

The best laid schemes of mice and men / Often go awry

Erin Toale



Glyphs of a Temporal Landscape (detail), Kushala Vora, 2021

Kushala Vora's exhibition for Bird Show—*Glyphs of a Temporal Landscape*—took place August 1-15, 2021. As I write this, it is March 2022. The admittedly self-imposed urgency to finish this essay has weighed heavily on me in the interim.¹ In this six-month epoch, a light at the end of the tunnel that is this insufferable pandemic (in the form of a vaccine) has come and gone.² Yet another war has started. Babies have been born, named, and adored. Loved ones have died, elders of natural causes and contemporaries unexpectedly. I have learned that the latter scenario is monumentally more difficult for me to process. I have written a lot. I have written for money, for fun, or for no reason at all other than to get some thoughts out of the traffic jam that is my brain. Here is an incomplete list of what I have authored:

- Some marketing stuff (to keep the lights on)
- The occasional art criticism³
- Grant/residency/funding applications⁴

¹ Let the record show that the other four Bird Show essayists were given a suggested deadline of two weeks after the close of the exhibition, which they all met. What a racket!

² Remember “Hot Vax Summer”? We really thought this damn plague was about to be over (American Exceptionalism at its finest).

³ That term only loosely applies to my reviews, which are usually published in *Newcity*, because if I don't have anything nice to say, I usually don't say anything at all (not in writing anyway).

⁴ I funded the inaugural season of Bird Show with my “economic impact payment” aka stimulus check. I paid everyone (jurists, artists, writers) a modest honorarium. One of the essayists was compensated in trade with a piece of my own writing. One of the artists (Barbara) used their honorarium to commission a dance piece in response to their work. I learned a lot about circular economies. I realized that nonprofits are an integral facet of evil capitalism and that we need a new model. In the future I will pay myself for my own labor. I deserve that, and so do you.

- Letters of recommendation
- Angry correspondences I didn't send
- Angry correspondences I did send
- Lists
- Entries in a gratitude journal⁵
- Syllabi
- Love letters
- Condolence cards
- Jokes I am too afraid to tell in public⁶
- Not this essay

Every day that I write, I have looked over at the two objects Kushala gifted me at the conclusion of her exhibition. One is a thimble-sized monument consisting of a glass eye from India and what looks to be a board game piece with a golden hat affixed to a shard of glass with mounting putty. Over the course of the show, I became unreasonably attached to this assemblage. I checked on it obsessively. I was in a suspended state of concern that something would happen to it. Kushala humored my irrational favor for this little sculpture by leaving it to live with me. The other keepsake is an extruded tube of clay that looks like a flaky pastry.⁷ It is glazed iridescent green, blue, and white. I like to turn it every which way to see how it looks from different angles. It makes a very pleasing sound scraping against the wood of the shelf when I do this. Anyway, most days, I stare at these relics on the bookshelf next to my desk and think: “What do I say about you?”



Glyphs of a Temporal Landscape (details), Kushala Vora, 2021

⁵ My therapist suggested it; my psychiatrist made an alarmist note in my chart about a “feelings journal” (quotes his).

⁶ Huge laughs in the group chat, though.

⁷ “Not extruded - it’s a fossil of rolled cloth and paper covered in slip. When you turn it to its side you can see the lines like the rings inside a tree trunk. :P” Kushala Vora, editorial note on this essay, 3/23/22

Bird Show is a 5'x9' balcony which features a square stainless steel table measuring 21.5"x 21.5". There is a brick wall on the south side and railings on the north, east, and west. The site features edible and decorative plants growing in containers alongside bird baths and feeders. When I started Bird Show, I very intentionally eschewed the roles and responsibilities of curator. I was, and remain, caretaker of the project. This is in deference to the origin of the term curator: the medieval Latin word *curatus*, which means to provide care in a spiritual capacity. I was to look after the work, water the plants, and feed the artists.⁸

I put out an open call for proposals in May 2021. I was lucky to work with a wonderful team of jurors who selected the projects to be exhibited.⁹ We had five exhibitions. Every Sunday (weather permitting) between June 20th and September 22nd, I set up the webcam and live streamed the art from 1-5pm CST. We had a few virtual public programs: Jen Delos Reyes gave a talk about avian art and community care, Enid Smith danced effusively on the tiny balcony in response to Barbara Jeanne Jenkins's porcelain doves, and Kushala led a workshop predicated on the prompt "Can we see things as they are rather than what we want them to be?" For each artist, I hosted an intimate private meal in my shoebox apartment in Rogers Park. It was the first time many of us had socialized following more than a year of pandemic isolation. Those gatherings were really special.



