Stephen Hunt and John Knight: Proximal Works in Situ Essay

Naming a Place: Stephen Hunt and John Knight's Artistic Interventions in Basin, Montana

By Siera Hyte, 2022

Against the backdrop of Basin, Montana, the Montana Artist Refuge (MAR) offers an opportunity for artists to contend, directly and indirectly, with the complex histories of the Intermountain West. In 1993, the refuge's four co-founders purchased an unoccupied bank and an abandoned Masonic Hall, which they converted into studio, exhibition, and living spaces. This small campus eventually became MAR's formal home; a place where creatives from all over the world could make work and seek respite in a secluded environment. After closing its doors for an extended hiatus in 2014, MAR reopened in the spring of 2022 with a slate of exhibitions featuring the work of Montana-based artists. On view now is a two-person exhibition, *Proximal Works In Situ*, curated by Jenny Bevill and featuring the artists John Knight and Stephen Hunt. Knight and Hunt, though their work is not visually similar, both foreground their practices in an understanding of place and an engagement with legacies of sovereign Indigenous nations, settler colonialism, extraction, and labor.

Basin is an unincorporated community and a census-designated place. The former term means that, from the perspective of the federal government, Basin is not, in the strictest sense, a self-governed town. The latter term, however, definitively assures Basin's legal status as a place where people live. For a place to become census-designated, it must have a name. The organizers of the census, knowing from experience that anyone can name anything anywhere at any time and assert a claim to it, specify that the place's name must "be one that is recognized and used in daily communication by the residents of the community." A place's naming is generated through a shared understanding of where the place is and to whom it belongs. In other words, a community speaks itself into being and is named when their voices are heard.

Basin's name is derived from its nearness to the confluence of Basin Creek with the Boulder River. In the 19th century, miners erected a camp near the confluence based on reports of gold deposits downstream. Like many communities in what is now known as Montana, settlers arrived in Basin following rumors of potential wealth. But Basin and a vast area now encompassed by Western Montana are the traditional territories of the Séliš, Qlispé, and Niitsítapi people, who have cared for these lands and called them by their own place names since time immemorial. Many of these place names articulate a harmonious,

continuous relationship between Indigenous people, other living beings, and the environment, tying the concept of naming in an embodied knowledge of what is precious or distinct about a particular area's natural resources. The Séliš u Qlispé Culture Committee, for instance, in their 'Bitterroot Valley and Place Names' map curriculum, chart a range of names used by the Séliš and Qlispé peoples to refer to places of great importance, places where they "carry forward the ancestors' values of respecting the lands and the waters, the plants and animals – and ensuring their well-being for future generations." One such place, called Ṇaayccstm, for the presence of aay, the bull trout, lies at the confluence of the Clark Fork and Blackfoot rivers. Its name speaks of an entire relationship between the trout, the rivers, and the people who are sustained by these fish and these waters. Basin came to be called Basin because of a proximity to a waterway presumably full of gold.

The appellative slippage between Ṇaayccstm and Basin illustrates two ways of knowing, and naming, the land; the former based in land-based learning in service of the whole, and the latter based in extractive technologies meant to benefit only a few, at the expense of many. Knight and Hunt draw out the effects of these approaches to collective well-being and wealth, reflecting on the value systems that shape our understanding of place.

On view in the repurposed bank that now serves as MAR's main gallery is a body of work, entitled *Light on the Land*, by Stephen Hunt, an Amskapii Pikaanii/Nimipuu/Sisseton/Ql'ispé/Ne Hiyawak artist. Spending much of his waking hours outside, always with his camera in hand, Hunt took these photographs over the course of three years. Often, he develops an interest in a particular place years in advance of actually taking a picture. During a walkthrough of the exhibition between Hunt, Bevill, and myself, the artist described how, in his land-based practice, spending extended time in the locations he photographs deeply informs the final image. Of *Into the Mystic* and *Variety*, both taken on the same farm, Hunt says that he had "always wanted to photograph the barn, but the conditions weren't right ever to be able to do it….I never had the right conditions or drama to create the image[s] that I saw in my mind." These imagined photographs, which long preceded the works themselves, encouraged Hunt to be patient with the landscape; the conditions he waited for to realize both photographs finally came after a thick fog encased the valley where the artist lives with his family. When the fog rolled in, Hunt captured the change in atmosphere at 2 am, in negative ten-degree temperatures.

Into the Mystic, Stephen Hunt © 2022

Variety, Stephen Hunt © 2022

Hunt's fortitude yields reverential and strikingly intimate photographs. When discussing *Variety*, Hunt traces his hand just above the composition's line of trees, gesturing to a house and a hill rendered invisible by thick mist. Both of these features are completely unseen by the viewer, but the artist knows that they are there. Their presence still vibrates throughout the image in some way—Hunt captures the density of the fog with such intensity that it is impossible not to wonder what might be blanketed by its weight. The obscured landscape in *Variety* is not achieved with digital manipulation. Rather, when composing his frames, Hunt's awareness of, and profound connection to, his surroundings allows him to organize light to reflect what he sees in his mind. Hunt's photographic perspective is centered in his own experience as an Indigenous person. Of his process, the artist explains that "the way that I view my work, every part of the land is part of me because I live in relation to it…our culture does not exist without the land because everything within our way of life comes from the land." In the relationship that Hunt describes, it is impossible to disentangle the land from its inhabitants–our fates are woven together.

