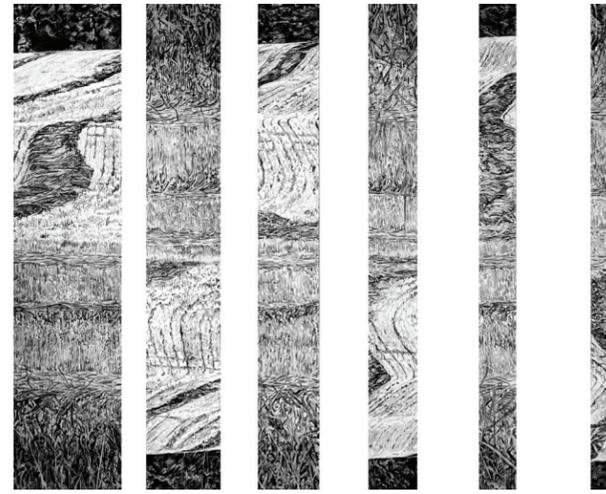
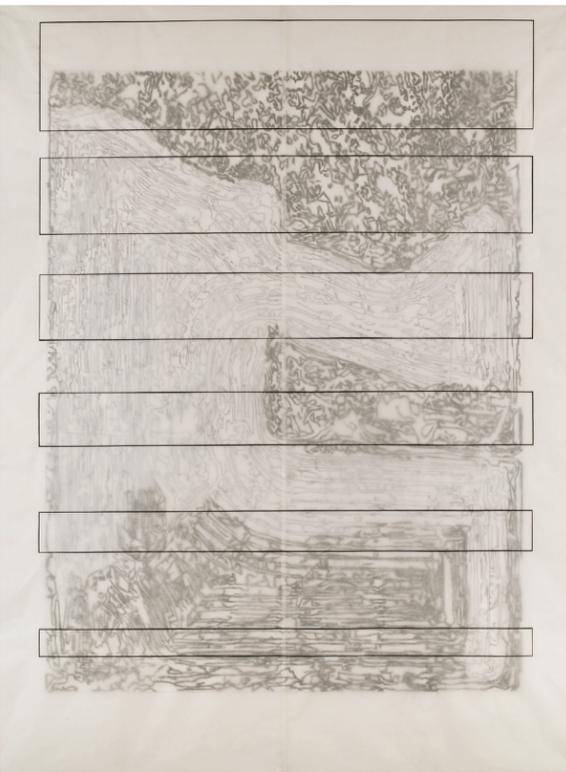


*land scaped*, Oil on canvas, 2012, photograph by Kevin Bertram, image courtesy of the artist.



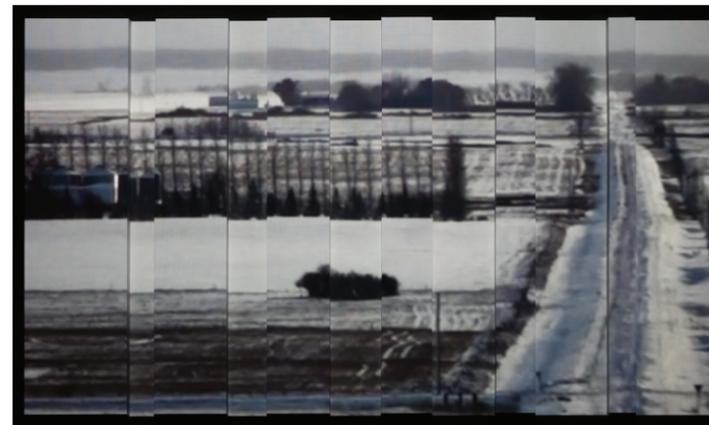
*transit 1*, Charcoal and gesso on canvas, 2012, photograph by Kevin Bertram, image courtesy of the artist.



*framed*, Graphite, permanent marker and charcoal on tracing paper, 2012, photograph by Kevin Bertram, image courtesy of the artist



*from turkey ranch road*, Charcoal, white charcoal and pastel on paper, 2012, photograph by Kevin Bertram, image courtesy of the artist



*drawn*, (detail), video installation, 2012, with Derek Gunnlaugson (video editing and key grip) and Leanne Zacharias (musical score, editing and performance), photograph by Kevin Bertram, image courtesy of the artist.



*landed*, Charcoal, white charcoal and pastel on paper, 2012, photograph by Kevin Bertram, image courtesy of the artist.



*Landed: drawn and framed*, Installation view, Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba, 2012, photograph by Kevin Bertram.

## BEN DAVIS

Ben Davis is a visual artist living and working in Brandon, Manitoba since 2008. Born in England, he has taught and exhibited there and in the United States, Botswana and Canada, with work in collections in all four countries.

His work problematizes his relationship to new and unfamiliar contexts – to people, culture, and land – responding to the distinct physical and social terrain of his surroundings, while adopting formats and using configurations to suggest processes of interpreting and understanding locality. His practice involves large-scale drawing, painting and mixed-media installation, along with video and collaborative interdisciplinary modes of working.

