. Ponder this as you climb back into the forest, still following the trail north, amid fallen giants cleaved through by the trail crews. The timber companies have had their eye on this spot for decades. At about four miles you'll cross Snagtooth Creek on a couple of fallen saplings.

As you climb out of Snagtooth Canyon you'll pass a campsite to your left. Just past this site the main trail switches back and you'll see a faint spur that continues, heading up the canyon, parallel to Snagtooth Creek. Follow this as best you can, keeping the creek within earshot. The trail often fades or is blocked by colossal nurse logs.

You keep checking in on the creek and before long you hear the roar of the waterfall. Fifty yards before the falls you make your way down the loamy bank and then up the creek bed, hopping rock to rock or maybe taking your shoes off. There are some nice swim places here, although pretty icy.

At last you reach Snagtooth Falls. Your view of it is bisected by a giant log, jackknifed and sprouting ferns and saplings. Look left, to the cliff edge of the basin. Erosion has created two parabola-shaped cutbanks, like surprised eyebrows, with roots dangling out. Way up under the left eyebrow you'll find your quarry, wrapped in black plastic. But the real treasure is all around you, right?

Pierce is also one of the founders of Signal Fire, a groundbreaking nature-based nonprofit residency project. “What if the wilderness was your studio?” asks the Signal Fire website. Pierce’s affinity for solitude, nature, and communal experience are imparted to participants through Signal Fire’s guided expeditions deep into the American West. Pierce started the group along with activist and public land advocate Amy Harwood in an effort “to merge their respective communities to turn activists on to the potential of using artistic strategies in their work, and introduce artists to the resources of public land as a way to support and inspire their work.” Since 2009, Signal Fire has provided opportunities for artists to venture into nature and wander. Pierce’s Signal Fire trips are both creative and intellectual. Pierce incorporates contextual readings and seminar conversations into group activities with visiting artists and activists. Signal Fire’s self-directed Outpost Residency is a nomadic artists’ colony that takes place in a different campsite each year. Participants are free to work, hike, or relax during the day, then meet in the evening to share dinner. Pierce spends months in the backcountry each year, using the time to recalibrate, gain inspiration, and convert urbanites into ardent lovers of nature.



Signal Fire, “Unwalking the West: Siskiyou,” [Ryan Pierce on left, artist Megan Hanley on right]. 2016. About the project: “We started our season in a crystalline watershed of the Siskiyou Mountains. The Siskiyou, spanning the California-Oregon border, are the largest subrange of the Klamath Mountains. 11 artists hiked along the namesake river of famed mountain man Jedediah Smith, using his journal and others’ observations as a point of departure to discuss the complexities of a region rife with paradox. We were joined on the first day by botanist Jeanine Moy from KS Wild.”

In an interview with the author, Pierce cites Portland’s “progressive politics, political resistance, and self-sufficiency” as important values that draw him to the city. Portland’s campaign to encourage swimming in the Willamette River and the city’s recent moratorium on new fossil fuel infrastructure projects are two major steps toward preserving the health of Portland’s environment. During the fall of 2015 Pierce returned to school, relocating his studio to the Portland State University Art Department, as the inaugural resident artist in the Contemporary Art Practice program. As a first-year graduate student, I’ve had the opportunity to work alongside him, peeking at unfinished works and watching his ideas unfold on canvas. Pierce’s presence as an artist, activist, and friend has contributed a wealth of knowledge and calm to our MFA community at Portland State, and to Portland’s larger artistic ecosystem. His sense of humor, enthusiasm, and persistent hope in light of the challenges facing our planet have made many of us in Portland—and beyond—far more aware of our responsibility to care for ourselves, each other, and the world we inhabit. As environmental issues become increasingly critical, innovative ecological perspectives and practices like Pierce’s will only grow in importance within the fields of visual art and activism.

Melanie Flood (born 1979 Manhasset, New York) is an artist based in Portland. She holds a BFA (2001) in Photography from the School of Visual Arts in New York and is a Contemporary Art Practice MFA (2017) candidate at Portland State University. Since 2008, she directs Melanie Flood Projects, which began as an artists’ salon located in her Brooklyn residence. In 2014, the gallery relaunched in downtown Portland, OR expanding its programming to include sculpture, sound installation and video. Recent projects include Robert Rhee: Disambiguation, Please, Justin James Reed: Shining Bodies, Maria Antelman: A Non Existent Event, and the series Thinking Through Photography, a survey of

photographic practices highlighting experimental and diverse approaches in which artists work featuring Leif Anderson, Teresa Christiansen, Rose Dickson & Dru Donovan. Her projects have been featured in Art in America, The New York Times, New York Magazine, Zingmagazine, Photo District News, among others. Recent presentations of her work include NADA Art Basel Fourteen30 Contemporary, Miami Beach, FL (2016), Carl & Sloan Contemporary, Portland, OR (2016) and Newspace Center for Photography, Portland, OR (2014). Flood is the recipient of a Regional Arts & Culture Council Project Grant (2014) and the recipient of a Precipice Fund Award (2016).

This essay was edited by Stephanie Snyder, and is among a series of essays commissioned for the Visual Arts Ecology Project by The Ford Family Foundation and Oregon Arts Commission with Editors Stephanie Snyder, John and Anne Hauberg Curator and Director, The Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery; and Sue Taylor, Associate Dean, College of the Arts and Professor of Art History, Portland State University. The commissioning institutions share a goal to strengthen the visual arts ecology in Oregon, and a key interest of increasing the volume of critical writing on art in our region.



The Free Museum, 2016. Flashe on canvas over panel. 72 x 72 inches.

OPP: It often seems that your compositions move back and forth between depth and flatness within a single work. Can you talk about that perspective shift?

RP: That shifting perspective is probably related more to my stylistic impulses. I'm no minimalist, and ideally a viewer would look at my work for awhile and experience multiple levels of visual interest. Like many artists of my generation, I'm influenced by a panoply of picture-makers, including self-taught Balkan painters, comic books and probably the video games of my youth. In a sense, approaching a painting more as a diagram than an illusionistic space allows one to try to impart the essence of an aspect of nature, as opposed to its appearance. I jump back and forth between those approaches, or both in the same

composition.



Mask for the Venomist, 2016. Flashe and collage on canvas over panel. 24 x 24 inches.

OPP: Masks show up in works like *The Free Museum* and *Stanley Falls*, where I take them to be literal masks, as exhibited in museums. But what about the series of paintings from 2016 with “mask” in the title? *Mask for the Venomist*, *Mask for the Bandit Queen* and *Mask for Night Farming* are just a few.

RP: I had a transformative art viewing experience some years ago, at the mask collection of the Museo Rafael Coronel in Zacatecas, in Mexico. The collection exceeds 13,000 masks from different Indigenous groups of Mexico, with maybe a third of that on display at any time. They often include imagery from animistic spiritual traditions, cloaked in biblical guises to survive the Spanish laws, and they're innovative and debaucherous and meticulous and funny.

I fixated on the mask as a formal starting point for the paintings where they're singular in the composition, piecing together objects that, along with the title, suggest a loose narrative. In the larger works like *The Free Museum*, the masks are stand-ins for looted archeological relics but I invented them all without source material because I didn't feel that it was my right to recreate any culture's holy objects.

Mask for the Welfare Rancher is a direct jab at the bozos who orchestrated the armed occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge a couple years ago. The degree of entitlement necessary to seize Federal land for any reason other than to return it to its original Paiute caretakers, let alone to claim it for a bunch of ultra-rightwing Mormon militiamen. . . ugh! I hope they're just a plastic bag hanging on the cruel barbed wire fence of this decade, soon to degrade and blow away.



The Portland Art Museum Podcast - Episode 2

SPEAKERS

Grace Kook-Anderson, Ryan Pierce



Grace Kook-Anderson 00:04

Hi, you're listening to the Portland Art Museum Podcast. On this first official episode, we're going to hear from Ryan Pierce, a Portland based artist featured in the current exhibition. The map is not the territory which is on view through May 5, 2019. My name is Grace Kook-Anderson and I'm the Arlene and Harold Schnitzer Curator of Northwest Art. I searched the Northwest for eight artists for this exhibition and found that Ryan's work masterfully captures our world through sharp and pregnant detail. If you've been to the exhibition you not only have seen his large paintings depicting flora and fauna, or the ruins of a strange cabinet of curiosities, but you may also have seen a short video about Ryan and his work as an artist and co founder of Signal Fire an organization that encourages artists to experience nature in ways that tap into their talents, what you're about to hear is the full audio from his interview, only emitting the voice of our interviewer and irrelevant bits of conversation relating to audio setup. We're waiting for the sounds of trucks and sirens to pass. relevant links will be in this episode's description. And a full transcript is available at [Portland Art Museum.org/podcast](https://portlandartmuseum.org/podcast). You will hear my voice from time to time but only when there is a shift in topics. Until then. This is Ryan Pierce.



