The Terrifying and the Beautiful: An Ecocritical Approach to Alexandre Hogue's Erosion Series

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The Terrifying and the Beautiful: An Ecocritical Approach to

Alexandre Hogue’s *Erosion Series*

Ann K. Hartvigsen

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

The Terrifying and the Beautiful: An Ecocritical Approach to Alexandre Hogue’s Erosion Series

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This thesis explores the work of Texan painter Alexandre Hogue, and specifically how his 1930s Erosion Series, paintings of wind-ravaged farms during the Dust Bowl, promotes environmental attitudes long before America had a well developed ecological language. It analyzes the Erosion Series in the context of Hogue’s personal land ethics and those of his artistic contemporaries, showing that the 1930s series strives to depict the devastation caused by both drought and aggressive farming practices. A comparison of Hogue’s work to Regionalist artists like Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood reveals that Regionalists’ depictions of land during the 1930s created an unrealistic portrayal of American farms with eternal abundance. In contrast, Hogue’s series explores man’s relationship to land and shows how that relationship is often destructive rather than constructive. In many ways, Hogue’s work is much more in line with works by FSA photographers and filmmakers who, similar to Hogue, imaged more realistic depictions of Midwestern farms at the time. Ultimately, this thesis asserts that paintings, and the fine arts in general, are an important step to a more environmentally minded future—a future Alexandre Hogue sought to promote through nine ecologically charged works.

Key Words: Alexandre Hogue, Ecocriticism, Environmental Humanities, Farm Security Administration, Dust Bowl, Regionalism
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Introduction

Alexandre Hogue (1898-1994)—a painter who depicted wind-carved dunes and desolated landscapes—remains an artist difficult to pinpoint stylistically. Though categorization of his works ranges from Realism to Regionalism to Surrealism and back, land has almost always been a preeminent theme in his work. His focus on what is now termed “land ethics” defines what Hogue entitled the Erosion Series, in which he explores man’s relationship to land and shows how that relationship is often destructive rather than constructive. Alexandre Hogue first started his Erosion Series in 1932, when Midwestern states were just beginning to see the detrimental side effects of repeated seasons of drought. He set out to create paintings that showcased the land affected by either wind or water erosion.¹

According to Hogue, after witnessing a horrific black blizzard when he drove across the Texas panhandle, he was compelled to paint the “terrifying beauty” of what he witnessed that day.² His series includes nine works: Red Canyon Earth, 1932 (fig. 1); Dust Bowl, 1933 (fig. 2); Drouth Survivors, 1933 (fig. 3); Drouth Stricken Area, 1934 (fig. 4); Dust Bowl, n/d (fig. 5); Mother Earth Laid Bare, 1936 (fig. 6); The Crucified Land, 1939 (fig. 7); Avalanche by Wind, 1944 (fig. 8); and Soil and Subsoil, 1946 (fig. 9). In his series as a whole, Hogue does not merely depict the barrenness of the wind-ravaged region, but unlike the majority of his artistic contemporaries, he actively implicates humans as part of the problem. For example, in Drouth Stricken Area, he depicts a wind-eroded land with a starving, emaciated cow searching for water

² Alexandre Hogue, “The Making of an Artist, Autobiography of Alexandre Hogue,” Hogue Archives, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa, 1945, 11-12.
and a vulture waiting for the livestock’s impending demise. The farm appears abandoned by the humans who once cared for it. In this image, Hogue exposes the ruin humans can cause when they exploit the land.

It is not hard for a twenty-first-century audience to incriminate mankind as irresponsible stewards of the earth and its natural resources; Hogue’s work might even seem didactic to contemporary viewers. Yet in the 1930s, suggestions that man deserved part of the blame in the ecological disasters of the time were as unsettling as they were radical: environmentalism was as yet a sensitivity unknown to most Americans. Also, at that time painting was not the usual vehicle for environmental proponents. Looking at Hogue’s *Erosion Series* through an ecological lens yields ideas not appreciated or generally even recognized in his day, especially when his work is juxtaposed against that of his artistic contemporaries. Perhaps the most insightful comparison comes as Hogue is set alongside the Regionalists, artists like Thomas Hart Benton, Grant Wood, and John Steuart Curry. Another comparison that yields insights about Hogue’s work sets him alongside more similar-minded image makers, like the Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographers and filmmakers hired to show the devastation of Midwestern farms during the Dust Bowl years. Yet, though Hogue had a similar agenda to FSA filmmakers and photographers, he depicted the devastation in a more subjective medium, that of painting. Like the Regionalists, Hogue depicted images of a part of rural America he intimately knew, and like the FSA photographers, he chose to depict those Dust Bowl regions with a raw and realistic attitude.

However, identifying Hogue exclusively within either of these categories is too simplistic. Hogue does not neatly fit the role of Regionalist, nor is he merely a painter with a few environmentally charged depictions. As viewers compare Hogue to his artist contemporaries,
they begin to understand Hogue’s distinctive position as he stands out with his own style and artistic motivation. His agenda illuminates man-centered American land attitudes that culminated in the Dust Bowl and encourages ecologically responsible land ethics long before environmentalism dominated the sociological, political, and artistic dialogue. This thesis analyzes Alexandre Hogue’s *Erosion Series* in the context of his personal land ethics and those of his artistic contemporaries, showing that Hogue’s 1930s series strives to depict the devastation caused by drought and aggressive farming practices. By implicating human involvement in creating ecological turmoil, Hogue ultimately promotes the place of ecology in the arts.

Years after a sensitivity to environmentalism began to inform cultural attitudes in the early 1960s, an attendant awareness in scholarship gave rise to Ecocriticism, creating environmental dialogues in a new theoretical language. Ecocriticism’s first footholds were in the literary world in the early 1990s, with many disciplines subsequently adopting and refining this ecocritical lens. As Ecocriticism fused environmental history with the humanities, it became a new theoretical language to analyze the arts. Yet art history has only recently started to implement more ecocritical approaches in analysis. In 2009, the first comprehensive collection of ecocritical art history essays was compiled in *A Keener Perspective: Ecocritical Studies in American Art History*. Ecocriticism illuminates discussions of Hogue, Regionalists, photographers, and filmmakers in the 1930s as ecocritics evaluate man’s relationship with the land to reveal prevalent (and often changing) human attitudes toward nature. Ecocritics identify many people’s belief that they are the wielders of discourse and that technology can make humans independent from, or even in charge of, the earth. The Dust Bowl was a time that clearly

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refuted the ideas that man could conquer and control adverse environmental situations, and the art of Alexandre Hogue convincingly shows that man’s seeming apathy toward the well being of the earth created catastrophic consequences.

In addition, Ecocriticism provides a theoretical approach to explore the depth of Hogue’s art. Other scholarship has pointed out Hogue’s environmental proclivities; inevitably, scholars who look at Hogue’s work immediately see his connections to land. However, they never fully credit the unique position Hogue holds. Rather, his work is often labeled as environmentally influenced rather than profoundly informed by ecological attitudes that ultimately seek action and reform. Hogue deserves more critical attention because of the distinctive message he asserts. Overlooking Hogue results in omitting some of the first American environmental art from the established canon, an error this thesis strives to correct.

Hogue did catch the interest of some in the American art world in the 1980s. This consideration stemmed from a rekindled interest in Regionalism as a whole, and Hogue, treated as a Regionalist, received some attention. Also, Texas was preparing for its sesquicentennial celebration in 1986, making exhibitions of Hogue’s work popular at this time. But from then until the present, the research has been sparse, and definitive Hogue scholarship can be reduced to a few notable examples, including Lea Rosson DeLong’s publication that coincided with a 1984 exhibition of Hogue’s work. In her book, *Nature’s Forms/ Nature’s Forces: The Art of Alexandre Hogue*, DeLong takes a social historical look at Hogue’s background and experiences that intimately connect him and his images to the land. However, DeLong’s main goal was

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4 The majority of Hogue’s oeuvre uses land as its subject. Before his 1930s work, Hogue painted beautiful images of Taos, and after the thirties he continued to paint landscapes. However, in the 50s and 60s, Hogue’s work became very abstract and geometric. By the 70s he returned to painting landscapes, a theme that remained until his death in 1994.
legitimizing Hogue as an artist worthy of study, and though this was a crucial step in Hogue scholarship, DeLong did not focus on Hogue’s work as the environmental declaration that it is. While DeLong involves the Regionalists in her discussion, merely pointing out how the Regionalists and Hogue coincide isn’t enough. Regionalists must be juxtaposed with Hogue, ultimately revealing how subversive the Regionalist agenda appears. And though DeLong also utilizes some FSA photographs, they merely serve as historical documentation and not as art that further clarifies Hogue’s individual environmental position.

