

STANDING WITNESS  
*site: Sage Creek*

Catherine Meier



*site: Sage Creek was projected nightly over a week at the end of August 2014 at the Sage Creek Campground in Badlands National Park, South Dakota.*

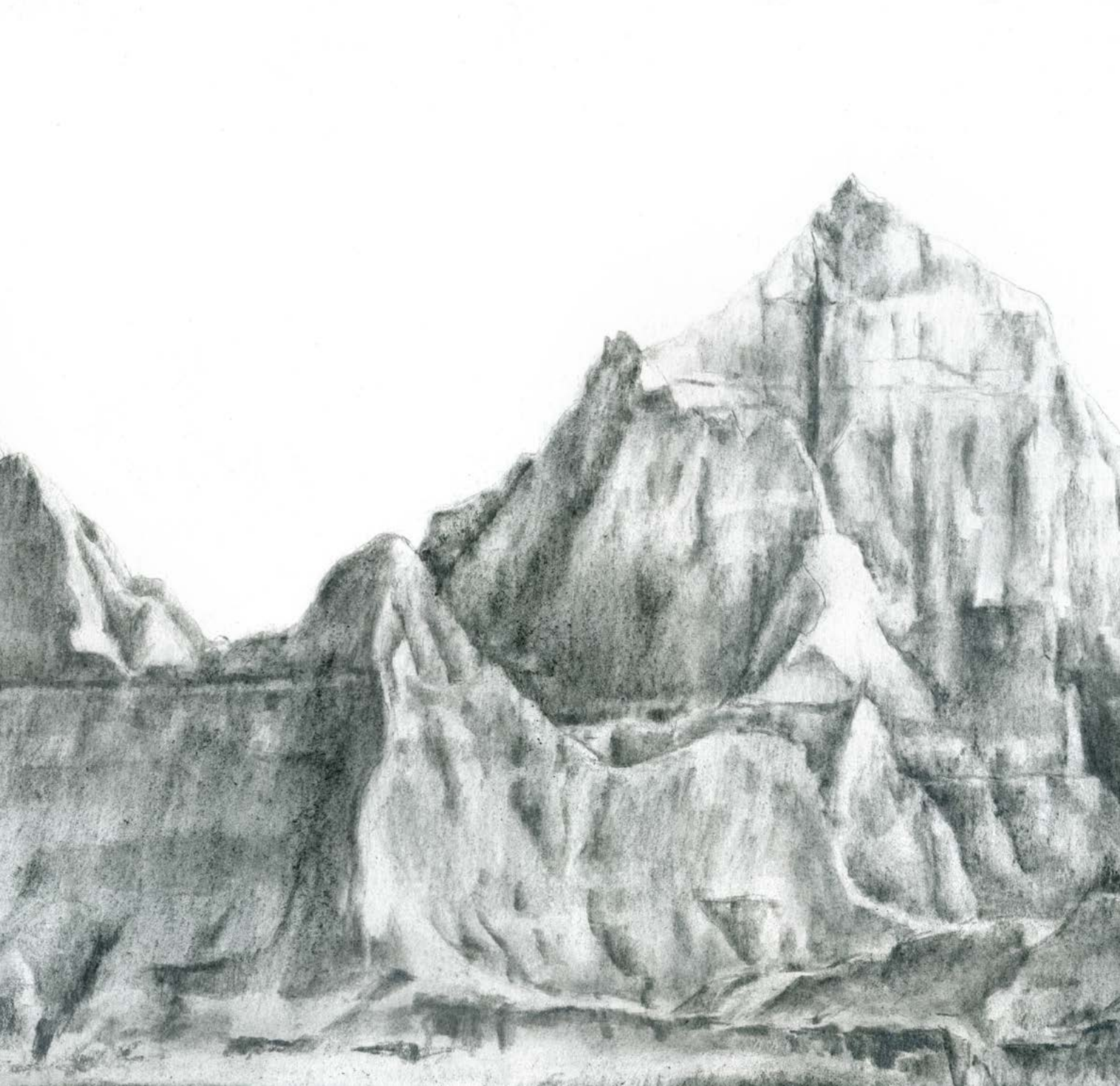
*Standing Witness, site: Sage Creek* is a hand-drawn animation that records and illuminates the temporality, fragility, and vastness of the ancient land located within and around the Sage Creek Campground in South Dakota's Badlands National Park. Graphite is set into motion through a draw, photograph, erase, and redraw method, and this earthy substance depicts grasses, sagebrush, and crumbling dirt. It reveals the detailed and changing horizon line, the shadows of passing, and the evolution of land as related to this place. These moving drawings that explore terrain become a visual poetry of place, allowing a viewer to relax into their rhythmic movement, or pause to catch detailed fragments of this overwhelming space.

