

James Ming Johnson

Personal Reflections on the American West

I. Looking West on I-90 in Eastern Washington (2023)

The late evening sun is setting over the plains and grasslands of the expansive American West. We speed steadily east, towards some of the most remote wilderness in the country, awaiting whatever adventures may come our way. I look out the sunroof and down the highway behind us to see the beauty and the turbulence in the skies above – growing ever larger as we cross the border from Washington into Idaho. Tonight there's no music, just the sound of the road and the wind. It is this simple moment, forever burned into my memory that I find my own respect for wanderlust and searching. My painting is based on a photo I took at this moment.

Somewhere in rural Washington on a vast interstate highway, a mini-convoy of two cars headed east towards Idaho. A reliable silver workhorse Toyota Prius followed a black 1990s Audi A6. I was the passenger in the A6 which Alyssa was driving, while Justin piloted the Prius. The sun was about to set through a thick layer of clouds in the distant West behind me and I could see this by looking at the car's mirrors. I knew that Justin was right behind us and I had the idea to turn around, raise my phone through the sunroof and snap a picture of the West behind us. The force of the wind through my unbraced arm off center and the resulting photograph reflects this angle. Another major road trip and the desire to document it.

Looking West on I-90 in Eastern Washington (2023) is an effort to capture the moods of youthful wanderlust and uncertainty that I experienced on this trip. For many young people, the road trip is a significant and important event. Yet there is a dark undertone to the painting which reflects the combination of uncertainty and ennui I was feeling at the time. I was 23 and I knew that my life was about to change dramatically. This road trip came at a perfect in-between time in my life and I jumped head-on into the future by joining my friends on this road trip. The moment depicted in the painting came about a third of the way in, as we had left the lush Pacific Northwest and headed into the interior of the country through Yellowstone National Park and towards my ultimate destination of Jackson Hole, Wyoming.

My undergraduate education was in film and media studies and I romanticized this road trip as a cinematic experience. The drama of the Western sky and the vast landscape reinforced this feeling and I attempted to capture it as such in the photo. Eleven years passed between the photo and the beginning of the painting, which developed slowly and in multiple sittings. Living with the canvas this way has allowed it to breathe and have its own personality. I would periodically spend days working on the sky or the road, improvising when necessary. The built-up surface and impasto are physical testaments to the layers of time painted upon the surface.

While painting, I was thinking about how road trips have been mythologized in American culture and cinema. I was thinking about Kerouac and his road novels as well as great

revisionist road films of the 60s and 70s like *Easy Rider* and *Vanishing Point*. I was thinking about all of the road trips I refused when I was even younger, as well as those I had embarked upon with my father and how he would reminisce about the road trips he had similarly taken in his own youth. The road trip is an experience that is very familiar to many Americans. We mythologize the freedom that the automobile brings us and the image of a solemn two-lane highway in a vast empty expanse immediately conjures up notions of wanderlust and adventure. The open road represents freedom in many ways, and the vastness of the American West and its range of highways (small and large) means that adventuring and exploration is only limited by the gasoline in one's tank. This road trip was the echo of similar desires. I was 23 and my life was going through serious changes. My father, who had a hippie soul, had previously taken me on a week-long road trip through California gold country, a two-week road trip to Vancouver, Canada, as well as several smaller trips up and down the central California coast. However this one was my first major road trip without my father, and so there was a feeling of adventure and Romanticism that accompanied me everywhere I went. I felt like the lonely figures in Caspar David Freidrich's paintings of two centuries earlier - humans dwarfed by the dramatic landscape yet holding steady and poised with the confidence and experience of one who is well-traveled.

Justin and I had started in San Francisco and had headed north through Mendocino into the hippie college town of Arcata for the night. We met two women who brought us to the Trinity River and we spent the next morning swimming and jumping off rocks into the river. After lunch in Willow Creek, we crossed the border into Oregon and arrived in Portland later that night. A friendly and extremely quirky taxi driver delivered us to a local bar with live music in an intimate and unassuming place called The Goodfoot, where we listened to rock music and had burgers afterward. After lunch the next day we headed out towards a rendezvous with our friend Alyssa in Seattle.

Somewhere about two hours south of Seattle we encountered a massive traffic jam. It was accompanied by the most vile stench imaginable. During our hour stuck in slow-moving traffic, we learned that a tanker truck carrying animal waste and offal had overturned, and its contents had spilled across all but one highway lane. We were relieved when the grim scene was behind us and we were welcomed by the beautiful terrain of Seattle.

