

CHATHAMESQUE:
RUSSELL CHATHAM'S MONTANA VERNACULAR

by
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my wife, Laurie F. Bishop. Without her, it would not exist. After dinner at the kitchen table in late December of 2020, I told Laurie, “I want to write a book about the history of art in Livingston, but I don’t know how.” Without missing a beat she said, “Go get a master’s.” So here it is, three and half years later, my master’s thesis—the first chapter of a book.

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ABSTRACT

Painter and lithographer Russell Chatham introduced a Tonalist aesthetic to Montana's art scene in the 1970s, making way for a new aesthetic relationship between humans and nature. His work is recognizable by its gray-and-brown palette, horizontally structured compositions, and his signature envelope of atmospheric haze. When Chatham depicted a scene with fog, snowfall or rain obscuring parts of the landscape, he evoked a quiet mood conducive to introspection. People familiar with his work, especially those living in rural Park County, Montana, might look out their window and call the view, "*Chathamesque*." This term—along with other commonplace statements like, "It's a Russell Chatham kind of day"—became tightly bound to his artistic style and public identity. In contrast to the romanticized mythology of C.M. Russell's Old West, or the sublime grandeur of Thomas Moran's panoramic landscapes, Chatham offered a depiction of the intermountain West as a place for private, transcendental intimacy with nature.

This thesis will analyze two series of Chatham's works he created in the 1980s: *The Seasons*, a series of twelve paintings commissioned by the Museum of the Rockies (MOR) in 1990, and *The Missouri Headwaters Suite*, twelve lithographs he made between 1985 and 1987. Through three stages of comparative analysis of his paintings and lithographs, this paper will trace Chatham's aesthetic development from conventional California Tonalism toward his transcendental Montana landscapes. The first stage connects Chatham's style to the nineteenth century's California Tonalist movement and its Transcendentalist relationship with nature. The second stage traces his struggle and resolution with interpreting Montana's mountainous landscape. The third stage ties his development as a lithographer to the establishment of his aesthetic vernacular. Each of these stages was another step toward a distinctive style which came to be uniquely identified with Russell Chatham. By the early 1990s, his local audiences had internalized his approach to landscape, and the term "*Chathamesque*" became a vernacular way of expressing their relationship with Montana's changeable appearance.

INTRODUCTION

Russell Chatham introduced a new landscape painting style to south-central Montana in the 1970s. Charles M. Russell and Thomas Moran had set the region's nostalgic tone with their representational paintings of craggy mountains and mythic cowboys. Chatham challenged these traditional perspectives with the idea the Western landscape could be a place of private, transcendent experiences with nature. This thesis begins from the observation that the residents of Park County, Montana, a rural county bordering Yellowstone National Park, often referred to foggy, rainy, or snowy days as "*Chathamesque*," indicating their perception of the natural environment was tightly bound to the artist's style and way of seeing the land. His atmospheric paintings depict low clouds obscuring parts of the landscape, reducing it into soft gradients of muted color. The weather in the mountainous parts of Montana can easily swing from sunshine to storm clouds on a walk to the river to fish. The region's wide valleys and steep mountains became Chatham's familiar terrain, and he strove to capture the moods of its ephemeral moments as he walked through it.

His signature atmospheric style reached its full maturity in the early 1990s in both lithography and painting. He developed a smooth gradient effect for the sky and clouds in his lithographs, which he concomitantly transposed to his oil paintings. In his 1993 lithograph, *Start of Winter* (Figure 1), the graduated gray fog of a snowstorm wraps around the base of a mountain obfuscating the snowy mountain peaks above—a direct contravention of the representational clarity of traditional Western Art. He used the same hazy effect in *Misty Afternoon* (Figure 2) to depict a rainstorm engulfing a lush valley floor. The subject of the painting is the interaction of the

weather with the land; it's in the darkened space under the cloud, not where the sun illuminates the cloud-top, or the glowing strip of sky beyond the storm.

Henry David Thoreau wrote in "Walking," "he would be a poet... whose words were so true, and fresh and natural... that they would bloom and bear fruit... in sympathy with the surrounding nature."¹ Thoreau gives nature the primacy of truth and measures words and poetry against it. He further positions poetry as the nearest humans can get to the beauty (bloom) and value (bear fruit) of nature. Similarly, Chatham's writer friends described his landscape imagery as visual poetry. When perfectly executed, the beauty of a painting could be in sympathy with the beauty of nature.

Chatham paintings and lithographs connect with the viewer through the nineteenth century Tonalist techniques of George Inness and William Keith. He achieved a maturity in the late 1980s that featured a unified composition, a low-key tonal palette, and a moody atmosphere. His restrained depiction of land, weather, and light interrelating created an imaginary emotional space for introspection and personal alignment with nature. This association between art and reality reflected the viewer's perception of their relationship with the natural environment through an aesthetic lens. In place of the agricultural and extractive relationships to the environment of the previous century, the wave of late twentieth century newcomers to Montana found ready access to the wildness missing from far away urban and suburban environments. The influx of artists and writers to Livingston, a community formerly populated by ranchers, farmers, and rail workers, further contributed to the new local cultural context. Chatham's paintings and lithographs offered

1. Henry David Thoreau, "Walking", *The Atlantic Monthly, A Magazine of Literature, Art, and Politics*, IX (LVI), Boston: Ticknor and Fields: 657–674, June 1862, Retrieved April 20, 2024 – via Google Books.

a visual model for describing their emotional connection to the place; they, in turn, expressed it with a hyper-local vernacular.

As Chatham's fame and recognition grew among the part-time Hollywood elite, he raised the price of his paintings. The working-class locals found themselves priced out of his art, but not in the traditional financial way. Until the late seventies he bartered paintings for goods and services in the community, including bar tabs and groceries. He could no longer trade his thousand-dollar painting for a hundred-dollar debt.

In 1982, Chatham began producing runs of ostensibly affordable lithographs to meet the local demand, and to increase his income. A central warrant of this thesis is Chatham's lithographs popularized his contemporary aesthetic despite a local historical context typified by the narrative art of the "Old West" like that of C.M. Russell and Thomas Moran. The lithographs furthered his conception of what a Western landscape picture could do and represent. A population of newcomers with modern tastes and environmental perspectives found this conception attractive.

It is not uncommon to hear someone in southern Montana remark, "*It's a Chatham kind of day.*" Facebook posts from former Park County residents, and from others across the state, capture in captioned snapshots of foggy foothills the idiomatic power of his work. His landscapes offer the viewer an alternative way into the quieter aspects of Montana's ecology and basin and range topography. They avoid a detailed mimicry of the landscape and refuse to engage with the sublime grandeur of the mountains. Chatham sought to create paintings in sympathy with what his grandfather called "nature's inner life."²

2. Russell Chatham, "Family, Art and Friends," Russell Chatham: One Hundred Paintings, Livingston, Mont: Clark City Press, 1990, 135.

Chatham's grandfather, Gottardo Piazzoni, was an established Northern California landscape painter in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His paintings filled the family home and Chatham admired and idolized him more than any other artist. His aunt and uncle on Piazzoni's side painted and fostered a culture art making for all family members. From the age of six he painted outdoors with the rest of the family. He benefited from a few informal mentorships, and by visiting museums around the world he was able to educate himself in the history and techniques of landscape painting.

Despite the supportive and immersive artistic upbringing, Chatham developed a bootstrapping persona that distanced him from American art in the postwar period. He claimed to be an outsider to the art world and uncategorizable within it. His literati friends—Jim Harrison, Hunter S. Thompson, and Thomas McGuane, among others—agreed, proclaiming his singular genius to be a balm to modern America and reveling in his nonconformity. I will argue, however, that being a self-defined rebel flying in the face of modernity was only part of the truth. Chatham's aesthetic was born from a tradition of art appreciation focused on beauty and the viewer's ability to read art independent of an artist's intended meaning—art for art's sake. Chatham and his boosters saw this approach as under threat by the abstract and pop movements of the 1960s and 70s. By the time his work entered its fully matured phase in the late 1980s, he had found a regional audience eager to adopt his version of the American West.

This paper will tie Chatham to the larger arc of American art history by tracing his aesthetic lineage back to nineteenth-century American landscape painting—specifically the California Tonalists—Henry David Thoreau's Transcendentalism, and Sung Dynasty paintings. It will show how his success in both oil painting and multi-plate lithography had less to do with his skill or

style than with his ability to evoke a mood or atmosphere. Using his masterful artistic skills, he depicted the natural world as a spiritual space, and thus differentiated himself from the still dominant ways of depicting the Old West, while aligning himself with old European and Chinese themes in art history.

Not all of Chatham's paintings or lithographs involved landforms obscured by fog; many of his paintings and lithographs depict valleys and their broad floors at sunset, or stacked planes of trees tracing a stream across the picture frame. He cast a hazy scrim over most of his scenes, an aesthetic feature associated with the 19th century Tonalist movement. The compositional structure of his work—specifically his lithography and subsequent paintings—follows the model of artist and art instructor, Arthur Wesley Dow.

Dow lived and painted in Ipswich, Massachusetts and founded the Art Summer School there in 1900. He spent most of his teaching career in New York City, working at Columbia University, The Art Students League, and Pratt Institute. His approach to art instruction asserted the beauty of an image came from the underlying compositional structure of the image, a position “absolutely opposed to the time-honored approach through imitation” of the traditional academic pedagogy of the time. Once the “art-structure” of the work had been established through methodical exploration of line, *notan* (a Japanese term for describing the harmonized balance of dark-and-light), and color, the artist could move on to modeling and shading to finish the piece. Chatham did not write specifically about reading or employing Dow's techniques, but his connection to his grandfather's generation—by looking at the paintings and family mentorship—provided ample opportunity to learn them regardless of knowing their source. This paper will show

he relied on a life-long problem-solving practice like Dow's to adapt his depiction of the Montana landscape.

Landscape paintings of the American West had conventionally depicted craggy mountains and large, dramatic skies beset by roiling storm clouds. The clouds framed brilliant light shining on the land from above—a divine revelation and endorsement of Manifest Destiny. The illuminated landscape drew the viewer deeper into the scene, an allegorical manifestation of the emerging American identity. Chatham did away with such operatic display in favor of a classical quietude. If his landscapes didn't provide low-slung clouds or fog, it offered a view of a distant rainstorm, the view of a low hill side, or an intimate approach to a stream.

It would be a mistake to describe Russell Chatham through the narrow lens of just one movement or *ism*, such as American Tonalism. Paintings and artists deserve to be analyzed on their own terms, not pigeonholed into categories that hold the audience back from fully engaging with the work. It would be an even bigger error to write another piece about Chatham that pretended like he came out of nowhere, like Vasari's image of the genius touched by God. Just as nineteenth-century Tonalism was a product of its era and environment, Russell Chatham was a product of his. However, much of the contemporary writing about the works of his heroes, Gottardo Piazzoni (his grandfather), George Inness, Albert Ryder and more, could be passed off as critical writing of Chatham. In the end, whatever his idiosyncrasies, Chatham was raised on tonalist painting and absorbed many of its tendencies.

Tonalism is not only a convenient description of Chatham and his work, but it also creates a way for us to understand his work within the arc of American art history. Charles Caffin described it in 1908,

When we speak of a picture, having tunnel qualities, we may need the artist has so combined the related darks and lights, and the related, coolness and warmth of his colors that is produced a harmony, threaded through and through with a suggestion of rhythm or vibration. And the vibration will be most felt on the suggestion of atmosphere pervades the picture.³

State of the Field

The difficulty with studying and writing about Russell Chatham is a paucity of critical texts. He does not show up in art journal database searches and never in art books, except for one mention by David Adams Cleveland covered below. In their place are a large collection of laudatory prefaces, prologues and introductions written by his friends in his self-published monographs. Many of Chatham's friends were famous writers, novelists and poets who could outline his character through anecdotes and good-natured turns of phrases, but knew little of art, its contemporary context or historical significance. Frequent contributors to Chatham's non-fishing books included Thomas McGuane, Jim Harrison, and Hunter S. Thompson. To a person, they describe his paintings and personal artistic acumen with their own considerable powers of the written word, and always as having captured something authentic about the human relationship with nature, or Montana, as a special place.

When journalists, interviewers, and contributors discussed Chatham's artistic training and family upbringing, they often referenced parts of two autobiographical essays. The first, "Myself, A Brief History", appeared in *Russell Chatham*. It was originally published in 1984 by Winn Books out of Seattle, Washington, and republished in 1987 by Clark City Press, Chatham's personal imprint. The second essay, "Family, Art, and Friends", appeared in his self-published 1990

3. Cleveland, David Adams. *A History of American Tonalism: 1880-1920*. 1st ed. Manchester, Vt: Hudson Hills Press, 2010, 447

monograph, *One Hundred Paintings*.⁴ While the details of his biography remain consistent between the essays, and no written evidence exists to counter the details, Chatham changes the tone of his self-reflection over the second half of his life. His early essays contain a healthy dose of self-deprecation that disappears in later interviews and writings. He admits in the essays to not being very good at painting in his early years, and to not expecting to ever be a great painter. In a 2001 interview with John Murray, he persists with a modesty about his early work but claims to have finally achieved a level of unparalleled mastery, “I’ve been around the world at least a dozen times, and have never seen any contemporary painting or printmaking, any better, or even as good as what I do.” He maintains a consistent narrative of biographical facts and the foundational inspiration of his grandfather—an influence evident in his stylistic development. His publicly stated opinions and interpretations of art and culture also remain consistent over time. Chatham craved recognition from the art establishment evidenced by his enthusiastic contributions to the Museum of the,

The exceptions to the non-expert category in art writing are Etel Adnan, Chris Waddington, Toby Thompson, and David Adams Cleveland. Adnan, a famous Lebanese poet and abstract painter, wrote the introduction to *Russell Chatham*. While she too lauded his character and gentle artistic temperament, she approached her subject with the sensitivity of a fellow artist. She appreciated his innate Adnan is not speaking of the understanding of color and how to use it to relate to the land, “Chatham had hung small canvases related to the northern California Hills whose color is no color: but he was following their essential hues, all within a range of pale yellow to

4. Russell Chatham, “Family, Art and Friends,” *Russell Chatham: One Hundred Paintings*, (Livingston, Mont: Clark City Press, 1990).

luminescent white, until the paleness turned to burnt gold and luminous browns, as it is near the end of summer.”⁵ As a poet, her writing style is non-academic, but she puts into context how he deploys color to fit with his subject—the land. In keeping with the complimentary nature of a book’s front matter, she finishes her essay with this veneration, “He is not a classicist, or a romantic painter, he is not to be labeled or explained... Chatham is a medium for his age, and in the history of American art he will be recognized for what he is, a visionary whose vision is reality.”⁶ Adnan is speaking of the reality beyond scientific description; she alludes to the truth or reality of poetry and subjective interpretation. The truth of the color of the California Hills is that it changes throughout the summer, and Chatham caught the grass’s state of being at a particular moment, which was familiar to her, regardless of its accuracy to whatever hill he had derived the scene from. Adnan praises his ability to stay true to his interpretation of what he feels or knows when he looks at the world. The danger of historicizing Chatham, of labeling him, according to Adnan, is to obscure by simplification his insightful perception.

