2010

**Bottom Creek, Bent Mountain, VA**

Genesis Chapman  
*Virginia Commonwealth University*

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BOTTOM CREEK, BENT MOUNTAIN, VA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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BFA Kansas City Art Institute 2001
MFA Virginia Commonwealth University 2010

Director: Reni Gower
Professor, Painting and Printmaking

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
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Abstract

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By Genesis Chapman MFA

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Virginia Commonwealth University, 2010

Major Director: Reni Gower, Professor, Painting and Printmaking

The title of this thesis Bottom Creek, Bent Mountain, VA is the subject of my large ink drawings. Starting with the spring outside my window, this book describes the creeks as it flows across the mountain that I grew up on. My drawings document the experience of walking along the banks of Bottom Creek as it flows past farms fields and along the roadside. Described as a seemingly insignificant place, the creek is in fact it is one of the most basic, and important parts of this mountain’s landscape, because the creek’s natural process it is responsible for producing the landscape as we see it. Through drawing the water from direct observation, I find a deeper connection to the land and respect for its ever changing processes.
Bottom Creek, Bent Mountain Va.

Genesis Chapman
The sound of the spring in the morning
bubbling
and
gurgling...
the water trickles out of the hillside from

in the summer disappearing into mud

ash tree, bleeding heart, maiden hair fern, trillium, ost
under a huge ash tree, through the yard meeting another branch on the left.

rich fern, daffodil, black-eyed-susie, watercress, daylily
the water slips down the hill, out of this hemlock, moss, cinnamon fern, maple tree, touch-me
hollow, past dead and dying hemlocks and oaks

dead leaves and sticks clogging,

little pools and waterfalls

not, solomon seal, locust, myrtle, oak, cucumber tree.
from the west the wind the wind blows

meeting the road on left, out of the trees

jack-in-the-pulpit, red oak, locust, daisy, sassafras, pepp
a consistent breeze

large gusts

a consent roar

blowing across the mountain

and dying off in the distance

open sky, fields, ridgelines in the west

her tree, plantin, queen-annes lace, milkweed, maple
gunshots in distance during hunting season

above the pond, there is a little spring, its water making a bell like drone, in the quiet of a snowy day

past the pond, with the wind blowing across

bullfrogs in summer

brush piled into creek

apple, white pine, blackberry, dutchmens pipe, wild ch...
the sounds of cows

dogs

a tractor

an ATV

its surface, stirring sparkling and fluttering ripples

frozen in the winter

berry, willow bush, locust, algae, wild rose, dandilion,
Tinsley cabin on top of hill on left
100 years ago
the creek crosses under the road, and joins
the smell of horses
the smell of horse shit
horses snorting
skunk cabbage, weeping willow, daffodils, telephone pole
clear-cut on top of ridge on right
gypsy moth damage

a larger branch of Bottom Creek which winds its way down from Poor Mountain
e, money plant, wild raspberry, fescue, sycamore, maple
it winds its way through open horse fields

large rocks piled up along banks

watersnakes sunning

hickory, poison ivy, poison oak, virginia creeper, willow
spread by bears
leading up through the woods
trail of trash
and pastures, cutting through dirt banks
deer bones
bush, hemlock, white pine, field grass, blueberry bush
the creek turns slightly and rolls under
red efts
blackberry, deer tongue grass, jewelweed, deer fern, e
a bridge, casting out quivering reflections

christmas fern, burr dock, chicory, sumac, Virginia pine
it passes an where a house once burned

spring time

late afternoon sunlight

two jays

a lone spring peeper chirps

and a barred owl

up on the ridge

blueberry, sumac, chokecherry, sycamore, virginia pine
edging the old yard, undercutting roots

apple, white oak, forsythia, wild garlic, spread-leaf moss
deeper and deeper pools

it bends to the left, through more fields,

more horses

sticks, branches and leaves, washed down

butterflies

yellow swallowtail
diana fruitilary
skipper
giant swallowtail
monarch

skunk cabbage, ash tree, maple, creek willows, yellow r
radio towers on top of ridges

