

**Shawn Bitters**  
**Artist Statement**

When young, I loved the Mormon creation story. It is similar to the traditional bible story but I was taught that we, God's children, *assisted* Him with creation. As I roamed the mountains around my home in Utah, I thought "I must love this landscape because I helped God make it." This a beautiful, but absurd, idea. Once I left Mormonism, and came out as queer, the stories that connected me to nature collapsed and I faced terra incognita.

Since then, I have been engaged with the narratives we use to connect to nature and more specifically the absurdity and usefulness in personifying nature to do so. An esoteric story in Mormon scripture features the earth weeping in distress at her mistreatment. Inspired by this I have created rock alphabets to build on the idea of nature talking back. I embed them in the landscapes depicted in my sculptures, installations, interactive public art, drawings, and prints. A key to decode the narrative is always included.

Recently, I have been appropriating and reworking early American landscape paintings that promoted America's "virgin wildernesses." Inserting my own drawings into these works I recast the "virgins" as ebullient volcanoes. Explosions crack open the Catskills, lava flows at Montauk, and my volcanic alphabet stones are scattered throughout. These landscape paintings (and the resulting avalanche of mass-produced prints) are complicit in justifying Manifest Destiny. My Mormon ancestors, who thought it their divine task to help settle a region spanning from Calgary to El Paso and San Diego to Denver, played a large role in colonizing the West. As their queer, Utahn descendent, I aim to help reset the narrative.

My creative research blurs the boundaries between printmaking and sculpture. Printmaking, traditionally bound to a flat surface and to the size limits of a press, is in my work expanded to fill rooms and to overwhelm viewers. The work suggests paper and ink as new media for sculpture. It questions the traditional assumptions of sculpture as substantial, durable, and solid. In my work the monumental is ephemeral. Residing between two and three dimensions and between mediums, my work is inherently queer. It resists binary modes of categorization.

My landscape sculptures and prints shift from successful illusion to obvious fabrication as the viewer changes the angle of their view. The sculptures appear as rock surfaces or volcanic eruptions from one vantage, reveal themselves as flat sheets of paper from another, and back to successful illusion as the viewer continues to move around the gallery. The work generates a state of cognitive dissonance in the mind in the viewer. This process continues subtly in the prints as well. I create media hybrids (drawing/print, screen-print/photograph, digital inkjet print/screen-print) and play the various ink surfaces and textures off of each other. In my reworking of early American landscape paintings mentioned above, my additions are printed in glossy screen-printing ink which sits, in slight relief, on the velvety paper which has been saturated with the inkjet ink that is used to reproduce the paintings. At first sight, my volcanic additions flow along the geography of the landscape depicted in the painting, appearing to be part of the original. Gradually, one realizes that my drawings are more graphic, hard-edged, and when viewed from the side, the glossy ink reflects light as the matte paper and inkjet ink absorbs it. These landscapes, made of subtly disjointed surfaces, are spaces that are never quite resolved. The illusions hold, break-up, and then reassert themselves. This frisson prompts the viewer to question the perceptions and expectations they bring to celebrated American landscapes.

Making multiples is inherent to printmaking. The process of creating an edition of prints was invented to sell books, posters, music, and pictures. While I make editions of traditional prints, I also use multiples within a single work. In the prints, my alphabet stones are a set of twenty-six images. I can print these in any size or color, just like any font on a computer, and distribute them in my landscapes. My sculptural work is also assembled out of multiples. Each shape of smoke or lava is part of a large set of images that I print repeatedly and then assemble to appear to create natural forms.

Finally, I use printmaking to elucidate queer identity. Printmaking and queerness are linked in modern art history. Artists such as David Wojnarowicz and Andy Warhol, who were some of the first, openly gay artists, used screen printing to crack open the art world, connecting low, popular culture (commercial, mechanical processes, and tabloid subject matter) with high culture (painting and the myth of the genius creator). A print is an original *and* a multiple, subverting key myths about originality and rarity that drive the art market. It is tied to political disruption (Gutenberg, propaganda, civil rights) and bad taste (magazines, posters, advertising.) Its history and marginalized place in the art world make it a natural medium to address the tectonic cultural shift the LGBTQ+ community has initiated. It is the process I use to undercut the heteronormative narratives employed to colonialize and exploit nature. More importantly, it is a powerful tool in creating and propagating new narratives for our place in the world.