Ryan Pierce 01:41

My name is Ryan Pierce. I live in Portland. I've been here for 20 years. I grew up in the redwoods and Northern California and I'm an artist and I'm also one of the CO directors of an arts organization called signal fire. Yeah, I was one of those kids who couldn't be

anything else. I was like always drawing and class when I was supposed to be paying attention and always had a rich, imaginative internal life. I studied art, formerly here in Portland, Oregon College of Art and Craft, and then went away to San Francisco to get an MFA in painting at California College of the Arts, CCA and I've been working professionally as an artist for about 20 years. Yeah, I've always been drawing and painting as long as I can remember. I think some of my my formative periods were kindergarten days, drawing people living on the moon, fourth grade, drawing knights and dragons in battle, maybe my high school years drawing a lot of dinosaurs with human bodies. The project that I'm involved in now I've been doing for about 12 or 13 years, and it's a project of depicting our world. In a increasingly climate change state, and so they're, they're recognizable scenes but they're a little bit accelerated in terms of the the drama of the weather and insinuations about the absence or presence of human society in a slightly different form. I think it started from a place of personal concern and just wanting to learn about how our planet was changing and compare that to my direct observations being, you know, being in the world. And I think it started out as sort of like a more of a science fiction project of imagining how people might be able to re inhabit the earth and a more sustainable way that was really a direct departure from the society that I was seeing around me, and then gradually as the evidence of climate Change has been more and more present in our day to day lives. The project has become less sci fi and more mundane, I guess. So this project is both a phase of this project is a long phase of my artistic development. And if it has a title, I would call it our dreams after sleeping for 1000 years. For the last 12 years, I've been depicting our world in various stages of accelerated climate change, and there's evidence of human habitation, but it's all implied. And the implication is that our president, society and governmental structure has collapsed that people are still around, but in a very reduced footprint. And that human society is really learning to live around the shape and the health of natural systems and that natural systems aren't And our sort of guiding the way that our species regenerates and learns to live on the earth. So within this larger project of depicting our world, and accelerated states of climate change, I also pursue sub projects like I did one called army of no one that we're all landscapes that have faced war sometime in the last century or so and depicting how those might recover with less human intervention. And then the project that I'm engaged in currently. I'm calling terra incognita. And that's the work selected for this exhibition. And that's really a project about the act of exploration and discovery, both the excitement of exploring the world and the problems inherent and doing so. And specifically looking to the Golden Age of Discovery as a time when Europeans were flooding into the Americas to the so called New World and excited to catalog every Bird and B and butterfly. But at the same time, you know, because of their racism and colonial mindset, we're erasing the indigenous knowledge that pre existed there. conquest. So the title, terra incognita comes from of Redeemer novel cop story, and if you haven't read his collected short stories, I heartily recommend them. It's about to European explorers

bumbling around in the swamps of some unnamed South American region and they're slowly going mad and they're hallucinating the comforts of European life like specifically the swirling pieces of an armoire or a wallpaper sample. And as they go mad and meet an unhappy ending, their sort of thirst for discovery is overwhelmed by their nostalgia for their comfortable life. Living in the northwest has influenced my work because I've been involved with environmental campaigns over the years, and I'm an avid hiker. And now that I run an outdoor organization, I actually spend at least three months a year living outside all over the American West. And so that has a really huge impact on my work, because I feel like direct observation of the natural world is kind of the singular most important thing to me as an artist as a researcher. So signal fire is an arts group that I co founded with an activist named Amy Harwood, 10 years ago, we've had 400 people involved over the years, and it's changed shape and brought in a lot of new leadership since then. But the premise from the very beginning was to get our artists and activists friends out to public lands to go camping and backpacking. together to get artists to fall in love with wild wild places, specifically on public lands, and get them to care about those places and advocate for them with their work. And also to bring it the other direction and convince activists and public lands, defenders, that there are open ended and creative ways that can influence their work and their campaigns and make them more effective. The creation of signal fire was inspired, I think, originally because we just wanted to trick our artists friends into going camping with us. And Amy and I were thinking, well, what if they don't have the time? Well, if we give it a name, and they can put it on their their CV, then they can call it a thing and say that they did it. And so yeah, that worked. The title of signal fire came from the idea of using art to advocate for wild places and sort of to raise an alarm around something. And we also both hate acronyms.

G

Grace Kook-Anderson 09:04

One thing that I'm always curious about and you'll hear this in all of the artists interviews from the map is not the territory is who the artists consider to be their mentors.

R

Ryan Pierce 09:15

Some of my mentors over the years have been my teachers at Oregon College of Art and Craft, which was a really positive experience for me. So local artists like Michelle Ross and Georgiana Neil and Bill will, I would also count them on my mentors, sort of my adult artist friends that I've met since moving back to Portland after grad school, I would be like Mark Smith and MK Guth, people who've been really good advocates. For me as an emerging artist in this community. This community has always felt really close and non competitive. And there's just a sense of mutual support in the northwest that has been really positive for me as an artist. And then now That I'm you know, in my old age, I think my artists,

peers and my past students are also increasing, you know, increasingly inspiring me and teaching me about how to maintain ambition and, and rigor in my own work. I think that my entire working practice could be grouped around the idea of responding to curiosity to my own personal curiosity about the natural world about the ways that human culture has been shaped by and that human actions continue to shape the natural world. And so whether I'm exploring that through visual art, or through writing or through coercing other people to Trump around in the landscape and read about it, all the things kind of circle back to this new These underlying questions that I personally have my process as an artist begins with some kernel of curiosity and our research thread. I'm really influenced by literature. I read a lot of fiction. And I do a lot of walking around and wild places in the West. And whether it's a title or just kind of a hunch that then germinates into a series of images. I usually work in pretty distinct projects and give them titles and will begin and end the body of work sometimes working on multiple ones at the same time, whether that's a body of paintings or sometimes I do these like interactive treasure hunt projects that involve inviting people out into the land and getting them to sometimes literally dig my art up out of the earth. And sometimes I make interactive walking artists, books, things like that. And so my process I would say is research generated and also very studio intensive. I'm kind of a slow labor as maker and I love having just a big empty studio day with like a list of to do items on the wall that I can march through and break down and and kind of go to work. I'm in a studio space that is one of the maybe the last remaining affordable studio buildings in Portland. They're building a luxury hotel across the street from us now. So our days may be limited. There's, I think, seven of us on this floor. And there's another floor of artists above us and really high caliber of artists involved here. It's sort of like I don't know, a community selected space like everybody on the floor chooses the new occupants. So there's no riffraff or ravers or people pretending to be artists. We're all pretty hard workers. I tended to kind of work a nine to five schedule. Get here in the morning and take a long coffee break and a yoga break and get back to work and work till dinner. I've had a studio in southeast Portland for the last 10 years. And before I found this space through a friend, I couldn't find a place to work that I could afford. And I came this close to leaving town. And so that's one of the major issues facing artists in Portland right now is just having affordable workspace. It's one of these strange cycles that I saw when I when I went to school in San Francisco as well where you know, the creative folks make a city really appealing to live in And then, you know, the city gets more expensive as more people move to it. And then the creative folks get priced out. And then it becomes sort of a shell of its former self. And, you know, the artists aren't can't afford to live in the city anymore. So that's, that's kind of where we're headed. I'm afraid I decided what my next project is going to be through a combination of just getting curious to answer what I identify as like the central questions of any project. So an example would be I had a body of work called New World Atlas of weeds and rags. And it started with the central question of what are we doing in a climate changing world that we're not noticing or

appreciating and through kind of following that research thread, and responding through imagery and research about the history of botanical illustration and growing my own garden. In the weeds that came with it had to kind of unpack that through my own artistic, artistic research angle. I think there's also an element of how do I want to spend my time? What do I want to do. And increasingly, as I make these hybrid projects that involve walking and writing and image making, I try to integrate the different things that I like to do, because I'm currently a really seasonal studio artist, and I'll go you know, leading trips with signal fire and scouting them and on my own camping trips for maybe three months a year, and then be back in the studio full time as a total troll the rest of the year, and I'd like to mix it up a little more and devise some way of working where I get to kind of integrate both of those practices. Yeah, so I do make a lot of really large scale work because it's really fun to have big area to play with as a painter. And also, if you see the work, you'll notice that I have an inclination towards maximalism. And so when I try to work small, I just feel things up so much that they become pretty uncomfortable to look at. And I feel that like when I spread out a little bit, there's maybe just the tiniest amount of breathing room to allow the viewer to navigate the digital space and the stories that implies I think that one of the best things about being an artist and especially as a painter is to go in search of surprises. And I think that the allegory at the core of the premise for this exhibition is about exploration and discovery and mapping perhaps, and that for me, there's like a really clear correlation between being out in the The world making those discoveries about what's around the next corner of the canyon to being in the studio and working as a painter and constantly seeking those surprises, some of which are fortunate, and some of which are, you know, my new little disasters that you have to fix. But I really do think of the art making process as like a series of errors and corrections that somehow winds up resolving itself into something palatable. Yeah, the map is not the territory, it really resonates with me, because I'm obsessed by maps. And I spend a lot of my life reading maps and teaching other people how to read them and using them to find my way through places I've never been before. So that's exciting. And also, as I understand it, that phrase refers to the distance between a model of reality and reality itself and so as a representational painter. I'm well as a representational painter. And as a wilderness guide, I'm involved in both far ends of that spectrum. And I love thinking about the distance between representing the natural world and just living in it, you know, sleeping in a place that's cold and damp and earthy and smells wonderful. And, you know, you're vulnerable to the weather. And yeah, like, I think in my work, I am increasingly thinking about trying to collapse the distance between those those ends of the spectrum. This is a really big deal for me to be part of this exhibition. It's the first time my works been recognized in the kind of biennial format although this is sort of a non traditional biennial iteration, but it's a big honor to be showing with these artists and and I'm excited to have more of a general audience for my work. I'm really excited that the curator has chosen or what I consider to be an eco regional model of the Pacific Northwest, because past biennials were like