Chris Waddington was a writer for *The Times-Picayune* in New Orleans, and covered a variety of music, dance, and culture. His essay in *One Hundred Paintings* carries the hallmarks of complimentary front matter using art historical language and references. He speaks as someone who knew Chatham and is faithful to the biographical narrative, especially Gottardo Piazzoni’s influence. He also establishes the culture of art and creativity on the Piazzoni side of the family. Waddington astutely describes Chatham’s art-structure, “For Chatham the illusion of space is a compositional tool. His is not the orderly, stereoscopic, recession of Renaissance perspective, a

5. Etel Adnan, Russell Chatham, Jim Fergus, Jim Harrison, Hunter S. Thompson, Thomas McGuane, *Russell Chatham*, (United States: Winn Books, 1987).

6. Etel Adnan, *Russell Chatham*, 1987.

reassuring trick of style that lost its freshness by 1600 and today survives only in the club foot realism of the camera.”⁷ The essay enumerates Chatham’s various technical accomplishments over a thirty-year period as artistic explorations rather than progressive developments of an emerging artist. Chatham struggled with perspective throughout the 1960s and well into his first decade in Montana. Waddington points out most audiences want the illusion of space to be orderly and predictably recessive; they want to be convinced that the painting represents the natural world it depicts. Chatham did not want that. He wanted something else, and it is possibly this resistance to illusionism that delayed his artistic maturity until he was 40.

Waddington connects Chatham’s work art historical precedents like James McNeil Whistler and Dutch landscapes. However, by referencing only European art history, Waddington misses Chatham’s place in the arc of American landscape painting, not to mention as part of a regional history. He also misses the essential context of Piazzoni’s association with California and American Tonalism. Instead, he positions Chatham against the art and artists of the postmodern era, “a new generation of painters have girded themselves in theory, presenting landscape as an ironic manipulation of cultural signs, one more deathbed regret of an urban society,” and fails to acknowledge the other landscape artists working contemporaneously to Chatham.⁸ In short, Waddington helps the reader narrowly appreciate Chatham’s paintings, but does not help them understand the larger historical forces at play.

David A. Cleveland’s, *History of American Tonalism, 1880–1920*, traces the historical arc of American Tonalism from James McNeill Whistler to George Inness to Wolf Kahn. Cleveland’s

7. Chris Waddington, “Reclaiming the Land”, *Russell Chatham: One Hundred Paintings*, (Livingston, Mont: Clark City Press, 1990), 7.

8. Waddington, “Reclaiming the Land”, 1990

book is a comprehensive resource for understanding how the movement came about in the nineteenth century and what contemporary century critics wrote about it. Charles Caffin figures prominently in the nineteenth century nationalistic agenda to develop an American art style. America's relationship with the continent's wilderness, and its eventual taming, provided an opportunity to paint a different kind of nature and landscape than in Europe.

The last section of *History of American Tonalism* covers a host of mid-to-late twentieth century artists who paint directly in the Tonalist tradition, or at least use a Tonalist palette to evoke mystery, atmosphere and a sense of spirituality through "non- narrative synthetic art."⁹ Cleveland refers to these artists as "postmodernist Tonalists", acknowledging their struggle as landscape painters to have careers during the postwar abstract expressionist and color field eras.¹⁰ He includes Chatham in this list without elaboration.¹¹

According to Cleveland, the resurgence of Tonalism gained energy in the late 1970s due to,

... a causal chain of indirect influence from the wellsprings of turn-of-the-century Tonalism; the influence of certain microclimates, or places where atmospheric conditions produced foggy or veiled effects; formalist concerns for which tonal-style painting presented a ready solution and expressive modus; and the direct influence on contemporary artists, certainly in the late 1970s, by the Tonalist movements finest painters, especially [George] Inness, [Dwight]William Tryon, and [James McNeill] Whistler, who benefited from reappraisal by scholars and comprehensive exhibitions.

The timing of this revival matches up to Chatham's time in San Francisco as a young artist. The Bay Area the epicenter of California Tonalism, but Chatham also had a direct generational connection to George Inness and William Keith through his grandfather. The influence of this familial connection to the roots of American Tonalism on his aesthetics cannot be overstated, but

9. David A. Cleveland, *A History of American Tonalism*, 557.

10. David A. Cleveland, *A History of American Tonalism*, 557.

11. David A. Cleveland, *A History of American Tonalism*, 557.

it deepens with Inness's and Keith's Swedenborgian philosophies and the movement's Transcendental underpinnings.

A fifth factor might well include the ongoing tradition of Emersonian Transcendentalism in both its literary and philosophical forms—and concomitant spiritual and ecological concerns, which reconnected Americans to the land—that in turn fostered a growing market and deeper appreciation for the postmodern tonal style in American art.”¹²

Cleveland centered Transcendentalism as the single connective idea across American art history. Similarly, Transcendentalism might open a path for understanding how Livingston residents, especially the newcomers, related to Chatham's work and thus to the land around them. Cleveland's writing on the Tonalist movement and its reemergence in the 1970s is as close to critical, or art historical, writing available on what Chatham was doing. Despite much evidence to the contrary, Chatham never acknowledged tonalism as an important artistic touchstone.

Wanda Corn wrote, *The Color of Mood: American Tonalism 1880-1910*, the catalogue for a Tonalist exhibit she curated in 1972 at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor for the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco. She brought together a comprehensive collection of paintings from a thirty-year period that shared a set of aesthetic attributes she called Tonalism. The word, and a handful of variants, had been in use in the nineteenth century to describe certain American painters' atmospheric approach to mood creation. But Corn's scholarship, combined with the resources of an established institution, definitively established the aesthetic as an identifiable style and movement.

Corn's thesis holds that a group of artists in the late nineteenth century responded to the accelerating pace of industrialization and shifting values of the Gilded Age with the nostalgia of

12. David A. Cleveland, *A History of American Tonalism*, 557.

the of the previous generation's romanticism—especially in relationship to art and nature—but they, “expressed their experience of nature in contemporary terms which were very different than those of their predecessors.”¹³ Corn is referencing the Hudson River school and Tonalism's “new use of light and atmosphere” to evoke the sentiments of “reverie, nostalgia and unfulfilled longing” as antidotes “to the heart-edged realism of the earlier, Hudson River school and to the styles influenced by Courbet”. This group of artists “confronted nature as a private and extremely personal experience.”¹⁴ They sought suggestive scenes enveloped in mist and the low-key tones of twilight's half-light, elements they could exaggerate “to intensify expression.”¹⁵

According to Corn, the ideology around the tonal representation of nature was antithetical to the clarity and scientific accuracy of the Hudson River painters. By contrast, Whistler and Inness both saw painting as an interpretation of nature, a tool for replicating the feeling of its beauty, not a mechanical reproduction of its appearance. They taught that the understanding of nature's structure was critical to creating a beautiful painting, even if the compositional elements of the scene had to be rearranged and colors exaggerated. Corn describes how these painters have great sympathy with the Barbizon school in France, but they felt they could “achieve a more perfect synthesis of the poetic in the actual.”¹⁶ With a new synthetic style, they could find poetic truth, or true art.

13. Wanda Corn, M M.H. de Young Memorial Museum and California Palace of the Legion of Honor, *The Color of Mood: American Tonalism 1880-1910*, (San Francisco: M.H. De Young Memorial Museum, 1972), 1.

14. Corn, *The Color of Mood*, 1.

15. Corn, *The Color of Mood*, 2.

16. Corn, *The Color of Mood*, 6.

The minor scholarly field of Tonalist studies has relied on Corn's 1972 definition of Tonalism. Russell Chatham viewed his art as the natural expression of beauty, of an emotion he felt in nature, as true art. Nevertheless, artists across time and space have responded with a similar visual vocabulary to the advance of industry on the land. When viewed over the distance of time, however, a larger historical argument can be posited that these artists were responding to their context with innovation, novelty, and the passions of strong opinions. In this construct, Chatham fits squarely within an old-fashioned revivalist movement resisting the commercialized and industrialized art world—the Modern Art age could be resisted with the same aesthetic tools as the Gilded Age. Chatham's version of resistance was to live in the cultural and industrial periphery where he could stay connected to nature on his own terms. This put him in a small rural town that had its own extractive relationship with the natural world and a romanticized naturalistic aesthetic—Western Art—to reflect it.¹⁷ It also kept him out of view of the career making art critics and consequently the contemporary art conversations; the result of which is the paucity of critical writings.

Methodology

This paper will analyze two series of Chatham's works he created in the 1980s: *The Seasons*, a series of twelve paintings commissioned by the Museum of the Rockies (MOR) in 1990, and *The Missouri Headwaters Suite*, twelve lithographs he made between 1985 and 1987. Both series of works were created as whole works, meaning they were intended to stand together as suites of images with shared conceptions of the beauty and emotional temperament of the region's

17. Fred Shellenberg, *It's the Chase, not the Capture*, USA, 2015, 3.

natural vistas. Chatham defined the region as those areas of Southwest and South-Central Montana that contribute to the Missouri River watershed, about a 10,000 square mile area. Each image of the two series reflected Chatham's interpretation of a particular mood associated with each of the twelve months in the Headwaters territory.

Chatham conceived of these series while looking for a way to experiment with form while learning the art and craft of multi-plate commercial lithography. Chatham had to break down his familiar compositional structures and intuitive processes to adapt to a new medium with unfamiliar demands. Using *The Seasons* to track his remarkably fast learning curve and produced innovative results, I will demonstrate how Dow's instructional methodology contributed to Chatham's reconceptualization of his compositional line, form, and color values. He methodically reprogrammed his image-making practice to give his paintings and prints a consistent structure that he could apply in either medium.

Following his turn to lithography, Chatham was offered the MOR project; he turned again to the twelve-month format. Chatham obviously already knew how to paint, but *The Missouri Headwaters Suite* shows how his work changed before and after lithography. This section argues that lithography taught Chatham a new way to paint that could capture the region's atmosphere, an elusive goal until then.

This paper explores how small Western communities form their aesthetics, and consequently a hyper-local vernacular. Thus, my approach is rooted in provincialism. This thesis tracks one artist's development in response to place, and toward a distinct visual aesthetic unfamiliar to a community historically invested in a different aesthetic. The roots of Livingston's aesthetics begin with Manifest Destiny, the ideological underpinning of nineteenth century

American westward expansion. The town was founded by the Northern Pacific Railroad to service its engine repair shops and as a diversion point for tourists headed to Yellowstone Park. The stylistic conventions of American landscape art after the Civil War grew out of the earlier representational and romantic Hudson River school movement, which the railroad favored for its promotional posters modeled after sublime and operatic paintings by artists like Thomas Moran. The settlers valued agricultural and extraction-based economic activities, and they appreciated the romanticized versions of their environment and immediate history—specifically styles like the cowboy art of C.M. Russell, and what is now known as Western Art. These approaches expressed man’s domineering relationship with the natural world.

Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau challenged the division between man and nature. Influenced by Confucian teachings from China they promoted the Transcendentalist view that humans were not separate from nature. They valued a humanist individualism that centered man’s identity as defined by his ability to feel “one with nature”, as co-equals in a heroic crucible of self-reliance. The idea was that a man could prove his worth, his deepest, truest identity, by living in the woods (in nature) without the trappings of civilization.

While Thomas Moran celebrated the sublimity of the continent’s geography and topography through the lens of Manifest Destiny and the development of an American national identity, the Transcendentalists concerned themselves with the individual and his personal relationship to nature. David Cleveland summarizes the Tonalist’s Transcendentalist view on the relationship between man and nature,

“It is this interdependent relationship of men and nature, a relationship in which the artist interprets the visual world through the alembic of the imagination and memory, often eliciting spiritual insights, both personal and Universal, that remains the enduring birthright of tonalism.”

Russell Chatham arrived in Montana with a different consideration of humans' relationship with nature. His philosophy was rooted in his family's Transcendental leanings, and it showed in his subject, painting style, and aesthetics.

According to Frederick Jackson Turner the frontier closed in 1890 when all the free land had been used up. Fifty-five years later, Post-World War II suburban growth applied pressure to the lands and waters around cities like San Francisco, eliminating much of the area's rural character. Chatham wrote about salmon and striped bass going extinct in the Bay Area due to the boom in development.¹⁸ The intrusion of civilization into untamed nature left only one direction for the myth-seeking energies of listless urban Americans: eastward—a kind of rebound to the intermountain West.

In 1970s blue-collar Livingston, Chatham found the freedom to paint and hunt and fish much as he did in his youth. The cost to his career was severe, but his eventual financial success relied on wealthy newcomers from the entertainment industry who were also retreating from the to the low-stress, rural periphery. Hollywood celebrities and writers saw in his landscapes something other than the Western Art typical of the area's existing painters and collectors. They saw a language, visual representations that strove for something beyond what the eye can see.

18. Russell Chatham, "Family, Art and Friends," 131.

EARLY CHATHAM AND FAMILY

To understand Chatham's approach to landscape we first need to understand that of his grandfather, Gottardo Piazzoni, who died when Chatham was only six years old. Piazzoni was a well-known Northern California landscape painter active from the late nineteenth century to 1945. Despite his early death, Piazzoni's influence is evident in Chatham's muted palette and the intimacy of the landscape as subject. In a 2017 interview with April Vokey on her fishing podcast, *Anchored*, Chatham described how, as a self-taught painter, he only had his grandfather's paintings around the house growing up—it was the only painting style he knew. He eventually made his way to major museums on the East Coast, Europe, and China to visit what he had only seen in books, but the formative aesthetic had been set.

