

# Landscape Painting as Counter-Surveillance of Area 51

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Subject: Landscape Painting as Counter-Surveillance of Area 51

## description

On April 25th and 26th 1997, a team of media artists lead by Joel Slayton collaborated on a site-specific conceptual artwork in the remote high desert region of south central Nevada known as Area 51. This vast desert region encompassing Nellis Airfare Base and the Sandia Laboratory Tonapah Test Range is the locus military experimentation and research including nuclear, flight and experimental weapons testing. It is renown for UFO sitings by the public and for supposed extraterrestrial research.

On the afternoon of April 25th, a caravan of four wheel drive trucks and passebger automobiles arrived in Rachel Nevada via the Extra-Terrestrial Highway, a small community of house trailers and site of the Ali-Inn Bar and Grill and the Area 51 Research Center. The artists strategy was to stage a conceptually based site work involving landscape painting as counter-surveillance of Area 51. Over the next few hours and numerous beers the artists conducted informal discussions with locals, reviewed photographs and paraphernalia on display, explained our mission, sought advise and strategized on how to proceed. A French Television Crew producing a documentary on Area 51, and seemingly very interested in our endeavor, would play out over the next two days.

Trespassing, photography, videography, filming and sketching of Area 51 is strictly prohibited. The selected entrance into Area 51, 20 miles north and east of Rachel, is dramatically marked with red on white government signs indicating the seriousness and severity of any violation. Breach of Area 51's security is enforced by 'Camo-Dudes', an unidentifiable policing force roving bluffs and remote dirt roads in white four wheel drives equipped with surveillance technology. The 'Camo-Dudes' notoriety stems from publicly documented responses to perceived intrusions to security along although not necessarily within the perimeter. Instances of decisive and aggressive encounters have reached mythological status. The 'Camo-Dudes' highly visible deterrence along the perimeter serves as a catalyst drawing visitors to Area 51 in an attempt to see what is being so diligently protected. In fact the vast remoteness of the desert and the mountains surrounding Area 51 permit no direct observation of any facilities or activities.

On the morning of April 26th, as the Art 210 team caravanned to the Area 51 border on a dirt access road. The 'Camo-Dudes' immediately appeared taking up surveillance positions on the hillsides assess the situation. After a survey of the selected site twenty pre-prepared easels, pre-stretched canvases and supplies were transported up to a small bluff providing a vantage point into Area 51, approximately fifty meters from the actual perimeter. Each artist was positioned 6 feet apart in a precise row perpendicular to the perimeter with their easel at 45 degrees looking directly into Area 51. Vehicles were then moved a 1/4 mile back from the site off the main road as stipulated by county regulation. Our presence and activities were continuously monitored by the 'Camo Dudes' using high focal length binoculars and perhaps sound surveillance or other media.

Over a period of five hours individual paintings were realized using either acrylic or oil paint as was preferenced by the artist. No direct contact was made with the Camo Dudes, although their presence was continuous and overt surveillance of our project was evident. Upon completion of the extraneous support materials were removed and the finished paintings depicting the landscape motif of Area 51 documented. The resulting installation of easels and paintings stood alone as a sculptural manifestation atop the bluff.

The paintings and easels were then transported directly to a communal camp in Alamo Nevada, 20 miles south of Rachel, where they were re-displayed and critiqued. The process was documented by the French Television Crew to be featured in a broadcast on French National Television later this year. The following morning the paintings were photographed, tagged and then delivered to the Area 51 Research Center where they were put on exhibition

and offered up for sale at \$51.51 including a 51% commission to the Research Center. Individual paintings will be rotated daily in a continuous exhibition throughout the summer.

significance

Digital art and the traditional fine arts are often considered as operating within distinct critical fields of discourse. This is differentiation is the subject of debate and serves as a conceptual framework from which the art enterprise and resulting site work and Area 51 Landscape Painting As Surveillance project was conceived.

Discourse in the arts informed by the philosophies of scientific research, information technologies and engineering results in re-assessment of traditional concepts involving intention, subjectivity, identity and meaning as central premises upon which art is to be culturally significant. Artists affiliated with the CADRE institute (Computers in Art and Design/Research and Education) are particularly concerned with such discourse and strive to produce works which serve to explore arts function within an information based societal context.

That artists primarily, although not all, affiliated with the production of new media technology choose to paint landscapes of Area 51 is both interesting and provocative. The social banality of landscape painting and painters was strategized to be used as a means of counter-surveillance by the surveyed, serving as a no threat typology of threat. In this context the artists demonstrate a perception of art as safe and innocuous, permissible and lacking in relevant information content. The need to surveil such activity is both necessary and unnecessary simultaneously. The Camo-Dudes duty, as it were, being that of serving as a critical agent to assess the significance of the event and resulting information liability. Because the paintings have no content beyond the individual expectations of the painter, neither artists or art can be understood as being anything other than a modernist perception of art as being personally expressive and expressive.

Yet, the action of landscape painting in the context of the Area 51 phenomena is clearly relevant as critical discourse on the nature of information culture and information systems. Area 51, is a simulacra, a reality constituted from a media folklore, super secrecy and the governments denial of its very existence. The reality of Area 51 exist only as pure simulation, constructed from the voluminous de-centralized and publicly assessable information that surrounds what might be there. The popularity of what cannot be seen or experienced directly is a catalyst to a composited identity formed of electronic networks, e-mail correspondence and media folklore. Area 51s notoriety as a physical and virtual tourist attraction provides an cultural experience as information simulation ripe with conspiracy theory, Hollywood style potentialities and the guarantee of being surveilled.

Painting', specifically landscape painting, serves to beg the issue of how it is that we think of art as being art while emersed and dependent upon an information system as simulacra. It is in this sense that this artwork is most interesting. While functioning within a hyper-logical system of Area 51, it too was devised to unfold as a logical determination. The result being the fulfillment of a logical absurdity, in this case the expansion, participation and re-enforcement of the simulation all the while elevating the artistic accomplishment to a revered status. The exhibition at the Area 51 Research Center and the French Documentary are testimony to accomplishment, quality and success.

The artwork continues in its evolution along a hyperlogical path. It is desirable that the paintings be purchased by individuals traversing the Extra-Terrestrial Highway stopping at the Area 51 Research Center where they will remain on exhibit indefinitely and can be supported intellectually by their staff. Each painting is to be geographically and demographically tracked relative to the purchaser. Purchasers will be engaged in a continuous electronic mail dialog and requested to document the paintings in their final display environment. A feature video documentary of the event is being produced encompassing all elements leading to and comprising of the event. An exhibition, public lectures and publication of documentation materials electronically and in print are being planned.

Certificates of Recognition are provided by the CADRE Institute to participating artists indicating contributions to this collaborative work.

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