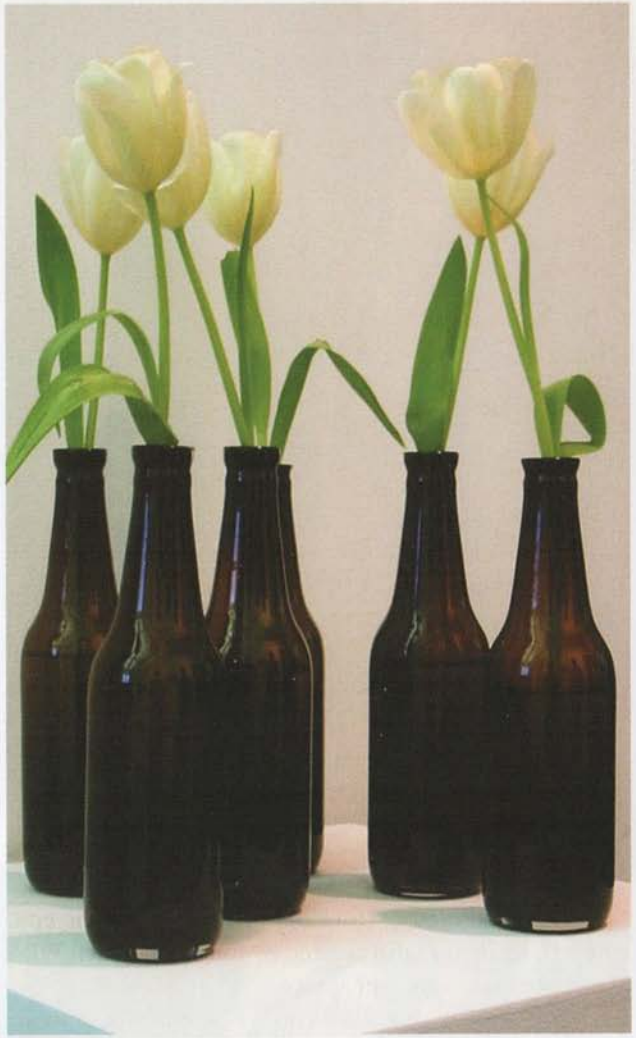


*Royal Leerdam Crystal Beer Bottle Candle Holders (Flower Vases)*, 2001, installation view, John Connelly Presents, New York

# Tree and Rock and Cloud

## Rachel Kushner

The opening scene of Mungo Thomson's video *The American Desert (for Chuck Jones)* (2002) is an illustrated landscape with a distant rocky outcropping in the background and a giant green saguaro cactus in the foreground. It has the familiar trappings of desert—dry, vast, spare, and dominated by sky. And it's a specific place—the domain of a famous Looney Tunes/Merry Melodies cartoon created by Chuck Jones, in which Wile E. Coyote relentlessly pursues the Road Runner. *The American Desert* is a montage of views, a sequence of uninhabited *Road Runner* domains edited in modules that reflect the twenty-five *Road Runner* episodes that Chuck Jones directed, from 1949 to 1964, and one episode of *Bugs Bunny* (also created by Jones), in which Wile E. Coyote makes an appearance.

The *Road Runner* landscape is comically surreal,

with giant rocks piled on smaller rocks, balancing like ungainly ballerinas on point. The sky is a wash of acid yellows, and peculiarly shaped and textured clouds have no meteorological referent. The predominant hues are sunburned rose, chalky blue, mauve, and purple. These backdrops were meant to flash on the screen as brief, shorthand reminders of the characters' habitat and then fade as the action took focus. Through digital manipulation, Thomson has absented the action and created pans, sweeps, and zooms, as though we were wandering through the set while the actors were on holiday. He has found a way of temporally dilating the landscape, and the inspection that this dilation invites feels like trespassing. We are allowed to linger, ponder the nadir of perilous river bottoms, the vertiginous rocky heights, the mercilessness of sun and gravity, the train tracks and absurd suburban byways that zigzag through this desolate desertscape. The road brings to mind another human imprint: the Acme gadgets, which look like proto–Jean Tinguelys, a parody of the newfangled gizmos that were popular in the 1950s. Acme was a relationship whose conditions were mail order only—like Sears, which did the bulk of its business by catalogue in that era. The products seemed to come from very far away, a reminder of the coyote's rural zip code.

So where, geographically speaking, is this place?

