Fictional Wonders / Real Hallucinations: Works by Dan Attoe and Tammy Mercure

Essay by Christopher Cook, Curator

Fictional Wonders / Real Hallucinations brings together two young emerging artists, Dan Attoe and Tammy Mercure. Both study images of the world around us, and both navigate the often-blurry line between reality and fiction, experience and dream. Mercure's photographs are small, close-up shots of what appear to be cultural icons and historic monuments—things that normally exist on a massive scale. Working in a similar size, Attoe's small paintings consist of tiny scenes dwarfed by vast landscapes such as dense forests or mountainous terrains. The intimate nature of both artists' work invites us to approach and closely examine each image. In Mercure's photographs, the narratives at first seem romantic and nostalgic, and in Attoe's paintings, humorous. But upon closer look, the narratives are deeper and less defined. In combination with Attoe's sculptural tents, his work becomes both a means to displace viewers into the forest, and a way to make viewers rethink the world around us. Mercure uses her images to force us to question what is "real" and what is imagined. Meanwhile, each artist leads us into a strangely familiar place, one often found in our memories or imaginations.

Tammy Mercure frequently embarks on weekend road trips through Illinois, Wisconsin, and Iowa. Accompanied by a trusty road atlas, a pinhole camera, and a full tank of gas, she searches out adventure, mystery, and amusement. Her mission as part tourist, part explorer is to find and photograph roadside attractions. She explores typical "tourist traps" such as amusement parks and miniature golf courses, places that oftentimes solely exist to turn a profit via costly admissions and souvenirs. Mercure also, however, visits sites that express a true sense of fantasy and vision. She seeks out private estates such as the Pyramid House in Wadsworth, Illinois, that showcase people's compulsive desires to build re-creations of famous, historic monuments and natural wonders. The Pyramid House, with its five-story pyramid and rows of mini Sphinxes, is a perfect model of the strangeness and obsession that Mercure hunts. While fun and quirky, sites such as this also express the owners' internal desires to pretend to be where they are not. By mirroring places we may dream of visiting, such as the Eiffel Tower or Easter Island, the replicas present the opportunity to experience a place without experiencing it, insofar as the likeness of the real replaces the real.

Mercure explores these roadside attractions, playing a round of miniature golf, touring a strange exhibit, or meandering through a contrived landscape. After fully experiencing the unusual places, she uses a pinhole camera to photograph specific details that capture the site's invented fiction, such as a life-size replica of a rhinoceros or a copy of a Buddhist shrine. She feels that the pinhole camera—usually constructed from a shoe box or oatmeal canister, photo paper, and electrical tape—provides "a very basic way of recording an image." Similar to point-and-shoot cameras carried by tourists, pinhole cameras are casual and immediate, with fairly unsophisticated features. Normally, pinhole cameras produce compositions with blurred and out-of-focus edges. Also, since they do not have view finders, the photographer only has a vague idea of what is being captured, thus involving a certain degree of chance. After returning from her weekend sojourns, Mercure goes to her studio and scans the photographs into her computer, and then processes the captured images. In the end, her photographs are not just straight photographs: the modified digital prints no longer truly resemble the roadside attractions of the Midwest. They instead resemble old travel photographs of distant, exotic places.

Many of the photographs in Mercure's *Wonders* series appear slightly out of focus. For instance, *Mayan Temple, IL* (2000) portrays the front side of what appears to be an ancient steppe pyramid. The pyramid, resting slightly off center in the middle ground of the image, is set against a muted, grey sky. The bottom half of the pyramid is softly reflected in what appears to be a body of water at its base. The overall outline of the pyramid is unclear: its edges are fuzzy and undefined, and the right side of the pyramid looks as though it is slowly dissolving into the surrounding atmosphere. We may also have trouble distinguishing between the pyramid's different levels: the individual sections appear to melt into a single, flat surface. Similarly, the wide, solid path running up the center of the pyramid's front side—traditionally a stairway climbed by priests to communicate with the gods at the height of the temple—looks flat, with no evidence of individual steps. It seems as though time and natural elements have eroded the stairs down to nothing. The photograph's even, grainy appearance adds to the pyramid's old and weathered look, as if it is solely made of sand and could easily be demolished by a single gust of wind. As Mercure indicates in the title, her photograph does not capture an actual Mayan Temple: the scene is set in Illinois. But does the photograph even document the roadside attraction at which it was found? Instead, it seems to reveal the elusive likeness of an exotic wonder that may only exist in the deepest niches of our minds.

