



# Katie Hargrave / Meredith Lynn

## Over Look / Under Foot

exhibition essay by: Veronica Kavass

# GALLERY GUIDE

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### **About the exhibition:**

As tent campers and National Parks enthusiasts, we spend a lot of time in the company of Airstreams, Winnebagos, and Jaycos, and have come to appreciate that for many, the RV makes a kind of relationship to nature possible. RVs can recreate the comfort and access of home, in the middle of spaces the federal government has set aside to be preserved as wild. We have seen our fellow campers set up potted plants, satellite dishes, and full multi-course meals, in the middle of what we hope to be wilderness. This comfort and accessibility is in opposition to romantic visions of national parks and some approaches to conservation. As nature writer Edward Abbey put it in *Desert Solitaire*, “You can’t see anything from a car.” There is a value judgement implicit in this statement. Abbey and others equate a certain connection to nature with spirituality, purity, and a unique kind of enlightenment, but that sort of experience in the outdoors deliberately excludes most park goers. Using a state with a wide variety of public lands as a springboard, we explore all five Utah National Parks – Zion, Arches, Canyonlands, Bryce Canyon, and Capitol Reef – and consider the complexities of a relationship to landscape that is heavily mediated by vehicles, cameras, and our own nostalgia.

We wish to acknowledge the land where this work was made, as the management of these places has happened from time immemorial by the Ute, Southern Paiute, and the Ancestral Pueblo peoples. While these sites are under the control of the National Parks system, it is indigenous peoples who continue to put necessary pressure on the US government to preserve these spaces.

- **Katie Hargrave / Meredith Lynn**

### **About the Artists:**

Katie Hargrave and Meredith Lynn are artists and educators who work collaboratively to explore the historic, cultural, and environmental impacts of public land. Their work has been shown at the Wiregrass Museum of Art (Dothan, AL), House Guest Gallery (Louisville, KY), and has been published by Walls Divide Press. Together they have been artists in residence at Signal Fire (Portland, OR).

Hargrave is based in Chattanooga, TN and has also had exhibitions at The Front (New Orleans, LA), Neon Heater (Finley, OH) and the Wienberg/Newton Gallery (Chicago, IL). She has been an artist in residence at Epicenter (Green River, UT), Hambidge Center for the Creative Arts (Rayburn Gap, GA), and the Vermont Studio Center (Johnson, VT).

Lynn is based in Tallahassee, FL. Her solo work has recently been shown at the Morris Graves Museum of Art (Eureka, CA), Miami University of Ohio, and the Alexander Brest Gallery at Jacksonville University. She has been artist in residence at the Jentel Foundation (Sheridan, WY), the Kimmel Harding Nelson (Nebraska City, NE), and the Vermont Studio Center. Hargrave and Lynn met at the University of Iowa, where they both earned MFAs.

## The Time Has Come: *Over Look/Under Foot*

by Veronica Kavass

A room—with windows covered in black vinyl, only allowing a bit of natural light inside—rattles through the Utah desert. The room appears empty except for a living landscape projected in real-time on a faux wood wall containing small doors with shiny knobs. The room is loud. The land and sky are flipped: the surrounding desert enters the chamber through a pinhole because the room is actually a mobile camera obscura driven by two artists. In the exhibition *Over Look/Under Foot*, Katie Hargrave and Meredith Lynn collaborate by traveling through the public lands of Utah, turning the landscape on its head, and studying the way the very tools that help humans understand American “wilderness” simultaneously help them destroy it.

In the United States, the wilderness is a place where people drive giant RVs, exchange cash for goods/experiences, prioritize their comfort, and zealously document *everything* they see. In 1995, the environmental historian, William Cronon, shattered a few nature-loving hearts with his essay, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature.” His theories on wilderness contradicted the popular notion that preserving the natural world was one of the few things people were doing right—“Seen in this way, wilderness presents itself as the best antidote to our human selves, a refuge we must somehow recover if we hope to save the planet.” He explains that the problem isn’t the landscape or the flora and fauna that inhabit it, but the way humans consider the role that “preserved” wilderness plays in how they view their own existence on the planet: “If we allow ourselves to believe that nature, to be true, must also be wild, then our very presence in nature represents its fall. The place where we are is the place where nature is not.” The essay was published before the Anthropocene became a familiar term, before “climate change” was a household political debate, before newspapers indulged in referring to our carbon footprints. By the end of the piece, the reader is left to reckon with the fact that a national park is not much different than a shopping mall.

