

RUSSO ▲ LEE GALLERY

About painting *Overlands*, a rail survey

In the spring and summer of 2022, I took a fabrication job in the Hudson Valley. I worked five weeks and then three weeks, commuting both times from Portland, Oregon by rail. I traveled coach. Only on the first trip did I make the mistake of *not* sleeping over in Chicago.

Between snow cancellations and family visits, my route was a figure 8 across the continent.

So long as it was light, I stared out the window and drew. I kept my watercolors open and painted a handful of the penciled pages while still on the train; some I colored a week later.

On the train, the United States of America was a political overlay. I was not in a single nation-state but travelling through dozens of very different, and long established, nations. This railroad track, some asphalt, some fences, some specious claims were all just mashed on top.

The United States exposed itself as a superficially imposed condition with every shift in terrain and watershed.

On the train, you may be travelling fast (sometimes), you may be travelling far, but you are never not somewhere, and that somewhere is always Indigenous.

Talking was difficult. I was distracted, usually masked, goofy with excitement, harboring opinions some travelers either might be offended by or knew too well themselves and didn't need to hear my take.

Causing offense on a long-haul passenger train is risky. I cause enough offense unintentionally: mumbling non-sequiturs, squeaking in obscure glee, forgetting to share snacks, born with resting scowl face and a bad case of the stares.

In providing context for a bunch of landscape paintings, however, offense is alright. The United States is, for the time being, a political given. It can be put to good use, fully-funding long distance train travel, establishing priority passenger rails, actually respecting treaties. It does not, however, ever deserve veneration for claiming lands and waters to which it had no inherent rights, and to which it still resists its obligations.

19th and 20th c. white artists used landscape paintings as a sales pitch or justification for theft and violence. Now, for me, they are an excuse to ask anyone nearby, "Where *are* we?" This is what I wanted to know as a kid, and I almost never got an accurate reply. Not that these paintings are so accurate, a gut response based on a gut response made while whipping through whole worlds at 30 to 80 mph.

Gabriel Liston, September 2023

"America is not a nation-state, and Europeans have a hell of a time to understand this simple fact, which, they could know theoretically; it is this, this country is united neither by heritage, nor by memory, nor by soil, nor by language, nor by origin from the same."

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Hannah Arendt,

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