Illinois State University

ISU ReD: Research and eData

3-16-2022

Imaginary Landscapes

Richard Oliver Reed
Illinois State University, richardoliverreed@gmail.com

Recommended Citation

IMAGINARY LANDSCAPES

RICHARD OLIVER REED

13 Pages

Worldbuilding is a common practice that informs and enriches our everyday experience. My practice of worldbuilding investigates the conception of an interior landscape. Through my cultural and material influences I construct spaces that highlight imagination and escapism. These overlooked practices serve an important mediative function in our lives. In a digital world where our play spaces and workspaces overlap it becomes harder to distinguish between them. How do we differentiate the real from the unreal? Perhaps the distinction isn't as clear as it seems.

IMAGINARY LANDSCAPES

RICHARD OLIVER REED

A Thesis Supportive Statement Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Wonsook Kim School of Art

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

2022

IMAGINARY LANDSCAPES

RICHARD OLIVER REED

COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

Albion Stafford, Chair

Tyler Lotz

Nathania Rubin

Melissa Johnson

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

CONTENTS

FIGURES

CHAPTER I: IMAGINARY LANDSCAPES

"It's not a physical landscape. It's a term reserved for the new technologies. It's a landscape in the future. It's as though you used technology to take you off the ground and go like Alice through the looking glass." -John Cage (on *Imaginary Landscapes*)[1]
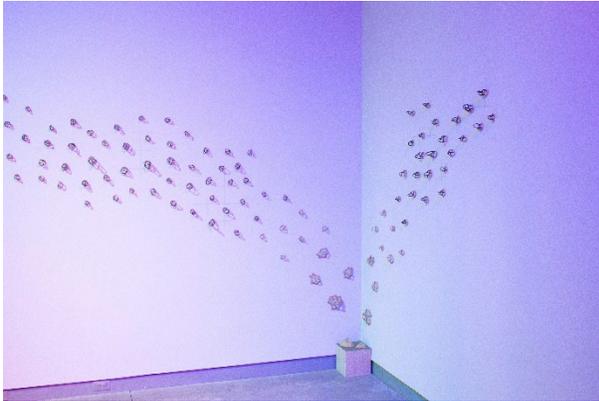

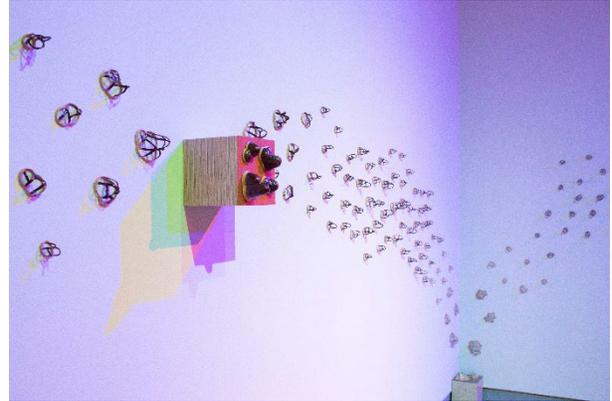*Fig. 1 Imaginary Landscapes View 1*, installation, 2022

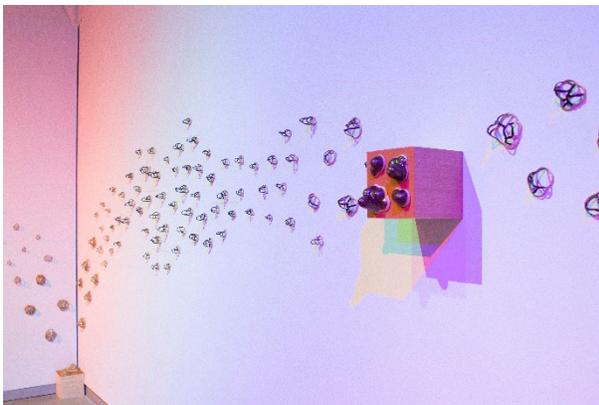*Fig. 2 Imaginary Landscapes View 2*, installation, 2022