Oregon, Washington, Montana and Idaho. And I really think of the Northwest more as a cascading model. And so these artists are Alaska, British Columbia, Washington and Oregon. And in my own work, there's a, there's a bio regional premise that supposes that nation states no longer exist. And so I really liked the idea that this spans nations and states and really looks at an ecologically determined region for the exhibition. Yeah, I think that our geography and environment really influences our conception of region at least for myself at signifier we work in five different regions, primarily one is here in the Cascades one is the greater Let's ask you which folks are familiar with from Southern Oregon and Northern California, the mountains along that border. Also, the Sonoran desert and sky islands ranges within their the Four Corners region and the Pacific Northwest sub Rockies, or rocky sub region. Sub ranges, I think we would call it which I think would be sort of like the second part of the exhibition, the bitter roots and Eastern Oregon and places like that. And so for me, like at the core of my painting project is a bio regional reimagining of the map. And I like to imagine that in this world that I'm portraying that the United States as we know it has completely been erased and that new communities are reorganizing themselves around the shape of natural systems, and so governing by watershed and governing by eco region, and you know, in some instances were already kind of managing resources that way. But we have a long ways to go. For me, I'm motivated by the idea that the viewer might make discoveries within the scenes that I'm portraying, and share my sense of curiosity. And increasingly, my paintings are these kind of elaborate fictions or like these open ended fictions implied by the arrangement of objects and landscape within this kind of jumbled up picture plane. And so I like the idea that people would get in there and make up their own stories and even possibly, like, use that as an excuse to get curious about some aspect of the natural world that they weren't familiar with before. And so for example, the painting that I'm working on now has a choice, a cactus at the center of it growing up through a rug. And when I wanted to make an illustration of a choice of cactus, I thought about all the choices I had known and then pricked by in my travels, but then I kind of fell down this research rabbit hole of which choice subspecies to select. And so it's important to me to have really like specific natural information underlying the the subject matter that I choose, and that that has some meaning in the piece. And I don't want to explain it away and to make the work really didactic. But I do want that specificity to kind of give it a sense of urgency that will peak people's curiosity ideally, you know, I mean, some people are not going to like it at all, or find it too specific and off putting and that's okay, it's not for everyone, but that that specificity is there on The ingredients list and so I hope that some element of it, you know, makes its way into the final taste.



Grace Kook-Anderson 23:09

A major theme throughout the map is not the territory is decolonization and centering

indigenous values, we decided to ask all of the artists how those values influenced their work, regardless of their heritage.

R

Ryan Pierce 23:25

Foremost I just want to be really cautious and state that I'm a white person, you know, living within the construct of settler colonial structure in the West. And in my work as an artist. I'm not really in my visual work. I'm not really addressing those ideas very much in my work with signal fire. We are increasingly working with native leadership within our own organization. And with native communities that live in or near the places that we're doing our outdoor programming and trying to share the stories of those communities, their histories and rights to the land with our participants and signal fire. And that's an ongoing process that's not always very graceful. The organization was started by two white people, and we, I think, are doing a better job of being listeners now, but much of the credit for the evolution of our organization has to do with the folks that we've brought into to help lead us and and help us grow in terms of decolonization. I would again, be really careful about what I actually claimed to do in my visual work. I don't think that a white guy making paintings that hanging a gallery or museum is actively involved in decolonization if there is an element that of the colonizing ethic that informs my work. It's just that I'm illustrating a future or a possible future where the natural world has usurped present power structures and initiated a realignment with the earth. And in terms of my work with signal fire, I mean, we are adamant that public lands or native lands, and we expose all of our participants to that idea. I do think that the early stages of decolonization probably involved probably involve just learning from the land and learning the history of the land and the people that live closest to the land. And so in that sense, I think that signifier contributes to an ethic of decolonisation at the earliest stages, but we're not actually taking land and return to its rightful inhabitants, I've been thinking about it in terms of of this exhibition because I'm, I feel like the theme of the exhibition really intersects a lot with my work. And yet, I also want to be really careful about what I'm planning to do with my work. And anytime that a curator or institutions situated in artists work, I think there's a potential of being misinterpreted that the artist situate their own work that way and really, you know, it's just one lens to look at our work through.

G

Grace Kook-Anderson 26:40

Thank you for listening to the Portland Art Museum podcast. On the next episode, you'll hear the full interview of a net Bellamy, an artist living and halibut Cove, Alaska, whose work can also be seen in the map is not the territory at the Portland Art Museum through May 5, 2019. Be sure to subscribe. So you know when that episode is released we appreciate that you've chosen to listen to this podcast and encourage you the listener to

get involved. If you have an idea for an episode of this podcast, visit pam.to/podcastidea and fill out the submission form. We would also appreciate it if you could take a moment to rate and review this episode if you're using Apple podcasts or iTunes. I'd like to thank Ryan Pierce for this episode, and Jon Richardson, our producer, and most importantly, thank you for listening.



Casta, 2016. Flashe on canvas over panel. 46 x 42 inches.

OPP: Tell us about Signal Fire, which you co-founded in 2008.

RP: Signal Fire's mission is to "build the cultural value of the natural world by connecting artists to our remaining wild places." Public lands activist Amy Harwood and I started Signal Fire as an attempt to merge our respective communities, to get artists outdoors for inspiration and to fall in love with public land, as well as to provide activists with new, open-ended strategies for their campaigns.

Eight years and 350 artists later, we have a real community of people who are sharing critical dialogue about wildlands and ecology, and our role as culture-makers is catalyzing social change. We offer a residency in wall tents, backpacking and canoe retreats, and an immersive arts and ecology field program called Wide Open Studios. Our Tinderbox Residency sponsors artists to work as temporary staff among environmental groups and our Reading In Place series offers a day hike book club in the Portland area. We highlight the work of our alumni in exhibitions and events, such as a film festival this coming fall.

Amy and I share the administrative work with our Co-Director Ka'ila Farrell-Smith, a splendid painter and activist, who brings her work in support of Indigenous survivance into everything she does. Amy and Ka'ila's leadership has helped our organization to evolve from a mix of arts, ecology and recreation, to highlighting the social justice issues that should be integral to any conversation about public lands in the American West.



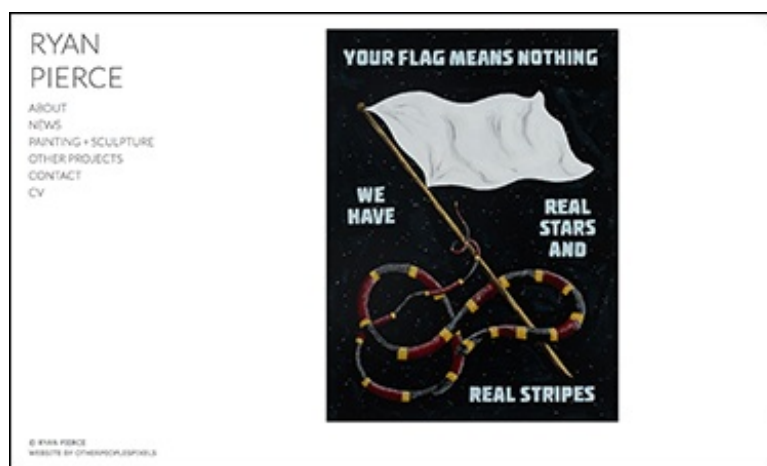
The Mountain That Devours Us, 2016. Flashe and spray paint on canvas over panel. 42 x 46 inches.

OPP: It took a while to get in touch with you to do this interview because you were actually out in the wilderness, with no reception for long stretches of time. I think many contemporary artists believe they need to stay connected to social media all the time, posting on Instagram and checking Facebook. Why is disconnecting a good idea for all humans? What about for artists specifically?

RP: I'm actually writing these answers in a tent in Oregon's Eagle Cap Wilderness, on week one of a four-week trip. The stars are brilliant tonight and I can hear a rushing, glacier-fed creek, about fifty feet away. Some of the students on our Wide Open Studios trips are young enough that they've never gone a week without a cell phone before.

I'm not a technophobe, but I believe solitude is healthy and increasingly hard to find. Disconnecting is good for building one's attention span and patience to work through a challenge without clicking away. It's reassuring to feel a lasting sense of surprise and the profound smallness that comes with living outside, away from the built environment. It cultivates wonder.

The friendships forged while backpacking through bugs and storms are precious and enduring. The internet is the gold rush of our day: sure, a few artists' work goes viral, but most of those people are either a flash in the pan or they were damn good to begin with. For the rest of us, myself included, it's a mildly unfulfilling time suck. Every time I hear the little voice encouraging me to scan around for obscure things to apply to, or to sign up for new ways to network online, I try to redirect that energy back into the work itself, or else go do something IRL.



To see more of Ryan's work, please visit ryanpierce.net.

