Braiding Fields as Critical Practice

verbal presentation

Liska Chan

University of Oregon, School of Architecture & Environment

I braid sculptural forms into fields of tall grass. The work of braiding acts as a form of maintenance, contemplation and construction. Usually a solitary figure in the field, I'm bent over, weaving handfuls of grass together, my posture recalling that of a farmer at work.

Yet, in contrast to one raising crops or cultivating the land, this labor done in a prone position is not practical, but instead is a critical practice. The Braided Fields series problematizes the pastoral landscape aesthetic through braiding large swaths of tall grass in fields, as both a time-based activity and a form of land art.

By layering a new aesthetic layer into an old one, the work highlights the tension between the idealized landscape and the realities of the work and maintenance it takes to make the place. Pastoralism is a common aesthetic that has had a deep influence on European and American landscape design for centuries. Its roots lie in ancient texts like Virgil’s Eclogues, where the pastoral is the serene joining of nature and
art. In the pastoral landscape, one can be in nature, but safe from the dangers of the wilderness, wherein one is free, like an idyll shepherd, to create music, art and poetry.

Like French braids on a head, plaited grass form lines in the landscape that have variable height and width, which wind around each other in spirals and waves. The interplay of shadow and light sharpen the visual experience by providing different levels of contrast through the day. Once complete, the braid structures remain, changing not only through the day, but also into rigid, golden structures through the season.

- **Author(s) Biography (200 words each):**

  Liska Chan is Associate Professor of Landscape Architecture and Director of the School of Architecture & Environment at University of Oregon in Eugene, Oregon. Her critical practice utilizes mapping, drawing, and land art to examine the interplay between the biophysical and cultural world. She teaches drawing, design, and critical practice in landscape architecture.