

WISH YOU WERE HERE:
LEGENDS OF THE GREAT PLAINS

by

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Abstract

Wish You Were Here: Legends of the Great Plains is an image-based project examining the reality of how the Great Plains romanticizes its history through legends, histories, and roadside attractions. This region, often referred to as flyover country, is low in population but is home to a plethora of roadside attractions. This history is often commodified through roadside attractions and monuments where tourists can enter these places, take part in photo-ops, and buy souvenirs as proof of the experience and inclusion in this part of history. The work in this series developed as both an observer and participant within these places. The Great Plains is full of legends rooted in truth, from the infamous Buffalo Bill in the Wild West to the spirits of the Badlands, but the stories overshadow some grim truths of Midwestern history. These stories become a sense of pride and comfort for the local population, who use iconography to perpetuate the ideas of manifest destiny and the Wild West. With awareness of this history, the authenticity of these spaces as well as their interpretations are put into question. This document supports the MFA Thesis Exhibition for *Wish You Were Here*.

WISH YOU WERE HERE:
LEGENDS OF THE GREAT PLAINS

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the School of Art and Design

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

by

Epiphany S. Knedler

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the two best roadtrip companions. To Winnie the Brave, our amazing dog who (somewhat) courageously explored the Great Plains. And to my partner, Tim Rickett, who drove us most of the 6,202 miles of the roadtrip; who helped me out of a prairie dog hole; who accompanied me on endless trips to the flea markets and second-hand stores; who supported my vision for this work endlessly; and who continues to encourage me every day.

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To my family, for encouraging me to pursue my passions no matter where they take me. Thank you for your endless ideas, critiques, motivation, and support. To the Rickett family for your support, welcoming me to your home, giving me ideas and places to visit, and taking care of Winnie. To my committee, for always supporting my work and process. To my cohort, who continues to motivate me and push my work. To Dana Smessaert, for your support, for being a Midwest friend here in the South, who I would not have been able to endure the process of graduate school without.

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INTRODUCTION

At many roadside gift shops in the Midwest, you will see a creature of myth and legend similar to that of Bigfoot or the Loch Ness Monster - the jackalope. With the body of a jackrabbit and the antlers of a deer, it is said to be rare, only mating during lightning storms, but can be caught with some whiskey to slow the speedy creature down. Jackalopes have been spotted across the Midwest and take on the role of the trickster of the Plains, where cowboys would often hear their songs or thoughts repeated back to them. Today, jackalopes are still said to be spotted across the wild Plains but can more regularly be found in gift shops. Brothers Ralph and Douglas Herrick created the mythical jackalope in 1932 in their family taxidermy shop. After a hunting trip, they tossed a jackrabbit's body near deer antlers, sparking the physical jackalope. Taxidermy jackalopes can be found in gift shops, where possibility is used to trick those not familiar with the legend.¹

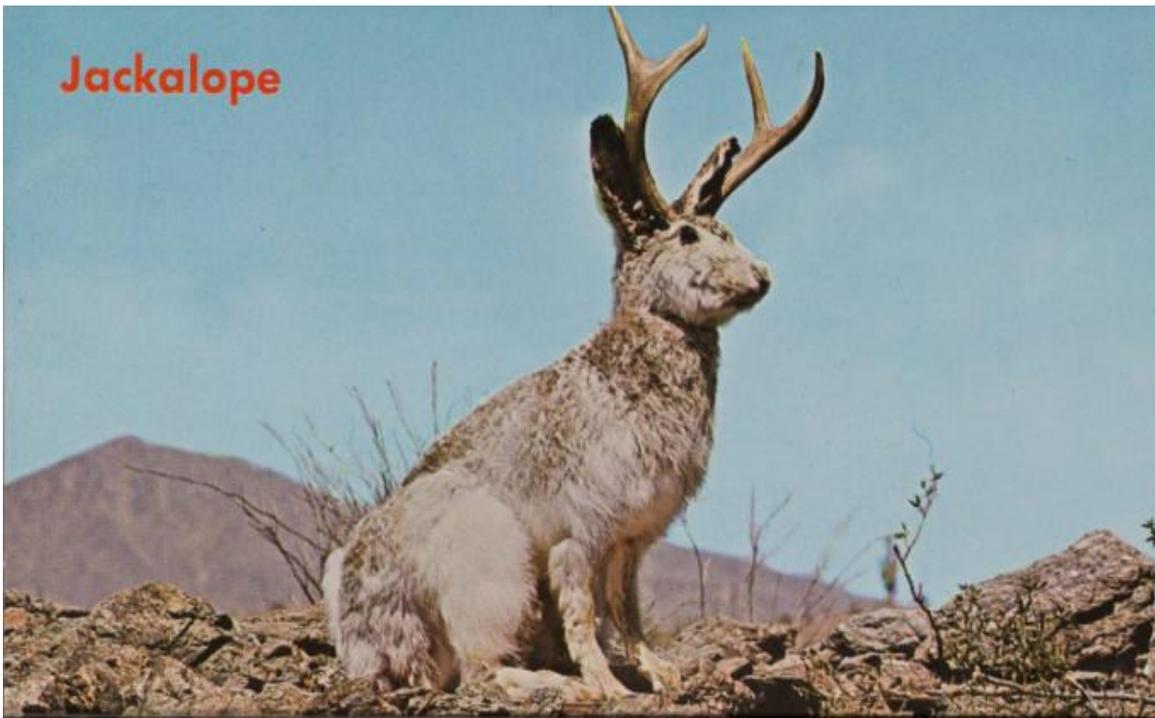


Figure 1: Jackalope, University of Las Vegas Digital Collections, 1950.