In projecting the animation at the site of its origins, *Standing Witness, site: Sage Creek* becomes art at play. Art is connected to the world in a visceral way, creating a new space for encountering both the landscape and the artwork. It is also an act of ritual, paying homage and attention to land and place. The animation will be set up every evening, allowing for unpredictable happenings as both campers and weather come and go. For me, it is the ultimate fun as an artist – going out to the land from which I derive my inspiration to explore how the artwork I make is revealed or transformed by its natural surroundings.

— Catherine Meier, July 2014

digital drawing included in the limited edition book *site: Sage Creek*





an essay

by **Candice Hopkins**

Catherine Meier's drawings and animations appear to emanate *from* the land. Their size is important: when you stand in front of them, they envelop you, placing you within the picture plane. The drawings mimic the grandeur of the Plains, the land austere and peaceful, pared down to its most basic elements without being oversimplified. Meier's landscapes are not drawn directly from photographs; they are often based on sketches created at the site itself.<sup>1</sup> Because of this, they are not simply documentary images—they are too gestural, too interpretive. In these drawings, the land seems as though it is a space waiting to be filled, not from its lack of color but perhaps from the expanse of sky. We find identity in landscape and place. Indeed, for Meier, this is true. These grasslands are not empty places but sites embedded with history and with

memory, and overlaid with the desire we project onto it.

In her new work, *Standing Witness*, Meier has transformed her drawings into a rich, animated panorama.

Created through a laborious process of drawing, erasing, then redrawing the same stretch of land at Badlands National Park, the animation documents subtle changes in the site over time. In its illuminated glow, the grass shifts and sways as people move across the picture plane; these subtle elements of motion are amplified through this new form of representation. The act of overlaying an image of the land back onto itself is a complicated gesture. Landscapes are normally displayed at a distance from where they were created, to enable one to gaze (pleasurably) at another place—they act as a stand-in for experiencing

the place itself. At the Sage Creek Campground on August 27–31, 2015, visitors witnessed a kind of “double landscape,” being in a place while seeing its representation.

The continual motion in *Standing Witness* is a reminder that the Great Plains are in flux. The region was first sea, then covered and shaped by glacial ice; it still undulates like water, with a rhythm all its own. Its relative emptiness is a recent phenomenon. Prior to the 1800s, the Great Plains teemed with bison, numbering as many as sixty million. Less than a century later, the population numbered in the hundreds. The U.S. Army, on orders from the federal government, launched an extensive and methodological killing spree; in some photos the bones of the dead animals are piled so high they obscure the sky. By decimating the

detail of drawing from  
site: Sage Creek animation

main food source of Plains Indians the government sought to force these seminomadic people into submission as well. The extermination of the bison and the forced removal of Native peoples onto small reservations cleared the prairies for settlement. Eighteen dollars would get you 160 acres; much of the West was reoccupied in this fashion. The drawing *Standing Witness—Chute, North Dakota* documents a familiar sight. A lone wooden corral long since abandoned sits on the edge of a field, the remains of one of the long-standing economies of this place when domestic cattle ranching replaced the sustenance lifestyle afforded by free-roaming bison herds.