Almost thirty years later, Susie Kalil highlights more of Hogue’s environmental agenda in her publication that accompanied an exhibition of his art that travelled in 2014: Alexander Hogue: An American Visionary. Kalil writes biographically, punctuating pivotal times in Hogue’s life through his paintings and drawings. She dedicates an entire chapter to the Erosion Series and helpfully categorizes and situates it within the context of Hogue’s entire body of work. Taking a more intense look at Hogue’s ecological agenda than DeLong did, Kalil emphasizes the Erosion Series’s priority to implicate human involvement in the damage caused to Dust Bowl regions. Yet she never acknowledges the potential Hogue’s series has to effect environmental change on a larger level.

Hogue’s environmental proclivities are better highlighted in Mark White’s 2009 essay, “Alexandre Hogue’s Passion,” appearing in A Keener Perspective. His analysis begins to establish Hogue’s place within the field of ecocritical art history. However, White limits his analysis mainly to Hogue’s 1939 painting The Crucified Land, claiming Hogue’s land attitudes were based in spiritual roots. To date, analysis of the uniqueness of Hogue’s entire Erosion Series, especially in comparison to Regionalists and FSA photographers and filmmakers also creating works in the 1930s, has not been done.
Hogue campaigned to initiate environmental awareness in people who viewed his works. Today his art transcends traditional labels and provides rich content that requires the context of many artistic disciplines to understand. He sought to be a voice for environmental change by trying to connect viewers to nature through painting. He championed the land by making people aware of the devastation caused to it. Even though Hogue’s impact on land attitudes in his own day was not widespread, looking at his work through an ecocritical lens today gives added merit to his work because such analysis can help in a larger effort to change ecological attitudes through the power of the arts. As the contemporary world faces growing problems concerning disappearing species and evaporating resources, new ways to effect environmental change become an increasingly important discussion. Hogue’s work serves as a pattern for one of those new ways, illuminating historical land attitudes as well as setting forth new solutions for reform. Hogue’s hope was to utilize America’s visual culture to raise awareness of human impact on the land in order to seek more responsible land interactions.

**Shaping an Artist: Hogue’s Early Years**

Hogue’s work has always been inseparably connected to his profound feeling for land, and the foundation for this ecologically minded series was likely Hogue’s own family background in Texas. From the time he was young, his mother instilled in him a respect for the land. Hogue remembered his early years in Texas when his mother, Mattie Hoover Hogue, worked the soil in their garden, while talking to young Hogue about “‘Mother Earth,’ the fertile

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force lying just beneath the surface.” Just as Hogue’s mother cultivated awareness of the life of
the earth, years Hogue spent with his sister on her ranch near Dalhart, Texas, also shaped his
attitudes. Dalhart is located in the Texas panhandle, and Hogue grew attached to the rich
grassland plains. The Texas that Hogue loved later became the site of some of the worst
devastation seen in the grasslands during the 1930s, and when the Texas panhandle of Hogue’s
youth became ravaged by ecological disaster, he had a strong emotional and artistic reaction to it.
Hogue went to work imaging and re-imaging the land that he loved, capturing the devastations
taking place during this bleak time in American history. Though specific farms and regions have
not been identified in his work, Hogue’s inspiration was first ignited during that tumultuous
“terrifying” drive from Dalhart to Hartley in the western-most corner of the Texas panhandle.
The majority of his subjects in the Erosion Series were this area that he knew intimately from his
adolescence.

In the mid 1920s, Hogue, like many young American artists of his time, travelled east to
work in New York for exposure to a more robust art scene and more opportunities to make
money drawing for magazines. However, unlike many of his contemporaries, Hogue never
illustrated magazines because he feared illustration might affect his own artistic sense; instead,
he studied calligraphy and did lettering for advertising agencies. He explained that he thought
calligraphy would “sensitize him to abstract form,” adding, “I chose [lettering for magazines]…
because it would not injure the viewpoint of a painter, such as has happened over and over to

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6 Lea Rosson DeLong, Nature’s Forms/ Natures Forces: The Art of Alexandre Hogue (Tulsa,
7 There is one exception to Hogue’s Erosion Series entirely depicting Texas. Red Earth Canyon
(1932), Hogue’s first Erosion painting, is believed to depict an Oklahoma landscape that he most
likely encountered travelling to and from New York City. Kalil, 65.
8 DeLong, 7.
artists who have gone into illustration for the same reason: to pay their way. They get the taint of
the illustrator’s viewpoint, and they can’t get rid of it in their painting.”\(^9\) Hogue’s dedication to
maintaining his own style and heightening his sense of abstract form accentuates that, both in
style and in subject matter, he strove to depict a new kind of art.

However, New York was never Hogue’s ultimate goal; he was there to get a grasp on
knowledge of the current trends of art, but really his work in the city was just a paycheck,
providing a means to return home to Texas in the summers to paint. Hogue cherished those
summers away from the city, the only season in which he would paint during those New York
years. He had a great sense of loyalty to and love for Texas, and when he left New York for the
last time, he was never inclined to go back.\(^10\) As Matthew Baigell explains, Hogue grew up in an
age when “artists in all fields were discovering America and trying to develop styles as well as
themes that might represent the entire nation and its individual sections.”\(^11\) Increasingly, artists
like Hogue looked to “environmental sources” for inspiration rather than “abstract aesthetic
systems” like those of the modernists tied to the city.\(^12\) In a nationalistic spirit, works from
artists’ personal worlds began to be valued, and the individual section Hogue advocated was his
beloved Texas.

In addition to his childhood upbringing and his formal training in New York, there is
another integral part of Hogue’s life leading up to the *Erosion Series* that becomes a fundamental
component of Hogue’s ecologically charged art. Though Hogue retained a deep admiration for
Texas, he also cherished time spent in Taos, New Mexico, an area of the West where many

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9 Hogue qtd. in DeLong, 8.
10 DeLong, 8.
11 Baigell qtd. in DeLong, 3.
12 Baigell qtd. in DeLong, 3.
Eastern artists painted. Artists and writers loved Taos for its vast clear skies, vibrant desert colors, and native Pueblo population. In fact, Taos had a well-established art colony with like-minded artists seeking to live close to the land away from urbanization and all that went with it. For those who visited and stayed in Taos, including Hogue, the Pueblo peoples embodied a simpler life with better values and a keener sense of self and surroundings. American studies professor Lois Palken Rudnick explains, “The Pueblos people’s lack of interest in material wealth, their devotion to communal values, their healthy respect for human limitations, and their adaptation to rather than exploitation of the natural environment are presented as sane counterparts to a chaotic white civilization that is heading for self-annihilation.”

Hogue visited Taos many times in the years leading up to the Dust Bowl. While there, he especially loved the reverence and spiritual connection that Pueblo people felt with the land. Hogue clung to this reverence, suggesting that the “strength of the Indian character rested in its closeness to nature.” In a 1927 article for the *Dallas Times Herald*, Hogue declared, “There are very few activities on the part of the Indian which do not have something to do with the worship of their own god of nature.” Similar to what Hogue’s mother taught him, Pueblos reaffirmed ideas of a “mother earth.” He notes that according to Pueblo beliefs, “earth mother is pregnant just before the sprouting in the spring.” Pueblo respect for land is so deep that there is even a period of time when no metal can pierce the earth. Hogue was more than merely intrigued by

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14 DeLong, 13.
17 Ibid.
how Native Americans let the land influence their culture; he also actively sought to incorporate those attitudes into his own art. Taos influences also are clear in his *Erosion Series*. From childhood into adulthood, Hogue’s life helped him develop his great desire to cultivate his art in the context of his deep sense of respect and love for the land from which he came. His mother and the Pueblos taught him about a Mother Earth lying beneath the soil, and New York provoked a deeper sense of respect and longing for his native state. Then, ultimately, living and painting in Taos solidified Hogue’s profound reverence for the land. With Hogue’s background in mind, his *Erosion Series* becomes a natural and congruous next step for his goals as an ecologically minded artist.

**American Land Attitudes**

Even if environmentalism was not a prevailing attitude among Americans of the 1930s, Americans’ focus on land has been woven into the very foundation of the country. This fundamental and enduring center of American life also shaped the work of Hogue as well as of other Regionalists, FSA photographers, and 1930s filmmakers. While Regionalists promoted the narrative that the idea of America is synonymous with endless land and endless resources, Hogue and FSA photographers and filmmakers revealed the errors of such a myopic environmental outlook. Yet land attitudes from the earliest days of American settlement to the twentieth century led to the complexity of perceptions about land in the 1930s.

