

# CONCEPTS and MOTIFS OF LANDSCAPE In Contemporary Latvian Sculpture

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The notion *landscape*, if we treat it as a complex phenomenon, encompassing its mythological background, its ecological, geo-historical and cultural parameters as well as immaterial factors, the ways and levels of its mental perception, is one of the focal points of those traditions, shared values and views that constitute our links with the world around us, our personal, human and national identity.

Every nation and community has its own deep-rooted vision of nature and local scenery elements. The inevitable, everlasting co-existence and confrontation of the geo-historical time of the Earth with the fleeting, transitory time limits of man's individual life and his mundane activities have always involved universal ideas and their local reflections, macro and micro levels of conception.

Throughout the 20th century and in its second half in particular the spreading of the so-called *green thinking*, the attempts to regain a holistic worldview in futurology and natural sciences on one hand and a threatening expansion of the destructive potential of modern technologies on the other hand, have added new dimensions to the role connected with the artistic perception of the Earth, its geological history and landscape scenery.

Traditionally Latvian literature, poetry, music and also visual arts have been and still are influenced by a poetic, often rather idealistic vision of nature and landscape that comes from the deepest layers of the traditional agrarian culture and that was stimulated since the mid-19th century by the aesthetic paradigms of Romanticism.

Professor Janīna Kursīte, a researcher of folklore and mythology, in her article, "The National Landscape in Latvian Literature and Art of the 19th Century" (Kursīte 1999: 358–392), has asserted that the particular focus on the motifs and semantic interpretations of the national landscape elements appeared in the context of national romanticism, and she has analysed the close links be-

tween the mythological roots and later visions of landscape. These and several other investigations have proved that the native landscape elements in aboriginal folklore traditions as well as in modern times are often identified with certain characteristic features of the Latvian people. Such identification and symbolisation refers to many mid-level elements of landscape, such as stones and trees, as well as higher-level phenomena of cosmological order, such as the sun, the moon, etc.

In the visual arts the pantheistic and romantic vision of nature has found its most direct expression in the national school of landscape painting. In sculpture the interest in the interpretation of landscape subjects and motifs acquired particular importance in the late 1960s and 1970s when the efforts to redefine nature/art interrelations were actualised in the Conceptualist ideas of the Earth Art projects and other similar activities all over the world.

Previously, in the 1920s and 30s, academic art history in Latvia was rather sceptical about the use of landscape or still life motifs in sculptural works. Boriss Vipers as one of the leading art historians of that period in his lectures and publications declared that "neither hills nor trees ... can provide suitable subjects for a sculptor" (Vipers 1940: 201).

In the inter-war decades and the early post-war period, Latvian sculptors really did not think of incorporating any landscape motifs in their works and kept to figurative forms of expression. Only amateur sculptor Miķelis Pankoks (1894–1983) occasionally and rather naively depicted some landscape fragments in his primitivist wood carvings.

Looking for a broader context in sculpture/landscape relations, we should mention several important aspects. Landscape is not only a source of motifs, it is and it has also always been the setting for sculptural works. Furthermore, it is a source and a storehouse of natural sculpture materials, of which stone is most directly linked with its particular local surroundings.

In Latvia, from folk traditions to modern times, stone has had a special role as a typical element of the national landscape, a valuable material and a multi-semantic cultural symbol. People look at stones as reminders of ancient magical beliefs and rites. Stones are regarded as reminders of nature's formative processes. In sculpture, all these aspects are connected either directly or by different layers of associations. Therefore, the vision of landscape elements in Latvian sculpture is closely connected with the revival and development of stone sculpture.

The first Latvian sculptor who paid attention to the relations of stone sculpture with landscape surroundings and geo-historical processes was Teodors Zaļkalns (1876–1972). In his essay on the form-building principles of sculpture (1947, published 1966), he wrote that his conception of stone is associated with his early childhood impressions of large granite boulders scattered in the fields. These "fieldstones," as we call them, were brought by the glaciers of the Ice Age. These stones have been thrashed and tumbled into a rounded shape and they have endured all the formative processes of nature. "And an artist too, when he works in sculpture," Zaļkalns wrote, "has to take into account the experience of nature," in other words, he has to feel the traces of the formative geological forces, he has to pay attention to the geo-historical background of the landscape (Zaļkalns 1966: 8).