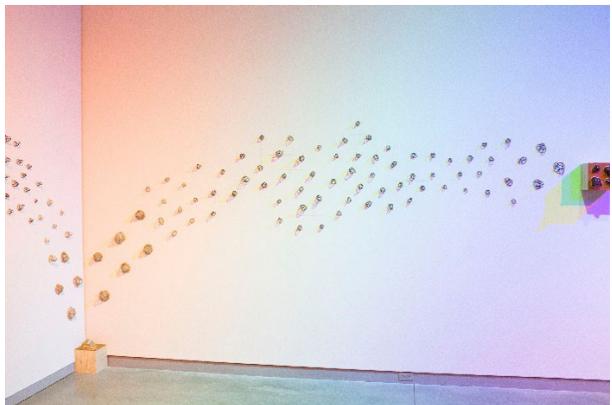*Fig. 3 Imaginary Landscapes View 3*, installation, 2022

Fig. 4 Imaginary Landscapes View 4, installation, 2022

---

[1] Richard Kostelanetz, *John Cage: (ex)plain(ed)*, New York: Schirmer Books, 1996, 66.
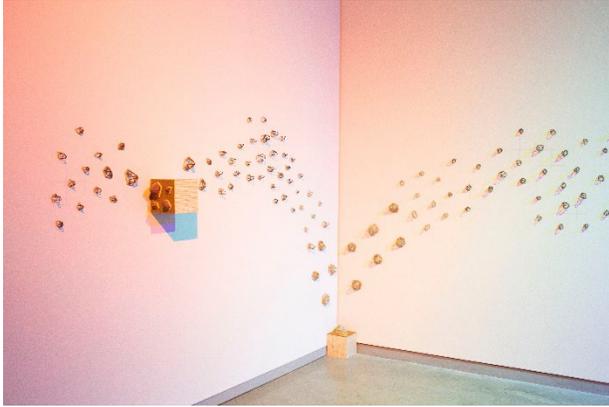
Fig. 5 Imaginary Landscapes View 5, installation, 2022

Standing in a darkened theater in Disney World's Epcot watching the Huangshan Mountains rising out of a misty basin was fascinating as a child. I had already been exposed to Ukiyo-e prints, Chinese landscape painting, and videogame depictions of place. However, seeing one of the sources for this style of representation heightened the intrigue, escapism, and reality of other places and ways of being. Exiting the theater put me in a beautiful pavilion embellished with color and intricate carvings and details. Disney was really trying to sell the idea of transcendent spaces and the marketability of exotic locations. As I exited the pavilion into a park filled with simulacra of other places in the world, the idea of what was authentic coalesced with the wonder of the attraction.

Like the Huangshan Mountains, the installation of *Imaginary Landscapes* is comprised of a range that stretches across the three walls of the gallery. Instead of being suspended in mist, these ideas of mountains and hills float on the walls and are suspended in a sea of colored light and shadows. The lights transition from purples and violets on the right to blues and greens, amethyst, yellows and pinks, and finally oranges on the left. The gestures at geological features are predominantly hollow wire form features of the landscape. As the light plays through the lines of these features the shadows extend and contract providing both a pleasant and

disorienting experience. As these loose, squiggly murmurations move across the wall they become solidified into more explicit representations of mountains, hills, rocks, dunes, snowdrifts, and glaciers. Two cubes hang on the central and left walls and the two others sit on the floor in the corners of the gallery. Solid forms of these features rest on the four cubes interspersed between the swaths of wire forms providing concrete representations of landscapes made through imaginative worldbuilding. Like a theme park movie theater, the installation creates a space for experiencing the escapism, wonder, and exoticism that representations of other places, both imaginary and real, provide.