Consider, for example, the push to move west and tame the land, which infiltrated the very roots of American ideologies. Especially shaped by the beliefs of Thomas Jefferson, America has been in the business of expansion from the moment it stopped being restrained by
British colonial policies.\textsuperscript{18} As environmental history scholar Benjamin Kline puts it, “The Frontier held the promise of renewal, betterment, and the freedom to throw off the shackles of established society.”\textsuperscript{19} The frontier meant the promise of a better start for those seeking to improve their situation, and many poorer Americans, especially new immigrants, saw the potential for a better life through independent agrarian effort. New land meant new freedom.

In addition, the push to move west was defined as America’s “Manifest Destiny,” referring to an American attitude that citizens had a right and were destined to stretch their civilization from coast to coast. Americans saw moving west as not just an individually advantageous move, but also a way for Americans to spread their culture across the country. From the 1840s into the twentieth century, such attitudes propelled thousands to continue pushing west.\textsuperscript{20} Donald Worster, one of the founders of environmental history and a leading scholar on the Dust Bowl, relates this expansionist ideal specifically to the Midwest, a region important to both Hogue and the Regionalists. He explains that “the plains have had their place in American dreams, back when the West was new and the grasslands offered unexplored possibilities.”\textsuperscript{21}

That was it: land meant new possibilities, and tapping into its resources meant an abundant and purposeful future, an attitude that dominated American thought up until the 1930s—but not without consequence. Even before the 1900s, Americans began to see the ill effects of treating the land as an endless resource. Buffalo hunting in the early 1800s for food,

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} Kline, 30.
luxury goods, and sport began to threaten the survival of Native American societies by the 1860s. Soon decimated herds in Midwestern regions also meant a lack of food for wagon trains and new settlers.22

Yet even seeing first hand that sapping resources had consequences, new settlers were undeterred in their expansion. The land’s promise for economic prosperity was just too tempting. Worster, delineating the selfish land attitudes leading up to and prevailing during the Dust Bowl, describes how, in addition to people’s desire to perpetuate the American ideal of westward movement, capitalism was an influential factor in pushing west and cultivating the land. He states that capitalism “has been the decisive factor in this nation’s use of nature,”23 and the tenets of capitalism always impact attitudes toward nature. Worster further explains, “Nature must be seen as capital,” and “Man has a right, even an obligation, to use this capital for constant self-advancement.”24 This was certainly true in the years leading up to the Dust Bowl. Because of WWI and the inflation it produced, wheat prices almost doubled in 1917 and stayed that high into the 1920s.25 The war also initiated a land boom in the 1920s, and caused a 69 percent increase in cultivation in Hogue’s native region of North Texas between 1924 and 1929.26 Farmers moved to the Midwestern plains to reap the benefits of a solid market. They plowed up vast grasslands to plant massive wheat fields. Similarly, the demand for wheat resulted in

22 Kline, 34.
23 Worster, 5.
24 Ibid., 6.
25 Woodrow Wilson even implemented rationing days in the U.S. to support the war effort. The more food produced and conserved on the home front meant more food for troops and Europeans, whose food production had been disrupted by war. The United States Food Administration implemented the “Food Will Win the War” campaign, and Wednesdays became known as “Wheatless Wednesdays.” Official Bulletin, President’s Proclamation Calling Upon People of Associates in the War, vol. 2, Monday, January 28, 1918.
26 Mark White, 175.
farmers’ planting the same crop every season, the monoculture planting year after year soon
leaching the soil of all its nutrients. The grass no longer held the earth stable, and aggressive
farming exhausted the soil, consequently damaging it beyond the possibility of a quick revival.

Until the 1930s, endless land as endless capital seemed to be an uncontested American
maxim, an attitude passed down for generations: America is a land of promise, a place where all
people can be their own masters and possess a piece of land to make a solid living. For
Americans, there seemed to be stability in working the rich and plentiful land. But after the
prosperous patterns of the past, the 1930s proved challenging for a myriad of reasons—dust
storms, the market crash, threat of war, unstable world politics. Specifically, the idea of stability
and prosperity in property came under scrutiny as many Midwest farmers lost their land and their
hope to the Dust Bowl. Every American was affected in some way by the Dust Bowl’s ravaging
effects. In response, American artists of the 1930s sought to make sense of the devastation
through their art. Hogue was one such artist as he centered an entire body of work on the Texas
landscape during the worst years of the Dust Bowl.

_Erosion Series_

Of the nine works in Hogue’s _Erosion Series_, seven were created in the 1930s, during the
Depression and Dust Bowl years.²⁷ The Dust Bowl began in the Great Plains as farmers in the
twenties blazed across the continent planting and farming with aggressive energy. By the spring
and summer of 1930 there was very little rainfall over much of the eastern United States, and in
twelve states the drought set record lows in precipitation.²⁸ As the decade continued, lack of
precipitation threatened a great part of the nation, and the center of the drought shifted to the

²⁷Two other works are often included in Hogue’s _Erosion Series: Avalanche by Wind_ (1944),
University Museum of Art, and _Soil and Subsoil_ (1946), Oklahoma City Museum of Art.
²⁸ Worster, 11.
Midwest. Beginning in 1931, farmers in the Great Plains "watched the scorched earth crack open" and to this day it is sometimes referred to as the greatest ecological disaster America has ever known.\(^{29}\) The most affected states included Oklahoma, Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico, and Hogue’s own Texas. As Worster explains, “In no other instance was there greater or more sustained damage to the American land. . . . Not even the Depression was more devastating, economically. In ecological terms we have nothing in the nation's past, nothing even in the polluted present, that compares.”\(^{30}\) As an artist intimately acquainted with the tragedy of the disaster, Hogue sought through his *Erosion Series* to bring the experience of the Dust Bowl to the viewer. In reference to his *Erosion Series*, he lamented, “I watched the whole works with my own dust-filled eyes.”\(^{31}\) He even recounted one time when he drove in such a bad storm that his Model-T Ford was so sand blasted that the “paint surfaces of the car felt like rough sandpaper.”\(^{32}\)

Living in Texas during the 1930s and witnessing the devastation with his own eyes, Hogue created his drought-stricken images from first-hand experience.

Seeking to acquaint his Texas audience with his environmental artistic agenda, Hogue published written expressions of his ideas about his art and the land. In both the *Dallas Times Herald* and the *Southwest Review*, Hogue wrote his artistic philosophy. He explained, “I consider[ed] this subject beautiful in a terrifying way. I’ve always been interested in that kind of beauty—things that scare you to death but still you’ve got to look at them.”\(^{33}\) A few years later, Hogue was even featured in a *Life* magazine article, in which he talks about how “suitcase farmers” were the catalyst to the devastation. A section in the first paragraph of the article reads,

\(^{29}\) Qtd. in Worster, 4, 11.

\(^{30}\) Worster, 24.

\(^{31}\) Qtd. in DeLong, 19.


\(^{33}\) Qtd. in DeLong, 19.
Hogue “watched ‘suitcase’ farmers pour into ‘the finest grazing lands, plow up grass roots where plow had never broken land before, plant wheat and corn for the lucrative boom market. Many a time he heard old ranchers say: ‘If you plow up this land, it will blow away.’” Hogue blamed aggressive farming practices for the Dust Bowl and helped audiences see his drought-ravaged Texas with keener eyes. In *Drouth Survivors* (1933) (fig. 3), for example, viewers are confronted with an uncomfortable scene. Two dead cows lie contorted in the foreground—one half buried in a barren, sand colored dune. However, viewers also see the beautiful textured striations of the sandy hill, relentlessly carved out by the wind and meticulously rendered. *Drouth Survivors* demonstrates Hogue’s explanation of subject matter that “scare[s] you to death, but still you’ve got to look at [it].” Through Hogue’s artistry, viewers are pulled in by the beautiful lines he depicts, and once captivated, dealt a strong message of a land ravaged by wind and drought.

Hogue’s series explores the reality of the Dust Bowl in two meaningful categories: images that simply and profoundly depict the hardship and devastation experienced by the earth and images that blatantly reveal the hand that humans have played in mistreating the Midwest. In one of his earliest Dust Bowl works from 1933, titled *Dust Bowl* (fig. 2), Hogue depicts the first category, an utterly drought devastated landscape. The dry, brown soil supports nothing but some lifeless, scraggily bushes and a dilapidated barbed wire fence—a symbol of the Old West. The curling, broken wire of the fence snakes in the sand, mimicking the spiny curves of some of the small bushes and reiterating the lifeless nature of the painting. However, though useless in the painting, barbed wire was once the cheapest and best way of facilitating expansion for farmers

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and ranchers.\textsuperscript{35} When barbed wire was introduced in 1870, many ranchers, some of the largest numbers from Texas, spent thousands of dollars on sectioning off their lands. The fence became a literal and visual representation of farmers’ seeming domination over land. This fencing served as a symbol for farmers’ staking their claims on the land, demonstrating superiority and a sense of ownership. Yet in Hogue’s painting, the fence sits sagging and broken. Hogue reduces what once represented man’s dominion and power to a drooping, scraggily wire, further reminding viewers that ultimately man can make no permanent claims on nature.

