

Waltz with Monuments Across the Staked Plains

By Aaron Beavers

West Texas, as many people know, has a particularly prominent feature, which is the appearance of being flat. In fact, there is a subtle southeastern slope of topographic variation that highlights the moments when the surface does change. The changes in topography, whether they are natural and exist as part of the land itself or are constructed objects, create this difference. In the natural environment the transition from the plains to topographic adjustment becomes drastic, but the transitions are created through natural occurrences which become an evolution in the topography. The built environment establishes a stepping feature from building to building and back to the plains. Pace of travel significantly affects how these features can be viewed. Gliding amongst the vast landscape, one can appreciate the features that generate an expansive view, though they begin to disappear at a faster rate of travel. Yet the features that do stand out become significant. Max Crawford described an empty river shoreline in West Texas that “had only added to the sense of desolation.” Sweeping from step to step along the Llano Estacado, there is a notable sense of isolation, always, between towns or cities. While standing only a few miles outside of Lubbock, it is calming because of an absence of population and a view that extends for miles on end. An anomaly occurs while traversing these plains through geographic modifications, and as these situations occur they become grand features and incredible moments. Crawford said, “A man who don’t have a fast car in West Texas is giving Father Time the edge and that old bastard don’t need it,” but driving along a two lane highway in West Texas presents views in every direction. So, yes, this area is vast with mile after mile of hot asphalt to ride upon, but do the people with these “fast cars” even begin to appreciate the uninhabited beauty? Highly doubtful, because of a sense of pace and scale. As one travels at high speeds, distances begin to blur from object to object, but at a slower pace one notices these grand spaces between objects or perhaps even the towering scale of something so regulated throughout the West. Strolling through the Llano Estacado, and passing through the subtly sloping landscape, these significant structures begin to protrude from the earth overpowering its desolation. This becomes a feature

unlike any natural occurrence, it is a monument of the Llano Estacado, and it is built to an ambiguity of the horizon. A structure this size becomes so fantastic in the region because of the unbroken landscape as well as the medium for travel. A natural occurrence of a monumental feature is much more intense in the plains due to its rarity, but when a person finds himself in that presence it is unforgettable. Whether this grandiose feature is of the earth or constructed by man, the fact is that these monumental presences are powerful while situated in their surroundings. Other repeated features such as lighting, power lines, signage, or fencing become significant because of the relationships between one another and the seemingly boundless horizon. When visitors pass through a small town in West Texas they notice a couple of things: the monumental features of the granary silos necessary to the agricultural business, the vastness that awaits their travel, and the distances between towns or objects along the road, and depending on their pace they may be capable of noticing all of this in one moment. These occur simultaneously while studying the horizon, the seemingly flat land does terminate, but it does so because of its constructed features. In contrast, these monuments could not possibly be seen as such if they were among other tall structures in a big city, therefore the sloping landscape of the Llano Estacado aids in the ability to tower over the emptiness of the path ahead, and the pace adds to the sense of monumentality because at a slower pace it is easier to notice the relationship of a towering structure over the vastness that surrounds it. Looking through the mirror of the car Crawford says, "I could see it for a distance; then it disappeared and I was alone." The seemingly flat landscape soon dances under me as the monumental feature that was once soaring about me disappears.