RE:GEN

Michael Takeo Magruder

ERATED

Robert M Geraci

Green Oaks _ MMXXV

PRAIRIE

+040.974238,-090.088654

‘This biota, through ten thousand years of living and dying, burning and growing, preying and fleeing, freezing and thawing, built that dark and bloody ground we call prairie.’

Aldo Leopold
A Survey of Conservation, c.1938

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Rubus fruticosus (Blackberry), Dried specimen
Green Oaks Biological Field Station, 24 May 2008
Collector: Ewurama Abaka-Sampson
Department of Biology, Knox College

For Dr Mary Kent Knight

whose vision, generosity, and ongoing support
made *re:Generated Prairie* possible

re:Generated Prairie is a new exhibition by British-American visual artist Michael Takeo Magruder that explores the renewal of the world and human interconnections between nature and technology by creatively reimagining his experiences of Knox College's Green Oaks Biological Field Station.

The artworks – ranging from digital prints and canvases to algorithmic 4K videos and soundscapes – have been created exclusively from mobile phone recordings captured by the artist and his academic collaborator, Prof Robert M Geraci. Through a complex and iterative dialogue between the artist and AI, Takeo reconstructs this source material into vignettes that consider our relationship to the prairie, from the annual controlled burn to the subsequent restoration of the grasslands.

The prairie burn is a moment where humanity takes seriously its obligation toward nature: it replaces accident with intention and emphasizes our crucial role as active participants in the regeneration of the world. *re:Generated Prairie* invites us to reflect on the cyclical processes of death and rebirth within the entangled systems of science, religion, nature, and culture.

Installation view of *re:Generated Prairie*
Borzello Art Gallery, Ford Center for the Fine Arts, Knox College
16–30 September 2025

RE:GENERATED PRAIRIE

ART AND THE REMAKING OF THE WORLD

By imaging and imagining the controlled burn and regrowth of the prairie, Michael Takeo Magruder reckons with our connections with nature, our desire to renew the world, and the technological mediation of both.

Art pursues fundamental forces. The painted rocks that stand under the open sky and on walls buried deep in hidden caverns – these are prodigious acts of meaning-making, a pursuit of transcendence and purpose inscribed in the natural environment.[1] The artistic search for truth is old; but millennia later, it was common for powerful institutions to overdetermine the narratives. This hold loosened when 20th century artists reclaimed what had been managed and mastered by theological doctrine. Wassily Kandinsky threw aside realism and religion both in his effort to "feed the spirit" through art's prophetic strength.[2] His contemporary, Constantin Brancusi, elevated us from the ground on which we stand: *Bird in Space* and *Endless Column* draw us upward while the artist's attention to the materiality of his creations restored sanctity to the natural world.[3]

Brancusi's sacralization of matter (e.g., bringing flight to stone) and his reinvention of "folk" and "primitive" art feel counterintuitive in an age of mechanical reproduction, digital transcendence, and the ongoing development and deployment of artificial intelligence (AI). And yet, his transcendent marble helps us understand the sights and sounds of Takeo's *re:Generated Prairie*.

Drawing nature into the gallery, Takeo drives home the technological mediation at the heart of our relationship with the environment. We cannot access the world "as such," but only through our intellectual frameworks.[4] If the world does not present itself immediately to thought, how much more does our re-presentation of the world require interpretation? Our representation of the world is through our technol-

1 See an echo of this in Joseph Campbell, The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology (New York: Penguin, [1959] 1981).

2 Wassily Kandinsky, Concerning the Spiritual in Art, translated by M.T.H. Sadler (New York: Dover, [1911] 1977).

3 Mircea Eliade, Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Arts, edited by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (New York: Crossroad, [1964] 1985).

4 Immanuel Kant, Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics, edited by Lewis White Black (New York: Library of Liberal Arts, [1783] 1950).

ogies, and the artifice of post-industrial technology makes this more obvious. We cannot know how painters in the dark of Lascaux or at the walls of Mesa Verde thought about the ink, the brush, the light of torches, or the stone of their canvas. But we naturalized those (and later) techniques only to be shocked each time innovation dragged us into the future.

Walter Benjamin famously complained that photography lacks the "aura" of true art, that its infinite replicability was an insurmountable obstacle to the artistic experience, leaving behind only politics.[5] Benjamin's influence was wide-ranging and the politicization of art became a defining feature of aesthetic theory in the work of mid-century critique. Nevertheless, while they spoke truly of their political fears (fears that this age of deepfakes and AI hallucinations can only exacerbate), Marcel Duchamp had already upended traditional notions of what constitutes art. There is no longer question as to whether photography is an art. Instead, in our own century we have come to a rather mature question: why is the art object art?[6]

Without doubt, AI compels us to this question and many more. Takeo's regeneration of the image, his reconfiguration of what the eye can see and the mind can think awakens us to the inescapable: our modern view is always through a technological lens. As impressionism challenged the audience to experience nature rather than pursue its realistic capture, *re:Generated Prairie* challenges the viewer to witness nature and its processes while recognizing that the witnessing, itself, must be seen, acknowledged, and experienced.

Theodor Adorno saw art in pursuit of truth that always breaks with empirical reality;[7] in such a way, *re:Generated Prairie* puts us in contact with the grassland, with the burn and the growth. That contact is tenuous, deliberately so through the technique of the digital camera, the manipulation of the image, and its reconstitution through the artist's use of AI. The artworks invoke nature, all the more so through their technological composition. Perhaps our own technological dependence is at the root of our encounter with Takeo's canvas tapestries and loops of regenerated video.

The tangibility of the canvas and the pull of cinematic landscapes offer a partial glimpse into the prairie (through a camera darkly?), and the inclusion of ghostly witnesses from the past match this fragile access. The work of Takeo's predecessors at Green Oaks rests in the archival resources that offer context for modern technique. Beginning with a survey of the land, then drawing a path across photographic technologies from glass plate negatives to airborne photography to the smartphone itself, the archive witnesses the reconfiguration of the lens through which we encounter land. The inclusion of a plant sampled and saved from the prairie, *Rubus fruticosus*, speaks also to the scientific witness that pervades *re:Generated Prairie*. The flower is and is not a part of the landscape and its history. It has relocated to the scientific archive and was displayed in the art gallery alongside the digitally re-generated photographs of other prairie flora.

Artificial intelligence technologies are part of a cataclysmic rush to capitalist profit, as ill-mannered technocrats "move fast and break things." But the prairie teaches us a different lesson, one that perhaps reinvigorates our artistic imagination. The prairie burns – a mixture of accident and intention – in order to open creative space, not to foreclose the world. Entrepreneurs point to AI as a "game changer" but Takeo reinforces the power of human intent, bringing the technology into *his* process. In an age of AI, art should follow his lead: art must reject the banal and destruction for its own sake. Instead, art must find opportunities to draw on new techniques in ways that create different visions for humanity.

In the emergence of new life from the burning prairie, we reflect on our hopes of renewal and redemption. The cycle that brings flowers from the ash, as traced in *re:Generated Prairie*, speaks to these braided patterns of religious ritual, human cognition, and the natural world. The burn that might happen becomes the burn that must happen. The very existence of the prairie depends on the fire, and the life of that prairie could not be distinguished from the needs of people who hunted bison, managed the land, and thus directed the first controlled burns. The colonization of the land and extermination of the bison are perhaps accelerants for our own contemporary need to experience a regeneration of our world and of our selves.