Legends, folklore, tall tales, and mythology are terms used for stories which are often influenced by a seed of truth which grows larger than life. In the Midwest, most of these stories begin as an act of the everyday slightly better than the norm, often local or personal histories with a sense of pride causing repetition. There is largely a sense of good in these stories, often morals, which overshadow any negative histories. This sugar coating creates an unauthentic atmosphere to the people and places where these stories are repeated.

These unauthentic retellings can be directly seen through the local roadside attractions of the Upper Midwest. While most of the region is known for its farming, prairies, and rural townships, there is a path of roadside attractions across the states of Iowa, Nebraska, and South Dakota, culminating in the National Monuments like Mount Rushmore and Badlands National Park. Each of these places has its own history and legend which is commodified for tourists. Each year, two million tourists visit the small town of Wall, South Dakota, which otherwise has a population of 766.² Tourism generates fifteen percent of South Dakota's yearly GDP.³ Small towns across the Midwest have created places that honor and perpetuate these legends. These places become larger than the stories themselves. While they embody specific stories, they are often void of any true interactions. Tourists visit these places, buy souvenirs like postcards and keychains and take photographs to prove they were there. The contemporary tourist often visits this place with their family, takes selfies to post to social media as proof of the trip, and buys souvenirs.

Roadside attractions often use a similar aesthetic, full of kitsch and Americana. It can be described as an artifice of my Grandma's house or derived from the Cracker Barrel chain. There is a series of iconography sourced from the legends of the Midwest, including Native American culture, farming, the Wild West, and animals and plants of the region. The histories of these cultures, specifically that of Native American culture and the Wild West, are thoroughly minimized or disguised, creating a sense of authenticity in these places.

This document will share how history shapes legends and places of the Midwest with images and objects exploring how tourists interact with these places.

CHAPTER I: A HISTORY

AMERICAN FOLKLORE AND LEGENDS

As a life-long resident of the Great Plains, my move to the South raised critical questions about the history of my region, including the stereotypes of the earnest immigrant as compared to immigration politics today, appropriation of Native American culture, and social politics of the region. When thinking of the region's symbolism, many ideas arise including patriotic images like Mount Rushmore, or the Wild West seen at Wall Drug, or kitsch creations like the World's Only Corn Palace, line the heartland. Each of these ideas are articulated through a variety of roadside attractions and monuments throughout the Great Plains.

Folklore is a broad term used to describe stories, oral histories, and legends often specific to a culture or region. In the United States, much of this lore is derived from Native American cultural stories, like creation and hero stories. The history of the country itself, specifically its founding, is lined with legendary figures like Christopher Columbus and George Washington, who embody the spirit of America. As the country aged, regional tall tales became more popular. Many of these were rooted in truth, describing the unlikelihood of one person to conquer the land, like Johnny Appleseed, a pioneer who began apple orchards across the Midwest and Northeast, or Davy Crockett, the King of the Wild Frontier who led and was killed at the Battle of the Alamo. Other characters are completely fictionalized but represent the broader western expansion and the hard work of the pioneers. Paul Bunyon is a giant lumberjack who helped clear the land with Babe the Blue Ox. More national folklore include Uncle Sam, who helps recruit men for war, and whose initials are U.S., or sites like the Battle of Little Bighorn, also known as Custer's Last Stand, where the United States Army fought the Lakota and were ultimately overtaken. Many of these stories have a moral or warning to them, while others are meant to instill patriotism for America. Every region has its own history and legacy it purports to give the area a certain feeling.

REGIONALISM

The Midwest shares stories of the pioneers and immigrants who conquered the land beyond expectations. While it is a large portion of the United States, it is often not thought of in terms of destinations. The Midwest is often referred to as flyover country. The term ‘flyover country’ originated in 1980 in Esquire magazine, used to describe Middle America where the author lived, “Because we live in flyover country, we try to figure out what is going on elsewhere by subscribing to magazines.”⁴ ‘Flyover country’ is most often used by Midwesterners to describe how they feel the rest of the United States looks at them, forgetting them until it is politically or socially important. Politically, it is also romanticized by conservatives, being described as the Heartland, or a place with simpler values. Because of this, Midwesterners are patronized by the rest of America.

Stereotypes of the Midwest include rural activities like farming or hunting. The culture of the area is less distinctive than other regions of the United States, where “the Midwest doesn’t have many unique, popularly resonant cultural exports that define the amorphous region in its entirety.”⁵ The Midwest visual aesthetic is that of the comfortable, homestyle, and earnest. It does not have one singular identity but includes the broader ideals of freedom, hard work, and patriotism. The cities which encourage art in the Midwest are few and far between, resulting in an appreciation of folk art. Folk art is visual art made by the untrained or rooted in popular culture, usually reflective of the region or community, closely related to kitsch.