The idea that art and the creative perception of certain space conceptions and form-building practices may be rather closely associated with the world-forming processes corresponded to the trends of ever-broadening environmental vision and some dialectical paradigms of the 20th century art.

"Landscape has traditionally been where an artist might experience a heightened sense of origin, of spiritual belonging, and the primitive, or of new beginnings away from the city," – that is how Andrew Causey characterised landscape as a source of sculptural inspiration in his survey book *Sculpture since 1945* (Causey 1998: 169). We may find straightforward and far-reaching formulations concerning the geological time and historical character of the landscape in several publications of Robert Smithson, who was one of the leading personalities in the development of Earth Art in America. In the article, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects" (1968), Smithson wrote: "The strata of the Earth is a jumbled museum. Embedded in the sediment is a text that contains limits and boundaries which evade the rational order, and social structures which confine art. In order to read the rocks we must become conscious of geological time, and of the layers of prehistoric material that is entombed in the Earth's crust." (Smithson 1996: 110.)

There was, of course, a great difference between Smithson's vision of the parametres and perspectives of Earth Art and Zaļkalns's more moderate meditations on the necessity to learn from the formative processes of nature. Zaļkalns himself remained faithful to figurative forms of expression. He is regarded as the founder of Latvian national granite sculpture tradition, and one of the major

sources of inspiration for him has been the superb stone carving skill of the Egyptians and other ancient civilisations.

Learning from geological processes, for Zaļkalns first of all meant the necessity to develop a thoughtful approach to the natural qualities of stone. He could not imagine that the stone strata of the Earth and landscape settings as such could be used as materials and sites for large-scale conceptual projects. But the very fact that Zaļkalns encouraged the interest in geological processes was quite symptomatic. Such an approach prepared soil for a broader understanding of the sculpture/landscape relations.

We all know that the "iron curtain," with its blocking of information and limitations of travelling possibilities, created obstacles for a wider involvement of our artists with those trends which marked the earlier stages of Land Art and Earth Art projects in America and Europe. Nevertheless, the general tendency towards broadening of sculpture/landscape relations kept growing.

Since the mid 1960s the tendency to emphasise the correlation of sculpture and landscape setting went hand in hand in Latvia with the growing tendency to exhibit sculptural works in the open. The first attempts to exhibit sculptures in outdoor areas reflected the European tradition to place sculptural works in gardens, parks and other cultivated spaces. Later sculptures were sometimes also erected in different rural situations, sometimes even in rather solitary landscape surroundings.

A sculpture garden was laid out in Riga in 1967, which event was followed by the emergence of open-air exhibitions in rural environments and provincial towns. Several sculptors who had started their creative career in the early 1970s later became active promoters of the search for new contextual and semantic links between sculpture and landscape. Ojārs Feldbergs (b. 1947), Vilnis Titāns (b. 1944), Ojārs Breģis (b. 1942), Igors Dobičins (b. 1958), several other sculptors of the younger generation and Indulis Ranka (b. 1934), a painter by training, who became a skilled stone carver, were active organisers of *plein-air* stone symposia.

Many artists then had close contacts with the folklore movement. Some of the sculptors as, for example, Vilnis Titāns, participated in the volunteers' group that under the guidance of the popular Latvian poet, Imants Ziedonis, organised the protection and revitalisation of typically Latvian landscape elements – giant trees and historical places. The patriotism-inspired interest in landscape motifs

and different actions was coincident with the wish to break with the official stereotypes of figurativism.

In this context, Ojārs Feldbergs became one of the most versatile explorers of the whole complex of sculpture/landscape relations, where he introduced a number of conceptual as well as thematic innovations. Soon after graduation from the Latvian Academy of Arts in the early 1970s, Feldbergs surprised and even shocked his teachers and colleagues by his granite sculptures of trees represented as laconic, sometimes highly abstracted sculptural symbols. This approach was visualised for example in the birch tree forms of the composition *Shadow* (1982).