Featured Artist Interviews are conducted by Chicago-based artist [Stacia Yeapanis](#). When she's not writing for OPP, Stacia explores the relationship between repetition, desire and impermanence in cross-stitch embroideries, remix video, collage and impermanent installations. She is an Adjunct

Assistant Professor in the Department of Fiber and Material Studies at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where received her MFA in 2006, and was a 2011-2012 Artist-in-Residence at BOLT in Chicago. Her solo exhibitions include shows at Siena Heights University (2013), Heaven Gallery (2014), the Annex Gallery at Lillstreet Art Center (2014) and Witness, an evolving, durational installation at The Stolbun Collection (Chicago 2017), that could only be viewed via a live broadcast through a Nestcam. Now that the installation is complete, you can watch it via time lapse. Her solo show Sacred Secular is on view through October 4, 2017 at Indianapolis Art Center.

Painter Ryan Pierce's green take on grim thoughts

Published: Wednesday, May 16, 2012, 9:00 AM

Updated: Wednesday, May 16, 2012, 9:11 AM



D.K. Row, The Oregonian
By



[View full size](#)

DAN KVITKA

Ryan Pierce's painting "Chance Ark," 2012. Flashe on canvas over panel; 72 inches by 47.25 inches

Few local painters can dazzle the eyes and challenge the intellect as well as **Ryan Pierce**, whose latest show is on view at the **Elizabeth Leach Gallery**.

In colors that burst and flare like mini-explosions on the canvas, Pierce paints vivid tableaux of a world at once recognizable and enigmatic, flourishing and ravaged, alive and also dead. It's a natural landscape that seems equally situated in the past and present, a dystopian future where humans just aren't around.

Trees sprout long limbs with spiky tentacle branches, for example; the overgrown leaves and stems of vegetable plants slither in patches like prowling snakes; flowers resembling the necks and napes of animals arc up toward an odd-looking sun.

This is painting of extraordinary skill and strange vision that further deepens Pierce's exploration of such enduring Northwest concerns as the environment and ecology. It's also a show that affirms Pierce's place in the company of some of the scene's best painters: Michael Brophy, painter of Northwest clear-cuts, and Eric

Stotik, the Renaissance master-meets-pulp-fanzine imagist, painters whose superb technique liberates them to imagine a world way out there.

Pierce is also one of the most prolific serious talents of recent years. He's 32, and yet this show at Leach's gallery is his ninth solo outing since 2005, with exhibitions at venues in Oregon, California, Nevada and Norway. This fast-paced output might suggest Pierce is making too much work at the risk of painting the same idea over and over again. But that's not the case.

Instead, each Pierce show adds to the evolving narrative, one subplot of which is the artist's obsessive commitment to his subject.

Pierce has been described as a "bioregional" painter, a play off the term "bioregionalism," which asserts cultural, physical and environmental issues define us more than political and economic ones.

In regards to Pierce's painting, the term is merely an academic way of saying the artist and others like him think about the environment and physical landscape and how they've been affected by industrialism and disregard.

In Pierce's paintings, the natural world embodies all of the tensions of the modern world and then some. Something's happened, but we don't know what. Debris, animals and nature interact, survive and sprout wildly. The images portray a world that's ravishing yet damaged.

Maybe it's me, but the post-apocalyptic feel is stronger in Pierce's previous exhibits than in the current show. Still, doom and struggle are always prominent, if not threatening.

In "Night Moths," the fluttery moths dance above a white moon and gnarled, wire fencing. In "Natural Dialogue," a snake wraps its body around a tree's long limb while lingering above a bird protecting a nest of eggs.

Pierce's website -- **ryanpierce.net** -- states: "The ideas that drive my imagery are anti-apocalyptic. I am intrigued by holistic models of ecology that suggest that the human species could be integral to a healthy planet."

I don't doubt the sincerity of Pierce's words. He has a background in environmental field studies and is a co-founder of **Signal Fire**, an arts and nature nonprofit. Then there's his impressive and ambitious painting career.

But the power of Pierce's painting relies on the very possibility of an apocalypse or some terrible happening that has pushed the world into a nether state, a place

Paintings by Ryan Pierce

Where: Elizabeth
Leach Gallery, 417
N.W. 9th Ave.

Hours: 10:30
a.m.-5:30 p.m.

where flowers, food, animals, and the sun and sky have transformed into something far less than what they once were.

That vision also is almost always a terrible but beautiful sight to see. It lures, astonishes and leaves us ill at ease.

That's the tension painters like Pierce must embrace and then master in a way that manipulates viewers. They imagine the destruction we all hope to avoid.

-- **D.K. Row**

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Website:
elizabethleach.com

Art in America

INTERNATIONAL • REVIEW

FEBRUARY '10



Ryan Pierce: *Umpqua*, 2009, acrylic on canvas over panel, 21 by 27 inches; at Elizabeth Leach.

PORTLAND, ORE. RYAN PIERCE ELIZABETH LEACH

Something has gone terribly wrong in the world Ryan Pierce envisions in this exhibition of recent paintings he called "Written from Exile." In each scene, he forecasts a future from which human beings have largely disappeared, leaving a landscape littered with evidence of their struggles amid environmental catastrophe. Pierce identifies himself as an "eco-regionalist" and is a co-founder of Signal Fire, which offers wilderness education and artists' retreats in the mountains of Oregon. The spectacular natural beauty encountered there finds a bleak foil in the ruined realms of Pierce's pictures.

In casting existence as a fight over diminishing resources, Pierce turned to *The Painted Bird*, Jerzy Kosinski's 1965 novel about a child's lonely survival in

the war-torn Polish countryside. As he flees from village to village, brutalized by the peasants, the boy carries his "comet," a bucket of embers for keeping warm and cooking food. The device is depicted hanging from a branch at the center of Pierce's painting *Comet*, its glow the only human trace in a forest where trees stand naked except for swags of moss, mint-green ferns sprout among acid-yellow vines, and mutant blue pumpkins grow. The landscape in Pierce's *The Fog Collectors* is completely denuded, baked brown and yellow beneath an overheated lavender-pink sky. Someone has pitched a tent beneath dead trees and strung tarps among their trunks, hoping to catch drops of moisture. Hawks circle overhead.

The plight of Kosinski's protagonist is allegorized in the painted bird of his title: decorated and released by a cruel trickster, the animal is attacked by others of his species who fail to recognize him as one of their own kind. For Kosinski, the victimized bird represented the Gypsy or Jew; in a gallery talk, Pierce invoked undocumented immigrants today, despised by xenophobes jealous of dwindling jobs and benefits. Thus in *Havas*, which bears an Arizona place name, he depicts the makeshift shelter of someone on the lam in the desert, hiding perhaps from vigilantes patrolling the border. An abandoned vehicle tipped on its side is draped with canvas; a plastic water bottle lies empty in the sand. Indifferent to the human drama, cacti at the impoverished campsite sport rose-red blossoms. Indeed, nature in Pierce's scheme endures, albeit altered, in civilization's

wake: deer graze peacefully in what was once someone's den in *Umpqua* (titled after a forested river valley in southwest Oregon), where a tree trunk has crashed through the roof, chopping a long table in half. From the rear wall, above a collapsed bookcase, mounted heads of two boars and a deer survey the destruction, adding an element of supreme irony to the scene. Here, it seems, Pierce is sanguine about the possibility of earth without Homo sapiens. In the meantime, he labors at his quixotic but urgent eco-regionalist project: creating technically superb paintings that give pleasure and pause to his viewers.

—Sue Taylor

Apocalyptic visionary

By D.K. ROW
THE OREGONIAN

With scenes of alternately frozen and dryly barren wastelands, roaming animals and other fantastically imagined visions of a degraded world, Ryan Pierce confirms his standing as one of the Portland scene's most talented artists.

His new show at the Oregon College of Art & Craft's Hoffman Gallery is the last of three incredibly ambitious exhibitions envisioning an apocalyptic future, a landscape of decay and ruin hastened by global warming and other environmental debasement. You can call the three shows — the first two were exhibited last year at Pierce's dealer, Elizabeth Leach Gallery — a concept album of sorts.

Indeed, the shows arrive with a catalog that includes an extensive narrative by Pierce (it's a short story, really) inspired by Jerzy Kosinski's novel about his childhood experiences during the Holocaust, "The Painted Bird." But Pierce's story seems more closely linked to Cormac McCarthy's equally grim "The Road."

Pierce is one of several local painters, including Michael Brophy and Roll Hardy, who might broadly be described as bioregional painters, artists divining a post-industrial world. Like his peers, Pierce possesses exceptional technical skills that can't be underestimated: That liberates him to draw and paint the landscape in an arduous, specific way that would otherwise make these paintings less compelling.

The post-devastation images depict a world familiar but also fictional. Each scene may seem banal. But Pierce paints vividly, and uses color



Ryan Pierce's
"Paradise," 2009.
21x27 inches.
Acrylic on canvas
over panel.

"The Ox Cart," now in the Portland Art Museum's permanent collection.

In a way, Pierce's paintings share much with

the work of Henk Pander, the Portland painter of transgressive images and energy. Though strange to some, Pander's worldview reflects that of other European painters of his generation. The Dutch-born Pander also was deeply influenced by World War II.