The post-burn growth experienced, documented, and re-envisioned by Takeo's *re:Generated Prairie* recreates our relationship to history and to the natural environment. Takeo points toward our necessary role in the regeneration of the world, especially because the future of our world is uncertain. The prairie burn at Green Oaks is a moment where humanity takes seriously its obligation toward nature. It replaces accident with intention, an intention that gets reconceived in Takeo's own participation in the Knox College tradition. The artist's eye opens our perception to the growth that follows on death, and to the intertwining realities of science, religion, nature, and culture.

Dr Robert M Geraci
Knight Distinguished Chair for the Study of Religion & Culture
Knox College

5 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Illuminations: Essays and Reflections, edited by Hannah Arendt, pp. 217-251 (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World [1935] 1968).

6 Arthur Danto, After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

7 Theodor Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, translated by Robert Hullet-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).


EXIT

ARCHIVING GREEN OAKS

The archival documentation of Green Oaks is not merely a matter of historical record; it is a means of preserving complex systems of knowledge about landscapes, ecosystems, and the human interventions that have shaped them. In the case of prairies and prairie burns, archival sources provide critical evidence of ecological change and management practices, while also revealing the wider cultural values that guided how the land has been understood, categorized, and used.

It is important to acknowledge that long before the advent of written surveys or institutional field stations, Indigenous peoples and nations across the midwestern region of North America maintained (and maintain) sophisticated systems of ecological knowledge. Through oral traditions, ritual practices, and lived stewardship, these communities recorded and transmitted their insights of prairie ecology across generations. Fire was one of the central tools for prairie management; intentional, seasonal burns sustained biodiversity, encouraged the growth of plants for food and medicine, and ensured the resilience of grassland ecosystems. These knowledge systems were profoundly disrupted by colonization. Much has been lost due to the erasure of Indigenous voices from official records and the privileging of written documentation over oral or embodied traditions. What survives does so in fragmented form, underscoring the gaps as much as the continuities in archival collections, including those held by Knox College.

Within the College's early settler archives, one such example is Nicholas Biddle Van Zandt's *A Full Description of the Soil, Water, Timber, and Prairies…* (1818, see figure 10). Produced as a survey of the Military Tract in what is now western Illinois (see figures 5 and 6), the volume catalogued resources in each quarter section of land for the purpose of speculation and settlement. While framed by a commodifying logic – land as resource, prairie as potential farm – it now functions as an ecological baseline. It offers rare textual evidence of prairies, forests, and waterways at the threshold of large-scale agricultural transformation.

By the late 19th century, photography emerged as a valuable and increaingly common mode of documentation. In the first half of the 20th century, Allen Ayrault Green recorded the Green Oaks landscape in images that are simultaneously artistic and documentary. His glass plate negatives (see figure 1) alongside his and other photographers' gelatin silver prints (see figures 2 and 3) not only capture physical features of the environment but also reflect historical aesthetics and cultural values, revealing what was considered worth recording during that period. They literally and metaphorically frame the prairie for viewers.

The establishment of Green Oaks Biological Field Station in 1955 (now the Green Oaks Field Research Center) added a new layer of archival record-keeping. Aerial photographs from the 1950s through the 1970s (see figures 4 and 9) provide visual evidence of ecological succession, restoration, and land-use change. Hand-drawn maps and administrative regulations by the College's biologists and environmental scientists (see figures 7 and 8) reveal how the institution formalized its stewardship, positioning Green Oaks as both a site of ecological research and an educational "living laboratory."

In the context of prairie burns, the importance of documentation becomes especially clear given that each instance is a complex ecological and cultural intervention. Scrapbooks and records about Green Oaks detail when and how annual burns were conducted. These reveal the evolving shifts in prairie management and demonstrate continuities with the long-standing practices of Indigenous communities.

Taken together, these varied sources – oral traditions, settler surveys, photographs, aerial views, maps, and institutional records – constitute a layered archive of prairie history. This range of historical material reveals the ways in which landscapes are shaped by both natural processes and human decision-making. Archival documentation is, in this sense, itself a form of ecological stewardship. By preserving evidence of the prairie and its management across time, the Green Oaks archive not only illuminates what has been lost but also provides a foundation for imagining what might be restored.

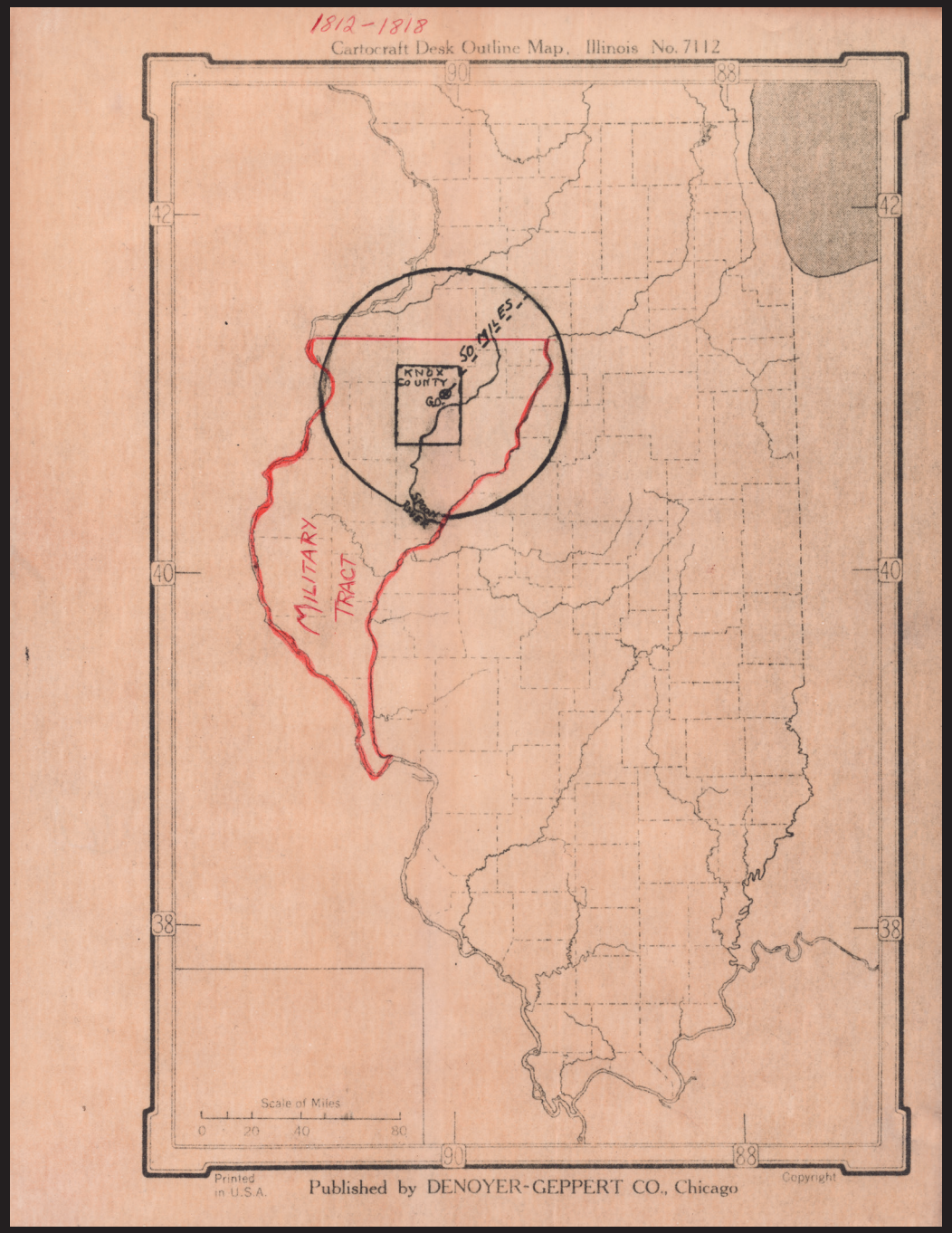
Joseph Taylor
Archives and Special Collections Librarian
Seymour Library, Knox College