The Midwest is also largely thought of as an area to pass through rather than a destination in itself. Regional history emphasizes the great tours through the Midwest, where immigrants moved to these areas pushing West toward California, while Lewis and Clark were tasked with exploring and conquering the new land acquisition. As immigrants made their homesteads in the Great Plains, they realized they could not convince others to move there with just the lure of vast farmland. Towns began creating attractions to bring people to their areas and create another source of economic gain. Out of this travel from East coast to West coast, many towns in the Midwest created attractions to bring visitors to their town.

ROADTRIP + ROADSIDE ATTRACTIONS

American history is lined with aspects of the Great American Roadtrip. There is an idealism within American culture, associated with freedom, where individuals have the ability to travel anywhere in the country, experience different cultures and regions, by way of their car. The epitome of this is Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, where a man based in New York City was tired of urban spaces and wanted to experience real America with real people. The general idea of road trips is strongly linked with photography and Westward expansion.



Figure 2: Timothy O'Sullivan, *Sand Dunes, Carson Desert, Nevada*, 1867.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the government began funding geological expeditions to record and survey the lands in the Western United States. These were primarily to encourage the population to expand westward as well as survey the potential paths of railroads. Timothy O'Sullivan joined the U.S. Corps of Engineers in photographing the West, to create a romanticized

version, essentially positive propaganda to encourage investment in the West. O'Sullivan's images were formal compositions that displayed the landscape in a picturesque way.

Road trips and roadside attractions grew in popularity during the 1920s and 1930s due to a rise in camping and automobile use. Highways existed but were largely unsafe. The Stock Market Crash and subsequent Great Depression put a damper on tourism in the United States. During the 1950s, tourism and family vacations rose with the economy, free time, and the nuclear family. There were minimal highways and many of the roads connecting the United States were unpaved dirt roads. Road trips were highly complex endeavors that took many days to complete. In 1956, President Eisenhower signed the Federal-Aid Highway Act, which created a National System of Interstate and Defense Highways to create safe roads and begin a speedy, safe transcontinental travel system. When automobiles were limited in terms of speed, billboards advertising would allow drivers the choice to slow down and stop for roadside attractions. Attractions continue to exist but are rarely the destination.

SELECTED MIDWEST ATTRACTIONS

Where the Heck is Wall Drug?, Wall, South Dakota



Figure 3: Wall Drug Sign, France, 1940.

Wall Drug was established in 1931 by Ted and Dorothy Hustead.⁶ The Husteads were looking for a community with a good church where they could start a pharmacy, deciding on Wall, South Dakota. The store initially did not have much success, since the town itself did not see a need for a pharmacy and it was out of the way for the rest of the state. To entice visitors to stop, the Husteads began advertising free ice water through hand-painted signs on Interstate 90, stopping travelers on their way West. These signs worked and the Wall Drug Store expanded to include a cafe and souvenirs. The quirky signage expanded throughout the years; during World War II, a family friend posted signs in Europe stating “Wall Drug Store, # miles” with an arrow in the direction of Wall, SD. These signs took off and soon visitors were both coming from all over the world and writing letters to the Husteads.

World's Only Corn Palace, Mitchell, South Dakota

Mitchell, South Dakota boasts being home to the World's Only Corn Palace, but this was not always the case. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Midwest agriculture was flourishing. Townships were looking for ways to gain engagement in their local communities. Looking to their success in growing crops, cities began building monuments to their grains. Corn palaces are a true work of art meant to honor the fertile land. In 1887, the community of Sioux City, Iowa erected a complete structure made of corn, with a wooden support structure on the interior. This structure was deemed a success, with a harvest festival in the fall. This tradition continued until 1893, when the community of Mitchell, South Dakota essentially stole the idea from Sioux City.



Figure 4: Sioux City Corn Palace, Sioux City, Iowa, 1889.

More than 500,000 tourists see the Corn Palace each year in Mitchell, South Dakota. Branding themselves as the “World’s Only Corn Palace,” the attraction creates new designs each year around a different theme. Using thirteen different colors and shades of corn, the murals are stripped at the end of August and the new designs are completed by October.⁷ It doubles as a community center, hosting high school basketball and community theatre. In fact, one of my favorite trips to the Corn Palace in my teenage years was participating in the Friend de Coup Mitchell Show Choir Competition of 2009.



Figure 5: The World's Only Corn Palace, Mitchell, South Dakota, 1954.

Mount Rushmore, Keystone, South Dakota

Mount Rushmore is the attraction that gives South Dakota its state slogan, "Great Faces, Great Places." Four of the United States Presidents, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt, are carved into stone, creating a national monument in the Black Hills National Forest in South Dakota. Created by sculptor Gutzon Borglum, the monument was conceived by Doane Robinson, a state historian, to promote tourism. The original idea for Mount Rushmore was to feature Western figures like Chief Red Cloud, Buffalo Bill Cody, Lewis and Clark, and other Sioux warriors.⁸ Borglum believed representations of four presidents would appeal to more people. The process of carving took over ten years, being completed by Borglum's son in 1941. Mount Rushmore continues to be a site for tourism, where more than two million tourists visit each year.

