

ARTFUL ACTS OF (PRAIRIE) RESTORATION: THE LANDSCAPE PAINTINGS OF KEITH JACOBSHAGEN

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Abstract: A kind of intense close reading and hands-on application of knowledge, prairie restoration is a transforming and transformative engagement. According to Cornelia Mutel, ecologist and historian of science, “Restoration ecology is the art and science of healing nature by reinstating the native biodiversity and ecological processes that once defined a given region [it] thus aims to reassemble our fractured native communities so they can once again function as diverse, self-sustaining units.” While awareness and practice of the *science* of prairie restoration has grown rapidly in recent years, the craft, resonance, and interpretive power of prairie landscape *art* is less well known and appreciated. Since traveler and artist George Catlin first painted the grasslands of western Iowa in the 1830s, a small but influential group of artists who focused on the American prairie (among them Albert Bierstadt, Grant Wood, and Georgia O’Keeffe) emerged and with a range of contemporary painters now constitute what some art historians call a turn-of-the-twenty-first-century Prairie/Plains School. A master of this school, Keith Jacobshagen (b. 1941) not only evokes the profound spatial and tonal qualities of the prairie, but also engages a more fundamental gesture. Insofar as his extraordinary paintings address what for many appears as emptiness or a useless void by providing new ways to see, sustain, and thus be sustained, he is, by the nature of his art, a restorer of the prairie. Based on interviews with Jacobshagen and a selection of his paintings, I will discuss (his) art making as prairie restoration.