Cool dark movie theaters[2], the myth of wilderness[3], and art[4] all share an ambivalence when the question of the real and unreal is asked. The disparity between reality and the imaginary creates a binary understanding of the world. The unreal cannot be real by its definition, but logically derived answers don't always suffice. The subjective experience of reality plays a part in the building of imaginary spaces. Just as the imaginary is informed by the real, the imagined informs our experience and engagement with reality. The secondary worlds built from imagination form a reciprocal relationship with reality, mediating and enriching our experience.

In his lecture *On Fairy Stories*, J.R.R. Tolkien creates a distinction between the primary real world and the secondary world that is produced through worldbuilding. What is important for Tolkien is that these two worlds are interdependent and live through one another. The primary world informs the building of the secondary world. In reciprocation, the narratives and

---

[2] Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge: The MIT Press. 2001.

[3] Vogel, *Thinking Like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy After the End of Nature*, 4-8.

[4] Susan Laxton, "Play as Disinterest," In *From Diversion to Subversion: Games, Play, and Twentieth-Century Art*, edited by David Getsy, 3-24, University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press. 2011.

spaces of secondary worlds enrich and inform our daily understanding of the real world. They mediate experience.[5]

Tolkien also evaluates imagination and the imaginary as lesser forms of creation than literary narrative that do not create secondary worlds but simply conjures images.[6] I consider this valuation incorrect. Imagination is the foundation and basis for creating secondary worlds. Without the first step in the process, the world made would seem hollow and not fully developed. This point of view inverts his argument that mere imagination can not be as full and vibrant as a developed narrative, but the action of narrative needs a setting. At the beginning of each novel in The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings there is even a map of Middle Earth to guide the reader.

The themes that arise from my experience growing up in the 90's are alienation, escapism, and worldbuilding. Alienation was the byproduct of being a queer kid in a southern, bourgeois, and catholic environment. This feeling of being outside the expected norm instigated my need for escape from the everyday. Worldbuilding through imagination and play filled this need. I didn't just consume the available worlds of TV shows, videogames, manga, novels, and movies, I used these media to build my own worlds.

I often felt like an alien trying to navigate a foreign planet as a kid. Videogames and other 90's nerd culture operated as coping mechanisms and escapes from the reality I felt disconnected from. Making the rounds during southern, bourgeois social events like college football games at the University of Alabama were uncomfortable experiences that I mediated with a Gameboy in my hands. It was easier to explore the mysterious Koholint Island in The

---

[5] E.C. Barksdale, *Cosmologies of Consciousness: Science and Literary Myth in an Exploration of the Beginnings and Development of Mind*, Cambridge: Schenkman Publishing Co. Inc., 1980, 48-49, 123.
[6] J.R.R. Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories*, London: HarperCollins*Publishers*, 2014, 59-61.