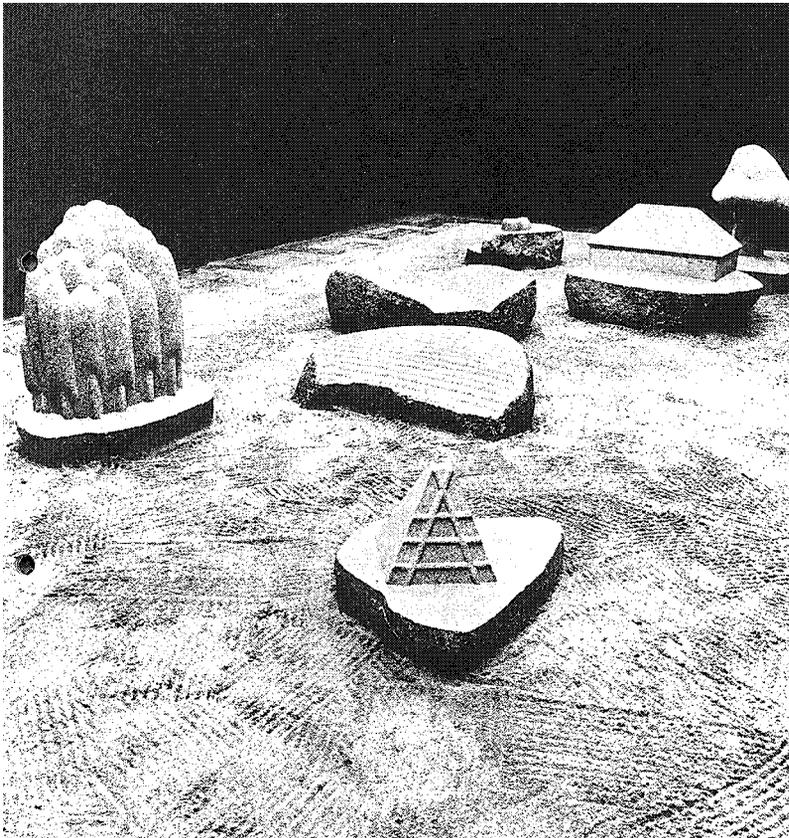


Figure 1. Ojārs Feldbergs. Solo exhibition in the Sculptors' House, Riga, 1987.

In some of Feldbergs's early sculptures the representation of trees was rather descriptive, but his style developed towards strictly defined structural architectonisation of forms. In his granite sculpture, *A Willow Tree at the Riverside* (1979),

Feldbergs contrived to incorporate a particular fragment of the landscape. He managed to find strictly defined sculptural forms even for such elusive atmospheric phenomena as smoke, fog, sun beams, clouds, or thunder. A typical example of his treatment of such motifs is his granite sculpture, *Smoke* (1979), depicting a small house with a train of smoke rising from the chimney. The contemplative mood and feeling of warmth is achieved by the juxtaposition of the solid geometricised elements with the discreet inner movement of the granite forms that depict clouds of smoke. In the composition, *Dawn* (1980), Feldbergs created a vision of sunbeams rising above clouds.

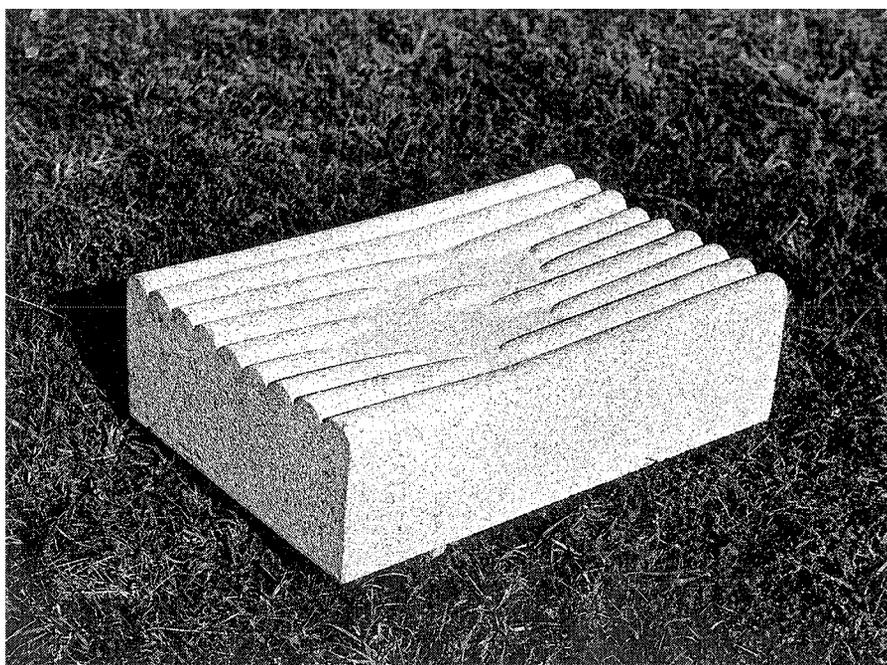


Figure 2. Ojārs Feldbergs. *Puddle in the Field* (1984, granite).