Hogue’s image is not completely devoid of life. He also includes small footprints in the dunes, starting in the center foreground and exiting the frame of the image to the left, further reinforcing the lonely lifelessness of the image. A break in the fencing frames a small farm in the distance, which at first glance looks bathed in a warm-toned sunset, but is rather, on further inspection, about to be swallowed by a huge impending dust storm. The concave shape of the dust cloud looks like a gaping reddish-brown mouth, waiting to swallow the sun whole, and with it, light and hope. Some of these dust storms, called "black blizzards," had dust walls as high as seven to eight thousand feet, and in \textit{Dust Bowl}, Hogue’s dark blizzard turbulently begins to take up the whole sky. Though Hogue does not directly implicate humans in this work, he successfully captures the horrors of the Dust Bowl and the drought devastated landscapes.

Another of Hogue’s images showing the hardships the land incurred is a lesser known untitled work (fig. 5), sometimes also referred to as \textit{Dust Bowl}. In this small work, Hogue paints large sweeping dunes that completely envelope half of a homestead. In the foreground, a fence pokes up along a sand ridge. Dust Bowl scholar Donald Worster could have been discussing this

image when he described the scene of the Midwest in the Dust Bowl years: “The fences piled high with tumbleweeds and drifted over with dirt, looked like giant backbones of ancient reptiles.” The log in the foreground looks skull-like, as if this fence and dead log represent an ancient extinct reptile. Here viewers can discern Hogue’s inclusion of themes of extinction in his images.

Yet while Hogue was at the forefront of championing the land during 1930s, he was not the only painter depicting Dust Bowl scenes. More than twenty-six states saw severe drought in the thirties, and over ten states experienced dust storms. With such numbers, there were, of course, other artists seeking to make sense of the hardships through painting, yet they never seemed to highlight or acknowledge humanity’s contribution to the ecological turmoil. Artists like Jerry Bywaters, a fellow member of the “Dallas Nine,” and Joe Jones painted scenes of desolate farm country that had suffered in the Dust Bowl, but they never implicate humans for irresponsible farming practices and sometimes even imbue a small sense of hope for the future. For example, Joe Jones’ *Our American Farms* (1936) (fig. 10) depicts a small farmhouse, shed, and windmill perched precariously on top of heavily eroded soil. The soil consists of etched out curves looking very soft and human-like, Jones painting deep contours that suggest the drought and wind that barraged the farm. Yet there is an aspect to Jones’ work, and other artists imaging the Dust Bowl for that matter, not seen in Hogue’s paintings like *Dust Bowl* or *Drought Survivors*—a sense of hope. Jones refrains from depicting dead livestock or another dust storm on the horizon; instead, he paints warm yellow sunlight peeking around a fluffy cloud set against a blue sky. The sun even spotlights part of the earth, and it is inching its way ever closer to the

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36 Ibid., 29.
37 The “Dallas Nine” was a group of painters, sculptors, and printmakers active in the Dallas area in the 1930s and 40s. Bywaters and Hogue were both participating members of the Dallas Nine.
summit, about to rest on the helpless little farm. Jones effectively uses light to suggest that the land is on its way to recuperation and brighter times. Artists like Jones also underscore the unique position Hogue holds among his contemporaries, reinforcing the Erosion Series as a singular body of work that seeks to give voice to the land.

Jones was not the only artist incorporating hope rather than human culpability in his works. Other artists similarly focused on depicting hope, even omitting the Dust Bowl as subject matter. Contrasting Hogue’s work to his other contemporaries, the Regionalists, most clearly emphasizes Hogue’s intent in his Erosion Series to implicate humans for creating the devastation of wind-blown lands. Hogue gives voice to the land by showing it as the victim of human dominance, pride, and negligence.

**The Ideal Versus the Real in Landscape**

Hogue was one the first American painters to address the idea of negative human impact on land through his work, and while Hogue chose painting to depict the ruined farmland and wasted Texan grasslands, he was not the only artist trying to make sense of the Dust Bowl by depicting rural American farmlands. Regionalists, such as Thomas Hart Benton, John Steuart Curry, and Grant Wood, were also portraying the American land in the 1930s. Yet in contrast, Benton, Curry, and Wood sought to deal with the hardships of the thirties by clinging to an image of the past—an image of better days that fulfilled the American dream of stability through land. Studying Hogue’s Erosion Series in light of other Regionalist artists, who have become the dominant paradigm in thinking about painting of this time, illuminates not only images that give voice to a devastated land of the 1930s Midwest, but also explains deeper rooted American attitudes of ownership and abuse of the land. By setting Hogue’s series next to the 1930s work of the Regionalists, and with a more fully developed theoretical language for ecology, the
ideologies created from images of land in the 1930s are revealed as complex combinations of faith and hopelessness, of innocence and culpability, of manipulation and stewardship.

The artistic dichotomy between Hogue and his fellow Regional artists springs in part from the historical framework of their artwork. After the First World War, America saw Europe’s foundation as shaky and began to look inward for stability. The search for a uniquely American identity soon led to the search for a uniquely American art. Thomas Craven, a prolific American author and critic of the 1930s, was the first to publicly call for this distinct art.38 Scholar Matthew Baigell eloquently refers to this exploration of American art as the “American Wave.” He articulates that the American Wave reflects a movement of looking forward to a production of art that would “cast off European styles in the search for an American one.” Craven’s ideas become especially important as they provide insight into the mentality that governed American artists who strayed away from the modernists and artistic hothouses like New York City—Regionalists and Hogue alike.39

Artists of the time set out to determine the prototypical subject matter for this new art. There are many directions they could have gone. For example, a place is often distinguished by its regional geography and by its population, and a large part of American culture could certainly

38 Thomas Craven played an integral part in creating a demand for art like that of the Regionalists. His argument was three-fold: first, modern European art was already “old and sterile,” and any American followers were bound to be financial and artistic failures; second, modern European art seemed to be merely a “question of technique” and therefore was insufficient for “communicating the experiences of mankind”; and third, Americans would simply never be known for their own sake as long as they were copying some French artist. American soil could not “…nourish a metaphysical imported style.” For further reading and analysis of Craven’s work and its application to the Regionalists, see also Matthew Baigell’s “The Beginnings of ‘The American Wave’ And the Depression,” Art Journal 27, no. 4 (1968): 388; Thomas Craven’s, “Men of Art: American Style,” The American Mercury 6 (Dec. 1925): 425-32.

39 Craven, 425-32.
be found in its cosmopolitan cities and the newly booming industry that came with them. But when it came to a defining picture of a country, it is hard for the American city to compete with the much older and established European city, and in Craven’s eyes the city was a place where artists were still merely copying European styles.\textsuperscript{40} It is not surprising, then, that to form a distinctively American image in art with a distinctively American subject, artists turned to the land. What was more uniquely American than the vast Western landscape with its massive Midwestern farms and the hardworking, robust farmers to take care of them? This question of city versus country became more than a discussion of art—it became a discussion of American beliefs.

In this sense, Hogue was very much like the Regionalists as they chose to portray American land and the plights, or glory, of the American farmer. Both Hogue and the Regionalists fought for the prominence of the rural and criticized the city. DeLong provides insight as she explains, “Despite the years spent in New York, Hogue never learned to like the city. He was particularly annoyed by what he perceived as New Yorkers’ condescension toward other parts of the country.”\textsuperscript{41} As Hogue was critical of the “condescension” he felt in the city, Grant Wood was even more vocal about the ruinous effects of urban areas. In a manifesto-like outline of his basic art fundamentals, vehemently entitled “Revolt Against the City,” Wood delineated the need to focus artistic and cultural attention away from urban areas. He writes, “America has turned introspective…. [T]his turning of our eye inward upon ourselves has awakened us to values which were little known before the grand crash of 1929 and which are

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 428.  
\textsuperscript{41} DeLong, 8.
chiefly non-urban.” Hogue shares similar ideals, championing the painting of rural America, specifically the rural America an artist knows best.

