DESERt GRASSLANDS

Artists respond to the fascinating biomes of desert grasslands.

Tucson Museum of Art
Desert Grasslands

Works by Michael P. Berman, Kate Breakey, Stephen Capra, MF Cardamone, Diane Dale, Dornith Doherty, Matilda Essig, Deborah Springstead Ford, Moira Marti Geoffrion, Heather Green, Michael Haykin, Ben Johnson, Karen Kitchel, Mark Klett, Mayme Kratz, Joseph Scheer, Stephen Strom, and David Taylor

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Curated by:
Julie Sasse,
Chief Curator and Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art
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To me a town is a prison, and the desert loneliness a paradise. -St. Jerome

Conjuring poetic images of vast tracts of land, lush with the swaying of tall, supple plants beneath soaring skies filled with majestic clouds, grasslands are large, rolling terrains of grasses, flowers, and herbs that can be found throughout the world. Typically found in harsh, dry climates, grasslands are resistant to the ravages of fire and drought. Their survival is due to the fact that grasses grow from the bottom up rather than from the tops of the plants. Comprised of mixed grass and shrub vegetation, desert grasslands occur in the basins and valleys that border the hills and mountain ranges of southwestern North America. Some of the largest grasslands reach far into the Mexican states of Sonora and Puebla. A place of incredible climatic, geologic, and biotic diversity, desert grasslands appear at once sublime and abject.

The sweeping desert grasslands of the Southwest are especially compelling subjects. For example, the Otero Mesa of the Chihuahuan Desert of south-central New Mexico spans more than a million acres of diverse rangeland and is home to countless species of migratory songbirds and other animals. As part of the Upper Sonoran Desert, the Apache Highlands Ecoregion, also known as the Apacherian Savannah, is home to a mixture of succulents, shrubs, and bunch grasses. Just southwest of Tucson, Arizona, the Altar Valley comprises approximately 610,000 acres of Sonoran desert grassland, one of the most biologically rich wilderness areas in the world. Yet there is more to these biomes than wide open spaces and miles of majestic grasses. They are among the most fragile ecosystems in North America, threatened by global warming, cattle grazing, human immigration, mining operations, and encroaching development.

The artists in this exhibition respond to desert grasslands in unique ways. They examine the individual plants through flat bed scanning; interpret the flora in poetic abstractions created with x-rays and cast resin; paint and draw the unique flora and fauna of the region in intimate detail; and photograph both close-up views and broad vistas. Their works reveal the beauty inherent in the microcosm of seedlings and grasses, and the macrocosm of large tracts of land that make up grassland regions. Such works reinforce the grandeur of the land, examine the fascinating details of its flora and fauna, and spark a dialogue about arid land management and other environmental concerns. It has been said that nature is a human construct with a long and complicated history. But nature is also created in the minds of artists who see it through varying lenses in an attempt to find a transcendent place for humanity. As 19th century French poet Charles Pierre Baudelaire writes, “In certain almost supernatural inner states, the depth of life is entirely revealed in the spectacle, however ordinary, that we have before our eyes, and which becomes the symbol of it.”

Julie Sasse, Chief Curator and Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, Tucson Museum of Art
Blending elements of 18th and 19th century botanical illustrations with the imaginative randomness of Dada and Surrealist collage methods, MF Cardamone creates playful interpretations of the intersection of nature, taxonomy, and popular culture. Cardamone collects plant specimens and combines them with images and words that result in complex visual narratives that reveal the science, history, and beauty of her subjects. She first started making art in 1980 under the guidance of Tom Palmore, a noted contemporary Southwest artist who paints highly detailed, yet ironically humorous animal portraits. Through her experiences with Palmore, she became attuned to looking beneath the surface of her subject matter to interpret the world around her from a personal perspective rather than a strictly empirical one. Focusing on the traditional and contemporary folk art of Chimayo in rural New Mexico, she created highly textured and brilliantly colored sculptures.

In 2003 Cardamone conducted research on native plant collecting shortly after she designed a native Pennsylvania wildlife habitat garden as part of her studies at the Barnes Foundation Arboretum School. As a scientific exercise, she created herbarium sheets that document observations of a plant for field notes. Learning about horticulture had a profound impact on the artist. From her studies, she gained a deeper understanding of the inner structures of botany and ecological systems of the natural world. Finding the herbarium tradition an intriguing starting point to address nature as an art form, Cardamone combined her interest in medieval herbals and manuscripts, folklore, traditional Chinese medicine, and Pop art to create lively digital collages. To Cardamone, the anatomy of a plant is part of a larger story that involves historical, medicinal, ecological, spiritual, and mythological elements.

In 2008, Bartram's Garden in Philadelphia, America's oldest botanical garden, discovered her work and offered her an exhibition, intrigued with an artist interpreting nature from an amateur botanist's point of view, much like the Victorian naturalists interest in taxonomy. Since then, she traveled to the Marie Selby Botanical Garden in Sarasota, Florida, to explore and interpret their epiphyte plants, an experience that resulted in an exhibition there in the spring of 2013. Last year, she also visited the Payaca-Samiria National Reserve in the Amazon Basin to meet with a Peruvian botanist and a Peruvian shaman who helped her collect plants and interpret them from both a spiritual and scientific point of view.

Cardamone visited The Nature Conservancy's Muleshoe Ranch in Arizona in 2012, where she collected specimens and walked the trails of the desert grasslands to immerse herself in the environment. She also gathered material culture from nearby Wilcox to gain an understanding of the people who inhabit the region. Returning to her studio in Philadelphia, she conducted research on the history of desert grasslands' use and management, native cultures, and the medicinal aspects of the flora of the region. According to Cardamone, “It never ceases to amaze me how stark the desert landscape appears at first, but how full of life it really is when you take the time to examine the environment and study it in more detail.”