FIGURE 1 (LEFT)
Glass Plate Slides of Green Oaks, c.1898–1910, 10 × 12.5 cm
Photographer: Allen Ayrault Green
Special Collections & Archives, Knox College

FIGURE 2 (ABOVE)
Historic Photograph of Green Oaks
Gelatin silver print, c.early-20th century, 29 × 24 cm
Photographer: Allen Ayrault Green
Special Collections & Archives, Knox College, Green Oaks Archive: Box 23

FIGURE 3
Aerial Views of Green Oaks, Gelatin silver prints, c.1925–1935, 25 × 29 cm
Photographer: Harold M Holland
Special Collections & Archives, Knox College, Green Oaks Archive: Box 14

FIGURE 4
Aerial Views of Green Oaks
Black-and-white photographs, 1950s, 9 × 14.5 cm
Special Collections & Archives, Knox College, Green Oaks Archive: Box 23



1815-1817

The Land is Surveyed into Rectangles and These Are Numbered

The time had come to trace lines straight and square on the land.

Midwesterners of our time, not knowing the irregular, oblique, shifting, and curving contours of older landscapes, may take for granted the square patterns that were to fix farm boundaries, direct the angle of furrows and crop rows, locate roads, lay out voting precincts, school districts, townships, and other local governing authorities, and in other ways become arbitrary measuring units for information about the area on which these lines were imposed, thus disturbing, distorting, or concealing the whole and undivided truth about living groups such as groves, prairies, and societies of animals and people.

Today we are so accustomed to the rectangular land system that it is difficult to appreciate that in 1815 it was still a relative novelty, only about thirty years old as applied to the public lands of the United States. Not only the technique of surveying but also its advantages still required and deserved exposition:

> So wise, beautiful and perfect a system was never before adopted by any government or nation on earth. It is the "corte diaseise," the divided feast of Homer. The government, with a temper and spirit truly parental, has divided, for the children of the republic, that patrimony in which all have a right and an interest.[1]

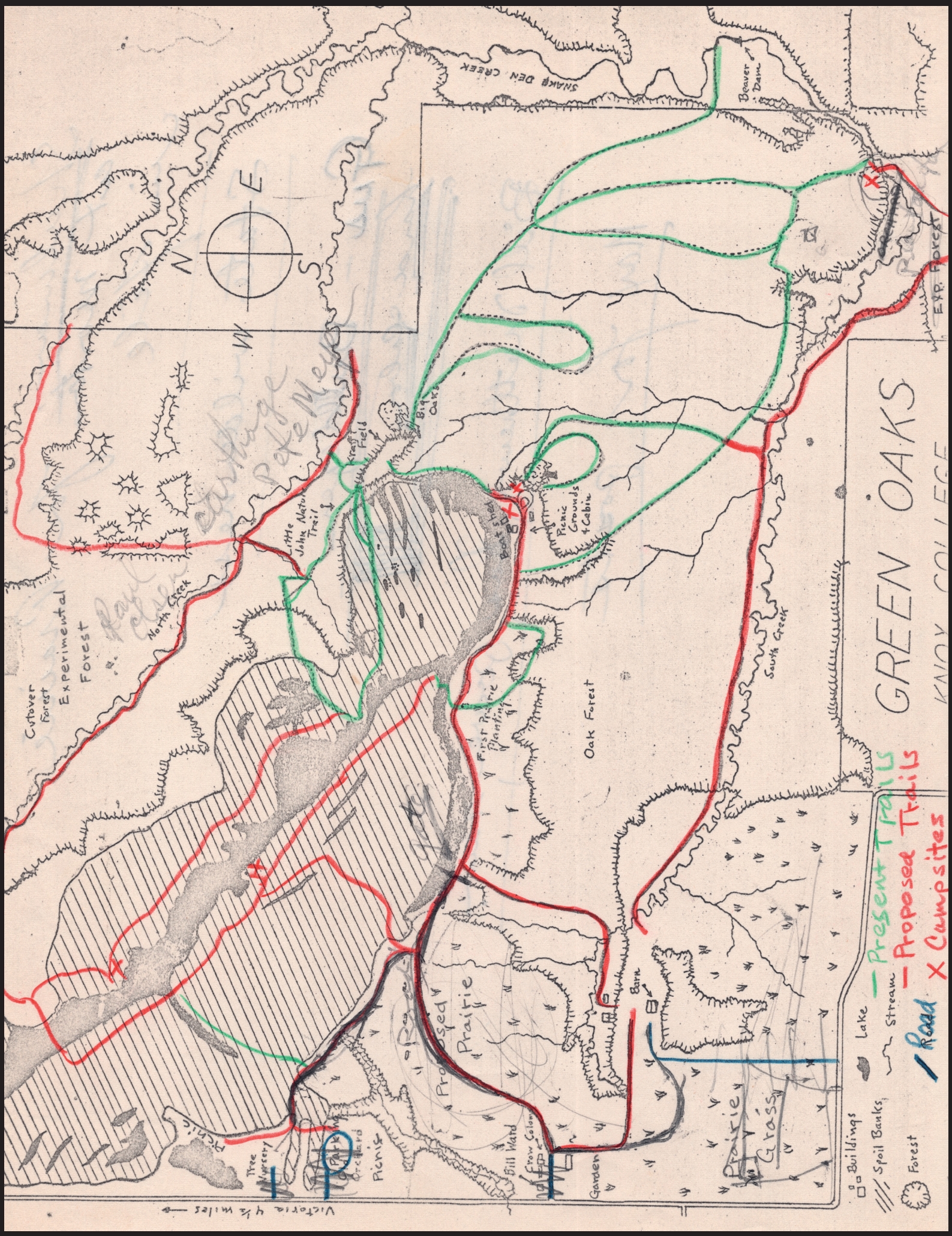
To landholders of the older states it was explained:

> Very few disputes as to limits or boundary can arise. It is a subject of regret that the spirit of this system was not, at an early day, adopted by Kentucky, Tennessee, and several other states. It has been said, that, probably, as much money is annually expended in

1. Niles' Register, July 24, 1819, p. 363.

FIGURE 5 & 6
Pages from Knox College – Green Oaks Scrapbook
Scrapbook with mixed materials, 20th century
Compiled by: Prof Herman R Muelder
Special Collections & Archives, Knox College, Green Oaks Archive: Box 21

FIGURE 7
Green Oaks Biological Field Station Map
Hand-drawn map, c. mid-20th century, 21.6 × 27.9 cm
Special Collections & Archives, Knox College, Green Oaks Archive: Box 21



enjoy this heritage and to study its intricate composition as here at Green Oaks is increasingly valuable and rare.