Quite astonishing is stone sculpture depicting a small puddle on the surface of a field (1984). It seems to be one of the most poetic landscape images in contemporary Latvian sculpture. The lyrical impression of an early morning in the countryside after the night's rain is suggested by the inner dialogue between the lasting material (stone) and the fleeting, transitory nature of the subject. One has a feeling that the horizontal rhythms of the field surface and the delicate outline of the rain puddle reflect the spaciousness and atmospheric energy of the sky. In

this rather minimalistic work, Feldbergs has managed to show that even seemingly marginal, occasional events of nature may be interpreted so that they express the vastness of space and create a multi-semantic set of associations.

In September 1982, the above-mentioned early granite sculptures were exposed in Feldbergs's first solo exhibition in the Sculptors' House in Riga. The Latvian poet, Uldis Bērziņš, in his introduction to the exhibition catalogue, gave the following explanation to some conspicuous features of Feldbergs's style: "Feldbergs's creative impulses spring from his immediate environment, his resources are nature, his nation and its history." Bērziņš also underlined that in

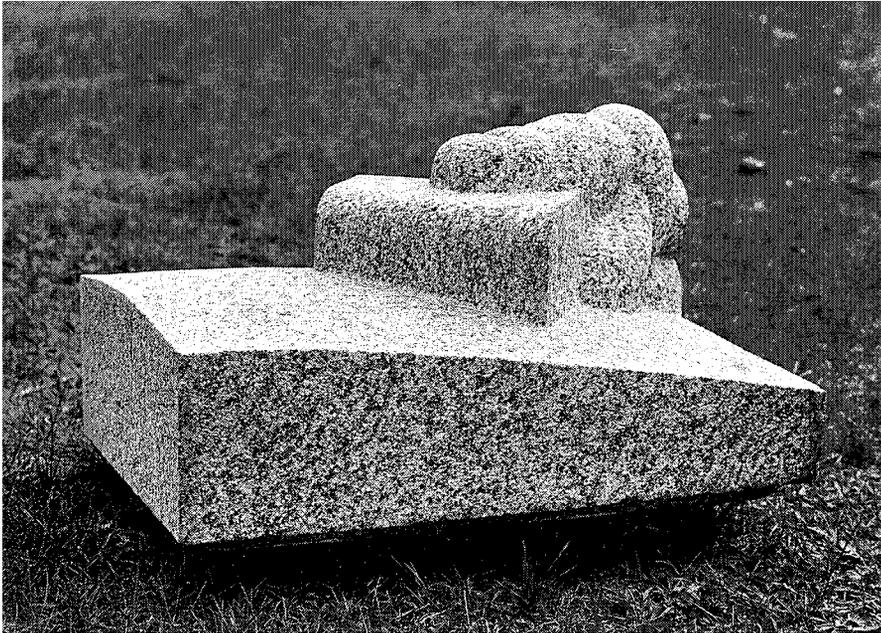


Figure 3. Ojārs Feldbergs. *Smoke* (1979, granite).

order to understand Feldbergs's intentions, his style and his imagery, one must recognise and interpret the "psychological strata" of the stone. He wrote: "The stone of this land is not simply granite, it is an integral element of the countryside: not stark matter, but a distinct image with associative powers. [---] From the stone's original image the sculptor carves and creates a new image. The interrelation of space and mass is the language that Ojārs Feldbergs speaks as a sculptor. He directs our attention to the coherence of material's particularity and the relations between different phenomena, he entices us to focus our gaze on

the object. Who succeeds in this may happen to perceive more than the sculptor himself." (Feldbergs 1983: 2.)