It is this important similarity that allows for a comparison between Hogue and the Regionalists because both Hogue and the Regionalists sought to use America for their subject matter in an era when the country seemed, in their opinion, to need it most. However, Hogue had a much different mission from that of the Regionalists. Rather than depict a land that showed hope, prosperity, and promise, Hogue sought to depict a less inflated image of the land. He sought to give land the voice that other Regionalist painters had silenced. Because the Dust Bowl was a trying time for many Americans, rather than diminishing the hardships of Midwestern farmers by masking their situation with glorious renditions of the past, Hogue depicted a truer picture of the ecological devastation of the 1930s. By exploring Regionalist images, Hogue’s *Erosion Series* begins to stand out as its own oeuvre unique to both 1930s Dust Bowl images and ecological art as a whole.

One of the most insightful ways to compare Hogue with the Regionalists is by exploring the differing roles each artist assigns to human involvement with the land. While Hogue’s *Erosion Series* attributes the atrocities of the Dust Bowl to human negligence, the Regionalists sought to glorify the stability of the land and, with that, its hard-working farmer. Yet the Regionalists are not entirely to blame for their depictions and attitudes of land. Regionalists were often connected to a vast collection of artists receiving public commissions through various New Deal Agencies, implemented in 1933 by Franklin D. Roosevelt to help assuage the devastating effects of the Depression. Artists worked for agencies like the Works Progress Administration

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(WPA) and the Public Works Administration (PWA), painting civic murals in government buildings like post offices. American art scholar Karal Ann Marling describes how often muralists would accommodate public opinion into their projects. Subsequently, these murals came to reflect what the American public thought “culture ought to be.”\textsuperscript{43} They embodied hard work, ingenuity, constancy, and along with those qualities, man’s dominion over the land. Similar themes infused the Regionalists’ smaller works. For example, Thomas Hart Benton’s 1938 \textit{Cradling Wheat} (fig. 11) typifies the glorification of not just the land but also the farmer. Benton depicts three grown men threshing wheat and collecting the plentiful harvests of the land. They are all hard at work, accomplishing various tasks associated with the harvest. There is even a young boy depicted, furthering the idea that the land provides not only for the current generation but also for generations to come. In the distance stands more land for the industrious farmers to harvest, intimating the bounteous harvests the earth supplies for the noble farmer who cultivates it.

Not coincidentally, Benton anachronistically depicts the farmers using hand-held harvesting instruments, completely leaving out the newly invented technology that contributed to misuse of Dust Bowl lands. In this image, it is as important to recognize what the artist chooses to exclude as well as what the artist chooses to include, or as Alan Braddock and Christoph Irmscher put it, “Ecocritical art history necessarily pays attention not only to overtly engaged or sympathetic forms of environmentalist expression but also to works apparently indifferent, or even hostile, to such concerns.”\textsuperscript{44} By leaving out newer technologies like tractors and grain turbines, Benton lessens the impact of man on nature, choosing instead to highlight the

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\textsuperscript{43} Karal Ann Marling, \textit{Wall to Wall America: A Cultural History of Post Office Murals in the Great Depression} (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 1.  \\
\textsuperscript{44} A Keener Perspective, 9.
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industrious farmer, using his bare hands and a scythe to make his way in the world. As Benton omits the technology implemented in his day, he demonstrates an ambivalence or indifference to land and its precarious balance.

Hogue likewise incorporates farmers into his images, though indirectly. Rather than showing the industrious, pre-mechanized agrarian, Hogue depicts the land wasted and abandoned by its human caregivers. For example, in *Drought Survivors* (fig. 3), he shows that it was uninformed and perhaps careless farmers who helped create the Dust Bowl. In addition to the two emaciated cows embedded in the drift in the foreground, a useless run-down tractor is similarly stuck in the dust bank. The only vegetation is more like a skeleton, as the twiggy shrub barely peeks out of the dune. DeLong points out the irony of the “survivors” Hogue depicts—the prairie dog and the rattlesnake: they “were exactly the two creatures most despised by the farmers trying to cultivate the plains.”45 Almost tragically ironic, the lives farmers first tried to squelch when taming the land are the only two life forms capable of remaining on the newly ruined terrain.

Though actual farmers are conspicuously absent in this work, Hogue portrays the death they have left behind as a statement about the role farmers played in the scene. The tractor and the cows represent the two main agricultural activities that sustained the farmers in the plains, and Hogue places the tractor above the cows in his composition, suggesting the dominance that technology and man tried to have over nature. The spiked tractor wheels are threatening, though in the end rendered useless. The tractor perhaps stands as a tombstone for the aggressive technology used to create the desolation depicted in the soft mounds that dominate the painting. Further, the idea that land will claim the dead is demonstrated as the emaciated skin of the cows

45 DeLong, 21.
mimics the striation of the wind-swept soil—this livestock now resembles the land that once tried to sustain its life.

Benton’s omitting farming technology masks the human role in the Dust Bowl scenario. *Drought Survivors* includes farmers and their technology that helped create some of the adverse ecological effects ultimately leading to the Dust Bowl, yet in *Cradling Wheat*, Benton conspicuously omits such technology. Without modern technology, namely tractors, the 1930s ecological disaster could not have been generated in such a short time. As Worster points out, the Dust Bowl "took only fifty years to accomplish. It cannot be blamed on illiteracy or overpopulation or social disorder." The culture deliberately, with its "expansionary energy," came up against a land where there was a "delicate ecological balance" that people ignored. It was American dreams of prosperity and misplaced hope in the land, mixed partially with ignorance and lack of foresight that led to such widespread devastation. Worster concludes that "[t]he dust storms that swept across the plains in the 1930s created the most severe environmental catastrophe in the entire history of the white man on this continent. In *Drought Survivors* (fig. 3), Hogue incites sympathy for the natural world and incriminates the human hand by showing the tractor towering over abandoned dead cows.

Other Benton works do depict the new machinery of the time, yet unlike Hogue’s incriminating depictions of technology, Benton’s goal for incorporating technology is to exhibit all that machines accomplish by way of planting and harvesting more crops, creating more resources, and ultimately generating more wealth and prosperity. However, Benton did not produce images depicting the glorious capabilities of machinery during the Dust Bowl years. In the heart of the 1930s, Benton only depicts fields being worked by men with hand-held tools

46 Worster, 5.
rather than machines, as exemplified by *Cradling Wheat*. He does not revisit the theme of technological interactions with the land until the tail end of the thirties. Also, before the Dust Bowl years, Regionalists glorified in their art not only the land but also the machines that could till, cultivate, and subdue the land. Then the ecological turmoil of the 1930s necessitated a different kind of image—an image of the resourceful farmer, rather than glorified technology. Hogue, by showing the realistic effects of technology, identifies his sympathies with the land, not the humans.

One early facet of Ecocriticism looked intensely at how technology had modified the land. Historian Lynn White gives the caveat that “[a]ll forms of life modify their contexts,” and he further acknowledges that “ever since man became a numerous species he has affected his environment notably.”\(^{47}\) However, White ties technology to the rapid change in environmental well-being. According to White, in the past, man had to report to nature in some degree, but with the invention of new technologies, nature began to be more and more mediated by man-made machines. As a result, humans thought that they were in charge of nature, or at least that through technology mankind could get greater output and resources from land at no cost. Harold Fromm also explores the ramifications of technology on nature. He describes how for much of human history, man operated with a “sense of his own physical weakness, his knowledge that Nature could not be tamed or bent to his own will.”\(^{48}\) But “by the eighteenth century, the rise of industrialism in the West” allowed man to “live in comfortable houses that resist the elements . . .

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store food for weeks, months or years ahead... [and] move long distances with ease.” With all the changes, man’s “perception of Nature undergoes a startling alteration.”

49 Humans’ “formerly intolerable dependency on the caprices of Nature [are] no longer so gross.”

50 In other words, because of technology, man now is less accountable to listen to the land and bend to its rules and statutes. Though White and Fromm do not specifically address the Dust Bowl, with scenes like *Drouth Survivors*, Hogue serves as an ecocritic ambassador, working to highlight the consequences of unmediated technological interference with the land.

Interestingly, the lack of agricultural technology in Benton’s 1930s works seems actually to suggest an acknowledgment that farming technology played a part in the devastating effects of the Dust Bowl. When Dust Bowl conditions faded by the end of the thirties, he seemed ready to break his silence on the issue and return to the promotion of man over nature. For example, the 1939 image entitled *Threshing Wheat* (fig. 12) aggrandizes technology and the land with which it interacts, in spite of what contemporaries were beginning to say about the ill effects of such technology. Benton’s thresher projects the wheat in a large stream onto a ready-to-bag pile of wheat. The pile of wheat is taller even than all the equipment it takes to produce it. A steam engine tractor powers the thresher and emits a cloud of black exhaust that perfectly mirrors the lines of the clouds, suggesting that the man-made pollution fits right in line with the natural clouds above—man’s technology can be an integral part of the natural landscape. Fromm suggests that people are “mostly unaware of a connection with Nature that has been artfully concealed by modern technology,” and Benton indeed most artfully blurs the connection between nature and technology when that technology so perfectly seems to enhance and aid all

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49 Fromm, 31.
50 Ibid., 32.
that nature offers.\textsuperscript{51} Observations of Benton’s careful inclusion and exclusion of technology suggest perhaps that Benton supposed that during the Dust Bowl, Americans were not interested in seeing technology save them from the turmoil of the 1930s; instead, the hard working and industrious American is the source of hope, which in its own way places man’s interests and abilities above those of the environment.

