

REACH, an exhibit of paintings by Lisa Grossman
HAW/CONTEMPORARY, September 5–October 18, 2014

Artist's statement

REACH includes *plein air* landscapes as well as studio investigations of certain naturally occurring visual phenomena of twilight in the open prairie. For over twenty years, I've painted on location in Kansas's tallgrass prairies and have experienced and painted distant horizons with atmospheric perspective, dramatic color shifts and vivid spectrums of sundown and twilight, Earth shadows, cloud arcs, etc.; however, I've never focused on each of these for the subjects of a show.

REACH references a reach of horizon, a vast prairie space, an expanse of sky, as well as reaching more deeply into my visual investigations, the physicality of reaching across broad painting surfaces to create the work, and ultimately, reaching the viewer.

None of these visual phenomena last more than fifteen minutes or so. The perpetual motion of the planet reveals peak moments that are powerfully intense and ephemeral—sunset or moonrise, for example. They leave an impression, an after-image perhaps, and then they are gone, transformed into something else.

By necessity, I'm painting fleeting moments; however, they are composites of several moments or half an hour even...so they're not static but contain a sense of movement, of time and light and color evolving. When you soften your eyes and stare at the work, some similar optical and atmospheric effects from direct experience can be simulated—contrast phenomena, after-images, Mach effects, airlight—even my own near-sightedness when I remove my glasses to blur and reduce detail in the view.

The visual experiments and groupings are informed by science but my process is far from scientific. I'm always mixing it up and can never do the same thing twice. My method is one of experimentation and discovery achieved by spontaneous, intuitive, and often impulsive responses to my ever-evolving surroundings.

Horizon

For over two decades, I've been captivated by the prairie horizon. I've studied it in every season, every daylight hour. Always, what most impresses and moves me is the blue beyond the blue ridgelines. Repeatedly studying the ineffable blue of distance that is part Earth, part mirage, and part atmosphere has evolved into rich composites of memory and imagination to draw upon in the studio.

The parallel lines of the solid flat-topped uplands and eroded valleys comprise this unique topography, and set the Flint Hills tallgrass prairies apart from all other landscapes. These are my "benchmark" horizons, the best examples of prairie horizons. Vaster, flatter prairies don't have the same kinds of ridgelines and features that provide scale, leading the eye into a deeper atmospheric distance and a sense of limitlessness. The solidity and silence of the hills, the particular layering of

seasons and storms, and animal and human migrations over millennia, shaped this terrain. To me, it conveys a timeless and enduring quality.

After painting innumerable horizons in the field, I created some studio pieces to narrow my impressions down to their purest form—distilled, concentrated, elemental sensations of light, color, and line, with the unique geology and optical phenomena that combine to create the visual effect of great, soaring distances. When I began delineating the horizons in luscious ridges of paint, it felt strangely indulgent to be able to focus entirely on the sensation of the horizon, remembering and recreating the idea of it. Carving out those lines, over and over, was intensely satisfying...making distance but never arriving, comfortable with not reaching a destination but reveling in anticipation and longing, “having” all that space to settle into. I was painting the feeling of Far.

Earth Shadow

When the sun sets on a clear night, you might notice a gorgeous blue band rising in the opposite direction. This is the Earth shadow, the shadow the planet casts upon the atmosphere in the East as the sun sets in the West. As the sun disappears, the blueness rises until it finally blends into the deeper blue of twilight, then night.

I'd painted this years before I understood what I was seeing. A photo I'd seen of it in [Color and Light in Nature](#) by Lynch and Livingston was lodged in my subconscious, but it wasn't until I was out painting it on the Konza Prairie one night, engrossed in the process, that it hit me what it was. Observing the shadow is another way to experience a “sense of planet” from any open space on a clear night at sundown. It is another way to connect the planet and its perpetual turnings.

Earth shadow is quite beautiful. With its pastel spectrum of vivid periwinkle blues, pink anti-twilight arch above and pastel minty green above, it's almost too “pretty” for me to paint. The orange-ish line along the bottom of the paintings is the sun's last light on the hills and our flatland version of alpenglow.

Seeing Earth shadow, or the “twilight wedge” or “dark segment,” as it is sometimes called, reminds me that the Earth is an object that casts a shadow, a shadow that we can see if we know where and when to look.

Sky Arcs

I first experienced a cloud arc when I was outside painting an approaching cold front. The leading edge of the cloud deck was extensive and unusually straight—I thought. As I was attempting to paint it on a panel that wasn't nearly long enough, I noticed that the cloud was gently curving overhead and out of sight.

Was I actually seeing the curve of the Earth? I abandoned the painting and frantically began scratching it out in my sketchbook to make sense of it. I concluded that yes, given a long-enough, straight-enough cloud, I could actually see the curve of the Earth reflected in the clouds. By necessity, the cloud bows to the shape of the atmosphere, which, of course, conforms to the shape of the Earth. Wow.

Open spaces have given me a tremendous gift—they remind me again and again of the vast planet we inhabit. In one sense it's so huge, in another, so small. Seeing cloud arcs is surely the most immediate and powerful way to connect viscerally with the immense sphere. Now that I know what they are, I see them all the time. All that is required is a sharpening of our awareness to such things—reaching out with our minds, our senses, developing our sense of expansiveness to include the planet.

These arcs are so immense and so subtle that I've failed many times to represent them in larger pieces. No matter how long I could make a canvas, it wouldn't come close to the size needed to describe the gentle arc. So I thought I'd try the opposite—tiny arcs. I found this a more effective way to convey the fullness of the visible arc, an expanse of 180 degrees or more.

Sky Circles

The majority of my work has come out of the directions of highest contrast and drama—East and West. In beginning the work for this show, it occurred to me that, other than watching passing flocks or vast decks of cloud patterns or celestial bodies in their movements, I hadn't spent much time looking up, considering what was going on directly overhead. What about the deepest blue of the clear-sky zenith at different times of day and season? I began searching for domed mirrors to view the zenith and immediately realized I could also view 360 degrees of the horizon—the entire celestial sphere in fact. It felt too easy to be able to capture it all this way. Domed mirrors and fisheye lenses are old technology, but they were new to me and to my purpose. I took my 18-inch domed mirror out to the prairie, walked around with it, took pictures, and marveled at the intensely condensed spectrums of horizon, moon, stars—the whole sweep of sky in a one-foot-diameter circle.

Months and many sheets of watercolor paper later, my watercolors evolved into the simple, all-sky watercolor circles you see here.

North/South

Earlier this year when I was out studying the prairie sky with my mirror dome, I thought, why not just take some pictures directly North and South and see what happens? I've typically avoided those directions because they lack drama. However, I discovered beautiful transition areas—somewhere between light and dark. Additionally, they revealed a flattened elliptical gradation of light to dark that was likely exaggerated by my lens, but present nonetheless. These include the far edges of the sunsets I've done so often, color extending in from the West just a little as night descends.