Much like the history of the Plains, the landscapes in Meier's drawings are occupied by intensities, as though driven by unseen or imagined forces. Not still, but in constant motion. Landscape "is built up as much from the strata of memory as from the layers of rock."<sup>2</sup> Meier spent her childhood on the Plains, where she later made a living as a cattle truck driver. She recalls the hours spent driving, transporting cattle, and watching the grasslands pass by in a blur. In a precursor to *Standing*

*Witness*, she projected drawings of her family back onto the lands where they used to live by taking a white cloth, stretching it, and then projecting an image of the place back onto itself. Here, the portraits appear like specters, reinscribing the land with its past.

In its form, *Standing Witness* recalls some of the earliest panoramic photographs in the United States, mammoth plate images dating from the 1860s of Yosemite and Zion National Parks by Carleton Watkins and Eadweard Muybridge. These panoramas collapsed space and time; the slow development process of wet plate photography meant that the single image was created by stitching together several images taken over a period of hours or even days. At the time, photographers carried their cumbersome equipment with them, processing images on site. What *Standing Witness* does is something of the opposite; it introduces time and movement into the space of the single image so that we can witness the land's subtle change. "Great landscapes all have a visionary character," observes Erwin Straus. "Such vision is of the invisible becoming visible."<sup>3</sup> Meier's panorama

emphasizes this quality; her animations refocus one's gaze onto a single blade of grass as it is pushed and pulled by the breeze. A world that appears static from a distance, up close is anything but.

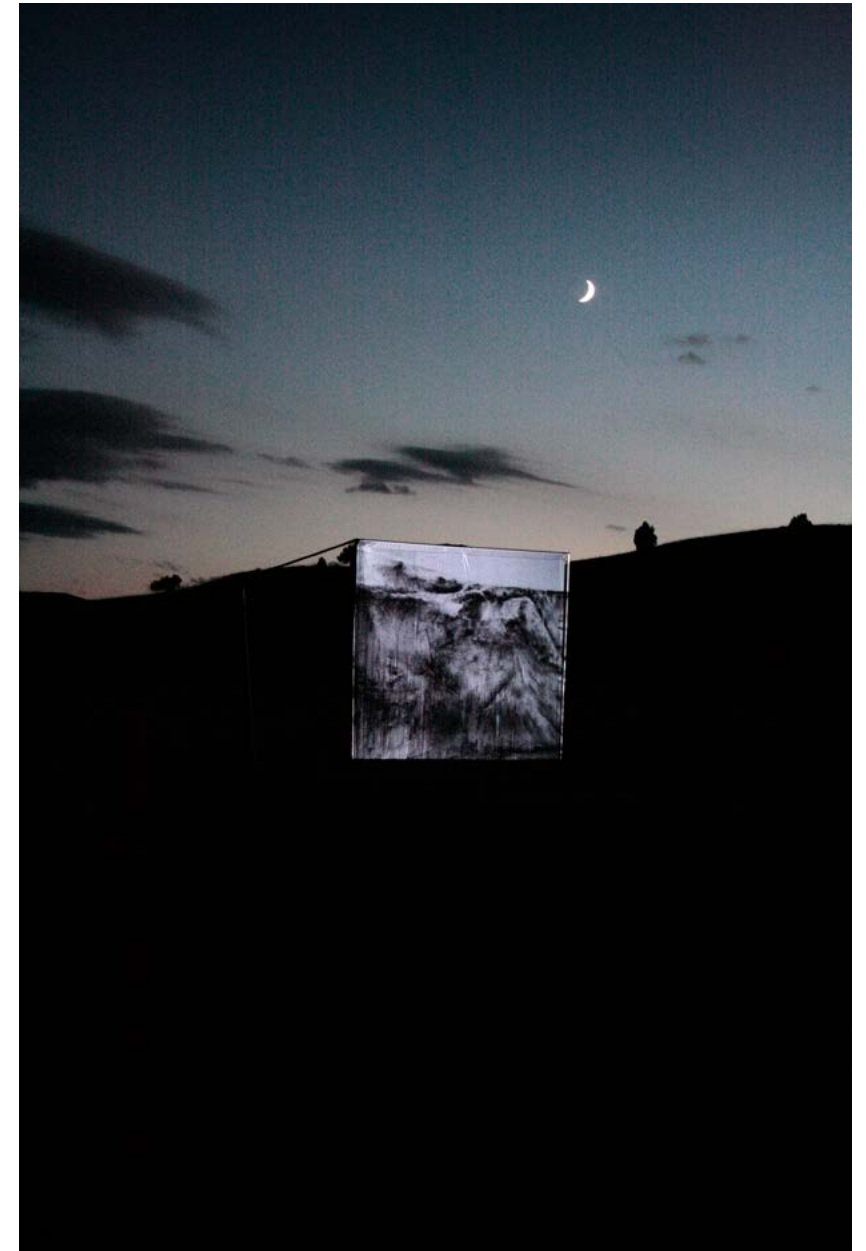
Badlands National Park, like all of the land in the United States, is marked by conflict. Bullets riddled the area during the Wounded Knee Massacre, when over two hundred Native people were gunned down, and thirty soldiers—most the victim of friendly fire—died. The bodies of the Native people were buried one atop the other in mass graves. Wounded Knee took place at the pinnacle of the Ghost Dance movement, a new religion that was based on the belief that through prayer and ceremony the land could be cleansed of newcomers, and ancestors and buffalo would rise from the dead. The massacre took place forty-five miles south of the boundaries of Badlands National Park on the Pine Ridge Reservation. The region later became a gunnery range for the military. Despite this violent past, the Badlands—*Maco Sica* in Lakota—remain the largest undisturbed mixed-grass prairie in the United States; they remain an open space—where endless land meets endless sky.