While comparing Hogue’s work to Benton’s offers insight into ecological attitudes toward land and technology, Benton is not the only Regionalist who, when juxtaposed with Hogue, shows that the \textit{Erosion Series} uniquely exposes divisive American land attitudes and even encourages ecologically responsible ethics. Works by Grant Wood similarly illuminate Hogue’s work. For example, Wood’s 1936 \textit{Spring Turning} (fig. 13) and Hogue’s \textit{Mother Earth Laid Bare} (fig. 6) illustrate far different agendas.

In 1936, Hogue painted perhaps his most compelling piece, \textit{Mother Earth Laid Bare}, which depicts an incapacitated female figure etched out in the barren, lifeless soil. A neglected, dormant plow dominates the foreground and is seen piercing its way into the soil, creating a female figure, whom Hogue named in his title “Mother Earth.” This image is one of Hogue’s final \textit{Erosion Series} works in the 1930s, and perhaps his didactic inclusion of the female form suggests a desperate attempt for audiences finally to see the connection of human and land. Until this point, Hogue’s works have only intimated human interaction with the land. Yet now Hogue places human and land as one, compelling the viewer to make this connection. While Hogue does not actively show humans farming or working the land, he shows a reclined female figure with a plow cutting deep into her skin—symbolizing the rape of the land. If indeed Americans were more interested in their own human needs above the land’s, Hogue’s humanization of the

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 33.
land invites viewers to feel greater sympathy while simultaneously, through placing the plow directly in the foreground, implicating man’s involvement in the land’s ruin. Because of this artful balance between allowing viewers to sympathize with the human land while implicating them as the perpetrators of the crime, *Mother Earth Laid Bare* becomes the best example of Hogue’s ecological message.

However, the figure in the earth is far more than a generic human. It is no coincidence that Hogue selects a female form to carve out from the dust. In 1938, toward the end of the Dust Bowl and after almost a decade of man-caused disaster, it is through *Mother Earth Laid Bare* that audiences also see a culmination of Hogue’s background, ruling ideologies, and artistic intent. In childhood, Hogue’s mother taught him the “idea of life within the earth.” Similarly, the Taos Pueblos taught of an “Earth Mother” forbidden to be touched by man’s metal objects, purely out of respect, for a period during the most fertile seasons. These influences are captured as Hogue displays such a gendered image cut into by man’s metal plow.

Ecocritics concerned with how women are imaged and subdued in connection with the land have their own branch of Ecocriticism known as “Ecofeminism.” Ecofeminists not only look at human domination over land, but also tie this domination to male control over female. Notions of the female connected to land are even embedded in our language with terms like the “virginal land,” “mother earth,” or even referring to the earth as “fertile.” Leading ecofeminist Annette Kolodny asserts that land is often depicted as woman to reiterate the domination that man feels privy to when it comes to conquering a land. She points out that land is not even seen just as mother, but as woman in general. She writes, “Probably America’s oldest and most cherished fantasy” suggests a “daily reality of harmony between man and nature based on an

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52 DeLong, 7.
experience of the land as essentially feminine—that is, not simply the land as mother but the land as woman, the total female principle of gratification enclosing the individual in an environment of receptivity, repose, and painless and integral satisfaction. . . . It is a realm of nurture, abundance, and unalienated labor.”53 She explains that the portrayal of the land as feminine identifies patriarchal attitudes toward that land, similar to those directed toward women by men. The land is seen as compliant and satisfied.

Kolodny’s ideas deepen understanding of Hogue’s metaphor in *Mother Earth*. Hogue paints a woman lying complacently in repose, recovering from the effects of the plow, which dominates the foreground. In addition to his message that farmers disregard life in nature, Hogue clarifies that men also assume nature will be compliant, an image furthering traditional stereotypes of female subjectivity, and promoting Hogue’s metaphor of abusing the land.

Female parallels can also be drawn in Wood’s *Spring Turning* (1936), as his hills take on voluptuous curves and contours. The two rounded hills easily suggest the form of the breasts or the hips and waist of a reclined figure much like Hogue’s. Yet Wood’s land remains lush and fertile, not wasted and bare. Perhaps an even more apparent parallel can be drawn between *Mother Nature Laid Bare* and Wood’s *Fall Plowing* (fig. 14), as these images show almost identical composition: the land stretches off into the distance, and the plow dominates the foreground as it cuts severely into the earth. It is almost as if the juxtaposition of *Fall Plowing* and *Mother Earth Laid Bare* show the voice of humanity starkly contrasted with the voice of the land, and Wood’s work typifies the “artistic protectionism” that Kalil describes. In some sense,

Wood is protecting the land as he continues to paint it in its full glory. It is this protectionism for American land and its reputation for abundance that highlights how Hogue drastically differs from Regionalists. Hogue and Wood both clearly have a love and reverence for the land, yet Hogue gives voice to the land and its hardships, while Wood looks to “protect” the land’s images by idealizing it, ultimately only silencing its voice more.

To further document Wood’s intentional idealizing of the landscape, there is evidence to suggest that he was exposed to dust storms in his native Iowa just as Hogue was in his native Texas. Wood completed Spring Turning in 1936, at the height of trauma during the Dust Bowl years, and even though Iowa was not considered a Dust Bowl state and therefore did not see the extent of trauma that some of the more western regions did—regions like Hogue’s Texas panhandle—Wood should have had a clear idea of the devastation taking place in the country.54 In fact, in 1936, according to the Palmer Drought Severity Index, an index used to measure dryness based on both precipitation and temperature, there were more areas experiencing severe to extreme drought in Iowa than in Texas.55 The winter before, Iowa experienced harsh snow blizzards that people hoped would suppress the drought, but to no avail. Iowa still saw no rain in the spring of 1936, and neighboring states were experiencing extreme drought too. When the wind came, whether it was neighboring dust, or their own, Iowa felt the devastating effects of dust too. One Iowan described Blackhawk, Iowa, near where Wood was living at the time: “We all knew about the dust storms in the dry plains of the Southwest, but for drought and wind and

54 Worster, 29.
55 The Palmer method was published in 1965; however, it can be applied to any time where sufficient precipitation and temperature data were collected. Thus it was turned into an index that can be used to evaluate drought much earlier than the 1960s. See also National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration: National Climatic Data Center, “Historical Palmer Drought Indices,” http://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/temp-and-precip/drought/historical-palmers.php.
dust to weep, like a plague over the fertile fields of Blackhawk County Iowa, seemed a bad dream.”

In this light, Spring Turning serves to silence the devastation occurring on American soil because Wood chooses to paint idyllic landscapes unrepresentative of the land at the time. Ecocritic Christopher Manes explores this idea of silencing the land when he writes, “Nature is silent in our culture (and in literate societies generally) in the sense that the status of being a speaking subject is jealously guarded as an exclusively human prerogative.” Some could argue that Wood was trying to give voice to the land through his art, trying to convey that nature is not malevolent, but has been giving and abundant over the years. Yet at a time when there were dust storms so large that dirt from the plains was carried by wind as far as Chicago, falling like snow over the city and even making it as far as the Atlantic, the voice that Wood gives the land is an inaccurate one. Nature was exhausted by humanity during the Dust Bowl, and images like Wood’s, whether born out of nostalgia or blatant silencing, seem to undermine nature and give it a false story.

In a time when the prevailing depictions of the land—those of the Regionalists like Grant Wood or Thomas Hart Benton—are hopeful, Hogue consciously sought to offset those images by championing the silenced voice of American farmland. Worster cautions that the hope for a

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56 James Hurst qtd. in The Goldfinch, 7 no. 4 (April 1986).
58 Worster, 13.
59 It is not that the Regionalists depicted every part of American life with hope, or even in a positive light. Grant Wood in particular was criticized by people from his native state for making Iowans look uneducated and unrefined; however, Wood never depicted the land as hopeless, lacking, or unprosperous. See Wanda Corn, Grant Wood: The Regionalist Vision (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1983), 101.
future filled once again with limitlessly producing farms can be dangerously naïve, “a refusal to face the grim truths about oneself or others or nature. Optimism can also divert our attention from critical self-appraisal and substantive reforms.” Viewing Wood’s work in contrast to Hogue’s shows that the idyllic Regionalist scene can be insensitive and damaging, ultimately stunting necessary reforms.

