

Lay of the Land: Work by Maysey Craddock and Erin Harmon at the Brooks

By Eileen Townsend

The Brooks Museum of Art is currently exhibiting the work of two contemporary Memphis artists who paint landscapes. But Maysey Craddock's and Erin Harmon's works are a far cry from academic oils of mountain ranges or waterfalls. Their paintings are, instead, weird negatives (Craddock's white vines on a velvet-black background) or false positives (Harmon's collaged trees in neon colors, looking not quite like anything you've ever seen).

The exhibit, "A Different Kind of Landscape," was curated by Marina Pacini, who says that she has been waiting for years to mount this exhibit. She describes Craddock's work as evocative and moody and Harmon's as otherworldly, with a hint of danger.

Harmon is responsible for a series of fantastical landscapes constructed with cut paper and gouache. Her works are placed among Craddock's large-scale paintings of ruin and overgrowth. Craddock's cross-haired line work is also executed in gouache on paper, though to very different effect.

The two artists' works have more than material affinity. One of Harmon's works is called Post-Historic Landscape, a title that could easily refer to either artists' work. Both Craddock and Harmon are concerned with how the landscape, as a concept and an actuality, is altered over time. Their works are not exactly landscapes; they are about landscapes. More specifically, their works are comments on the way landscapes have been envisioned and documented in the past.

Both artists have laborious artistic processes that, as Pacini puts it, "distance them from the place they are depicting." To create her scenes, Harmon uses six kinds of paper cut, painted, and stored in Ziploc bags. She later collages the paper, trimming and expanding where necessary. Craddock shapes her canvases out of flattened paper bags that she hand-stitches together.

One of Craddock's more recent pieces, *Deep the Well* (2012), shows a destroyed barn. In the foreground, vines form a hairline-thin curtain. The collapsed barn is painted in light shades of gouache, the brown of the paper canvas showing through at parts. This work is a subtler addendum to Craddock's earlier pieces, such as *Night Memory* (2007), in which the white silhouette of a tree is stamped flatly on an even, blue background.

Craddock says she is interested in the "psyche of the border." She was raised in Memphis but has lived on two coasts, in New Orleans and Maine, and has traveled (or border-hopped) widely. She returned to Memphis and to a studio south of downtown, because, she says, the ruinous landscape that she is most engaged by is all around her here. (Craddock calls the process of assembling her canvases "making a ruin out of a ruin.")

Craddock's imagined border may be the border of a kudzu-draped river bluff or the metaphoric border between the past and present. Perhaps the most intriguing border in her work, though, is that between the negative and the full scene, the undeveloped and the fully shown. Craddock's concerned with the liminal space behind the image — the memory behind the place.

Harmon's work, on the other hand, is about scientific memory rather than personal memory and about documentation. As much as she is painting landscapes, she is creating botanical cabinets for faux embroideries of faux species in a faux garden. In *Contained Cave* (2010), luminescent, blue, heart-shaped leaves grow along an arched vine, carefully contained within a glass terrarium set on a deep-black background.

Harmon's landscapes are mysterious but crystal clear. They are like those fish that glow in the deepest parts of ocean: something about them familiar, something alien. Harmon says that she wanted to capture the sense flying into Las Vegas at night — a contained thrill, a note of the otherworldly sounding over the meticulously built.

Harmon's and Craddock's dialogue with history, memory, and place are well

suited to the Brooks' quiet halls. The two painters are well paired, both as practitioners and as artists with much to say about the landscape, be it dark and ruinous or bright and surreal.