For Meier, the idea of "open space" is not just about land but describes "a state of mind and a state of being [that] lie at the heart of my curiosity for understanding the distance between the external, physical landscape of earth and the internal, intricate landscape of the human mind."<sup>4</sup> It is this coming together of the physical landscape and the internal landscape that offers much potential, the possibility of grasping the full history of a place along with the possibilities afforded by reconsidering the land not as an economic resource or something to be owned but as a life force all of its own.

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#### Notes

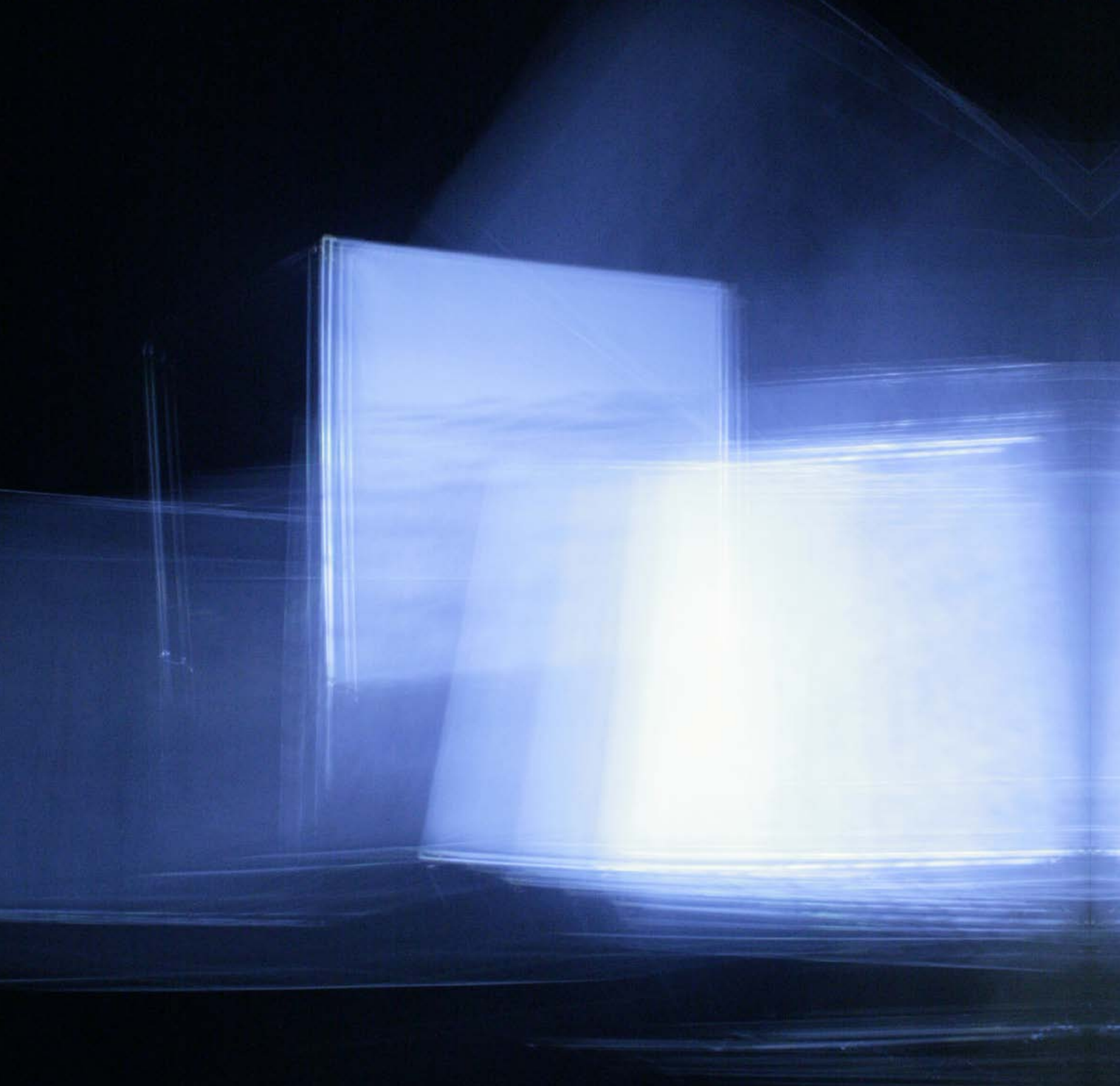
1. Indeed, Meier clarifies that photographs have a very functional relationship to the work, not as the art itself but as a recording device.
2. Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London: Harper Collins, 1995), 6–7.
3. Cited in Erwin Straus, *The Primary World of the Senses: A Vindication of Sensory Experience* (London: Collier-MacMillan, 1963), 322.
4. Cited from an undated artist's statement by Catherine Meier, emailed to the author, April 2014.