Location. Green Oaks is located in eastern Knox County, 3 miles south of Victoria, Ill. From Galesburg it may be reached via Ill. 150 and north through Dahinda; by way of U.S. 34 to Wataga and Ill. 169 to Victoria; or via Fremont Avenue, 17 miles east and ½ mile south.

Plans and Projects. Student research projects, workshops in nature education and planting, trail construction, class field trips, reforestration and stocking programs are being carried on during the school year. Archery, boating, swimming, and hiking are area uses. The development program envisions extension work, a conference meeting area, lodge, dormitory, research and camping facilities. An arboretum, demonstration areas, trailside museum, and a wildlife restoration program are planned or in progress.

Regulations. Fires should be built only in places provided. All plants and animals at Green Oaks are protected and should not be picked or collected without permission. Firearms are prohibited. Automobiles should be driven only on roads and parked in specified areas. Intoxicants are not permitted. Swimming in the lake must be under the direction of a qualified life guard. The lake is stocked with sunfish, catfish, and bass: you are welcome to fish with conventional hook and line. During dry periods, smoking in the woods is not advisable.

What to Bring. Wear field clothes, preferably protecting arms and legs. There are no poisonous snakes. The main hazard to hikers is poison ivy, which abounds in forest openings and parts of the spoil banks. Ticks and mosquitoes may be inhibited by the use of appropriate preventives.

Custodian. Information and aid are available at Green Oaks from Bill Ward, who lives at the entrance. Drinking water, some equipment, tools, and telephone are located at his house.

DON'T BE A LITTERBUG!

KNOX COLLEGE

Green Oaks

Welcome to Green Oaks. This 760-acre study and recreational area offers you a unique opportunity for outdoor learning and appreciation. Operated jointly by Alan Green and Knox College, it is typical glaciated upland laced with small streams that flow south into the Spoon River. Green Oaks contains 400 acres of forest, 200 acres of strip-mined or spoil bank land, and 160 acres of grass and meadow. From its upland oak forests to bottomland woods in cool, steep ravines, brushy slopes, ponds, and lake it has a variety of habitats.

Many of these areas are accessible by trails and roads. A picnic area at the edge of the lake is reached easily by car. Here, a log house is being constructed by Knox students after the pioneer homestead.

Much of Green Oaks is maintained as a natural area. As man rapidly develops and exploits most of our countryside to maintain his growing population, in the natural area are preserved communities of plants and animals in their native habitat. Here is refuge and sanctuary for all members of the plant and animal population; here is solitude and retreat for people as well. The original splendor of the great prairie of Illinois with its interspersion of forest is gone. Its boundless grasses and wildlife were sacrificed for national growth and local settlement. Almost nothing remains of the primeval scene - a few giant oaks like these at Green Oaks.

With our help, time and nature can reestablish the community of wild things. Even where the big shovels have plowed the earth and left spoil banks, a slow process of recovery leads again to the primal forest. Research into these processes is part of science; here is an outdoor laboratory for biology and related fields. Opportunity to

FIGURE 8
Green Oaks Biological Field Station Regulations
Printed rules sheet, c.mid-20th century, 21.6 × 27.9 cm
Special Collections & Archives, Knox College, Green Oaks Archive: Box 21

FIGURE 9
Aerial View of Green Oaks
Black-and-white photograph, Autumn 1970, 20.5 × 25.1 cm
Special Collections & Archives, Knox College, Green Oaks Archive: Box 23

re:Generated Prairie now takes its place in the storied history of Knox College and Green Oaks. Takeo's limited-edition set of art prints celebrating the exhibition alongside his original mobile phone recordings of the site (see figure 11) have been accessioned into the College's collections. The Archives and Special Collections at Knox College's Seymour Library are thus expanded to reflect the present environment and to provide new modes of witness for the next generation of scholars and students. (Robert M Geraci)

FIGURE 10 (LEFT)
re:Generated Prairie, 2025
Green Oaks Archive display

FIGURE 11 (ABOVE)
re:Generated Prairie, 2025
Artist photo/video archive
Takeo's Green Oaks recordings were captured between 24–30 May 2025 and used to create the *re:Generated Prairie* artworks.

Green Oaks
.burn

‘3 April 2025, almost one year from when I first visited Knox: it was a good day for burning. The winds were calm and the flames (once started) rarely rose above my head; mostly they burned low but steadily, leaving plumes of smoke in their wake. Occasionally chatting with the students who lived and studied at Green Oaks during their spring term, and who safely maintained the burn, I walked through the ashes, crouching down to watch smoke swirl amongst the burnt heaps, feeling the crumble of ash beneath my shoes. The crackle of flames was constant, the smell of smoke driving us to don masks.

It really was everything I could have hoped for: the epic feeling of post-apocalyptic transformation, the witness of destruction and the participation in something that stretched back into the distant past of the prairie itself. Wisps of smoke swirled at the ground, low-lying gusts trailed across the open field, and plumes rose into the sky. Well controlled, the fire crept forward and a stark contrast between the past and future of the grassland emerged: last year’s growth on one side, the blackened ash that prefigures the future on the other…’

Robert M Geraci
The Burn Experience, 2025

[+040.974023,-090.088431 ¦ 03/04/2025 11:30 CDT ¦ RMG]

Reconstructed Landscape{s} – Green Oaks .burn (iteration i – source data), 2025
digital photographic monoprints; archive pigment ink on pearlescent cotton paper, 60 × 40 cm [each, framed]

[+040.974023,-090.088431 ¦ 03/04/2025 11:52 CDT ¦ RMG]

[+040.974023,-090.088431 ¦ 03/04/2025 12:03 CDT ¦ RMG]

Reconstructed Landscape{s} – Green Oaks .burn (iteration i – source data), 2025
digital photographic monoprints; archive pigment ink on pearlescent cotton paper, 60 × 40 cm [each, framed]

[+040.974023,-090.088431 ¦ 03/04/2025 12:12 CDT ¦ RMG]

Reconstructed Landscape{s} – Green Oaks .burn (iteration i), 2025
digital monoprint diptych; archive pigment ink on polycotton canvas
90 × 90 cm [each, framed]

Generated from four 12MP digital photographs recorded on
an Apple iPhone SE by Robert M Geraci on 3 April 2025.

SEEDS OF DESTRUCTION?

interview by **Dr Aaron Rosen**
Executive Director, The Clemente Course in the Humanities
and Founder & Director, The Parsonage Gallery

Aaron Rosen: For a long time, we've been talking about the apocalypse, especially since your 2014 *De/coding the Apocalypse*[1] exhibition at Somerset House in London. How has your thinking about this theme – and particularly the relationship between society, technology, and destruction – changed over the past decade? Do you still see the role of technology as you did then, or are the challenges and risks ahead now more acute with the widespread deployment of artificial intelligence (AI)?

Michael Takeo Magruder: If I was producing *De/coding the Apocalypse* now, I'd certainly incorporate robotics and AI into the exhibition (specifically drones and generative neural networks). Those technologies are currently forefront in people's minds about what might prompt the end of our world. And honestly, these fears are justified given that AI is transforming and amplifying countless technological infrastructures at unprecedented speed and scale, including many with existentially destructive potential.