between hills, and past a marshy area

* a common snipe
* woodcock

mutsedge, joe-pye weed, iron weed, wild rose, milkweed
the creek courses straight, through a hollow,
delicate fern, skunk cabbage, may apple, moss, fern moss
across the road
the smell of flowers
from a century old cabin,
chickens
dogs barking
and a parrot screeching

between it and the road wet swampy ground
black water,
stagnent pools
rotting leaves

first sign of spring,
skunk cabbage coming up in the late snow
spring peepers
willowbush, horsetail, milkweed, blackberry, daylily, algae
then it turns right and into wide, open

fresh berries in July

raspberry, fieldgrass, poke, purple top grass, fall panicu...
hay fields, and bright, sparkling sunlight


m, sweet vernalgrass, giant foxtail, roughstalk bluegrass
helicopter following powerlines over mountain
turkey buzzards

in the springtime, the sound of spring

purple hairstreak cabbage butterfly dogwood butterfly
goosegrass, horse nettle, spurge, bluegrass, wild plants
high voltage tower silhouetted black against sunset

bright white contrails pointing south

peepers, the smell of apple blossoms from a long neglected orchard

deer, lots of deer

gain, timothy-grass, johnson grass, wild violets, buttercup
dear trails
deer shit
deer beds

as the road turns away, the creek plunges

large sycamore on edge of creek
roots undercut by creek

blackberry, raspberry, goldenrod, poison ivy, sumac
down into the forest, away from the field

deep pools
dark shadowed water
native trout darting
c, thistle, sycamore, jerusalem cherry, tulip poplar
following a deep trail...

through roadside grass,

gap in the briars

as the creek rushes through woods, bright

sitting
drawing
looking at water

tulip poplar, yellow birch, sugar maple, false hellebore,
rays of sunlight pierce the canopy of leaves

the way it moves through the creek

the way it flows

lady fern, witch hazel, wild parsley, elderberry, sorrel
inside the forest, the water surface

sycamore, wild violet, mountain maple, blackberry
some ripples disappear
while others stay constantly in the same place
is dark with reflections of the trees
the surface of the water is defined by
the fundamental elements that compose
the land
the air
the water
the stone
berrry, ash, golden rod, false hellebore, earthstar
rocks and stones cause patterns that swirl

minerals sand stones pebbles rocks boulders

down the stone flows in a different,

tulip poplar, indian strawberry, goatsbeard, poison ivy, black
quartz

granite

shale

retaining the sun's heat

as the water negates underwater topography

slower time.....

slowly eroding.....

rolling ....

flowing

down stream
to the sea

cherry, hawthorn, stinging nettle, wild violet, solomon seal
air

wind

air moving across the surface, its pressure

these three

indian cucumber-root, speedwell, elderberry, sphagnum
weather

pushes down, imprinting with its presence

making patterns that are not reflections of light

elements represent the most basic, fundamental parts of the landscape

moss, boxelder, sourgrass, chesnut oak, flame azalea
fueled by gravity the water becomes a force
this is what creates its sounds
ripples
patterns
flow
the landscape that is seen, is constantly changing.

lousewort, fire pink, speedwell, yellow birch, white
of change, carving the soil, rocks and hills
crowd around
the creek
banks

watering the land

the plants

the animals

the trees,
even as they

sometimes slowly,
sometimes overnight

shaped by these elemental forces

oak, false hellebore, skunk cabbage, creek willows
dammed by deadfall, twigs, and leaves it seeks

the musty smell of speedwell throughout this place

bowmans root, oak fern, service berry, yellow birch
short cuts, branching across level ground

wood that was a field 30 years ago

now a young forest

mountain maple

witch hazel

rose thickets

moss, mountain maple, creeping charlie, sensitive fern
it cuts and though a wood that is young
not long ago
this wood was
an open field

the water finds its way, flowing over the

a burst of noise
from the brush....

a flash of white from a deer

described

creek is an agent of change cutting down into the

sawgrass, veronia, beech, yellow poplar, white alder bu
forest floor, cutting through the woods
now it has gone fallow, filled with weeds,
brush, shrubs, now trees grow here
the soil sliced open,
by the stream,
sh, fire pink, wild geranium, mountain holly, jewelweed

not changing the terrain, carving out the landscape
what it looks like...
how the wind flows over it...
where the rock are eroded...
and gone.

