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Night Lights

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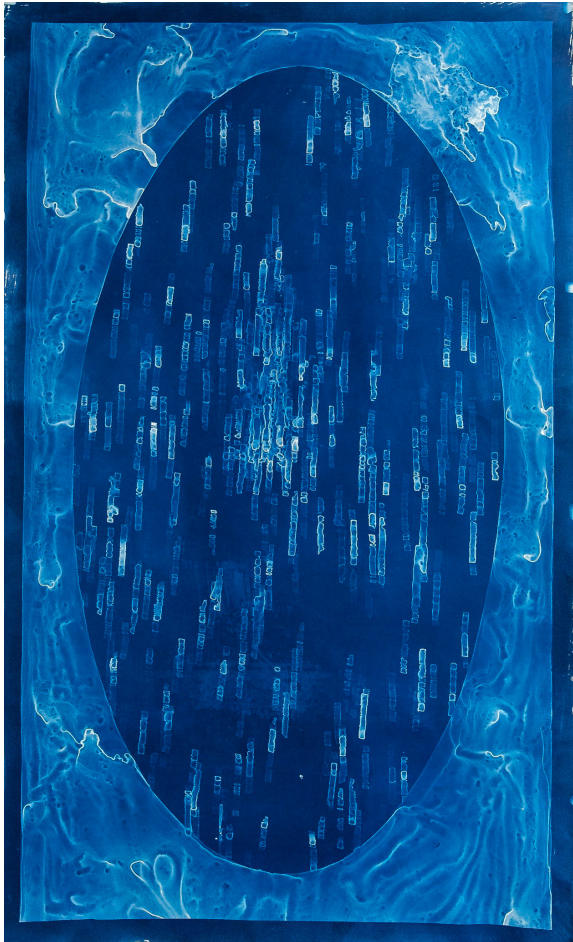
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Spectra, after Annie Jump Cannon

Lia Halloran, courtesy of the artist and Luis De Jesus Los Angeles

NIGHT LIGHTS

Among the many things plainsfolk, and other Americans as well, take for granted is good lighting. But many of you can probably, as I can, think back to the days before we had electricity and recall just why it was that we went to bed and got up with the chickens—there just wasn’t that much you could do by the light of a kerosene lamp.

And doing the chores by lantern light wasn’t much fun, either, not to mention dangerous—think of Mrs. O’Leary’s cow and the Great Chicago Fire. It was real progress when we could come home on a Saturday night from our weekly “trading” in town and be able to flick a switch and have light flood the yard.

But the advent of night lighting in the country was not all positive. For one thing, it made it easier to start work earlier in the morning and finish later at night. No longer did we get to stay in bed until dawn or quit work before sundown, so we could get the cows in and milked before dark. Instead we could just turn on the barn lights. Even worse, good lighting has also played a role in the demise of the small farm. While electricity did ease the life of the individual operator, it also made possible the huge dairies that run twenty-four hours a day, and the chicken factories where hens are tricked into laying more eggs by keeping them in constant light.

The greatest evil caused by rural electricity, in my mind at least, is that it has resulted in the destruction of darkness. That, you might say, is the purpose. But I'm talking about unnecessary lighting, the kind of light pollution that makes it impossible to experience true night. Why, for instance, was it necessary for the Kansas Turnpike Authority to install such bright lights at their interchanges, and to place them on such tall poles? It's one thing to have this kind of lighting at Wichita or Topeka, but why at Cassoday or Admire? Why destroy the natural nighttime environment in these rural Flint Hills areas when lower poles would limit the spread of the light? Our home place at Cassoday is where I want to go to get away from it all, not to be able to read a newspaper at midnight by the light of the turnpike over a mile away.