The blurry, indistinct nature of Mercure's photographs gives them an overwhelmingly romantic quality. The black-and-white photographs seem ageless, as if untouched by time. In *Pisa, IL* (2000), Mercure captures a soft, hazy image of what appears to be the famous Leaning Tower of Pisa in Italy. The icon rises at a slight angle into a foggy sky; it is tall and massive, and commands

the entire picture frame. The top half of the tower is hazy and unclear, hidden in the low-lying clouds. Similar to Mercure's *Mayan Temple, IL*, the entire image is muted by a soft, gentle grey. The photograph's small size reminds us of old travel photographs or precious postcards, and encourages a strong sense of nostalgia, conjuring imaginative ideals of wonder and freedom often associated with far-away places. The small size of the work also invites viewers to step closer to the image, creating a more intimate relationship. In this closeness, we may be reminded of our own distant voyages and exotic trips, whether real or dreamed.

Mercure's images usually exist in an ambiguous context. By centering the subject and closely framing it in the photograph, she eliminates details that would provide a sense of scale, time, and place. For instance, in *Giraffe, IL* (2000), one sees the top portion of what resembles a wild giraffe. Its bottom half is cropped off by the lower edge of the photograph. The profile view of the giraffe, centered in the frame, only allows its right side to be seen. Similar to the other photographs in the *Wonders* series, *Giraffe, IL* has an overall grey tone, and the subject is indistinct and out of focus. The giraffe's head lacks clear details: its eyes and ears appear as dark abstractions. The only context available to the viewer is the twilight sky; there are no clues to inform us about location or background activity. The absence of context makes the visual narrative of the photograph difficult to determine, and prompts us to ponder where the photograph was shot. Is the giraffe grazing through the tall grasses of central Africa, or is it caged in a zoo somewhere in the Midwest? In addition, the actual size of the giraffe is impossible to discern. Our perspective is from below and at a relatively short distance, which might make the giraffe seem larger than it really is. Unable to judge its exact scale, we cannot accurately determine its size. In fact, Mercure's giraffe might not be real at all; it is quite possibly a small-scale plaster replica found at a miniature golf course.

The fragmented contexts found in Mercure's photographs help create an odd and unsettling ambiguity. They produce a visual uncertainty, which may confuse viewers, prompting us to question the reality of what is depicted. Although Mercure employs photography, a medium once championed for its honesty and objectivity, she uses it to challenge viewers' perceptions of what is real and what is not. Similar to images in a dream, Mercure's photographs appear strangely familiar, yet their meaning remains unclear. They are images of distant, mythical lands that live in our imaginations; places that have inspired the creation of inventive roadside attractions planted alongside the highways of the Midwest. Her photographs simultaneously remind us of the real treasures of the world while pointing to the fictional wonders that exist just beyond our backyard. In this light, Mercure's photographs may represent a true, inner reality, one that pervades the dreams and fantasies of all of us. They may call us to take the journey of the dream, or to go out into the world to experience its wonders

firsthand.

Mercure's outings along the highways of the Midwest in many ways parallel Dan Attoe's frequent retreats to the great outdoors. While growing up, his father worked for the United States Forest Service, and much of Attoe's childhood was spent in remote terrain, hiking and camping among beautiful forests. The tall canopies of trees that sheltered his daily walks and explorations are part of the landscape that is deeply rooted in his paintings, creating a consistent theme found throughout his work. He often focuses on human interactions with our environment, creating narratives within the natural world.