Coincidentally, Pierce writes that Eastern European painters have been a keen influence. That makes sense: Pierce has the tense, cool urbanity of a scientist on a great head trip.

Hoffman Gallery at the Oregon College of Art & Craft, 8245 S.W. Barnes Road. Closes Feb. 25; free admission. www.ryan-pierce.net

ART PAPERS

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2010



RYAN PIERCE
PORTLAND, OR

For all the hysteria over shrinking shorelines, surging temperatures, and depleted resources, Ryan Pierce's latest body of work suggests that mankind might be overestimating its own staying power. While flora and fauna flourish in the post-apocalyptic wastelands of *Written from Exile*, humanity does the vanishing [Elizabeth Leach Gallery; October 1–31, 2009]. These sumptuously painted canvases are littered with remnants of civilization amongst the desolation: a rusted-out ice machine, a shored motorboat revamped as makeshift desert shelter, an opulent vacation home that has become an indoor grazing pasture for a pair of deer. A number of clues suggest that the human species has not entirely lapsed into extinction. After all, to follow the very logic of these fictional tableaux, there must be at least one survivor. Who else would have captured these scenes? But that presence is intuited and never shown, banished from the pictorial space.

Here, the painter is a figure of necessary exclusion, exiled—so to speak—from the world he depicts, whether observed or imagined. Pierce amplifies that isolation by alluding to self-taught, outsider art, specifically the pastoral scenes of Croatian painters Ivan Lacković Croatia and Ivan Večenaj. He adopts a graphic approach, in which painterly depth commingles with flattened stretches of decorative pattern. In *Blue Rooster*, 2008, the ground beneath the titular subject is a lattice of curved, ornamental forms; the rocks and stands of jutting prairie grass sketching out its surface seem to exist on another plane altogether. Likewise, willfully untechnical touches complicate the meticulous detail of *Comet*, 2009, which presents a patch of moony, blue-white pumpkins on the edge of a winding stream. Thick black edging traces enormous fronds that pop rather loudly. Meanwhile, featureless anemone-green ferns scan as sections of raw canvas in the midst of an otherwise painstakingly worked surface. In *Maricopa*, 2009, the stalks and leaves of purple flowers shoot up from the cracks in an asphalt parking lot. They are jarringly flat: these silhouetted starbursts of green undo

the painting's realistic dimensions. This tense, perspectival push-pull sabotages these sites as real places; their spatial inconsistencies out them as the unstable terrain of possible outcome, fueled by dreadful anticipation.

As Pierce invokes the figure of the outsider—in both form and content—he asserts that humanity is the ultimate interloper, too new and estranged from the natural world to pose any legitimate threat of ecological annihilation. While environmental activists decry mankind as an invasive species, hell-bent on its own primacy, such an appraisal fails to appreciate the chaotic and indefatigable thrust of nature. If the natural world mirrors man's impulse to colonize and conquer, it also lacks the capacity for compassion or the ability to acknowledge boundaries. In the stunning and densely composed *Easter Island*, 2009, Pierce crams the canvas with the instruments of violence and torture encountered by the protagonist of Jerzy Kosinski's novel *The Painted Bird* as he wanders through war-ravaged Europe. These relics—an electric chair and a skull suspended in a bird cage—are lodged in arid earth, rendered benign in the absence of either captive or captor, as the hearty leaves of a bush extend, sun-like, in every direction. In a nearby sculpture, a wooden fencepost grows out of a tiny garden footprint, barbed wire coiling and fanning off it like vines. These barbed vine patterns recur as baroque curlicues, subtly crisscrossing the surfaces of several paintings. Pierce implies that cruelty is an organic condition, which arises inevitably from the fecund soil of human desire. But crueler still is nature's indifference, which persists, expertly impartial to mankind's existence—let alone the ecological holocaust it feebly enacts.

—John Motley



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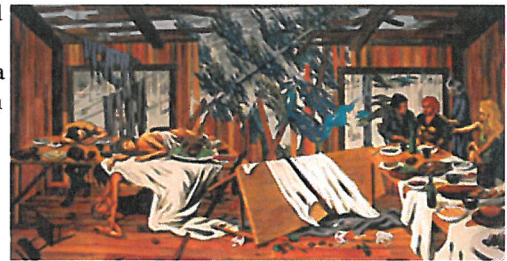
Artists Spotlight: Ryan Pierce



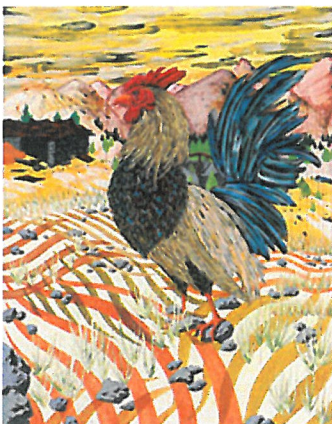
Ryan Pierce, visual artist
Recipient 2009 Project Grant

Ryan Pierce makes paintings and objects that describe our world after the end of the industrial era. His colorful acrylic landscapes illuminate aspects of deep ecology and bioregionalism, ideas that mandate restructuring human society around the health of natural systems. His work draws on a vivid, and often dark, imagination, as well as his background in environmental activism and interest in literature.

Pierce was born in 1979, in the rural Redwood Empire of Northern California, and has been based in Portland since 2000. He earned his BFA in Drawing from Oregon College of Art & Craft in 2003, and a Masters in Painting from California College of the Arts (CCA) in 2007. His honors include fellowships from the Joan Mitchell Foundation (2007), the San Francisco Foundation (2006), and a residency at Caldera in 2008. His work has been exhibited nationally, and is in the collection of the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art in New York. Recent exhibitions include a solo show, *Army of No One*, at Lisa Dent Gallery in San Francisco, and group shows at the CUE Foundation in New York, Roberts & Tilton in Los Angeles, and Irvine Contemporary in Washington DC.



Taiga Feast, 2007
by Ryan Pierce



Blue Rooster, 2009
by Ryan Pierce

Writing is a key component to Pierce's art practice. He contributes arts writing and political essays to regional publications, and is currently developing an artist book, *To Those Who Will Not Know the Way*, for which he is the recipient of a 2009 RACC Project Grant. This fictional travelogue, which will be presented in conjunction with an exhibition, *Written From Exile*, will run from **October 1-31, 2009** at [Elizabeth Leach Gallery](#) in Portland, is concerned with projections of the human migrations that will occur due to global warming. The images are loosely tied to chapters of Jerzy Kosinski's *The Painted Bird*, a classic Holocaust novel about the xenophobia and cruelty that erupt when people are displaced in times of scant resources and superstition. *To Those Who Will Not Know the Way* will pair images inspired by Kosinski's dark parable alongside Pierce's writing, which recasts the narrative in a post-climate change landscape.

Pierce is the co-founder, with his wife Amy Harwood, of Signal Fire, a group that facilitates wilderness opportunities and outdoor education for creative professionals. In Summer 2009 Signal Fire will host remote

residencies on Mount Hood for six Portland artists, and also organize rural retreats and backcountry trips. Harwood— program director at Bark, which defends the public lands of Mt. Hood National Forest— and Pierce formed Signal Fire in 2008 to help expose urban artists to the skills and issues inherent to wilderness living, as well as to nurture more crossover between the arts and environmental activism. Pierce is an adjunct instructor in the BFA and MFA programs at Pacific Northwest College of Art, and is represented by Elizabeth Leach Gallery in Portland and Irvine Contemporary in Washington DC.



Easter Island, 2009
by Ryan Pierce

March 13-19, 2009

Change in an anxious world

By BRIAN LIBBY
SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

There are thousands of sayings about change. Confucius wrote that we must often adjust in order to be "constant in happiness or wisdom." William Blake warned that clinging to the same opinions "breeds reptiles of the mind." And as Bob Dylan sang, you'll sink like a stone if you don't notice the water level rising.

But let's face it — we have all these inspiring proverbs about change because it can actually be a scary, confusing experience.

Factor in today's economic, environmental and political tribulations, and it's unsurprising to see two galleries this month contemplating our tenuous times: Eva Speer's solo show at Charles A. Hartman Fine Art and a group exhibit at Elizabeth Leach Gallery.

Organic reclamation

Whereas change is part of larger ongoing cycle of life in Speer's work, "A Fragile Reality" at Leach's gallery is about the tension and anxiety of a



Ryan Pierce's "Dabrowa Station"

world falling apart. The dealer threads together the work of six local and out-of-town artists to portray the organic realm taking over civilization — or, perhaps more to the point, reclaiming the latest in a line of doomed societies including the Mayans and Easter Islanders.

Two pieces by Brooklyn artist Nicola López are curious, captivating blurs of reality: the pen-and-ink drawing "Skeleton's Reach" and a collage called "Impossible Reach #1." Depicting a twisting array of bridge spires and suspension cables, López's work recalls the mind-bending drawings of MC Escher, but without descending into fantasy or visual illusion.

The show also includes one small painting by Dan Attoe, a finalist for the Portland Art Museum's inaugural Contemporary Northwest Art Awards last year. In "Come and Go," Attoe turns his attention away from rural and forested enclaves to depict a small convenience store. But the sense of a carved-out community amid the vastness remains, as does Attoe's exceptional gift for detail, color and shadow.