The Legend of Buffalo Bill, Fort Cody, North Platte, Nebraska

William F. Cody is a figure who embodies the frontier lifestyle. As a hunter of buffalo to feed the railroad constructors, he gained his nickname “Buffalo Bill” and inspired a series of fictionalized stories throughout his life. He is said to have killed around four-thousand buffalo in seventeen months.⁹ Ned Buntline used Cody as a figure in his dime-store novels, creating a frontier hero. He played this role in *The Scouts of the Plains*, a fictionalized play about Buffalo Bill. He continued working in show business, creating *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West*, a traveling carnival of sorts featuring all aspects of the West, including a buffalo hunt, a Pony Express ride, and a recreation of Custer’s Last Stand with real Lakota playing the part of Native Americans in battle. *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West* featured many legends of the time, including sharpshooter Annie Oakley and Chief Sitting Bull. This traveling show inspired a series of stories as well as attractions, including the Fort Cody Trading Post in North Platte, Nebraska, which boasts being Nebraska’s largest souvenir and Western gift store, including a miniature *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West* featuring 20,000 hand-carved figures.

Badlands, Badlands National Park, South Dakota

The Badlands, now a National Park in Western South Dakota, is a naturally reoccurring rocky landscape that is distinctive in the traditional flat prairie or forested Great Plains. The Lakota, one of the Sioux Nation tribes, describes the creation of the badlands as beginning as a green prairie. The Great Spirit declared the area to be shared equally among the tribes, which lasted for years but changed when a western tribe went to war over the plains. When the battle began, the Great Spirit struck lightning on the plains, swallowing the tribe whole as well as the prairie, leaving the new, jarring landscape behind. Since then, the land has been dry with no agriculture. Today, the Badlands are a popular national park with camping and hiking in the South Dakota landscape. This is usually a stop with roadtrip destinations like Mount Rushmore, Crazy Horse, and Wall Drug.

ART HISTORY AND FRAMEWORK

The exhibition for *Wish You Were Here* is an installation creating a space where the viewers take on the role of tourists into the Great Plains roadside attractions, seeing these images and objects through the context of historical awareness and commodification will allow them to make connections between images and socio-political issues. The exhibition includes artifacts of the cultural vernacular of roadside attractions.

The Everyday in Art

In fine art terminology, the everyday is rooted in the idea that some objects or scenes are routinely overlooked or deemed unworthy of sharing. Artist Stephen Johnstone explains it as being “the place where ordinary people creatively use and transform the world they encounter from one day to another . . . [and] what is at stake in such a gesture is the extent to which an artist is able to get close to things, to be immersed in the world, as opposed to observing and judging from afar”.¹⁰ The framework for the everyday is embedded in the history of kitsch, folk art, Americana, and the larger concept of Pop Art. Artists who use the everyday are able to become a part of it, giving authenticity to their work.

The process and execution of *Wish You Were Here* uses this framework. During the trip, I took on the role of both artist and tourist, documenting the roadside attractions as well as participating in the activities of a traditional tourist. Artist Virgil Abloh uses the dichotomy between the tourist and purist in his conceptual work; a tourist has ambition and seeks things out while a purist believes in the value in meaning and history. Abloh believes in demystifying purity and not being responsible to preconceived culture and meaning in art, allowing the everyday individual to have meaningful experiences with art and culture. This framework can be understood within the terms of kitsch, folk art, Americana, and Pop Art.

Folkloric Art

Kitsch and folk art are found in the same arena of low-culture within the art world. They are related to mass-culture and come from an appreciation and preservation of culture, rather than needing

specific cultural history or visual education to understand them. In *How Folklore Shaped Modern Art*, cultural historian Wes Hill uses the term folklore to describe these ideas, as rooted in the adjective folkloric which refers to both “the production of culture as well as its study and compilation.” These traditionally low culture aesthetics are described within the contemporary art world as “those kitsch or capitalist imitations of traditional practices that were categorized in the early twentieth century as fakelore or folkloreism”, in reference to critic Clement Greenberg’s use and popularization of the term kitsch.¹¹ Kitsch is rooted in the German word for trash, “describ[ing] particularly cheap, vulgar and sentimental forms of popular and commercial culture.”¹² Kitsch was a direct opposition to the avant-garde or that which is new, innovative, and in the forefront of its era. Today, the kitsch is closely related to mass-production, like plastic flamingos or porcelain figurines. These are largely considered to have no value due to being mass-produced and are often fake reproductions of the real thing. Postmodernism promoted the idea of high and low culture in the fine art sense, but this has been interpreted and manipulated by artists in the Pop Art era and the Young British Artists.

Pop Art emerged as a departure from the traditional high-culture sense of art. Artists used mass-culture as subject matter. Sculptor Claes Oldenburg’s *I am for an Art* lays out the Pop Art manifesto to art which is about anything and everything; it is the perspective and framework the viewer comes to the work with which allows it to be deemed as art. Andy Warhol, understood this framework. On a roadtrip from New York to Los Angeles, Warhol described his view of America, stating “the farther west we drove, the more Pop everything looked on the highways. Once you ‘got’ Pop, you could never see a sign the same way again. And once you thought Pop, you could never see America the same way again.”¹³ This broad statement is meant as a part of high-culture, where artists would be able to use mass-culture to engage with the idea of authenticity in society.

