

## Art

### An Artist Takes a Peek Into the History of Rural Storekeeping

Reza Safavi's digital reinterpretation of Thomas Grocery and Pump explores modern technology and rural storytelling.



Bianca Velasquez March 5, 2023



Reza Safavi's *Thomas Grocery and Pump* (2021), game engine-driven digital video (photo Kamilla Earlywine, courtesy Granary Arts)

STERLING, Utah — *Thomas Grocery and Pump* at Granary Arts tells the story of a 90-year-old building hidden on the west side of US Highway 89 in Sterling, Utah. With its 1930s facade intact, the mere existence of Thomas Grocery and Pump protests today's proliferation of redevelopment occurring in neighboring cities and gives visitors a look into the history of country storekeeping.

While the nature of the now-closed Thomas Grocery and Pump's current standing is what drew artist Reza Safavi to casting it as his muse, Safavi's digital reinterpretation gives viewers a second look at the time capsule and explores the juxtaposition between modern technology and rural storytelling. "Technology allows us to create installations in places we wouldn't be able to otherwise," he told *Hyperallergic*.

*Thomas Grocery and Pump* is a video loop projected onto the wall of the CCA Christensen Cabin Gallery at Granary Arts. As the video pans through different angles of the building, “Being Green” by actor (and Thomas Grocery regular) Wilford Brimley plays on a loop congruently with the video. The tone of the video and swells of emotion coming from the score sweeps through the luscious natural scenery (added by Safavi), allowing viewers peek at the building.

Prompted by Granary Arts fellow David Lindsay to create works about Sanpete Valley (the valley in which Sterling is located), Safavi took on the assignment and drove the more than 12 hours from Washington, where he is based, to Utah in search of a story to tell. “That trip was very important to me during the pandemic,” he said. “I had two days to spend in that area, and I was able to drive around like a tourist and stopped just to make works in the Sanpete Valley.”

To capture the area, Safavi used photogrammetry to take digital portraits of the building at every angle. Combining hundreds of images with 3D scanning technology, triangulation, and 360-degree video, he created a realistic depiction of the building’s current facade and architecture. “The area is very dry and the digital piece is a very lush environment,” Safavi says. “I took [an image of the building] and inserted it into a game engine and added this lush environment to make it look like the building just appeared and ended up in this natural space.” The artist wanted to give *Thomas Grocery and Pump* a hyperreality to allow space for meditation on the history of the store and leave those added elements open to interpretation.

“We learn about specific aspects about a community on the surface, but it takes extra work to tell stories about that place,” Safavi said. After some research, he found stories about Lillie Thomas (who passed away at 93 in 2008) who ran the store for 74 years and her connection with Wilford Brimley. Safavi explained, “The story of Lillie is an important one, being an independent woman who built this place and established a real connection with its visitors. She had such a deep relationship with the truckers who would pass through; in fact, they grieved the news of her passing.”

The absence of stores like Thomas Grocery and Pump pushes society into more sterile, transactional, and lonely interactions. Stories of folks like Lillie Thomas and places like this remind viewers that the human experience is one based in connection to other people, without which we are left to contend with self-checkout kiosks at box stores. Safavi’s digital reality attempts to keep the magic of community alive.



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Installation view of Reza Safavi's *Thomas Grocery and Pump* (2022-23) at Granary Arts, Utah (photo Kamilla Earlywine, courtesy Granary Arts)



Reza Safavi (image courtesy the artist)