AR: Interestingly, AI has been invoked as an eschatological tipping point by both its strongest critics and its proponents. Some Christian nationalists like Sen Josh Hawley see this technology as diabolical or idolatrous by dint of its non-human nature. Others, like conservative tech entrepreneur Peter Thiel, believe that limiting AI's expansion is actually a mission of the Anti-christ! Neither position is exactly nuanced, and the putative moral nature they ascribe to AI, whether good or evil, is tendentious. But what do you make of the cultural positioning of their arguments? Are there better or more sensible ways to bring spiritual questions and terminology to bear on AI debates?

MTM: Although I don't subscribe to either of those extreme positions, I do believe religion can be a useful lens through which to critically assess emerging technologies. To give an example for those of the Christian faith, we can ask if AI is being developed and deployed in ways that engender "feeding the multitude" across society or simply filling the coffers of elite "money changers." If it's the latter, perhaps those who follow the ethical teachings of Christ should be seeking to address this issue and pursue a "cleansing of the temple."

AR: Switching disciplines, I recall an interesting conversation we had with a leading medical researcher on the use of AI to monitor patients and spot subtle trends in data that most physicians would be unlikely to spot during brief examinations. The researcher emphasized the importance of a 'Human in the Loop' (HITL) model, in which clinicians interpret AI analyses using their insight and experience. Where do you see other crucial places for such HITL engagement with AI?

MTM: I personally feel that the HITL paradigm is presently one of the best ways to mitigate undesirable (or even potentially disastrous) outcomes that current AI guardrails often fail to moderate. AI's ability to rapidly process complex data sets and generate results is undeniably transformative, but its 'black box' nature and tendency to 'hallucinate' untruths requires a cautious approach. Ensuring humans are kept 'in the loop' can absolutely provide robust checks and mechanisms for 'firebreaks' based on expert judgment.

AR: If only we lived in an era that valued expert judgment! How would you describe your own engagement with AI in your work? Would it be more accurate to say you are 'in the loop' or rather that you're bringing AI into your own loop as the creator or generator of images?

MTM: I'm unquestionably bringing AI into my 'loop' since I retain full artistic control over the conceptual and aesthetic decisions within the creative process. This is not dissimilar to how I use traditional editing programs, but AI does blur some longstanding boundaries between digital creators and their tools. As the complex algorithms of AI models are derived from large scale analysis of real-world 'big data,' they provide fundamentally different and often greatly expanded capabilities over previous software offerings; but their inscrutable and unpredictable nature requires a far more nuanced approach based on iterative experimentation and dialogue with the systems themselves.

AR: Sometimes people can mistake the use of AI as a tool for the endorsement of AI writ large. In your recent projects, viewers might first recognize the 'feel' of AI in the imagery you produce, but it can take a second look to truly see what you're doing with the technology, and the ways you are probing and questioning its limitations, both technically and philosophically. What kinds of reactions have you had from audiences? Have you had any interesting misperceptions?

MTM: Most reactions from within arts, academia, and the wider public have been very positive, but unsurprisingly there has been pushback

1 De/coding the Apocalypse (takeo.org/nspace/2014-decoding-the-apocalypse, 2014).

from a minority of traditionalists within the visual arts community. Predictably, their arguments are dismissals of any creative endeavor using this technology as "AI slop" without properly examining either the art in question or the artist's methods and motivations. Such myopic views fail to recognize that my works are not just exploring the artistic potentials of AI, but are critiquing its potentially disastrous environmental and socioeconomic impacts while seeking to offer alternative, human-centric and ethical approaches to its creative use.

AR: Your title for this exhibition plays with the idea of (re)generation both ecologically and technologically. How do you see this metaphor translating in different directions, i.e. does generative AI provide language that helps reframe environmental cycles of destruction and growth, or does the language of reseeding and regrowth help shed light on the mechanisms of generative AI?

MTM: A reoccurring theme within my exhibitions is to explicitly demystify emerging technologies in ways that help unveil their inherent nature and potential impact on society. With *re:Generated Prairie*, one intention was to contextually place AI within the artistic-technical history of image capture and (re)production while highlighting its transformative potential to extend well beyond previous mechanical and digital limits. However, AI has its own challenges and constraints, such as its need for fresh sources of training data within today's overmined digital landscape. In this context, notions of "reseeding" and "regrowth" offer interesting points of reference. If we cannot effectively "reseed" and "regrow" AI models, the technology will stagnate and potentially die.

AR: That is really interesting on many levels. The ecological metaphor is perhaps more powerful than I realized, emphasizing how we must tend to it carefully, or reap what we sow… Moving to more tangible terrain, what compels you the most about the unique prairie habitat in Illinois? What do you think its cycles of human-managed destruction tell us about effective stewardship in a time of rapid climate change?

MTM: Prairies are seen as natural, but they are in fact human-made environments that persist through the technology of fire. Their disappearance from Illinois (and elsewhere) was also from deliberate transformation of the land during industrialization; we ceased to want stretches of tallgrass for bison and instead desired farms, woodlands, and strip-mines to exploit. But a century later, our focus shifted back and we sought ways to recreate some of those lost habitats. Once again, it was accomplished through technology. At this moment of climate crisis, the story of the prairie, and Green Oaks, is equally one of warning and hope. Technology has caused the destruction, but it also holds the power to regenerate; the choice is ours.

AR: Looking at your reconfiguration of Robert Geraci's photos of the Green Oaks burn, I am of course reminded of so many uncontrolled forest fires from Canada to California to Hawaii, to name some of the most recent catastrophes in North America. I wonder if your images might have an almost prophetic aspect, reminding us that unless we fundamentally change human behaviors, no amount of strategic, small-scale interventions will be enough to prevent wider devastation in the future. The idea of a controlled burn – salvific destruction to put it theologically – will become but a quaint memory…

MTM: Perhaps, and if so, one of the consequences of our actions (and inactions) would be the permanent loss of these treasured places that embody millennia of our multifaceted relationship with the natural world. Returning to your previous question, the extinction of the prairie would not just be an environmental tragedy; it would also be a cultural one. Its material loss would herald the death of countless living histories and yet-to-be-written stories that are rooted in its being.

AR: I really like that emphasis on the cultural importance of the environment as a site of past and future imagination. I think that's an underrated element of our understanding of the climate crisis presently. Looking at this exhibition, I notice that for all the ingenuity of your media and methods, the works you have produced are also ineluctably traditional. They stand within a long history of artists depicting the natural world, and in doing so shape how we engage with it. Which landscape painters have you taken inspiration from?

MTM: The list is quite long, but the apocalyptic visions of John Martin, the pointillist techniques of Georges Seurat, and the increasingly abstract landscapes of Wassily Kandinsky immediately come to mind.

AR: What do you think the future of landscape art will look like? Is there still room for it to be beautiful, or is beauty no longer relevant?

MTM: Landscape art – like all art – has been and will surely continue to be informed by the adoption, repurposing, and critique of emerging technologies. And beauty, whether aesthetic, conceptual, or some combination of the two, will remain at the core of art's purpose within society. I believe that the current proliferation of soulless AI 'art' (read 'slop') will only increase our desire for authentic objects and experiences that remain grounded in human design and endeavor. In an age of infinitely remixable and regenerated digital culture, surely it will be the minds and hands of artists who will imagine and then 'paint' the compellingly beautiful landscapes of our time and beyond.

Green Oaks
.growth

‘Who is the land? We are, but no less the meanest flower that blows. […] What are the sciences? Only categories for thinking. […] What is art? Only the drama of the land’s workings.’

