

The Prairie Suite: A Study of Place

One important aspect of the prairie is how those who encounter it, live in it, or wrest a living from it perceive the prairie as an environment, a setting, and a place. Perhaps this is true of any landscape, but in the prairie's case the question is crucial for a simple reason. Of all the native biomes in North America, the prairie, especially the eastern tallgrass prairie, has been the most completely transformed by human action.

The prairie began to disappear in the 1840s. European and Euro-American farmers, armed with the self-scouring steel mold-board plow invented by John Deere in 1837, broke the prairie and turned it into cropland, or grazed cattle on it until the native tall grasses disappeared and were replaced by brome grass, bluegrass, oats, and alfalfa. In Iowa, where the transformation has been most complete, today less than one-tenth of one percent of the original prairie remains.

In the last two decades, there has been a growing recognition that the prairie has all but disappeared. Efforts to protect prairie remnants and to recreate prairie on land that had been farmed are increasing across the region, including at Grinnell College's Conard Environmental Research Area. These efforts can be said to constitute a movement whose ultimate goal is to make all of us think about our relationship to the land and to a place.

Throughout this history, artists have given visual expression to their perception of the prairie and its transformation. From the mid-nineteenth century prairiescapes of George Catlin and Karl Bodmer, continuing through the reverential farmscapes of Grant Wood and the critical ones of Alexander Hogue, to the recent work of Keith Jacobshagen, Terry Evans, and April Gornik, among many others, artists have depicted not so much the prairie region itself as ways of seeing it and thinking about it.



Spade
David R. Kamm



Invasive Species
Curtis Bartone



Remainder
Ellen Jean Price



Reconstructed Prairie
Timothy Frerichs



Pages Turned
Louise Kames



Untitled
Sara Grace Tabbert



Revolution
Ronald Davey



Winter Prairie Dock
George W. Olson



Gift & Touching Earth
Mudras with Prairie
Flower Shadows
Katie Kiley



Prairie Form
Robert Erickson



Prairie Song
Keith Achepohl



Prairie Rails
April Katz