In Attoe's paintings, the landscape plays a dominant role. His small, intimate scenes often include individuals or groups of figures participating in outdoor activities such as hiking, hunting, or sunbathing. In others, the narratives are less familiar. For instance, a painting of two men playing a brutal game of rock throwing or another depicting a fisherman wrestling a walleye might strike viewers as strange or absurd. Similar to viewing a film one still at a time, the narrative of each painting can seem fragmented and incomplete. The brevity of each scene casts the paintings in a very ambiguous light, making their actual meanings uncertain and oddly curious. Nonetheless, each of the scenes develops in a beautiful landscape: dense forests, expansive prairies, rolling hills, mountainous countryside. Most of these painted landscapes represent places Attoe has lived or visited. On the backs of his paintings, Attoe often inscribes brief notes identifying the place in the painting or what it reminds him of. For instance, on the reverse side of *A House by a River* (2003) he wrote "like Moab, Utah." Similarly, "my grandparent's house between Wautoma and Wild Rose, WI" appears on the back side of *Chopping Wood* (2003). In this respect, each painting reads as a visual journal—depicting individual experiences and personal recollections of the artist.

Attoe's paintings often involve unusual and possibly disturbing situations between humans and their environment. For example, *Shining for Deer* (2002) depicts two men hunting at night with the illegal aid of hunting lights. Under the cover of darkness and with rifles in tow, both hunters search for deer prints in the winter snow. In the center of the painting's foreground, one man bends slightly and looks down. The hunting light attached to his head shines down, revealing four hoof prints. While no deer are in sight, their tracks left behind prove they are out there somewhere. The glowing light catches the tip of his rifle as it whitens the tall, leafless trees in front of him. His hunting partner stands at a distance; a small dab of white paint represents his hunting light, which is directed out of the painting and toward the viewer. In the middle ground of the painting, quick brushstrokes of green and black paint form trees in the outlying horizon. Above the trees we see a mysterious, wintry sky that is highlighted with faint touches of yellow and red. The overall scene portrays a

typical hunting trip on a cold winter's night, but one that is fraught with nervousness: the men could be caught at anytime in their illegal activity. For that reason, it seems as though the hunter peering out toward the viewer might be keeping watch for anyone coming.

In other paintings, Attoe's landscape takes on a more mysterious tone. In *Magic Fairy* (2003), the forest is the site of a perplexing, supernatural event. A young girl in a blue-and-white dress stands motionless in a dense wood. The thick tree line crowds the picture plane. Near the top of the painting, sunlight pierces through the heavy tree branches. With her head slightly raised, she looks up in amazement at a nearby tree; her eyes are fixated on a floating orb. Its bright rings of yellow and orange reflect off the surrounding trees, intensifying the girl's pale skin. Inside this hovering sphere is a tiny, white figure that looks as though it is kneeling forward, trying to communicate with the girl. Painted to its left is the word "Poof!," suggesting that the "magic fairy" has just appeared before the girl as she stands frozen in a state of disbelief. Moreover, near the bottom edge of the painting is the message "Feed your lust," which adds a spiritual or satirical tone to this dark scene. The forest in Attoe's *Magic Fairy* can be understood as a place where fantasies and dreams can come true: it is an enchanted place, summoning our deepest desires to appear right before our very eyes.

Much of Attoe's subject matter teeters on the edge between fantasy and reality. While often based on actual places he has experienced, his paintings illustrate fictional narratives that amuse and bewilder. In speaking with the artist, he casually explained that his work is mainly about "pretending to be in a forest." This element of make-believe is also present in Attoe's sculptural "tents." Using all-weather, rip-stop nylon and aluminum, collapsible poles, Attoe designs and fabricates three-dimensional objects that resemble traditional camping tents. Ranging in size, shape, and color, each tent can stand on its own, or several can be joined to form a large group. Most of Attoe's tents are tall and spacious, comparable to a standard two- or four-person tent. They include zipper openings and incorporate several mesh windows. Unlike traditional tents however, the windows are irregularly shaped and sewn in unexpected places: some are found at the top of tents, facing upward toward the sky, while others are at foot level, providing a scenic view for a camper laying down inside.