what lives here...
the current moving
around large rocks
and boulders that
have rolled into
the creek bed
undercutting large rocks
slowly.....
gradually rolling them forward....
then the creek makes a sharp turn away
in the turn of the creek,
a burled and gnarled maple with
owl droppings and bark fragments
in the ferns at its base
hawthorne, witchhazel, veronia, ash, mounta
from a hillside of exposed granite bedrock

then swept away.

leaving deposits of sediments:

sand, pebbles, rocks.

maple, firepink, delicate fern, looserstrife...
it coils and curls around the rocks, making rocks...

stinging nettle, wild rose, delicate fern, hawth
ancient bedrock of granite,

relentless carving

ancient mountain

wearing down gradually

rapids and spirals, cutting down bedrock

air
	surface

current,
sand,
stones

bedrock

borne, tulip poplar, solomons seal, jewelweed
an ancient feeling

a feeling of timelessness

a sense of the others that have walked these mountains before

it courses through moss covered rocks

a sense of isolation and loneliness

forgotten tribes

an old arrow head,

broken brown whiskey bottle,

old beer can with a pull tab

beech, birch, delicate fern, hickory, oak, goats
flat area on the side of the creek,
broken glass, old rusty barrels
an old still perhaps?
lovers names carved on an old beech tree

1956 and 2003

the creek grows, joined by tributaries
abandoned cabins deep in a hollow
the whitewashed walls covered with child’s letters
grown over fields,
orchards surrounded by forest, still bearing fruit

beard, bee balm, fire pink, rattlesnake plantain
the water
its complexity
its chaotic patterns
the water erodes its banks, leaving
coiling and curling

tulip poplar, blood root, wood anemone, black co
the colorless flow

of its movement,

highly complex natural forces

mud, sand, soil, and rounded stones

hosh, false solomon seal, ash, maple, sassafras
Stinging nettle, henbit, alderbush, birch, bee

Movement and energy
gliding along, the water forms pools that

each ripple, eddy, furrow, whirl, composed of layer after
lines,

grids,

layer of complexity

v-shaped,

s-shaped

radiating out...

seem still, but run with fluttering currents

feathering out

fracturing,

reflecting,

quivering

pulsating

palm, fire pink, rattlesnake plantain, cinquefoil
Turkey vulture circling
catching heat thermals

The complexity of the water is betrayed by its seemingly chaotic appearance.

A couple of crows

It passes through thickets and brambles,
A trail of
Turkey feathers mixed
With the leaves

Wild geranium, loosestrife, goats beard, tulip poplar, morels
the structure of each ripple, a symphony of physics,
the delicate interplay of water and rock,
gravity and motion,
light and shadow,
under the power line, past an old orchard
der the creek banks,
dirt and quartz stones trailing down the bank into the creek,
cherry, sumac, blackberry bush, black locust, serviceberry
each stone, stick, leaf causing a reaction specific to this place

the creek surface reflecting shadows

witch hazel, wild alder, beechnut, sourwood, black cherry, wh
each part of this creek, has its own feel, smell
animals, plants, rocks
temperature, speed, light
each part, causing patterns completely individual
each pattern specific to this place
marking the individuality
from the trees that crowd its banks
of this place
the patterns and ripples small and insignificant,
indicate each little feature of this creek,
its action,
its complexity
white oak, wild geranium, stinging nettle, tulip tree, cinquefoil.
the wind blows across the tree tops overhead,

each bit of with its curves and stretches, tributaries

this place is almost inaccessible to people

rarely visited or even thought about

its thickets concealing deer

rabbits

roots, branches, and vines reach

squirrels

birds

honeysuckle, wild rose, saxifrage, service berry,
passing rustling, leaves in waves

flowing out from each hollow, or draw, joining it 

...part of the greater whole

still in the distance

the system of water

a car passes

that makes up Bottom Creek

a train

an airplane overhead

into the water, clogging its current

driven past,

flown over,

passed by

glanced at or

ignored

a seemingly insignificant place

white oak, wild cherry, poison ivy, touch-me-not
the ground levels out as the creek

insignificant creek made significant by its part of the larger world

the crystal-clear water, distorting

the brown mud

silt-covered stones

underneath

sassafras, locust, yellow alder, skunk cabbage, be
gets lazy and it starts to flow slowly
whole, the larger system, the creek in the next hollow
the next spring
the next river
all part of the
interlocking water systems
that flows to the sea

geebalm, mountain laurel, mountain ash, waterleaf
Bottom creek flows over Bent Mountain, through farms and fields, forests and trees, pastures and playgrounds, deep hollows thick with dododense.

