

JULIE HEFFERNAN

Self Portrait as Great Scout Leader III, 2010
Oil on canvas, 72 x 54 in



COLLECTION OF ROBERT KIRBY
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RYAN MASTERS

Irredeemable, Now and Forever

I sat on a pile of back-dirt beside our unit and poured a handful of fish vertebrae into a plastic Ziploc baggie. We'd been working alongside this stretch of Interstate 80 for over four weeks now. It was a broad bench of sage and sand at Milepost 282, about halfway between Elko and Battle Mountain. Beyond the highway, the Humboldt River flowed by like a sluggish, alkaline snake. It was June in the northern Great Basin. Everything moved like it was half asleep. The cars, trucks, and RVs droned by on arrow-straight trajectories towards Utah or California.

I watched the highway while I worked, willing someone to stop and break the monotony of the day, if only to remind me that I wasn't just digging slow, careful, square holes in the desert. Yesterday, a westbound Winnebago had pulled over and discharged a pair of ancient Good Sam Club members. They'd wobbled up through the lunar landscape like astronauts, asked a few questions, even taken a few pictures. When nothing was found in twenty minutes, they got bored and hot and left.

I took the black Sharpie pen out of my mouth and wrote "Milepost 282/I-80 - Unit 4-Quad C-Level 8 [90 cm] - Fish Vert. [17] - 06/02/94 - DH" on a clear plastic baggie. Behind me, Susan troweled the last of our dirt through a screen balanced on her lap, then violently shook it back and forth a few times like she was trying to tilt a pinball machine. As the fine clay fell through the mesh and piled at her feet, she scanned what remained in her screen with a vacant intensity. I was going to have to switch back to the screen soon. I was in no hurry to mash and shake and mash some more. It was tiring and dusty and it hurt your back, and the screen's handles were sharp edges that rubbed the web between thumb and forefinger raw, even with gloves. It was almost always better to dig.

I poured the vertebrae, which look like deflated little bone soufflés, back out of the baggie and began recounting them. I was taking my time. The floor of my current quad was perfectly flat at a depth of ninety centimeters. I'd been shaving it down since lunch with more care and precision than I shaved my own face. Using my knife-sharp trowel, I'd slice a millimeter off here and there, then remeasure every inch of the square meter using a dirt-clogged tape measure, a level, and string as guides.

Susan and I had now completed eight ten-centimeter levels in three out of four of our unit's quadrants and