

INTERVIEW ([HTTPS://BOMBMAGAZINE.ORG/FORMAT/INTERVIEW/](https://bombmagazine.org/format/interview/))

Miles Huston by Louis Bury

Mixing the grid with geology.

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Miles Huston didn't appear to have an artist's website, so I asked him just to be sure. He confirmed that he doesn't and told me his Instagram account effectively functions as one. But when I searched for him there, I still couldn't find anything. I haven't asked again because I enjoy the idea that his art practice might not have a centralized, explanatory web presence. It feels fitting for work that explores the extent to which its ideas can be self-evident through visual presentation.

Whether organizing his watering-can collection into charming installations, embedding mixed-media agricultural imagery and text inside wall-hanging frames, or drawing nests of colorful geometric patterns, Huston's design background manifests in his work's compositional economy. We met to discuss his current exhibition, *Overshoot* (<https://thealdrich.org/exhibitions/miles-huston-overshoot>), in which soiled and unfolded produce boxes are displayed beneath aerial photographs of mid-century US farms. These curious pairings are at once tactile and cerebral, jokey and earnest, simple and complex—everything you could ask for from art if you know how to look for it.

Louis Bury

Where does your interest in agriculture come from?

Miles Huston

It took time to get to agriculture, but my interest in the environment began with my mother, who studied whales and meteorology. She worked for a nonprofit, Clean Harbors, in Boston. Later she worked for Chemical Waste Management as a field manager, remediating hazardous waste sites. When she passed away from non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, we wondered if her work played a role in getting the disease.

AMY SHERALD

(https://whitney.org/admission?utm_source=bomb&utm_medium=leaderboard&utm_campaign=amy_sherald)

LB

I'm sorry for your loss.

MH

Thanks. After she passed away, I was in my twenties, and my dad moved back to Ohio. I started learning more about Midwestern agriculture and the geology of wetlands and lakes around it. I was already doing projects about the relationship between nature and the built environment, going back to when I studied interrogative design with Krzysztof Wodiczko at MIT. It all came together when I figured out that the history of agriculture was basically the history of the world and an umbrella term for what humans do on the planet, from technological advance to state formation.

LB

What's interrogative design?

MH

It's a way to reframe a problem, usually through an intervention, to question who speaks for whom. The intervention is a design solution geared toward making framing visible so one envisions a kind of nested structure of competing contexts, histories, materials, or programs. Formally, this could be described by the Charles and Ray Eames's *Powers of Ten* film.



(<https://dumboopenstudios.com>)





(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Miles-Huston-Nichols-Farm-Saline-County-MI-Detail-3.jpg)

Detail of Miles Huston, *Nichols Farm, Saline County, MI*, 2024, vintage aerial C-print, waxed cardboard, Medium Density Fiberboard, acrylic, 68 × 24.75 × 1.5 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Gordon Robichaux, New York City.

LB

That film is great! It focuses an overhead camera on two picnickers as the camera zooms out, by factors of ten, deep into outer space. What got you interested in aerial photography?

MH

I was first enchanted by agricultural-drone harvest videos. My friend and painter Cynthia Daignault pointed out that Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* contained a similar view. That led me to W. H. Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts," an ekphrastic poem of that painting. In it, Auden describes "how everything turns away / Quite leisurely from the disaster," but why? It occurred to me that the perspective Bruegel gives the viewer—the God view, the place where Auden is literally standing—could be a solution that unifies each individual's experience of Icarus falling. It's an epistemological advance, which today is facilitated through geo-spatial technology and accessible on our phones.

LB

The title of your exhibition, *Overshoot*, has a double sense: to take photographic images from above and also to go beyond an environment's carrying capacity as defined by William Catton Jr. Why did you use archival aerial images of farms for it?

MH

I wanted to go back to when a view from above was first becoming widely available, pre-GPS. I found this immense archive started in the 1950s by State Aerial Statistics, now a searchable database run by Vintage Aerial. The photographs were used for census purposes but were primarily sold to individual families. I noticed two things in these images. The first is a deep sense of nostalgia for the family homestead captured, obviously, by a plane flying horizontally overhead; however, I could also look at them as a stage of vertical progress in our collective technological ascent to our current, novel above position. Like the Eames film, we have been slowly rising over decades to get to where we are now, which for me carries both a feeling of excitement and a lament that something will never be the same.



