

What the Artist Asks

My exhibition will feature four works: Michelle Dee Tidwell's *The End of the Road*, Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, A. M. Cassandre's *Étoile du Nord*, and Charles O'Rear's *Bliss*. All of these involve landscapes and/or roads, and these will form the foundation of the exhibition's main message. Pivoting away from the content of the art, the exhibition asks what each work demands of the person looking at it, and how that demand is shaped by the conditions under which the image was meant to be seen.

The works are similar, not only in what they contain, but what they don't contain. Each landscape can be defined by its pertinent negative – the absence of an expected detail within the piece – discussed in Unit 2. The four are arranged according to the conditions they were designed to be seen: how much attention was available, whether the looking was chosen, and whether it was repeated. The exhibition doesn't organize the artworks based on any kind of physical aspect – they don't share the same time period, medium, etc. – instead they are organized by principle and how they are interpreted.

That principle rests on two questions: does the image resolve into a clear interpretation, and was it made as a single object or for mass reproduction? The goal of this pairing is to show that an image's neutrality (or refusal) is intentional rather than coincidental – whether manufactured for a train platform in Paris or a computer screen installed worldwide. That reach is a kind of border crossing: Cassandre's poster sold international travel, and *Bliss* gave a window into Sonoma County from anywhere in the world.

Tidwell's artwork is unique and demanding. It was only created once, based on a specific moment in the painter's memory. *Bliss*, on the other hand, asks nothing of the viewer. Its serenity and blandness leads the viewer nowhere. We have two new works to fill the remaining gaps. A.

M. Cassandre's *Étoile du Nord* is a lithography print kept at MoMA, which depicts a train track converging to a star in the horizon. Unlike *The End of the Road*, it offers a reachable goal rather than an unreachable one. It was mass produced for the Paris railway system, and its message resolves instantly. Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* fills the opposite gap. It is a coil of black basalt and earth built into the Great Salt Lake in 1970. The sculpture itself is very unique, similar to Tidwell, but the message is completely unresolved. The path it offers spirals inward and stops, and the work itself has spent most of its life underwater, obscuring its true meaning.

Together, these four works trace a single question across four different answers. We question the amount each artwork asks, and how widespread their influence is. This exhibition asks visitors to notice that difference the next time an image asks something – or nothing – of them.