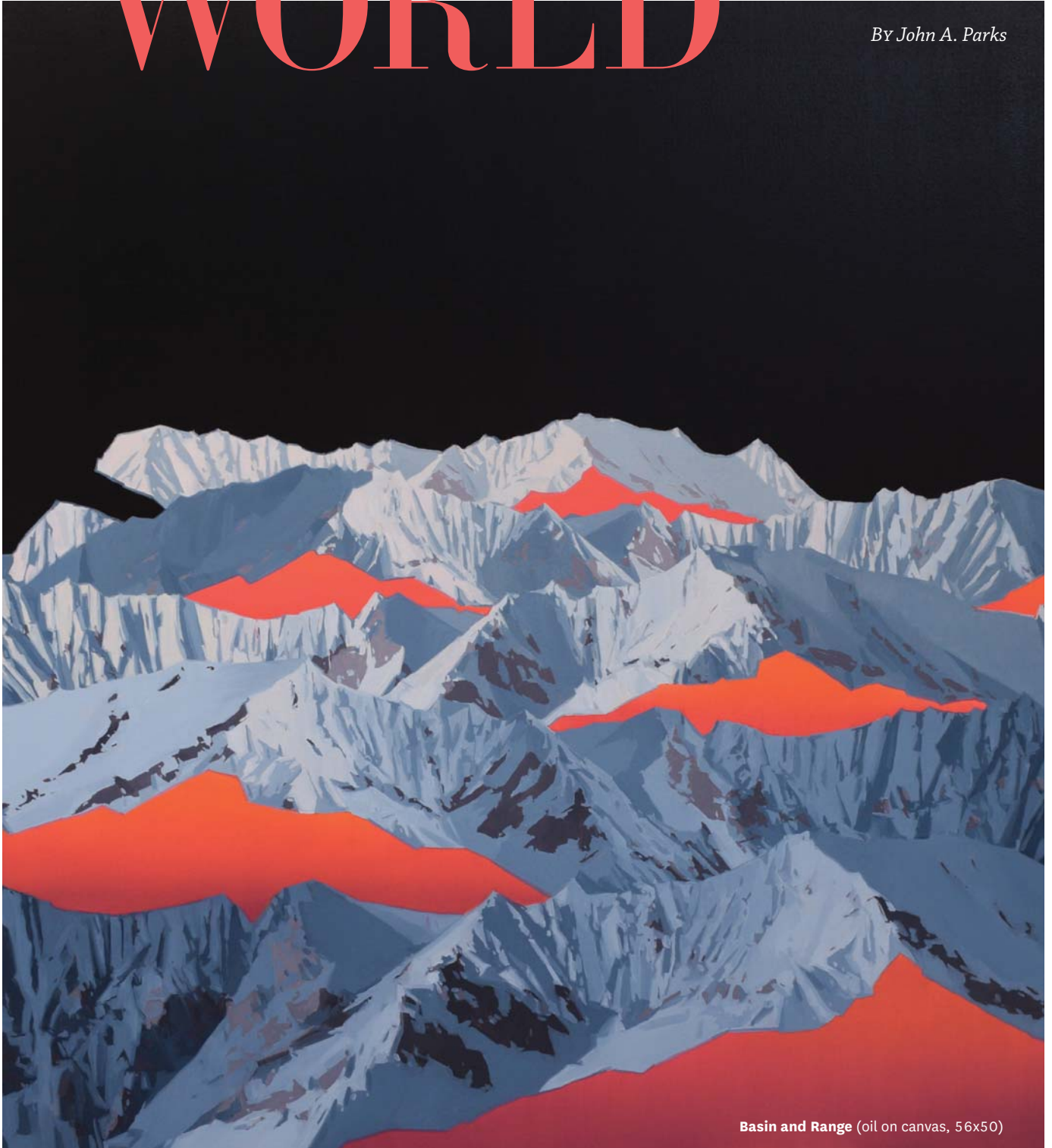


# THE *fractured* WORLD

Encounters with nature at the ends of the world lead **Beau Carey** to make a new kind of painting.

*By John A. Parks*



**Basin and Range** (oil on canvas, 56x50)

**“THERE IS NO TRUTH,” OBSERVED FRENCH NOVELIST GUSTAVE FLAUBERT. “THERE IS ONLY PERCEPTION.”**

The idea that the world is more malleable, less certain and less knowable than our conventional understanding of it underpins the paintings of New Mexico artist Beau Carey. His canvases feature mountainous, generally Arctic, landscapes in which multiple horizons and repeated views combine with highly colored flat shapes to create fractured, disorienting and deeply mysterious images.