site: Sage Creek, August 29, 2014, 9:02 p.m.



*site: Sage Creek, August 31, 2014, 7:50 p.m.  
photo credit: Adrienne Vetter*



a narrative

by **Felicia Schneiderhan**

Sunbeams burn into the windows and through the subterranean darkness. Dim yellow lamps illuminate photos and drawings covering the walls of the basement studio. At a brightly lit and tilted table towards the middle of the room sits Catherine, graphite dust has collected below. Long blond hair is carefully tied back, her eyes through glasses focused on the minute within the expansive. There's a photo of Dylan, her two-year old son, running in the badlands, another of her husband Chris, facing south with a guitar playing to that which is beyond and to the morning dove tucked in the cedars. And photocopies of maps: of the Great Plains, of Eurasia and Mongolia drawn by cartographer Erwin Raisz, the National Park Service trails map of the Badlands. Drawings of Dylan, of grandparents,

Nebraska farmland, Mongolia. *Why there's still all this space inside me/I don't know.\**

*Draw. Photograph. Erase. Redraw, photograph, erase.*

Be still and hear the whispers, the slightest movement of a blade of grass, the slightest sway. Grass, sagebrush, fragile earth. The horizon line is never static here, shadows come to pass.

*Draw. Photograph. Erase. Redraw, photograph, erase.*

Enormous landscape, enormous project. Hours and weeks and months.

*Draw. Photograph. Erase. Redraw, photograph, erase.*

Beyond the subterranean, big skies and relentless winds wait.



Catherine Meier's childhood was spent in Orchard on the eastern edge of the Nebraska Sandhills, a place where one can see tomorrow's weather on the horizon. Driving hour after hour with her family through the Great Plains. Wandering alone through pastures, seeking the mysteries within shelterbelts. She learned to drive a big-rig truck and spent considerable time hauling cattle throughout the Plains. Thousands of miles on roads, up all day, up all night. Driving wide-eyed, staring at landscape.

