

Patrick Dunford – Artist Statement

Over the past few years I have painted figures at work in the landscape, modifying it, blasting through it, digging holes in it, planting trees and building railroads. These figures work in areas where the material built environment meets the natural landscape. The areas include clearcuts in the forest, construction sites throughout the remote desert, and mines. The paintings depict places where resources are extracted and where human activity encroaches on what we consider the natural environment. I am interested in how these areas show both the history of their use by people and of geologic forces on their surfaces. I am also interested in the separation between the people who do the work and those who profit from it.

My paintings are investigations of the places in which I have lived, worked and travelled. My recent work focuses on clearcuts in British Columbia where I worked as a treeplanter and the desert I visit close to my home in California. I draw from historical research on these sites, my own experiences working and traveling through them, and examples from art history. Many images in this new body of work show the building of the Impossible Railroad through a particularly difficult and rocky stretch of the Southern California desert in the early twentieth century. I became interested in this history when I visited the abandoned remnants of the railroad while hiking through Carrizo Gorge in Anza-Borrego State Park.

Painting is a material process for me, in which I build up an image through many layers. I am constantly making corrections and alterations, scraping away as often as adding paint. Working in series, images of figures, roads, stumps, rocks and debris are repeated obsessively. Much like the spaces I represent, the paintings are constantly being modified, built up and torn down. Depicted in a flattened space, they create a diagrammatic effect through the various human, natural and geological markings on the landscape. They describe a landscape in which even the most remote areas have been lived in and altered and where private property and state owned land belie the idea of pristine and open space.