

ROCHESTER

LANDSCAPE LOTTERY

Project and Location Notes

JIM MOTT 2018

Rochester Contemporary Art Center

Rochester Landscape Lottery - Project and Location Notes

This Exhibit Includes:

29 paintings developed from visits to 15 randomly-chosen locations in the Greater Rochester area; maps and grids used during the project to generate the random points; a sketchpad used for some of the location studies (this one open to a page of birds seen at location #10); and this folder of written material that helps to explain and document the project.

Blank spaces have been left on the wall for paintings from two additional locations to be completed during the run of the show.

This Notebook Contains:

1. Notes on Project Background and Method p. 1
2. Map Notes p. 2
3. Location Notes p. 3-10
4. End Notes: Brief Reflection on Outcomes p. 11

Dedication: Usually only books come with dedications, but this Exhibition of the Rochester Landscape Lottery is dedicated to Phil Bliss, unsung local art hero; Paul Bartow, for conceptual inspiration and support; and Sonja Livingston, who encouraged me to take the project seriously and has shared the adventure.

And thanks: This project is made possible with funds from the Decentralization Program, a regrant program of the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Andrew Cuomo and the New York State Legislature and administered by Livingston Arts Center, a member supported organization.



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1. Project Notes

The Landscape Lottery – using randomly generated points on a map to determine what I would paint – started as a game, a simple concept, which I first tried out in Tucson, AZ a few years ago. It soon revealed itself to be a serious personal and artistic challenge, as well as a surprisingly effective tool for exploring and engaging with two of the things that concern me most: place and community.

Among other things, the Lottery process subverts the tendency to stay in the same neighborhoods, seeing the same faces and landscapes – thus opening up verbal and visual conversation with unexpected people and places.

For the Rochester Landscape Lottery, I added elements to enhance the project's social dimension. Most importantly I switched from using computer-generated random gps points to an interactive method that uses dice and nested grids to determine coordinates on a map. The map method makes it easy to get people involved by “rolling the dice” and sending me off to my next location. It is also far less precise than a gps point, encouraging more exploration when I get to a new “point.” Other new directives for the Rochester project include: mandatory effort to meet people on site, the distribution of sketchpads to interested parties, and returning to offer prints of selected paintings to participants.

The result has been an adventure in seeing largely unseen parts of Rochester, and activating – at least for myself – a greater sense of the community by moving back and forth through diverse and contrasting sections of the metropolitan area. It has been very challenging and very rewarding. And the resulting paintings, while clearly a limited, arbitrary sampling, present perhaps a truer view of the city than would have been likely had I set out to paint familiar landmarks or whatever already interested me.

Please see **Section 4: End Notes** (p. 11) for reflections on the outcomes.

For more information about my outreach projects, including portfolios from the Itinerant Artist Project and the Tucson Landscape Lottery, visit: www.jimmott.com.

3. Map Notes:

The boundaries drawn on the Rochester map and the system for determining painting location coordinates were hastily improvised, shortly before a talk I gave to art students at MCC. Karen Sardisco, one of the art professors, agreed it would be fun to launch a Rochester Landscape Lottery during the talk, with students participating to give me my first 3 locations. Simply pushing buttons on a laptop (to generate random gps points) seemed high tech but unexciting. I'd used dice to determine positions on a 6x6 grid for a board game I'd made, so grids and dice came to mind. Karen happened to have an old street map of Rochester on hand, and we figured her colleague, Kathy Farrell would have a pair of dice somewhere in her office. Luckily she did.

Method: A primary grid is drawn on the map (with 3 columns, not 6, so dice rolls are adapted). There are two successively smaller, nested, transparent 6x6 grids used as overlays. The dice are rolled one at a time: the first number rolled is the horizontal coordinate, west to east; the second is north to south. Three rolls of the dice lead to a location of meaningfully limited size – a few stone throws in each direction. Up to six people can participate in rolling dice to determine a location.