In his essay on Feldbergs's vision and his methods of work, Uldis Bērziņš has rightly pointed out the interpretative openness of the artist's sculptural compositions. Feldbergs himself has also described his works as objects for meditation. When we look at his granite sculptures which are not at all large, we get a keen, almost physical sensation that his intention has been to create a really condensed, skilfully contracted and energetically loaded sculptural form, in which he has visualised reflections of a vast open space, the "oceanic space," as Robert Smithson has called it. Different threads of associations link Feldbergs's works with the poetic vision of the native scenery as such and also with different interpretations of nature in literature, poetry, folklore and other expressions of national culture.

Furthermore it should be mentioned that sometimes when he visualises his metaphors not in stone, but in wood or metal, the interrelation of separate compositional elements is not so organic. Some of his works in painted metal and wood may give an impression of three-dimensional posters.

A typical feature of some of Feldbergs's earlier works is the accentuation of horizontality. His granite sculptures usually have a basement which is an integral part of the whole composition. Even when his sculptures are placed not on the ground, but on some kind of support structure or a pedestal, the spectator is invited to look at them as if from a bird's eye view. This spatial particularity also adds some poetical nuances to our vision of the depicted landscape motifs.

One can trace certain minimalistic elements in the form-building principles of this period in Feldbergs's creativity. Some granite compositions, such as *Destiny* (1979) and *Equilibrium* (1981), are deprived of any descriptive hints, reaching a purely geometric, minimalistic clarity of form. These works express the universal symbolic idea of the unity of opposites and the discreet character of those forces which may leave traces or imprints on nature's and man's destiny. The development of Feldbergs's style and imagery is marked by a growing tendency to create different conceptual frameworks and explanations for particular objects, their combinations, groupings or installations in his sculptures. A typical example in this respect is the compound composition *My Native Land* (1982) which consists of four rather narrative images grouped around the central granite form depicting the outline of Latvia on the map.

In 1987, Feldbergs staged a conceptual exhibition in the Sculptors' House in Riga as a tribute to the traditional Latvian farmstead, its poetically conceived elements of everyday life, architecture and scenery. It was the artist's tribute to those thousands of traditional farmsteads which were destroyed during the years of occupation.

The arrangement of the exhibited granite sculptures comprised the image of a typical Latvian threshing barn, a symbolical fragment of a river flowing by, and a field. One could also see the typical elements of a Latvian farmstead neighbourhood such as a granite oak tree and a birch grove, and there was even a cow disappearing into the morning mist. The sculptures were placed on a layer of sand like stones in a Japanese garden. At the opening of the exhibition some light effects were used: at first the whole room for a moment sank into absolute darkness, before the light gradually reappeared.

In the early 1990s, Feldbergs managed to find an authentic rural setting for his work. Supported by the local municipality, he started a large-scale landscape project and created his private open air museum at Pedvāle in Kurzeme, Western Latvia, with an area of 200 ha.

Initially, Feldbergs planned to develop it as a really multifunctional project, combining traditional ways of seasonal farming with contemporary art activities. As the transition economy in Latvia was not favourable for farming, he focused on different landscape-based art programmes, interdisciplinary projects, installations, actions and other events with innovative participants from different spheres of creative activity, different countries and continents.

From May 31 till October 20 1996, Pedvāle welcomed the 4th Annual Exhibition *Geo-Geo* of the Soros Centre for Contemporary Art in Riga (curated by Jānis Borgs). The subject of geometry/geography was interpreted by artists in various media – installations, objects, paintings, graphics, sculptures, performances and Land Art objects.

In 2000, the Pedvāle Open Air Art Museum staged a year-round programme, *Landscape Laboratory*, with a number of seminars and other events for poets, visual artists, etc. On 20 October 2000, a conference on the relations of contemporary art with landscape surroundings was held there. At Pedvāle, one can see original expositions of Feldbergs's early granite sculptures. One of them is installed in a simultaneously closed and open space – in the ruins of a roofless old barn with solid stone walls. Feldbergs has created several new installations

with (also painted) stones hung in different wooden or metal constructions there. He has also staged several actions with stones, e.g. throwing them down from a helicopter, a procedure which was filmed.

During the 1990s, Feldbergs participated in several international symposia, creating different Earth Art and landscape-based objects or installations. In 1991, just before starting his Pedvāle project, he took part in the Henry Moore sculpture competition in Japan and was selected as one of the finalists. He transported to Japan his granite composition, *Four Elements of the World* (1991), which was carved especially for this event. It consisted of four rather large and heavy (some 4 tons each) rectangular granite sculptures. Presently these works are included in the permanent contemporary sculpture exhibition of the Utsukushi Ga-Hara Open Air Art Museum in a mountainous Japanese landscape.