Yale-trained New Yorker Daniel Gordon's collages of cut-up photographs are not radically different from any number of past assemblage works. Collage is so common it transcends ordinary artistry: People from all walks of life make them. Yet Gordon's fragmented figurative

pieces, such as "Red Headed Woman," are painterly in composition, perhaps the closest to the show's theme.

Ryan Pierce's large-scale vibrantly colorful paintings are captivating. There's a touch of Vincent van Gogh's period in Arles, when he abandoned somber hues for yellow sunflowers and red vineyards. Yet, probably quite knowingly, Pierce twists that tradition to portray ecological decay.

The paintings, photographs and drawings in these two shows neither dissect reality in cold resolute terms nor cajole us into believing things aren't dire. Instead, they express more elusive but compelling truths. Individual lives and times are fleeting, the artworks seem to say, yet nature continues with or without us. Luckily, save for a few gallery closings, the artwork continues as well.

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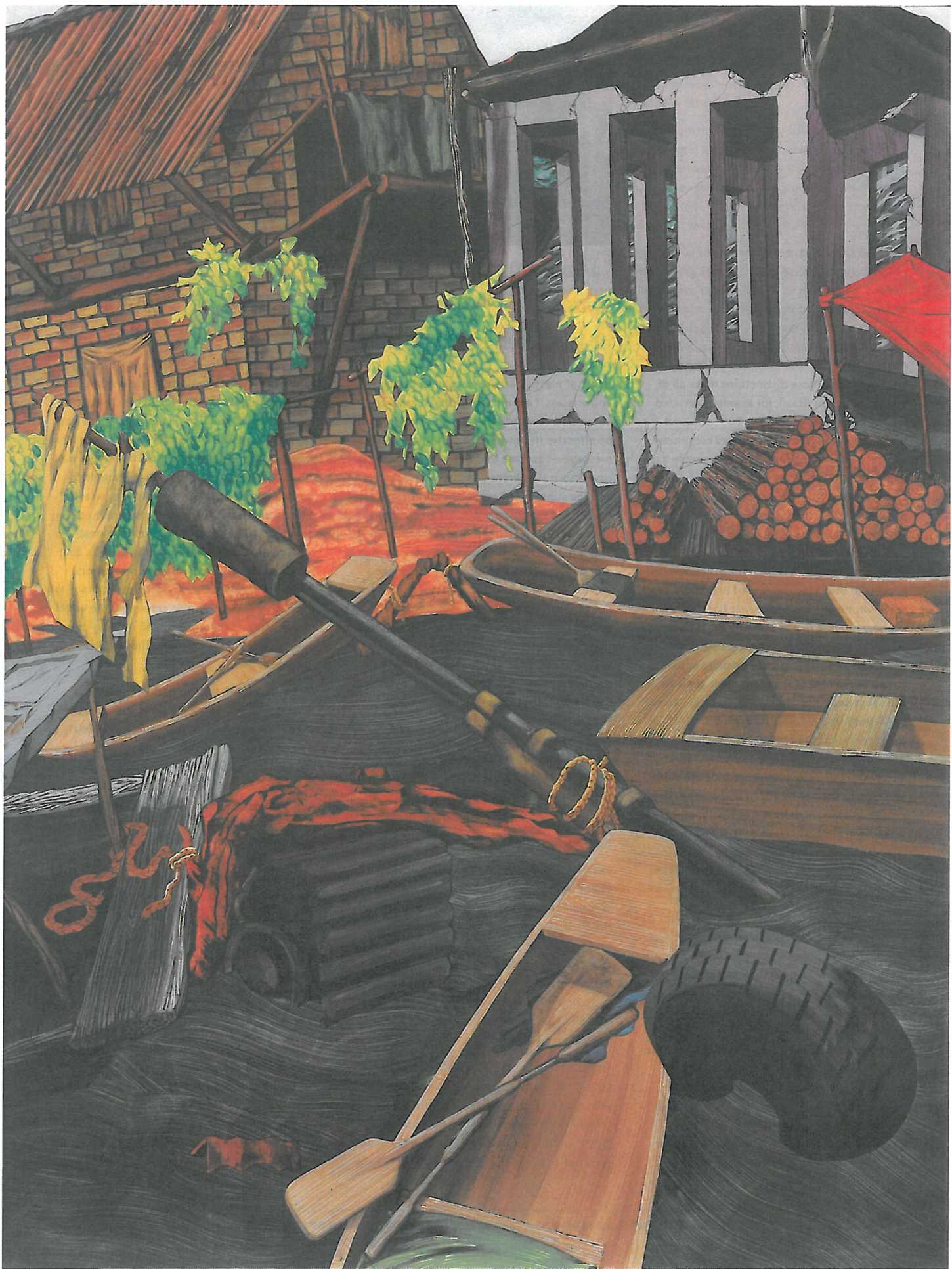
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ORLO: 15 YEARS STRONG



opposite page:

Lake Dai

40" x 30"

Acrylic on panel

2008

this page:

Kolyma

20" x 16"

Acrylic on panel

2007



RYAN PIERCE

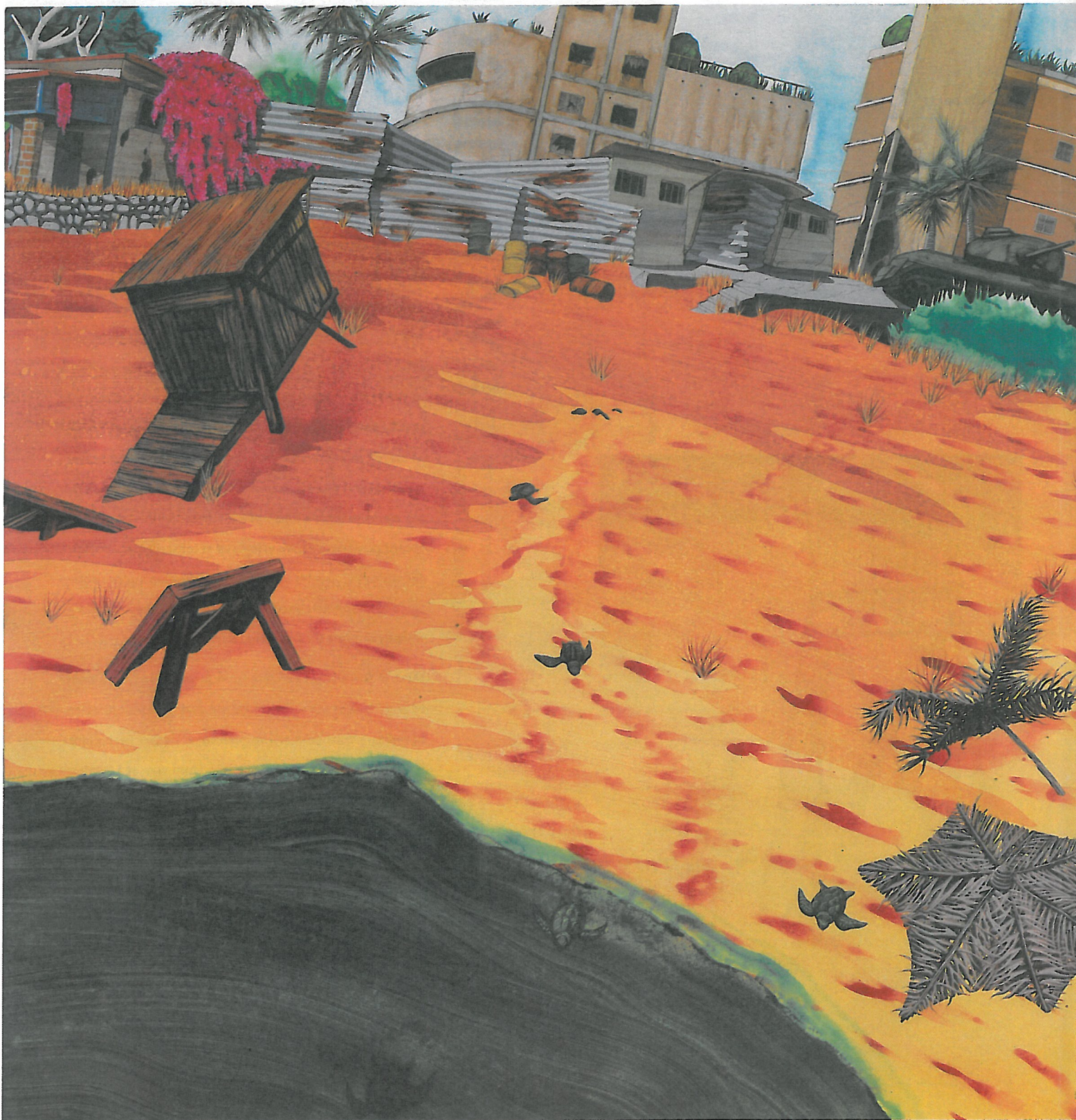
<http://ryanpierce.net>

Portland, Oregon

My paintings depict a post-industrial world. Drawing from a personalized theory of bioregionalism—the idea that sustainability can be realized by redrafting society around the health of natural systems—I create hypothetical landscapes that speak to the resiliency of the Earth in the face of human violence and calamity. In reality, bioregionalism is a quiet practice, a way of “living in place.” In my version, however, restoration would take a radical and thorough annihilation of industrial society. My works portray a harsh place, where the mistakes of the recent past loom above efforts of reconstruction. Within the arc of my greater investigation I develop subprojects—ways to examine related concerns through the lens of my historical interests and visual agenda.

