



Daily Bromides 6/19 - 7/18/2011, 2011

Ink on paper postcards, 32" h x 36" w (4" h x 6" w each).

Photo: Rich Barlow

RICHARD BARLOW



The first time I encountered Richard Barlow's work was in the library of the Walker Art Center, where I noticed a stack of hand-painted postcards on a desk. I remember holding them and being delighted by these strangely personal abstract things. They seemed so at home in that setting, surrounded by the other conceptual handmade works that librarian Rosemary Furtak had accumulated over the years. I asked her what they were, and she said she wasn't sure, but that she had been getting one a day every day for the past few weeks. Two years later in Barlow's studio I saw a paper postcard on his worktable, "It's you!"

What I was looking at was Barlow's *Daily Bromides*, a project that the artist returns to periodically in which he chooses one recipient and sends them a card a day for thirty days. The cards all feature the same pattern: a series of vertical tributaries that bisect a strong central horizon. He composes each by dripping ink through an eyedropper, which—depending on the color and volume used—causes surprisingly varied gradations of staining from card to card. The works seem abstract and process-based, like a Sol LeWitt gouache. However, Barlow has a source image, a reproduction from a catalog of an early Henry Fox Talbot photograph made using the calotype technique titled *Reflected Trees* (c. 1845). The image is of course quite beautiful, a line of trees reflected in a pond, itself a metaphor for the negative-to-positive process that the

calotype introduced. The framing and composition of the source photograph come from a time when people still thought of photography as a way to make a really good painting, so it has the feel of a traditional nineteenth-century landscape. To summarize the steps: Barlow hand-inks paper in a pattern based on an image in a catalog, which itself is a reproduction of a vintage print, made as a positive from a negative original, taken with a camera in a way that echoes the perspective and composition of a painting. And I should not neglect to mention that Talbot was the inventor of the calotype, which would go on to dominate worldwide image production for the remainder of the Analog Age.

Much of Barlow's work has circled around the question of how meaning is conferred on the inherently meaningless, how the social and cultural history of the landscape genre, for example, has allowed nature to be narrativized to conform to various human perspectives on purity, beauty, and so on. Through the appropriation of his sources, Barlow makes an initial gesture toward removing his importance as artist-creator from a direct relationship to the content of what is being produced. As with much appropriation, this has the effect of creating a filter between that which is represented and the subjectivity of the artist himself, making the viewer less likely to jump to conclusions that the work relates to some deeply personal expression based on life experience. This play can be observed with the *Daily Bromides*, which as we have seen, are conceptually many steps away from any original source. They are mediated meditations on the nature of the image,



or, rather, the image of nature, in our society and its role as a tool in the building of various forms of mythologies: from that of the nation state always dependent to some degree on the existence of the idealized landscape, to the various ways in which nature is instrumentalized in the manufacturing of our very human desires. And yet, rather than being programmatically conceptual tools to educate us on the nefarious ways in which nature is used to tame us, the works are objects of tactile and visual beauty, handmade and sent through the ever-more intimate and personal distribution network of the U.S. Postal Service. It is as if Barlow is removing the figure of the artist as the grand creator to replace it with the figure of himself as the somewhat gentler producer. In presenting nature itself as always already complicit with a very human agenda, he is giving us permission to engage with it again as something contingent and flawed but also potentially personal and, dare I say, real.

Whereas the *Bromides* take their source imagery from a nineteenth-century landscape photograph, two other ongoing projects have more popular, contemporary sources. In the *Covers* series, Barlow appropriates imagery of trees from various album artwork and reproduces them with his usual attention to detail using silver leaf on several layers of vellum. This technique has the effect of creating an aesthetic similarity across the series, though each piece is named for the record album from which it is derived, creating often quite playful juxtapositions between word and image—*A Forest*, for example, or *Mount Eerie*.



Welcome to the Open (installation view), 2011

Chalk on blackboard paint, dimensions variable.

Photo: Sean Smuda

The artist creates a formally neutralizing though highly aesthetic typology of different natural scenes, though a knowledge of the sources allows the viewer to see how various bands position themselves using the environment as a form of amplification, often with a great deal of sincerity but also at times subversively or with a degree of irony.

For his ongoing project *Welcome to the Open*, Barlow became fascinated with the SUV advertising genre and its obligatory scenes of massive vehicles careening from dirt tracks to off-road utopias, attacking (formerly) unmolested nature by looping around trees, splashing through rivers, or overcoming steep inclines. Man—and with SUV advertising it is generally a man—must prove himself, establish his ability to dominate this landscape, like the pioneers before him, and prove that he is Master of his beast/ machine. Barlow has taken forest landscapes from Hummer advertisements and rendered them in graphically simple chalk murals on large, black matte-painted gallery walls. Divested of all references to the original brand, the forests evoke a haunting and soulful world, seeming lonely and secretive, loaded with an affect that is hard to define but is perhaps tending toward the sublime. That they are so compromised in their actual source comes for the viewer as something of a shock. The irony of the pairing of the SUV with nature is of course that SUVs contribute to the CO₂-based destruction of the very landscapes they depict. Barlow's choice of chalk as medium is no accident. It speaks to the ephemeral feedback loop between meaning and nature that his work is so uniquely oriented to describe. BR



Richard Barlow
www.rbarlow.net



E d u c a t i o n



- MFA 2005 Painting and Drawing, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities
- BFA 1992 Painting, Rhode Island School of Design

S o l o E x h i b i t i o n s



- 2011 A Crow's Nest, Macalester College Art Gallery, St. Paul
Covers, The Phipps Center for the Arts, Hudson, Wisconsin
- 2009 Bromides, ARThouse, New London, Minnesota
- 2008 Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere, Harry M. Drake Gallery, St. Paul
Daily Bromides, Space 144, Minneapolis Central Library

S e l e c t e d G r o u p E x h i b i t i o n s



- 2010 The Sylvan Screen: Richard Barlow & Regan Golden, Johnson Gallery, Bethel University, St. Paul
Great Lakes Drawing Biennial (juror: Hartmut Austen), Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti
Arrowhead Biennial (juror: Paula Brandel), Duluth Art Institute
- 2009 Land-escape, Thomas Barry Fine Arts, Minneapolis
- 2008 12x12 (juror: Dave Hickey), Todd Gallery, Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro
Mailed and Mounted, Anton Art Center, Detroit
- 2007 Summer Invitational, Thomas Barry Fine Arts, Minneapolis
Look Forward to Seeing It: The Discipline of Anticipation (jurors: Susanne Cockrell and Reynold Pritikin), The LAB, San Francisco
Common Ground (juried), SUNY Westchester, Valhalla, New York
- 2006 Open Door 2 (juror: Kathleen Kvern), Rosalux Gallery, Minneapolis
Post-Postcard 10, The LAB, San Francisco
- 2005 Biennial (juror: Aron Packer), South Bend Regional Museum of Art, South Bend, Indiana
- 2004 Draw (juried), Soo Visual Arts Center, Minneapolis
Undervatten (juried), Karta/Terräng, Malmö, Sweden

G r a n t s / A w a r d s



- 2011 MCAD—Jerome Foundation Fellowship for Emerging Artists
- 2011 Clean City Minneapolis, Graffiti Prevention Mural Grant
- 2010 Community Supported Art Program, Springboard for the Arts and mnartists.org
- 2009 Clean City Minneapolis, Graffiti Prevention Mural Grant
- 2008 Bush Foundation, CVA Faculty Enrichment Grant



Forest, 2012
Iron oxide on paper, 30"h x 22"w.