Mark Blanchard, Kushala Vora, Alberto Aguilar, & Noodles (gallery dog) at Kushala's dinner, the theme of which was: "Found Fermented & Foraged (vegetarian)."

⁸ This was the best part. I never got to feed artists inside any white cubes.

⁹ Jen Delos Reyes, Grace Deveney, Raven Falquez Munsell, and Kate Sierzputowski

The esteemed Lynne Warren, MCA Curator emeritus, was one of my first and only IRL guests (pandemic times). She asked if she could write about the first show, Barbara Jeanne Jenkins. I was over the moon! I decided to commission an essay for each exhibition. I was surprised and a little amused when Bird Show jurist Grace Deveney (once a work spouse, always a work spouse) suggested that I might try writing about Kushala's work, to which she had taken a special shine. Grace knew that I did not normally work with installations or objects this quiet and gentle.¹⁰ I usually find myself writing about capital A Art: braggadocious Art, loud Art, funny Art, crass Art.¹¹ Kushala uses words like anthropocene, which I pretend to know the meaning of, but don't. Grace is extremely smart and perceptive. I trusted that she had her reasons for suggesting that I write about this work in particular, so I set out to the task. Step one: make a plan. A well-laid plan. I have a very specific way of doing things, and I am rather inflexible in my approach. Admittedly this is not very fun, and results are often mixed. But why did I attend art school for approximately 47 years if not to learn exactly how to go about Writing About Art?¹²

Over those next few months, I tried. Oh, how I tried! I pulled catalogs off the shelf. I revisited old texts of mine that dealt with archives, memory, and the construction of meaning. I skimmed several newer books I couldn't connect with. I interviewed Kushala at length (which usually just consisted of drinking tea and talking about how our minds worked or what seasonal vegetable we were excited to cook for dinner that night). I wrote several drafts of an overly stiff academic text railing against the #patriarchy and white supremacy. I titled it "The Violence of Order." It was full of great ideas, but none of them were mine. I tried a formal approach: describing the objects in simple art historical terms—but the challenge of summarizing them succinctly was just too great. I wrote about how one morning in the dew, the installation looked like a shipwreck. I wasn't getting anywhere. What the heck.

When my partner had C*VID over winter break and we quarantined from each other, I did a mini reading and writing residency. I kept a daily journal of thoughts and observations (as I did during the two weeks the exhibition was up)—blech, too clinical. I tried to force myself to write. I wrote on post-it notes. I scribbled in the margins of other books. I told myself I would eventually quilt it all together like Kushala does—in an intentional, narrative, and poetic way. I guilted and shamed myself. I am a F-ING WRITING TEACHER! Why the heck can't I just write a little story about some art that I lived with for two weeks?! When I started getting angry, and writing in all caps, and beating myself up for not being the Next Great American Cultural Historian or whatever—I tried to return to the feeling of calm I felt drinking tea with Kushala. I tried to remember how

¹⁰ An excerpt from Kushala's proposal: "Glyphs of a Temporal Landscape is made from curious objects collected during walks, encounters, happenings, chances and intentional mimicry. As I dig new life into my garden - objects, roots, insects reveal themselves. These found and made objects are then laid out in the form of a sentence - a line. I look for moments of tension, silence, presence - both historically and visually. The organization of the components takes the form of a dialogue. The exhibition caretaker will be invited to add to the collection from their encounters."

¹¹ Please note I am not assigning value or hierarchy to any of the types of art or Art discussed herein, simply observing my own patterns.