After Pop Art, the Young British Artists began using objects and images of the everyday in the context of the fine art approach to discussing British culture. Damien Hirst “approaches the art institution as a tool that enables greater attention on the artifacts of everyday life, highlighting a relation to the common cultural vernacular and folk identity of Britain.”¹⁴ By placing mass-culture within the art world,

it engages with ideas of authenticity. This can be seen through the medium of installation. For example, an installation that closely relates to reality could be seen as a direct recreation. Being placed in the context of the gallery, use of the everyday and reality actually “reveal subtle details that are often overlooked in our daily interactions with aesthetic clichés.”¹⁵ The medium of installation allows the work to become an experience for the viewer.

CHAPTER II: THE JOURNEY WEST

THEMES

The images in *Wish You Were Here* show the roadside attractions as they are rather than as the traditional picturesque postcard. These images feature tourists interacting with the places as contemporary tourists do. The photographic works have a cynical undertone to them, showing the lack of engagement with the place. These attractions, rooted in legend and history, are each very similar. They are created around a specific story in history, usually with a primary viewing point or monument. They are usually family oriented. There is often a fee you have to pay to get in. Once you are in the area, there are multiple photo opportunities, usually wood cut-outs to place your head or with fiberglass sculptures. These serve as a means for interacting with a place or historic event. Every single attraction has a gift shop with an abundance of t-shirts, keychains, and postcards to buy. With research across the Midwest attractions, most of these are the same save for the location. The way the tourists interact with the place is the same as well. They go to the spot to take photographs, then the family splits up to peruse the souvenirs. Somewhere in the attraction, you can find some history on the place in a brochure or on a plaque. Occasionally there are also tours with guides to give background information. This similarity is striking and relates to an inauthentic experience.

Wish You Were Here explores a variety of themes related to the roadtrip, legends, and the West. These are explored through photographs, postcards, viewfinders, installation, and souvenirs like keychains and stickers.

The Great American Roadtrip

Photography is often associated with this search of images and places to capture. The road trip allows for a practical venue for this, where the photographer will travel for a certain period of time to explore and capture the essence of these places and hopefully have a successful series which encapsulates their experiences on the trip as well as the spirit of the people in these places. The images in *Wish You Were Here* are not the traditional family portraits or picturesque landscapes found in roadtrip images.

These images show the reality of these spaces in terms of architecture, photo-ops, tourism, and created places.

The Beat generation, a group of literary artists of the 1950s, inspired a new love for the Great American Roadtrip. Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* articulated the feeling and experience of traveling across the country. Robert Frank, a Swiss photographer, traveled to the United States with a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1955 and 1956 resulting in *The Americans*, a revolutionary book in the history of photography and America.¹⁶ Frank did not capture Americans in a romanticized light but focused on the actual existence of American life. Frank inspired a new generation of photographers with this now archetypal style.



Plate 1: *Onlookers at the Unfinished Crazy Horse Memorial*, Archival inkjet print, 2019.

The images include the attraction, but they are rarely the focus of the image. The focus is usually on the tourists and their interaction with the place, attraction, or each other. *Onlookers at the Unfinished*

Crazy Horse Memorial captures the traditional tourist experience with tourists looking at the monument from the constructed viewing point.



Figure 6: Martin Parr, *Boring Oregon*, 2000.

These are largely influenced by anthropological photographer Martin Parr. His work focuses on satire through the ordinary with exceptional compositions. Parr's *Boring Postcards* and *Boring Oregon* series use travel and recreation as focuses. *Boring Oregon* focuses on the town of Boring, Oregon, playing with the idea of what actually makes things everyday, banal, or boring. *Boring Postcards* is a collection of the most boring postcards he could find between the 1950s through the 1970s, emphasizing the repetition and lack of aesthetics in mass-produced photography.

The West

Many of these attractions were created to preserve the history and legends of the region. The attractions often include history in an effort to encourage tourism to the area. The Midwest emphasizes its inclusion of the west, pioneering, and frontier lifestyle of those who settled the land. The visual history of American mythology can be seen through paintings of landscapes and frontier men, miniature

reproductions of historical events, and souvenirs reminiscent of pioneers including coonskin caps and knives. Some attractions include recreations of specific events, like cowboy shootouts or photo-ops for tourists to take part in the times.



Figure 7: Mount Rushmore Photo-Op, Rickett Family Archives, 1999.

Many places within the Great Plains use Native American iconography as representative of the times. While some tribes use this to their advantage to sell souvenirs to tourists, much of the history is overlooked or ignored. As pioneers and frontiersmen made their way West, Native American tribes were pushed into reservations and had much of their land taken for American migration. The majority of South Dakota belonged to the Sioux tribes; today the state houses the most reservations in the United States. Unfortunately, many of the attractions have commodified this history to continue their own narrative. Western South Dakota and Nebraska reinforce the cowboys versus Indians dynamic, pitting the two against each other. As frontiersmen made their way into the West, Native American tribes attempted to

keep their land secured, creating this dynamic. The story of Custer's Last Stand, or the Battle of Little Bighorn, where the U.S. Army was defeated by the Sioux, reinforces the stereotype of the Indian savage as compared to the heroic frontiersman. Contemporary Apsáalooke artist, Wendy Red Star, confronts the romanticized and stereotyped images of Native Americans in her work, both making fun with these representations in *Four Seasons* and educating the general public in tribal history in *Medicine Crow and the 1880 Crow Peace Delegation*.