soon the creek surges to the left, into swamps, old cars, white oak, yellow tulip, hawthorn, rattlesnake plan...
through forest that were once virgin

a rocky area, then the current quickens past stumps that were once huge chestnut trees

woods that were teeming with wild animals

bottom creek falls, second largest in Virginia

wolves, elk, panthers, buffalo, eagles

and animals even more ancient
tain, hemlock, false hellebores, solomon seal, oak
after winding across the mountain it falls
off the western side, rushing through
Bottom Creek Gorge
soon horizontal ridges of stone cross
boulders of granite
through a nature preserve,
miniature forests
than meeting with
moss and lichens
of
thick carpet of pine needles
rich black dirt underneath
hemlock, reindeer moss, Indian pipe, red moss, wh
the creek, creating waterfalls and rapids
the Roanoke River
passing through
Virginia and
North Carolina
and on
into the
Atlantic Ocean
white pine, mountain laurel, fern moss, frogskin lichen
as it travels along, in some places paralleling the road
it is barely noticed by people driving past,
it flows through forests and hollow, rarely traveled,
but it still carries out its process of
shaping and defining the landscape
the water surges forward as it cascades
delicate fern, rattlesnake plantain, cancer root, white
over the edge of rocks in smooth sheets
this process carried out by each finger of this creek,
by each creek in this river
by each river into each sea
all over the world

oak, mountain laurel, Solomon seal, rhododendron
regardless of how the rest of the landscape is seen, or not seen

it sweeps and splashes into stone pools
this small creek in the power of its little current,

hemlock, red oak, reindeer lichen, pine needles, cir
carved by the fast, percolating current

...is reveled as a small part of a huge process,

...that has defined the spirit of this place

...cinnamon fern, indian pipe, white oak, chestnut log...
the spirit that even once this mountain is used, its ignored, minimalized, explored, hiked, mythologized, the water then rushes down a slide of migrating to generations born, generations growing cataloged, killed off, introduced, reintroduced, replacing, burned, clear-cut, select-cut, bulldozed fields cleared, stones split, dynamited, marked, sold, resold, divided, developed, harnessed, paved, chestnut stump, hemlock, dying hemlock, hemlock
fields, forests, rocks, soil, wind, wilderness, farms, houses, homes,

over valued, undervalued, settled, people driven out, people living

polished rock, frothing into the next pool

old, dying, moving, displaced, its animals hunted, prized, captured,

displaced, trees cut, trees planted, species wiped out, species

the soil spent, fertilized, mined, rocks moved, walls built, posted

painted, farmed, fenced, grazed, abandoned, swamps drained

suburbanized,

but, even then...

log, tent caterpiller, dying hemlock, new oak sprout
a teeming chaos, before it slows, and

even after everything else is gone and this place is empty

even once this mountain

chestnut oak, pine, flame azalea, wild strawberry,
the current returns, slowly rolling on

is all used up and nothing else is left, there will still be

sphagnum moss, louse wort, turks-cap-lily, spruce
on its way to the sea

a small trickle of water winding through the land

yarrow, queen-anne’s-lace, solomons seal, and
and off into the distance and of one little buttercup.
After ascending the mountain a beautiful plateau practically level, stretches out for miles. The land is well watered by streams and branches flowing from innumerable springs of free-stone water, almost ice-cold. Situated some two thousand seven hundred feet above sea level, there is always a delightful breeze in the hottest summer weather and blankets are in demand for sleeping purposes at all seasons of the year.

Just when or where the first settler pitched his tent, or built his rude log cabin within the confines of Roanoke County is indeterminate, there is a well authenticated tradition, however, which leads the historian to believe that the foothills of the Bent Mountain were occupied by white men even before any settlers' cabin were reared in the more fertile Roanoke and Catawba valleys.

