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TREMBLING EARTH

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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May 2008

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Abstract

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By Amy Chan, MFA

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

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Major Director: Barbara Tisserat
Associate Professor, Painting and Printmaking

This thesis details the literary and visual influences in my work, the definition of American Gothic, and its connection to my work. Literary sources such as Edgar Allan Poe and Fanny Kemble help spark a vision of the landscape. Visual influences include Japanese woodblock prints, scenic wallpapers, vintage postcards and Victorian mourning pictures. My regional explorations span the James River, Tidewater swamps and architecture within the city of Richmond.

My work depicts local history and ecology inspired by Richmond and the surrounding region. Subtle Gothic elements add anxiety to the otherwise pastoral scenes. Gothic foreboding in the work questions our ecological future and the permanence of our human presence in the landscape.

At the end of the New York City commuter line in Connecticut is a semi-mountainous rise above the Hudson known as the Highlands. In my lifetime the entire region, including my hometown has been transformed from rural to commercial.

Witnessing the change there, and throughout the country, has given me a reason to document landscape. The landscapes are always site specific, and though my focus has spread far beyond New England, some aspect of it always remains in the work. Each piece is an attempt to connect the multi-layered history of a place with its present and possible future.

Literature

The imagery in my landscapes is drawn from remembered and imagined places, with literature as a primary source. Travel narratives and fiction where the land is romanticized both in its beauty and danger provide the basis for much of the setting. I keep a journal of passages, sentences or single words that spark my interest, and refer to them in the studio.

One of the texts that I have worked closely with is Frances Kemble's *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation*. It is the travel narrative of an Englishwoman who is wed to a Southern planter. She is a highly intellectual woman with a background in botany who recorded her impressions of the South and her uncomfortable new position as mistress of a plantation.

Kemble's observations alternate between the beauties of the landscape and the ugliness of plantation life. As a botanist she marvels at the unbridled growth of the place with its new specimens and wildlife. At the same time, Kemble witnesses the horrors of slavery and dangers of disease that plague her family in a sub-tropical climate. Kemble's description of riding a path on St. Simon's Island in Georgia:

"The sides of the road across the swamp were covered with a thick and close embroidery of creeping moss, or rather lichens of the most vivid green and red: the latter made my horse's path look as if

*it was edged with an exquisite pattern of coral ; it was like a thing
in a fairy tale, and delighted me extremely" (Kemble 224)*

Staghorn Sumac (fig. 1) is an example of the translation from passage to image. The image of the staghorn sumac plant, common on the East Coast, is abstracted to mimic “an exquisite pattern of coral”. The greenery places it among the abundant growth of the Southern landscape, with spots of creeping moss or “lichens of the most vivid green and red”. The experience of the landscape is abstracted naturally by degrees of separation. *Staghorn Sumac* represents the 3rd generation of the experience of place --

{Figure 1: *Staghorn Sumac*, 15 x 22", 2007}



from Kemble's ride to her writing, from writing to my interpretation, and lastly from interpretation to image on paper.

Some of the richest literary material that I find comes from American travel narratives, frontier accounts and wilderness romances. Written during the Romantic period in America, these works play on the danger, mystery and lure of the unknown landscape. The frontier and struggle to survive in the wilderness often figure heavily as themes. These texts often contain firsthand accounts of the American landscape written in a lyrical style, heavy with allegorical meaning. They describe some of the classic elements of American Gothic such as the swamp, the frontier, and the decaying South.

In my reading, a short passage can spark an image, such as English traveler Isabella Bird's 1854 description of a train ride through the American prairie:

"When the sun set, it set behind prairie waves. I was oblivious of any changes during the night, and at rosy dawn an ocean of long green grass encircled us round." (qtd. in Newby 422)

Images can come from a sentence such as Henry David Thoreau's experience of the desert-like sand dunes in Truro, MA:

"From time to time we lay down and drank at little pools in the sand, filled with pure, fresh water, all that was left, probably, of a pond or swamp"

(Thoreau 197)

Kemble's further description of swamp flora adds a romantic element to my own experience of wetlands:

“Dismal by nature, indeed, as well as by name, is that vast swamp, of which we now skirted the northern edge, looking into its endless pools of black water, where the melancholy cypress and juniper trees alone overshadowed the thick-looking surface, their roots all globular, like huge bulbous plants, and their dark branches woven together with a hideous matting of giant creepers, which clung round their stems, and hung about the dreary forest like a draper of withered snakes.” (Kemble 18)

Often a term or place name can conjure imagery, such as the “Goblin Swamp” from John Kennedy’s *Swallow Barn* or the “black and lurid tarn” described in Poe’s *Fall of the House of Usher*. Local names like the Chickahominy River or Flowerdew Hundred Plantation become titles that identify the work as locally specific.

