

Artist's Statement

Lisa Grossman – A Fluid Line

Haw Contemporary, Nov. 8 – Dec. 11, 2019

I began this work with a pair of sandbar paintings from photos of the Kaw along McDowell Creek Road near Manhattan. Then the sandbars disappeared.

2019 has been a story of weather. New terms to describe weather and climatic shifts keep springing up like “bomb cyclone.” That was the wet weather “bomb” that descended on the Midwest this past spring and set into motion one wave of unprecedented weather after another.

I got a small drone in the spring intending to gather low-altitude footage of Kansas River sandbars and prairie. In April I went to paint in Chase County, Kansas, for a week and arrived with the storms. Straight-line winds had overturned a train (the first of two this summer) south of Matfield Green, and I parked on a rise above the site to paint the waves of weather moving over the prairie. I was painting an awesome line of white and steel gray on the southwest horizon during a break between storms. A few drops hit my hand and minutes later a wall of wind and water hit with such force I could barely hold onto my painting and easel. My materials scattered across the road and I struggled to throw everything in the back of the truck and barricade myself in the cab. The truck was rocking. My left side was soaked and I had rain in my left ear. Wild. That's what the big “Gust Front” painting is about—a piece I did later in the safety of my studio.

The pattern continued that week with torrential rain overflowing creeks, filling floodplains, and rendering roads impassible. But it turned the recently burnt prairies verdant, and, when the sun did emerge, it was glorious. So I focused on the saturated watersheds and draws that were working overtime. I reveled in fluid lines of paint that evoked the water-sculpted draws. Prairie shadows washed over the hills in dizzying waves of light and dark—perpetual motion that felt like big water swells on this inland sea.

Back home in Lawrence, the Kansas River rose dramatically, and the sandbars remain submerged half a year later. So I took drone footage of the flooding at Mud Creek, Lecompton, and just west of Eudora. On May 28, an F4 tornado tore through southeast Douglas County and crossed the Kaw in the very place I'd photographed six days earlier near Eudora. I went back and shot it from the opposite side of the river. The devastation to the riparian areas was breathtaking, and the series of events didn't seem likely to happen again. I thought I'd better paint it.

Those in the path of destruction are still putting their lives back together, and some of us might have been spared this time, but aren't we all “in the path” now? Eons of wind and water have shaped the prairie and the waterways but what can we call *natural* or *normal* now? We're bending and twisting the yardstick of “Nature As Measure.” My work has always focused on the weather so it feels profoundly disorienting. The climate is bearing down on us, and we really just don't know what's in store.