She moved on and studied drawing and printmaking at the University of Nebraska, and then pursued a graduate degree at the University of Michigan. A research grant meant travel to Mongolia. She hiked through so much public land,

free to move, a translator and driver nearby. “It’s completely distinctive how you traverse open land, public land...in your mind and physically.”

Her research in Mongolia led her back to the plains with a new appreciation for the value of open space and public lands. She drove solo on her old truck route, through Kadoka, Rapid City, cut through Wyoming, up through Montana, through North Dakota and Theodore Roosevelt Park. She spent a night in Bismarck. She was looking for something.

Half way back to Michigan, she had a heavy feeling in her gut. She called her new husband Chris from Minnesota and tried to explain the call she felt to make art about the Great Plains.

“You need to go back,” he told her.

She paid for new tires on a credit card, borrowed her mother-in-law’s thirty-dollar tent, a stainless steel bowl, a cookie sheet. Alone, she drove out to Theodore Roosevelt National Park in North Dakota and spent days hiking, driving, and drawing all over the northern

grasslands.

“Chris was worried about me being alone there, it’s so remote,” she says. Chris had traveled the west extensively and was not worried so much about the remoteness of the land, but the people who inhabit and travel through remote areas of the west. But he also knew Catherine had drove a cattle truck, which was not an easy world, and grew up on the plains. “But it was good. I remember feeling so free. I would lie on the picnic table at night and look at the sky. I loved being out there, with very little stuff, and making something. I like the resourcefulness—and art being a part of it.”

Catherine’s timing was uncanny. She explored the steppe of Mongolia just before the mining frenzy. In the Great Plains, she arrived just as the North Dakota oil boom was gathering momentum, before it was so public. As she sat outside alone, drawing, a Halliburton truck drove by slowly, the driver watching her. She called Chris. “I had no idea there were so many oil rigs out here,” she told him.

In Mongolia, her anxiety mounted in the sheer openness of so much unfamiliar space. She did not know the language of the land or the people. In the Great Plains, relief filled her cup; she knew that landscape, spoke the same language, verbally and not. But in either place, the question hummed: How does the mind navigate so much space?



Eons ago, the ancient sea receded, leaving buttes, pinnacles, and spires, a mixed-grass prairie ecosystem. Today, bison and bighorn sheep roam, intricate prairie dog towns sprawl. An unrelenting sun beats down on the stratifications of color in the landscape. Wounded Knee on the Lakota Pine Ridge Indian Reservation is less than an hours’ drive away.

Sage Creek Campground in the Badlands is free, first come, first served. Pit toilets and covered picnic tables circle up in a wagon shape. Water? You’ll have to drive twenty-four miles for fresh water.

At the overlook in 2008, Catherine climbed out of her red Chevrolet Monte Carlo and gazed down at the

Sage Creek Campground. Catherine thought of her friends Al and Marcia, who over decades camped here often. She had finally visited the site she had heard so much about.

