



Phoenix Art Museum

***Llano Estacado: High Plains, High Stakes, The Diptych*, Don Stinson**



Source: Phoenix Art Museum, phxart.org

I. Gallery Resources:

Don Stinson (American, b. 1956)

Llano Estacado: High Plains, High Stakes, The Diptych - 2009

oil on linen

48"x88" and 48"x60"

Museum purchase in 2013 with funds provided by Men's Arts Council Western Art Endowment Fund

Currently (summer 2020) not on display

On E-Gallery: no

II. Touring Tips:

- **Quick facts about the work and artist:** Don Stinson was born in Amarillo, Texas. Today, he lives in Denver, CO. Traveling by car, Stinson typically visits the locations that he paints. He takes many photographs, sometimes a hundred photographs or more, of each site he plans to paint. He uses these as reference points as he paints. His paintings are not recreations of a specific place. Rather, the photographs provide inspiration.

Stinson is interested in portraying, without judgement, the use of the land. He includes aspects of our built environment of the recent past into the beauty of the landscape. These may include tumble-down buildings, rusting signs, old gas stations and restaurants. These items become our relics. Stinson, with his paintings, is the reporter. He asks viewers to consider relationships with the land and the marks we leave upon it.

“When I paint there are books open, streams of images on a screen, piles of photographic references, the view out of my windows and always the landscape outside of the studio. Also present are my memories of the long drives and repeated visits to many of the sites that I have painted over the years. Sometimes when my work reminds people of a photograph, I think it means only that I have successfully translated the complex experience of our contemporary landscape into a vernacular language that everyone understands,” Don Stinson 2015 email.*

This painting was a location Stinson saw in northwest Texas, near Amarillo. He found it as he was driving home to Colorado from Texas.

- **Engagement Questions**

- Describe what you see. Do you see anything that looks familiar to you? Anything you don't recognize?
- What type of artwork is this? Painting? Photograph?
- Thinking about the elements of art (line, shape, color, texture) which one stands out to you? Why?
- Why do you think the artist made this painting on two panels (diptych)?
- Look at the two panels, what are some of the similarities between them?
- What are some of the differences between the two panels?
- Do you see any people?
- Do you see anything that tells you people have been here?
- Is this a place you would like to visit? Why? Why not?
- For older students and adults: Is this place good or bad? Does Don Stinson think this place is good or bad?

- **Gallery Activities/tasking ideas**

- Imagine that this is not a diptych but was painted on one canvas. How might that change the way you see this landscape?
- We are going on a hike. Imagine where we would start this hike and what equipment we might need. Then, determine the path we would follow.
- Compare this landscape to another landscape. Contrast with a portrait or an abstract work of art.

- **Relevant vocabulary**

- Diptych: a painting on two canvases. Often an altarpiece on two hinged wooden panels that could be closed like a book.
- Landscape: a painting in which outdoor, natural scenery is the main subject.
- Realism: term describing art showing objects or scenes as they actually appear to the eye.
- Perspective: the art of drawing solid objects on a two-dimensional surface to make it look three dimensional.
- Horizon line: a line across a painting at which the sky and earth appear to meet.
- Vanishing point: the point or points on the horizon line at which receding parallel lines meet and seem to disappear.
- Wind turbine: a machine having a large vaned wheel rotated by the wind to generate electricity.

- **Collection Connections**

- Albert Bierstadt, *Snow in the Rockies*: artist explorer in whose tradition Stinson follows
- Thomas Moran, *Zoroaster Temple at Sunset*: artist explorer in whose tradition Stinson follows
- Ed Mell, *Sweeping Clouds*: vastness of the west emphasized by the percentage of the painting taken up by the blue sky with clouds
- Lew Davis, *Paradise Valley*: ruins appear in this landscape as a way to show the impact of humans on the land
- Howard Post, *San Tan Valley*: another perspective of a western landscape