¹² For a rich, funny discussion of what constitutes "serious" "art", see: "Joe Brainard's Queer Seriousness, or, How to Make Fun out of the Avant-Garde" by Gavin Butt (2006)

peaceful it felt to sit in my garden with her work: in the peak of Chicago summer, watching the plants and the animals and insects come and go. Regardless of the approach, and for no lack of effort on my part, I could not finish this essay.

I am a clinically anxious person. Perhaps this is why I am drawn to work that is brash, loud, and large. It gives my mind something to use as a punching bag. Perhaps this is why Grace suggested, in her intuitive way, that I work with a person whose practice is the inversion of those things. Kushala's site-specific installations for *Glyphs of a Temporal Landscape* (an ongoing project) consist of clay sculptures and assemblages of various found and built objects that together comprise a meandering line. A workbook accompanies each iteration. For Bird Show, the cord of her intervention perambulated through planters, vines, and flower beds. It was all very subtle, beautiful, poetic, and so extremely ::whispers:: art.

When Kushala arrived with her boxes of treasures, basically floating around my apartment on a cloud of calm, I fretted over them to an embarrassing extent. Here was this meditative work that I had the honor of living with for two weeks—what a gift!—and I was the physical embodiment of anxiety. An incomplete list of unhelpful things I said during installation (paraphrased):

- I am afraid that will blow away!
- How much is that worth?! ::furrowed brow edition::
- Is this trash or art?
- What if there is another Derecho?
- What if there is another tornado?
- The dog might eat that.
- CAN THAT GET WET?



Kushala with her treasures

Kushala remained unbothered by my palpable perplexion. A few days into her exhibition, I had a complete meltdown when my apex nemesis the squirrel knocked a delicate ceramic cylinder off of the reclaimed dresser drawer planters created lovingly by local artisan Aro Farmiliant. It smashed into a bazillion pieces. EVERYTHING IS RUINED. Kushala will never forgive me. No artist will ever want to work with me again. It's ok, she texted. It's ok.

During Kushala's public program, I was so afraid of being Zoombombed that I was barely present. Kushala, as usual, remained unbothered by my mania. She gave a brief overview of her practice, and then led us through several observational exercises. It was very relaxing. Some interesting people we'd never met before participated. The discussion was fun and funny and melancholy. The whole time I wondered DOESN'T THIS PERSON EVER WORRY ABOUT WHAT COULD GO WRONG? I obsessed over this internally. I eventually asked Kushala. Sure, she said. But it will be ok. It will all be ok.

After the show closed and Kushala left me with my two souvenirs, I would regularly send panicked emails about how terribly sorry I was that the essay was taking me an eternity to write. "Here is a draft." "What do you think about this title?" "I started over again." It had been a long time since I felt so insecure in my own writing. From halfway around the world, Kushala would respond with emails like this:

(9/20/21) It makes me happy that you would like to write about the work you find hard to talk about. There might be something there :)

(10/27/21) Thanks for sharing. Please don't feel bad. Perhaps it is a good sign that it is taking you longer to write this piece. Sometimes difficult things make us take leaps within our lives - but I might be completely wrong.

In January of this year, coinciding with the nadir of my despair about finishing this damn essay, I wrote about local legend Dan Gunn's latest solo show for *Newcity*. He titled the exhibition *of the land behind them*, which is a line from John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*. "Literature! How terribly quaint!" I thought to myself (sorry, Dan! I am such a b-word!!!). Dan's work, whilst certainly capital A Art if by no other qualifier than scale, is also incredibly slow. And thoughtful. And intentional. When I visited, I found that the more turns I took around the gallery, the more my pace and brain calmed down. I felt a surge of serotonin. What was happening? At first I thought it was simply the euphoria of seeing work in person after experiencing the majority mediated via screens these past two years.¹³ There is also a type of vicarious satisfaction one experiences when one sees an artist they are rooting for make huge strides in their work. But—no, that wasn't quite it either.

¹³ Please note, the author is exercising great restraint here; as the author is very tempted to go on a tangent about Walter Benjamin's notion of "the aura", which the author loves, but will not, for reasons the author hopes the reader will soon understand. (Yes, I switch voice in the footnotes a few times, get over it.)