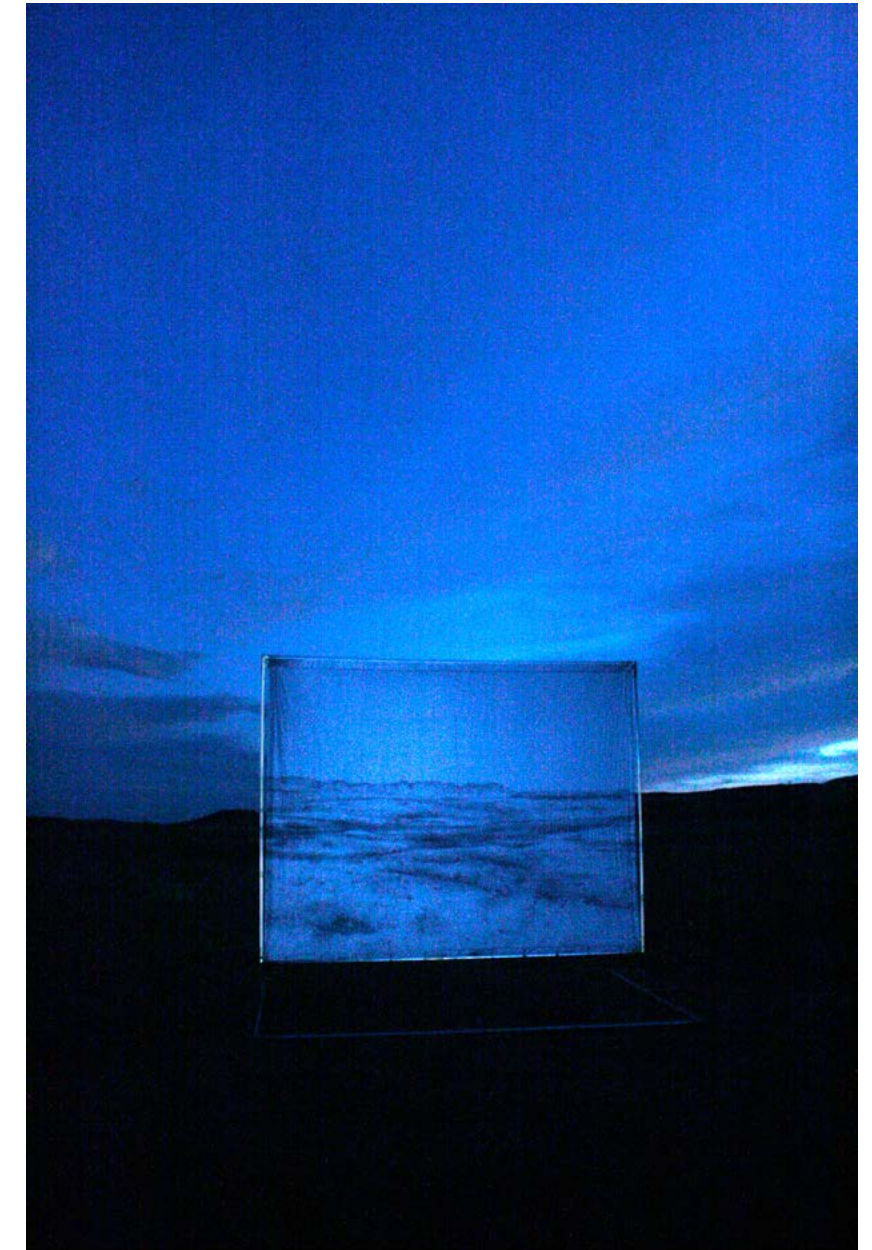
In 2011, Catherine returned, this time with Chris and Dylan. Al had been gone a year. She felt him present, their family trip to see Sage Creek a kind of homage to him. Catherine hiked, sketched, photographed. The heat was excruciating; there was no water. They loved it.

In 2014, the family returned on a pilgrimage, with Catherine’s new work. *Standing Witness*, site: Sage Creek.



Catherine, Chris, and Dylan drove across Minnesota and South Dakota, to Sage Creek, in the last week of August. They hauled the basics for a family camping trip: a two-door Sierra Designs tent, cook stove, sleeping bags and pads, cooler, tarp, gallons of fresh water. They also hauled a laptop, projector, solar-powered generator, aluminum poles, and a 9-by-12-foot screen.

“The solar generator was a big deal



site: Sage Creek, August 28, 2014, 8:55 p.m.





video documentation from August 31, 2014, and short clip of animation file

for me,” Catherine says. “The sound would be an interruption. I had to make sure I had a silent operation.”

The National Park Service had named her an artist-in-residence and granted permission to project the animation. She planned to project it at one location for six nights. But nature had its own show of lightning and torrential rain on the first night.

And later she decided to try three different locations within Sage Creek Campground.

Setup took a half hour. The animation would run about two hours at dusk. Take down was another half hour.

Months of meticulous drawing, of communicating with the National Park Service, seven hundred miles

of driving to the Badlands from northern Minnesota, setting up camp, choosing the location, waiting out the lightning storms, and near dusk on the second night, at last, setting up the screen, the projector.

Finally, pressing start.



Chris challenged Catherine to think about the audience and the impact of projecting animation in a space of sacred land. There would be people who found the animation an intrusion in their wilderness experience. He challenged her to think about her response.