Many of Feldbergs's objects, installations and sculptures are arranged to reflect the changes caused by the daily movement of the sun. This particularity can also be seen in a sculpture made in a symposium in Santyago (Chili) in 1999.

A number of other Latvian sculptors have also explored their own ways of interpreting landscape-inspired subjects, trying to find new forms of sculpture/-landscape relationships in particular environmental settings.

Numerous granite sculptures have been installed in the rural areas of Latvia by Vilnis Titāns. They are different signs, memorials of different cultural events and toponyms, sculptural interpretations of cosmological ornaments. Typical for his earlier style are granite sculptures from the series *Mile Stones* – simple vertical forms with inscriptions of toponyms, the names of farmsteads that have been destroyed.

These mile stones as well as many other granite sculptures are designed by Latvian sculptors so that they can be demonstrated both indoors and in the open. Interpreting landscape motifs, Titāns sometimes combines stone and bronze. So, for example, he has created a poetic and vivid image of a rye field on a hot summer day where forms of the field are carved in stone, but the shimmering vibration of the hot air is suggested by expressively modelled bronze elements.

The largest of Titāns's site objects is an eight-metre high pyramid of rough stones with the names of the neighbouring farms on them. The impressive arrangement has become part of the surrounding landscape. This object is devoted to the famous folklorist, Krišjānis Barons, and it is situated at Valpene, in the Kurzeme region, near the place where Barons spent his early years.

One of Titāns's most poetical granite sculptures is placed in the countryside, on the bank of the river Daugava, as a tribute to the raftsmen and their rafts. It is a compact and rather precisely modelled image of a raft. Now there are no more raftsmen on the Daugava, but in the 1960s and even in the 1970s, one could see them quite often. The raftsmen with their long, smoothly gliding rafts, their specific calls and songs once were typical elements of the Latvian landscape.

Pauls Jaunzems (b. 1951), too, must be mentioned among those sculptors who have been inspired by the vision of landscape. He has produced several skillfully abstracted granite works the compact forms of which recall the outlines of a tree or the orb of the sun. The smoothly polished surfaces of the rounded forms reveal the layers of crystallised particles and insertions that from specific viewpoints look like fantastic landscapes. Visionary landscape settings are also suggested in some of the granite and dolomite sculptures by Igors Dobičins with contrasts of smooth and rough surfaces.

Echoes of landscape-inspired and Earth Art motifs were present at the International Sculpture Quadriennial Riga-2000. One of the leading artists of the younger generation, Aigars Bikše (b. 1969), exhibited an installation evoking the atmosphere of a graveyard and of the rich memorial art tradition in Latvia. On the wall behind Bikše's earth, wood and stone composition was a monumental wreath of green branches by Kristaps Gulbis (b. 1967). The author of this work is an active participant in the international *Art in Nature* symposia movement.

Recalling Henry Moore's reclining figures we may remember that his works were described as being "as solid and stable as a landscape" (Causey 1998: 24). A somewhat similar symbiosis of figural and landscape elements is typical of Ojārs Breģis. His abstract composition of a reclining figure, carved in green stone, evokes direct associations with the rounded, undulating hills of the Latvian countryside. The green slopes of hills and forests in a painted wood sculpture by Andris Vārpa (b. 1950) suggest the joyful atmosphere of a summer landscape. In a corner of the hall where the Quadriennial works were exhibited at the *Arsenāls* Contemporary Art Museum, there was an earth and stone composition, *From the Underworld to the Sky* by Pauls Jaunzems. The artist tried to draw attention to the three mythological levels in man's vision of the earth. During the Quadriennial one could see that among the works of artists from different countries landscape-inspired subjects and motifs were more recurrent and important in the

objects and installations by Latvian sculptors. Considering the active involvement of many artists with different landscape-based projects and activities not only at Pedvāle, but also at the International Art Symposia and Education Centre at Zvārtava, at Staicele and several other places in Latvia, we may hope that subjects, motifs and new concepts revealing the interrelations of landscape and art, and landscape and culture, will continue to play an important role in future decades.

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