The map boundaries are somewhat idiosyncratic. I wanted to focus on the City of Rochester, but I also wanted to include representative portions of the Urban-Suburban-Rural gradient that defines the character of a small-city metropolitan area. I wanted to minimize chances of getting sent to the suburbs too often while having at least a small chance of getting to Rochester's premier outlying natural areas – Mendon Ponds Park to the south and the Braddock Bay area to the northwest. Thus the Lottery "playing area" ended up a tall 3x6 rectangle, with the first row drawn on the Charlotte/Greece/Hilton extension on the back of the map. Lake Ontario figured prominently in Rows 1 and 2. The rule was: if someone rolled a location on the lake I would go to the nearest publicly accessible shore area. This weighted things in favor of a lakeshore location, which was OK with me.

As an example of generating a location: rolls of 3-6, 2-5, 1-4 would put you at the Route 65 Thruway overpass in Pittsford. The map on display has the overlay grids arranged accordingly, to give the idea.

3. Location Notes

The Rochester Landscape Lottery paintings in this exhibit are grouped by location, in order of location visited, going clockwise from the Rochester map. In the end there will be 15 locations visited, with at least one painting per stop. The blank spaces to the left of the map are placeholders for paintings from the 2 remaining locations.

Most of the random locations were determined in the field, by strangers met at one location who took a turn at “rolling the dice” and sending me off to the next location (see map notes). Some locations were “rolled” by people I know. The project was launched at MCC, where 18 art students participated in “rolling” the first 3 locations.

Location notes follow, with painting numbers in parentheses:

Location1: Former RG&E Russell Station Site (#1-3)

One never knows what to expect when coming up with a set of random points. I’d counted on the random locations being well distributed and taking me through contrasting visual environments, reflecting a range of uses and demographics. The 3 locations that the MCC students came up with did not disappoint: an industrial site adjoining a suburban tract in Charlotte; an inner city neighborhood in one of the poorest parts of Rochester; and an apartment complex near the RIT campus.

When I actually arrive at a new location, however, disappointment is almost inevitable. Usually I have strong expectations based on similar places I know, something I imagine finding, or something appealing I see on the way to the new place that I would like to paint. I’m always confronted with something different: a small part of the world that initially feels inaccessible. Even though it’s my project and I love the concept, arriving on site can be so frustrating I want to quit.

At the Russell Power Station there was a special twist: I knew the place and was looking forward to the chunky buildings and smokestacks. But that was gone, having been demolished earlier in the year. And the site was sealed off with locked gates. I painted the gates.

Location 2: Bay Street and 5th Street (#4, 5)

Although it's just a few blocks north of the Public Market, Location 2 was a corner of the city I'd never been to. I'm not exactly a stranger to the inner city, but the economic devastation evident on nearby streets was hard to believe. Sketching in such a setting can feel like fiddling while Rome burns, but, at the same time, there seems to be some value in taking time, paying attention, and being engaged. I don't know what the people who saw me thought. The owner of the car and the maintenance garage I painted asked me what I was doing standing on his property but warmed up a little when I explained the project.

A little girl outside one of the houses across the street was playing a toy flute, in the crazy way kids play toy flutes, and glancing at me curiously. I wanted to take her picture and maybe make a painting of her but couldn't figure out a comfortable way to interact without potentially scaring her or her parents. I didn't yet have the sketchpads I've been giving out during the project, so I'll go back.

Location 3: RIT Park Point Development (#6, 7)

Initially, when I saw this point on the map, I was very unexcited about the location. And in real life it was the kind of place I normally dismiss as soulless development in a ruined natural habitat. But the bit of nature remaining – a wetland area – seemed worthy of attention. And the light was nice that day, the kind of soft sunlight that Rochester gets some days in late fall or early spring.