Piazzoni was well-known in California, and even after he died his public murals kept his legacy alive. He painted in a mid to low-value palette with limited tonal range using the larger romantic tropes of late nineteenth century landscape. The idea that Tonalism was a unique style or movement did not become established until after Wanda Corn's exhibit, *The Color of Mood*, in 1972. In 2001, Scott A. Shields, associate director and chief curator at the Crocker Art Museum, said, "Piazzoni and many other California artists of the period, including Xavier Martinez, Arthur Matthews, and Charles Rollo Peters, have lately been labeled California Tonalists, so-called because of their close color values, muted tones, and frequent nocturnal scenes."¹⁹ While they would not have used the term, artists of the Bay Area used these technical tools to capture a sense of place where nature and human unified toward the divine.²⁰

19. Scott A. Shields, "Eternal Light: Visions of Gottardo Piazzoni," *California History* 80, no. 2/3 (2001): 106–23. <https://doi.org/10.2307/25177650>, 111.

20. Shields, "Eternal Light: Visions of Gottardo Piazzoni," 111.

For Piazzoni, nature was “the embodiment of God.”²¹ He expressed a sympathy, or affinity for “nature’s inner life”, a distinctly Transcendentalist perspective. The Transcendentalists believed “humankind’s redemption and union with a higher power lies with the internal cultivation of the divine in the individual through the observation of the natural world.”²² Piazzoni, therefore, passed the Transcendental ethic of nature’s moral order—and the cultivation of the individual’s alignment with nature—to his grandson through landscape paintings. Chatham’s love for, and comfort in, the outdoors predisposed him to develop a personal relationship with the natural world. A life-long fly fisher, Chatham became known as a world class angler; he made his living in the 1960s and 70s by writing about fishing and the sporting life. But his art only occasionally depicted fishing; it rarely depicted figures at all.

Chatham claims his three major influences to be his grandfather, Gottardo Piazzoni, his uncle, Maurice Del Mue, and Albert Pinkham Ryder.²³ He lionized Piazzoni because he’s his grandfather, but also for the elder’s aesthetic disposition. Del Mue’s influence also shows up in his paintings because they painted together through Chatham’s teens. And he identified with Ryder because, “he was the first artist whose work appealed to my need for a spiritual sensibility...”²⁴

Chatham begins the essay with a story of how he used to stare at his grandfather’s painting, *The Soil* (Figure 3), studying it with his nose nearly touching the surface of the canvas. “I entered

21. Shields, “Eternal Light: Visions of Gottardo Piazzoni,” 108.

22. Austin Bernard Ross, “Confucianism, Transcendentalism, and the ‘Dao’ of Henry David Thoreau,” *The Concord Saunterer*, 26 (2018), 113.

23. Chatham, “Family, Art and Friends,” 120.

24. Chatham, “Family, Art and Friends,” 125

the world of this painting completely, as if it were a looking glass.”²⁵ The 1925 painting shows a foreground of a plowed field, its patterned rows receding at a slight angle around the foot of a double peaked hill in the middle ground. Chatham refers to the area above the double-knobbed horizon as a sky with “architectural cloud formations” that “seem to speak in a voice from above.”²⁶ The sky ambiguously reads as either all clouds or snowy mountains under gray clouds. The patterns within the sky and plowed field mimic each other, creating a synchronized horizontal zigzag rhythm. The swooping, linear brushstrokes of the hills’ surfaces change the direction of the rhythm into a horizontal grain, meeting the tilled soil at a low angle. The undeveloped terrain joins the agricultural land in a quiet tension between tamed and untamed.

The Piazzoni family practiced painting across all generations. Chatham’s aunt and uncle and their children all painted. Russell was terrible at school, but diligent and well supported by family in the practice of painting. Family summers on the Piazzoni ranch in Carmel Valley enveloped Chatham in the culture of making art: “there wasn’t any formal training involved; materials instructions were made available to us, and we were told to paint whatever we wanted.”²⁷ The following comparison between Piazzoni, Piazzoni’s brother-in-law, Maurice Del Mue, and Chatham illustrates the importance of the family culture in forming his Northern California aesthetic.

Piazzoni’s 1921 study, *Golden Hill with Live Oak* (Figure 4), shows how well the muted Tonalist palette works for the dry Northern California landscape. Piazzoni depicts a yellow hillside with two leafy green trees positioned at its base. The hill climbs to the left, creating a rounded peak

25. Chatham, “Family, Art and Friends,” 119.

26. Chatham, “Family, Art and Friends,” 119.

27. Russell Chatham, “Family, Art and Friends,” 122.

in the upper corner of the picture, only to begin a gentle descent to somewhere beyond the edge of the canvas. The trees, centered on the canvas, sit well below the ridge line, comfortably hunkered into the gulley that holds them. They sit in a diagonal tandem establishing the shallow, leftward trajectory of the full composition. An amorphous shape of green paint holds the bottom left corner of the canvas. Its color suggests the top of another tree, but its longer and straighter brushstrokes keep it from complementing the two oaks' shrubby canopies. It serves as an abstract *repoussoir*, leading the viewer's eye to the trees. A smaller green spot appears in a shallow depression beyond the featured trees.

While the trees cast shadows beneath them, they do not appear to be strongly lit by the sun, creating the impression of a hot, hazy day. The side of the hill is painted with a darker and grayer gold and the color of the sky beyond the ridge is a muddy haze over an undercoat of blue. Perhaps it is fog rolling in from beyond the ridge, defusing the sun.

Piazzoni has created a scene with depth and a sense of distance commensurate with the rolling hills of the California terrain. The trees may be the subject of the picture, but the atmosphere in which they exist is the subject. The bright foreground shifts into a darker tone right where the hillside steepens, fading even darker as it progresses to the top of the hill. The sharpness of the brushstrokes at the closer end of the hill smooths out on the hill on the left of the painting, adding to an illusion of distance between the viewer and the hilltop. This world, tucked in a little gulley, offers a simple intimacy by combining subtle tonal shifts with shifting brushstrokes and a light haze in the air.

Almost a decade later another of Chatham's early mentors, Maurice Del Mue, painted *Hills on the Piazzoni Ranch* (Figure 5). It depicts a hillside on Piazzoni's property in Carmel with the

familiar golden grass and green shrubs of Piazzoni's *Golden Hill with Live Oak*. A rounded hilltop leans off center toward the top right corner of the painting, visually supported by an angled gully leading up toward it. Del Mue's use of yellow highlights and warm shading forms the hill's contours. A long shoulder of land projects from the hilltop down toward the viewer, ending on a flat field of yellow green. Halfway down the image, a large bush or tree (as with the earlier painting, minimal detail leaves it uncertain) sits on a crease in the landform, mirroring the hilltop.

Green ground cover takes over the painting at this point. Shrubs in the gully accentuate an implied line pointing at the hilltop. The gully and the undulation serve as implied perspective lines, converging at the crest of the hill to create a perception of depth. While the air in Del Mue's scene is clear, unlike Piazzoni's, he employs a subtle atmospheric perspective technique by painting the hilltop with a slightly pale tone and the base of the hill with a slightly warm tone.

Del Mue's sky, a band of high chroma blue, caps the top of the canvas. Del Mue was a professional illustrator—he designed the Arm and Hammer logo—and it is doubtful that the choice to include only a tiny sliver of brightly colored sky was accidental. The intensity of the hue contrasts with the narrow color ranges of the warm landforms and green trees. He tempers the greens with modelling and shadow, and the patches of other vegetation are muddled with brown and neutral tones. Yet his palette is noticeably more vivid than Piazzoni's. This approach, which works well with the complexity of the golds and yellows, reflects an illustrators need for the clarity of sharp contrasts.

His brushstrokes add texture to the surface of the canvas suggesting uneven ground and adding depth to the greenery on the lower parts of the canvas. The open hillside in the top portion of the composition draws the viewer's eye up, but unlike Piazzoni's composition, Del Mue's

horizon is set close to the top of the canvas. Del Mue doesn't fully achieve Piazzoni's introspective atmosphere. The intense blue above the horizon is neither representative of the sky's true color, nor of a Tonalist's tonal moderation. His brushstrokes remain sharp from the foreground to the back, and the wider color range, while tightly controlled, contrasts with the subdued calm of tone. Overall, the Del Mue has a graphic quality that values strong color and contrast over visual complexity or subtle moderation. There is no record of what Chatham thought of this painting. He did offer this observation about his uncle, though it says more about Chatham's intense devotion to his grandfather's aesthetic than Del Mue's *plein air* skills:

“I came to realize that Maurice's paintings fell short of Papa's because he chose his subjects, more or less indiscriminately, and injected a bit of false drama. He was not in love with his subjects, and he was not trying to reveal their inner life, their mystery. He lacked sensitivity, commitment, and passion, and yet he painted everything with tremendous facility.”²⁸

Chatham painted alongside his uncle, Maurice Del Mue, while growing up. In comparison, Chatham's 1960 *untitled* oil sketch (Figure 6) looks like a blocked-in replica of Del Mue's *Hills on the Piazzoni Ranch*. It is the same hill, evidenced by the horizon line that follows the same contour and by his placement of vegetation in similar spots, specifically the little bush on the ridge. Thirty years has passed between the two paintings making it unlikely the little bush would appear the same in both depictions. Chatham may have copied Del Mue's painting to work out its formal elements and major features.

Chatham replaces Del Mue's exaggerated naturalism with flat, muted colors painted in large blocks positioned around the panel. The sky is a muddy light blue, the hill is a nearly orange putty color, the large brown feature intruding from the right represents a patch of low brush or the

28. Russell Chatham, “Family, Art and Friends,” 123.

shaded slope of the hill's undulation. Peeking into the frame from the bottom and lower left sides is greenery—trees or bushes. The color-coded shapes hold their positions like a cell from an abstract animation. The colored blobs push against the framing edge, transforming the hillside into a negative space separating the brown from the green.

Chatham's sky is thicker than Del Mue's, giving the hilltop more room to breathe, but compared to Piazzoni's, the sky remains secondary to the foreground scene. Its muted blue tone matches the rest of the forms, and without it the painting would lose any reference to reality and the composition would become fully abstracted, transforming the orange field into a nonobjective space. As a study, the piece has no perspective or illusion of depth. The flat forms interact on an abstract two-dimensional plane, pushing past and through each other, unable to leave the surface of the painting and overlap the other. The abstract quality of the piece suggests it was made as an exercise in compositional problem solving and to test the relationships between hues and tones. He continued his practice of playing with compositional arrangements and colors tones throughout the 1960s and 70s, though his Montana studies took a new form.

CALIFORNIA AND MONTANA

Chatham spent the 1960s trying to make a living as an artist in San Francisco. It was a time of experimentation with composition and color. He worked on small to medium-sized canvases ranging from 6"x8" to 12"x15", with a few reaching as large as 30"x40". The smaller size suited his *plein air* practice, as smaller canvases are easier to carry. A few of his larger paintings from the era suggest he may have been looking at the abstracted rectilinear arrangements of urban landscapes by California artist Richard Diebenkorn. These experiments show Chatham's process of discovery, of trying to figure out how paintings work, but they continue the blocky style of abstraction seen in *Untitled, 1960*.

Chatham's brush strokes in this period were heavy and expressive, a trait he would work to erase after a 1974 trip to museums on the East Coast. In his experimental landscapes of the 1960s he closed the distance between the viewer and the land, confronting the inter-relations of soil, vegetation, and rocks. These tightly arranged compositions on small panels flattened the rolling California topography, transforming the landscape's natural features into abstracted forms of low-toned hues.

When he painted on a larger canvas, he opened the composition and tended to depict more coherent scenes. The picture might include a ridge line with a band of blue, or a neutral wedge of light indicating a patch of sky above the horizon. He painted his subjects from the perspective of walking the land. The sky situated the scene in the world, making it a landscape, not merely a formal arrangement of forms and colors. If he included a foreground, it was rarely the main subject; it either filled out the composition or carried a supporting feature, like a pasture with cows or sheep.

Chatham met with limited commercial success in San Francisco, selling his paintings mostly in street markets and to friends. In “Family, Art and Friends” he describes participating in the San Francisco art world: he entered shows, networked, taught, and submitted work to all the galleries, but success never came.²⁹ Instead, because of his expertise in fishing, and the renown that came from catching a world record striped bass, he wrote fishing stories for angling journals and *Sports Illustrated* to pay the bills. He admits, however, he “turned to writing because I couldn’t sell my paintings, the fact being they weren’t good enough.”³⁰ His ultimate goal was to be a great painter.

Beyond the idea that he “wasn’t good enough”, Chatham’s quiet landscapes would have made him an outsider in the abstract, conceptual, and pop art obsessed world of urban-centered contemporary art. His 1971 study, *Sonoma Mountain* (Figure 7), shows tremendous growth from the decade before. He has integrated the brushstrokes into the unity of the painting and has achieved the light to dark harmony so important to Dow.

San Francisco was not a major commercial art center in the 1960s, but Bay Area artists like Richard Diebenkorn, Elmer Bischoff and David Park had been effectively pushing back against the New York Abstract Expressionists’ dominance since the 1950s. From their positions in academic institutions like University of California, Berkeley, Stanford, and the California School of Fine Arts, Bay Area artists could influence art trends on a national level with their regional perspective.

29 Russell Chatham, “Family, Art and Friends,” 127.

30. John A. Murray, "Motive Is Everything: A Conversation with Artist, Writer, Publisher, Sportsman, Gourmet Chef and Restaurateur Russell Chatham," *Bloomsbury Review*, 2003, 3.

Chatham was especially antagonistic to the use of commercialized imagery in art. In the late 1990s, after living in Montana for many years, Chatham wrote a short piece in the *Big Sky Journal* on the art world's declining standards of quality. Chatham laid the blame on the commercialization of painting and people like Andy Warhol—whom he called “a mediocre draftsman, a colorist without his own palette”—taking advantage of the absence of tradition or standards in art. He said, “Respect for tradition has been replaced by contempt, humility by arrogance, knowledge by ignorance, commitment by ennui, and perhaps worst of all, innocence by cynicism.”³¹

Chatham's animosity toward the larger American art market arguably kept him from making headway in the East Coast culture-making centers, an attitude that began as early as the early 1960s and lasted through the 1990s. Toby Thompson quoted him as saying, “dealers are mostly shysters, hyping bad art to people in museums, which are filled with absolute trash.”³² Montana was a long way from the art markets, a distance that shielded him from having to confront a contemporary art world on a daily basis.