III. Formal Analysis:

- **Describe use of the elements of art significant to object**

- Color: the blue sky dominates both panels of the diptych. It looks to be about 85% of the work. The dominance of the sky helps illustrate the vastness of the western landscape. The brilliance of the blue is balanced by the browns and dull green of the landscape.
- Lines: the vertical lines of the wind turbines (bring stability) contrast with the horizontal lines of the clouds (imply movement) and the horizon line.
- Texture: the application of paint is smooth. It's difficult to discern brushstrokes.
- Perspective: look at the different perspectives between the two canvases. In the smaller canvas, Stinson seems to have placed us very close while on the larger canvas we are at a different viewing point. These two perspectives not only play with the visual differences of the west as well as make us think about how and why they may be different.
- On the larger canvas, the vanishing point helps emphasize the vastness of the west.

- **Medium and techniques**

- *Llano Estacado* is oil on linen. Linen was used because of its absorption of oil paint. That allows Stinson to use multiple layers of paint. Many viewers think this work is a photograph because of the clarity and brightness of the colors as well as the realistic depiction of the location.

- **Artist style**

- Stinson paints in a realistic style. He usually chooses to not show humans in his work. He does show evidence that they have been there. He wants viewers to consider responsibilities to the land and to future generations. Is what we are doing and leaving behind good or bad? For Stinson, there are no right or wrong answers. It's more important that we look at all sides.
- "There is something sacred about diptychs and the American landscape to me but also something political and ultimately democratic about the format in contemporary life. A diptych suggests a commitment to looking carefully at more than one side of things," Don Stinson 2015 email.*
- In a YouTube video from 2009, Stinson comments that he hopes viewers, when looking at his works, have an emotional experience, slow down and look more

carefully. You might blow by something as you quickly drive by. He hopes his paintings may change the way viewers see things.

IV. Biography

- **Significant info on artist**

- Don Stinson was born in Amarillo, TX in 1956. His father was a geologist. Stinson would accompany his father as he drove around the state for his projects. After obtaining a Masters in Fine Arts at Tufts University in Boston, MA, he moved to Colorado where he was hired as a driver for Federal Express. He wanted to experience western landscapes and see how we use them, so he requested the most rural routes for delivering packages to remotes areas of the west.

- **Interesting tidbits**

In a conversation I had with Don Stinson at the 2015 West Select exhibition/sale at PAM, he told me that Rembrandt's *The Mill*, reminded him of the turbines at Llano Estacado.



Rembrandt Van Rijn, *The Mill*, 1648 – National Gallery of Arts, Washington DC

Stinson was very interested in the writings of J.B. Jackson (1909-1996). Jackson was a writer, publisher and instructor in landscape design. He was a proponent of the theory of cultural landscape. Things have a golden era and then they fall aside. Only later do we see beauty in them. Jackson referred to this as the “necessity of ruins.”

- **Other works in our collection by same artist**

None

V. Historical Content

- **Relevant historical information**
 - Stinson's work can be seen as a continuation of the work of mid-19th century artists such as Thomas Moran and Albert Bierstadt. These artists traveled with explorers as they discovered America's west. Their job was to create paintings that showed to residents of the East Coast the beauties of the newest part of the country.
- **Symbolism**
 - Stinson modernizes the work of artist explorers by including vestiges of decayed buildings or current technologies. We know these places are inhabited and changed by the people who have lived or worked there.
- **Where the work fits into the artist's oeuvre**
 - *Llano Estacado* is representative of Stinson's work.

VI. Resources

- donstinson.com
- YouTube: Don Stinson: Talk about your process, What's it like to be an artist, How do you hope viewers will respond
- Westword Magazine: Michael Paglia, May 17, 2017, "Review: Don Stinson, Lanny DeVuono and Linda Connor Keep Their Eyes on the Horizon
- "Don Stinson: The Road to Valentine", David B Smith Gallery: call #: ND237.S75 A4 2013
- "Elevating Western American Art", Petrie Institute of Western American Art, Distributed by University of Oklahoma Press: call #: N6525. E52012
- *Emails between Docent Gail Paredes Ewan and Don Stinson in 2015