Location 4: Hinckley Road, Gates (#8)

After working on the first 3 locations I returned to MCC to show the results and talk with art students. In general they acted much more interested and animated than during the previous visit – probably because they were now collaborators. A few of them, along with one of their professors, Kathy Farrell, rolled the dice for Location 4, and Kathy said she'd grown up near there. She described a stone quarry, a railroad line and all sorts of exciting subject matter nearby. When I arrived at the

actual spot it was just a dull little street lined with little houses, and a generous display of flags. As usual, I had to fight the sense that I was out of place and wasting my time. I struck up a conversation with a woman who came out to get her mail and asked if she knew anyone who did art (part of the RLL project is giving out sketchpads and other supplies on site). She surprised me by saying “my husband sketches all the time.” He was out jogging but then, “...there he is now.”

He eyed me suspiciously and didn’t seem to want to talk. Did he want a sketchpad? “Not really.” What did he sketch? “Everything around here. All this stuff.” Could I see some of his sketches? “I don’t think so.” Eventually, though, I got him to talk about his work, and the result was one of the most intriguing stories I’ve ever heard. (If you want to hear more about it, come to the talk at DUPC Nov. 14th or contact me via ROCO or my website).

The painting features the mailbox that led to the encounter and the rock that I’d told myself, while trying to orient myself on arrival, was the point we’d marked on the map back at MCC.

Location 5: Evergreen Ave, Mount Hope Cemetery (#9)

Two other people whom I met at Hinckley Road – an older woman who owned the house I’d parked in front of and her daughter – rolled the dice for Location 5. When their car pulled into the driveway, I quickly ran over to explain why I was parked there. And I asked if they would be willing to participate. They were naturally a little confused but surprisingly friendly, willing to put down their shopping bags and roll the dice right in their driveway. When they ended up with a location in Mount Hope Cemetery the mother was excited. “There’s a Firefighters’ Memorial there. I hope you get to see it. My husband was a fireman.”

The actual spot was not near the memorial, not near anything I particularly wanted to paint. But I saw a stone marked “Filkins” and two smaller stones in front of it marked “His Wife” and “His Wife”. The thought of making a painting of three gravestones and calling it *Filkins and His Wives* was oddly amusing, so I let that be my subject.

Location 6: Troup Street (#10, 11, 12)

Just one bird can make a big difference.

A short stretch of Troup Street, at the ragged edge of the Corn Hill neighborhood, was the first stop “rolled” in an attempt to get the project back on track after a hiatus of several-months. As usual, I did not sense a lot of promise when I arrived on site. All the nice Corn Hill houses were a few blocks away. Dramatic views of downtown buildings and the 490 expressway were also just out of range. I decided to go through the motions and see how long it would take for the necessary sense of connection to *where I was* to click in.

My first encounter was with a man, maybe early 30s, sitting on the steps outside one of the several small, identical, austere-looking apartment buildings that confronted me. He didn’t look like he wanted to be bothered, but I walked up, hurriedly explained the project and asked if he knew anyone who would like a sketchpad. He just stared at me for a long time. Then said, “Yeah, my girlfriend. She does tattoos and designs and stuff. She might want one.” He got out his phone and made a call to get confirmation. “Hey, there’s this..... *dude* here, wants to give you a sketchpad. You want it?” She said yes. It didn’t seem like I should press my luck by asking if he wanted to roll some dice.

It took about an hour of wandering around, talking with people, taking photos, and sketching to adjust to the location. Of those activities, sketching was by far the most important. Sketching helps me see into a place, the sketched line provides growing, graphic evidence of connection. What really opened me up to the place, though, was the unexpected appearance of a nuthatch – a cheery little bird that hops around tree trunks looking for insects to eat. It’s one of my favorite birds, not typically associated with city streets, and seeing it instantly dissolved my sense of not belonging. I began to see things I wanted to paint in every direction. The shift to late afternoon light helped, too.

The person I got to roll the dice for the next location was a friendly guy named Samuel McNish. While I talked about art, he told me about his mother, who had been an architect. His three rolls sent me off to a rural road in Hilton.