<u>Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening</u> than engaging in the spectacle of a sport I had no interest in. Traveling through the pixelated landscape and moving from one frame on the island's gridded map to another distracted me when feeling isolated.
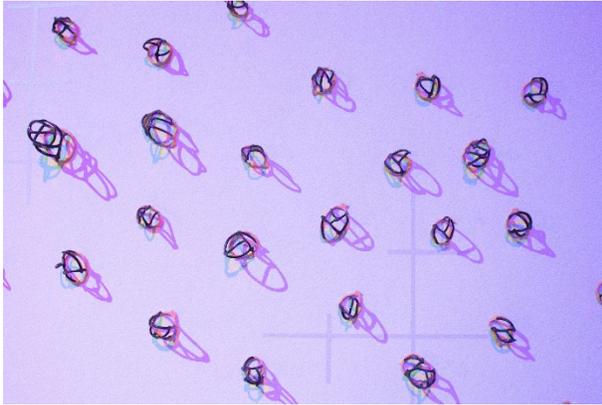
Fig. 6 Imaginary Landscapes Detail 1, installation, 2022   *Fig. 7 Imaginary Landscapes Detail 2*, installation, 2022
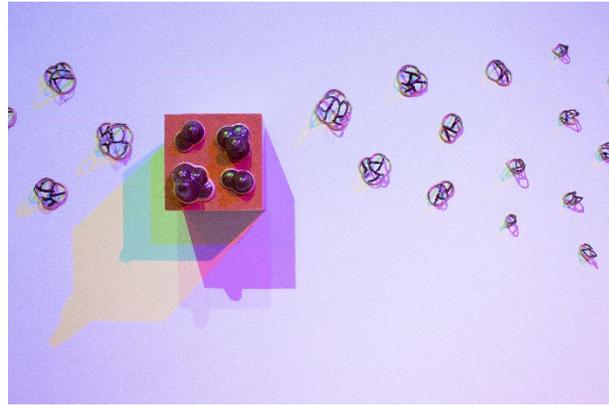
Grids, cubes, and squares exist and operate in *Imaginary Landscapes* as references to the influence of videogames and as basic building blocks used in physical and metaphorical constructions. Koholint Island is laid out as a gridded world due to the digital technology it was created with, but real-world maps use grids to analyze and quantify the landscape as well. Subtle vinyl grids are laid out beneath the loose, wire form features as they stretch across the walls. These indications of structure ground the open gestures of geological features in the sea of color. The cubes that ground the solid forms rise out of these flat expanses like extrusions from the grid. The two cubes in the gallery corners ground the installation in the real world while accentuating the angular nature of real constructed spaces. The grid also carries connotations of the digital infrastructure that typifies life in the real world, a drawing of the intersection between the real and the unreal.

The material sensibilities that inform my worldbuilding have developed from my experiences as a child. Readily available construction materials remind me of my father's never

ending home improvement projects. Craft materials were available because of my mother's

constant projects in sewing and making things for the house. The active employment of

imagination during playtime also contributed to my material development. Videogames

informed digital sensibilities with their flashing graphics and highly saturated hues, while

playing outdoors in the mud with sticks and broken bits of brick fostered a love for earthier

substances and discarded things.

I am fascinated by light and shadows as materials because they have an inherent

insubstantiality to them. Light can be overlooked or taken for granted, and the subtlety and

differences it produces can be missed. Drawing on the formative experience of videogames, the

light provides super saturated hues of light and shadow that cause the solid forms to pop and

highlights the contrast between the substantial ceramic and cubes, and the insubstantial light and

color. Like imagination and whimsy, light has a quantifiable realness in experience while

remaining out of reach.

Another material that was common in my childhood was plywood. When used with

contact paper, this heavily mediated material connotes construction and the building of spaces

while also referencing the interplay of the real and unreal. The contact paper has the most direct

correlation to the idea of realness because it depicts woodgrain while masking the plywood

beneath it. This idea of the synthetic shows the nature of our mediated reality. Everything we

interact with has participated in the exchange between the real and the unreal.

Felt was also a commonplace material in my childhood. It carries connotations of craft

and brings softness into these landscapes. As a child I would lay pieces of felt out to serve as

grass, a foundation of earth for toys to exist on. On the cubes it serves the same function. As a

synthetic material, the felt gestures at the intersection of the real and unreal in the same way as

plywood and contact paper. The felt provides a soft space for the harder pieces to settle.

Landscape can be thought of as hard and rocky, but, like turf, it is also soft and comfortable.

Clay and ceramic have both a personal and symbolic use in my work. With my playtime

divided between videogames and playing outside, I spent a lot of time in the mud. Clay still

brings back memories of wet dirt and building worlds in the backyard. An old torn down

greenhouse with an old PVC spicket left behind allowed me to flood the ground and build a

world with trenches and holes that became lakes and rivers with bits of brick and sticks

populating their banks. Working with clay today carries that familiarity and comfort.

In a broader sense, clay is earth and functions as a material reference to the land and

landscape. The entire ceramic process mimics geological processes of shifting bedrock, pushing

up land, and tempering material with magma and heat to make rock and mountains. This

familiarity from childhood and sense of freedom in building my own worlds the way nature

provides both an escape from the world and a sense of control in it. Ceramic serves as an

affirming, worldbuilding process engaging with tectonics and the movement of the earth, but for

me it ultimately brings back the smell of wet dirt and the ability to make worlds out of mud.