For this exhibition, Attoe has installed nine tents throughout the Art Center. They hang vertically from walls or rest firmly in the viewer's space on the gallery floor. In this context, viewers may appreciate their three-dimensional presence and aesthetic qualities, reading them more as sculpture than camping gear. In one sense, the tents become sculpture, and in another, the Art Center is transformed into a sort of impromptu camping ground. Attoe seeks to make objects that have definite sculptural qualities, but still maintain a certain

utilitarian sensibility. Even though they look abnormal, most of the tents can function as adequate shelter in the wilderness. In fact, Attoe has used many of his tents on camping trips in the Midwest. In this light, the tents truly operate as three-dimensional art objects with a recreational use value, where fine art meets the everyday.

Attoe further pushes our minds into an imaginary, forest retreat by embroidering wildlife imagery and provocative messages on each tent. For example, on the outside of one of the tents, Attoe stitched its title, “Be Grateful,” in yellow thread. Above the message is an image of a deer’s head with large antlers that frame a small, circular window. Gazing inside, we can read the phrase “There’s always more,” which Attoe embroidered on the opposite side. By combining both phrases, one may interpret the message as directed toward deer hunters, possibly reminding them to be thankful for nature’s many gifts. Attoe’s grey tent *Stand Somewhere* (2004) is decorated with the phrase “There are not always clear answers. I guess you just have to stand somewhere.” Viewed from outside the tent, the text wraps around a circular window through which we can look inside and see a sewn compass on the tent floor.

According to the artist, many of the phrases and images embroidered on the tents deal with issues of navigation. Whether searching for the perfect fishing hole, hunting for a secluded camping spot, or finding our way along an unfamiliar path, traversing through natural areas requires navigational skills. In a literal sense, being outdoors compels us to think about our physical location—our body’s position in space and its relationship to its surroundings. On a more profound level, being enveloped in the landscape, away from humanity, may also encourage us to think about our place in the larger world, possibly pushing us into a state of self-reflection. The great outdoors is not only a place for physical exploration, but can also be the milieu in which we “find” ourselves. With this in mind, perhaps the dominant forest theme in Attoe’s small, intimate paintings and peculiar tents is a metaphor for the artist’s search for an inner self.

Both artists take our imaginations on a visual journey. While Mercure tours the Midwest in search of popular roadside attractions that many find fun and amusing, her photographs do not represent their true appearances. Instead, the photographs ride the fine line between truth and fiction, creating fantasy worlds that remove us from reality and allow us to ponder faraway, exotic lands. Attoe’s paintings and tents also blend fantasy and reality, functioning more as private investigations, and representing subjective experiences of the great outdoors. As he explores moments from his past, Attoe slowly uncovers truths about himself. In the end, *Fictional Wonders / Real Hallucinations* couples two artists that expose internal truths while revealing the fictions of reality.
Tammy Mercure currently lives and works in Chicago, Illinois. Dan Attoe currently lives and works in Iowa City, Iowa.

Dan Attoe
Fireflies for John
2003
oil on mdf board
5 x 5 in.
Courtesy of private collection, Los Angeles

Dan Attoe
God 2003
oil on mdf board
5 x 7 in.
Courtesy of Western Exhibitions, Chicago

Dan Attoe
Stranded 2003
oil on mdf board
5 x 7 in.
Courtesy of *peres projects*, Los Angeles

Dan Attoe
Shining for Deer 2002
oil on mdf board
5 x 7 in.
Courtesy of Frank Maurer and David Kobosa