

Lisa Grossman

Exquisite Solitude—statement

Haw/Contemporary, 2016

The most alone I've ever been, painting, was in the backcountry of the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, just north of Strong City, Kansas. This rare gift of time and space to work was granted through the newly established Tallgrass Artist Residency, which gave ten artists two weeks to work on the preserve. My residency was April 17 – 26, 2016, when the burnt-black hills were greening.

In the five other artist-in-residencies I've done in western and southwestern parklands, all is unfamiliar, wondrous, and at times, overwhelming for a flatlander, and I sometimes feel like an interloper. I reveled in the opportunity to paint in “my” place, the tallgrass prairies I've explored and painted for over 25 years now. The solitude, silence, dark night skies, and spring emergences were a tremendous gift. It was also a great honor in this auspicious year of anniversaries—the 20th anniversary of the Tallgrass Preserve, the centennial of the National Park Service, and the 25th anniversary of PrairyErth, by William Least Heat-Moon, my initial guide to the tallgrass.

During my residency, I re-immersed myself in the prairie, focused on themes that have ceaselessly captivated me—the enigmatic horizon itself with its beckoning blueness, and successions of flat-topped uplands unique to these prairies. I never tire of delineating these blue-beyond-the-blue ridges. They can't be photographed, the way I see them, so I have to get in there and paint. Ironically, I have to bring them up close. They are composites of first-hand experience, memory, imagination, and emotion. Surprisingly, on the last night of my residency in the farthest northwest boundary, I encountered the best example I've seen, with at least six parallel ridges. It was like what I'd been painting all these years, and that was inspiring.

And how could I resist responding to days of great sweeping clouds and their shadows racing silently across the prairies? These were “plein air” experiences at their best—pure visceral response to prairie reveries.

In the studio recently, I've been working with the eroding draws of spring-greening valleys. Too intricate and huge to paint on location, they allow me to shift my gaze downward from the anchor of the horizon and are immensely satisfying to carve out in paint now that I've finally made peace with painting green.

“Prairie time” always makes me contemplative, and the gentle strength and enduring quality of the hills, the resilient grasses, the evidence of deep time in the rocks and weathering, reassures me. It's easy to confront one's smallness, enfolded into the great sweep of time and space in the vast open, and I recommend it. It provides a sense of well-being and helps me focus on all that I can and cannot do. The shorter time seems, the more I realize my best strategy is to dig deeper into *my* places—explore and engage them from every angle, over time—“consult the genius of place,” as Wes Jackson suggests. My most authentic advocacy is to put these places on the map, visually, with energy and affection.