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Paintings in Epsten Gallery exhibit are grounded in the land Without showing a soul, artists portray our connections to the soil around us.

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Our union with the land is primitive and modern, emotional and pragmatic.

In the exhibit "Overland" at the Epsten Gallery, Marci Aylward, John Davis Carroll, Lisa Grossman, Mary Ann Strandell and Jane Voorhees embody our various relationships to the land. They relish the freedom that painting the natural world embodies, whether they stand in a stream or in a studio to create.

New Jersey-based Strandell, a former KC resident, produces energetic oil and pigment works on paper during her perambulations around the country. Painting in an abstract and extremely gestural style, Strandell favors untainted land over human intervention.

"Los Huertos With Trees" is a dynamic and frenetic relationship of natural elements. Branches crisscross the picture plane, and are, at times, seemingly blended with the boulders that appear in the water and merge toward the indistinguishable shore. It is a spectacle of color and geometry.

Human commerce infiltrates Aylward's linear paintings, in which power plants and industrial buildings dominate the land.

Painting scenes from around her studio in Kansas City's West Bottoms, Aylward presents the land's pact with its industrial occupiers. In "Grand Street Power Station, River Market," a smokestack slices into the sky, while a crisp diagonal line connects it to the earth. Painted shadows direct the eye through the painting.

Taking a visual cue from the sharply focused paintings of Charles Demuth, Aylward creates spectacular light, bathing the scene in a crisp, crystalline glow, rendering the factories visually appealing.

Carroll also paints the intersection of industry and landscape. Here he turns to installation, combining miniature videos with detailed works on paper. The drawings are narrow and wide, and provide companions to three videos, "In and Out I, II, and III," in which a wintry river flows among smoke plumes.

The tiny videos provide ambient sounds of train whistles and wind rustling, informing the visual experience. While we worry about industry's impact on the land, Carroll's scenes suggest that anxiety and beauty may form an interesting cartel.

Voorhees treats the land as a site of mysticism and mystery. Her dreamscapes exist in the spaces between what the land is and what it might be. These murky and earthy paintings on paper reveal her emotional and spiritual experience of the land.

In "Sailor's Delight," a bright orange swath of light emerges out of the dark sky and ground. Playing off the ancient adage "red sky at night, sailor's delight" Voorhees creates a visual poem. Her paintings provide contrast to Aylward's or Carroll's by trading on Romantic notions of spirituality and the sublime.

Lawrence artist Grossman's paintings are visual love letters to the vast Kansas plains. Dark and moody, yet realistic, they are elegiac images of Kansas that emotionally align with Voorhees' work.

"Flatwater II" is an homage to the Kansas river. Viewed aerially (Grossman photographs the river from a

plane, then paints in her studio) the river slices through the land like a ribbon of sun-illuminated gold. The river and the land carry on forever, until, as if in a dream, the river touches the golden sky. Grossman captures the land's capacity to physically and psychologically replenish itself and its people.

“Overland” artists have essentially imaged the land as unpeopled — no realistic human form provides scale or interferes with our view. And yet, human imprint is writ large on most of the paintings — through industry or through wonder and enchantment.

For the artists, the land represents commercial promise and spiritual fecundity, giving back, hopefully, more than we might take.

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