Paradise Scenery, Dan Gunn, 2022

I went home and re-read Steinbeck. I recalled the compulsory reading of his books in high school. I physically felt the memories in my body. Was this nostalgia? I was very confused. I skimmed *Of Mice and Men*. I reacquainted myself with Lennie Small, who I first met in 1999.¹⁴ Lennie is one of two main characters in Steinbeck's novella *Of Mice and Men*.¹⁵ He has an intellectual/developmental disability. His narrative arc is one of escalating, misguided attempts to make personal connections with things he loves. He hugs them so hard he ends up crushing them to death. It starts with bunnies and ends with... well, you can pick up a copy for yourself. He and his accomplice/caretaker George were perhaps the first literary antiheroes I felt deeply, DEEPLY conflicted about. Is this person good or bad? Is it possible to be both at once? I became very emotional revisiting this character. I still did not know why this was happening. I felt an uneasy discomfort. What I was experiencing was not the disconnected, cold, dispassionate approach to historicization that I had spent years honing. This was rapturous engagement. This was visceral. This was that-which-cannot-be-named. This was the moment I realized that I was learning how to see again.

In that moment, I realized that in my overzealous attempts to connect with art, I had become totally detached from it. I left no room for play, or spirited debate, or holding *multiple, conflicting truths at once*.¹⁶ I was suffocating art with my words and actions. I was obsessed with distilling its meaning down into an elevator pitch or a quippy punchline. I wanted to manipulate it into something small and manageable so that I could fit it neatly into a tiny box, file it away, move on,

¹⁴ Neshaminy High School, Langhorne, PA

¹⁵ This text is notoriously problematic, but the author won't go into that here.

¹⁶ Is this critical thinking? (Not a rhetorical question.)

and never think of it again.¹⁷ I realized that I related to Lennie and his bunnies because I had an almost pathological need to dominate art. To over-intellectualize it. To memorize and reiterate verbatim ideas that were not my own, but were acceptable in “The Discourse.” I realized that I had spent so long in The Academy, The Museum, The Institution—pretending to know it all—that I started to believe myself. Meanwhile, I didn’t even enjoy reading the things I was writing back to myself. Ew.

I realized that somewhere along the line, I started playing strange capitalist games instead of being critical of them. I realized that I would never win this game, and I didn’t actually want to. The rules and objectives of the game did not at all reflect my personal values and goals. Lauren Berlant writes about this double-edged-sword at length in *Cruel Optimism*, which Hua Hsu describes as “a meditation on our attachment to dreams that we know are destined to be dashed.”¹⁸ It was time to sever that attachment. It was time, too, to admit that I was complicit in enabling the Exposure Economy: a system that had exploited my personal resources—as well as the time, sanity, and optimism of both my peers and the people that reported to me—for far too long. Exposure is not currency. No one can pay their bills with compliments or clout.¹⁹

I realized that I had worked for people I found ethically and morally reprehensible. I had labored in institutions where abuse was the norm. I had written lengthy texts about things that didn’t matter to me. And between all the social posturing, the gossip, the cocktail parties, the fundraisers, the being-verbose-just-to-hit-word-count, the “have you seen?” and the “have you been?”, the quests for prestigious titles at fancy museums (where they call labels *tombstones*, did you know that?), the judging who wore what, the quoting Barthes, the posing-questions-that-were-really-self-aggrandizing-statements, and even more gossip (yes I included this twice, I was a really big gossip, ok?), I realized that I had started prioritizing things that didn’t matter to me because I was very, very afraid. I was afraid of losing things—relationships, jobs, money, social currency, *whatever*.²⁰ I told myself I did this for noble reasons. I told myself these behaviors were excusable because I was following a rule book that I didn’t write. I told myself my intentions were good.²¹

I realized that I had lost sight of what I love about art: the creativity, the beauty, the problem solving, the storytelling, the moment something takes your breath away. I had lost sight of the ability art has to make you *remember*, or evoke a feeling you haven’t felt in a long time, or make

¹⁷ As noted above, the author had very recently drafted an essay, “The Violence of Order,” in which they outlined how this is very bad!