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LB

Underneath each image you've included a soiled, vertically oriented vegetable box. The boxes bring the images down to earth and add a touch of comedy.

MH

I wanted to estrange the boxes, unfold them flat, highlighting their two-dimensional design so that I could think about how they were made and how they got here. I like boxes with generic messaging about freshness and quality that ironically points back to the homestead as the source. The sad joke is that the efficacy of a food system based on a network of cute homesteads, which both right and left YouTubers idealize, is not going to save us.



(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Miles-Huston-Rickert-Farm-Little-Valley-NY-3.jpg)

Rickert Farm, Little Valley, New York, 1963. Courtesy of the artist and Vintage Aerial, Ltd.

LB

A lot of contemporary art relies on explanatory apparatuses to render its intentions legible, but your work seeks to do that, as much as possible, through its design.

MH

Yes, you really don't want to be confronted by evidence and data with art. There still has to be a base feeling or some kind of unnerving magic unfolding in the moment.

“I don’t want to create a one-sided didactic experience; I want inner conflict and contradiction on display.”

— Miles Huston

LB

How do you deal with that presentation problem?

MH

The best word I’ve come up with is *demonstration*. I like the idea that it shows you how to do something—an all-purpose knife advertised on QVC, say—but also can be a protest against something at the same time, such as all the other implements you currently have in your kitchen drawer. Like we spoke about earlier, an intervention should make framing and its externalities visible. So this knife cuts, slices, and dices; it replaces everything you ever knew about knives, so much so that you might as well redesign your kitchen because you don’t need that drawer anymore. But for this to be effective, it also needs an audience observing an action and forming a consensus in that moment to negotiate over what to do with these obsolete knives. I don’t want to create a one-sided didactic experience; I want inner conflict and contradiction on display.

LB

How might your drawings’ use of self-imposed procedures fit with your other, superficially different-seeming styles of work?

MH

My drawings derive from a class I took on biophilic design in Yale’s forestry school under Stephen Kellert. The goal was to design an irregular, infinitely repeating pattern that could be seen as a “natural” pattern rather than a rigid one, like a brick wall. They’re a nice counterbalance in terms of their making, and there’s also overlap in that the drawings involve lots of layering and top-down spatial thinking, reduced to color and shape. In my recent Gordon Robichaux exhibition, *Verse*, people kept asking if the drawings were representations of farms, like from a plane, which was funny. I agreed, but not as literal representations and instead as related to patterns of expansion and contraction in a landscape that mixes a grid with geology.



(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Miles-Huston-Overshoot-4.jpg)

Installation view of *Miles Huston: Overshoot*, 2024–25. The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, Connecticut. Courtesy of the artist and The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum.

LB

Abstraction is a term of value for someone like the philosopher Benjamin Bratton because it's impersonal and allows humans to see the big, systemic picture. But, talking together, I'm struck by your work's push-pull between its impersonal design elements and its personal backstory.

MH

That's interesting. Maybe all of my work is about my mom, the loss, and my trying to have a communal experience with her. From my conversations with Big Agriculture farmers, I see a gap in understanding, which I'm somewhat sympathetic toward, given that a one-degree change in global temperature can create a policy change that makes it illegal to do a process locally. This comes from the same government that enabled you to take on the debt to implement said process so you could "feed the world." I see why farmers deny climate change, not as a scientific reality, which I think they believe, but because it is often politicized.

LB

How might the god's-eye view factor into that?

MH

Access to this view is having a profound impact, not only financially, but insofar as these same farmers now see themselves in a landscape with others, especially with those who are downstream of their chemical runoff. The technology smuggles in an environmentalist conceit just by using it. Bratton is right to ask whether this stack view should be governed or become a new form of governance. Daniel Schmachtenberger is right to ask whether technology is neutral in its values. Vanessa Machado is right to ask if our need to classify and value everything separately in an economy distorts our notion of being “one with the Earth.” There is a big abstraction between what we have to do together as a species to survive and what we assume is our God-given right to buy whatever we want, anytime. I don’t have an answer; I am just exploring the feeling between it all.

Miles Huston: [Overshoot \(https://thealdrich.org/exhibitions/miles-huston-overshoot\)](https://thealdrich.org/exhibitions/miles-huston-overshoot) *is on view at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut, until January 5.*

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Louis Bury is the author of *The Way Things Go* and *Exercises in Criticism*, and Professor of English at Hostos Community College, CUNY.

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