To understand how the artist came to paint these pictures, it's necessary to go back to his early passion for plein air painting. “As an undergrad, I was lucky enough to take classes that encouraged me to work outdoors,” Carey recalls. “It was such a gift early on not to need a studio. Working that way prompts me to ask certain questions about the places I'm painting: ‘Who owns this space? How is it changing? Who uses it?’ Those broader interests led me to seek out less conventional spaces.”

Along the way Carey painted illegally dumped trash piles in the desert as well as cement-lined arroyos and drainage ditches in and around his hometown of Albuquerque, N.M. Later he painted the famously polluted Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge and eventually found himself on an artist residency aboard a tall ship that sailed around the Svalbard archipelago.

“On that residency, I had a couple of experiences that broadened how I thought about painting and the environment,” Carey says. “One was that the world is tough to perceive and, in a great deal of cases, we perceive it incorrectly. For example, distances are very difficult to gauge in the Arctic. The air is so clear and

dry that atmospheric perspective is almost nonexistent. Without trees or objects to provide relative scale, you just can't tell how far away something is. A glacier that looks a quarter of a mile away may, in fact, be 5 miles away. Reality becomes distorted.”

This left the artist with a conundrum: If he painted what he perceived, the image didn't work. Carey notes, “You're left with the choice of painting it as you're perceiving it and thereby looking like you don't know what you're doing or painting it like you're ‘supposed’ to and so denying the perceptual experience you're having.”

### **ON THE HORIZON(S)**

Carey's experience with the deceptive distances in the clear Arctic air quickly led him to realize that much of the way in which painters represent the world is not so much to do with their perceptions as with their use of well-worn pictorial conventions. This insight made him question another staple of landscape painting—the horizon.

“When I was painting in Denali, in Alaska, and at another residency, Rabbit Island in Lake Superior, I kept having the thought that there is something wrong with the way we approach horizons,” Carey recalls. “It's this amazing pictorial invention. A simple horizontal line across a page makes a landscape. But it's fiction. In reality it happens everywhere and nowhere.”

A horizon only exists in relation to an individual viewer. Moreover, as a viewer raises or lowers his head, his perception of the placement of the horizon shifts. Further, Carey points out that the idea of a horizon carries a certain amount of meaning. “As a metaphor it implies that the world is infinite and not the

contained entity we know it to be,” he says. “Consequently, I thought I needed to disregard it entirely or explode it. So entered the idea of multiple horizons in one picture.”

Carey began to make paintings featuring numerous horizons in which he included mountain ranges from multiple locations—Alaska, Colorado, New Mexico and Norway. “I loved that compression of geographies,” he says. “I began repeating the same location with different light and angles, and they became an exploration of the dynamic way we actually encounter the landscape throughout a day or season. Time became a factor, which then led to the multiple suns and moons.

“Each painting became a consideration of the time it takes to watch the moon rise or sink below the horizon,” he adds. “The new compositional structure freed up opportunities for abstraction. Surprising colors, patterns and textures emerged as opportunities.”

### **SUBVERTING CONVENTIONAL SPACE**

Carey's exploration of pictorial representation also resulted in his experimentation with his painting technique. His early, highly planned procedures gave way to a more flexible approach. “For reference I use plein air studies done on-site; these are often pretty direct representations,” he says. “I use photos when drawing particular ranges, but most often now I just paint from memory. I shift things, sometimes dramatically, if I think the painting needs it.”

Carey begins a painting by drawing the composition. “I'm not interested in making the mountain ranges exact, so the patterning is random,” he says. “You only really notice the repeated ranges with a

careful look.” The initial drawing is subject to change once the painting gets underway.

Carey’s next task is to establish a color palette for the painting. “I’ll spend anywhere from a day to a week or more creating the color palette,” he says. “I make these little color-swatch scraps that I hang all over my studio, and I take careful notes about how each is mixed.”

The artist is acutely aware that different color combinations endow a painting with different atmospheres and identities. Having made a decision, he sticks with this limited palette throughout the work. “I begin painting fairly directly with very little underpainting,” he says. “I used to be pretty traditional in how I’d build up a work, laying in detailed underpaintings first. After a while I just started laying it in chunks, and it worked.”

In other words, Carey builds one section before proceeding to the

next. “The paintings are puzzles that I’m never really sure are going to work as far as color, value and composition until I lay in the last piece,” he says. “The finish can range from loose and gestural to tight and representational.” The artist says that making a painting this way is a more exciting and organic experience in which the completion of each part of the painting demands a response in the next part.