Worldbuilding has been a coping mechanism I've used for my whole life. Playing alone

in the backyard, staring at the TV while playing Nintendo, or reading about fantastic adventures

were my common pastimes. I continue engaging with these influences in my current work which

serves as an integral coping mechanism for the separation and alienation that weigh on me today.

The small scale of the installation's pieces refence the intimate space of play for children.

Small toys and objects, whether they are mass produced or found makeshift toys, operate in this

space where they are approachable. They show how small things build into the totality of

experience. Their intimacy and delicacy speak to vulnerability through their light and airy

structures. As a group in the installation, these small pieces create a larger effect. The viewer can measure themselves against the process of experience and insert themselves into the space and process. By interacting with the effects of the installation they can attempt to make sense of the smaller parts. Small is comfortable, familiar, safe, cute, fun, and whimsical. Small things can be easily carried with you both physically and metaphorically. Ultimately, the smallness of the pieces creates a welcoming place for comfort and escape.

By utilizing these themes, activities, and material experiences from my childhood I am building a world where the interplay between the digital and the analog can be explored. This relationship is especially prescient in a society where there is little distinction between real life and digital life. When our workspaces and our play spaces are muddled with no clear delineation the reciprocal relationship between them becomes apparent. Like Tolkien's primary and secondary worlds, each one informs the other.

In <u>Play as Disinterest,</u> Susan Laxton traces the evolution of the philosophical role of play in art history through the theorists: Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schiller, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, and Georg Simmel. Kant's conception of art and play consider both to be transcendent and outside of daily life and experience. Schiller worked to codify this transcendence into a didactic tool for moralization in society. Nietzsche wrestled with the inherent contradictions in play. Freud drew play as a societally sanctioned subversive act. Simmel brought the trajectory that Nietzsche and Freud had begun by presenting his ideas on play forms. These activities held an ambivalence because of their situation as a part of daily life while being separate from work. Yet, these play forms synthesize both reality and an escape

from it. Laxton equates these play forms with the concept of play in an art historical sense.[7]

This equivocation makes play an inherent, though difficult to quantify, aspect of both art and life.

Lev Manovich asserts that our play spaces and our workspaces have become the same in computer technology in <u>The Language of New Media</u>. In tracing the development of new media, Manovich cites the union of cinema and data computation as the advent of new media. The darkened movie theaters where people had escaped to mediate modern society now exist in handheld devices, computers, and home entertainment systems.[8] Apps for streaming services, videogames, and social media exist alongside email, spreadsheets, and documents. This integration mirrors Simmel's social activities and their tension between the real world of work and the secondary world of play.

The influence of Japanese mass media on my work begins with 1990's videogames, manga, and anime. The colors, interactivity, and ways of depicting environments have remained with me and influenced the way I interpret the world. The absurd whimsy of these games, i.e., a mushroom kingdom being saved by an Italian plumber from a fire breathing tortoise, instilled the desire for lightheartedness and fun in the real world. The escapism of Japanese media impacted me beyond a simple enjoyment of fun. This media began to show me that there were other perspectives outside of the restrictive society I was living in. There was a physicality, a realness in worldbuilding that went beyond pure imagination.

The experience of Super Nintendo graphics informs my use of color. The palette this system used had a distinct use of very natural, earthy tones and highly saturated tones that we associate with the synthetic. This union between the two continues the opposition and duality of

---

[7] Susan Laxton, "Play as Disinterest," In *From Diversion to Subversion: Games, Play, and Twentieth-Century Art*, edited by David Getsy, 3-24, University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press. 2011.