Location 7: Manitou Road, Hilton (#13)

On the way to Manitou Road I remembered it was the start of apple season in western New York. I further remembered that there were several farm markets in the vicinity where I might get cider and fried cakes. I called around, and only Kelley's had early cider.

After visiting Location 7, I continued on to Kelley's to make a purchase. And, since I hadn't seen anyone near the field I chose as my subject, I asked Mr. Kelley and his son if they would roll the dice. Luckily it was a calm time for business and they were willing to help out. The son had some interest in art, as well, so he got a sketchpad.

The location the Kelleys "rolled" was near the airport, along an access road. I was delighted, and I had cider and fried cakes to celebrate with.

Location 8: Eastside Way, Rochester Airport (#14-16)

The airport is a place we all know but don't often pay attention to. It also has a distinct visual environment – open space and fences, odd-shaped buildings, fuel tanks, maintenance vehicles, billboard signs, and of course airplanes – that provides a good contrast to the residential settings one is more likely to end up in with a random roll of the dice.

I found it refreshing and made several short trips back, mainly in hopes of seeing a plane landing. On one trip instead of planes I saw a migrating flock of blackbirds arriving. Some of them made it into one of the paintings.

Location 9: Van Stallen Street (#17, 18)

Finding no one at my airport location to roll the dice gave me an excuse to bring in a few people I wanted to involve in the project, the first being the writer Sonja Livingston, who has written about growing up in parts of Rochester that most of her readers do not know (and who happens to be my wife). She made a comment on Facebook, relating to the project, that I'll quote in part: *I never saw any place I lived as a kid as "worthy"*

enough for a painter's attention. Artists have the awesome power to decide where to shine their light...

My first impression of Van Stallen Street was a sense of gradually accumulating disrepair. As I approached the section of street that seemed closest to the point marked on my map, I saw that one house had a colorful, extravagant garden out front. It was also the only house with people sitting outside.

When I walked over Mrs. Santana put her little granddaughter inside but came back out to see what I was up to. I told them about the project and admired their flowers. Not long ago it was a better neighborhood, and young people were more respectful, they told me. It was quieter. Now people were stealing their flowers. I noticed a window overlooking the garden where Mrs. S had put all her garden gnomes for safe-keeping. She brought one out to show me.

Mr. Sanatana mentioned that his brother was an accomplished artist in Puerto Rico and showed me some of the paintings on his phone. "The paintings he used to do I liked better." Puerto Rican landscapes and people. Now the brother tends toward surrealism and death imagery, stylized skulls and such. I'll be making a return trip to give them a print of the garden painting and a sketchpad for the artist brother.

Location 10: Oklahoma Beach (#19-23)

I'd hoped to get the director of MAG to participate in the project and roll the dice. He was busy that month, but his assistant, Jamie Dinolfo, was happy to roll the dice and asked if she should round up some other people at MAG. We ended up with Jamie, Meg Colombo (public relations), and Dale McDowell (head groundskeeper).

When I showed them some of the paintings I'd done, Dale surprised me by recognizing the big chimney in the view from Hinchey Road (Location 4). And he recognized the mailbox – it keeps getting hit in winter. And he's also a friend of the Kelleys, from Location 7. It was an interesting time for connections.

The location they rolled was in Lake Ontario, near the Irondequoit Bay outlet. By the rules of the game that let me go to the nearest public access to the shore, which happens to be one of my favorite spots in Rochester: a stretch of shoreline some people call Oklahoma Beach. Besides having a charming – if overused – stretch of beach, and a little woods where migrating birds and butterflies find a place to rest, it's one of the few places in Rochester where you can see people from all walks of life mingling freely – often in large numbers – in their appreciation of water, open space and sunset views.

The problem there was that there was far too much I already wanted to paint there, so choosing was difficult. I made a point of doing one lake scene that includes the stretch of open water marked on the map.

Location 11: Falstaff Road (#24)

City arts writer Rebecca Rafferty was also kind enough to take a turn at rolling the dice. Her roll sent me off to yet another residential area, this one with smallish homes on quiet streets, near Empire and Culver.