American tastes were aligned against landscape painting in the 1960s and 70s, and the cultural and political climate clashed with Chatham's independence, and his painting skills and style were not developed enough to save him. He found work as a carpenter and other odd jobs. He was married with a baby by then, and his greatest fame had come from his fishing prowess. This fame led to an encounter with the writers Thomas McGuane and William Hjortsberg and his

31. Russell Chatham, “Painted into the corner of America”, in Allen Morris Jones and Jeff Wetmore, ed., *The Big Sky Reader*, 1st St Martin's Press ed., New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997

32. Toby Thompson, *Fired On: Targeting Western American Art*, United States: Bangtail Press, 2020.

first visit to Livingston to fish in 1971. McGuane encouraged his friends to all move to Livingston. The rural lifestyle combined with exceedingly cheap rent, ready access to fishing, and a built-in community of like-minded fishing friends who appreciated art drew Russell Chatham and his small family to Montana in 1972.³³

Chatham encountered a foreign landscape when he moved to Montana. Compared to the relatively low hills and gullies of Marin County or Carmel, the distances between Montana's snowcapped mountain ranges created valleys with wide, flat open spaces unfamiliar to newcomers. The mountains of Paradise Valley, south of Livingston, rise 5,000 feet above the valley floor on the east side, and about half that relative elevation on the west side. Together, they frame a valley five miles wide and thirty-five miles long (twice as wide and twice as long as the island of Manhattan). The steep mountains on the east side, the Absarokas, launch almost directly from the valley floor, leaving only a shallow band of timber at their base that might resemble his intimate native California places. Chatham's challenge was to adapt his understanding of how to see and depict the tight gullies and approachable hills of the California landscape to the vastness of the Montana landscape.

His first painting in Montana, done with his California eye attuned to intimate hillsides, is a small 8" x 10" study of a sheep grazing near a bush, *Sheep at Deep Creek*, (Figure 8). He self-deprecatingly critiques the painting by saying, "The personality behind it seems frail" and influenced by his grandfather.³⁴ The painting's thick brushstrokes blend with the narrow color range to hide the sheep in a swirl of impasto paint. Perhaps Chatham is projecting the painting's

33. Russell Chatham, "Family, Art and Friends," 132.

34. Chatham, "Family, Art and Friends," 132.

“frail” personality as his own lack of clarity on how to approach the Montana landscape—a landscape he ignored by closely cropping the painting to just a bush and a sheep on a hillside. He stopped painting for the public and concentrated on writing about fishing for the next two years. He also renovated his family’s old log cabin and built a studio on the property in the Paradise Valley.

In 1974, Chatham took a trip to New York City to sell his collection of fishing essays, *The Angler’s Coast*.³⁵ He took advantage of being in the city and in proximity to Boston and Washington DC by making a grand tour of East Coast art institutions, including the Met, the National Gallery, the Phillips, and the Frick. He writes that he was “stunned by Vermeer, thrilled to discover Goya,” and “finally saw real Ryders...” He loved Paul Gauguin and Théodore Rousseau and Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot.³⁶ Paul Cézanne challenged his appreciation for a wide range of styles. He said, “I couldn’t comprehend Cézanne yet...” He did not elaborate, but the two artists approached their compositions and renderings differently. Cézanne is famous for “his unique method of building form with color and his analytical approach to nature.”³⁷ Chatham was anything but analytical about nature. He was chasing a feeling, or an atmosphere, to convey a unity he felt with nature. It is no wonder, therefore, that he felt a strong affinity for Corot, Rousseau, and Millet, artists frequently associated with the Barbizon School, and Ryder, one of his personal idols.

He began painting again when he returned to Livingston. He looked at his technique with a fresh critical eye.

35. Russell Chatham, “Family, Art and Friends,” 132.

36. Russell Chatham, “Family, Art and Friends,” 132.

37. James Voorhies, “Paul Cézanne (1839–1906),” In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–.

http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/pcez/hd_pcez.htm (October 2004)

“I was aiming at some things I noticed in nearly all the best paintings I'd seen. The surfaces of such pictures were cohesive and unobtrusive. Even when the strokes were free and expressive the artist's presence was never announced. The statement was always foremost, and the artist could only be distinguished as a shadowy presence.”³⁸

Chatham was not attracted to the sublime grandeur of the mountains, in contrast to Thomas Moran, who had celebrated with dramatic realism the rocks and crags and scale of the Yellowstone region. Chatham preferred grassy fields and clusters of trees in the foothills—the quiet places he could reach on foot.

“(W)hen I look up into these mountain peaks that are right above the house... they're very, you know, very, it is very hostile. I don't want to be there... I don't like it up there... so it's very hard for me to paint a picture of that because in order for me to paint a picture of it I have to place myself in the spot where the brush... hits the canvas, that's where I am... I have to be able to feel that I could walk through there and that I know what it's like to be under those trees or back against those hills or on those fields and so forth. I have a sympathy for it.”³⁹

Chatham was more inclined to paint trees and fields and hills, things approachable on foot. He invokes the feeling of sympathy for a natural place. In this context he is using the term “sympathy” to describe his need to be in a communal relationship with nature. He sees the hard, rocky exposure above tree line as not sympathetic, but as hostile. Chatham not only does not want to go there, but he also feels aggressively turned back and unwanted there.

“The essential difference between the country here and Carmel or Marin is scale. In California, it is easy to have an intimacy with the country,” Chatham says. “But things here are seen at great distances. It's wide-open and tall. You've got to reduce it here, telescope it. The other essential difference is that the California Hills are

38. Russell Chatham, “Family, Art and Friends,” 132.

39. Russell Chatham, Doris Loeser, *The Innocent Obsessions of Russell Chatham*, Bozeman, MT: KUSM-TV, 1994.

sensuous. They're like nudes in the way they roll and curve. Here, they're angular, cold, distant, even hostile.”⁴⁰

By contrast, Moran's large-scale panoramas of the Mountain West express awe at the rugged inhumanly scaled landscape. His masterpiece, *Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone* (Figure 9), was instrumental in the campaign to establish Yellowstone National Park in 1872—the visual drama of the mostly foreign frontier appealed to nineteenth century notions of romantic sublimity and exoticism. In the months before President Ulysses S. Grant signed the Yellowstone National Park Protection Act on March 1, 1872, Hayden included Moran's field watercolors with William Henry Jackson's photos as part of the lobbying effort to congress. Moran unveiled the oil painting two months after the signing.

Moran's painting strikes the viewer with its light and dark contrast and geologically derived palette. The intensity of the reds and yellows of the canyon's rock walls frame the meandering blue waters of the river as it dodges in and out of view at the bottom of the canyon. Sunlight directs the eye by illuminating the canyon and the falls, a scene framed with the contrast of the shaded foreground which presumably sits in the shadow of a mountain behind the viewer.

The scale and grandeur of the canyon and its waterfalls are conveyed by the large dimensions of the piece and the contrastingly tiny figures toward the bottom of the composition in the shaded area. Two figures stand on the edge off a cliff, surveying the canyon, prominent only in their recognizable human forms silhouetted against the glowing rock walls. This is the classic romantic notion of the sublime: rooted in place, face to face with the grand omnipotence of nature. The image is meant to take the viewer's breath away.

40. Van Gordon Sauter, “Russell Chatham's Big Sky Country: A Western Landscape Artist Finds a Loyal Following Among the Hip and Famous,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 2, 1987, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1987-08-02-tm-461-story.html>.

The visual clarity of Moran's work created a world at once visually plausible and sublime. A viewer can look across the canyon and see the detailed trees on the opposite rim as clearly as they can see the cracked rocks in the foreground. Moran at first directs the viewer's eye to the waterfalls, then along the path of the impossibly blue water of the Yellowstone River at the bottom of the canyon to the people standing on the edge of the canyon. Their tiny scale emphasizes the immensity of the canyon. Moran places his little figures low in the frame, almost directly below the attention-grabbing waterfalls, yet clearly visible in their high contrast silhouettes; they admire nature, and by their appreciative gaze, claim it.

Moran used the human figure motif in the same fashion as so many other Hudson River School painters. Where European custom had been to treat the landscape as a background for the people in a painting, the American tradition featured the landscape with the support of human figures. This approach perpetuated a human narrative within the landscape. Eight hundred years earlier, the neo-Confucian artists of the northern Sung Dynasty also used miniaturized human forms in their landscapes, but to a different end.

In Fan K'uan's *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams* (c. 1000) (Figure 10), the artist diminishes the presence of the humans and donkeys passing through the scenery. He situates them at the bottom of the composition—beneath the monumental mountains—subsuming them into the landscape. This approach to centering the landscape in art by reducing the relative scale of human forms represents a philosophical difference from the European humanist tradition of privileging human presence in a landscape.

The mountain peaks behind Chatham's house in the Paradise Valley were no less grand than the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, yet he did not revel in their immense scale. He saw

them as “hostile” and avoided them. He was not looking for the grandiosity of a panorama, but for an atmosphere of calm and solitude. The soaring mountains, however, demand the attention of most viewers. This attention is most often delivered by artists as performative depictions of nature’s sublime essence, from Frederic E. Church (e.g., *Niagara*, 1857) to Thomas Moran, and on to Ansel Adams (e.g., *The Tetons and the Snake River*, 1942). These works were designed to invoke an emotional reaction from their audiences, and in the case of Moran and Adams, to align public opinion to a government project— for Moran it was Western boosterism, for Adams it was the US Department of the Interior.⁴¹

Because Chatham’s introspective view of his relationship with nature was personal and private, it reduced the primacy of scale as the West’s defining feature. Viewers were no longer put in a consumerist relationship with a sweeping panorama—like Moran’s tiny men gazing at the waterfalls from the rim of Yellowstone’s Grand Canyon. Because he was not trying to make a public statement with his paintings, he had to figure out how to make Montana’s terrain the subject of a private, if not intimate, statement. His answer would introduce an antidote to the view of the mountain ranges of the American West as panoramically sublime landscapes.

The tension between Moran’s sublime and Chatham’s intimacy can be seen in the latter’s 1975 *Thunderstorm*, (Figure 11) a square canvas of a mountain glowing in a composition crowded with a dark sky and layers of foothills. Throughout the 1970s Chatham only occasionally depicted mountain peaks. *Thunderstorm* exemplifies his reluctance to elevate mountains with dramatic

41. Carrie Seeker, “The Tetons and the Snake River - Ansel Adams,” The Ansel Adams Gallery, September 14, 2023, <https://www.anseladams.com/the-tetons-and-the-snake-river/>, Accessed March 31, 2024. Adams intended the photo to be part of a 1941 project honoring the US National Parks system for the Department of the Interior.

swirling clouds or beams of heavenly sunlight. Instead, he illuminates the peak with an even light, directing the viewer's attention to the relationships between the gray mountain and its large white patches of snow. A hint of clouds billows above the ridge, but the sky is nearly the same tone and value as the foreground mountain slopes. The darkest forms in the painting are the steep slopes of a canyon plunging behind a low foothill. The flat layers of natural features crop the brilliant mountain, allowing it to stand out. The light does not divide into neat rays and is not symbolic of God's glory or dominion over nature as it would be in a Moran painting. Yet, for all the implied depth of the image, the painting lacks modeling or directional light and shadow to create the illusion of deep perspective. The cool colors do not fade through any kind of atmosphere, and there is nothing in the scene to suggest a receding scale like in an aerial perspective. The foregrounded planes of mountainous features block the viewer out, keeping them from feeling invited in. The graphic structure of the piece offers a kind of visual intrigue through its arrangement of shapes, but Chatham's lack of sympathy for distant peaks is evident.

Chatham had to find a way of relating Montana's mountainous landscape. His challenge went beyond the just the scale of the mountains—the valleys between them were also vast. The flattened hillside paintings of Carmel did not require a consideration of how the light changed color over twenty miles or how the amount of detail diminished in the distance. He experimented with linear and aerial perspectives and, in keeping with the European tradition of imitating the flatness of Japanese prints, he often stacked receding planes of natural features to signal the illusion of depth and distance. The geometric structure of the painting's composition also shows his application of the formal, abstraction-based problem-solving techniques of the 1960s. Neither of these two approaches alone gave him the perspective he needed.

He studied depth and perspective in multiple paintings in the mid 1970s. His Montana problem boiled down to more than just scale, it included distance—the distance between the viewer and the horizon, the distance between the features in the pictures. He realized he could depict the depth of the landscape instead of the wide, horizontal sweep of panoramas by spinning the vastness of the panorama 90°. This proved to be the telescoping effect he described in *Silent Seasons*. It created a deep landscape in a more naturalistic perspective and a moody atmosphere. His subjects ranged from the open valley floors to the intimate spaces of clustered trees. The panoramic treatment of storms rolling over the land in the distance suggest the breadth of wide valleys, but he never includes both sides of a valley. Chatham depicts the emotional center of the action and crops out the larger context of the path of the storm. His focus on the interaction between the land and the sky, the foothills and clouds, or precipitation on the plain, reveals his interest is limited to the private emotional responses, not the outward performance of the sublime.

At such a distance the scale seems grand because the panoramic motifs are featured; the clouds and the land are included in the height of the frame, but the width is narrow, like looking at a distant object through a paper towel tube. Chatham trains the viewer's gaze on the interrelation of the land and the atmosphere, and he crops out the irrelevant terrain. This is not a comprehensive view of the entire valley, but a minimal presentation of the heart of the artist's statement.

Chatham borrowed his muted palette from tonalism and his early impasto surfaces from Impressionism to create an image that is both textural and atmospheric. Chatham's personality was poetic and introspective, well suited to the suggestive Tonalist approach to painting, not the Impressionist's analytical approach. If he was frustrated by the conflicting styles, he could only

choose one in resolving the rest of his Montana problem, and only one suited his personality: Tonalism.

The full resolution to his Montana problem would come once he reworked his technical skills to depict an atmosphere with the kind of mood that reflected his emotional response to the landscape. The first problem had to do with perception; the landscape had more depth and distance than he could manage, and his post-impressionistic impasto kept his eye and perspective at the canvas's surface. The second problem was the representation of his emotional response to the landscape.