The interconnection between the individual and the whole is visually articulated through the overall installation of Light on the Land. At MAR, Hunt places his photographs on varying sightlines, fostering an interplay between the work and the building that pushes beyond an expected gallery presentation. Bark, a vertical closeup of a cottonwood tree's surface, reaches towards the ceiling, arcing above the line of horizontal photographs surrounding it. On the adjacent wall, a constellation of three works hangs in alternating rhythm, allowing the central image to hover just above the floor. Stretching to the outer reaches of the old bank's architecture, Hunt physically envelopes the entire gallery into the presentation of his work. His installation binds up the experience of his photographs with an awareness of the building's original purpose and history. This puts Light on the Land into dialogue with Basin itself, Hunt's practice throwing the wreckage of colonialist land practices and Montana's extractive industries into sharp relief.

Basin's 77 square mile mining area, which includes approximately 300 individual abandoned mines in and around Basin, was listed on the Superfund National Priorities List in 1999. At that time, several EPA inspections found contaminated soil, sediment, and water throughout the Basin, all believed to have been caused primarily by hardrock mining. According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office, "Until the 1970s, mine operators could mine for valuable hardrock minerals—i.e., gold or copper—then abandon the land. On lands they oversee, federal agencies [have] identified about 140,000 remnants of these hardrock mines, including unsecured tunnels and toxic waste piles. Hundreds of thousands more likely exist." Communities all across Montana continue to be affected by these harmful practices. An EPA cleanup of Basin's site began in 1998, and was eventually concluded in 2002, but the impact on Basin's residents, who must contend with their exposure to hazardous chemicals, will last for generations. Close to Basin, the city of Butte's streams and waterside habitats are still poisoned with arsenic and heavy metals. Hunt's landscapes are almost beautiful beyond words; they are photographic evidence of all that is at stake in the aftermath of extraction. Though *Light on the Land*'s images revel in the splendor of the place that Hunt calls home, they are also shot through with an awareness of continued environmental damage.

Beyond the proliferation of these kinds of threats to all living things, a different kind of extraction has also disrupted traditional modes of Indigenous land stewardship. Over the past three centuries, the federal government seized lands from the Indigenous peoples whose traditional territories encompass Montana, displacing tribal nations from their homelands and violating their sovereignty. The National Bison Range, located in the center of the treaty-reserved Flathead Indian Reservation, was established on tribal lands without the consent of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT), who reside within the reservation's boundaries. The range's bison were initially brought to the reservation by Tribal members, who established a free-range herd in the 19th century when plains bison were almost extinct. Over the next century, tribal members, despite the federal government's unlawful land seizure, continued to nurture the National Bison Range's herd. A prolonged effort by CSKT finally led Congress to lawfully restore the care of the range back to its rightful stewards in 2020.
Caretaker, Hunt's photograph of the range's bison grazing peacefully on a sunflower-covered hill, alludes to this recent change in legislation. Its title may gesture to the protection that CSKT members gave to the National Bison Range, despite the efforts of the federal government to keep them from their own land. It might also reference the thousands of years that these caretakers' ancestors spent living in balance with the bison before prolonged contact with settlers. These animals, awash in soft light, have always belonged to this place. Like all of the exhibition's photographs, Caretaker includes no people. Hunt infers their presence, and his own respect for his subjects, through a reverence that imbues the frame.

Caretaker, Stephen Hunt © 2022

In Hunt's photographs, the landscape breathes with many forms of life, from monumentally-scaled mountains to, as in Flowers of the Sun, a small arrowleaf balsamroot. Shot at close range, Flowers of the Sun shows the titular flower in full bloom, its delicate petals outstretched in a widely flung embrace. It is a photograph that, for Hunt, speaks to the relationality at the core of his practice: "Even though people aren't here [in this photograph], the flower, that's called the flowers of the sun…is a traditional food, and it blossoms because of the sun, and is only there for a short while, and you would only know that if you lived in relation. This is the flower in full existence, full life to the peak of what it is ever going to be for that season…" These are cherished places, claimed, defended, and pictured here with an acknowledgement of the cyclical interconnections between all living things.

Knight's body of work, *Hard Labor*, is hosted about a hundred yards away from *Light on the Land*, in an abandoned jail. Knight often conceives his exhibitions in response to the surrounding architecture and history of a given place. Here, the artist mounts three paintings, entitled *Cloud*, *Land*, and *Water,* respectively, to the jail's walls and bars. At first, these canvases appear starkly white, though Knight built up their surfaces with many layers of acrylic paint and colored pigments, all chosen to match the graffiti that covers the jail's interior. Depending on the hour and the viewer's perspective, these layers reveal themselves almost as hallucinations, inconstant and elusive. From inside a cell, they are barely visible, or not visible at all, as two of the paintings are mounted on the cell's bars, facing away from the confined area.