I had trouble making any connections there. People did not seem to want to be bothered. Eventually I got my most pronounced critical reaction and my most enthusiastic response, all on the same block. See the title of painting #24 for the negative. The couple who rolled the dice – a retired art teacher and a firefighter – were more tolerant and then positively friendly; we talked for a while and Ivy, the artist, said she loved the Landscape Lottery idea. On top of that they “rolled” a great location: the top of Cobbs Hill. “Wow,” they said, “that’s where we got married, at the pump house” – right by the spot they rolled.

Location 12: Top of Cobbs Hill (#25)

Like Oklahoma Beach, the top of Cobbs Hill is one of my favorite places in Rochester. It's also a place where people of all types mingle to enjoy exercise, open space and sunsets.

As of the opening of this exhibit, I've only completed one painting from Cobbs Hill – and not the sunset or view of people walking I'd planned to do. Instead I saw a hazy gibbous moon rising over the pump house. I've always called the pump house "the temple" and this was a good chance for me to give it an aura of sacred mystery.

During my first trip Lottery trip to Cobbs Hill, I went to the pump house to watch a gorgeous sunset. While there, a young couple, two students from Roberts Wesleyan, asked me if I'd take their picture. We got to talking, and it turned out they're engaged to be married...although probably not on the top of Cobbs Hill. The happy resonance of the last two stops made that seem like a good time to end the work for the exhibit, but I got in one more location:

Location 13: 490-590 Interchange (#26, 27)

With all my time at Oklahoma Beach, I never bothered to get anyone there to roll the dice for a next location. I went back early one calm sunny morning and asked the only other person there – a woman I'd decided was a "regular" there who likes to wades in the lake on sunny days. While rolling the dice in the sand, Theresa told me about various things she's observed while standing in the lake. She knew which gulls were injured, the habits of 3 coyotes who lived by the beach, and many other things. And she "rolled" a most fascinating location – the 490-590 interchange.

The last painting I did includes a billboard that was up at the time. It says, "I WON." And that seemed like a good closing message for the Landscape Lottery.

4. End Notes:

One of the curious things, for me, about looking at this exhibit is knowing this: if I'd started the project at a different moment – if, for example, there had been a little more hesitation before the first roll of the dice, then the set of paintings on display, the parts of Rochester I spent time with, and the encounters with strangers along the way would all have been completely different. And yet the idea and probably the general sense of what it's about would probably be about the same.

And, whether or not the paintings are able to suggest it, I found that paying attention, letting myself open up to and develop a genuine interest in *any* place – something that was by no means automatic, but which the project encouraged – made *every* place seem more real and important. And *everyone*. Driving home after a few hours on location, I often felt a deep fondness for every thing and every person I saw. This was an unexpected side effect, usually short-lived, but it led me to attempt more paintings with people in them, for better or for worse.

Social encounters on site were reliably awkward, but I learned to ignore that most of the time. Interactions were memorable. It was always humbling simply to take time to reflect on other people living their lives.

I'm not sure what the people I met thought of the project. Most seemed to take an interest in the concept, many took sketchpads, usually for a friend who liked art. Some really enjoyed participating. But my favorite response from a stranger was a scoffing, "New York State *pays* you to do this??" I'd mentioned the NYSCA Grant for credibility in an untrusting neighborhood. I chuckled, "yeah, crazy, eh?" But on reflection I thought it wouldn't be a bad use of state money to make this a full-time job.

As the demonstration of an idea, I think this particular run of the Landscape Lottery has served its purpose. As a work of community engagement and exploration it could stand to develop indefinitely. I, for one, am not sure how to go about being a good neighbor in a large sense, working for something more whole in our society, without an art project to give me a map, so to speak. But it seems one of the imperatives of our times is to make the effort. This project has reminded me that reaching out can be its own reward, a rich experience, worth the trouble.