

HOW MUCH LAND

curated by Jessica Cochran

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McCORMICK GALLERY

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How Much Land is a summer group exhibition of contemporary artists working in Chicago. Artists in this group deploy the practice of painting to diverse, incongruous ends, but share disciplinary commitments to the medium that are deeply reflexive. Rather than tie together artists and works under a theme, trend or manifesto, I decided instead to create a thought-space under the umbrella of a story.

The exhibition takes its title from Leo Tolstoy's parable *How Much Land Does a Man Need?*, in which a protagonist peasant, Pahom, in an insatiable quest to acquire land, is offered ownership of all he can mark off with a spade in the dirt before sundown in a deal orchestrated by the devil. After drawing his borders in the earth with his spade and with a plow, he sprints back to the finish line only to drop dead and be buried on the spot—in a diminutive six-foot plot.

The human desire to claim land, or at minimum, to declare a site for oneself, is an interesting thought experiment in relation to one of the most fundamental characteristics of the contemporary painter's project: how is the activity of claiming space with paint an extension of one's wish to occupy space in the world—bodily, ideological, political, professional, domestic and social?

Tolstoy's Pahom was motivated by a cocktail of desire, fear, greed, loss, ego and love. He visually marked the land with a spade, like painters mark a canvas, panel or paper. If I were to talk to him, I might ask him why he became land-obsessed. Was it out of a desire to care for his family and to build a legacy? To make his power visible? To re-emerge as a citizen of higher status, no longer oppressed?

Some see the realm of painting as theirs—a native space or a hospitable commons—while to others it is contested territory, an institution of which to sneak in and out. Here in the gallery, I might discuss with some artists their returns to painting after sojourns in other fields or creative disciplines; I'd love to talk to others about how their paintings re-animate not only memories, but also the visual spaces and material culture of their childhoods. And to other artists in the exhibition I might ask how, through their paintings, I might understand the body, or find politics. How does the painterly intersect with matters of audience, family, history and sex? Is the realm of painting your freedom or mine?

— Jessica Cochran