

Struck by Beauty, Struck by Tragedy: Alexandre Hogue's *Drouth Stricken Area*
Anthony Jiang

The inhospitable wasteland painted by Alexandre Hogue may not seem radical today, but when it was completed in 1932, it constituted a bold repudiation of the public misconception that Americans were improving the land.¹ At the time, Americans believed they could ignore the ecology of the Great Plains and plow up the wild grasses and degrade the soil cover without any harm. Hogue knew otherwise. Having spent his childhood on his sister's ranch near Dalhart, Texas, he developed a respect for nature that influenced his *Erosion* series of paintings that includes *Drouth Stricken Area*.²

In this painting, man's presence is battered by the very land it seeks to harness. The shack on the right is slowly collapsing, while a nearby road is being reclaimed by the land. Sand dunes swallow the abandoned house, burying evidence of human occupation. The windmill's blades are broken and its pump dry, condemning the last remnant of man's imprint on the environment, the emaciated cow. The wind, having already dismantled the windmill's blades, now threatens yet another "duster."

Hogue's use of crisp forms further the impression of desolation and rejection by making his fictional world feel tangible.³ The sweeping curvilinear lines of the sand contrast with the hard-edged rectilinear forms of the man-made structures, thus accentuating the incompatibility of man's hubris with nature and the destruction wrought on both. This was part of a technique he developed called "psycho-reality." By arranging symbols and forms to create a fictional depiction imbued with both reality and emotion, Hogue gives the viewer a richer understanding of his perspective.⁴ The emphasis on this style was also informed by his studies in the 1920s with the Taos Society of Artists, where came to believe that expressing the emotions associated with an area, the "locality," was more important than expressing the objective reality.⁵ Indeed, this is what differentiates it from the visually similar Surrealism. Hogue's psycho-reality is embedded in reality, while surrealism is an artistic treatment of the dream world.⁶ Here, his "psycho-reality" is a nightmarish revelation of the Dust Bowl.

This view was unique among American artists. Other artists, encouraged by the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration, celebrated the resilience of ordinary Americans while downplaying the environmental destruction.⁷ Hogue denounced this deception, believing "to record [the drouth's] beautiful moments without its tragedy would be false indeed."⁸ He was so steadfast in his view that he initially declined to work for the WPA.⁹ His criticism of American farmers' actions was so controversial, that when *Life Magazine* featured *Drouth Stricken Area* and two other paintings from the *Erosion* series in its June 1937 issue, it angered Texans who claimed that the paintings misrepresented their state and would harm tourism.¹⁰

Alexandre Hogue grew up with a deep respect for the land. He centered his artistic ideology around it, embedding deep emotional connections to nature in his work. When irresponsible American farmers ruined his beloved land, he poured his disappointment into the mournful "psycho-reality" of *Drouth Stricken Area*.

¹ Ann K. Hartvigsen, "The Terrifying and the Beautiful: An Ecocritical Approach to Alexandre Hogue's Erosion Series," (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 2015), 2.

² Mark Andrew White, "Alexandre Hogue's Passion: Ecology and Agribusiness in The Crucified Land," *Great Plains Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (2006): 20.

³ K.R. Edwards, *Midcentury Modern Art in Texas* (University of Texas Press, 2014), 36.

⁴ White, 72.

⁵ Polyxeni Potter, "The Ecology of Wrath," *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 19, no. 10 (October 2013): 1717, <https://doi.org/10.3201/eid1910.AC1910>.

⁶ Susie Kalil, *Alexandre Hogue: An American Visionary--Paintings and Works on Paper* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2011), 65.

⁷ Hartvigsen, 20.

⁸ Potter, 1717.

⁹ Elizabeth Tobey and Ann Prentice Wagner, "Dust and Drought," *The American Experience in the Classroom*, n.d., <http://americanexperience.si.edu/historical-eras/the-great-depression-wwii/pair-dust-bowl-valley-farms/>.

¹⁰ Tobey and Wagner.