

River to Infinity—The Vanishing Points

Andréa Stanislav

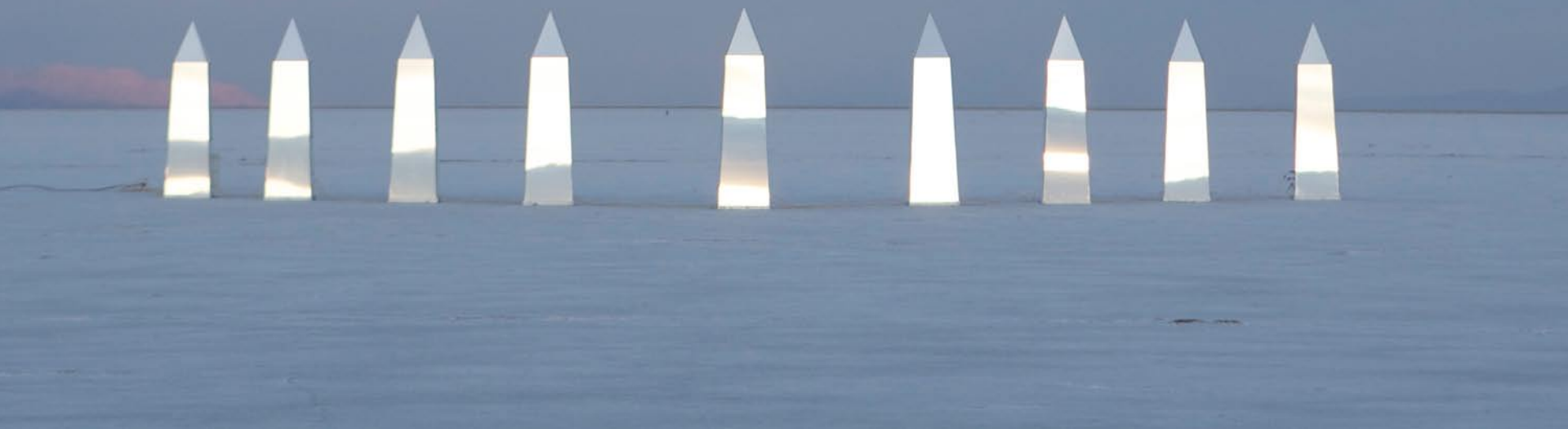




Photo by Andréa Stanislav

## River to Infinity—The Vanishing Points

by Jan Garden Castro

Jean Cocteau was a fabulist—a lover of splendid vistas, and bodies, and mirrors, and stories that became timeless parables about truth and beauty, illusion and reality, life and death. We all know the basic plot of Cocteau’s film, *Beauty and the Beast*, but it is timely to consider how it presents a dilemma we face today. Beauty’s well-meaning father ignores his host’s warning and steals a rose—just as Augustine plucked a pear in his youth and later pondered the notion of guilt in his *Confessions*—but Beauty’s father, unlike Augustine, has no idea he has harmed nature, and if he has trespassed on his host’s property, he’s a “so-what?” kind of guy. His innocent act of wanting to fulfill his daughter’s simple-sounding request is going to have multiple consequences he has not considered.

We might extrapolate that in the same way the first settlers did not *intend* to steal land from the Native Americans; to partly destroy that land in search of gold and oil; to pollute that land; and, in return, to herd the Native Americans onto reservations; to provide blankets carrying smallpox, and, generally, to set into motion the disenfranchisement of

Native Americans along with the settlers’ enthusiastic quest for more land, power, money, and oil that, given global developments over succeeding years, has turned the world into a self-polluting and self-destructing battleground. But things don’t seem that bad, do they? Is it because we see only what we choose to see?

This is artist Andréa Stanislav’s finely-executed point. Today we dwell increasingly in the wonderlands of our iPods, BlackBerries, big-screen televisions, movies, and in mirrors and other self-reflecting surfaces that give us not the real thing, but surrogates. Most of us have neither the time nor the courage to kayak through the Grand Canyon or ski down Mount Everest or ride a camel from Amarna to Luxor. So we’re left watching *Little Big Man* and *Nature* on cable TV, as the real Native Americans remain more or less as hidden as the few remaining patches of wilderness. We have to make a huge effort to see them, and, even with great effort, what we see is literally vanishing before our eyes.

This is Plato’s metaphorical message in *Allegory of the Cave*—we can’t see the sun (truth, the good, wisdom) because we’re stuck in the

cave/society we have constructed to protect ourselves from the unknown beyond the cave.

Stanislav gives new teeth to the allegories of Cocteau and Plato. She uses the river—the symbol of Westward expansion, and the vanishing point—the illusion that two parallel lines meet somewhere in the far distance—as potent metaphors illustrating today’s quandary: outside of our sanitized and romanticized big-screen versions of vanishing species, we’re literally destroying the wilderness and the natives we profess to respect. Stanislav uses these images to remind us of the nineteenth-century notion of “Manifest Destiny,”—begun in the 1840s to justify turning the western territories into states, revived in 1890s to justify U.S. military support, interventions, and invasions beyond U.S. borders, and continuing today in Afghanistan, Iraq, and various military bases around the world.

