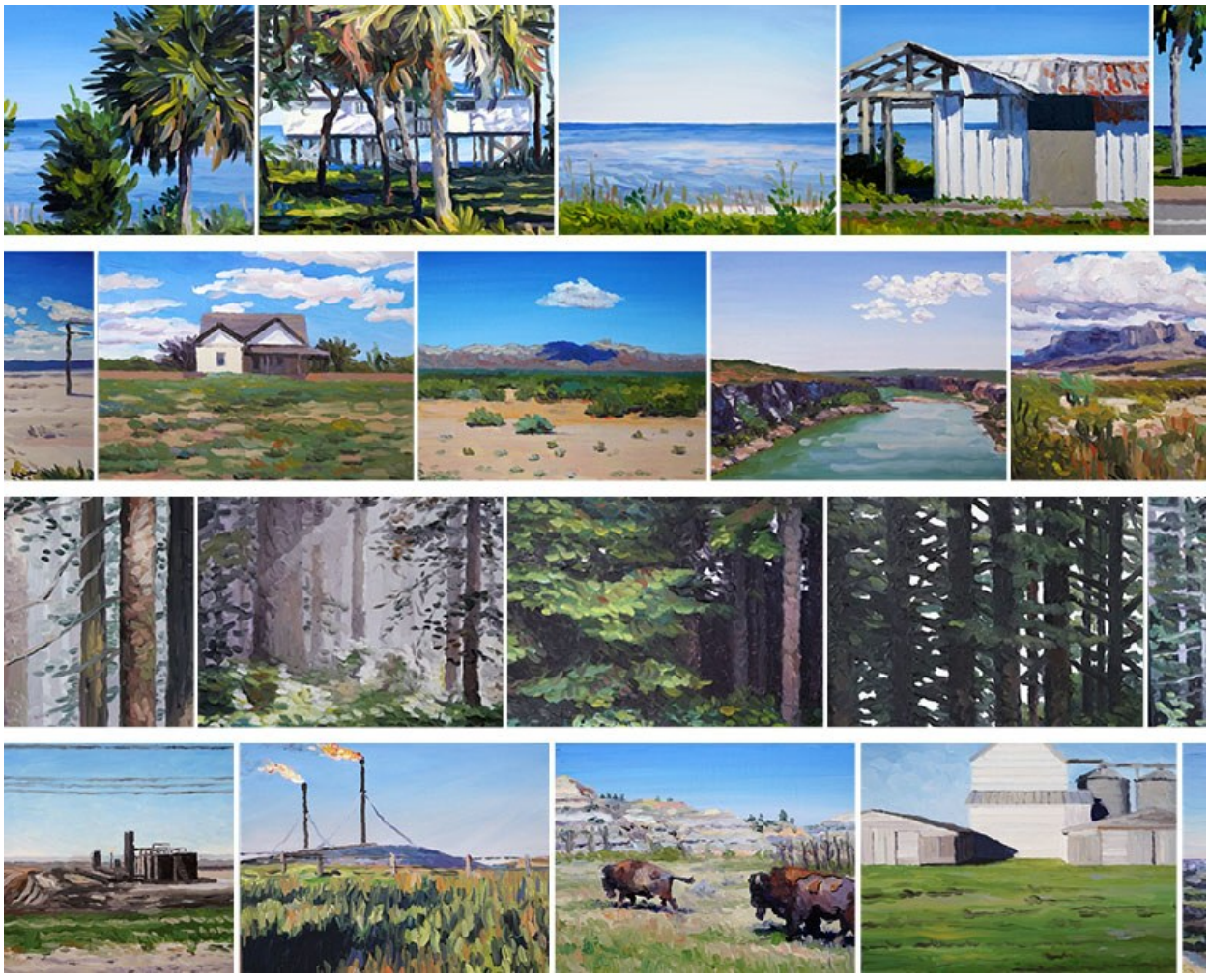
Julia Felsenthal, "On the Road With Cynthia Daignault at Lisa Cooley Gallery," *Vogue*, November 2, 2015.