Understandably, in the time of the Dust Bowl, so much of America seemed to be in turmoil that the American public can hardly be blamed for wanting a hopeful art rather than an art suggesting human blame for the desolation of their current situation. It is hard not to view Wood’s lush green spring fields without sensing an encouraging message of life and rebirth. However, messages like this are precisely the problem because they are especially human-centric. And though the Midwestern region’s new farmers “did not understand what their environmental limits were nor have the techniques to overcome them,” their priorities in the late 1800s through the 1920s reflect their human-centered belief in their right to new land with new promises. The farmers taking advantage of cheap land in the Midwest found an offer too good to pass up. American culture has seemed too willing to ignore natural needs, valuing only human needs. Americans are not blameworthy for wanting to be bolstered during the discouragement of the Dust Bowl years, yet they also seem willing to achieve their agendas at the cost of the land. These farmers represent a long history of American land attitudes that assume the role of owner and exploiter, and as the Regionalists continued such attitudes in their art, they serve as a foil to Hogue’s ecologically conscious *Erosion Series*. As Hogue’s work is set side by side with that of the Regionalists, viewers begin to understand not only land attitudes of the 1930s, but also

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60 Worster, 26.
understand just how uniquely Hogue’s ecologically conscious work sits alongside attitudes of optimism and endurance.

**Like-minded Contemporaries**

Juxtaposing Hogue’s work against that of his contemporaries accentuates Hogue’s aggressive campaign to portray truthfully the devastation of the land and to assign human culpability for the disaster, ultimately carving out a new dialogue in the representation of landscape. In addition, analyzing Hogue’s *Erosion Series* alongside other works whose visual messages were more similar to his aesthetics and ideologies reveals how accurately Hogue represented the destruction of the Dust Bowl years.

Contemporary filmmakers and photographers corroborate the ecological dialogue Hogue promoted through his art and show other attempts to educate the public about the human destruction of landscape. Yet in a time when photography was struggling to establish itself as an art form, Hogue elevated an ecological message in the more artistically accepted form of painting, further legitimizing his ecological agenda. Filmmakers and photographers addressing land issues received their start as part of the Resettlement Administration. The RA, which eventually became the FSA in 1937, was just one of the many New Deal Agencies. The RA strove to relocate struggling rural and urban families to communities planned by the government, mostly located in California. Under the Information Division of the RA, Roy Stryker hired photographers to document the hardships Americans were going through at the time. However, New Deal agencies were far from unbiased and took on a propagandistic nature. Both filmmakers and photographers working for the RA and FSA had the objective to communicate to viewers the need for federal aid, thereby showing emotionally charged pictures that elicited sympathy for both the American farmer and American land.
One of the most famous works to come from this era was the film *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (1936), written and directed by Pare Lorentz, which was promoted by New Dealers seeking to show the ill effects of unchecked capitalism.\(^2\) Much like Hogue, the film actually implicates unmediated farming practices as the cause for the devastation in Midwestern states. Lorentz shows the over-plowing that occurred in the twenties, directly implicating society’s ignorance and oversight in aggressive agricultural measures driven by capitalism. He frequently pairs hopeful narrations about a plentiful land with shots of barren farmland. For example, a narrator can be heard proclaiming, “But the great day was coming [for the farmer]. The day of new causes, new profits, new hopes!” Yet less than thirty seconds later, Lorentz pans across a dirt field, the only apparent vegetation some stubbly dry wheat (fig. 15).

Through such rhetorical measures, Lorentz highlights aggressive farming and the tragic effects of technology, over-plowing, and extreme drought. *The Plow* premiered in Washington D.C., and President Roosevelt even wanted every member of Congress to watch it together in a joint session in January of 1936, though this did not actually happen.\(^3\) The film also received much attention when over twenty American newspapers put “glowing review[s]” of the film on their front pages.\(^4\) *The Plow* continued to open across the nation, even though Hollywood was boycotting government films at the time. That only made the film that much more enticing, and eventually *The Plow* was featured in over three thousand theaters.\(^5\)

Though there is no definitive evidence suggesting Hogue ever saw *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, similarities between Hogue’s attitudes toward imaging the Dust Bowl and those in

\(^2\) *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, directed by Pare Lorentz (1936; Naxos DVD, 2007), DVD.


\(^4\) Dunaway, 52.

The Plow, not to mention the film’s wide circulation, make it hard to believe that he did not. Lorentz distributed his film in 1936, the same year that Hogue painted his most didactic piece, Mother Earth Laid Bare. There are even frames of the film focusing solely on a plow much like the plow cutting into the figure in Mother Earth Laid Bare (fig 16). Hogue’s ecological fire could well have been stoked by sympathetic artistic productions such as The Plow that Broke the Plains. However, the 1930s film was not widely accepted as an artistic expression, and it was Hogue’s inclusion of such themes in a medium taken more seriously as fine art that better legitimized ecological dialogues. To a great extent, government agencies prescribed the work of photographers, but Hogue worked for himself, crafting a personal message of ecology rather than directed documentation of a scene.

In addition to Lorentz’s efforts in film, many FSA photographers documented some of the most famous images of the Dust Bowl. FSA photographers provided America with shocking images of the Dust Bowl, as their photographs were included in both magazines and newspapers. For example, FSA photographer Arthur Rothstein’s images illuminate the goal photographers had during the hard Dust Bowl years. Rothstein even helped provide photographic references for Lorentz in conjunction with The Plow that Broke the Plains. Rothstein took his first photographs of the Dust Bowl in 1936, when under the direction of Roy Stryker, Rothstein set out to find images of small town America. Rothstein’s photographs not only reveal the devastation taking place in the Midwest, but also reveal the agenda of the RA to highlight mishandling of resources. James Curtis, in his book Mind’s Eye Mind’s Truth, describes how Rothstein especially sought to promote RA agendas. He explains that Rothstein’s compositions “conformed to Resettlement
Administration instructions that whenever possible, photographs should include evidence of land misuse and mismanagement. “66

One of his images that was part of a larger series became especially iconic. It was shot in Cimarron County, an area in the panhandle of Oklahoma that saw some of the worst ecological ruin of the entire Dust Bowl. As Worster puts it, “If there was an archetypical Dust Bowl Community—eroded, depopulated, broke, and on relief—it was Cimarron.” In this image, Rothstein depicts a father with his two sons, running to their shack-like house to avoid a dust storm (fig. 17). Viewers can almost feel the grit as they watch the smaller son scampering to catch up, while shading his eyes from the blowing dirt. In another Cimarron County image, Rothstein shows only a turned-over plow, covered partly in sand and clearly in disuse (fig. 18). The plow lies there, conveying the message that man has tried, failed, and abandoned the land that once held promise. These images were taken in 1936, the same year that Wood’s *Spring Turning* and Hogue’s *Mother Earth Laid Bare* were created. It is almost as if the dormant plow became the symbol of the Dust Bowl—whether it is shown creating the devastation or lying lifeless after the devastation. Wood, Hogue, Rothstein, and Lorentz all use the icon of the plow to symbolize their broader commentaries on the ecological state of America at the time.

In addition to similar iconography, Hogue’s work is further connected to photography as reproductions of his paintings are situated next to photographs in a 1937 *Life Magazine* article. According to the article, Hogue became an artist of the Dust Bowl to express a “scathing denunciation of man’s persistent mistakes.”67 *Life* utilized Hogue to tell the story of a man-created disaster, using three images of Hogue’s—*Dust Bowl, Drouth Stricken Area, and Drouth*

67 *Life*, 61.
Survivors. Hogue’s images are interspersed with aerial shots of dust storms blowing across large fields. By placing photographs next to Hogue’s paintings, Life acknowledges how well Hogue’s series works in conjunction with photography, both playing off each other to tell a similar story. Hogue heightens viewers’ emotions as they see his subjective images of emaciated cows juxtaposed with a photograph, which only reiterates that Hogue is not exaggerating the horror. Hogue’s work and the photographs intensify each other in a story of mistakes and retribution.

Hogue’s audience grew much larger than his native Texas as a result of being featured in Life, which reached millions of readers each week. With the help of one of America’s most popular magazines, Hogue’s environmental message had a national platform. Now Americans saw stark photographs of ecological disaster juxtaposed with paintings exploring that same devastation. This direct visual comparison made Life’s depiction of the Dust Bowl different from all other portrayals, strengthening the validity of both the photographic and artistic accusations of a ruined environment and elevating the legitimacy of photography as a voice in defense of the landscape. By including Hogue in the article, Life increased cultural acceptance of the ecological message and promoted painting as an impactful way to share environmental messages.