Figure 8: Greta Pratt, *Using History*, 2005.

Photographers Greta Pratt and Alexis Pike use themes of preservation of legends in history in their respective series *Using History* and *A Photographic Reconsideration of the Oregon Trail*. Pratt focuses on national identity and American myth, specifically documenting how Midwesterners express history through festivals and monuments to connect with the past. Pike's *Oregon Trail* explores the

iconography and historical adaptations of the Oregon Trail as it exists in the contemporary world, including tourism, preservationism, and history.

Nostalgia

The mention of roadtrips usually brings back first memories with family on cross-country adventures; if not specifically, then the memory of the movie *Vacation*. Nostalgia evokes specific feelings, usually regarding sentimentality and reminiscing, which can affect interpretation of events and memories. Roadside attractions use this to bring tourists in, hoping they will be reminded of their childhood or years before. In general, being nostalgic tends to be yearning for happier times, where memory tends to recall positive aspects rather than the whole. These roadside attractions use this when discussing their histories and folklore of the region, where truths are twisted or overlooked.



Figure 9: Joel Sternfeld, *Mount Rushmore National Monument, Black Hills National Forest, South Dakota, August 1994, 1994.*

Nostalgia in art can play a useful role with aesthetics and evoking emotion but can be called cliché or distract viewers from having objective or critical conversations about the work. Ryann Ford documented rest stops across America in *The Last Stop* after realizing uniquely designed rest stops were being destroyed for more economic and commercial areas. Her images are formal but the designs of the rest stops immediately transport viewers to another era. While not obvious, the project creates commentary on the transportation system and importance of aesthetics. Joel Sternfeld creates more obvious controversy in his series *On This Site* which features less than picturesque images of sites which had violence occur. The photographs use light, color, and composition to give a feeling of seeing this area before; the images are accompanied by text which explains the previous violence. Looking at the image itself, it is not obvious, but the text gives context.

Both the objects and images in *Wish You Were Here* use aspects of nostalgia, reverting viewers back to a specific time and place. Postcards, while still around, tend to bring back memories of pre-social media communication. The viewfinders, a popular toy throughout the twentieth century, bring viewers back to their childhood. The images in the series remind viewers of their last roadtrip or when they visited South Dakota on a trip with their family as a child.

Patriotism

With the popularity of roadtrips in the mid-twentieth century, many roadside attractions were created to promote American patriotism for families. Washington, D.C and Philadelphia. include a multitude of monuments that honor specific American heroes, like the Founding Fathers, or events during the creation of America. Other states across the country wanted to recreate the feeling of patriotism by honoring their region or other local heroes. As maps for roadtrips were created, they centered around the idea of reinforcing patriotism in children. South Dakota's iconography is centered around Mount Rushmore, which features four of the U.S. presidents. South Dakota is also home to Crazy Horse Memorial, which honors the figure Crazy Horse from the Lakota warrior who attempted to preserve

native land from the U.S. government. This was built in direct opposition to Mount Rushmore and does not use any federal funding.