VOGUE

CULTURE > ARTS

On the Road With Cynthia Daignault at Lisa Cooley Gallery

NOVEMBER 2, 2015 11:20 AM
by JULIA FELSENTHAL



Collaged details from four individual sections of Cynthia Daignault's *Light Atlas*, 2015.
Photo: Courtesy of the Artist and Lisa Cooley, New York

"There are so many cows in America!" the painter Cynthia Daignault declared on Saturday morning. "That's something you realize driving around. There are 100 million cows at any given time in this country. I Googled it, just out of curiosity."

Daignault and I were speaking at the Lisa Cooley gallery on New York's Lower East Side, where the artist's latest show, "Light Atlas," opened last night. But 30 hours before, she still had her work cut out for her. The small white box of the gallery's main space was strewn with hundreds of Daignault's 8x10-inch landscape oil paintings (some depicting cows), part of a series of 360 that represent a slice-in-time portrait of America. That series also constituted a year of Daignault's life: The artist spent six months alone in her Dodge Ram pickup, driving the 15,000-mile perimeter of the continental United States, sticking to back roads and small highways and pulling over every 25 miles to sketch and photograph the view out her passenger side window. Then she retreated to her L.A. studio for six months to translate those images into oil paintings, at the furious pace of about two a day.

"The only way is to get focused, cut out your whole life, and do nothing else," she explained about her process, which ended only a few weeks ago. "Now coming into the world for the first time, I feel like the Unabomber. I had a freak-out in the Union Square Whole Foods. You forget the energy of 7 million people. It's terrifying but intoxicating. It's like an amphetamine high."

Daignault, just off a plane from Chicago, is tall, young, and pretty, with paint on her hands, rips in the knees of her jeans, and mascara smudges under her eyes. She's no stranger to this sort of intense, repetitive, iterative method. Past projects have included series of paintings of the sky, sunsets, and CCTV screens. Her idea for "Light Atlas" emerged from several preoccupations. As one of the gallery's curators, Nichole Caruso, told me, Daignault's odyssey was on one level a political statement: "There are a dozen-plus men throughout the course of history who have explored our country, gone on the road, Jack Kerouac–style, and documented their journey," Caruso explained. (The press release for the show mentions William Eggleston, George Catlin, Mark Twain, and Woody Guthrie, among others.) But when Daignault and her gallerists tried to think of women who had done the same, they came up empty-handed.

Daignault was also thinking about how we use photography in our lives. "I became interested in the way that painting had ceded its role in depicting to photography," she explained. "And now that photography is in this fraught place because it's so prevalent, what would that mean for painting to reclaim some of that." She used photography as a tool for remembering and for framing, to create a "shared distance sense" across the work as a whole. Painting the canvases—deliberately 8x10 in the manner of a Walker Evans photograph and not, say, an Instagram-ready square—in her studio after the trip was over meant that she effectively re-experienced the journey, filtering images recorded on the spot through the emotional lens of memory.

NIGHT GALLERY

2276 E. 16th Street, Los Angeles, California 90021 **nightgallery.ca**

Cynthia D aignault

Daignault was also thinking about how we use photography in our lives. "I became interested in the way that painting had ceded its role in depicting to photography," she explained. "And now that photography is in this fraught place because it's so prevalent, what would that mean for painting to reclaim some of that." She used photography as a tool for remembering and for framing, to create a "shared distance sense" across the work as a whole. Painting the canvases—deliberately 8x10 in the manner of a Walker Evans photograph and not, say, an Instagram-ready square—in her studio after the trip was over meant that she effectively re-experienced the journey, filtering images recorded on the spot through the emotional lens of memory.

And then there was just the scale, the sense of bravado of her undertaking. "What would it be like to make a show about something so loaded as America?" she asked, laughing. "There's something hackneyed about it. 'Oh, you're going to do a show about America?' It almost sounds like a terrible idea. For an artist, that's kind of exciting. 'Oh, this could go terribly wrong? Let me give it a try!'"

Even in a state of chaos, the impact of what Daignault has created was evident. Of the 360 paintings that she made, about one-third are being displayed at Lisa Cooley, a site-specific edit that took into account the room's size—to display them all would require something like 300 linear feet of wall—and its dimensions. Daignault literally mapped her journey onto the space, each corner representing a moment when she swung a hard left to hug the country's borders.