Installation view of *Untitled (cloud)* and *Untitled (water)* John Knight © 2022
Photo by Kalaija Mallery © 2022

When the paintings' shimmering hues beneath the white are imperceptible, they have, at a surface level, a repressively monotonous quality, drained of color, expression at its most aseptic. Like a tally on a wall, their repetitive forms mark the time. But these are slippery canvases. They manufacture a sense of a place of freedom perhaps just out of reach. With time, instead of an accounting of days passed, these snowy paintings might be windows, with each wash of color catalyzing the imagination. A field of vision unencumbered by bars, or a portal into the interiority of your dreams in the face of confinement.

Knight's work has contended with the concept of incarceration before: in 2021, the artist's *Laconic phrase*, a three-part text piece, featured the words "JOIN THE ARMY," "WORK AT FACTORY," and "GO TO PRISON," three of the primary futures Knight saw realized by the young, working-class men of Cincinnati, where he was raised. Like graffiti, these directives were spray-painted onto the walls, drawing on this upbringing in a community sustained by industrial labor, where the closing of factories led to shrinking opportunities. *Laconic phrase* and *Hard Labor* both consider how one's circumstances are bound up with personal and political autonomy. Though, like Hunt's *Light on the Land*, *Hard Labor* features no figures, the figures are inescapable here in this cell. They're figures, Knight asserts, who struggled throughout their lives, only to be abandoned by history, their names and biographies unarchived. Knight treats the jail as an embodied archive; one that holds the spatial and spiritual experiences of Basin's incarcerated residents.

The exhibition's location begs the question of who might have been imprisoned here. *Hard Labor*'s title refers to penal servitude, but also pays tribute to the miners who sustained this region's industries, only to wind up being exploited by their employers. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, miners, and other manual laborers, assumed extreme risk without the option of recourse against unsafe or unfair conditions. Mining executives in Montana had disproportionate power over the people who worked for them and employed many tactics to impede organized labor. In 1918, the state of Montana's legislature passed the Montana Sedition Act, which decreed that anyone who expressed anything during wartime that was "disloyal, profane, violent, scurrilous, contemptuous, slurring, or abusive" could be found guilty of sedition. The University of Montana's Journalism School, in their "The Montana Sedition Project," sketches out the relationship between mining companies and the sedition law: "The political and economic establishment, led by the Anaconda Copper Mining Company, saw a mounting threat by

political dissidents, such as the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and sought laws to destroy them. The IWW had been active in promoting strikes against leading industries, such as copper mining, logging and agriculture to increase wages being eaten away by inflation and to improve execrable working conditions." Many copper miners opposed the United States' involvement in World War I and did not want the fruits of their labor used to supply military efforts. The sedition law provided a guise under which mining executives could threaten legal action against any worker contemplating a strike by implicitly tying organized labor to anti-war sentiment. For years, working class people in mining towns were mired in legal precarity as they argued for living wages and safe conditions, only to be forsaken by their companies when the mines were no longer drawing a profit.

Installation view of *Red Patch* and *Common Poppies (non-native)*, John Knight © 2022
Photo by Kalaija Mallery © 2022

Knight alludes to the ways in which this history of exploitative labor practices continues to perpetuate itself in Montana in Common Poppies (non-native), a print wheatpasted on an interior cell wall thatdocuments dérives undertaken by the artist when he could not find a full-time job that paid him enough to live. Of these dérives, Knight says: “The dérive is a revolutionary strategy and mode of experimental behavior linked to conditions found in urban society. It is an unplanned journey through landscapes in which asks participants to drop their everyday relations to place in favor of being attracted to and engaged in chance encounters with an environment. The goal of the dérive is to study the terrain of the environment or landscape. When I first moved to Montana, the only job I could find was driving food delivery. During this time, I worked most days of the week, for ten-hour stretches to generate enough capital to pay my debts and bills. The dérive was a tool that I used to interrogate my relationship to the urban landscape of Missoula, Montana. These journeys were performed on the clock, as an anti-capitalist gesture, under the context of generating capital for the large delivery conglomerate that I independently contracted for. A series of photographs taken on a point and shoot camera document these early journeys in western Montana.” Knight operated within the confines of Missoula’s twin housing and wage crises, reclaiming his time by choosing to make art during unpaid hours when he was on call for his anonymous employer. Like Hunt, who rejects a colonialist view of the environment, choosing instead to live and work in relation to the land, Knight’s practice similarly circumvents the restraints of capitalism, another unjust system.

In Basin’s empty jail, and across the way in the old bank that hosts Hunt’s *Light on the Land*, each artist intertwines the present moment with this multiplicity of pasts. Through these braided histories, both artists account for how we wound up here, and ask what it would take for a community to truly thrive. One has to wonder, how soon after establishing Basin did residents devise a system of imprisonment? Who discovered riches in these waters? Who had money to put into the bank, and who went into debt?Where, in these once-abandoned buildings, do we surface the people who shaped this place? Hunt and Knight start with naming accounts of their resistance, reinhabiting these sites of dispossession with their stories.