Aldo Leopold
The Role of Wildlife in a Liberal Education, 1942

[+040.974238,-090.088654 ¦ 24/05/2025 19:16 CDT ¦ MTM]

Reconstructed Landscape{s} – Green Oaks .growth (iteration i – source data), 2025
digital photographic monoprint; archive pigment ink on pearlescent cotton paper,
25 × 60 cm [framed]

Generated from a sequence of five 50MP digital photographs recorded on a Google Pixel 8 Pro by the artist on 24 May 2025.

Reconstructed Landscape{s} – Green Oaks .growth (iteration i), 2025
8-section digital monoprint tapestry; archive pigment ink on polycotton canvas
198 × 88 cm [each]

Reconstructed Landscape{s} – Green Oaks .growth (iteration i), 2025
8-section digital monoprint tapestry; archive pigment ink on polycotton canvas
198 × 88 cm [each]

REMAKING LANDSCAPES

Beholding the landscapes of Michael Takeo Magruder's *re:Generated Prairie*, one is struck by a stylistic familiarity, but also a strangeness. The images are instantly recognizable, yet on closer inspection reveal an unusual materiality. Takeo has developed a process of taking single frames or mere seconds of digital footage and then using the latest generation of AI models to transform the data. As such, these works could only have been produced at precisely this point in our technological development, but they also encapsulate the timeless relationship between humanity and nature long reflected in visual art.

Takeo's juxtaposed *.burn* and *.growth* installations are derived from photographic sources that have been mostly desaturated into greyscale except for a few boxed areas of color at their center. The first shows a scorched terrain before a tree line with a solitary figure standing near the horizon, facing away. The second depicts the same vista but at another time and without human presence, only lush tallgrass and trees in full leaf. Takeo frames the orange flame, blue smoke, and brown earth of the *.burn* in contrast to the resplendent, verdant green of the *.growth*, and expands these windows into sets of striking, large-scale canvases.

These compositions lead us to revisit previous artistic renderings of landscapes. For example, by capturing deliberate yet temporary records of human action on a landscape, they are reminiscent of Richard Long's *A Line Made by Walking* (1967). In this piece, Long journeys back and forth across a field, creating an area of flattened grass that is both temporary sculpture and conceptual gesture documented in visually iconic black and white photography. In *re:Generated Prairie*, Takeo builds upon the strategies of land art and conceptual art from the second half of the 20th century, but with a key difference; he is recording instances of others' actions rather than his own. Moreover, for the Green Oaks prairie burn and ensuing regrowth, Takeo's journey is not one of traversing a landscape but instead exploring the passage of time *within* it.

If time and memory in relation to landscape are central to Takeo's art, then the work of British painter Howard Hodgkin may also be considered. Hodgkin asserted that his works were not abstract but intensified and distilled evocations of place and time, as illustrated by the striking bands of contrasting color in his modest-scale paintings like *Meadow* (2012). Hodgkin didn't work from photographic sources. Instead, he spent many hours in the studio contemplating memories of environments and sensations which he would seek to capture visually, if only with a few sweeps of pigment. Although using different materials and methods, Takeo's approach connects to Hodgkin in his precise, deliberate framing, capturing the essence of each location and moment.

However, Takeo's *re:Generated Prairie* and other *Reconstructed Landscape{s}*[1] are created from source materials that he himself recorded in-situ. The personal experience of a place at a particular moment in time is the starting point for both artists, but for Takeo this is an opening proposition rather than a fixed culmination.

Takeo's installations reveal much but also retain mystery. The colored windows hovering within his structurally crisp and symmetrical photographs act as portals to another state of being. This calls to mind Ad Reinhardt's paintings of the early 1950s, where he reduced compositions to T and Cross shapes while experimenting with subtly varied hues of the same color family. Reinhardt believed in the purity of abstraction, seeking to present "art-as-art and nothing else."[2] His was a quasi-spiritual belief in art as a space of contemplation through reduction. But Reinhardt and fellow travelers in non-objective abstraction had to contend with the human propensity to see symbols and meaning in even the most minimal image; the brain is hard-wired to seek something it recognizes. In Takeo's AI-enlarged and processed canvases, hallucinatory details draw the gaze and seem much more than randomly generated artefacts and aesthetic glitches.

What is our obligation to nature? Are we to revere it, to fear and respect it, to continue remaking it in our image? Perhaps it is simply to acknowledge 'nature' as a concept that is ever-shifting according to human feeling and interpretation. Takeo's captured fragments of place are contingent on his presence at those moments. His experiences would have been replete with sensations of light and temperature, textures of ground under foot, aromas of smoke or flora, and the people who were – or were not – present. Landscape, as a genre in which we are drawn to contemplate the above questions, can be approached afresh with the image-making tools of today. And it is within this context that Takeo invites us to look closer and more deeply at what surrounds us, whether natural or human-made.

Paul Luckraft
Curator and Head of Program
Gazelli Art House

1 Including: Fisherman's Trail (takeo.org/nspace/2023-rl-fishermans-trail, 2023); Hidcote Bartrim (takeo.org/nspace/2023-rl-hidcote-bartrim, 2023); and Great Falls (takeo.org/nspace/2024-rl-great-falls, 2024).

2 Barbara Rose, ed. Art-as-Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt, p. 53 (New York: The Viking Press, 1975).

Reconstructed Flower{s} – Green Oaks .Sanicula_canadensis, 2025
digital monoprint diptychs; archive pigment ink on metallic cotton paper, 60 × 40 cm [each half, framed]

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Reconstructed Flower{s} – Green Oaks .Rubus_allegheniensis, 2025
digital monoprint diptychs; archive pigment ink on metallic cotton paper, 60 × 40 cm [each half, framed]

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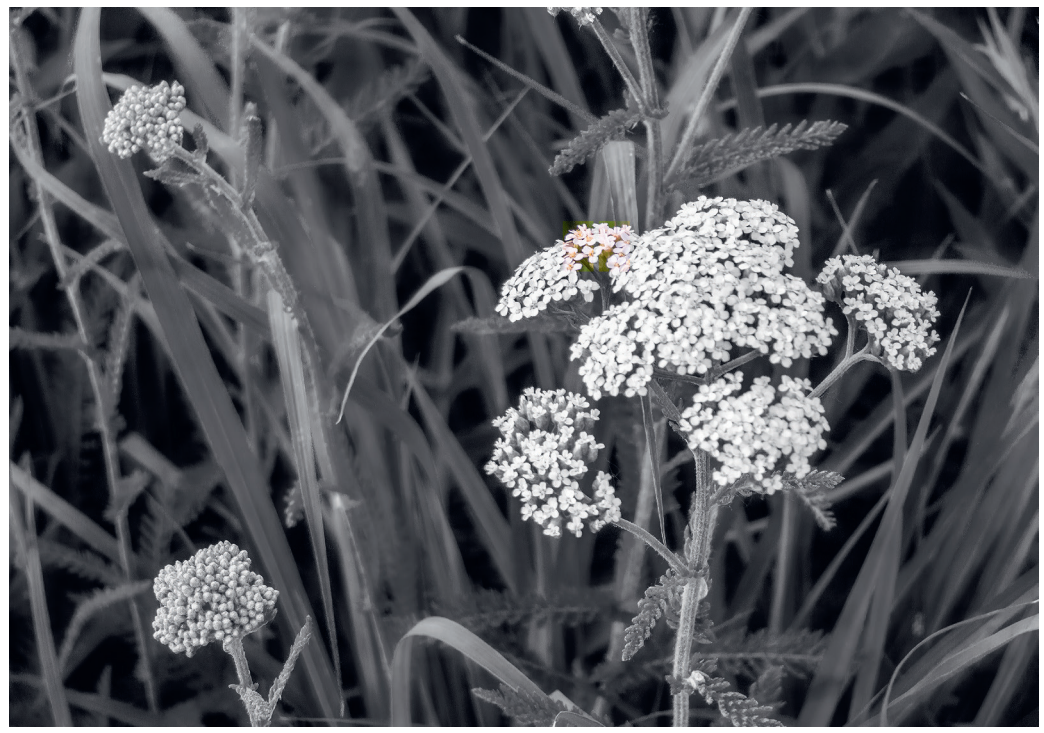
[+040.973734,-090.086946 ¦ 24/05/2025 08:56:31 CDT ¦ MTM]

[+040.973935,-090.089813 ¦ 24/05/2025 09:04:23 CDT ¦ MTM]

Generated from single 50MP digital photographs recorded on a Google Pixel 8 Pro by the artist.