## BEN DAVIS LANDED: DRAWN AND FRAMED

CURATED BY NATALIA LEBEDINSKAIA  
OCTOBER 4 – NOVEMBER 24, 2012

ART GALLERY OF SOUTHWESTERN MANITOBA  
710 ROSSER AVENUE, UNIT 2  
BRANDON, MANITOBA. R7A 0K9

[www.agsm.ca](http://www.agsm.ca)

“A working country is hardly ever a landscape.”

- Raymond Williams<sup>i</sup>

A mile-by-mile plot of farmland South of Brandon, Manitoba, looking down Turkey Ranch Road, constitutes the focus of Ben Davis’ new body of work. Having recently relocated to Canada from England through Botswana, Davis approached *Landed: drawn and framed* as a systematic study of his new surroundings. The resulting exhibition embodies the paradoxes, layers of meaning, and the intersection of emotive and political concerns that remain acutely autobiographical, even as they speak to wider questions about land use and division.

The mile-by-mile plot selected by Davis is different from the plots that it overlays. Chosen arbitrarily as his own, it is a fictional division only existing within this series of drawings, painting, and video work. The arbitrary boundary that Davis imposes on the land brings to the fore the artifice of the boundaries that surround it. The geometry of the mile-by-mile plots carries the history of individual ownership, which shapes the way in which the prairies are experienced, measured, and framed. The rhythm in the division of the plots does not “undo” landscape into farmland, but suggest another way of constituting the definition of landscape that includes gaps, empty spaces, erosion, and constant change.

The title is a play on words: *land* transformed into a verb, indicates Davis’ status as a landed immigrant. The land is *drawn* and *framed* within the exhibition, but it is also drawn and framed outside of it through use and division. Meanwhile, a *landed immigrant* suggests a state of newfound stability, as if one was until now afloat - a semantic suggestion of manifest destiny, of the land open for the taking. Consequently, settlement histories and colonialism continue to define the practices and geographies that Davis’ work deconstructs. The very act of landscape representation as a statement of land ownership is paramount to the continual development of the colonial project.

Satellite imagery provides many of the motifs that appear throughout the exhibition: a swathing pattern that emerges in the pieces as one walks around them, sometimes concealed beneath a sheet of tracing paper, other times overlaying an image of the same field, perspective intact but turned upside down. The Google view of the mile-by-mile plot acts as the guiding entry point. The abstract shapes that come back again and again can be traced to this image. However, as in the process of riding the combine harvester back and forth through the land, some parts of the drawings are turned upside down, repeating the rhythm of rotation and gaps.

The two *transit* pieces frame the exhibition as two sets of barcode. The mathematical rhythm that guides the sizing of the panels and the spaces between them appears throughout the rest of the gallery, but it is most apparent in the two multi-panel drawings. The white spaces and the detailed layered mark-making echo each other, and the decreasing width of the panels corresponds to the size of the increasing gaps between them. Davis explains the rhythm as stemming from a variety of sources, guided by the principles for this body of work:

division, framing, and drawing. Furthering his argument for the work to embody the physical experience of the land, he imagines the spaces between the panels as gaps between cars of the freight trains crossing the prairies. The cars block the landscape behind them and a frame moves through the land on the railway tracks. Through the history of its construction and use, the railway is inextricably tied to the farming industry and the settlement of this region, dividing the landscape and guiding land use, value, and distribution.

Landscape was initially a German word that assumed a mark of human presence, meaning a cluster of houses nestled in a natural setting. It only shifted as the importance and status of land ownership grew, especially to encompass new colonies.<sup>ii</sup> The Canadian national identity has been shaped by images of landscape, especially those that appear devoid of human presence, and the omission of that presence has become accepted truth. While the images in *Landed* are always about the land, they bring out the dual meaning of *drawn* and *framed*. How decisions about land use are framed will likely guide the future of this region.

The white space of the gallery surrounding and entering the work through the gaps suggests everything that is left out but that still haunts the exhibition: the histories of colonialism and settlement; environmental degradation as a result of farming practices; family farms disappearing; many small towns vanishing. The prairie continues to shift as one of the most altered landscapes on earth.<sup>iii</sup> Altered through the vision of land ownerships and labour, it is steeped in violence to the land and its occupants. The vastness of the alterations to the land suggests the cost of transformation and of ownership.<sup>iv</sup>

In the video piece *drawn* a small cloud of dust rises as a car drives across the field, describing a line through the land. The gesture suggests the practices of 1960s Land Art or Earthworks movement, which has greatly influenced Davis’ work. In *Richard Long: A Line Made by Walking*, Dieter Roelstraete makes an argument that there are two kinds of Land Art that emerged in the 1960s: in the United States, a group of artists including Robert Smithson were interested in moving large amounts of materials to create monumental sculpture such as Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty*; on the other hand, British artists such as Long and Andy Goldsworthy made work that was much more contained by small gestures, such as *A line Made by Walking*.<sup>v</sup> *Landed: drawn and framed* plays out this dichotomy. The violence done onto some of the works, in dividing them into sections and turning some of them upside down, mirrors the violence done to the land through its drastic alteration, suggesting the aesthetics of its use as a sort of vernacular monumental Earthworks. Driving across the land to produce a dust cloud, however, lies closer to ephemeral mark-making through walking.

