

## Decoys

Vesna Pavlovic and Nicholas Nyland's recent collaborative project *Search for Landscapes*, a title which reaffirms our desire to seek out, explore and possess a place, critiques the cultural function of the tourist by highlighting the dynamics of desire produced through memory, photography, and object production. As the artists' express: "This collaborative installation explores the ideas of travel and transformation of landscape through representation and conditions of seeing...the artists explore the history of travel, visual tourism, and the relationship we have to the culture and history of particular tourist sites." As source material, they have mined an archive of found slides picturing the travels of a family during the 1960s, a time arguably considered the heyday of post-war, American tourism.

Through a series of representations realized in photographs, sculptures, and drawings, the artists engage in a dialogue about transparency and materiality. Images are appropriated and pushed through processes of translation and interpretation. *Study for Wall Drawing* derives from a slide picturing a domestic interior that makes visible the inhabitant's attempt to simulate nature through its representation, revealing their want to reconstruct the sublime. In this image, a wall-mounted scroll depicts a tranquil landscape. In the adjacent room, a table and chairs are positioned in front of a wall papered in a landscape print and placed next to a floor to ceiling window draped with curtains made of thin, semi-transparent fabric, so as to frame a view and allow the outside in. The domestic comforts and travels to faraway places, once experienced by this American family and kept alive in still images, offer insights into our own blind spots. Pavlovic and Nyland locate themselves in this prism, questioning the production and replication of images and objects made during a specific, historical period. Their explorations give focus to more recent history and the problems inherent in how we participate in and construct our cultural moment.

In the spring of 2008, I heard a single phrase, a new phrase, staycation, on a morning television program that unsettled me, and its recurrence throughout the media in the weeks and months to come produced the same sensation of unease. My discomfort was brought about by the fact that a change in mainstream American society was well underway. Even with the economic hardships, the tourist industry had conceived of a concept to replace many Americans' summer vacations. Prior to the era of staycations, travel was considered easy and affordable. This previous view was bid farewell when gas prices rose and our economy became increasingly unstable. The term came into use and marketing soon followed – promoting a product that one could be a tourist, a foreigner in their own town – as a strategy to keep consumer spending domestic.

With the media encouraging families to stay local and create a desirable vacation in their own backyard, individuals became increasingly aware of their own financial instability. The staycation trivialized the economic reality of families across the nation. They were being sold a trendy alternative to one of their American dreams and the domestic was soon transformed into somewhere else, another place – the exotic island. The concept challenged a demographic of middleclass Americans, who since the mid to late 1950s and 1960s had become accustomed to the freedom of mobility, whether experienced through the pleasures of the open road or a flight to a tropical destination, endeavors which encouraged escape from domestic realities. During one's vacation, domestic and professional responsibilities are taken out of focus, yet are inevitably visible upon one's return home. Vacations are as much self-preservation, as they are escapism disguised as freedom.

This cultural phenomenon of the staycation was presented as a suitable alternative, but clearly not an even trade. Do staycationers photograph their backyard experiences as tourists in their familiar surroundings? How did the illusion of the far become replaced with the fantasy of the near? Why seek out new landscapes when you can create them in your backyard? Much like traditional tourist photography, the staycation, was a copy, a stand-in, an unsuitable substitute, a mere replacement for the real deal. This decoy used to reframe experience could not capture the pleasures of the original, just the loss of it.

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