A novel element in Carey’s pictorial repertoire is his use of flat shapes—usually painted in brilliant color—that are juxtaposed with the representational passages of the painting. These are established with razor-sharp edges, achieved by masking, and have the effect of pulling the viewer out of the more conventional illusions contained in the painting. They’re an unmistakable reminder that the painting is simply a flat surface. Images of the moon or sun, similarly masked to

create sharp edges, often float in front of mountains, once again subverting our sense of conventional space in the painting.

Carey’s painting, *Basin and Range* (page 30), shows the kinds of subversive games he plays with picture-making. A mountain range is repeated multiple times, painted in a conventional realist manner, while some of the negative shapes are painted in a flat bright orange, popping up at regular intervals across the painting. A sky in pure black is an unlikely surprise, but any thought that it might be a faithful representation is subverted by a curious and impossible notch that digs into the side of the mountains on the left. The viewer is abruptly reminded that the picture is just a two-dimensional surface.

In a more recent painting, *Divergence 2* (opposite), Carey paints in a looser, more suggestive style. He strings together a line of

## A PROBLEM WITH PERCEPTION



**Glitch** (oil on canvas, 48x60)

In his painting, *Glitch*, Carey presents what looks like a straightforward view of an Arctic scene. The artist explains that, in reality, the distant hills on the left were just as dark and contrasted as the hill in the foreground. The clear Arctic air contains little moisture, so the usual experience of aerial perspective is missing.

Had he painted the scene the way it appeared, the artist felt that it wouldn’t work as a painting because no recession would occur. With this in mind, he introduced a change in contrast, lightening the darks as the landscape recedes.

The painting now works as a conventional landscape but no longer records the artist’s experience of the place. The artificiality of the procedure is reinforced at the bottom of the painting where the water suddenly, and alarmingly, gives way to a pitch-back strip. This element is abruptly out of keeping with the rest of the painting.



**Divergence 2** (oil on canvas, 50x44)

## MEET THE ARTIST



ANDREW FANVILLE

Beau Carey, a native of Albuquerque, N.M., was encouraged to make art since his early childhood. He studied at the University of New Mexico, in Albuquerque, eventually earning a master's degree in painting and drawing. He has undertaken many residencies in remote and challenging parts of the world, including Denali, in Alaska, and Rabbit Island, a large, uninhabited island on Lake Superior. His work has been shown in many group and solo exhibitions and is represented by Richard Levy Gallery, in Albuquerque; and Visions West Contemporary, in Bozeman, Mont.

▶ VISIT THE ARTIST'S WEBSITE AT [BEAUCAREY.COM](http://BEAUCAREY.COM).



**Moonrise** (oil on canvas, 44x 50)

mountains in repeated horizontals with a red disc of sun, or perhaps moon, floating both in front of and behind the peaks. Here the flatly painted negative shapes are presented in more subtle colors—a soft orange and a pale blue—to create a strangely sweet color world.

Sometimes Carey's pictorial subversions are more subtle. In *Moonrise* (above), for instance, we're presented with a conventionally painted view of an Arctic landscape showing sunlight coming in low from the right. Behind it a full moon rises in a dark sky. Something feels odd about this setup, but it takes a little while to realize why.

A full moon can never be in the sky without being directly opposed by the sun. Having the light come in at right angles is quite impossible.

### PERCEPTION VS. REALITY

With his vigorous exploration of the divergence between pictorial representation and perception, it's hardly surprising that Carey names Paul Cézanne (French, 1839–1906) as one of his principle influences. "I feel hugely indebted to him," Carey says. "He was so doggedly committed to perception. There's so much searching in his paintings. He always seems to be asking, 'Is

this the way we actually see it, or is this the way we are taught to see it?"

Cézanne realized that the way in which we see things is fractured, endlessly shifting and often incomplete. We don't, in fact, see the world as the kind of stable, continuous space that had become the currency of European painting. Cézanne consequently made paintings that are records of his attempts to see and locate parts of the world in front of him—an approach that led to a radical revision of pictorial space.