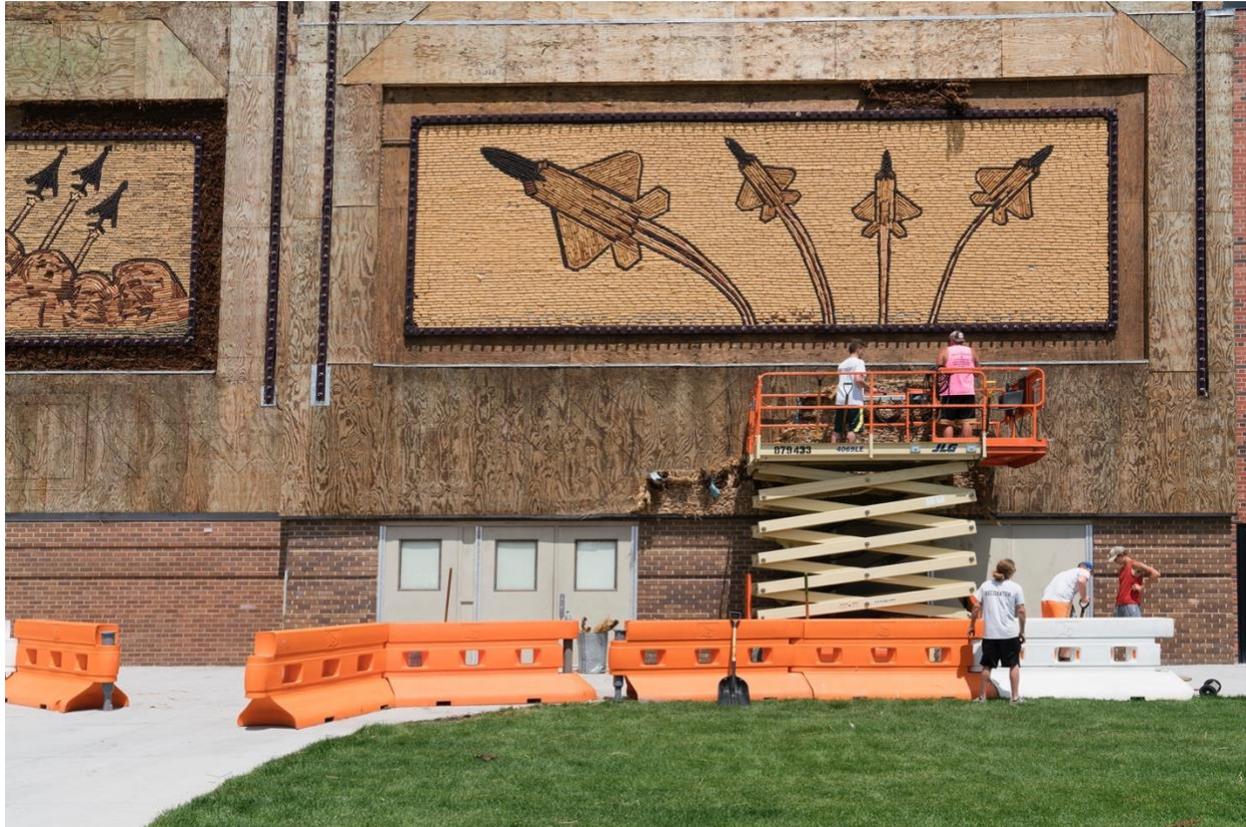


Plate 2: *Rehusking the World's Only Corn Palace*, Archival inkjet print, 2019.

The themes of patriotism and freedom are abundant in even the most kitsch of roadside attractions. For example, the Corn Palace often features murals like *Everyday Heroes*, *American Pride*, and *a Salute to the Military*. While these are centered around South Dakota, where Mount Rushmore is usually pictured, they feature a specific line of values with reference to the military or war. Many American monuments are rooted in this structure. Photographer Lee Friedlander created images full of visual culture and history with a focus on monuments throughout the United States in his series *The American Monument*. The monuments in his images are the focal point without being the only visual. With tourists in the composition or the changing environment of the monument, Friedlander creates a commentary about how Americans honor events and people in our country. This conversation is coming to a head in politics today where many people are calling for reparations in terms of tearing down

monuments that honor Confederate soldiers or others who incited racial violence. These occurrences bring up the ideas of who we honor in America and why.

The Land

While many of the images in *Wish You Were Here* are busy, they also allude to the overwhelming isolation and quiet in the Great Plains. The roadside attractions are miles apart and the drive to get there is lined with the prairie and farming fields. In one day, from Rapid City, South Dakota to Sutherland, Nebraska, we visited Christmas Village, the City of Presidents, Dinosaur Park, Chimney Rock, Carhenge, the Rural Rest Area (complete with a toilet!), Front Street, and the UFO Water Tower across 306 miles. While this was one of our busier days, it can seem like there is nothing for miles. Growing up in this region, I relate to Gretel Ehrlich's description of openness of a landscape in *The Solace of Open Spaces* as "...closer to home we might also learn how to carry space inside ourselves in the effortless way we carry our skins."¹⁷



Figure 10: Rebecca Norris Webb, *Rearview Mirror*, 2005.

Photographer Rebecca Norris Webb's *My Dakota* is a photographic essay with poetry which gives a view of the isolation and beauty of South Dakota. The journey to the attractions is as important as the attractions themselves. These attractions were built out of communities aiming to bring more people to their area as tourists. Willa Cather's *My Antonia* poetically explains the history of the pioneers who established these communities. It is important to understand this history and experience the journey to the destination.

Landscapes has influenced both photography and the roadtrip since their creations. Landscape photographers like O'Sullivan captured the West, influencing an entire category of photography. In *Land Matters*, Liz Wells defines landscape as "vistas encompassing both nature and the changes that humans have affected on the natural world", as the untouched landscape no longer exists.¹⁸

Inauthentic

Roadside attractions across the Midwest use a similar aesthetic of kitsch and comfortability which help tourists understand the aesthetic of the region. Part of the kitsch is the inauthenticity of place, recreating the idea of a place or legend that is ultimately larger and more impressive than the true thing. Most of the roadside attractions are created simply for people to visit. For example, Wall Drug has a multitude of recreated places for tourist photo-ops, like the plastic Mount Rushmore or fiberglass jackalope. This direct inauthenticity through physical space and objects can be seen throughout roadside attraction history. *Another Roadside Attraction* by Tom Robbins expresses the satire and kitsch of roadside attractions.



Figure 11: Stephen Shore, *Uncommon Places. U.S. 97, South of Klamath Falls, Oregon, July 21, 1973, 1973.*

Photographer Stephen Shore largely explores these ideas in his work *Uncommon Places. U.S. 97, South of Klamath Falls, Oregon, July 21, 1973* features a billboard of a mountain range in the center of a picturesque landscape, playing with the ideas of real and fake, man-made and natural, the epitome of American vernacular.