In Seattle we explored the city with Alyssa, visiting museums, walking through the neighborhoods, and hanging out in bars. Alyssa broke up with her boyfriend during our time there and decided she wanted to join us as we drove east towards Yellowstone and Wyoming. She decided to bring her Audi A6 because she would be returning to Seattle for work while Justin would be continuing on from Jackson Hole all the way to his new home and life in Philadelphia. I was to join Alyssa and drive back to Seattle with her, before later taking a 21 hour long Amtrak train back to my home in San Francisco. It was several hours after we left Seattle that we wound up on I-90 in eastern Washington at sunset when I snapped the photo that would serve as the reference for this painting.

We still had more experiences and adventure to behold for the next week or more, but I recall the excitement of that moment over what I had already experienced on the trip: I had seen beautiful natural landscapes and had experienced several memorable events with my friends. Yet somehow out there on that stretch of highway in rural Washington I had a

different feeling because I was entering a part of the country which I was totally unfamiliar with. The multitude of experiences I had previously had over years of driving up and down the coast melted away as we drove deeper into the American interior. I was full of anticipation over what I would see as I was headed towards Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming.

Later that trip, it was my turn to drive and I remember pushing that big solid Audi to 110 mph on the straight and flat roads of Montana in the middle of the night. It was a classic moment for me and solidified my admiration for automobiles and the adventures they enable us to undertake.

We spent that night in Spokane, Washington where Justin and I, inspired by the rich musical history of the Pacific Northwest. I thought of Jimi Hendrix and Nirvana, and wondered if they had wandered around the rural roads of their native Washington State. I wondered if it was something magical in the landscape that inspired all of these great rock musicians of the Pacific Northwest, and how this environment might inspire me somehow. We checked into a drab but modern roadside hotel, which was entirely painted different shades of gray save for large portraits of famous musicians painted directly onto both the interior and exterior walls. Some of these musicians were jazz musicians whose music I had loved for years, and I was pleasantly surprised to find homage to them in a former frontier town on the Idaho border - a place reputed for its brutality, ruggedness, and isolation. That night we played air guitars to "Heart-Shaped Box" in front of the bathroom mirror, hoping to channel some of that rockstar energy into our own young lives.

In Coeur d'Alene a friendly camera shop owner sold us some rolls of 35mm film for us to document our road trip. We spent the afternoon dipping our feet in the lake alongside families on vacation. When we left, we had an ambitious plan to reach our campsite in Yellowstone National Park that night, and so wound up driving at high speeds through the Montana night. We finally arrived at our campsite after midnight and struggled to successfully pitch a sturdy tent. Alyssa was exasperated and decided to sleep across the backseat of her Audi, while Justin and I stayed up drinking, smoking, talking, and stargazing until dawn. I will always remember this as one of the few times I have seen the subtle glowing band of the milky way and how humbling the experience was as my ego was entirely dwarfed by the heavens.

The next day was sightseeing in the park alongside huge throngs of tourists and families. We played our part fitting right in as we watched old faithful blast alongside delighted children and paused for a herd of bison crossing the street. Later we drove south to Jackson Hole, Wyoming where we would spend the night before parting ways in the morning. Once we arrived we couldn't find a hotel room and had to sleep miserably in the cars. Without housing there was nothing to do but go to the bars; we met some road trippers from New York who had been slowly making their way West; we were mistaken for professional musicians by a drunken customer at a local pizzeria; and the next morning at coffee we typed typewritten notes to pin to the walls of a local cafe. I wonder if they're still there. Who collects all of these notes if they ever take them down?

The next morning, exhausted and emotional Justin parted ways with us to begin the next phase of his life and career. Alyssa and I drove back to Seattle through southern Idaho where

I had one of the more memorable hamburgers of my time. In Boise, I had excellent Mongolian BBQ and after a night in a surprisingly affordable, drab, decades-old corporate hotel in Kennewick, the kind with wood-paneled walls and spacious rooms with sparse furniture. We were back in Seattle by the next afternoon. I would go on to spend two weeks in Seattle staying with other friends from college, and then unwind on a long-distance train back to San Francisco.

While my actual time on the road had come to an end, the memories of that road trip in 2013 – during such a formative time in my life – endure and are alive in every mark that I have made on the painting. The painting became a journey itself with my memories and my photos as a guide. I tried to capture the feeling of adventure and Romanticism that I have previously described, and make a painting that is grounded in specific imagery but which is able to have its own life and its own relationship with the viewer. I hope to capture and express the feelings I experienced to viewers who may not have ever seen the expanses of the American West.