Reconstructed Flower{s} – Green Oaks (source data), 2025
digital photographic monoprints; archive pigment ink on pearlescent cotton paper, 25 × 30 cm [each, framed]

[+040.972879,-090.097613 ¦ 24/05/2025 18:46:28 CDT ¦ MTM]



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Reconstructed Flower{s} – Green Oaks .Barbarea_vulgaris, 2025
digital monoprint diptychs; archive pigment ink on metallic cotton paper, 60 x 40 cm [each half, framed]

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Reconstructed Flower{s} – Green Oaks .Achillea_millefolium, 2025
digital monoprint diptychs; archive pigment ink on metallic cotton paper, 60 x 40 cm [each half, framed]

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PRAIRIE RESTORED

Tallgrass prairie is a highly endangered ecosystem, both within the state of Illinois and throughout North America. At the time of Illinois statehood (1818), about two-thirds of its landscape, approximately 22 million acres, consisted of prairies. Almost all those grasslands were consumed by agricultural and urban development, and only some 2300 acres of original, high-quality prairie remain. For these ecosystems to survive in Illinois, the remnants of prairie must be preserved and, when possible, restoration must happen in areas where they have been lost. Although we will never again see 22 million acres arrayed across the state, there is room to support restoring tens of thousands of acres.

Paul Shepard, emeritus professor of biology at Knox College, and the first director of what is now known as the Green Oaks Field Research Center, began restoring prairie in a former soybean field at Green Oaks during the spring of 1955. He and a half-dozen students scattered seeds from 63 plant species that they gathered from nearby remnant prairies, with some additional seed provided by the University of Wisconsin. This six-acre plot is known today as the Shepard Prairie. It was the first prairie restored in the state of Illinois, and only the third ever attempted anywhere.

Peter Schramm, Shepard's successor at Knox, continued the restoration efforts; he planted the nineteen-acre West Prairie and thirteen-acre South Prairie during the 1960s and early 1970s. Schramm developed and shared many prairie planting techniques as restoration activities spread throughout the midwestern United States in the 1970s. Today, Knox students and faculty maintain the Green Oaks prairies and their tradition of ecological restoration. This requires removing invasive species and maintaining a regular schedule of controlled burns, so that the land retains its vibrant, high-quality grasslands.

Prairie restoration and maintenance are labor-intensive and potentially dangerous, especially given the need for controlled burns that prevent forest growth from supplanting the grasslands. The prairies first envisioned by Shepard and Schramm were primarily intended to restore small pieces of a rapidly disappearing landscape. They were interested in having land that showcased what Illinois was like at the time of statehood and which provided valuable habitat for many species. Today, we also recognize the importance of preserving biodiversity. Many of the species which were common when prairie occupied millions of acres in Illinois are now rare and in decline. In response, we grow prairie plants with an "if we build it, they will come" approach, hoping to encourage the return of species that typically inhabit these ecosystems. We have had some success with this strategy. For example, Green Oaks enjoys the warm weather return of migratory Henslow's sparrows (a rare, prairie-dependent bird). We want to maintain environmental heterogeneity, ecosystem functions, and ecosystem services, and in exchange the prairies serve both education and recreation.

But it is important to remember that prairies are not simply examples of wild, pre-settlement landscapes; they have long been engineered through human labor. Prairies, as they exist today, formed about 8000 years ago after the glaciers had melted and the Earth experienced a hot, dry period. Grasslands expanded all across the planet. Beginning around 5000 years ago, however, the climate in Illinois could support the growth of trees and the development of forests. Two-thirds of the land was prairie in the 19th century thanks to the efforts of Indigenous Americans who made active use of fire to modify and maintain their environment. This facilitated food gathering, production of important medicinal and fiber plants, hunting, travel across the landscape, and habitat variability. Marquette and Joliet encountered prairies during their journey through Illinois in 1673 because Indigenous peoples had been burning prairies for millennia. Prairies as we know them are cultural landscapes, maintained by human activities. Although we now burn prairies for different reasons than did the Indigenous Americans who were once the sole human occupants of the land, we still do so to actively maintain our desired environment.

The first restorationists at Green Oaks sought to recreate a landscape that existed in the past. Today, we live in a world with increasingly rapid climate change and environmental destruction. Conditions are different than they were 200 years ago, and in 50 years, they will have undoubtedly shifted once again. Ecological restoration and environmental management must therefore be future oriented. We don't know what that future will hold, but we must be ready to respond to it. Our restorations are living, breathing ecosystems that must have the ecological and evolutionary freedom to adapt as conditions change. We have to be good stewards to help them continue as prairies and havens for biodiversity; but we will have to be vigilant to observe changes as they arrive, and be flexible in our approaches so that prairies can flourish for millennia to come.

Dr Stuart K Allison
Director, Green Oaks Field Research Center
and Watson Bartlett Professor of Biology, Knox College

Reconstructed Landscape{s} – Green Oaks .prairie (iteration i), 2025
single-channel 4K video sequence, duration 2:00 [seamless loop]

Generated from a pair of 30-second digital video clips recorded on a Google Pixel 8 Pro by the artist on 30 May 2025.

Reconstructed Landscape{s} – Green Oaks .prairie (iteration i), 2025
single-channel 4K video sequence, duration 2:00 [seamless loop]

Generated from a pair of 30-second digital video clips recorded on a Google Pixel 8 Pro by the artist on 30 May 2025.

UN/FAMILIAR TERRAIN{S}

Michael Takeo Magruder's ongoing series of reconstructed landscapes challenges viewers to reconsider the role that artificial intelligence (AI) can play within established forms of artistic practice. Understandably, concerns often arise regarding generative AI displacing human creativity. Takeo's approach, however, offers an alternative perspective where AI technologies are employed in ways that do not usurp the role of creator, but instead work within a model of sophisticated partnership. In this novel 'collaboration,' AI becomes a unique conversant within the artist's studio, augmenting and extending the creative process rather than becoming its primary agent.

Takeo's landscapes – including those in *re:Generated Prairie* – stem from audiovisual recordings captured solely with his own AI-enabled smartphone (already, we may begin to ask where reality stops and artificially generated aestheticization begins). Each composition is not only rooted in the artist's physical presence, but also his close relationships with the people who have guided him to the places of renowned natural beauty that he documents. From his ever-growing personal archive of source material, Takeo selects and transforms small fragments of original footage, alternating between conventional digital editing tools and leading-edge AI systems. This back-and-forth exchange with AI thus brings forth an otherworldly aesthetic that provides the foundation for his atmospheric creations.