Indian names are an especially useful source for sparking a narrative. Their translations are romantically descriptive and bear no relation to what our landscape looks like today. Recognition of the history of a place and the residual Native language figures prominently when I conceive a work. When determining the architecture, flora and fauna, it is important that each element have a reference to a real history. The part of the word or passage that remains for the viewer can be an architectural element, signifying plant, or simply a title.

Gothic

Much of what I read is categorized as Gothic. Not only the classic American authors like Poe or Hawthorne, but many historical adventure novels and slave narratives fall into the category. Visual references like mourning pictures, science fiction and outsider art, all reveal a Gothic strain.

In defining Gothic art it is necessary to have an understanding of Gothic literature, as the two are inextricably linked. The most basic definition of Gothic Art is any work that is concerned with the symbols and signifiers of Gothic literature, such as the haunted castle, cemetery, labyrinth or gloomy landscape. This imagery is slightly skewed when applied to American Gothic in both literature and art. Since America does not have the history of castles and aristocracy to support a gothic tale, those elements become their American equivalents. The castle becomes the plantation, and the ghosts of aristocracy become the ghosts of slavery or Native civilizations.

Though traditionally historical – the Gothic can reside in any time period, even bordering on science fiction. Settings can be as diverse as the mansion, crypt, graveyard, frontier, island, primeval forest, factory, laboratory or computer memory. (Hogle 2) The only quality that must be present is a sense of antiquity, disuse or loss of the place's original purpose.

European Gothic	American Gothic
the castle or ruin	the ruined plantation, decaying south, ghost town
ancestral legend (often of an aristocratic family)	Native American folklore colonial hardship / narratives
ghosts of aristocratic past	ghosts of destroyed Native civilization , ghosts of slavery
gloomy landscape (often England, Italy, Slavic countries)	American wilderness (mystery, danger, adventure), the Western frontier Oppressive heat and miasmatic air of the South
the labyrinth	the swamp
madman or deviant	the white American who has left society to live in the woods, escaped slave, the demonized Indian
ruins of antiquity	Native Americans as symbol of a ruined and conquered past, loss of habitat, destruction of the land
monster, specter	Native American legends, superstition of the land

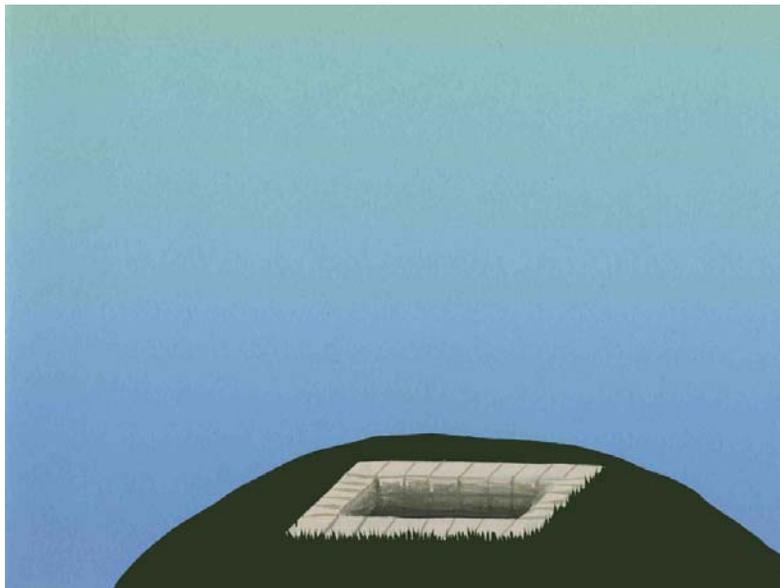
Key plot elements of gothic fiction that can be translated to art are:

- paranoia
- hidden secrets of the past that haunts the characters
- specters of the haunting rise from the structure or place
- oscillation between earthly laws and the supernatural
- the possibility that a line between two worlds has been crossed
- exaggeration of the decadent

Add to these qualifiers the opulence of decay, grotesque imagery, the sublime, humor and irony, and you have a short list of parameters for Gothic art.

The Gothic landscape can be defined as the opposite of a pastoral landscape. In a broad sense, my work depicts the locally specific history and ecology of a place. However, subtle Gothic elements can add an anxiety to the otherwise pastoral scenes. The use of acidic color, science-fiction style flora, or futuristic architecture can bring an uneasy tension to the picture. The sense of foreboding, whether from an obviously sinister tree or a slight atmospheric quality is the "haunting" in the landscape.