The effect was mesmerizing, like an illustrated, depopulated Google Earth. Standing in the center of the room with my eyes unfocused, the U.S. became a band of color and light that tonally shifted from the steely grays of the Northeastern coastline to the blackish greens of the Pacific Northwestern forests to the bleached-out whites of the Southwestern desert. I moved in closer and the distinctions came into focus: weather patterns; regional wealth and poverty; the scarcity of cities; the impact of development on the land. Another step revealed details like hay silos, stone walls, livestock, fast-food chains, and empty billboards. Even closer and suddenly I was in the abstracted world of Daignault's deft, gestural brushstrokes.

Daignault walked me around the room, pointing out memories. A misty rocky seascape on the Maine coast was an accidental tribute to Edward Hopper. Down the wall, Detroit appeared in a painting of an abandoned building tagged with the word "Safe. "You don't have to look for broke-down Detroit," Daignault said. "You just drive through it." She told me a story of doing exactly that, and calling her boyfriend to report that she *didn't* feel safe. While on the phone, another car tapped her bumper, rolled over, and exploded. Its driver jumped out, shirtless, tucked a gun into his pants, and ran off.

"There are definitely places where dodgy stuff happens," Daignault said. "There are parts of the country where as an outsider you're not exactly welcome, as a woman alone." In the North Dakota section, Daignault juxtaposed molting buffalo and towers billowing with flames, markers of fracking sites. "The oil boom is crazy. It's 90 percent men. You see so many prostitutes. It's the gold rush, *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*." She camped most of the trip (there was a period where she was dragging an Airstream, but she eventually ditched it to improve her gas mileage), and would occasionally check into a motel to shower. "I was like, North Dakota will be easy. I went to the worst Days Inn in America.

In the Pacific Northwest, she had what she called a “life moment. I was sitting near the Cascades on this river, thinking, ‘Why don’t I live in a place like this?Do I have to live in New York?’ ” Like so many painters before her, she also fell hard for the desert, its beauty and its strangeness. Daignault took her trip in the springtime, and in her depiction, the Rio Grande was turquoise and wide, swollen from rain. Across it the landscape suddenly turned lush, the high desert giving way to green farmland, and then to the Deep South, honeyed sunlight filtering onto buildings through massive live oaks. Florida, Daignault told me, took forever, and was the only place where a person had to be artificially deleted from her frame. “I went to the beach. I was like, I’ve made it this far. I can’t have one person. That’s too cheesy. Like, Florida man!”

Our journey around the room ended with another shot of New York, One World Trade Center looming over the skyline. Daignault, who is from Baltimore and currently splits her time between New York and L.A. (though she tells me that her next project will take her to Alaska for an extended stay), chose to spend the six months of hard-core studio time required to complete these paintings in California, where she could work outside. At the end of the process, she packed the 360 canvases into her truck and headed back east to deliver them to her gallery. She traveled the fastest route, going through Lebanon, Kansas, the geographical midpoint of the contiguous states. Along the way, she recorded the landscape using a 35-millimeter camera. At the same time, her boyfriend, the photographer Curran Hatleberg, whom she hadn’t seen in months, drove his car from New York to L.A., recording his own journey using the same kind of film. They met for 15 minutes in Lebanon, and then both went on their way, which Daignault called romantic and heart-wrenching. “We got out of the car. It was like, ‘Hello! Surreal to see you in Kansas! Goodbye!’ ”

in the back where their project will be displayed, his film projected on the front wall, hers on the back. As the couple moved closer to Lebanon, explained Daignault, their landscapes grew more similar; as they moved farther away, they drifted apart again. “The piece is a metaphor for how we’re solitary. We’re born alone, we die alone. Even if you spend 50 years with your partner, you begin and end life without them.”

Sounds heavy? “It was fun!” insisted Daignault. “It was a long drive,” she added, glancing at Hatleberg walking by. “It was a long drive,” he echoed. Maybe so, but Daignault told me they’re itching to hit the road again as soon as her show comes down on December 20. “I guess it’s a bug that can bite you,” she said. “January 1st: It’s like, ‘Where are we going?’ ”