

## SCOUT

I've always gotten ideas for my paintings from ambling and driving the back roads with an atlas, like a backcountry flâneur, exploring the visual and mental drift of moving through the landscape. I think of "place" as a character, with the landscape having agency and a real presence as a fellow traveler. These source-gathering trips are very much like film scouts (though I never called them that until I started doing scouts with Kelly). I don't paint on location; rather, I gather raw data in the form of photographs, sketches, and memories. The paintings are always created in the studio, constructed in my mind out of that source material. A recent series of gouache paintings titled *Pacific Wonderland*, for example, stemmed from several road trips throughout Oregon; I consider this grouping to be a portrait of the landscape—a landscape that carries, and tells, stories.

My first scout with Kelly, accompanied by her dog Lucy and producer Neil Kopp, was in July 2007, through Lake, Harney, and Malheur counties in the empty southeastern corner of Oregon. Kelly was in the process of working on *Meek's Cutoff*, about an ill-fated pioneer wagon train, led by a delusional mountain man, that became lost in this unforgiving desert region in the mid-nineteenth century. We stayed at the extremely remote Fields Station—a combination gas station, tire repair shop, café, post office, and general store, with a two-unit motel attached and a small patch of grass that looked like it didn't belong there. From here we set out on long, looping day trips planned over maps and coffee prepared on a portable butane stove. We had only one rule: that we'd stop the car if something caught the fancy of any one of us. Things I remember about this trip: basalt, oceans of sagebrush, no shade, gravel roads, shallow alkaline lakes, sparse isolated trees, playas, bad food (bring your own), soaking in the Alvord hot springs, a campfire in the foothills of Steens Mountain, the scattered carcasses of coyotes along the edge of the White Horse Ranch road, Lucy barking, and pulling into the immensity of dimming space. One night, as we were driving back to Fields in the darkness, I told a story of some friends driving this same gravel road and being unable to avoid hitting jackrabbits, and at that very moment, a jackrabbit darted across the road, and it was true—there was no way to avoid hitting the rabbit as it sped out of the blackness, halted, turned, and turned again, straight into the headlights.

We have since gone on other scouts, camping in the Siskiyou among huge fir trees and mountain lakes, and taking day trips to Oregon Trail museums and to dams and the impounded reservoirs behind them. I remember camaraderie, laughing, moving through space, and stories.

## STORYBOARD

I had never done storyboards until Kelly asked me to help her visualize the wagon crash scene in *Meek's Cutoff*. (It's interesting to follow another artist's thoughts; our sensibilities cross and I can't imagine doing them for anyone but her.) Our process is simple: I set up a table in my studio by placing a sheet of plywood across two tall sawhorses. We sit side by side on high stools. Kelly brings a sketchbook, and I draw a square or rectangle—four to a sheet—and then I draw in pencil (lots of erasures) as fast as Kelly describes the composition. The “drawings” are crude and scribbly—more like what we painters call “thumbnails” (small sketches that sublimate detail to an overall feeling of space, composition, etc.). We go back and forth, back and forth. Sometimes Kelly will act out a posture or gesture, or we'll go outside and try to puzzle out some viewpoint or clarify some logic of perspective. Sometimes, when I'm watching Kelly's films, I have a vague feeling of recognition, and some image I've roughly drawn comes back to me like an echo: Meek on horseback, a close-up of the palm of a hand.

From one of these small storyboard images (approx. 2 x 2 inches), I made a large-scale (7.5 x 9.5 feet) oil painting called *Ladder*. The original drawing was of feet climbing a rope ladder onto a boat, viewed from below. This image struck me and I thought of a painting. In my studio, I set up a camera low to the floor, set the timer, and ran up a ladder to capture the movement of my feet. I did this several times until I had enough information to paint the image, which eliminated the boat altogether. In the painting, a rope ladder hangs isolated against the pitch-black night as two feet exit the top of the canvas. Kelly later informed me that during the filming, because the boat was loaded down and sitting low in the water, there was no longer any need for a rope ladder—it took only one step to get onto the boat—so it never made it into the film. The distance between idea and expression...

—Michael Brophy, 2014