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Scott Greene *Oasis*, 2010, Oil on canvas on panel, 20x30 inches, Collection of the Artist; Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco. © Scott Greene Previously on display in [Environmental Impact](#)

Out of Sight and Mind

Scott Greene

We wake, if we ever wake at all, to mystery, rumors of death, beauty, violence...
– Annie Dillard

There is an anecdotal backstory to [Frederic Edwin Church's famous paintings of Niagara Falls](#) having to do with exclusion, and I can't stop thinking about it. Not one of his depictions includes a trace of the observation deck and scaffolding that would have been in place for tourists when he made these paintings in the mid-1850s. Why the omission of all human elements? Would it have cluttered his composition, or obstruct the notion of a prehistoric vision of the sublime, or would it have made it a statement about civilization's intrusion into unsullied beauty? Church's decision to leave out any indication of the existence of humans in his interpretations of the great natural wonder is curious to say the least.

These Niagara paintings have been awe inspiring for generations of people for good reason: they are drop-dead gorgeous. Created at the beginning of the industrial revolution, with the locomotive symbolically belching the sooty concept of Manifest Destiny westward, the clean crisp water ebbs before plummeting into a rising vaporous cloud of wondrous halation. It still would have been easy to imagine an untouched landscape at that time, and this perhaps reveals Church's thought process most clearly - it was imagined. In fact the concept of a virgin

pristine landscape was a complete illusion; Native populations had been profoundly altering the environment and depleting natural resources in often unsustainable ways for around 10,000 years before European settlers stepped foot on the continent. So again, reality exists beyond a faithful representation of the great cascades.

It would be simple to conclude that Church wasn't being true to what he saw, and this would be correct. Many pictorial selections are made when painting a landscape that are or are not part of the scene the artist works from. The sheer amount of visual information confronting the painter in nature can be overwhelming, and the first act of censorship is to filter out much of it in favor of what will fit a small frame of reference — there are simply too many leaves to paint. Church was also aided by the latest in technology in the form of a camera, so it is safe to say he was after something more than an accurate rendering of a particular view. His painting is, in a sense, akin to a photoshopped image that has been edited and retouched — a glossy advertising spread of an unblemished natural wonder. The presence of visitors would also have offered a measure of scale to his representation, a compositional device he was known to make use of, but he chose not to include them. Was his decision a response to the threat of a popular and growing encroachment into natural settings?

Nearly 160 years after Church created his famous paintings, the world is a very different place. An endless procession of man-made environmental disasters have transpired, many hidden from sight and others impossible to ignore. It is estimated that there is approximately as much weight in plastic debris floating in the ocean as all sea life combined. Geological maps of the Rocky Mountains locating mining activity resembles the pocked surface of a dart board, with heavy metals leaching in the form of mine tailings, as well as pesticides and fertilizers from big agriculture creating dead zones in the Gulf of Mexico - continually contaminating rivers and aquifers. There are many instances of underground chemical plumes from industrial waste and fracking activity across the country, colossal methane leaks and deep ocean oil drilling ruptures, not to mention the chemicals used to break down crude oil in the countless number of spills. There are old plutonium mines never properly closed, mountain top removal for strip mining, radioactive water and waste from power plant meltdowns spreading in the ocean, mismanaged natural resources leading to desertification and deforestation, melting polar ice caps and rising sea levels caused by increasing greenhouse gasses, and growing evidence of mass extinctions in wildlife beyond our imagination.

In light of what we now see, and also what we know but cannot see, would a naturalist painter like Frederic Church continue to look away and ignore the new toxic frontier? Perhaps, because his work was not reportage of the moment, but a vision for the ages. There is a point, however, where looking away from the human impact on our surroundings rings so false, that it is a distortion growing exponentially in proportion. That is not to say that all art needs to address environmental issues, but continuing to paint quaint pictures of pristine nature seems rather pointless when life on the planet is so profoundly threatened. It amounts to little more than an exercise in decoration and escapism. Now is a good time to include that observation deck.



Scott Greene *La Bajada Bluff* 2013, Oil on Canvas on Panel, 50x50 inches, Collection of the Artist; Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco © Scott Greene, Previously on display in [Environmental Impact](#)

La Bajada Bluff

As part of my *Plains Of Parting* series, *La Bajada Bluff* depicts a precipice showing depositions of various kinds of refuse in a state of erosion. It is either a shifting formation at the edge of the world or a landfill that didn't get tamped down enough. This is a portrait of poverty in New Mexico, where regulations are loose and radioactive refuse gets dumped. With the nation's largest underground spill of jet fuel threatening the state's largest clean water aquifer, my intention here was to undermine the notion of the areas claim to beauty, and to suggest that like the Bison, something very significant is in the process of being lost.

UV Celltree

Cell-phone towers disguised as trees are, in a sense, a new invasive species. They seem to be popping up with increasing regularity, and are able to thrive within a wide range of climate conditions. The evolution of these tree-like towers grew out of a need to camouflage tall antennas considered to be ugly, but they also symbolically suggest a sense of loss for what they attempt to replicate.



Scott Greene *UV Celltree*, 2013, Oil on Canvas on Panel, 45x92 inches, Collection of the Artist, © Scott Greene, Previously on display in [Environmental Impact](#)

My painting *U.V. Celltree* depicts a cell-tower-tree in an arabesque gesture in order to create a more graceful life-like quality. Because it never drops its leaves, the artificial blueish foliage shows the effects of ultra-violet light fading the more fugitive red and yellow colors in the spectrum. This tree is also a Snag, a term commonly used to describe a dead tree that has become a habitat for new life. My intentions were to play the role of a Botanist creating a pseudo-scientific study of a new tech-based plant form.

The paintings by Scott Greene featured above were on display in the traveling museum exhibition [Environmental Impact](#), which closed at St. Mary's College on May 1, 2016. A sequel is scheduled for January 5 to May 26, 2019 at the North Carolina Arboretum in Ashville, NC.



Scott Greene in studio with *Exhaust*, 1994, Albuquerque, NM

[Scott Greene](#) initiated his art school education at the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland, CA before going on to complete his BFA from the San Francisco Art Institute, and MFA from the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque. Green utilizes classical painting styles and the composition of historical works to create paintings that examine the relationships among politics, nature, and culture. Scott currently lives and works from his studio in Bernalillo, NM.

This post is part of the [MAHB's Arts Community space](#) –an open space for MAHB members to share, discuss, and connect with artwork processes and products pushing for change. Please visit the [MAHB Arts Community](#) to share and reflect on how art can promote critical changes in behavior and systems and [contact Erika](#) with any questions or suggestions you have regarding the new space.

MAHB-UTS Blogs are a joint venture between the University of Technology Sydney and the Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere. Questions should be directed to joan@mahbonline.org

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