Since paintings were considered more acceptable than photographs as forms of art in the early 1900s, Hogue’s work better advances environmental causes. In previous scholarship, photographers are rarely considered artistic equals to Hogue. Photography like Rothstein’s was mostly only seen as historical documentation to contextualize Hogue’s (or other painters’) work. At the time Hogue painted the Erosion Series, photography was still struggling to be considered art, perhaps in part because many photographers of the time were commissioned by the government to produce only images that supported a propagandistic government script. Hogue,
on the other hand, never worked for the government, so not only was his chosen artistic medium more highly regarded, but also his themes were his own, dictated only by his passionate feelings for the land.

Yet Hogue’s environmental agenda did not resonate positively with everyone. Though there were no negative letters to the *Life* editor in response to Hogue’s featured article, perhaps some of the same audience who saw Hogue’s work in *Life* were among those enraged by Hogue’s incrimination of humans in the Dust Bowl disaster. Donald Worster tells a story of irate public officials, so upset with Hogue’s *Drouth Survivors* that they attempted to buy it so they could publicly burn it. Fortunately, the representative sent to the auction to buy the painting only brought a fifty-dollar bill to buy a two-thousand-dollar painting. This example demonstrates that in some degree Hogue did create an ecological dialogue in his own day.

**Conclusion**

The Dust Bowl was the inevitable outcome of a culture that chooses to dominate and exploit the land. Hogue’s final *Erosion Series* work from the 1930s serves as almost a eulogy for the land during the Dust Bowl era. In his 1939 painting *The Crucified Land* (fig. 7), Hogue shows the whole cycle of the Dust Bowl in one image. He depicts an abandoned tractor on the horizon, reminding viewers of what first initiated the demise of the land. In the foreground, viewers see the effects of the windstorms as Hogue paints the eroded land with curves much like those found in *Mother Earth Laid Bare*. Finally, after the land has lain fallow and rain has returned, it starts to regain its ability to sustain life, and rather than brown, sun-baked earth, Hogue shows new, green life on top of his eroded soil. A raincloud even pours down in the farthest recesses of the image. But in addition to the vibrant image suggesting that the worst is over, a tattered scarecrow has lost its head and hands and is reduced to its bare form—a cross. It
stands atop the earth, memorializing all that it has been through. Hogue’s title, *The Crucified Land*, intimates connections to Christ, and suggests that the scarecrow’s death is not just any death. It is a sacrifice of the innocent land.

Hogue’s *Erosion Series* sought to use the visual arts to effect change. He utilized his paintings to invoke cultural reform—specifically reform regarding more careful treatment of land. He is an artist like those discussed by American environmental historian Finis Dunaway who have purposefully tried to promote the voice of the land through their art. Dunaway illuminates the discussion of Hogue as he explains that American photographer Ansel Adams strove to “celebrate the American earth and learn that preserving the land enriches the human spirit, …merging art with politics [and] fusing national identity with the land.” Dunaway continues that art offers a way to “preserve the American landscape and save the American soul.”

Hogue’s paintings function in similar ways as they also use the visual arts to save the land and, along with it, the “American soul.”

Hogue’s Dust Bowl works are more than merely significant in their own time. The *Erosion Series* becomes valuable in ecological discussions today as Hogue sets a pattern for using the arts to champion more ecologically sensible attitudes. It is this sympathy with the land that firmly situates Hogue as a pioneering environmental artist. Mary Evelyn Tucker, a professor of environmental studies, pleads with those in the humanities today to use their artistic voices in advocacy of the environment: “Those of us in the humanities need to join in the conversations of the natural and social sciences regarding the environmental crisis in its global and local

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68 It must also be noted that other disciplines within the liberal arts centered their work around land ethics in the 1930s. Similarly, literary works like John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* sought to give voice to the ecological disaster of the Dust Bowl.
69 Dunaway, xv.
manifestations.”⁷⁰ She observes that “without the careful and collaborative research of thousands of scientists around the planet we would be virtually blind to the state of the environment and our effects on it.” And yet those scientists’ findings and attendant political policies “are not sufficient in helping to transform human consciousness and behavior for a sustainable future.”⁷¹ Perhaps the humanities, she feels, and specifically the visual arts, will be the bridge from scientific awareness to a more personal awareness that elicits necessary change in apathetic environmental attitudes. In a way, Alexandre Hogue’s *Erosion Series* responds at the beginning of the twentieth century to Tucker’s twenty-first-century plea. Works like *The Crucified Land* connect initial scientific understanding of human impact on the environment to “more personal awareness” that seeks to change “apathetic environmental attitudes.”

The arts might be the key to lasting environmental change. Frederick Waage, a scholar of environmental literature, believes that looking at art in light of ecology can create “a greater presence of environmental concern and awareness” in artistic disciplines.⁷² Such assertions reiterate the important role the arts can play in environmental reform and make a comparative study of Hogue important for art historians and ecologists alike. As Hogue is seen in light of his contemporaries, his *Erosion Series* illuminates destructive American land attitudes. Hogue’s work, more than mere images of hardships that befell his cherished Texas homeland, chastises unchecked technology and irresponsible land practices. It is, ultimately, an artistic call for ecological reform.

⁷¹ Ibid., 3.
Hogue truly stands out as an individual who centered his artistic efforts on being a voice for change. His work in America’s twentieth-century history just might speak for visual representations that encourage ecologically responsible land attitudes for years to come. Hogue maintains his ecological commentary throughout the *Erosion Series* and models the role art can play in raising awareness of our interactions with and impact on the environment. His choice of medium similarly accentuates his artistic agenda, as he manipulates and adds emotion to his imagery, thus creating a more impactful environmental message. It is both his terrifying and beautiful erosion paintings and his commitment to the land that demand a recategorization of Hogue as an ecocritical artist. In the end, Hogue strives to replace America’s naïve hope that good times are never-ending with a better ecological sensibility and a more ecologically sensible art.
FIGURES

Figure 1 Alexandre Hogue, *Red Canyon Earth*, 1932, Oil on canvas, 19” x 33”, Collection of Oklahoma State
Figure 2 Alexandre Hogue, *Dust Bowl*, 1933, Oil on canvas, 24” x 33”, Smithsonian American Art Museum
Figure 3 Alexandre Hogue, *Drouth Survivors*, 1933, Oil on canvas, 30” x 48”, Musee National D’Art Moderne
Figure 4 Alexandre Hogue, *Drought Stricken Area*, 1934, Oil on canvas, 30” x 42¼”, Dallas Museum of Art
Figure 5 Alexandre Hogue, Untitled (Dust Bowl), no date, Oil on panel board, 6” x 9”, Private Collection
Figure 6 Alexandre Hogue, *Mother Nature Laid Bare*, 1933, Oil on canvas, 44” x 56”, Philbrook Art Center
Figure 7 Alexandre Hogue, *The Crucified Land*, 1939, Oil on canvas, 42” x 60”, Gilcrease Institute of American History of Art
Figure 8 Alexandre Hogue, *Avalanche by Wind*, 1944, Oil on canvas, 33” x 46”, University of Arizona
Figure 9 Alexandre Hogue, *Soil and Subsoil*, 1946, Oil on canvas, 36” x 52”, Oklahoma City Museum of Art
Figure 10 Joe Jones, *Our American Farms*, 1936, Oil and tempura on canvas, Whitney Museum
Figure 11 Thomas Hart Benton, _Cradling Wheat_, 1938, Tempura and oil on board, 31¼" x 39¼", Saint Louis Art Museum
Figure 12 Thomas Hart Benton, *Threshing Wheat*, 1939, Tempura on board, The Sheldon Swope Art Museum
Figure 13 Grant Wood, *Spring Turning*, 1936, Oil on masonite, 18¼” x 40 1/8”, Reynolda House Museum of American Art
Figure 14 Grant Wood, *Fall Plowing*, 1931, Oil on canvas, John Deere Art Collection
Figure 15 Film Still from *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, 1936
Figure 16 Film Still from *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, 1936
Figure 17 Arthur Rothstein, Dust Storm, Cimarron County, OK, 1936
Figure 18 Arthur Rothstein, Plow Covered by Sand, Cimarron County, OK, 1936


*The Goldfinch*, 7 no. 4 (April 1986).


*The Plow that Broke the Plains*. Directed by Pare Lorentz. 1936; Naxos DVD, 2007. DVD, 112 min.