Carey has explored some more complex expressive possibilities

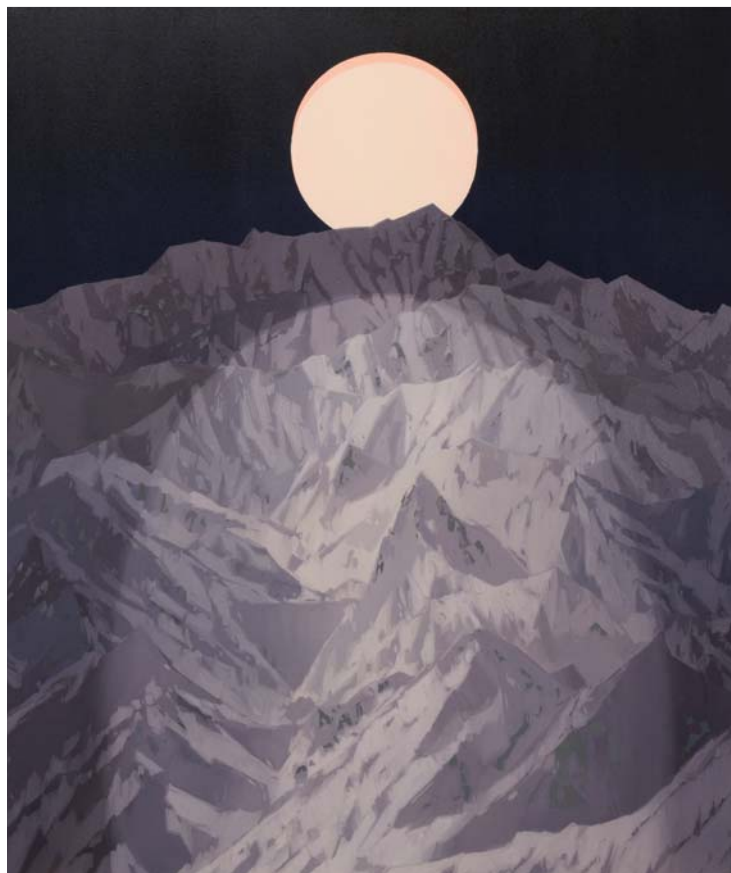
with his approach in some of his recent works. In a pair of paintings, *Signs Preceding the End of the World 1* and *2*, intended to hang as a diptych (below), a mountain range of repeated peaks has been massed into a more-or-less conventional block of landscape. In one painting, the sky is white, and the moon eclipses the sun to cast a disquieting shadow on the landscape. In the companion piece, there's a black sky from which a pale moon shines. This appears to cast an oval area of light on the mountains, resulting in an eerily impossible phenomenon.

With these paintings, Carey succeeds in making his pictorial gamesmanship an expressive force as he creates a sense of unease in response to something disturbing, even threatening, happening in the landscape. The viewer is prompted to think about issues of pollution, global warming and environmental degradation—concepts that are close to Carey's heart.

"It underlies all the work, from the places I choose to paint and the artists I work with," he says. "There is almost no other issue. Part of pulling apart the horizon comes



**Signs Preceding the End of the World 1** (oil on canvas, 50x44)



**Signs Preceding the End of the World 2** (oil on canvas, 50x44)

**“THE PAINTINGS ARE PUZZLES THAT I’M NEVER REALLY  
SURE ARE GOING TO WORK AS FAR AS COLOR, VALUE  
AND COMPOSITION UNTIL I LAY IN THE LAST PIECE.”**

—BEAU CAREY



**Batholith** (oil on canvas, 40x46)



## MATERIALS

**Substrates:** 12 oz. cotton duck. For outdoor painting, the artist uses prepared wood panels or Arches oil paper.

**Brushes:** Princeton is Carey's preferred brand.

**Paint:** Williamsburg and Old Holland

**Medium:** M. Graham walnut oil. (Walnut oil is ideal for working in arctic conditions because it has a lower freezing point than linseed oil.)

**Pochade boxes:** The artist uses various boxes, but prefers his 11x14-inch custom Alla Prima pochade box.

directly from the realization that we live in a closed system.

"The world isn't infinite as the horizon in metaphor implies," Carey continues. "Our resources are finite. We can't just dump things over the edge of the world. Nothing we make disappears, and solutions aren't coming from some far-off place over the horizon. We need to find them now, here, where we are."

Carey's passion for nature has grown out of his experiences of painting in extreme environments in distant corners of the planet. As for how he hopes his work might affect audiences, he says, "I want them to see that the world isn't always as they perceive it. It's a misquote of Heraclitus to say that no one ever steps into the same stream twice, but I want people to see that the mountain outside is a little different every day and that, conversely, they are, too. The world is more dynamic, beautiful, connected and in trouble than initial perceptions allow." ❄

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*John A. Parks is a painter, a writer and a member of the faculty of the School of Visual Arts, in New York City. His work was shown this spring in an exhibition, "Oceans and Seas," at 532 Gallery Thomas Jaeckel, in Manhattan.*