“Chris suggested to me that the project could be perceived as an encroachment upon the very thing that many of us seek wilderness areas, open spaces for – solitude, quietness and intimacy with nature,” Catherine says, “and that this landscape is also sacred for many people and for many reasons – we should be very respectful of it. He believed in the project, but thought that compelling or forcing it upon people could have the opposite affect of what the project was trying to achieve. So in all of a sudden having a ‘movie’ without sound, at all, the work became a part of the place without fully intruding upon those who were there.”

She adds, “I’ve come to realize what a collaboration this project was and is.”

Setup started late the third night. They were still setting up when car after car overwhelmed the

campground. There were well over one hundred people for just a few sites. Tension flooded the campground.

Suddenly, a man emerged from the tall grasses, walking right at her. He had long silvery blond hair, a mountain-man necklace on his bare chest, arms raised high. “I give up,” he said. “I gotta know what you’re doing here.”

Catherine explained she was projecting animations of the drawings she had made of this place.

“Why are you doing this?”

“Well, I really love this place. I make drawings about it. I did an animation project in Nebraska, and it was the most fun I’d ever had as an artist. I want to connect to this place. I want to get art out of the gallery.”

He persisted. He and his wife had been out in Yellowstone for six weeks, riding horses by themselves, and now he was reentering the world through the Badlands, this remote campground with a hundred people and a large animation installation looming.

He called her out on her ethics.

“Well, I really love this place,” she said. “This is my way of showing how much I love something.

“Yeah, but I’ve never seen this much technology out here.”

“Well, it is a solar generator.”

“Yeah,” he said, sweeping his arm toward her equipment, “but look at all of it.”

“Here’s the deal,” she said, seeing she was getting nowhere, “I was a truck driver for seven years, hauling cattle throughout the Great Plains. All I want to do is make art about it.”

“Oh,” he said, demeanor shifting. “So we’re in your backyard then. We’re the intruders.”

“We’re all intruders,” she said.

“Well, we’re not going to have that conversation now,” he said. “I agree with you, but we’re not going to have it . . .”



Within the Great Plains is a projected graphite Great Plains. The grasses slowly undulating, the horizon line shifting, a trail back to a bare mound, the Badlands formations

in the distance, a child, a buffalo, a bear appearing—and then gone.

“I’m trying to get people to look at this landscape,” Catherine says, “look at it and think about it because it’s a landscape that’s in danger. I need to communicate it to people beyond the environmental conscience—I need to communicate it to the guy who only respects the truck driver.”

Some nights were easy and fun. Two kids came over to Chris and Catherine while they set up. “Hey, are you going to show a movie?” they asked.

“Kind of a movie.”

There was a family from Madison, with kids about eight, ten years old. As soon as it started up, they said, “Oh, it’s like a flipbook.”

A photography student from Canada, passing through the Badlands on his move from Ontario to Vancouver, paused, mesmerized.

Some nights felt like nobody wanted her doing the projection. There was the stress of setting up, the stress of people approaching. One evening, they projected it inside the camp circle. People came up with lawn

chairs to watch. “Somehow that made it entirely more accessible.”

On the last night of the installation, Catherine waited for her uncle to arrive. He was also her godfather and a poet, a great influence in her life. They set up the screen against a huge hill, and the audience had to walk a trail to get to it. The animation was embedded in the land, rather than sitting against the land. She was still waiting for her uncle to arrive, when her friend Adrienne—another artist—told her, “You need to get going—you’re losing awesome light.”

Catherine turned around, and there were three people sitting on campstools, watching. She went to talk with them. “I just got here,” one guy said, “and this is the most amazing thing. This just made my day.”

When she looked up, she saw her uncle and his friend sitting on concrete parking blocks. They were silent, absorbed in the show. Then her uncle turned to Catherine and said, “It’s beautiful.”

“And I thought, okay, I did it. I could be happy with that.”

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\* *A Large Number*, by the poet Wislawa Szymborska



site: Sage Creek, August 31, 2014, 8:55 p.m.



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