The 1974 trip to New York and East Coast museums showed Chatham how to refine his brush strokes to be “free and unobtrusive”, like the European masters. He said he “couldn’t get a handle on” Cézanne, who painted “monumental and unchanging landscapes” and the solidity of their forms. That might be because Cézanne “was not interested in transient and fleeting effects” and Chatham was.⁴²

To keep his paintings loose and lively—and to avoid the stiffness that can come with too much attention to detail—he adopted a technique from the eighteenth-century portrait and landscape painter, Thomas Gainsborough. According to Chatham, when painting a portrait, Gainsborough blocked out his canvas in paint with rough compositional forms, then scraped all the paint off, leaving a ghost image on the textured canvas. This light shadow of the composition

42. James Voorhies, “Paul Cézanne (1839–1906),” In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–.
http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/pcez/hd_pcez.htm (October 2004)

offered a sketch of the painting's structure but allowed the looseness of spontaneity when he returned to rendering the subject in the ensuing sessions.⁴³

Contrary to the Impressionists, Chatham did not chase the momentary effects of light on the surface of the world; he sought to capture the landscape's emotional atmosphere. That atmosphere was not created by direct light but by light filtering through atmosphere. In *Park County in February* (Figure 12), Chatham confines the sun's brilliance to a crack just above the horizon at sunset. Two other paintings in the *Seasons* series have highlighted areas in the sky, but only as supporting elements. He paints the light source as a glow in the overcast sky, and even obscures it with denuded winter trees. The blocking of the natural light source casts a half-light over the landscape, reducing the crisp edges of objects and the clarity of distinctions between figures and ground.

Chatham returned to California most winters in the 1970s to visit family. The visits were also opportunities to develop painting techniques with familiar subject matter in favorite places. He painted Tomales Bay in Marin County many times in his life, and by 1979 he had achieved a level of mastery and refinement in his depiction of its light and depth. The view in *Tomales Bay* (Figure 12) looks across a narrow body of water to a pair of beaches at the foot of a stretch of rolling hills. The grass covered hills form a rolling horizon against a pale blue sky. A distant bank of fog evenly parallels the horizon like white icing on a cake. Centered vertically and horizontally in the composition, the hills crumble into rocky outcroppings on the beaches illuminated by the midday sun. In the near middle ground, a wood pier juts into the water from the left, leading to an

43. Alex Scaff, "Pt 5'Gone Fishin' - An Interview with Russell Chatham", YouTube, E-mulsionless Productions, 2009

empty floating dock. The viewer's ambiguous grounding seems too high to be standing on a beach—the water stretches beyond the bottom of the canvas, leading to a sense of floating above the water, not on it.

This picture shows two significant developments in Chatham's progress toward a solution of his Montana problem. First, he deploys realistic depictions of direct light and shadow, which produces the illusionistic effects of depth and volume on the landforms; Second, he uses horizontal banding to further the illusion of depth in space, and establish stability within the composition. This painting shows Chatham studying depth and distance in a different way than his flattened amorphous forms of the 1960s.

The painting's loose brushwork directs the viewer's attention to the play of light on the land and beaches, conveying a sense of direct observation rather than the impression of memory and imagination. The original Tonalists considered Impressionism a branch of Realism, that it was "anathema to late nineteenth century painter and photographer."⁴⁴ They were "artists of mood" and sought to "convincingly reproduce not only what [they] saw in nature, but [their] emotional response to it as well."⁴⁵ *Tomales Bay*, however, was painted in the studio.⁴⁶ The glowing beaches and textured cliffs stand separated from the viewer by the barrier of water; the absence of a boat at the dock accentuates the beaches' inaccessibility. This painting lacks the darker, diffused light of Chatham's later atmospheres where he avoids distracting detail and invites the viewer into a reflective environment more open to an emotional reaction.

44. Corn, *The Color of Mood*, 2, 3.

45. Corn, *The Color of Mood*, 2.

46. Russell Chatham, "Family, Art and Friends," 133.

His understanding of how to proportion light and dark on the canvas balances the tonal range of the whole picture in a structure reminiscent of Dow's Notan. Taken as a whole, the painting presents a level of clarity uncommon to Chatham's later work: He concentrates the sunlight so it forms distinct shadows to give the impression of natural detail; the shading of the rolling hills creates the illusion of three-dimensional space; the rippled water holds multiple shades of blue—the darker shade depicts the indistinct reflection of the rolling hills—adding to the illusion of distance.

Second, the horizontal structure of the composition establishes a sense of calm and stability and creates the foundation for aerial perspectives. Nearly every form in the composition is a horizontal shape. The water takes up almost the entire bottom half of the canvas as a blue rectangle. The dark reflection of the land on the water's surface slopes gently down toward the right corner at a shallow angle, but it still reads as horizontal. The land, the bank of fog, and the pale sky all traverse the scene horizontally. The wood pier and dock parallel the banded features, but their vertical pilings carry the only vertical intrusions of the entire piece, breaking the monotony of the horizontal rhythm.

Chatham stacks the formal elements of the scene like layers on a cake. He adds the structure of progressive recession to the light's three-dimensionality. Each banded form represents a step deeper into the scene—each step recognizable by the forms' function in the world: water separates things, hills have depth, fog covers large areas. These elements add up to a type of assumed perspective, not a formal aerial perspective with objects getting smaller in the distance or the haze of an atmospheric color shift. This kind of perspective places the elements into measured

arrangements in relation to the depth of the scene in addition to each other. By the late 1970s he had begun to break out of the flat, California-informed world of abstract oil sketches.

LITHOGRAPHY

For the first twenty years of his career, Chatham relied on his great facility with color to create attractive images. His paintings from those decades strike a pleasing first impression due to their color and dark-to-light balance. His encounter with lithography would challenge his palette and drive it deeper into the gray, or hazy, Tonalist range.

In the 1987 book, *The Missouri Headwaters: Twelve Original Lithographs* Chatham described his first encounter with lithography as the backstory for the suite of twelve prints. It also served to educate the public in the process and originality of lithographic prints. He recounted two major developments in his adoption of lithography. The first is the application of a seamless continuous tone, especially to a large format; the second is drawing with a crayon.

Larry Winn, a Seattle-based print publisher, approached Chatham in early 1982 to go to Seattle to make lithographic prints with master printer, Kent Lovelace, at The Stone Press. Chatham was familiar with lithography to the extent his first wife had taught printmaking at Marin College while they were married. The idea intrigued him, especially since he was in constant financial difficulties at the time and thought it might be a good way to make money.⁴⁷

Chatham's first attempts were made with six-plate to nine-plate stone lithographs. The process was slow, grueling, and technically complex. His first print, *Paradise Valley at Evening*, 1982 (Figure 14), disappointed him, "My work more than anything else is color specific."⁴⁸ The scene is a view from a hillside looking onto the valley floor with clumps of trees lining a winding river. The browns of the hillside and greens of the valley floor create an image that is dark like a

47. Russell Chatham, *The Missouri Headwaters: Twelve Original Lithographs*, Livingston, Mont: Clark City Press, 1987, 31.

48. Chatham, *The Missouri Headwaters: Lithographs*, 38.

nocturne, but the low values lack full ink saturation, giving the picture a light, faded feeling that's not quite a day scene either. He compared his stone prints to those of Art Hansen, a Washington printmaker whom he admired and with whom he shared a print shop, saying, "Hansen's work was saturated with three colors, and mine was drab with ten."⁴⁹

Yellowstone River (Figure 15), another 1982 stone lithograph, shows a step back from the over-worked crayon drawing approach. Perhaps with coaching from Kent Lovelace, the owner and head printer at The Stone Press, this print addresses the muddy, overworked look of *Paradise Valley at Evening* by including sky in the composition. He used the lithography crayon in the trees and ground areas, and a brayer-based blending technique for the sky and parts of the water. Chatham does not describe making the three-part *Yellowstone River* suite, but the subtle pink-to-blue gradient in the sky can be achieved with a common technique of using a 12"-14" brayer on a lithography stone. The printmaker dabs a measure of each color a few inches apart on the inking table and hand-rolls the brayer over the ink until the colors spread out, blending into a gradient on the ink-charged rubber roller. They roll the blended ink onto the stone, which in turn transfers the ink to the paper when run through the printing press. If the printmaker overdoes the rolling, or uses inconsistent quantities of ink, the gradient prints become muddy or over-saturated. This process is repeated by hand for every imprint, limiting the size and consistency of the run.

Similar dynamics applied to the rest of the image as each plate contained its own drawing with an individual color assignment, offering endless variations on colors superimposed through overlapping layers of ink. However, those same variations also introduced opportunities for problems. Chatham lamented the difficulties of stone lithography, "I simply could not trust the

49. Chatham, *The Missouri Headwaters: Lithographs*, 32.

proofed plates to be exact every time. Even if I could trust them to be exact, the system tended to deny the print its own life by allowing infinite changes on any of the plates.”⁵⁰ Implicit in his statement is the idea that the artist was the source of the image’s life. Chatham drew his pictures from memory, not from photos or directly from nature, emphasizing his need for fidelity to his mental image. Commercial aluminum plates would offer the consistency he sought.

Chatham met artist Dan Smith early in his residency at The Stone Press. Smith had recently bought a Harris one-color, commercial offset lithography press that ran aluminum plates for making posters and artist reproductions. Smith explained how he could use the offset process to solve Chatham’s lithography problems. Smith and Chatham developed a workflow based on Smith’s ability to run large numbers of plates—a process that played into the artist’s strengths with color and line and mitigated his frustrations with stone lithography. The giant machine’s mechanization dramatically cut stone lithography’s setup, registration, and color proofing times. It’s aluminum plates provided consistent and accurate color registration over longer runs, and while they needed to be prepped before use (like stones), they were disposed of after their one-color use, easing cleanup and transition between plates. These efficiencies compounded into a process of up to fifty different color plates with a large-format, continuous-tone print—a technique that fundamentally affected his aesthetic.⁵¹

The early stone prints illustrate more than Chatham’s struggles with a new medium. *Paradise Valley at Evening* shows his desire to create a unified atmospheric whole. His innate skill with color—blending the tones and values in a scene by mixing what he needs on a palette—does

50. Chatham, *The Missouri Headwaters: Lithographs*, 37-38.

51. Chatham, *The Missouri Headwaters: Lithographs*, 34.

not make the jump to lithography's complex layering of inks. To get his vision out of his head and into the print, he must first break his image into manageable parts, color by color. And like Arthur Wesley Dow, he starts with composition.

Lithography's technical process forced Chatham out of his intuitive compositional constructions and into a more methodical approach. He constructed *Yellowstone River* into a newly deliberate, horizontally unified composition. The image is bifurcated by cottonwood trees running in a straight line across the middle of the frame. River water runs in and out between the dark clumps of trees, reflecting both the featureless sky and the trees. The distance between the trees is what Dow would refer to as "good spacing," a subjective judgement of proportion, or the pleasing balance between dark-and-light massing. The concept presents itself most prominently in the rhythmic spacing between the trees in Chatham's lithograph. Tiny trees limn the distant riverbank, and behind them a darker, narrow ambiguous landform stretches behind everything.

The strong presence of the main row of trees is because they are not actually a row—they are separate rectangular clumps of trees aligned by implied line. Their proportions set a rhythm with the smaller interspersed gaps which is accentuated by their vertical trunks just visible in the darkness. Whereas *Tomales Bay* featured a horizontal construction to undergird the symmetry of the concentrated light on the beach, this picture favors an ambient, diffuse daylight, directing the viewer's attention to the dark forests in the clumps of trees. The trees' reflection in the water increases the presence of the dark spaces in the composition and contributes to a balanced arrangement of contrasting values across the bottom half of the image.

As a complement to the compositional lessons from his California predecessors, Chatham was also starting to incorporate pictorial motifs drawn from Sung dynasty painting. The reflections

in the placid water are reminiscent of Ni Zan, a Yuan Dynasty landscape painter. Ni was a member of a literati movement that brought spiritual iconography back into landscape painting after the Sung dynasty collapsed. The Chinese literati had withdrawn into the mountains in a form of self-exile, and it is within this solitude that a new, mystical aesthetic developed, best exemplified by Ni Zan's calculated open spaces. Chatham's own move to the rural Mountain West paralleled that of the artists he admired. The character of his paintings countered the finely detailed realism propagated by the preceding Northern Sung Dynasty—a relationship echoed in the Hudson River School versus Tonalism dynamic.

Ni's favorite technique was to depict a lake or wide river by separating the far shore from the near with open space, as in *Six Gentlemen*, from 1345 (Figure 16). The empty areas of the composition represent the water's placid surface; the nothingness of the open area becomes the painting's symbol of calm. According to Mark Sullivan, "Ni's landscapes are known for their... repeated images of foreground trees separated from distant shores and mountains by broad empty stretches of water."⁵² The effect of this empty space has an "...ability to create at once a yearning for the tranquility it represents, a nostalgic memory of such moments of equipoise in one's own life, and a brief experience within the painting of this quietude."⁵³ Chatham created the effects of yearning through the gradients of his open skies and enveloping clouds.

Each step of the lithographic process required a degree of forethought not native to oil painting. Where Chatham could instinctively mix paint from tubes on his studio palette, lithography required multiple plates of colors organized with a degree of unfamiliar planning and

52. Mark Sullivan, "The Gift of Distance: Chinese Landscape Painting as a Source of Inspiration," *Southwest Review* 92, no. 3 (2007): 410.

53. Mark Sullivan, "The Gift of Distance," 410.

forethought. Chatham learned to create a clear and well-defined initial sketch, an art-structure he could use on every plate. Once he had the structure in place, he could more easily choose his values and colors.

“My initial problem with lithography was how to proceed more or less organically so that natural selection can take place. For this to happen I needed a stable, precise image on the paper from which to proceed, an image I was missing before. I needed commitment, not options.”⁵⁴

The *Missouri Headwaters* suite, a project he worked on from 1985 to 1987, was his first comprehensive series of prints using aluminum plate lithography. To give the project “some sort of form”, he conceived of a twelve-print study of the region of Montana where he lived, “the area I most often fish and hunt, the area where I am likely to roam around with a sketchbook, or paintbox.”⁵⁵ Chatham lived in Southwest Montana and near the headwaters of the Missouri River, but he claimed the larger 10,000 square mile region between Butte, Crow agency, Great Falls and Yellowstone Park as part of the suite. He envisioned each print as a “statement about one month of the year.”⁵⁶ As a whole, the suite of twelve prints comprises a portrait of the region.