¹⁸ “A relation of cruel optimism is a double-bind in which your attachment to an object sustains you in life at the same time as that object is actually a threat to your flourishing. So you can’t say that there are objects that have the quality of cruelty or not cruelty, it’s how you have the relationship to them... it’s not the object that’s the problem, but how we learn to be in relation.” Lauren Berlant, “On Citizenship And Optimism”, *Society + Space*

¹⁹ Please do not send emails asking me to write about your work without including a project budget detailing what you will pay and where you intend to publish. It’s really disheartening. Critical writing—i.e. what I do for *Newcity* for \$25 per byline—is never solicited.

²⁰ Reader, I did lose some of these things. It was difficult at first but ultimately for the best.

²¹ I want to emphasize that placing intent over impact when apologizing is generally a very bad and futile practice. But since this is an essay, I am explaining why I did what I did.

you cry, or make you laugh in a unique way like the person that made it understands you, sees you, has made a big beautiful monument to an inside joke that just the two of you share. I forgot about all of these intimate and ineffable things because I was holding onto a constructed and limited idea of what art SHOULD be instead of what art COULD be so very tightly.²² I was viewing art from a place of judgment instead of curiosity. I forgot what it was like to live and breathe with art, and to let it be organic. To watch it evolve, fade, grow, break, disappear, and not think of any of those transitions of physical form as a disaster or worst-case scenario.

I realized that sometimes, museums are where art goes to die. I realized I had to loosen my grip on my notion of how art should be displayed, spoken, and written about. I realized elitism benefits no one except for those already in power. I realized that humans built this world—with its racism and student debt and nine-to-fives (that actually bleed into one's every waking moment) and inequities and puzzling hatred of knowledge—and that we could build another, more equitable one. I realized that no one else was going to do this for us. I realized that *We Keep Us Safe*. I realized that being an abolitionist meant that I believed harmful systems within the art world needed to be abolished too.

I realized that I had become a grotesque caricature of what I had originally set out to be. I was a shell of the 90s kid who thought paintings, books, music, puppets, costumes, murals, dance, theater, etc. were the coolest things about being alive and couldn't understand why anyone would dedicate their life to anything else. I thought about what that open-minded, idealistic youth would think about the bitter person I was becoming. Someone who spent a lot of time complaining, regurgitating the ideas of Dead White Guys (DWGs), and trying to impress people who they didn't respect. Suddenly it all sounded so terribly boring. I often tell my students: "Don't be so afraid of saying the wrong thing that you don't say anything at all."²³ And here I was, doing exactly that. My scope had gotten so small. I was looking down at my feet and not up at the sky (shoutout Stephen Hawking). One of the ways I justified this was a fear of being embarrassed or admonished for stepping out of line—but what is more embarrassing than living an inauthentic life?²⁴

²² "Relationships - of all kinds - are like sand held in your hand. Held loosely, with an open hand, the sand remains where it is. The minute you close your hand and squeeze tightly to hold on, the sand trickles through your fingers. You may hold onto it, but most will be spilled. A relationship is like that. Held loosely, with respect and freedom for the other person, it is likely to remain intact. But hold too tightly, too possessively, and the relationship slips away and is lost." Kaleel Jamison, *The Nibble Theory and the Kernel of Power*

²³ This deserves a much larger conversation about group agreements and accountability in anti-racist spaces than I will delve into in this text. I acknowledge that I have said the wrong thing many times, and I apologize for the hurt and harm that I have caused. I am grateful for community members that have called me in with love: helping me learn from my mistakes and grow. The writings of adrienne maree brown on this topic have also been invaluable.

²⁴ I always think about this scene from *Papillon* (1973):
Judge in Dream: "I accuse YOU... of a WASTED LIFE!"
Papillon (played by Steve McQueen): "Guilty... guilty... guilty..."