The soil is well adapted to the production of all kinds of crops such as wheat, rye, corn, and buckwheat. It is doubtful if any section of the United States grows larger or sweeter cabbage, and the yield of potatoes is sometimes enormous. Cattle raising is given much attention, while many farmers are devoting much time to blooded horses and hogs. No better sheep country can be found, and as many as six hundred head have been seen on a single farm on Bent Mountain.

And such is the story of the settlement, progress, and development of Bent Mountain.

from History of Roanoke County,
George S. Jack and Edward Boyle Jacobs
1912
This body of work represents the culmination of work I started five years ago. From the beginning I used my sketchbook drawings to examine and investigate Bent Mountain, Virginia, which is the place I grew up, and a place I deeply love. As a small rural community in the Blue Ridge Mountains, Bent Mountain is known for its natural beauty and rich history. My art aims to reflect this place, to show the respect and love I have for nature and to highlight the changes, which have occurred to this place during my lifetime. These changes, (some natural and gradual, some accelerated by technology) have left me with a deep sense of loss.

Through drawing and painting, I intimately describe Bent Mountain. Through meticulous marking, I distill my emotions, observations, ideas and experience to make sense of the changes that have occurred while attempting to preserve its fundamental essence for the future generations. I record the changing dynamics of the mountain in a historical, geological, and personal scale of time.
To do so, I investigate the genus loci, or spirit of this place. Historically, this spirit is often represented as a mythological creature such as a nymph or satyr. However, I choose to represent the genus loci of Bent Mountain in a more tangible form; as a natural force that existed before me, before the mountain, or before life itself. To me, this is embodied in the most basic elements of the land, and the processes that shape the landscape; the actions of weather, air, water, stones and rocks. While these forces act in concert to form the mountain, water is the most important, element to me. Not only is it the most dynamic and life-like, it is most primal element of life. Water is where life begins, it determines if an environment is habitable, and what organisms can exist. It is only by its continued presence that our own existence is assured. It also has the power to erode mountains and change the terrain of every facet of our planet.

I think that this creative and destructive power is embodied in the insignificant creek I choose to draw. The subtle flow of its water, moving across the land contains "the spirit" of my mountain. In my drawings, I depict "the spirit" through the water's action. Stripping out most of the landscape allows me to concentrate on the movements, currents, and flow of the water rather than the effects of light, color or surface reflections.
For me depicting water as energy is colorless and I choose to emphasize this power through the contrast of black and white. When I paint, the brush's movement across the surface of the paper is a metaphor for the water's movement across the ground. I want the viewer to be perceptually and physically submerged in water's natural rhythms and cross current complexities.

To exaggerate this affect, I use very large pieces of paper and paint the creek in sequential sections and shifting perspectives. I depict the creek winding its way from its source, across the wall, and from opposite banks. I show it through my eyes to convey where I stand, what I see, what I experience, what I pay attention to, and most importantly, what I value. By keeping it simple, my priority, is to keep it focused on the experience of being in this place.

The use of black and white India ink is important because of its directness and simplicity. It is the drawing media I take with me when I walk and hike and what I use exclusively when I draw the creek from observation. Through the inks infinite shades of gray to black, I focus my brushwork on the patterns across the surface of the water. Metaphorically and literally, water carries the ink across the paper and evaporates to leave a sedimentary mark.
which perfectly imitates water’s natural evaporation cycle. The use of Yupo, (a plastic paper like substrate that does not absorb water) greatly improves this effect. When using Yupo, ink sits on the surface, leaving a mark created by the surface tension of the drop of water. The improvisational nature of the spontaneous mark empowers me as an artist who acutely observes nature. While part of me wants to describe the creek with scientific precision, I challenge myself to let go of a perfectly realistic rendering, to open up and pay attention to the spontaneity of my process. Consequently, through the drawing I experience the water’s dynamic movement and flow. Instead of literally depicting the water, I describe its action and energy with obsessive marks, that range from large spontaneous gestures, to intricate detailed meditations.