Chatham’s ability to invoke strong emotional reactions to his work achieves a new level in the *Headwaters* suite by creating an emotional atmosphere. The ambitious twelve-print scope for the project reflects his understanding of the ability of the medium to capture subtle changes of light that occur throughout the year. He defines the statement each print will carry in terms reminiscent

54. Chatham, *The Missouri Headwaters: Lithographs*, 37.

55. Chatham, *Missouri Headwaters: Twelve Lithographs*, 38.

56. Chatham, *Missouri Headwaters: Twelve Lithographs*, 38.

of a meditation practice: “Each month can more or less be distilled into a feeling or mood composed of what actually is at the moment, what has just passed, and what is to come.”⁵⁷

The last technical step in achieving these ephemeral seasonal qualities was to resolve the issue of the sky. In his previous attempts at depicting the immense Montana sky, he had brushed asphaltum on the plate in “...many overlays of transparent ink, to produce the effects in the sky of *Bighorn Valley*, but these were all painted plates, and so the ink film was continuous.”⁵⁸ The result of the continuous film was a sky filled with streaked and blotchy layers of pale pinks and blues. To mimic twilight’s shifting hues, he would later use the multi-plate process to create a smooth color gradient in the sky with the seamless spray of a paint gun. The gun was filled with Vernis Noire (black varnish), a grease-based medium, which like a grease crayon, attached the pigment to the press.⁵⁹ The pressman, Charles Matson, had “talked about ‘open’ plates and ‘keeping the paper open’” in reference to the sky in *Bighorn Valley*, an improvement Chatham finally came to see as a gentle aesthetic suggestion as much as a technical one.⁶⁰

The 1986/87 print, *Missouri Headwaters, September* (Figure 19), displays the benefits of using the spray gun for unifying the process and his atmospheric goals. It supported Chatham’s harmony of tone-relations which he could begin to apply across mediums.

In addition to this technical change, he also began to drop the horizon to below the print’s midpoint. In *Valley at Evening* the horizon played a supporting role, setting the distant limit of the landscape’s range; here, it is the main attraction. The contrast between the high value of the pale

57. Chatham, *Missouri Headwaters: Twelve Lithographs*, 38.

58. Chatham, *Missouri Headwaters: Twelve Lithographs*, 38.

59. Chatham, *Missouri Headwaters: Twelve Lithographs*, 40.

60. Chatham, *Missouri Headwaters: Twelve Lithographs*, 39.

gold sky and the lower value of the land accentuates the crisp division between earth and sky. The landscape is filled with a golden haze brought on by a glowing tonal gradient in the sky. The trees, tiny forms on the valley floor, darken the closer they sit to the viewer's vantage, exaggerating the aerial perspective. The gradient and the haze set the evening's calm emotional atmosphere.

The river winds its way across the valley floor, again catching the glint of the twilight sky on a strategically placed bend. Individual trees dot the paths of ditches and property lines; gone are the groves and clusters of the painting's trees. This valley is agricultural, not wild. It does not represent an opportunity to commune with the land—the sky is the subject. Or more precisely, the relationship between the sky and the land—and by extension, the viewer's relationship to all of it.

Missouri Headwaters, September shows us something approaching Chatham's vision of pastoral transcendence. It keeps the viewer separate from nature, treating it as something marvelous to behold. It situates the viewer on a stable surface, like a butte or a saddle between hills. This is the kind of scene one might stop the car for on a warm September evening.

The sky, filled with a realistically smooth color gradient, is the open space needed for the viewer to land emotionally in the image. The haze that shrouds the land ties the low value bottom of the frame with the high value top. The hazy air and its moisture become part of the natural environment, coequal with the land. Chatham has matched the mist of the spray gun with the mist-like haze of the evening air, showing him how to tie the natural atmosphere to the emotional atmosphere. Lithography has shown him how to paint.

PAINTING

Chatham started to manifest a signature aesthetic through the development of his stylistic techniques in the late 1970s. His narrowly toned palette was beginning to create the same “changing envelope of subtle gradations” of the nineteenth century Tonalists’ atmospheres. As he resolved his perspective issues with the vast Montana landscape through atmospheric haze, he created scenes that could hold the mystery and suggestiveness necessary for a sympathetic encounter with nature.

In 1981, he painted *Valley at Evening* (Figure 15), an oil painting that exemplifies the mood he was trying to achieve. The very dark, ambitious canvas measures 603x723, and presents as a nocturne. It places the viewer on the side of a hill or mountain looking over a valley floor composed of patches of trees, a large open field, and a distant river. The river runs quietly across the canvas on the far side of the field, suggesting the flat area to be a flood plain. Through the darkness of the image, the picture provides a view of the land’s transition from slope to plain, with a series of receding open spaces inviting the viewer’s eye down the hill, through a gap between two clumps of trees, and across the open field to a shiny bend in the river.

The art-structure of the painting shows the advanced two-dimensional approach Chatham learned from his grandfather and uncle. He treats the sky as a horizontal band on the horizon; it is the same color and value as the land in the middle and foregrounds. The trees, except a few protrusions on the horizon, take the shape of masses of extremely dark (but not black) amorphous shapes, precisely arranged to frame the lighter valued open spaces—the same technique as his version of Del Mue’s *Hills on the Piazzoni Ranch*. The first impression of the painting is there are only two objects, tree clusters and open land, and two values, dark and darker. His facility with

color balances the picture within the context of a nocturne, but its darkness distracts from the opportunity for poetic interpretation.

With such subtle value distinctions between land and sky and between tree groupings, the whole scene takes on a dreamlike atmosphere. Chatham uses the inherent value differences between his lights and darks to distinguish the forms from each other but adds tonal shifts to achieve an aerial perspective of a deep landscape not often seen in nocturnes. The tree clusters, however, do not precisely obey the rules of tone or value progression. Swooping in from the left edge of the painting, the closest line of trees appears lighter and warmer than the set beyond it—a large mass sitting at the middle-right of the composition. That darker mass of trees sits on the valley floor, anchoring the right side of the canvas with its solid presence. As a flat shape on the canvas, it reaches up and touches the dark horizontal band of trees lining the far side of the river. The resulting structure of dark shapes frames the lighter, funnel shaped flood plain with its narrow entrance pointing at the base of the slope. Beyond the river, multiple horizontal bands of trees recede to the horizon in a tidy arrangement of straight rows.

Every element of the composition leads the viewer to the glint of moonlight in the river. The closest trees “swooping” in from the left form a diagonal line dropping into the middle of the canvas. The end nearest the viewer is twice as tall as the far end, and through its tapering imitates a linear perspective that draws the eye farther into the picture toward the river. The reflection off the water is the brightest spot in the picture, drawing the viewer’s eye through the carefully arranged shapes, and serving as an emotional destination. The rest of the river appears as delicate horizontal marks at the far end of the flood plain, drawing attention to itself only at the bend. The

rows of trees above it recede to the horizon in horizontal bands, suggesting other, similar spaces down river.

In his California paintings, Chatham depicted shallower landscapes because he was closer to the hillsides, which presented like the sides of buildings. It would be easy in a tight little valley to feel close to the land and its natural features. In *Valley at Evening* he avoids using his California flattening techniques by turning away from the hillside and looking outward. Instead of staring at a hill, like so many of his Piazzoni Ranch pieces, he gazes out on a valley much larger than the ones in Carmel, but he avoids the temptation of the sweeping panorama. To align with the vastness of the landscape, he incorporates the valley's distance by painting the horizon as the outer limit of his painted world. It's not a destination, it's the boundary beyond which everything dematerializes. The most attractive thing about this painting is the reflection of light on the river, but the subject is the viewer's relationship to the land, to the terrain they must travel to get to the glinting surface. He is showing his audience an intimate path to nature within the large scale of Montana's landscape. When viewed as a flat surface, the trees jut into the composition, like his abstract forms in the 1960 untitled oil sketch, but now the composition resembles an actual space, one with real depth and palpable atmosphere.

His palette matches Montana's monochromatic winter vegetation, evoking the landscape's sense of solitude. The open hillside in the foreground, like the water in *Tomales Bay*, keeps the trees at a distance, allowing for a feeling of quietude to pervade the painting. The horizon is made visible by a distant line of trees, but the sky is the same color as the land, creating a sense of almost infinite depth through the indeterminable distance.

Valley at Evening presents Chatham's full grasp of how to use aerial perspective in relating to Montana's vast distances. He had created a transcendental space between the unassuming foreground and a sliver of river made visible by a glint of moonlight. Measured by color, intimacy, and distance he had found an evocative, moody atmosphere. The question of whether it would resonate with his audience remained.

By 1986 Chatham had achieved a unique balance between a naturalistic illusion of realism and the shroud of mystery provided by California's coastal fog and its effects on aerial perspective. *The Sea at Pacifica* shows his innate preference for his grandfather's compositional structures as he again builds a view to a low, distant open space through cliffs and angled foregrounds. Chatham repeats Piazzoni's steep cliffs and narrow view, as well as his ambiguities—the viewer seems to hover in open space, a view possible only in dreams of flight. The horizon sits at a noticeable distance from the top of the frame. The land below the horizon runs down to the beach but presents as a flat wall shrouded in fog, indistinct in its depth or steepness. The viewer's attention is directed first to the details of the foreground, not the background. The beach, represented by flat swathes of light tan and white tones in gentle curves, draws attention by its lightness mainly serves to complete and balance the composition's imposing landforms.

All three of these paintings depict scenes from the imagination or memory. The flattened land and sea forms become symbols of place, or at least of a kind of place. They distort perspective and challenge the specificity of Impressionism's reference to reality. Having learned composition from his grandfather, Chatham's paintings could achieve the harmony of design elements necessary for what Arthur Wesley Dow called, Good Spacing. His understanding of Dow's "harmony of tone-relations" also came from his grandfather. The tonal shifts were subtle, the dark

and light values balanced the relationships of forms in the compositions. The difference between him and Piazzoni was that Chatham kept striving for greater depth in the scene. Dow said, “I am not arguing for the entire omission of shadows and modelling... but am insisting that flat relations of tone and color are of first importance.”

Piazzoni uses dramatic lines and flattened landforms to create an idealized image of a woman standing perilously close to the edge of a cliff, looking pensively into a deep canyon cut by the ocean. The featureless water forms a flattened shape that leads to a narrow beach on the floor of the canyon, a shape Chatham borrowed and widened for his *Valley at Evening*. Piazzoni pinched the space between the beach and the water with a pair of rock outcroppings like a partially open gate that keeps the Pacific at bay, a motif Chatham translated as dark masses of trees holding space for the outward energy of the viewer’s gaze.

The dominant form in Piazzoni’s painting is the equally featureless “L” shaped plateau the woman is standing on. At first view, its crisp edge swoops down from the upper left of the canvas and disappears off the bottom right edge. Because it has no detail, its flatness has no perspective or clues as to whether she is standing at a distance from the viewer (as in an aerial perspective) or standing on top of a steep promontory—she could either fall over the cliff or roll downhill toward the viewer. All the painting’s details, save the woman’s floor-length hem and a train of fabric wrapped around her feet, are contained in the space beyond the plateau. The space beyond is the inverse of the open space—the composition is a stylized yin-yang symbol. The woman exists mostly in the active, masculine Yang space, but her feet are rooted in the feminine, contemplative Yin space. This compositional swirl activates the canvas and references the Japanese influences on nineteenth-century transcendental thought.

Chatham borrowed the idea of open spaces and their relationships to light and dark forms in *Valley at Evening*, but he included texture and slight value shifts on the surface of the land and a hazier atmosphere to create the illusion of a deep landscape. His foregrounds jut in from the edges more gently than his grandfather's. The graphic elements in Piazzoni's piece are severely angled, nearly vertical, to accentuate steepness and sublime grandeur. Chatham's angles are lower, less symbolic of nature's sublimity, and by comparison his scene is deeper and more naturalistic.

In 1990, the Museum of the Rockies, in Bozeman, opened a Chatham retrospective exhibit Of Chatham in their newly renovated and expanded facility. The addition included two new galleries for temporary exhibits, both of which were used for the retrospective. The museum was building a floor-to-ceiling wall opposite the first gallery's entrance to hold a signature painting, and the museum's director, Mick Hager, approached Chatham with a commission for the marquee piece.⁶¹ Chatham agreed and set about to repeat the monthly theme of the *Headwaters* lithographs with twelve new oil paintings.

The *Missouri Headwaters in April*, Chatham's centerpiece of *The Season* suite, measures 11.5' x 9.5' and is permanently affixed to the museum's wall in the first gallery. The viewer stands above a valley floor, looking down on the Missouri River. The image contains design elements from *Valley at Evening*, such as a low and tightly constrained tone and a raised viewpoint; it even appears to share subject matter—a valley floor with a river winding through it—but the new canvas presents a lighter mood than the dark emotional intensity of the first painting. *Valley at Evening*'s extremely low values and narrow value range hinder the viewer's ability to easily make out the

61. Tad Bartimus, "In Montana, Museum Keeps Its Word to Artist," Los Angeles Times. July 15, 1990, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-07-15-mn-143-story.html>

painting's features; the trees are indistinct, the horizon barely registers, the open spaces require study to discern.

Missouri Headwaters in April, by contrast, has a wider value range, making its major elements easier to grasp at first view. Lines of individual trees can be easily seen running parallel to the riverbank, standing out as dark green forms against a higher valued valley floor. Light glances off the river's bends and each straight stretch of river is a shiny streak on the land. The painting's aerial perspective makes sense; the foreground features are the most saturated, and in the middle ground a progressive tonal shift begins its slide toward the hazy horizon.

The entire landscape is rendered in warm, dark tones, enhancing the otherwise moderate luminosity of the golden light reflecting off the river. Despite its approachability, ambiguity pervades the scene. The golden hues of the painting compete with its low value, rendering it unclear whether this is sunlight at twilight or a deceptively warm nocturne on a full moon. The river reflections indicate a light source too high in the sky for a setting sun, but a full moon would cast a cool blue light. The tension between these incompatible elements creates an irresolvable ambiguity. The viewer has a choice: attempt to resolve it through reason or let go and enter the imaginary.

