

Gallery Talk  
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I will be talking briefly about the wood collage behind me & 2 smaller horizon paintings in gallery 261a.

### **COLLAGE IX: LANDSCAPE (1974)**

#### FORMAL DESCRIPTION:

- As Morrison tells us in the title, this large-scale wood collage is also a landscape.
- Largest known wood collage created by Morrison
- Particularly interesting ::
  - his leitmotif, the horizon
    - we see the horizon through abstract yet iconographic visual cues
    - it suggests a union of earth, water, and sky
  - conversation between material and imagery: both about the looking out over the water, and also about the shore
- Sedimentary effect, underlines the organic nature of the materials.
- Suggests a number of different imagery: cross-section of the earth such as one finds in geology books, an aerial view of landscape, or even the flow of material within a cell, or the way lichen, rocks gather along the shore line.
- Also has a sense of order, Morrison “weaves a coherent whole out of the fragmentary bits with which he begins.”
  - creates calm, solidity impression in viewer
  - strength in Morrison’s sensitivity to materials, fitting parts into a whole
- Above the horizon: similarly shaped pieces in a systematic, cloud-like arrangement; below the horizon: more erratic, chaotic, like waves, rocks, plants, land.
- Throughout his career, an interest and preoccupation with texture. He once related this to growing up “close to nature” and near the north shore, stone’s throw away from lake superior, where he went to fetch water for his mother every morning.

#### BIO:

- Grew up in Chippewa City, just east of Grand Marais.
- 3<sup>rd</sup> of 12 children
- Sent to boarding school in Hayward, WI, where he developed tubercular hip.
- Hospitalized for 14 months, age 9-10, in Gillette Children’s hospital in St. Paul.
- Attended Grand Marais High School, where he studied industrial arts.
  - used his skill as artist to “make various Indian souvenirs for tourist trade”
- With help from Consolidated Chippewa Agency, he was able to attend Minneapolis School of Art (now Minneapolis College of Art & Design), 1938-43.

- Art Students League, NYC, 1943-46 (where several leading Ab Ex artists matriculated, e.g. Jackson Pollock)
- Spent most of the 40s-50s-60s in New York
- Fullbright Fellowship: U. of Aix-en Provence, 1952-53
- Professor, RISD, 1963-70 (first Native artist appointed to the faculty of a major, non-Indian art school).
- Gave up tenure track position @ RISD & returned to MN – Professor of Studio Arts and in the newly created American Indian Studies Department @ the U of M, 1970-83.

#### NEW YORK COLLAGE:

- First wood collage was done in the early 60s & was entitled “**8<sup>th</sup> Ave. Landscape**”
- Comprised of a large piece of found wood, possibly from a door, ~ 50” long & 30 “ wide.
- Covered in peeling paint, reds and yellows, some areas he sanded & treated a bit.
- He then created a bifurcated composition by adding a long, narrow canvas covered & textured w/ red oil paint to the top, pairing that flush with the found wood.
  - not an “assemblage” collage, but there are some smaller scale collages that are similarly composed of 2 pieces of wood, fused together. These still, however, convey a sense of landscape.
- Side note, this piece no longer exists. Hung in Morrison house for decades, but when George moved back to the North Shore at the end of his life, he curiously decided to burn this piece...

#### CAPE COD / COLLECTING:

- Throughout the ‘60s, George, Hazel, their son Briand spent their summers on Cape Cod, in Provincetown, MA.
- They spent a lot of time walking the beach here, finding (in George’s words) “driftwood from all over the world” that had washed ashore.
- He would then box the “choice pieces” up to ship back to NY / bring back in his station wagon.
- Even played game with local kids: they had to go and find “interesting” pieces for George to use. “Choice” pieces = dictated by some sort of quality scale (pieces with colors, rust marks, and round pieces were especially favored), and George “always rejected more than he accepted.”
- As he became known for wood collages, friends began sending him pieces of wood found from around the world in the mail.
  - one prize piece was an old scrub brush handle, with all the bristles removed
- The variations of color and texture of gathered driftwood resonated with George, who saw each piece as holding it’s own story.

- Interesting to think about the kinds of stories held in each piece of wood, stories that are ultimately unarticulated / in-concrete.
- It's more the *suggestion of history*, a history that viewers are left to fill in, to reflect on. It resists a clear, concrete narrative or story.