Most of the images here are from *Army of No One*, a body of work concerned with militarism and the appropriation of military culture in environmental activism. Each painting is set in a landscape recovering from war: sea turtles reinhabiting an occupied Cypriot resort or young firs growing on the rotting guard tower from an abandoned

continued on page 20 >





Ryan Pierce, continued

“ I create hypothetical landscapes that speak to the resiliency of the Earth in the face of human violence and calamity. ”

gulag. These works are a way of cross-examining my own ideals. Through the lens of my fears—violence, nationalism and a vast uncertainty—I can debate the plausibility of my passions. Each painting is based on a specific “ecoregion,” an area of land defined not by a nation state but by ecology, with its own place on the spectrum of human impact. These factors bring specificity to my dream world. □

above:

Grozny (Cathedral at Dawn)

60" x 48"

Acrylic on canvas over panel

2008

opposite page:

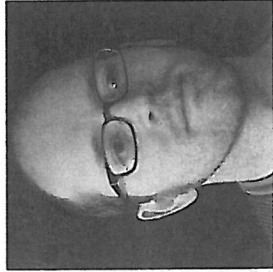
Varosha

48" x 48"

Acrylic on canvas over panel

2008

Ryan Pierce (Portland, Oregon)



featured on pages 18-21

MEDIA: DRAWING AND PAINTING

EXHIBITIONS IN 2008: ARMY OF NO ONE, SOLO SHOW, LISA DENT GALLERY, SAN FRANCISCO, CA; XXL GROUP SHOW, HUDSON CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ART, NEW YORK.

Ryan Pierce earned a BFA from Oregon College of Art & Craft in 2003 and an MFA from California College of the Arts in 2007. He received fellowships from the Joan Mitchell Foundation and the San Francisco Foundation in 2007 and was a resident at Caldera in 2008. His work is available through Irvine Contemporary in Washington, D.C. and Richard Heller Gallery in Los Angeles.

Who are your favorite artists working today?

Francis Alys, Mark Dion, Critical Art Ensemble, Wangechi Mutu, William Kentridge, The Yes Men, Futurefarmers, Storm Tharp, Karen Kilimnik, Walid Raad, Kaye Donachie, Kai Althoff...

How do you define "place-based" art?

Anything that recognizes or considers the uniqueness of a place in its making. This is getting trickier in a globalizing art world, where the tourist's gaze is ever present.

Is your work intended to move a point of view or just engage the viewer?

My images come from internal deliberations. I prefer oblique art, mysterious art, even if that mystery is reached through layers of very direct, even contradictory, images. When I want to make a clear point I turn to writing or activism.

From where do you draw your greatest inspiration?

From people like my wife, who infuse activism with creativity, and vice versa. I also take career advice from underground rappers like Phonte, who suggests, "Stayin' on my grind like bicuspid, dawg."

If any, what do you find to be the most common misconception of your work?

Some people think it's made out of stickers. It's not.

Where do you see your work going in the next two years?

Stranger, darker, more ambitious.



"CEDAR OF LEBANON," 2008, Ryan Pierce
 ACRYLIC ON PANEL, 20" X 16"
 PHOTO: DAN KVITKA COURTESY THE LISA DENT GALLERY

SAN FRANCISCO

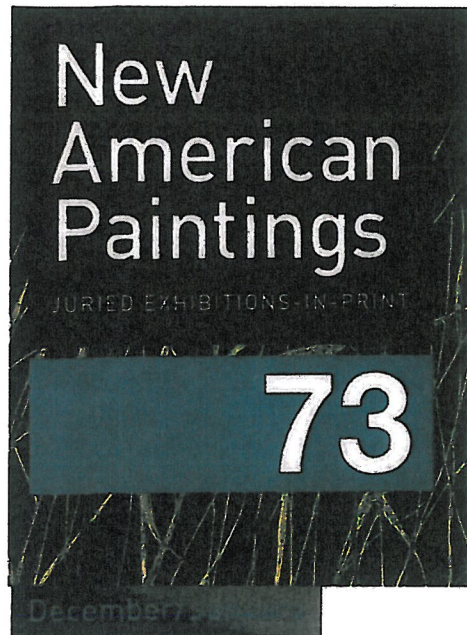
Ryan Pierce: "Army of No One" at Lisa Dent Gallery

Artists addressing issues like the botched war in Iraq and the looming eco-crisis are more visible nowadays, at last. Ryan Pierce's mixed-media show, "Army of No One," its title mocking the U.S. army's superhero-recruiting slogan of 2003 or so, examines the daily bad news, yet in a manner that is lyrically beautiful, balancing esthetic delight and ethical dismay.

In his recent exhibition at Lisa Dent Gallery, Pierce showed flags, drawings and paintings. His silkscreened flags, gifts to viewers who forswear militarism, nationalism, imperialism and religious dogma, bear an angry vulture above the emblazoned pledge never to serve such interests. Pierce also offered brush-and-ink drawings to viewers who promised to get tattoos based on the designs: winged bombs, a tree confined in barbed wire, crossed white flags, and shot, broken-stemmed flowers; a few drawings had been removed from the wall. Pierce's vibrantly colored paintings, however, were the mainstay of the show. These views of various international conflict hotspots have been synthesized from collaged newspaper images and other sources, and the painting style is non-naturalistic, with ground, foliage and cloud rendered schematically; but the images cohere thematically, and we 'read' them as we would 'read' crime scenes—even abandoned, and paradoxically lush with verdant new growth. The vivid color catches and holds the eye, too. In *Cedar of Lebanon* the transparent blue-green

foliage, the bullet-spattered orange wall, and the cloudy gray sky play spatial tricks that momentarily distract us from the brooding car wreck and skewed traffic signs beneath. In *Kolyma*, an ominous guard tower made of birch trunks stands in a snowy forest next to a sapling. In *Varosha*, beachside hotels and outbuildings sway and totter, while small turtles make their antediluvian way back to the green water as a tank rumbles by, its gun turret pointed our way. In *Kabul*, flowers grow in a garden gone to seed amid rubble and bullet-scarred walls, while clothes hang in the sun and wind, presumably never to be reclaimed. Be sure to read Pierce's booklet, "Lunch During Wartime," describing respectfully but critically, the gargantuan (40' x 70') great-wars mural in the cafeteria at West Point by WPA artist and liberal patriot, T. Loftin Johnson.

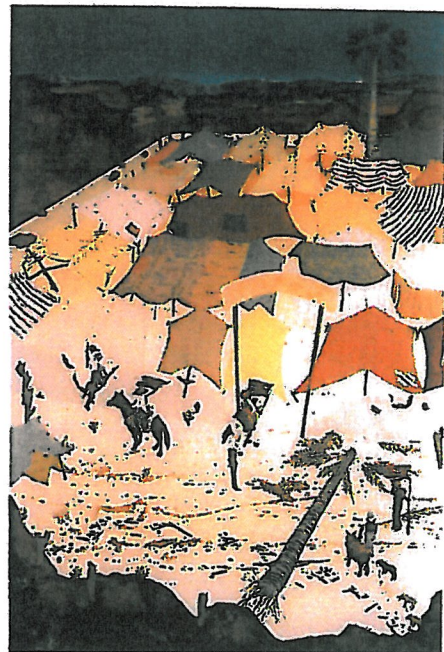
—DEWITT CHENG



Editors' Pick / Ryan Pierce

Like a number of emerging contemporary artists, Ryan Pierce chooses to construct his images using a faux-naïve pictorial vocabulary. Pierce's compact paintings capture the unease of our increasingly destabilized world. Within the density of subject and surface, the natural and the man-made compete—literally and figuratively—for space. The finished paintings overflow with the tension of their own internal conflicts and Pierce's conflicted world view. —SZ

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Ryan Pierce

b. 1979 Fort Bragg, CA

Education

- 2007 MFA, California College of the Arts, San Francisco, CA
2003 BFA, Oregon College of Art & Craft, Portland, OR

Selected Exhibitions

- 2008 *Lisa Dent Gallery, San Francisco, CA*
2007 *Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art, Peekskill, NY*
Roberts and Tilton at Domestic, Los Angeles, CA
Irvine Contemporary, Washington, DC
Lisa Dent Gallery, San Francisco, CA
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
2006 *San Francisco Arts Commission Gallery, San Francisco, CA*
Art Aqua Fair, Miami, FL
2005 *The Affair at the Jupiter Hotel, Portland, OR*
Marghitta Feldman Gallery, Portland, OR

Awards

- 2007 MFA Grant, Joan Mitchell Foundation
2006 Cadogan Fellowship, San Francisco Foundation
Richard K. Price Scholarship, California College of the Arts
All College Honors, Jury's Mention, California College of the Arts