The painting hangs approximately three feet from the floor, but rises fifteen feet up the wall, placing most viewers' heads at the bottom quarter of the composition. The scene effectively has no foreground, like *Sea at Pacifica*—only a tiny plot of sloped hillside in the far bottom left of the canvas, too far below the viewer to support them. The act of standing without grounding positions the viewer as a floating observer, or as a hiker who's found themselves on the edge of a cliff.

It can be compared with Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (Figure 21), which achieves a thrillingly sublime sense of danger by placing a man on the edge of a rocky outcropping, overlooking swirling clouds in a valley below him. The man's back is to the viewer, rendering him anonymous—an absence of identity into which the viewer can vicariously pour their own reaction to the atmospheric vista. Frederick's active figure has arrived at his destination and confidently placed his foot on the precarious outcropping. His contrapposto stance alludes to a classical heroism, lending him a measure of strength, and stabilizes him on the rugged terrain.

Chatham avoids the emotional allusions of the human proxy. He positions his viewer at the edge of an invisible cliff as in a memory where the ground has no relevance, only the view. In Chatham's painting, the viewer's perception is decoupled from the presumption of stable ground or the narrative comfort of a strong protagonist; it is stabilized, instead, with a unified and balanced compositional structure, a convincing aerial perspective, and an attractively warm-toned palette.

A jagged line of trees in the upper portion of Chatham's canvas serves as a horizon. It delineates the top quarter of the composition from the landscape below, but the area above is not clearly definable as sky. The area is the same color as the land but has no defining features except for a faint circle of unassuming streaks of light on the right. It could be read as cracks in the clouds or as distant glimmers of the river. As in his 1975 *Thunderstorm*, the sky area holds the same hues and values as the rest of the piece, but instead of adding to a particular mood, it renders an atmosphere so ambiguous as to be abstract. The viewer must decide if they want to create meaning in that space, or if they want to leave it as part of the atmospheric envelope of the whole painting.

The effective horizon sits at eyelevel with the viewer, balancing them visually and emotionally with the depth of the landscape, like two ends of a seesaw. If the jagged line were any

lower, the upper portion would certainly be read as sky, which becomes the subject and needs to be treated in a more explicit relationship with the landscape. If the line were any higher, the balance of the composition would shift down, centering the steepness of the foreground and distracting from the depth of the landscape—the emotional statement of the scene.

In keeping with the Chinese reading of open space, the emotional space in the picture is held by the high value reflection of the light reflecting off the river. The composition's forms are balanced both horizontally and vertically, indicating a strong sense of art-structure, which lets the emotional work be done with value and tone. Like Ni's Yuan Dynasty compositional emptiness, Chatham's painting separates the viewer from parts of the landscape. Unlike Ni's use of untouched canvas to represent water, Chatham has filled his water with tone and a high relative value. The nostalgic yearning available through emptiness is available, but he accomplishes it through shifting tones of atmospheric perspective. In other words, the landscape's atmosphere is its emptiness, the symbol of union with nature.

MUSEUM OF THE ROCKIES

On the evening of June 9, 1990, admirers, friends, and family of Russell Chatham attended a reception at the newly renovated and expanded Museum of the Rockies in Bozeman, Montana. After they passed through the new, and very long, atrium they entered a brand-new exhibit hall 30 feet tall and roughly the size of a basketball court. The room was filled with over one hundred paintings comprising a 30-year retrospective of the artist's paintings. A smaller collection of his grandfather's paintings and other relatives' art hung in the mezzanine gallery.⁶² On the far wall facing the main door hung *Missouri Headwaters in April* (Figure 20).

The show at the Museum of the Rockies, *The Seasons*, was designed to establish Chatham as the preeminent landscape painter in Montana, by being "the biggest one-man show by a living artist in the history of Montana."⁶³ It was not the first time most of these people had seen Chatham's paintings—most of his friends and relatives already owned his work. But it was certainly the first time they had seen so many of his works at these large dimensions, or such an ambitious museum exhibit featuring only him. By 1990 he had shown in hundreds of exhibits, many at high-end galleries in New York and San Francisco, but in Montana they were used to seeing his work hanging in the old museum's hallways and at other small galleries around Bozeman or Livingston.⁶⁴

Central to the exhibit's design were the paintings hanging on the outer walls of the exhibit hall. Chatham did not finish all twelve canvases in time for the exhibit—a total of eight paintings lined the outer walls of the first gallery, each a different width, but each the same five feet in

62. Bartimus, "In Montana, Museum Keeps Its Word to Artist," 1990

63. Bartimus, "In Montana, Museum Keeps Its Word to Artist," 1990

64. Russell Chatham, "The Seasons", 15.

height. They depicted snow, rain, twilight, autumn colors, summer heat, the darkest night, and even cows. In an article Chatham wrote for the *Big Sky Journal* in the summer of 1990, he said, without elaboration, that April was “a pivotal month.” It seems reasonable to assume he was referring to the changing of the seasons.⁶⁵

Russell Chatham’s art redefined the area of south-central Montana as a place of contemplative engagement with nature. Before he arrived, the local appreciation of art was Western Art—the descendant of CM Russell and the romanticization of the preindustrial western frontier. Western art has not been fully displaced in the region; predicament scene artists like Gary Carter continue to enjoy commercial success. What has changed is the addition of contemporary art in the form of wider conceptualizations of how to relate to the land, the landscape, and the ensuing conceptions of place.

The many iterations of western identity and sense of place have been in motion since the arrival of the frontier. Thomas Moran depicted the West as a place of grandeur and unlimited opportunity. C.M. Russell depicted the action of taming the wild and the interaction of conflicting cultures. Isabelle Johnson defined her ranch as a place of intimate adaptation to the constraints of the land and the weather; it is the realism of the intersection of laborious ranch life and the beauty of the landscape. Theodore Waddell had stripped out the personal narrative of working the ranch (its land and livestock) to explore place through the abstraction of forms and materiality. Gary Carter continues the adventurous depiction of the West as a place of cowboy romance: “To authentically preserve and perpetuate the culture of Western life in fine art.”⁶⁶

65. Russell Chatham, “The Seasons”, 15.

66. The Cowboy Artists of America, *Our Mission*, Cowboy Artists of America, https://cowboyartistsofamerica.com/our_mission/, Accessed March 26, 2024

Each of these artists imported a new ideological approach to the human relationship with nature, with the land, and with the place. To Thomas Moran, the landscape is a symbol of Edenic discovery, where the progress of the Western frontier can be aligned with a new national identity. For CM Russell the land is the matrix and backdrop for cultural encounter; it symbolizes the wildness of the territory into which the American civilization was expanding, and by connotation its taming. Gary Carter perpetuates the nostalgia of Russell's romance with the land playing an active role in the predicament scene genre rather than just being a backdrop signaling location, its crumbling cliff edges provide a three-dimensional place for man to encounter wilderness—an expression of masculinity and dominion over nature.

As the inheritor of the previous generation's expansion and settlement, Johnson's quiet appreciation of the land reflects the settler's need for a symbiotic relationship with a productive resource. The adventure and sublime have been replaced with quietude and an appreciation of nature's offerings, including beauty.

Waddell abstracts the land and the cows and the sky into a conceptual place. In an Arthur Dow manner, he envisions the landscape as an aesthetic resource for synthetic restructuring.

Chatham offers a new kind of relationship with nature. Most of his pictures are landscapes devoid of human traces. When cows, agriculture, houses, or anglers appear, they interact with the landscape, letting nature keep its primacy. Like Waddell, Chatham decenters humans as subjects. Like the Dutch painters after the Renaissance, Chatham brings the landscape forward to feature it. Through his California Tonalist and Transcendental lenses, he creates a new vision of Montana as a place where a person can find a relationship with the land to match the idealized conception of modern wilderness they brought with them.

CONCLUSION

The term *atmosphere* shows up in many writings about landscape painting throughout history to describe a mood or feeling an artist has evoked in a scene. If the air is clear and bright, and the subjects in the scene are clearly identifiable, the painting appeals to the objective rationality of representational illusionism. If the scene is cast with a mist or fog, and perhaps the half-light of twilight, it will appeal to the viewers emotionality with suggestive allusion. When James McNeil Whistler painted his *Nocturne in Black and Gold—The Falling Rocket* in 1874, he set the path for Tonalist painting in America. The painting was shown in London but had an influence on American landscape painter, George Innes.⁶⁷ Innes had been working in the Hudson River School's style but couldn't completely adopt the attention to detail and clarity as the depiction of nature he craved.⁶⁸

Inness and fellow American, John Henry Twachtman began interpreting the American landscape according to the French Barbizon affinity for nature, but with an American eye for “a more modern color and form” they could “achieve a more perfect synthesis of the poetic and the actual...”⁶⁹ Inness was in essence trying to blend American analysis with French poeticism. By the 1880s, his work's structure was subsumed by the emotional content of his colors and tones—an American atmosphere.

Many of Chatham's paintings decenter the idea of a single object as subject. He balances his compositions with a subtle asymmetry, placing trees of varying sizes on both sides of the composition, leaving a space in the middle filled only with a receding field or plain. Like Ni Zan's

67. Corn, *The Color of Mood*, 6.

68. Corn, *The Color of Mood*, 5.

69. Corn, *The Color of Mood*, 6.

water, this objective emptiness opens room for the viewer's subjectivity to enter the image. It decouples the mind from the need for a subject-narrative and invites the viewer to create their own inner space to contemplate the inner life of nature.

The study of atmosphere as an aesthetic subject has been historically framed through an architectural lens. A person experiences a building's atmosphere with their body, by standing and walking through the space, by seeing its light and hearing its sounds. Gernot Böhme proposes a "New Aesthetic", based on the phenomenological awareness of architecturally attuned spaces, but applied to every aspect of modern life. He states everything in the commercial and industrialized modern world has become aestheticized—beauty and aesthetics can no longer be separated from product designs or the affects of happiness and pleasure used to sell them: the Affect Economy sells moods, and whether he liked it or not, Chatham did too.⁷⁰ Böhme argues that the experience of being physically present in a space is transferable to the aesthetics of other human constructs, including two-dimensional art.

Chatham wants to offer the sentiment he felt when he looked up while crossing an open field. Standing in a gallery or museum space, however, is a poor substitute for standing outside in the rain and wind. Chatham's images have an effective power of suggestion that reminds the viewer of standing in a similar field looking at a similar foothill watching a similar storm pass over it. The Tonalist haze adds to the memory effect because it implies temperature, air movement, and tactility—the landscape looks like it feels right, like we've been there, but the details are only suggested, leaving the viewer room to fill them in with personal memory.

70. Gernot Böhme and Tina Engels-Schwarzpaul, *Atmospheric Architectures: The Aesthetics of Felt Spaces*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 2017), Apple Books, Chap. 1.

The reverse happens when the same viewer is driving through a Montana valley and the fog, or squall, or distant rain glides along the landscape and they are reminded of Chatham's painting in the gallery. Perhaps their experience is not in a car but looking out the kitchen window or sitting in a hot tub drinking wine. They viscerally experience the land and the weather. The memory of the painting combines with the felt body in the natural space, and the viewer's mind recreates the emotion of passing through an attuned architectural space—an atmosphere.

Atmosphere is the emotional relationship between object and subject, between the painting and the viewer. It is empty, like the open space between elements in the painting, or the distance between the viewer and the canvas. It connects things, like the elements in a painting separated by distance, or the viewer and the illusion of a landscape, or the viewer and a familiar scene.

Russell Chatham achieved the unity, or the alignment, or the sympathy with nature he promoted. His paintings and lithographs grew into a unified aesthetic recognizable by their familiarity and shared atmosphere. His paintings were too expensive for most people, but his lithographs were more affordable and many people in town, especially his many friends, acquire at least one, or even a collection. As a result, the prints lost some of their value through their local ubiquity. That ubiquity also provided aesthetic access. Because his paintings went straight from easel to buyer, the public at large knows his style mostly from the lithographs.

Comments from Facebook posts provide examples of the idiom, in use with a photo that inspired the narrative (figure 22), “[M]y friend Kelly and I sat and watched skies turn dark in this Russell Chatham look alike landscape. [S]he fixed buffalo ribeyes, fingerling potatoes and Vino

for dinner.”⁷¹ All the posts relate to the beauty of the scene. The sharing of the view and the moment on social media ties together Chatham’s audience into a community of people with shared aesthetics. The shared element includes the appreciation of his art, but also his gaze. His audience carries his images with them in their memories and relies on them to describe what they see. The idiom changes from person to person—some say, “a Russell Chatham kind of image”, or “It’s a Russell Chatham kind of day”, or “It’s a Russell Chatham painting kind of day”, and one says, “I often refer to certain landscapes as Chathamesque”—but they all point to the shared need to identify with the natural environment.⁷²

Chatham’s audience saw his art as beautiful and their relationship to the natural world as beautiful. Art is not the natural world, it is the perception of an imaginary world made of ink and paint on paper and canvas; and the mountains and trees and fog are not art, they are the materials of the physical world. Together they form the features of the locations people call place.

Lucy Lippard defines place by appropriating Denis Cosgrove’s definition of landscape: the “external world mediated through human subjective experience.”⁷³ To Lippard, a landscape is transformed into a place through people’s intimate experience or exploration of it. It will remain a

71. Vicky Van Buskirk, “my friend Kelly and I,” Facebook. February 26, 2012.

<https://www.facebook.com/search/top?q=russell%20chatham%20buskirk>

72. Connie Dillon, “There was fog most of the day,” Facebook.com, November 29, 2021, 7:54 PM. <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10227405003019104>

Rob Forstenzer, “It’s a Russell Chatham kind of day,” Facebook.com, November 11, 2018, 3:20 PM.

Bob Schleicher, “It’s a Russell Chatham painting kind of day,” Facebook.com, December 15, 1999, 3:33 PM. <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10220012988695811>

73. Lucy R. Lippard, *The Lure of the Local : Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*. New York: New Press, 1997, 7.

landscape should people not interact with it; it's only meaning it will be to be a view seen from the outside, to become picturesque.

Through their familiarity with a place, people deepen the complexity of their social order. They generate a shared experience of the place, and consequently a vernacular to signify the commonality. *Chathamesque* holds that signifying power. It ties people together through the shared experiences of observing the natural world of the South-Central Montana landscape, and of appreciating Russell Chatham's distinctive artistic style.