On a virtual tour of the world Stanislav has invented, we find a doubly reflecting, mirrored river. If we venture to peer into it, which we do, it carries us into infinity. As the river snakes around us, we see hundreds of selves. In the center of the stepping-stones, a soundtrack audible only from the center of the river brings into focus a two-channel video projection at the end points of the river. We see nine mirrored obelisks lit by the setting sun in the desolate Utah salt flats. Amazingly, they burst into flames and explode in a choreographed execution-style finale. The sun has set on the obelisk, a power symbol from ancient times to the present. Exploding a controlling structure pays tribute to Michelangelo Antonioni’s 1970 film, *Zabriskie Point*, in which a character hallucinates that her family’s ranch house blows up. Our perceptions begin to change. The video images offer one view, and the unbroken, fallen obelisks in a crystalline formation just beyond the river, offer a second vista. The two competing narratives are symbolic images of collapse. Fallen obelisks become ruins, artifacts of a ruthless age.

We are drawn into the next space where two headless horses encrusted with rhinestones—the artist’s invention—rotate slowly. Are they real or cloned? Why are they headless? We see, too, four shadowy images that Edward Curtis once made of living Native Americans and charts that contrast war strategies and astrology. Are both sciences less than true? The four images and the headless horses may or may not relate to the Bible’s Book of Revelation and to Albrecht Dürer’s woodcut, *The Four Horsemen* (of the Apocalypse)—Death, War, Famine, and Pestilence.

Stanislav’s body of work has multiple correspondences with aesthetic theory, the sciences, and humanities, starting with Jean Baudrillard,

the French cultural theorist who was fascinated with America’s quest to achieve Utopia. His notion of “Simulacra and Simulation,” inspired by a Jorge Luis Borges story, posits that sometimes the map is not just a double or a mirror of the territory—but precedes it. In Stanislav’s version of this, the salt flats mirrored in the obelisks and in the video are more real than the desert alone. Without these interventions, viewers would never see these salt flats at this moment in time. What’s more, the real desert scene involved vehicles, equipment, a pyrotechnic expert, our artist/director, and her crew. The video does not literally picture this yet figuratively embodies the physical acts leading to the digital images. Stanislav wants viewers to be seduced by her exploding metaphor and, at the same time, to wake up to the falsehood of the myriad illusions in our daily lives.

There is also a metaphor inside the metaphor. We are both the voyeurs and the victims of our own actions. The decline of species, habitats, and native peoples points to the beginning of the end of the natural world. Al Gore’s film, *An Inconvenient Truth* underscores that humans are creating pollutants and are complicit in their own demise. In an interview in March 2007, Dr. Peter Raven, renowned biodiversity researcher, cited climate change, atmospheric poisoning, and rapid decline of species, and other factors as contributing to a looming biodiversity crisis.

“River to Infinity—The Vanishing Points” is the culmination of ten years of prior works that transform Stanislav’s ideas about Manifest Destiny into sculptural and audiovisual environments involving maps, mirrors, and obelisks. The twenty-one mirrored obelisks of *1000 Kisses* (2001) inspired viewers to create a kissing fest in three harmonizing sound zones. The Baudrillard-inspired, experiential *Double Obscenity* (2003) gave viewers swinging on facing swings between mirrored maps of the United States the vertiginous feeling of falling into a canyon of mirrors. Viewers who punctured the pink bubble-wrap maps of *Bubble* (2005) and *Bubble II* (2005) were deflating the conceits of countries with environmental and political conflicts. Viewers participated subconsciously in the layered audio rhythms, scale, and surreal and horrific images in the three-channel video installation, *Flashland* (2007). The obelisks have also been seen “on the road,” standing in the waters of the Atlantic Ocean like the Pilgrims of old, and facing the Washington Monument.

Stanislav’s *River to Infinity—The Vanishing Points* at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts continues the note of reflectivity in her nearby public art commission, *The Garden of Iron Mirrors* (2007). The work sites banded taconite boulders, one of the densest and heaviest materials

in the world, in the landscape surrounding the building on the east bank of the Mississippi River, where the taconite pellet process was developed in the 1940s. The invention of electro-magnetic processes to extract iron ore from taconite boosted the state's foundering economy. *The Garden of Iron Mirrors* reflects the formal beauty of the stone and signifies its transformation from giant geological formations into the end product: pure, polished stainless steel. *The Garden* is, in some ways, an antidote for "River to Infinity—The Vanishing Points," joining history, memory, geology, nature, and human ingenuity. However, the real river, sadly, is polluted and exploited.

As we return to the obelisks with their many prior lives, we must conclude that they appear to be dead or dying. Manifest Destiny has collapsed. *Infinity*—or "unboundedness,"—anything from a luxury car's

moniker, to infinite multiples to declining species—is not the answer. Our only hope is that phoenix-like, the installation will recharge *our* batteries—passing the torch so that we may invent new directions for our country. Looking at our own reflections, one of Stanislav's many messages may be that pluralism is the new face of global survival. We must each find, within ourselves, new metaphors and means of preservation.

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The views expressed here are those of the writer and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts.



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**River to Infinity—The Vanishing Points #3 (detail)**, 2007, mixed media, 240" x 102" x 87"  
Photo by Rik Sferra

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MINNESOTA ARTISTS EXHIBITION PROGRAM

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## River to Infinity—The Vanishing Points

Installation by Andréa Stanislav

January 25 to March 16, 2008  
Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program Gallery

**Opening Reception**  
Thursday, January 24, at 7 P.M., MAEP Gallery

**Gallery Talk**  
Thursday, January 31, at 7 P.M., MAEP Gallery

**Critics' Trialogue**  
Thursday, February 21, at 7 P.M., MAEP Gallery  
*With critic Chris Atkins*

ALL EVENTS ARE FREE AND OPEN TO THE PUBLIC.

For more information about the artist,  
this exhibition, and MAEP, visit  
[andreastanislav.com](http://andreastanislav.com)

MAEP: [www2.artsmia.org/wiki](http://www2.artsmia.org/wiki)