Collections

Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art, Peekskill, NY

Publications

- Artweek*, 07/07
San Francisco Bay Guardian, 05/07
Portland Mercury, 01/05

Represented by

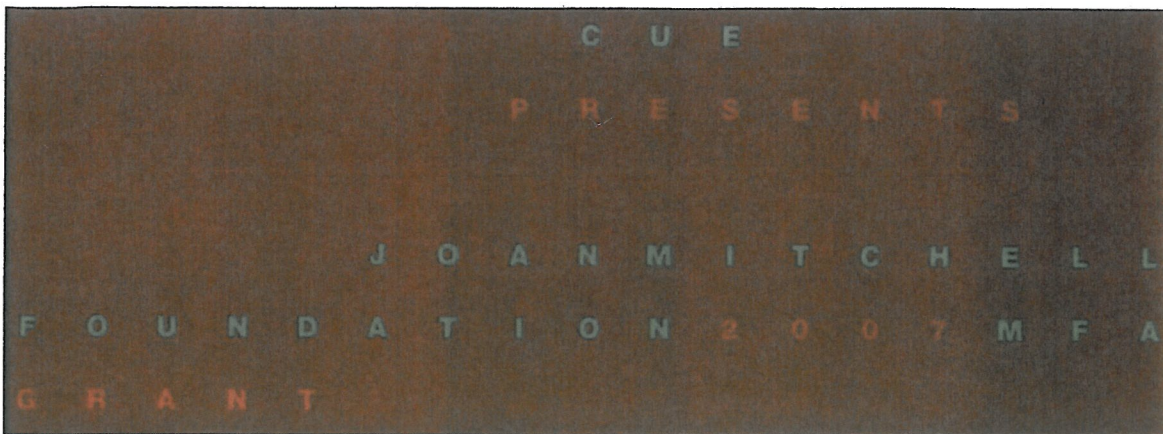
Lisa Dent Gallery, San Francisco, CA
Richard Heller, Santa Monica, CA

In my paintings and related sculptures I depict how humans might rebuild society and culture after the end of industry. I synthesize two opposing hypotheses to create scenes that focus on the struggle and mystery of our relationship to the rest of the natural world. One side of me believes that with a clean slate and cautious determination, we could avoid further ecological disaster. This is tempered by another view that fears that human greed and conflict are unavoidable.

This project is a way of cross-examining my own ideals. Through the lens of my fears—violence, nationalism and a vast uncertainty—I can debate the plausibility of my passions. Each painting is based on a specific "ecoregion," an area of land defined not by a nation state but by ecology, with its own place on the spectrum of human impact. These factors help me add a richly imagined specificity to my dream world. I am thus forced to reckon with both the triumphs and pitfalls of the bright and cloudy future.

Pierce





RYAN PIERCE

CALIFORNIA COLLEGE OF THE ARTS

Born 1979 in Fort Bragg, CA / Based in Portland, OR

Selected Solo Exhibitions: *Army of No One*, Lisa Dent Gallery, San Francisco, CA 2008.

Evidence, Marghitta Feldman Gallery, Portland, OR 2005. **Selected Group Exhibitions:**

Reunion, Irvine Contemporary, Washington, DC 2008. *XXL*, Hudson Valley Center for

Contemporary Art, Peekskill, NY 2007. *Bliss*, Roberts & Tilton at Domestic, Los Angeles,

CA 2007. *Introductions 3*, Irvine Contemporary, Washington DC, 2007. *Three Artists*,

Lisa Dent Gallery, San Francisco, CA 2007. *Anonymous Drawings*, Blütenweiss, Berlin,

Germany 2007. **Selected Awards and Residencies:** Caldera Arts Retreat, 2008. Edwin

Anthony and Adelaine Bordeaux Cadogan Fellowship, The San Francisco Foundation

2006. **Selected Bibliography:** *Editor's Choice*, New American Paintings, 12/2007.

Rigorous Sincerity: An Interview with Ryan Pierce, Imprint, Fall 2007. *Local Artist*, SF Bay

Guardian, Volume 41, Number 28, 4/11/2007. Rene de Guzman, *Three Artists at Lisa*

Dent, Shotgun Review of Art 7/2007. **Education:** BFA, Oregon College of Art & Craft

2003. BFA, University of California at Santa Cruz 1999. Environmental Studies, The Sierra

Institute 1998.



Krajina, 2007. Acrylic on canvas over panel; 48" x 72"

"I wanted to situate my paintings somewhere between utopia and dystopia." Ryan Pierce



"Utopia", 2007, 20 x 180 inches. Acrylic on canvas, every part.



Shy or skeptical Ryan Pierce's charming reserve was hard to place when I first met him in the OCAC painting studio sometime in 2000. As it turns out, an intriguing blend of those qualities have likely fed his ambition and discipline. Modest in the face of growing success, Ryan and I spoke about his time at OCAC, painting, and activism. I sat down with him on the rooftop ledge of his Chatsworth studio in late August for this conversation.

MJR When you think about your time at OCAC what stands out to you the most about your education there?

RP The thing that I really responded to at OCAC was having lots of individual attention; having somebody, if necessary, literally hold my hand and show me how to build my technique and lighten up.

MJR Were there other things that you encountered in your education at OCAC that surprised you?

RP Well now when I look back on it, it seems like a little bit of an unorthodox program to be studying drawing at a craft school. At the time I didn't think anything of it, and a huge part of the appeal was being able to spend a lot of the time learning ceramics and sewing in the Fibers department. I spent a lot of time on my electives and I think that was good for building confidence and cross-disciplinary studio skills. I think the thing that ultimately stuck with me the most about the school was, this kind of... rigorous sincerity...

MJR Hmm, that's a great term.

RP ...and I think that sincerity is really valued in art whether it's functional craft or completely conceptual art, and I think that the way OCAC builds that is by really drilling that technique.

MJR It's interesting for you to make the connection between sincerity and technique.

RP I think the stuff that lasts beyond ten years and the artists that have long-term successful careers are the people that have a really deep investment in their subject and their material. Part of what I got from the OCAC realm was developing a good work ethic and spending a lot of time on stuff.

MJR I'm interested in hearing how you think OCAC prepared or didn't prepare you for what you experienced when you went to California College of the Arts.

RP Again, the work ethic is huge; I had a teacher in grad school describe it as "building studio muscles". The thesis emulates a working artist's life and demands with training wheels. When I was working on my thesis at OCAC I was probably in the studio 50-60 hours a week, and I have tried to match that since.

MJR You've had some things happen because of grad school that have enabled you to paint or work in your studio more or less full time since you graduated.

right? You get an amazing grant from the Joan Mitchell Foundation. What was the effect of that... literally and figuratively?

RP [laughing] Pure jubilation. Most practically it allowed me to start a savings account and budget a little money to do some traveling, hopefully next year.

MJR Your artist statement synthesizes two opposing hypotheses that I would characterize as belief and doubt. I see artists grappling with this question of, "How do I hold these opposing forces in some sort of balance?" and it seems to affect everything from studio practices to content. I think it's a loaded ambivalence that is actually a sort of fuel for artists.

RP Yeah, I feel that art is a comfortable place for uncertainty. You ask questions throughout the process of making a painting. In my case a representational painting, to use really loaded imagery that conflicts with itself sometimes, and I get called out on that a lot. I'd rather

a painting contain some elements of mystery and be something that sits up discussion rather than acting as a billboard for a cause.

MJR You say you use a person-alized theory of bioregionalism. Are the titles of the work a reference to whatever that region might be?

RP Most of my paintings are titled after regions of the world.

MJR Can you say more about this idea of an environmental philosophy structuring your working process and concept?

RP Bioregionalism is a fairly new name given to a very old philosophy of place-based, ecologically delineated ways of measuring the world that was started by Peter Berg in the 60's. Through my involvement in environmental action, I thought it would be a good project to imagine the bioregional agenda as dictating a future world. In my painted scenarios there are no nation states — just groups of people whose social and cultural

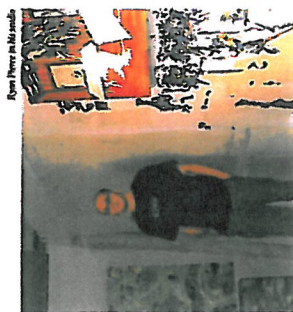
identities, and motives for action, are determined by the land that they live in. Bioregionalism as it is practiced today is more of a quiet revolution— just people taking an active role in their inhabitation. But in my paintings it's more dramatic; a natural dictatorship where people are really struggling to adhere to principles of sustainability and to reclaim the ways that they were supposed to live on the earth in order to not destroy it.

MJR It gets back to this tension between belief and doubt. You want to believe that under the right circumstances we can figure it out and not destroy the planet and yet...

RP And yet we have no evidence to support that belief.

MJR Exactly!

RP I wanted to situate my paintings somewhere between utopia and dystopia.



Ryan Pierce is an artist based in Portland, Oregon. He received a Bachelor's degree in Fine Arts from OCAC in 2003, and a Master's in Fine Arts from California College of the Arts in 2007. He is one of 15 MFA graduates in the country to receive a grant of \$15,000 from the Joan Mitchell Foundation in 2007. His work has been exhibited nationally, and forthcoming exhibitions include a group survey of large-scale painting at the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art and a solo exhibition at Lisa Dent Gallery in San Francisco. Ryan is represented by Lisa Dent in San Francisco, and Richard Heller in Santa Monica, CA. He is also a volunteer for BARK, a local grass-roots group that monitors logging projects in the public lands of Mt. Hood National Forest. www.bark-out.org