II. Big Boy's House

“...Round the decay

Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare

The lone and level sands stretch far away.”

Percy Bysshe Shelley, Ozymandias (1818)

Some of my earliest memories are sitting on the floor of my grandmother's cozy bungalow in Pasadena, California. I remember eating boiled potatoes with margarine. My grandmother's house was a 1920 craftsman bungalow in a historic architectural district full of similar homes called “Bungalow Heaven”. My grandparents had been the second or third black family to buy a house in Pasadena in the 1940s. I never realized they were pioneers until I was old enough to understand the history of this country and feel a sense of pride for their modest accomplishment. When my grandmother passed in 1994 my parents and I moved in. It was a small house but my father cared deeply about making it a nice home, and I have vivid memories of sitting in the backyard amongst his plants and rock water fountains. To this day any time I hear a dove cooing, I am immediately transported back to those warm, idyllic Southern California evenings at my grandmother's house.

When I was seven, my parents sold the house and we moved away. I would go on to live in many different apartments and houses over the years. As my life goes through its chapters and seasons, some of these homes would have a major impact on my life. My memories of these homes capture my life in a very specific slice of time. It was when my idea of a “home” was first being solidified as my safe place - where I rest and unite with my family. I was too young to understand the fortune that we enjoy to have a place that *feels like home*. Arriving at this understanding and continually searching for this in my adulthood has brought me to making paintings about this very notion of *home*. Is it a house? A place? Just a feeling? Every place that has ever felt like home has also included the people living there, and the personified memories of my own life there. When I am making my house paintings, I am

thinking of these captured personalities. In my practice, I explore how I can embody the memories of these people as the inhabitants of homes in the process of being lost and forgotten. With each year my memories of my grandmother's bungalow continue to grow distant and – as time passes I find that the feeling of longing for home and the awareness of displacement from the comforting spaces of my childhood remains consistent – often growing stronger.

Big Boy's House (2024) is inspired by the memories of this home. It is haunted by the constant reminder of the impermanence of people and places against the relentless march of time. The architecture of the building is inspired by another home which I grew to be familiar with. A 100-year-old adobe house where my father lived in the basement as he worked as a ranch caretaker towards the end of his life. The weeks I would spend visiting with him during my academic breaks would be the final times that I would ever see him. I had a feeling of this even back then; it was not a surprise when he left. The character inside this house is inspired by the statue of Ozymandias, the pharaoh Ramesses II of Ancient Egypt who ruled during the 13th century BC, and whose monumental statue was discovered ruined and crumbling into dust when discovered nearly 4,000 years later. The ruined statue is a metaphor for impermanence and ephemerality - even the great kingdoms of the world all perish to time. In my painting, he inspires a character who is nothing more than a giant bust trapped in the confines of a tiny house.

In this painting the Western landscape has shifted into something dark and tragic. The black sky absorbs light and reflects it down on a desolate gray desert. The colors are muted and intentionally dulled. It was the landscape of my youth and so it would always be home. Ozymandias tells us of the passing of time through the millennia and the rise and fall of empires, leaders, mythologies. I thought of a tension between the idyllic memories of suburban California homes and the brutality of colonization and subjugation. It all complicates my idea of home. I am ultimately reminded of the mortality of every individual, every empire, every mythology, and every building. This reminder stalks my idea of home like the ghost of Ozymandias. He is the big boy in the house.

My life now is hectic as usual. For some time now, I have not felt able to put down roots deep enough to warrant the feeling of another home again. For this reason I am always thinking about the familiar comforts of homes in my past. They provide me with an immediate memory and experience which I can moderate through paint. Each brushstroke or gesture carries with it emotion and memory. When I am thinking about home I paint with more spontaneity even though my brush is loaded with the memories of very specific places and times. My house paintings are thus improvisational but grounded in something extremely concrete. While all of my house paintings deal with the idea of home, how I am feeling about home is different on each given day, giving each of the paintings their own flavors. Painting on a small scale is immediate and feels like drawing as I am able to make a gesture that spans the entire canvas in one sweep. *Big Boy's House* and my small house paintings are a vehicle for me to express memory through a subject which is familiar to me.

III. Zombie Factory

"The helicopter they shot down is still burning about a quarter mile down the road at the edge

of that embankment. I hope the attention was worth it. I am foraging for food and Nick is chopping down a tree to light the furnace. Everything in our neighborhood is looted and it's at the point that running into a cactus no longer hurts. The radiation in monuments will still kill us. I saw three people today down by the stone ruins and was lucky that they didn't notice me. We're terrible at combat but Nick is an excellent strategist and hopefully that will see us through."