This idea references French philosopher Jean Baudrillard's theory of the simulation and simulacra. Baudrillard argues that post-modern society's use of semiotics, where we rely on signs and symbols for interpretation, has evolved to the point where we do not consider what the symbols are based on; the simulation references the real, but the simulacra bases our reality from these nonexistent symbols or images, as in the simulacra. Roadside attractions across America emulate an idea of an experience or event rather than using objects of the actual. Using the example of Route 66, author Andrew F. Wood describes that "objects...are often designed to remind tourists of fertile American myths, and motel

owners learned to capitalize on the tourist expectation of Route 66 as the West, more than a mere link to the West, in their signage and even physical designs.”¹⁹ For example, Wall Drug in South Dakota is an amalgamation of Western iconography in the form of capitalist entertainment, including photo-ops with fiberglass jackalopes, horses, and covered wagons, homestyle food and coffee, and souvenirs like cowboy hats, pocket knives, and sheriff badges. The landscapes and histories of the West are combined into one place; visit this stop and you are able to be a part of larger history.

CHAPTER III: OFF-ROAD

EXHIBITION INSTALLATION



Plate 3: *Wish You Were Here*, exhibition installation, 2020.

Wish You Were Here: Legends of the Great Plains uses installation-based materials to emulate the roadside attractions and gift shops. The exhibition is influenced by the aforementioned themes. The gallery transforms into a gift shop and attraction in itself. The photographs line the walls, exploring a myriad of places along the Midwest highways and how tourists engage with them. The viewer takes on the role of a tourist within the gift shop. According to Claire Bishop, the role of the viewer “constitutes the subject of that experience.”²⁰ The space should have a Midwestern, kitschy aesthetic, a cross between a gas station and Grandma’s house. Referencing simulacra, the exhibition is based on the idea of roadside

attractions across the Midwest or images rather than a recreation of specific places or spaces. While the images are real places, this transference from real to image to object allows viewers to create new connections between place and images.



Plate 4: *Onlookers at the Unfinished Crazy Horse Memorial*, exhibition installation, 2020.

Using photography, this work engages with the typical controversies of representation and interpretation. Photography is often equated to truth and reality due to its engagement with what and how we see. As Wells explains in *Land Matters*, “photographs are afforded an authority, founded in the authenticity that has been ascribed to the photographic since its inception.”²¹ With this installation, the work engages with how photography mediates what we see, by reprinting to a life-size scale and adding objects to play with perspective and reality. By placing objects within the photographic frame, the viewer can engage on a new level. The entire space of the gallery becomes a new room, a gift shop. These images do not just capture the interactions of the tourists but create a conversation on how we engage with history and place.



Plate 5: *Corn Palace Gift Shop*, exhibition installation, 2020.



Plate 6: *Buttons*, detail shot, 2020.

Roadside attractions usually have a primary viewing point that is the best for photographs or allows tourists to solely focus on the attraction. These created viewpoints usually get rid of any distractions, like a fast-food sign in the background or a surrounding wall. One way many attractions do this is by including tower viewers for distance viewing. Relating to the perfect view, *Wish You Were Here* includes images on viewfinders. Viewfinders are preceded by the stereograph, where two images are seen through each individual eye creating the illusion of space.²² These largely featured tourist spots or street scenes but many satirical scenes were also popular. The stereograph revolutionized the photography industry, allowing people to travel to these places without leaving their homes. These viewfinders include images from the series sequenced into mini-series focused on place or iconography. The mini-series gives the viewer a specific, curated, and inauthentic view.



Plate 7: *Viewfinders*, detail shot, exhibition installation, 2020.



Plate 8: *Viewfinder Reels*, detail shot, 2020.



Plate 9: *Viewfinder Reel*, digital mock-up, 2019.

As with any gift shop, souvenirs are for sale representing the place. The souvenirs within the installation include keychains, magnets, buttons, and postcards. They all feature images from *Wish You Were Here* which are not the typical picturesque representations. These souvenirs show tourists interacting with these places, allowing the gallery viewers to engage with how the tourists engage. Keychains, magnets, and buttons are some of the most common souvenirs found in any gift shop.



Plate 10: *Postcard Display*, exhibition installation, 2020.



Plate 11: *Carhenge with Goldenrod*, Postcard, 2019.

Postcards have a long history of communication within the world of photography. Before telephones were widely used, notes and letters were used for long-distance communication. Photographic postcards featured tourist attractions, news events, comedic illustrations, and erotic imagery to be sent to loved ones. Today, postcards are still used largely to share vacation spots and small notes to family. *Wish You Were Here* plays with the ideas of traditional aesthetics and mass-production of postcards. Using the images from the series, postcards are sent to friends and family with “Wish you were here!” signed. The postcards include hand-stitched embroidery emphasizing part of the image, either drawing focus to the tourists or the attraction. Since they are sent through the postal service, the actual stamps and general travel evidence are included.

CONCLUSION

Wish You Were Here is a series which uses roadside attractions to understand how we engage with legends and histories, creating space to question our interactions. This series has created a pathway to further question how we, as a society, engage with our history. Ideas surrounding Manifest Destiny and the West are perpetuated by these roadside attractions. They often sugar-coat some of the negative aspects of history with engaging activities like photo-ops and souvenirs. While these fun ways of engaging with history are a step, a more meaningful level of engagement is necessary. By creating a new environment, *Wish You Were Here* allows new images to be seen together. Connecting these images and scenes creates new conversations and associations. This series should give viewers a sense of interest and understanding the next time they visit a roadside attraction. And maybe do a little more research the next time they see a “real” jackalope.

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