#### PROCESS / CONSTRUCTION:

- Hazel said George "never cut the internal pieces, only the ones around the edges (framing pieces)."
- He did sand down pieces vertically to fit the depth field, and he did do some intentional weathering, but he didn't alter the edges in order to make them "fit."
- It was important to him to arrive at compositional solutions that made the pieces fit tightly together, edge to edge, naturally.
- He always used elmer's glue, sometimes tinting the glue red with acrylic paint in order to give the background a slight, fiery glow.
- Hazel: Morrison was "by nature a builder."
- "oblique angle" → throughout much of his oeuvre, we see compositions build with a slight downward momentum, down towards the right corner. George worked in this direction from left to right, and attributed this to the limp he had his whole life because of his tubercular hip.
- George on process:
  - "I can do one in 15 days, although they're 15-hour days."
  - "Not planned, but there are no mistakes."

#### LANDSCAPE / INSCAPE:

- Viewers may not immediately recognize this as a "Landscape," and like much of George's oeuvre, this is not a composition directly depicting or responding to landscape.
- As opposed to landscape, Morrison was creating an "inscape" of sorts: not physically sitting in front of his subject matter, but working in his studio, often from his subconscious.
- Morrison: "But this is the culmination of a total experience which probably has more to do with age, with New York and Cape Cod as well as Minnesota."
- Dualities:
  - poetic, elemental relationship & duality between wood and water
    - this creates conversation between material and subject
  - order and chaos
  - spatial paradox: the subject is a horizon (distance), yet the composition as a whole has a flattened, post-cubist space.

#### MIA ACQUISITION:

- Acquired by MIA in 1975, Evan Maurer
- 1976 show @ MIA in the "Friends" gallery:
  - Largest number of his wood collages together in one show

- In a nearby gallery, one of his white paintings was hanging as part of an exhibition featuring work of MN artists.
- Sparked an editorial in the Minneapolis Tribune comparing the 2 works (white painting & wood collage):
  - texture: white paintings = thick impasto, calling attention to painting's surface and the texture of the surface
  - heavy application of paint also gives sense of weight & solidity
  - overall concern w/ tactile effects

#### AUDIENCE:

- Pieces eventually grew to be deliberately crafted with corporations / institutions in mind (e.g. General Mills, Pillsbury, several banks). George was a businessman.
- Downfall of this is that the collages were never archived / cataloged (we don't have a complete running record of where they've all ended up), and corporations are much more likely to sell their works or allow them to fall into disrepair....

#### LATER WORKS (NEW WOOD):

- These found wood assemblages anticipate the later "new wood" collages he did, one of which is in the U of M law school & one in the La Salle Plaza in downtown Minneapolis.
- These later collages incorporate treated, exotic woods he ordered from around the world.

#### RED ROCK VARIATIONS:

- The horizon motif would continue on in most – if not all – of his later works, becoming even more pronounced in the late 80s / early 90s as he began painting small scale, intimate works he termed his "Horizon paintings".
  - He shifted to a smaller scale in part because of health concerns, a heart attack in 1980 and the development of Castleman's disease
- 1983: George resigns from studio arts Dept. @ U of M, moves back to the North Shore, back where he grew up.
  - In the face of the disappearance of his hometown, which no longer is inhabited by people (absence), he created an active presence - quite literally in the form of his studio / home Red Rock, named after the local red Jasper rock.
- Throughout these late works, he continually reasserts this place (Red Rock), this active presence he's created through their titles, generally formatted like "Concept, Red Rock Variation: Lake Superior Landscape."
  - like a patterned poem
  - titles have always been an important in George's work

- As a whole, the pieces convey are intimate yet simultaneously convey an endless expanse... the expansiveness of Lake Superior is transformed into subject, made both unique and immortal.

**Departure, Red Rock Variation: Lake Superior Landscape (1993):**

- forms are aesthetically related to some of the surreal shapes emerging from Morrison's automatic drawings, though he did not consider the buried shapes to be surreal forms unless they were "floating"
- muted colors, interest in texture
- subtle color shifts & nuances demand close looking

**Far Echo, Red Rock Variation: Lake Superior Landscape (1993), acrylic on canvas on board:**

- presence of the "oblique angle"
- thatched, layered texture surface with muted, almost buried underwater forms

**HORIZON AS SUBJECT:**

- because of the shortened picture space and simultaneous underwater & foreground detail, it is unclear whether we are looking at our own horizon, or perhaps standing at the horizon looking inland, or at someone else's horizon
- enigmatic quality, illusionary, a poetic metaphor of sorts for the limits of time & awareness