It has the unmistakable mesas and monoliths of Monument Valley, located on the Utah-Arizona border. But Monument Valley has no native saguaros. This is not simply a mistake; rather, it seems to be Chuck Jones's blithe, deliberate distillation of a mythological





West made famous by John Ford. Ford's cinematic representations of Monument Valley, which included towering saguaros—a synecdoche for desert—dominated the western film genre in the 1940s with movies such as *Stagecoach* and *My Darling Clementine*, just before the advent of the *Road Runner* cartoons, which were played in theaters as shorts before feature films. Ford took a place that was distinct and singular—nothing else in the southwestern desert looks quite like Monument Valley, with its massive eroded sedimentary rock formations and seemingly infinite vistas—and made it into a generic topos, a curtain of stereotyped images serving almost as an architectural frieze, the rock outcroppings like steles rising dramatically from the sandy desert floor. It signified the void between white settlements. Now it has become a meaningless cliché, used as a backdrop to advertise any number of products.

The John Ford scenery that was spoofed in *Road Runner* cartoons reflects a dizzying history of permutations in our cultural relation to the West. Representations of the early frontier were largely influenced by the compositional techniques of western landscape painters like Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran and by the photographers Eadweard Muybridge and Carleton Watkins—all of whom borrowed from German Romanticism. Later the geologic survey photographs of Timothy O'Sullivan and Jack Hillers, sold as stereographs to a nineteenth-century public curious for a peek at the vast and terrifying and incontrovertibly ancient West, had enormous impact. From paintings to photography to stereographs, film, and cartoons, our cultural depictions of what was once called

the Great American Desert, stretching from western Iowa to southeastern California and referenced in the title of Thomson's piece, have had a convoluted genesis. But mythologies aside, the desert is not a cultural construct but a real and gorgeous place. And Mungo Thomson's *American Desert*—like Richard Misrach's photographs of Nevada and its nuclear test sites and John Miller's pastiche paintings of Arizona scenery—is a paean to the desert. It is an expression of love, if a love that doesn't overlook the desert's mettle and mythos.

Desert is vanguard. It is our interface with nature, with horizon, with land and sky—day sky, in its depthless cerulean blue, and also night sky, the glittering cosmos. (Both of which appear in *The American Desert*, coy reminders of the desert's circadian drama, a two-part spectacle on an infinite run.) The desert is a place for contemplation. It is void—or, better yet, a reification of the void in which we are already suspended and in which we already founder. The desert is gaps, aporias, unanswered questions. It is perspicaciousness, as if view equates with knowledge. It signifies freedom in its spatial limitlessness and its solitude. And purity—an experience of essential earth without the interference of culture. Desert is truth through austerity, privation. A place for man to immolate himself under the sun, resized by God's will and earth's sublime power. The desert is often described as oceanic. It is infinity and also nothingness. It is a form of silence. It is inscrutable. It is sometimes seen as God or a hazy approximation thereof—an idea that shimmers on the road, a warped mirage in the noonday heat. The writer and naturalist Ed-





ward Abbey called it "a hard and brutal mysticism."[1]

But then there is Marilyn Monroe and her tender communion with the desert, a fluid dance under scrubby oaks that was so erotic—so subversive in its suggestion that woman and nature were one and that the desert was a home for the celebration of such female essence—that her moonlit scene twirling barefoot over desert ground endangered the release of *The Misfits*. Arthur Miller had gotten the inspiration for the film while staying in a cabin near Pyramid Lake, a hundred miles from the closest town. He was waiting out a divorce, a thing you could get quickly in Nevada. Saul Bellow was staying nearby, also waiting out a divorce.[2] This desert, in Miller's vision, was a place for the three disaffected characters to escape to from an alienating modern world. Yet the place to which they flee is even more isolating, physically and morally, and ultimately it undoes them. *The Misfits* is the western mythos unraveled; it's a setting not just for gunslingers and freedom but also for desperation and failure.

Robert Oppenheimer visited the desert as an adolescent. He was sent to a dude ranch in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, northeast of Santa Fe, to overcome his delicate constitution and toughen into adulthood. He chopped wood and learned to ride horses, taking a pack trip, the highlight of his summer, into the Cañon de los Frijoles and up to the mesas of the Pajarito Plateau. One of these mesas, shaded by a grove of cottonwoods, was called Los Alamos—a place of transparent air, with magnificent views of the Jemez Mountains to the west, the Rocky Mountains to the east. The following year, as

a freshman at Harvard, he wrote to a friend: "My two great loves are physics and desert country. It's a pity they can't be combined."[3]

The world's first atomic bomb was detonated at Trinity Test Site, New Mexico, in July of 1945. And since World War II the military has had a pervasive presence in the western desert. The imagery in *Road Runner* cartoons of fantastic jet contrails and well-maintained suburban byways that shoot off to nowhere have had, since before the cartoon's inception, very real referents. Lonely roads that lead to mysterious fenced-in installations, the deafening thunder of ultramodern jets over desolate land, and high-tension pylons in regions that wouldn't seem to use much electricity—these are facts of the desert. In *The American Desert*, Thomson has foregrounded *Road Runner's* exaggeration of the military-industrial imprint, the incessant demarcation of telephone wires, electricity lines, the inclusion of aqueducts, and drainage pipes sticking out of cliff edges at odd angles—all of which are comically out of place. (Or are they? If Jones's aqueducts are out of place, is Hoover Dam?)

