Toxic Landscapes:
Artists Examine the Environment

"Landscape is a unity, a wholeness, an integration,
of community and environment; man is ever part
of nature, and the city is basically no less involved
than the countryside. The dichotomy of Man and Nature
is a 19th Century aberration and in time it will pass."

from ***The Imitation of Nature***,
John Brinckerhoff Jackson

The landscape has traditionally been a means for artists to celebrate the grandeur and the sublime beauty of our earth. In our own age, the landscape has become a document of degradation and a means for preserving a record of what could be irretrievably lost to us – just as John James Audubon's prints were destined to serve as a chronicle of now-extinct species. ***Toxic Landscapes*** begins with the landscape – the damaged and the pristine – but also moves substantially beyond the genre to address issues of urban environmental racism, environmental justice, and environmental activism.

The Puffin Foundation Ltd. was invited by the Cuban National Union of Artists and Writers (UNEAC) to mount an exhibition of US artists examining the environment. We issued an open call and selected works from 65 of the US's outstanding environmental artists and photographers.

Despite the suggestion of the title, ***Toxic Landscapes*** is not limited to documentation of environmental destruction and degradation. We have chosen instead to present the deeper levels of abstraction and creative investigation of the state of the earth as rendered by the artist's imagination. Rather than trying to sound another alarm into the gale, or issuing yet another unheeded call to action, we sought out art that might help us to change our views of *ourselves in the world*.

We hope to instill in the viewer a perceptual shift where the environment ceases to be dualistically conceived as a place separate from us – where we go or live, a set of geophysical or biochemical events, or some abstracted, peopleless ideal. It is our hope that you will be moved – through this broad range of media and conceptions of *the landscape* – to see the environment and ourselves, our bodies, our consciousness, as a single, fluid reality.

The *environment* – the landscape as a place and as a subject – through the industrial revolution has become evermore objectified and alienated, just as human beings become more alienated from each other and ourselves. Even as environmentalists, we have learned to experience the environment as something *other* – a commodity which we may see as more precious and worthy of preservation, but it is still objectified. The damaged environment is a reality we confront as separate/separable instead of acknowledging the implicit damage to ourselves.

> "What the specialization of our age suggests, in one example after another, is not only that fragmentation is a disease, but that the diseases of the disconnected parts are similar or analogous to one another. Thus, they memorialize their lost unity, their relation persisting in their disconnection. Any severance produces two wounds that are, among other things, the record of how the severed parts once fitted together."
> (Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America*)

This dualism begins to break down in the lives of people living in "Cancer Alley", Louisiana, documented by Greenpeace photographer Les Stone. His outstanding photo documentary highlights the effects of PCBs and other persistent organic pollutants on the communities surrounding the vinyl manufacturing plants in Lake Charles, Norco, and Morrisonville, Louisiana. Examine also the work of muralist Miranda Bergman, who views the human body as an inextricable part of the landscape – or perhaps better said, an extension of the landscape itself – in its beauty and its contemporary agonies. As the earth becomes sick, so too, does the body, and in turn, the psyche.

Throughout this exhibition, you will encounter found objects that have been painted, reconstructed, and manipulated to evoke the human impact upon the earth. These human constructions seemed to be imbued with a lifeforce all their own, as if the artist has continued a process begun by metalsmiths, carpenters, or even oil riggers, that was then taken up by sea, oxygen, and sun. Gabrielle Senza's small works resurrect the memory of the oil tanks and rail beds their substrates were once a part of: the essence of "stored labor." Similarly, Kim Stringfellow's and Todd Trigsted's photographic landscapes elaborate more destructive human projects that have inadvertently left behind a poisonous, yet undeniable beauty. It is the contradiction of our contemporary sunsets, now all the more magnificent for the elevated hydrocarbons and particles in the atmosphere, or the fascination we had as children for the rainbow colors of oil on the surface of a lake.

Another important exploration of toxicity in this exhibition comes in the examination of the landscapes of war. Joy Garnett, with her chilling nocturne *Tracer Fire, Baghdad*; elin o'Hara slavick's *Places the US has Bombed*, and Valentina DuBasky's *Cambodian Journal* remind us of our species' most self-conscious toxic efforts to annihilate each other and our earth.

However, I remain convinced that it is a mistake to adopt the apocalyptic, received view that our species is inherently self-destructive – that is in our *nature*. In our time, we have come to see humanity in aggregate as the enemy, a collective perpetrator. We cannot change the world, and heal the environment while at the same time begin from a position that conceives of humanity as an indistinguishable mass – the enemy. It is an immoral, and ultimately, unscientific premise. What we do with and to the earth may be measurable by equations and aggregate statistics, but not who we are. This position freezes us and how we identify ourselves – our "human nature" – in the peculiar economic and social relations of early 21st century capitalism. At the same time, it dismisses the heroism of Greenpeace and this exhibit's fusion of art and activism as anomalous and incidental.

If there is such a thing as an essential human nature, our nature is change itself. This may be the single most important lesson of evolutionary theory, and for us, a source of hope.

Artists have historically served as the conscience of humanity; now they serve as the conscience of the earth itself. This is the unseen but palpable hope behind this exhibition's elaboration of environmental abuses: art as an act of stewardship, a testament to a new reintegration of consciousness, body, and earth.

Tim Blunk
Curator