

Virginia Colwell's "To Have and to Hold" critiques sentimental views of the American South



Virginia Colwell's exhibition 'To Have and to Hold' at Co-Lab Projects in Austin. Photo courtesy Co-Lab Projects

By **Courtney Thomas** February 24, 2023

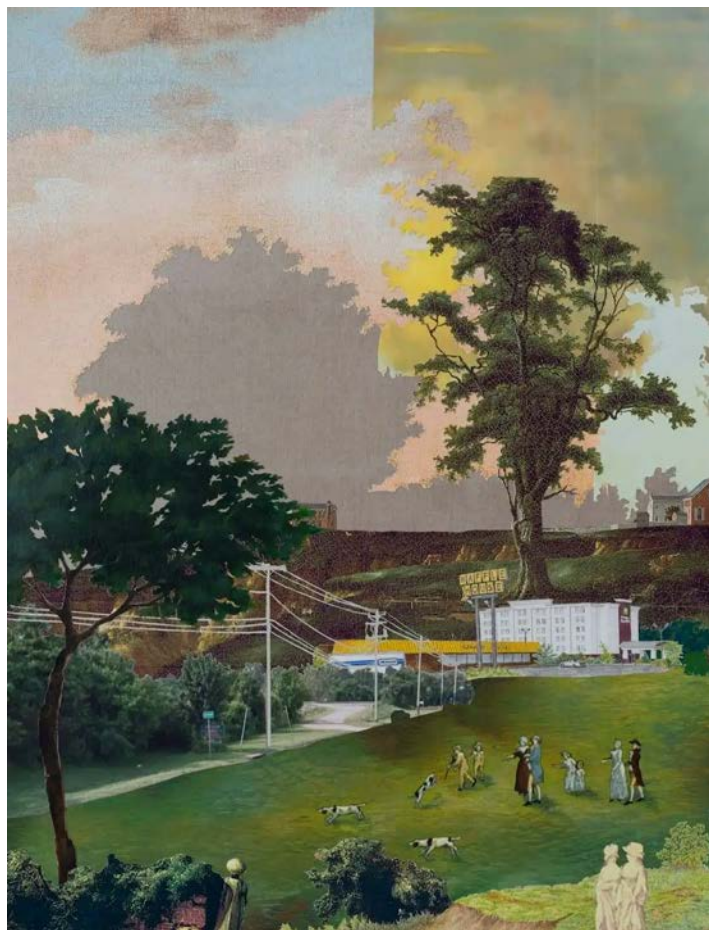
Virginia Colwell's "To Have and to Hold" at Co-lab Projects consists of two new works: a series of five landscape paintings and a work of sculpture, both cleverly installed in Co-lab's concrete culvert turned gallery space. Deeply invested in histories of place both trouble cultural and artistic romanticization of the American South.

Colwell's landscapes respond to artistic representations of plantations from the British colonial period that depict the American South as a kind of arcadia. Typically commissioned by slaveholding Southerners to depict their wealth and holdings, enslaved people were generally edited out of the painted scenes, unlike in plantation paintings from colonies in Barbados and Jamaica. The resulting images present an imagined past that deliberately obscures the histories of slavery and racism such.

Colwell titles her landscape series "Myriorama," after the 19th century sets of illustrated cards children played with by rearranging them to form different landscape scenes. Each of the five paintings is sized to resemble a scaled up Myriorama card. Incorporating this card game context, Colwell argues that romanticization of the American South through its ecology is a longstanding element of its culture, passed on from generation to generation. But in Colwell's hands, the card game is transformed into a palimpsest. Her landscapes are mixed media collages that combine images of historical plantation paintings with contemporary scenes.

The contemporary images are unmistakably screenshots from Google maps. Some of the panels that form "Myriorama" include the app's familiar navigation arrow, compass, and even copyright watermark. While the images of the paintings Colwell manipulates and the Google maps screenshots are both printed, some of the collage elements are hand drawn. The time Colwell spent creating these portions calls extra attention to their details.

Many of these hand drawn elements are architectural features: a colonial mansion, a strip mall, a Waffle House. But Colwell's care in copying these buildings isn't the only thing that makes them somewhat personal. The contemporary sites in Colwell's collages are the former landholdings of her own slaveholding ancestors.



The collaged result is striking. A Waffle House and a Hilton hotel stand on rolling hunting grounds where 18th century parents and children ramble with their dogs. Men in tri-cornered hats and breeches stroll in front of the strip mall at "Colonial Square Office Complex." Sheep on a slope fade into the full parking lot of a pain management center. The blurry

pixelation of Google maps contrasts the cracks of the aged oil paint visible in the sections created from pictures of old paintings.

Cutouts in the collage reveal the linen canvas beneath, indicating that the images are incomplete representations of history and the land. These blank spaces expose gaps in the archives and selective memories shaped by romanticization.

Put into conversation through collage, the silence of the historical paintings on slavery and the evidence of disenfranchisement in the contemporary landscape suggest that the South has experienced a transition from one dystopia imagined as a paradise to another. In the small area of the modern South depicted, billboards and strip malls demonstrate the multiple crises the region is facing, from the health crises that necessitate pain management centers to the pervasive economic insecurity that makes stores like Dollar General so prevalent. Even so, for Colwell, identity-forming attachments to the South are inseparable from a culturally ingrained sentimental affection for the natural environment and vegetation of the region.

In her sculptural work "without shadow of sympathy," brass trailings of Spanish moss and ball moss hang from a telephone wire strung across the culvert gallery. The thin pieces of shining brass beautifully mimic natural forms, but up close, surgical blades peek out from the flowers.





The work was inspired by a site visit to the former Carlota colony in Veracruz, Mexico, which was founded by defeated Confederates in search of a new place to reconstruct their Antebellum society. Its title comes from an 1867 U.S. congressional report that details the collapse of the colony. While few remnants of this colony survive, on a visit to Carlota, Colwell noticed the similarity of the vegetation in Veracruz and the American South. Using the mosses to establish a link between the sentimentalized views of Southern culture in both places, the dangerous surgical blade flowers speak to the harm these attitudes cause and perpetuate.

In this thoughtful and historically engaged exhibition, Colwell uses images of Southern vegetation and architecture to investigate Southern histories and present realities, rejecting artistic and cultural focuses on the beauty of the natural world as means of avoiding these necessary and complex engagements.