

## THE FEELING OF FAR

By Rick Mitchell

Artist, photographer and writer; former professor at Rutgers University and Director of the Exhibition Program at the Lawrence Arts Center

I visited Lisa Grossman's studio on a warm Tuesday afternoon in June. She was working on a new series of paintings for Haw Contemporary in Kansas City and was surrounded by new oil paintings and watercolor studies. Some of the studies incorporated handwritten notes intended to remind her of ways to think about the phenomena she wished to represent in her paintings. I scanned the large bright room noticing stretched canvases, tubes of paint, well-used brushes, sheets of watercolor paper, palettes, and also a large dry-erase board covered with words in five marker colors—a stream of notes that described ambitions for the new work. In one column were these words: “Sense of Planet, enfolded, embraced, surrounded, enveloped, encompassed, held, comforted, relaxing into space.” Across the room was a device called a surveillance hemisphere or mirror dome—an eighteen-inch convex mirror that reflects 360 degrees.

Lisa's studio is a professional space, architect-designed and purpose-built several years ago to accommodate her full-time work as a painter. The contemporary steel and glass structure lies between her small house and the alley that runs down the middle of the block in her late 19th-century Old West Lawrence neighborhood. A ceiling fan turned slowly overhead on this humid late spring day—enough to aid the drying of



Above: Grossman's studio. Above right: Grossman photographing the mirror dome on Konza Prairie Biological Station. All images by Lisa Grossman © 2014

new paintings but not enough to stir dust onto their tacky surfaces—an optimum airflow. There is a similar balance between exertion and restraint that Lisa achieves in paint—one that strives for equilibrium on the canvas's surface but simultaneously achieves an enlivening chromatic energy and always just the right hue, tone, contrast and texture.

Lisa was a precocious western Pennsylvania child-artist whose talents were encouraged by her mother. Her abilities as a teenager were displayed in illustrations she did of available subjects—animals, landscapes, and people. It was her uncommon technical skill that led to her being offered a position as artist at Hallmark in Kansas City, which in turn led her to the Kansas Flint Hills, with which she developed a

profound connection. After a time at Hallmark, she felt moved to leave commercial illustration and chose to pursue a degree in painting at the University of Kansas. This bold step led to a protracted and ongoing exploration of the landscape horizon, a pursuit both scientific and esoteric and one that required an unbroken span of attention that has lasted over twenty years.

This brings us to a question regarding Lisa's recent work. Namely, is she still a landscape painter? If we look at the paintings of the last two decades we will see that she has repeatedly returned to the prairie to paint its features *plein air*. She has made, in all seasons of the year, countless paintings of farm fields, river valleys, prairie panoramas and cloudscapes. At ground-level, she incorporates the horizon near the bottom

of her paintings. She has also painted from photographs made looking obliquely on the landscape from an airplane. In these cases, the horizons appear most often near the tops of the paintings. Over the years, regardless of the perspective, the paintings have become simpler, less about specific landscape features and more about “the feel of the landscape,” as she has said, and about the subtle transitions

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of light affected by the changing angles of the sun and moon. Where once she painted recognizable landscape features—tree lines, roads, and agricultural areas—she now increasingly looks past these details. “I'm painting the feeling of far,” she says, her powers of observation strengthening as her gaze has grown more confident. There is a longing in this work. Lisa now wonders how she managed to neglect the directions of North and South, having earlier been attracted to the visual drama of sunrise and sunset in the East and West. She now looks into the cloudless sky directly above her or where the Earth shadow causes barely perceptible transitions of color that only the most disciplined observer would perceive, much less try to paint. And with the help of the mirror dome, she now can look at the entire horizon—all the way around—from a vantage point perpendicular to the ground.

Her ritual of observation evolves from study to meditation. I think again of the words on the dry-erase board and search for indications that the painter has somehow seen something quite different from what most of us would see were we standing beside her. She has stood alone studying the horizon countless times. Could the experience be

something like repeating a familiar word so often that it starts to sound strange and lose its original meaning? “The Kansas landscape”—an often heard term that produces in me visions of vaguely pleasing paintings of low rolling hills—is, in Lisa's perception, charged with cosmic clarity that burns away any remaining evidence of human activity on Earth's surface and somehow grips the ineffable shadow

of the planet on its own dusty atmosphere. This is surely the most ephemeral of all visual experiences of sunrise/sunset but one that seems somehow inevitable for Lisa who has watched morning and night the changing sky, while never seeing it the same way twice. This way of perceiving does not yield “regional” landscape paintings. Nor do her paintings navigate intentionally toward abstraction. Yet the new paintings somehow address both. Looking at them, one can find vestiges of representational landscape, even as she leaves the genre behind. One can also sense that she is reaching for abstraction but not quite going there, creating a pleasing tension in the viewer—perhaps a feeling of anticipation, or even yearning. These paintings are put into harmony by a painter whose compositions depict the evanescent falling of light on dust by stroking pigmented oil on canvas—no small feat. And let's not forget that she also knows just where to stand.

Grossman painting details:  
Cover: *Horizon 2*, oil on panel  
Inside spread: *Earth Shadow 10*, oil on canvas  
Flap: *Sky - Gibbous Moon*, watercolor

### Artist's Statement

## REACH

references a reach of horizon, a vast prairie space, an expanse of sky, as well as reaching out and more deeply into my visual investigations, the physicality of reaching across broad painting surfaces to create the work, and ultimately, reaching the viewer. The paintings are *plein air* and studio explorations of certain naturally occurring visual phenomena, primarily late-afternoon prairie horizons, sky arcs, the Earth shadow, and vivid spectrums of sundown into night.

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AN EXHIBITION OF PAINTINGS BY  
**LISA GROSSMAN**

**HAW/CONTEMPORARY**  
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