Earlier this summer, when I first started reviewing the moving and still images to be included in *Over Look/Under Foot*, I experienced a growing desire to visit the Utah desert. Hargrave and Lynn’s collaborative project doesn’t function as a desert road trip advertisement—but their artwork is observational rather than judgmental, leaving open the possibility to become inspired to see the area oneself. I made arrangements to camp in Kodachrome Basin Park (named after the Kodachrome lens by the National Geographic Society in 1948). I hiked Bryce Canyon and Escalante, stargazed during a meteor shower, found scorpions under a blacklight, and cooked dinners over a campfire. I left the mid-August trip feeling like I did the desert “right,” but also that itch of the guilt of potentially (ahem, definitely) contributing to nature’s fall. I rewatched “Capitol Reef Scene Drive (8 miles)” and contemplated why the video made me feel like I was watching Tarkovsky’s film, *Stalker* and, consequently, made the memory of my trip occasionally feel like a version of *Stalker* (like I had spent a grand effort to go nowhere except my inner hell, perhaps). When asked how the trip was, I’d describe the stars and talk about how the entire area had once been the bottom of the sea when the dinosaurs roamed—both examples far, far away from me with regards to space and time.

Human presence is evident in Hargrave and Lynn’s images by way of signage, roads, a van interior, a campsite bathroom, the tools used to capture the scenery—but the only actual visible human figures are found in the historical postcards mounted on the gallery walls and the open-source images printed on a tent. None of the visible people were captured by their lenses. The retro postcards refer to the early days of exploring national parks—a time when it wasn’t so obvious how throngs of camping families could stifle and destroy nature. These found images also remind the artists of the time they traveled

with their own families to national parks. Their work is about a pastime they innocently engaged in...before they grew up and started to interrogate the nostalgic adventures.

Hargrave and Lynn met at the MFA visual arts program at the University of Iowa where they both began to understand art-making as a form of real discourse (opposed to portraying the aesthetics of research with no intention of actually testing theories). In the beginning of their graduate school days, they separately experimented with self-portraiture before evolving into work that put them in a deep dive mode—digging through archives, traversing vast amounts of physical space, and testing the tools that allow them to hypothesize what the hell is happening in our country. How do Americans shamelessly uphold mythologies and willfully tune out honest narratives? Their artistic collaboration asks questions instead of making statements. Together, they tug at the seams that hold a beloved facade together.

Separately, their practices overlap regarding conceptual underpinnings but they branch off from there. Lynn's body of work navigates ecopoetics as she imagines what language will surface in the future to commemorate nature after it ceases to exist: "In 100 years, we may use Valspar swatches to know what grass looked like."<sup>1</sup> In "Champagne Velvet Periplus," she draws the parallels between ancient and present-day codified language—used to elucidate the puzzle of our physical world—to reveal how dominant communication methods run around in circles, using abstractions (like language) to take steps *forward*.

I saw Hargrave's project "History Repeats Itself" at The Front Gallery in New Orleans many months before Michael Dickens introduced me to her work for this essay. I snatched several of the takeaway posters featuring printed speeches by all 16 of the 2016 GOP, their duplicate words redacted from each one. They are hilarious (I hung them up on my wall at the office). Eerily fitting that this exhibit opens one day before the 2020 presidential election.

The pinhole camera—what 11th-century Chinese book *The Dream Pool Essays* calls "the burning mirror"—initially functioned as a scientific tool that, amongst other things, prevented the human eye from becoming blinded when observing eclipses. It wasn't until the Renaissance that the camera obscura became a crucial artist tool. So, yes, the camera obscura has a long history that performs very differently today in the 21st century when everyone, especially in overcrowded national parks, is taking picture after picture with smartphones. Hargrave and Lynn were likely the only people documenting the landscape with a camera obscura van when they traveled the area earlier this year. What do they capture by bringing the landscape inside in this manner?

When asked what made this camera obscura road trip through national parks different than their previous journeys in Florida and California, Lynn told me there was more equipment (including their first time driving a camper) and a stronger commitment to "getting a complete picture of this huge area." A severe snowstorm pushed them to "haul ass across the state as the pandemic was shutting everything down" until they were forced to wait out the storm for a few days. While stuck in the snow in a time fraught with panicky questions regarding a future dominated by global disease and economic collapse, the two artists brainstormed over their footage and discoveries.

Nostalgia typically serves as the touchpoint people use to refer back to *that time* in the majestic forest and the awe-inducing canyon. They point to a picture they took and ask questions like *what year was that* instead of considering the landscape existing in and of itself (without them). The camera obscura and photography function in a sense, by definition, to first and foremost set-aside a moment in time. As

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<sup>1</sup> From artist website description for "Mnemonic for the Future."

Teju Cole puts it in his essay, “Memory of Things Unseen,” a camera isolates these memories or moments, letting all other surrounding moments fall away “like sheer cliffs.” But “Over Look/Under Foot” links all those moments in a continuous stretch and, perhaps, allows the cliffs to remain while the people fall away.

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**Veronica Kavass** is a writer, teacher, and criminal defense investigator. She holds a masters in curatorial practice and critical writing from Chelsea College of Art in London, and an MFA in creative writing from University of Minnesota. She has trained as an oral historian through her work with StoryCorps, and has written about art for local/regional publications such as *Burnaway* and *The Nashville Scene*.

She is the author of *Artists in Love: From Picasso & Gilot to Christo & Jeanne-Claude, A Century of Creative and Romantic Partnerships*, published in 2016, and is completing a book on the immigrant history of her hometown Nashville, Tennessee.