Before the military began its love affair with the desert, it was a haven for artists. Europe had no desert; it was a distinctly American phenomenon, and as it had stood for America's unique qualities to nineteenth-century expansionists, it stood for new ideas to artists wanting to leave the European tradition behind. Mabel Dodge went there in 1917 and then lured C. G. Jung, Max Ernst, Dorothea Tanning, Yves Tanguy, Marsden Hartley, and Georgia O'Keeffe, among others. Jackson Pollock didn't go, but he did attend the *Indian Art of the*





*United States* exhibition at MoMA in 1941 and then made paintings inspired by what he saw, a shift that marked the triumph of the New York School of painting. Yves Klein went to the desert in 1961, while visiting Los Angeles. He wanted to make "fire fountains" in Death Valley, and he asked Edward Kienholz and Walter Hopps to take him out there. They drove him to the Mojave and told him that it was Death Valley, figuring that it would be hot enough for this French eccentric (it was) and that he'd never know the difference (he didn't). Klein was thrilled with the desert, with its ruggedness, its emptiness. He said, "I'd love to live here."[4] But he died the next year.

Then came the Land artists, such as Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, Walter De Maria, and Donald Judd. They went west seeking space and a sort of masculine engagement with the elements, a way to reject the European model of art making and embrace a realm that was distinctly American: the American desert. Subsequently they were part of the first generation of American artists to influence the Europeans. There was also Robert Irwin, who embarked on a phenomenological study of desert environs, interested in experiencing the presence of desert, its hum. The lineage of the desert's meaning to artists—some of whom, like Heizer, have stayed—was a key inspiration for the development of *The American Desert*.

Mungo Thomson wonders if these artists were watching *Road Runner* cartoons somewhere along the way. And maybe they were. Heizer commented in a *New York Times* profile, "I operate in the twenty-ton minimum

range. If I screw up out here, I know it will be big time. I'm going to go down in flames."[5] This image calls to mind Wile E. Coyote, who often does go down in flames (and there are no judo mats waiting below, as there were when Yves Klein made his leap into the void).[6] In the rules Chuck Jones used as guidelines for the *Road Runner* cartoons, number three is: "The coyote could stop anytime—if he were not a fanatic." And rule eleven: "The coyote is always more humiliated than harmed by his failures."[7] The coyote, through his obsession, creates a structure with a built-in prophecy of defeat. And then repeats it. Film critic Richard Thompson has written that the coyote is "doomed to his own intellectuality."[8] His obsession with the technology acquired for capture rivals his obsession with capture itself, a humorous, self-defeating paradigm that seems not dissimilar from the lineaments of conceptual art making, the built-in function of failure, the syllogism and irrationality of endeavor, the absurdity of outcomes.

In *The American Desert*, the only audio is the sound of a few small rocks falling, the momentary roar of a train, the purl of water through an aqueduct, wind gusts, a bird chirp, and one crack of thunder. For the most part we "roam" the landscape in silence, in a retinal engagement with a series of images. Our gaze seems reminiscent of the way that people looked at stereographic views of the West, a phenomenological experience that required absorption over a period of several minutes in order to take in the wealth of detail from left to right, the deep recession of stereographic space. Oliver Wendell Holmes described stereographs as producing "a





dreamlike exaltation in which we seem to leave the body behind us and sail away into one strange scene after another, like disembodied spirits."[9]