Taking the Land Art movement further as Davis’ reference point, a tension emerges between a delineated interest in immateriality, such as the dust drawing lines across the land and the distinct physicality of the works. They occupy space in the gallery since they are strongly tied to the tradition of landscape painting. Davis states that his motivation is to

invite the viewer to ergonomically re-create his experience of the land within the gallery. The process is at the forefront, as the land’s surrogate in the paintings is cut, turned on its head, rearranged. The act of turning parts of the work upside down and around, of realigning and rearranging pieces into a new whole, asks the viewer to undo the artist’s decisions: to imagine turning the panel back around, or putting the paintings back together. The viewer’s desire for these actions make the work distinctly performative and spatial, while highlighting the naturalized expectations for what landscape painting should be.

Nigerian born curator and art historian Okwui Enwezor suggests the concept of ‘to-ing and fro-ing’ as a way to conceptualize the “restless, ceaseless engagement” that marks the state of negotiating co-existing traditions.<sup>vi</sup> While the legacy of colonial violence looms large over any practice of landscape representation, the question arises of how to negotiate these relationships in the present, and within the gallery space. Davis proposes the inversions and transformations of his canvases as one such strategy, as the viewer is constantly reminded that the image is not a window into reality, but a flat construct. The flow of vision from illusionary three-dimensions into tactile two-dimensional space enacts the ‘to-ing and fro-ing’ of negotiating contemporary colonial realities.

The prairie might be an imaginary and constructed landscape, created through erasure, framing, and settlement. However, it is also physical land that continuously works and produces wealth in the present. To make a “working country” into landscape is to focus on what traditional landscape practice leaves out. The land that is constructed by representation as imaginary - but also physically and through economic activity - is a *palimpsest*: it carries and shows layers of past uses and histories, even as they are erased. Based on the ancient practice of reusing sheets of parchment and vellum by continuously erasing and rewriting on them, palimpsest has grown to mean any surface that carries visible accumulation of meaning and history. The prairie landscape carries the layers of its past that has shaped its current conditions: from its topography guided by the mass of moving and melting glaciers, to the shift into corporate farming, and everything that lies between.

The landscape explored by Davis was never innocent, and the images of pastoral fields and farmland have grown to signify power, possession, displacement, and often violence.<sup>vii</sup> Familiar prairie scenes with bright hues and rolling hills were initiated as promotional images for settlement of the West and were often heavily altered to eliminate signs of harsh climate and the vast flatness of the prairies, along with any trace of the colonial project. Since then, such images have grown to seem increasingly vacuous, as they have become absorbed into the vernacular painting traditions of the prairie picturesque. By reconfiguring, layering, and inverting images that directly reference these traditions, *Landed: drawn and framed* is a testament to how landscape representation remains relevant and politically charged. Meanwhile, the foreboding and mournful sound of Leanne Zacharias’ cello echoes through the gallery, accompanying the video in *drawn*. As the video traces the transition from fall to winter, Zacharias’ relentless and

haunting music brings the rhythm of the drawings in line with the changing seasons.

- Natalia Lebedinskaia  
Curator, Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba

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#### LIST OF WORKS

*mile by mile*, Inkjet print, 2012

*land scaped*, Oil on canvas, 2012

*palimpsest I*, Charcoal, ink and white charcoal on paper, 2010

*palimpsest II*, Charcoal, ink and white charcoal on paper, 2011

*landed*, Charcoal, white charcoal and pastel on paper, 2012

*from turkey ranch road*, Charcoal, white charcoal and pastel on paper, 2012

*transit 1*, Charcoal and gesso on canvas, 2012. Private collection of Serena Petrella & Roger Shears

*transit 2*, Acrylic on canvas, 2012

*framed*, Graphite, permanent marker and charcoal on tracing paper, 2012

*drawn*, Video installation, 2012, with Derek Gunnlaugson (video

editing and key grip) and Leanne Zacharias (musical score, editing and performance)

<sup>i</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 120. Quoted in W.J.T. Mitchell, “Preface to the Second Edition,” *Landscape and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), viii.

<sup>ii</sup> Steven Matijcio, “Garbage Hill: the prairie as problematic,” in Steven Matijcio, ed., *Scratching the Surface: the Post-Prairie Landscape* (Winnipeg: Plug In ICA Institute of Contemporary Art, 2008), 77.

<sup>iii</sup> Alison Calder, “Sense and Place,” in Matijcio, ed., 14.

<sup>iv</sup> Calder, 15.

<sup>v</sup> Dieter Roelstraete, *Richard Long: a Line Made by Walking* (London: Afterall Books, 2010), 25.



<sup>vi</sup> Karen Raney and Okwui Enwezor, “To-ing and Fro-ing”, excerpts from a 2001 interview originally published in *Art in Question*, Karen Raney, Continuum Press, 2003

<sup>vii</sup> Matijcio, 78.