In this way, Takeo continues the traditions of painters, photographers, and cinematographers who have long harnessed technological advances to transfigure familiar terrains into their creative interpretations. Yet his artworks go further and offer new ways of seeing, for as film critic Laura Mulvey reminds us, "changes in the technologies of seeing affect human perception."[1] The veiled, 'black-box' algorithms of Takeo's carefully selected AI models manipulate the basic factors upon which his footage is predicated: time and space. For Mulvey, alteration of perception occurs when media are paused; when time can be stopped and space explored. In his works, Takeo takes this further: each individual frame and sequence of source material is not only paused and pored over, but is revised, reworked, and reformed through the dialogue with AI. The results – ranging from digital prints and canvases to algorithmic videos and soundscapes – become repeatedly expanded. Viewers experience fleeting glimpses of realities that never quite transpired and visual details that were never entirely there, thus transforming his captured vistas into uncanny encounters.

This, in turn, prompts us to probe the systems underpinning our highly mediated engagements with the world around us and the processes behind how our own memories are formed. Concepts such as automatic processing, misattribution ("alternative facts"), and memory reconstruction further complicate human recollection. Experiences rarely happen exactly as we later remember them. The artificial, inorganic, and disrupted qualities of Takeo's landscapes challenge the organic and fallible ways through which we recall our own presence in the past, defamiliarizing the familiar.

The fact that these artworks originate from personal videos taken on a mobile phone also draws attention to our contemporary compulsion to incessantly capture what we experience, creating a digital record that preserves our individual movements through time and space. The apparent need to document our lives in ways that we can later revisit and share seems indicative of a fear of not being able to recall and recount these moments, recognizing the instability of human memory. And, perhaps, this suggests a desire to intervene in the natural limitations of individual human experience by not only capturing these instances but often also making them public, connecting with others through the collective storing of memory.

And yet, as we examine Takeo's enhanced and expanded vistas, we may sense something more sinister than mere personal recollection lurking beneath the alluring surface. As these installations present the repeated process of selecting certain frames and zooming into new AI-generated details, they evoke a sense of the growing pervasiveness of surveillance as well as content curation and manipulation, steering our gaze in specific directions towards edited versions of reality. Through these works, we are reminded that the demand for AI-enhanced methods of processing source material in order to capture and collate previously unseen details is fueled by very different driving forces than the mere preservation of memory. Shaped by governments and corporations alike, AI forces that seek to change our perception with machine interpretations of human reality illustrate the increasing infiltration of technological intervention in our lives at almost every level.

Overall, Takeo's reconstructed landscapes are *unfamiliar terrains*[2] that infuse leading-edge AI systems with traditional artistic practices to retrofit the world anew. In doing so, he pushes visitors to reflect upon the shifting relationship between creators and their creations, the organic and unstable nature of their own memories, and the precarious interplay between notions of preservation and control.

Dr Michelle Fletcher
Deputy Director, The Visual Commentary on Scripture
King's College London

1 Laura Mulvey, Death 24x a Second, p. 27 (London: Reaktion Books, 2005).

2 Un/familiar Terrain{s} (takeo.org/nspace/2024-unfamiliar-terrains, 2024).

Reconstructed Firmament{s} – Green Oaks, 2025
dual-channel 4K video sequences, duration 0:50 [seamless loop]

Generated from a single 20-second digital video clip recorded on a Google Pixel 8 Pro by the artist on 24 May 2025.

Reconstructed Bio/Geophony{s} – Green Oaks, 2025
real-time algorithmic soundscape, duration infinite

Generated from 320 seconds of digital audio clips recorded on a Google Pixel 8 Pro by the artist between 24-30 May 2025.

Michael Takeo Magruder is a British-American visual artist and researcher whose practice utilizes Information Age technologies and systems to examine our networked, media-rich world. His projects blend traditional artforms with emerging media including real-time data, VR environments, mobile devices, digital archives, and AI processes. In the last 25 years, Takeo's art has been showcased in over 300 exhibitions and 35 countries, and his work has been supported by numerous funding bodies and public galleries within the UK, US, EU, and beyond. He is represented by Gazelli Art House, London.

Takeo's latest projects include *Imaginary Cities* (2017-19), a research residency and solo exhibition at the British Library exploring digital maps drawn from its collections. He was the first ever artist-in-residence at the UK National Archives, where he reflected upon the institution's ongoing digital transformation through his solo exhibition *[re]Encoding the Archive* (2019-21). During the Covid-19 pandemic, Takeo was virtual artist-in-residence at the Henry Luce III Center for Arts & Religion in Washington DC (2020-23), where he created *Uncounted*, an illuminated manuscript documenting social and ethical issues connected to the global health crisis. He was MDI Biological Laboratory's inaugural artist-in-residence for its *Art Meets Science* program (2023-25), developing the solo exhibition *Beyond Resolution* in dialogue with the Laboratory's research scientists. Most recently, Takeo was commissioned by the Knight-funded Program of Religious Studies at Knox College to produce *re:Generated Prairie* (2025), a solo exhibition highlighting the cyclical processes of death and rebirth within the entangled systems of science, religion, nature, and culture.

Robert M Geraci is Knight Distinguished Chair for the Study of Religion & Culture at Knox College. He is the author of *Apocalyptic AI: Visions of Heaven in Robotics*, *Artificial Intelligence, and Virtual Reality* (Oxford 2010), *Virtually Sacred: Myths and Meaning in World of Warcraft and Second Life* (Oxford 2014), *Temples of Modernity: Nationalism, Hinduism, and Transhumanism in South Indian Science* (Lexington 2018), and *Futures of Artificial Intelligence: Perspectives from India and the U.S.* (Oxford 2022).

Geraci has been a visiting researcher at Carnegie Mellon University's Robotics Institute, the Indian Institute of Science, and the National Institute for Advanced Studies in Bangalore, India. His research has been supported by the US National Science Foundation, the Republic of Korea National Research Foundation, the American Academy of Religion, and two Fulbright-Nehru research awards. He has lived in India, collaborates in Korea, and studies the world of science and technology with a lens grounded in religious thought and practice. His research explores the social arrangement of technology, ranging from handloom weaving to virtual worlds. He has been reflecting on the religious narratives told by AI researchers for more than two decades.

re:Generated Prairie
by Michael Takeo Magruder
in dialogue with Dr Robert M Geraci

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KNOX COLLEGE

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re:Generated Prairie is a new exhibition by British-American visual artist Michael Takeo Magruder that explores the renewal of the world and human interconnections between nature and technology by creatively reimagining his experiences of Knox College's Green Oaks Biological Field Station.

The artworks – ranging from digital prints and canvases to algorithmic 4K videos and soundscapes – have been created exclusively from mobile phone recordings captured by the artist and his academic collaborator, Prof Robert M Geraci. Through a complex and iterative dialogue between the artist and AI, Takeo reconstructs this source material into vignettes that consider our relationship to the prairie, from the annual controlled burn to the subsequent restoration of the grasslands.

The prairie burn is a moment where humanity takes seriously its obligation toward nature: it replaces accident with intention and emphasizes our crucial role as active participants in the regeneration of the world. *re:Generated Prairie* invites us to reflect on the cyclical processes of death and rebirth within the entangled systems of science, religion, nature, and culture.

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