Chatham died in 2019, leaving his personal history and artistic legacy vulnerable to neglect. The larger romantic narrative of the Old West will continue through the efforts of large museums like the CM Russell Museum in Great Falls and the mythos of the cowboy archetype. The value of regional artists and their idiosyncratic aesthetics is their insistence on counternarrative. Even if the aesthetic and the artist's style are imported, they challenge the hegemonic provincialism of the New York art world. Their art is a is an intimate bond with a landscape and a community. It's an interpretation of a lived experience that hits a communal nerve and sparks a vernacular—an aesthetic vernacular that gives voice to the people who live in a place. If the *Chathamesque* phenomenon is not recorded and interpreted, the history of Livingston's development as an art community is reduced to a few fossilized lines in a handful of self-published books. Chatham's counternarrative will lose relevance as the community moves on with no real sense of the historical undercurrents of how it came to be.

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APPENDIX

FIGURES



Figure 1: Russell Chatham, *Start of Winter*, 1993



Figure 2: Russell Chatham, *Misty Afternoon*, 1993

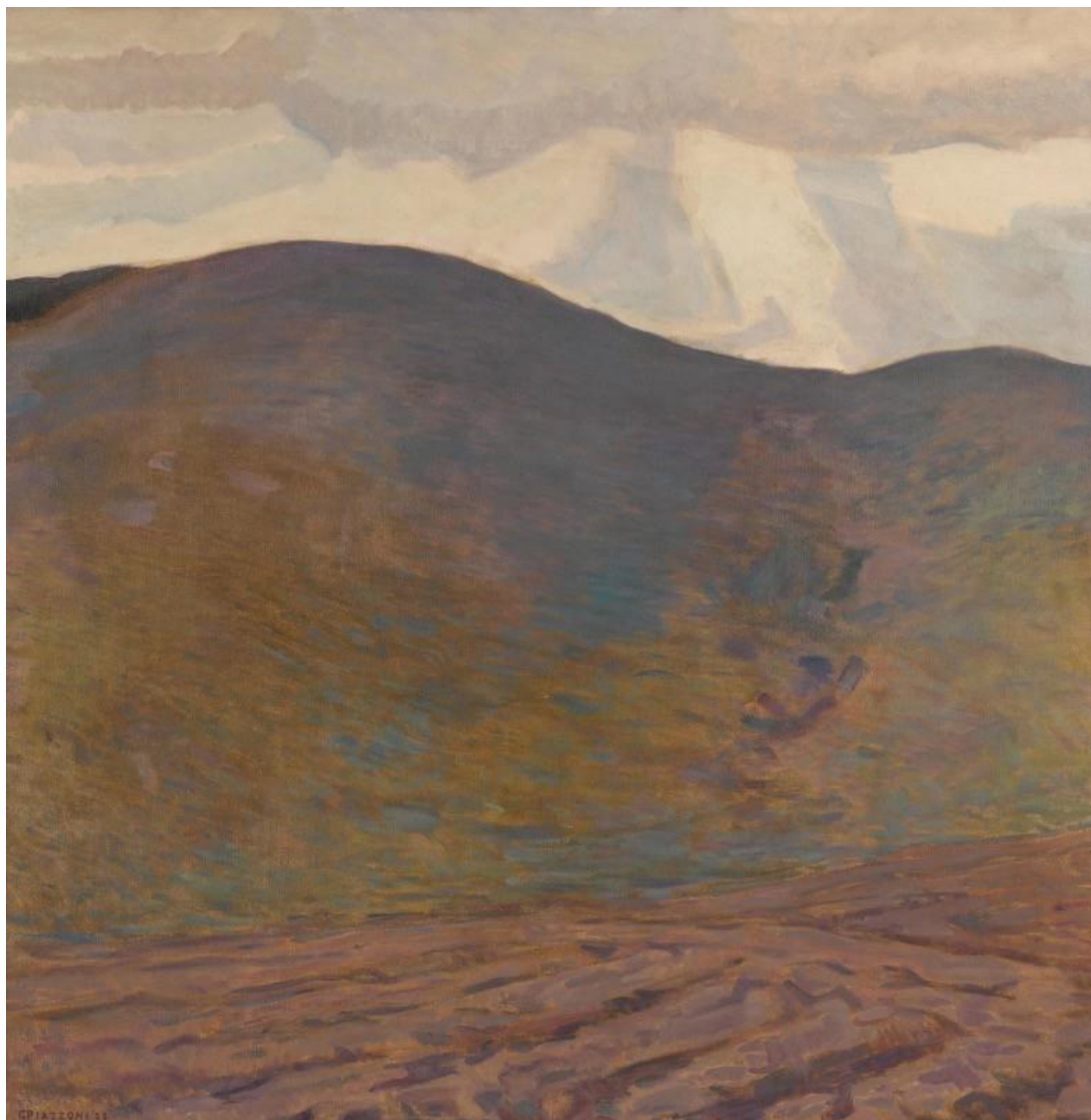


Figure 3: Gottardo Piazzoni, *The Soil*, 1925



Figure 4: Gottardo Piazzoni, *Golden Hill with Live Oak*, 1921



Figure 5: Maurice Del Mue, *Hills on the Piazzoni Ranch*, Carmel Valley, 1930



Figure 6: Russell Chatham, *Untitled*, 1960



Figure 7: Russell Chatham, *Sonoma Mountain*, 1971



Figure 8: Russell Chatham, *Sheep at Deep Creek*, 1972



Figure 9: Thomas Moran, *Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone*, 1872



Figure 10: Fan K'uan, *Travelers among Mountains and Streams*, c. 1000



Figure 11: Russell Chatham, *Thunderstorm*, 1975



Figure 12: Russell Chatham, *Park County in February*, 1990



Figure 13: Russell Chatham, *Tomaes Bay*, 1976



Figure 14: Russell Chatham, *Paradise Valley at Evening*, 1982



Figure 15: Russell Chatham, *Yellowstone River*, 1982, Stone Lithograph, 6 Plates



Figure 16: Ni Zan, *Six Gentlemen*, 1345



Figure 17: Russell Chatham, *Big Horn Valley*, 1985, Offset Lithograph, 45 Plates



Figure 18: Russell Chatham, *Valley at Evening*, 1981



Figure 19: Gottardo Piazzoni, *Reflection*, 1904



Figure 20: Gallery at Museum of the Rockies, *The Seasons*, 1990.

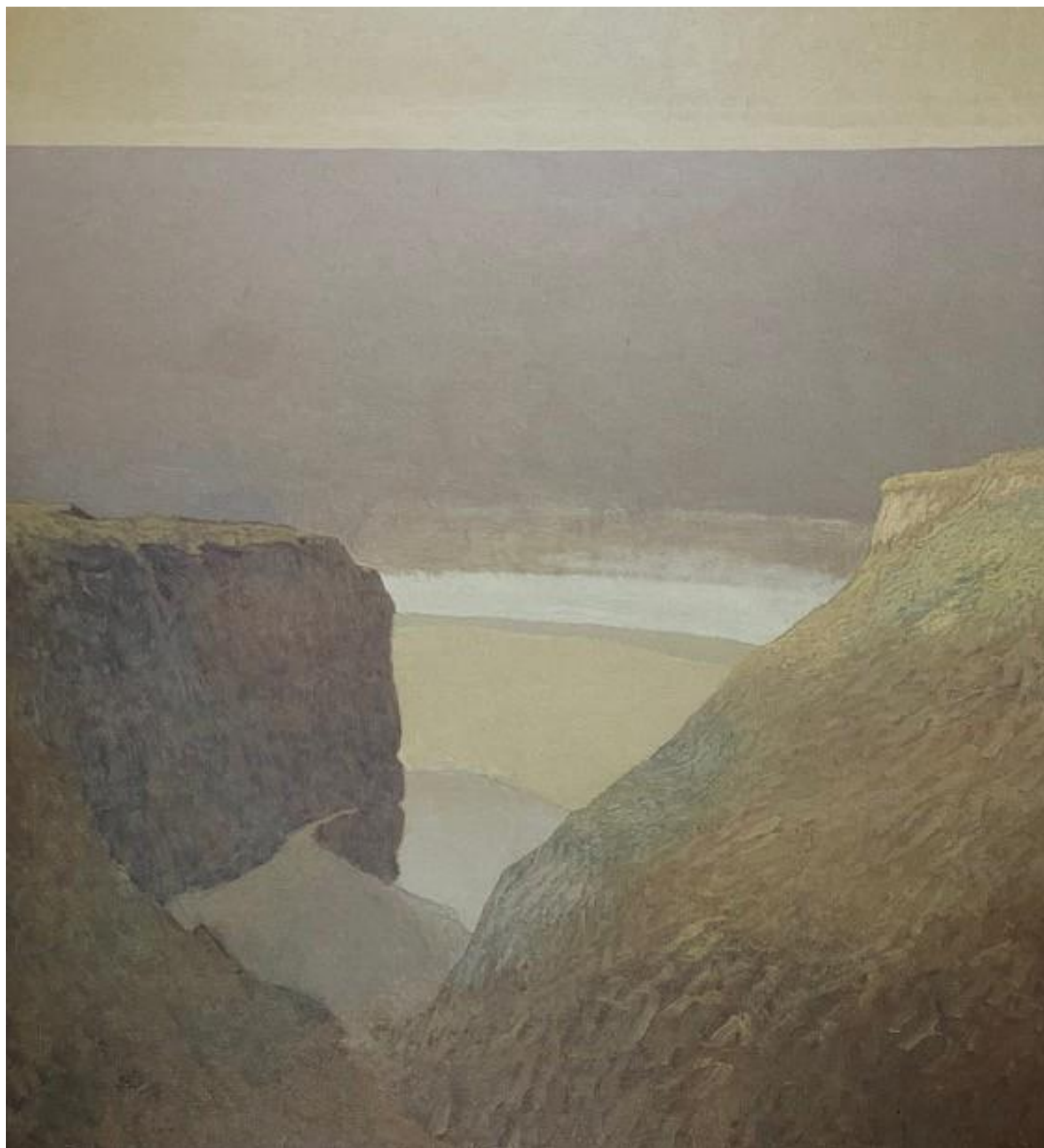


Figure 21: Russell Chatham, *The Sea at Pacifica*, 1986



Figure 22: Russell Chatham, *Missouri Headwaters*, September, 1986/87



Figure 23: Russell Chatham, *Missouri Headwaters in April*, 1990

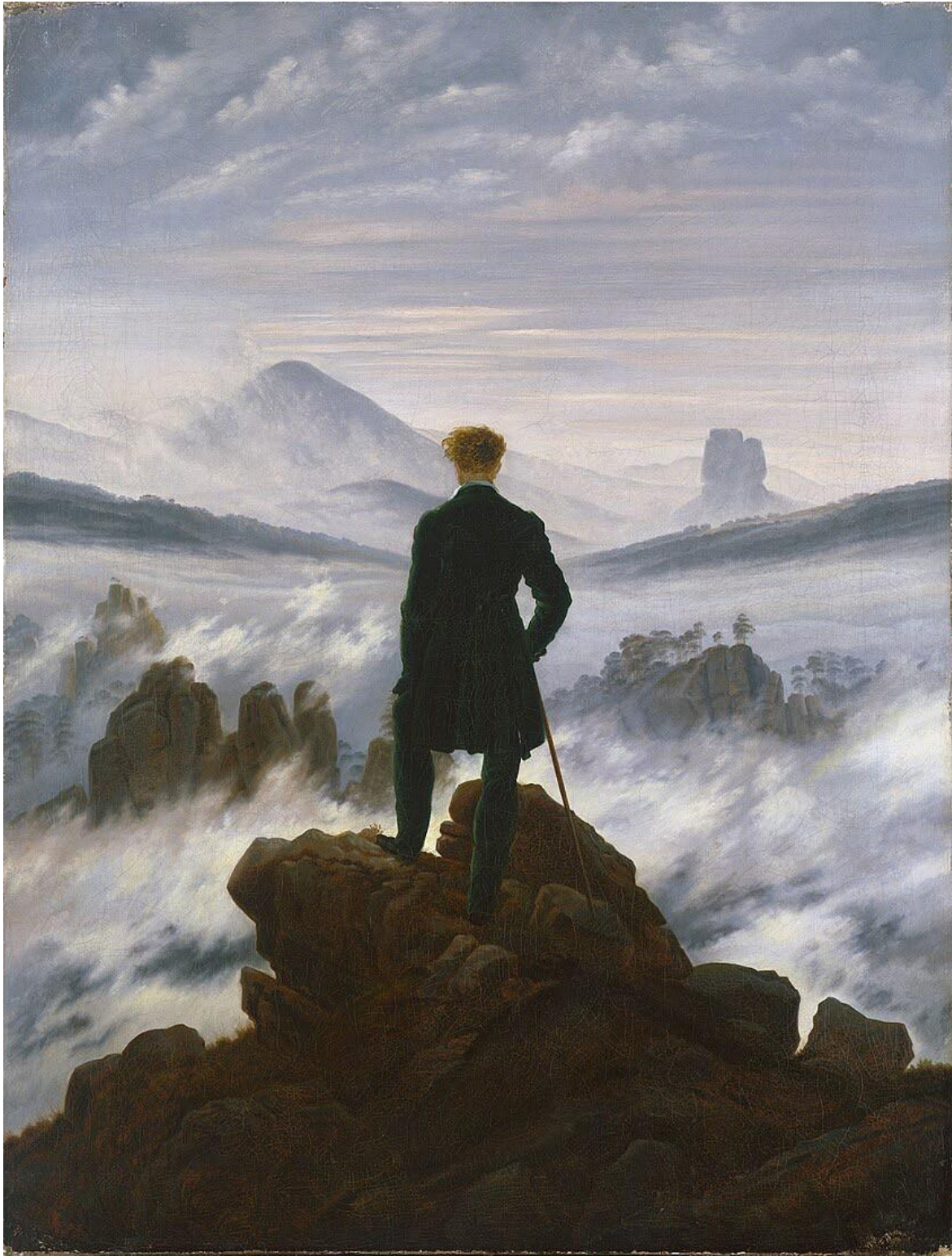


Figure 24: Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, 1818



Figure 25: Vicki Van Buskirk, "My friend Kelly," Facebook Post, 2021