I realized that this is why I was afraid of Kushala's work. I was afraid to let oxygen into the room.²⁵ I was afraid to admit that there were a lot of things I didn't understand. I was afraid to think for myself—did I even remember how? I was/am afraid to admit that sometimes I was/am really scared. I was afraid to admit that I knew in my heart that all our best laid plans could not save us now. That I could not Chicago Manual of Style or John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* my way out of this conundrum. That I owed it to my community to do more than passively write glorified book reports quoting a bunch of DWGs while pointing out that one object looked similar to another object that a *different* DWG had made. I realized that all of the cynicism and arrogance detailed above notwithstanding, I could be new again. But in order to do that, I had to loosen my grip. I had to re-learn how to write: but with ease, as opposed to force. I had to stop squeezing the bunnies. I was killing them. I had to abandon the plan. It no longer worked. It hadn't for a long time.



Glyphs of a Temporal Landscape (detail), Kushala Vora, 2021

I really don't like change.²⁶ Bird Show was like nothing I had ever done before, and it involved a lot of unfamiliar scenarios. It was also fun and scary and sexy and dangerous! On a daily basis, it challenged me to leave my "comfort zone" and enter "the growth/change zone." This also involved a fair amount of regression, and rapid journeys through the whole caterpillar-to-butterfly cycle ad infinitum.

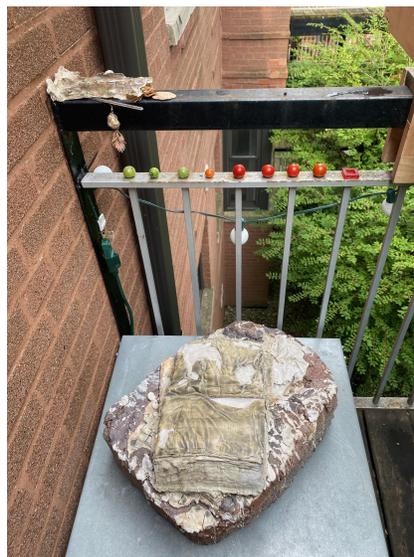
²⁵ The author realizes this is a very curious thing for the founder of an outdoor gallery to say. The author is learning.

²⁶ Taurus sun, Aquarius moon, Leo rising.

Concurrent with the evolution of this essay, I have been experiencing a season of change in my personal life. I conveniently left this information out of my introduction because I Wasn't Ready To Talk About It! But now that we have journeyed through my dark night of the soul together, I will share that between August 2021 and now: I got married; I bought a house; I had a Big Medical Scare that is yet-to-be-resolved and involves-my-heart-and-brain so I hope the reader will excuse my sentimentality as I address my Chicago creative comrades-in-arts at large.

Over these past six months, I have thought a lot about how I am so, so proud of us. My friend Gabriel Chalfin-Piney often says, in many different contexts and to no one in particular and everyone in the universe simultaneously: "I love you, keep going." I can't believe we all persevered through the hell that has been these past two years. I can't believe we are still going! Thank you to everyone who has encouraged me to rest, to breathe, and to make sure my cup is full before I pour from it. I feel so lucky that this is my life, and that this is how I get to spend my days: thinking and writing and making and arguing and crying and laughing and failing and storming off and stewing and resting and coming back and picking up the pieces and starting all over again. And get to do it with all of you.²⁷ Let's keep lifting each other up any way we can, ok? If you are in awe of someone, tell them. Speak their name and laud their projects in rooms and conversations they are not in. And—let's celebrate loudly and often the contributions of those that left us too soon. As Dana DeGiulio says of the dearly departed artist and organizer Gregory Bae (1986-2021), "let the stories get told and told."

Thank you, Kushala. This probably wasn't the essay you were expecting, and I hope you are not disappointed. I was lost when we met, and your work helped me find my way again. What a precious gift.



Glyphs of a Temporal Landscape (detail), Kushala Vora, 2021

²⁷ My friend Matt Morris (stellar at writing and most other things) is always better at articulating the emotional depth, breath, and significance of these relationships. I left a weepy voicemail telling them as much just now.

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To everyone else: I love you, keep going.

²⁸ The author acknowledges that this is extremely corny, but argues for inclusion as garden metaphors make us laugh, and, as argued throughout this essay, one must avoid taking oneself too seriously.