[8] Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge: The MIT Press. 2001.

the installation. The Super Nintendo's simple color palette speaks to the interaction of the real,

natural world and the imaginary, synthetic, digital, and constructed world. By highlighting these

distinctions, the colors help expose the supposed opposition between these two sides, and show

the greater commonality between them in their interactions. The magenta, cyan, and yellow

shadows complexify and accentuate the earthy ceramic forms and surfaces. Together the effect

of this interaction mirrors the colors of videogames and concretizes the imaginary worlds those

pixelated graphics depicted.

The physicality of worldbuilding and the elusiveness of imagination and escapism come

together for me in my imaginary landscapes. In seeking to reconcile my alienation I spent a lot

of time not being fully present. I created these alternate environments of absurdity and whimsy

to visit when I chose. Ukiyo-e prints and the stylization in videogames they informed serves as a

basis for my environments.

The sensibilities of the "world of floating pictures" and the economic impetus behind

their sponsorship made sense to me. A bourgeoning middle class in 17th century Japan

sponsored the popular media of the Edo Period. Growing up in a consumerist society that

continues the traditions of late nineteenth century bourgeois culture highlights the impact

capitalist modes have on my work. Just like Japonisme consumed Western bourgeois culture

then, Japanese media in the late twentieth century was in high demand in the 1990's and early

2000's nerd culture I grew up with.

Alienation operates as a symptom of modern capitalist society.[9] The isolation that

capitalist culture creates initiates the need for personal explorations in secondary worlds. Like

Ukiyo-e was born from the burgeoning merchant class in the Edo period, the idea of a floating

---

[9] Steven Vogel, *Thinking Like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy After the End of Nature*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2016, 69-79.

world persists in modern mass media. Super Mario games allow people to run through the clouds and imagine their own floating worlds.   These sensations and fascinations provide inspiration for my imaginary landscapes. When capitalist culture and all the problematics it creates become overwhelming, it's nice to have somewhere else to go to process and have respite.

These interior landscapes are like the fiction of wilderness. Vast empty places that contain all the promise and potential of an unspoiled world.[10] Like any ideal form, they don't exist but create an aspiration for the real world. By manifesting these spaces, others can share in that wonder and possibility. Finding comfort in the optimistic premise of these imaginary landscapes.

As an installation, space, environment, and place serve an important function. Playing with the gallery as a constructed environment, the introduction of light, color, a plethora of ceramic wire forms, and cubes builds in the gallery a place for viewers to operate in and interact with the work. The viewer isn't just viewing a representation of landscape but is activating it by entering a play space where they can participate in the transition and vacillation between concrete reality and the process of imagination. The installation participates in this process because it is comprised of smaller parts that can be rearranged and manifested in new iterations. The possibility of imaginative play serves as an inherent quality of the work in its ability to be reconstructed to occupy and activate future spaces.

The installation serves as a diagram or illustration of the imaginative process. Things begin in a loose and ambiguous state, and then gradually solidify into solid representations of fantastic places where the hills and mountains from my mind can take shape in the real world.

---

[10] Vogel, *Thinking Like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy After the End of Nature*, 4-8.

By manifesting this process and sharing it with others, I hope that they can find some solace and escape from being overwhelmed by the messiness of the real world. Like the possibility and wonder in a Disney World theme park attraction, everything we experience informs our interior worlds which build the concrete world around us.

WORKS CITED

Barksdale, E.C.. *Cosmologies of Consciousness: Science and Literary Myth in an Exploration of the Beginnings and Development of Mind*. Cambridge: Schenkman Publishing Co. Inc. 1980.

Kostelanetz, Richard. *John Cage: (ex)plain(ed)*. New York: Schirmer Books. 1996.

Laxton, Susan. "Play as Disinterest." In *From Diversion to Subversion: Games, Play, and Twentieth-Century Art*, edited by David Getsy, 3-24. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press. 2011.

Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge: The MIT Press. 2001.

Tolkien, J.R.R. *Tolkien on Fairy-stories*. London: HarperCollins*Publishers*. 2014.

Vogel, Steven. *Thinking Like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy After the End of Nature*. Cambridge: The MIT Press. 2016.