There is a first-person survivalist video game called *Rust* which I would play regularly with my friend Nick. Gaming together during the pandemic became an entertaining way to keep in touch with one of my oldest friends and a way to collaborate competitively. In *Rust*, you and your team gather resources and build bases in a massive open world that lasts for 30 real-world days, 24/7. Everything you do on the server persists for 30 days and then the entire server gets wiped clean and everyone starts all over again with nothing. The bases you build and destroy, the loot and weapons you collect and craft, and the players you interact with are all reset after 30 days. This gives *Rust* a unique set of challenges and tactics as opposed to first-person online games that might last 30 minutes. You can and must plan for the long-haul and you can obsessively play for a month with little sleep - something that turns you into a zombie. There are no rules for interactions in this post-apocalyptic world, so as you run around and explore the post-apocalyptic landscape, you encounter other players and are never sure if they will be hostile or friendly. It is always advantageous to err on the side of caution because more times than not, violence is the immediate first choice. The parallels to the legends of Western frontier serve as reminders of the darker tendencies of uncontrolled human nature.

I made *Zombie Factory* while thinking about my other paintings of the West. An uncertain and pessimistic world destabilized by rising international and sectarian conflict casts a growing doubt over what the future holds. I wanted to create a painting about characters stuck in a hostile world, and the emotional toll that living in those extremes takes on the soul. I kept recalling the hours Nick and I would invest into *Rust* and how enduring the reality of brutal misfortune in that game often made me feel. The hours upon hours of lost sleep over the course of a month-long game, combined with the stresses of gaining and losing loot and critical supplies can so quickly turn you into a burnt out shell of your former self.

I imagined the figures in the painting to be characters in the game, controlled by Nick and myself. They appear as zombies, made that way by the lawless wilderness that traps them in a never-ending cycle of birth, violence, death, and rebirth. The mounted rider stares forward with intensity. His clothes and hair radiate energy. He represents the chaos and violence of life in the lawless world. The seated figure is the strategist, he thinks clearly even though sometimes he has incomplete knowledge. The standing figure is the guardian, a protector who looks after our wellbeing and serves as an intermediary between the other two.

The desert landscape reflects the harshness of worlds without laws or rules. The virtual world of *Rust* gives me some of this experience, but I grew up in a region scared by the history of colonization and one known for its former lawlessness and violence. Despite the extreme difficulty of living in such a place, the desert is still intoxicating and charming. It has a distinct beauty and for millennia, it has been a central feature in mythologies and religions. This setting, combined with the backdrop of *Rust* as a stressful but addictive game, made me

consider the entire enterprise as a factory producing hallowed out characters at odds with each other and with their own world.

The desert would be the perfect setting for my characters, complete with psychedelic and radioactive cacti. The cactus is long the symbolic representation of the desert and of the American West and so has featured in a lot of my work. In *Rust*, cacti are dangerous. Running into them will cause you to bleed and will deplete your health. There are radioactive hotspots all over the world which will also kill you, and so for this painting I wanted to combine the two concepts. I chose to paint the cactus in vibrant, glowing colors that recall radioactivity but also centralize that specific tree as being an important aspect of this harsh world. At the same time, I felt it was important to remind the viewers that our understanding of the West is still constructed fiction, as we know through Hollywood films, novels, and video games. I chose to depict some of the cacti as being potted plants as opposed to naturally-growing flora. This is a slight hint and a reminder of the fictional elements in the Western post-apocalyptic genre.

Zombie Factory (2024) represents a formal balance between the two methods of painting which I have used in the other two paintings I have discussed. This painting is the slowest and its composition is entirely imagined. It went through several iterations before arriving in its final state. Though my house paintings are also improvisational, they are single-session paintings. *Looking West on I-90 in Eastern Washington* is entirely based on photography and is thus different from the other two in that regard. *Zombie Factory* is one of the slowest paintings I have ever made – painted over the course of several weeks. I had a composition in mind already based on a pastel drawing from a year earlier. The composition remained more or less the same throughout the process, though the figures and color changed significantly. It was the first painting that taught me to trust the process, and I see it as a major personal breakthrough. Throughout the process of making, I allowed myself to develop a relationship with the work and through experience I was confident that I could eventually coax it back to a point that I was satisfied with. Through my daily and weekly interactions with the painting, the narrative slowly emerged. The figures are painted differently because of their different characters and the different emotions that they each hold.