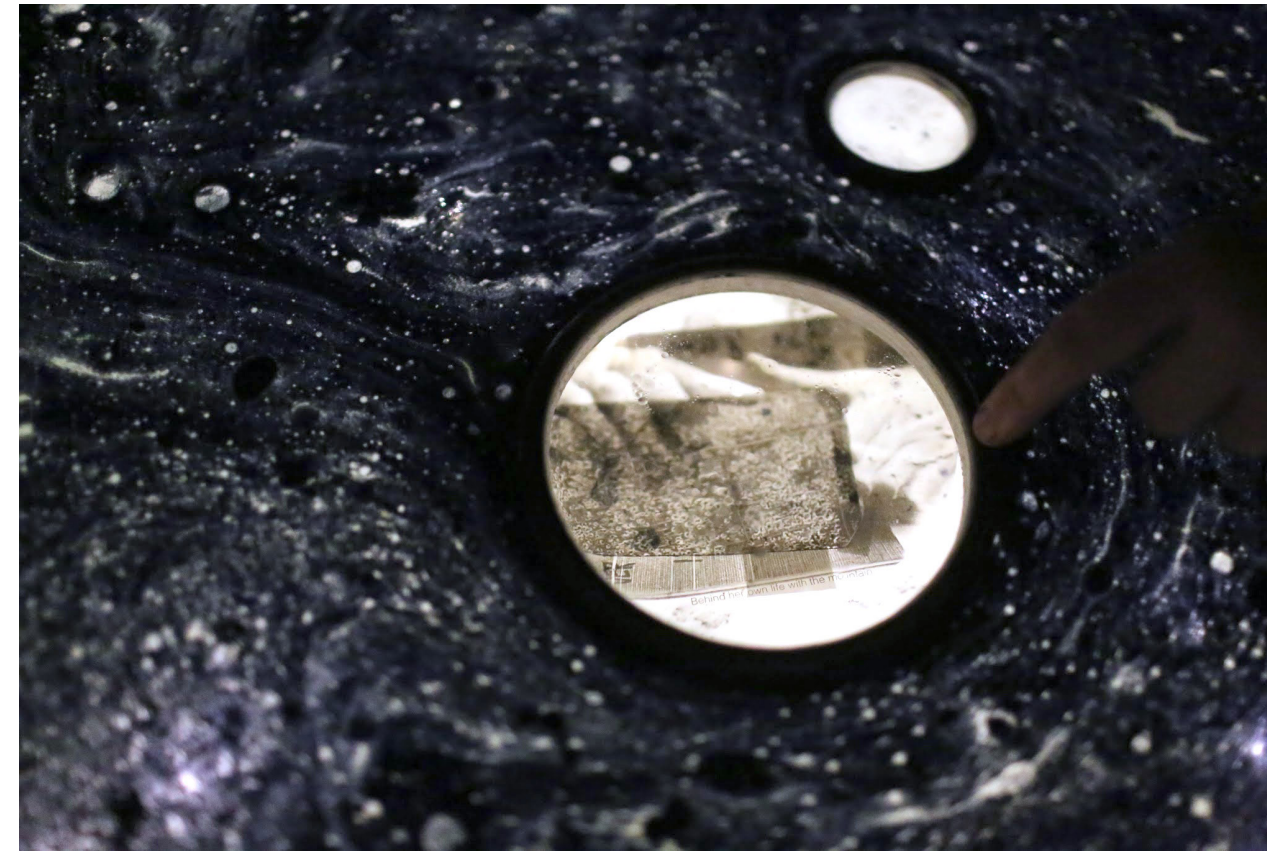
About as bad are the space lights that dot the rural countryside. I just can't understand why anyone living in the country would want to have a light burning outside all night long. You might as well be living in town. Are people just too lazy to turn a yard light off and on? If they are afraid of theft, then get the kind of lights that automatically go on when they sense motion. As it is, it seems to me that a space

light would just make it easier for a thief to see what he was stealing.

How bad is light pollution in Kansas these days? Well, you have to live pretty far out in the country not to see the glow of city lights, whether from Topeka or Wichita or the local county seat. Last June I left Garden City for Emporia at midnight, and, as a little test (and also a means of staying alert while driving), I checked out the night lights. In 250 miles I was never once out of sight of a light (space lights in farmyards, floodlights at feedyards, street lights from towns, flashing lights on radio towers), except for a couple of miles in the Flint Hills east of Marion.

It's not just a Kansas problem. Last fall, I was doing some research in northern Nevada and had to do some night driving. Out there where the population is as thin as the air, you could see the lights of a town forty miles before you got there. One rancher near Golconda, whose nearest neighbor is fifteen miles away, told me that he can read a newspaper in his yard at night, too. Not from turnpike lights, but from the lights of a gold mine. Then there's Las Vegas.

Maybe we've reached the point where we need to hear a Voice from above declaring: "Let there be night!"



Mobilis in Mobili Detail 3
Erin Curry

Jim Hoy is the author of *Flint Hills Cowboys*, Director Emeritus of the Center for Great Plains Studies at Emporia State University, and former Board Chair of Symphony in the Flint Hills.