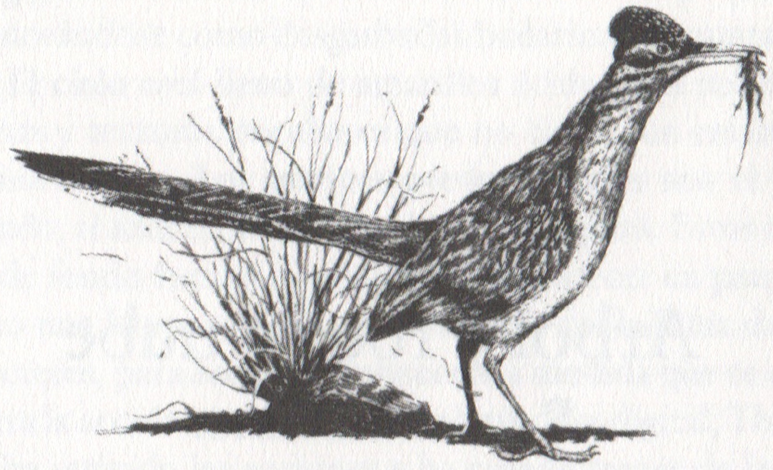
Perhaps for Thomson, *Road Runner* backdrops are the strange scenes that invite such rapture. As the artist has said, "I'm interested in the idea that maybe you *have* to go there. That there has to be a place where culture ends. But as soon as you encounter it, it no longer exists—it becomes *apprehended*, in both senses of that term. And my video, being a sort of cultural doppelgänger for the desert, a surrogate trip, doubly removed, is as good an imaging of it as any other—the cartoon almost pictures it better than you could, more platonically, and yet psychedelically. And maybe this surrogate starts to rebuild a strangeness for the desert itself, to help it escape this apprehension as much as lay it out for display."[10]

*The American Desert* is an homage, a critique, a deconstruction and appropriation, and more simply, a reminder of what we've lost. As Roderick Nash wrote, "For thousands of years after our race opted for a civilized existence, we dreamed of and labored toward an escape from the anxieties of a wilderness condition only to find, when we reached the promised land of supermarkets and air conditioners, that we had forfeited something of great value."[11] If the message of the Grand Canyon—as tourist after tourist on the south rim comments—is that it looks "just like a postcard," the teetering, polychromatic landscape in *The American Desert* looks like us, like our dreams and our nightmares. And it whispers something else: that we may have taken a wrong turn at Albuquerque.

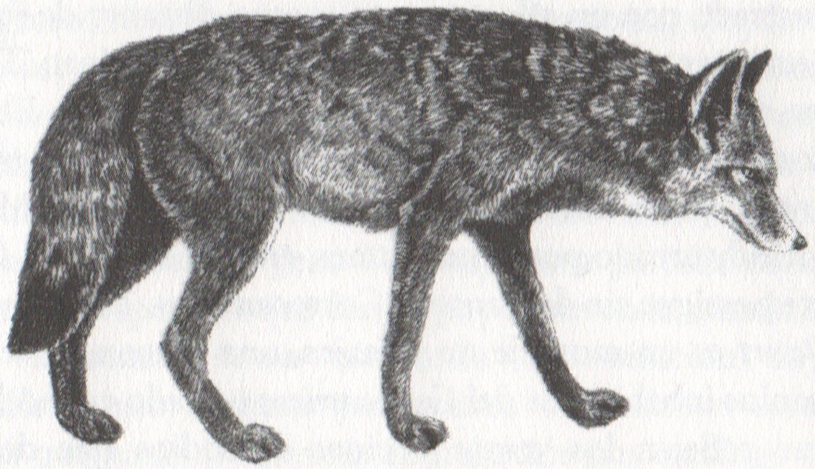
Notes

1. Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), 6.
2. Arthur Miller, interviewed by Serge Toubiana, in *The Misfits: Story of a Shoot* (London: Phaidon, 2000).
3. Richard Rhodes, *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), 451.
4. Yves Klein, quoted in Walter Hopps, "Yves Klein," *Grand Street*, no. 67 (Winter 1999): 101.
5. Michael Kimmelman, "A Sculptor's Colossus of the Desert," *New York Times*, December 12, 1999.
6. In October 1960 Yves Klein leapt from the roof ledge of a building in the suburbs of Paris and landed on judo mats waiting in the street below. The photographer who captured the incident then altered the photo, cutting out the mats so that it appeared as if Klein were floating in midair two stories above the street, faced with immanent disaster. The piece was titled *Leap into the Void* and captioned "The Painter of Space Hurling Himself into the Void."
7. Chuck Jones, *Chuck Amuck: The Life and Times of an Animated Cartoonist* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989), 225.
8. Richard Thompson, "Meep Meep," in *Movies and Methods: An Anthology*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).
9. Oliver Wendell Holmes, quoted in Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 138.
10. Mungo Thomson, conversation with the author, January 2004.
11. Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 267.





TASTYUS SUPERSONICUS



EATIBUS ANYTHINGUS

top: *The American Desert (Tastyus Supersonicus)*, 2002
bottom: *The American Desert (Eatibus Anythingus)*, 2002