I choose to depict the landscape as a white featureless void, rather than yet another romanticized version of the mountains. The trees, plants, animals, soil, rocks, light, sun, and reflections are present in their glaring and painful absence. This hollowness is further emphasized in the spontaneous shapes and voids the creek creates. While emphasizing what may disappear or is lost, this depiction also questions the transitional aspect of what we really see or experience in nature. These questions
are most relevant to the landscape of my childhood, and the place with which I most identify: the Appalachian Mountains.

The Appalachians are one of the oldest mountain ranges in the world. Prior to the evolution of the earliest fish, the mountains first rose 280 million years ago. Over time, they eroded and were worn down before being violently pushed skyward again in the Cenozoic era. They continued to erode, forming the rounded, folded ridges and fertile valleys I know today.

Ever since I was a small boy, I have tried to imagine what these mountains looked like long ago. What did its habitants see? How much has it changed? Would I recognize it? Unfortunately, the Appalachians have been subjected to several hundred years of change: precious little virgin forest remains as most has been clear-cut; the mountains have been plundered for coal and other natural resources; invasive species of trees, plants, birds and animals, have driven out native species or assumed positions in the ecosystem left vacant by extinct or over-hunted species. For example, one ridge near my home, Poor Mountain, earned its name for the collective opinion of its condition after years of over-hunting.
As lush and fertile as the mountains may seem now, it is difficult to comprehend that the southern Appalachians were once one of the most ecologically diverse areas in the world. Now lost, many species such as the Peaks of Otter salamander were found only in these mountains.

Early descriptions of the Appalachians forests describe a forest of huge trees measuring over an arms’ width around. A hundred years ago, the American Chestnut was the dominant and most important tree in the forest. Once described as magnificent, it is now virtually extinct. The only ones I knew as a child were ghostly, dead, hollow logs found on the forest floor. The forests of my youth were not old; rather they were filled with invasive species. Sadly, the past ten years have seen more waves of blight and parasites, which have wiped out entire groves of trees I had known as a child.

The past hundred years of settlement have also left these mountains a ghost of their former selves. This region – its land and culture ignored, minimized, stereotyped and looked on as insignificant – has cleared the path for outsiders to harvest the natural resources. The Appalachians are manipulated for their minerals, coal, timber, wind, water, and open land. As I walk the ridges overlooking the valley, I see suburbs encroaching on my home. These developments diminish the wildness, diversity,
natural beauty and sense of individuality of Appalachia, in favor of the homogenized culture of suburbanized America.

The Appalachian experience is one of loss and loneliness. My time spent here tells me this: old friends, family, neighbors, distant memories and times are long gone. The timeless melancholy that hangs over this place is a reflection of the ancient worn and weathered mountains that bears witness to eons of life. Having seen much, these ancient mountains speak silently of the people who lived here. An arrowhead or spear point found in a creek bed affirms the past presence of Indian tribes that once hunted here. Stone piles and fences mark the isolation of the first settlers. The forest has reclaimed itself. Abandoned farms, empty cabins in distant hollows, and cemeteries grown over in vines are signs of what once was. The isolation and loneliness that hangs over these hollows and woodlands is reflected in the folk music and bluegrass associated with these hills today. The music's distinctive “high lonesome sound” preserves a longing for home and is an idealization of a simpler time.

It is this sense of loss that motivates me. While my experience is only a small part of the history of this place, it is my wish is to protect and preserve it through
through documentary drawings. For good or bad, these mountains are always changing. Through my work, I ask if it is possible to truly know this place, for my time on this mountain is but an instant.

Ultimately, I wonder and ask - what does it mean to love and identify with a place, to call it home, and to watch it change. Bent Mountain whether I like it or not, is going to change. Even this small insignificant creek is an agent of change, which trickles down from the spring outside my bedroom window taking with it the sediments, soil, stones, bones, ashes and memories.

Genesis Chapman, 2010
VITA

Genesis Nathan Chapman was born on August 26, 1970 and grew up on Bent Mountain in southwestern Virginia. He graduated from Cave Spring High School in Roanoke, VA in 1988. He received his Bachelors of Fine Arts in Painting from the Kansas City Art Institute in 2001. He currently lives in Richmond, VA with his wife Terry and their daughter Evelyn. They spend their weekends at their cabin on Bent Mountain.