{Figure 2: *Wolf Trap*, 5 x 6.5", 2007}



In *Wolf Trap* (fig. 2) there is danger in the black pit, but the scenario also appeals to our sense of curiosity. The empty sky and sloping ground can allude to the surface of a small planet, leaving the viewer with a vague sense of “what” and “where”.

The Gothic unease is present in the landscape through juxtaposition. In this case an archaic structure (a pit for holding wolves) with negative connotations is set in a questionable futuristic landscape. The solitude of the structure is common to the architecture in my work, and is linked to the abandoned or "haunted" quality of the Gothic scene. Just as a tone is set in a story, the landscape is a blank space where perhaps something will happen.

As nature reclaims the scene, these Gothic landscapes question our ecological future and the permanence of our human presence. The architectural forms can be seen as ancient, contemporary or as post-apocalyptic remains. It can be a landscape overgrown with strange ugly flora, a lonely cracked monument, or a heavy atmospheric sky. The references to multiple time periods create a suspended sense of time, and the pervading stillness of the landscape suggests the absence of humans.

In *Temple Mound* (fig. 3), the traditional medium of block printing calls to mind medieval manuscripts with primitive carving style and abbreviated vegetable forms. Though contemporary, the history inherent in the format gives the piece the authority of age and tradition. With a faux patina of age, the pyramid becomes one of antiquity and conforms to the parameters of a Gothic scene. The framing plants slightly veil the pyramid, suggesting an overgrown structure that has perhaps fallen into decay. There is also a biblical atmosphere to the landscape. Many of the characteristics of the Gothic such as prophecies, the supernatural and ancient civilizations are embodied in biblical stories. There is an Edenic quality to the lush fruited landscape, which at the same time

is countered by the foreboding black sky. The unclear time period plays with the duality of the bible as both an ancient text and harbinger of future events.

{Figure 3: *Temple Mound*, 9 x 12", 2008}



Expanding the narrative scope of previous works, *Atlantic Folly* (fig. 4) reveals a long landscape of linked islands. It is in the format of a frieze or scroll, a narrative tool in both Western and Eastern traditions. In a contemporary context, it also relates to side scroll video games and digital landscapes. The landscape is punctuated with white stone temples, mazes and folly buildings, and the architecture is pristine, with only hints of decay. The building forms seem to be from a historical period though their gleaming white brick reflects a more futuristic view. Sentimentally drooping trees suggest the season is winter while the rainbow sky is at odds with the clearly painted structures and lack of shadow. Diamonds, seemingly of the same material as the architecture appear to

be performing some mysterious act in the air. The picture evokes an atmosphere of threat, guilefully disguised as the norm.

{Figure 4: *Atlantic Folly* and detail, 24 x 144", 2007}



The Gothic instills unease by violating the everyday. Gothic artworks operate by "produc[ing] horror mainly through the disturbance of the mundane and familiar. Suggesting that something is going dreadfully wrong in the everyday world, they promote fears not about the past, but about the future" (Punter/Byron 38). Gothic foreboding fits in quite naturally today with our ever alarming environmental situation. Historically, Gothic strains in art and literature have emerged during times of crisis.

Traditionally Gothic literature is classified as an escapist form, just as the Gothic romance novel is today. This escapism -- the feeling that we are outsiders looking in --

can be seen as a distancing method for dealing with contemporary issues. All the indicators of the Gothic -- paranoia, decadence, and decay -- can be symptoms of our own cultural disorder. The ironic melancholy in a Gothic picture or story begins to suggest the environmental concerns of the 21st century. "Instead of being gateways to other, distant worlds of fantasy,....gothic stories are intimately connected to the culture that produces them" (Goddu 2). Though it is fundamentally rooted in the past, the Gothic narrative looks critically at the present and future.

The Swamp

The history of slavery, climate of decay, and defeat in the Civil War have associated the South with the Gothic landscape more than any other region in America. "Identified with Gothic doom and gloom, the American South serves as the nation's 'other,' becoming the repository for everything from which the nation wants to disassociate itself" (Goddu 4).

Essential to Southern Gothic literature and art is the icon of the swamp. As one of the last bastions of undeveloped land, it remains a strong symbol in Southern culture and identity. Its atmospheric gloom has always made it the natural setting for Gothic tales and a melancholy symbol in art. The tradition of the swamp as a sorrowful place extends even to its flora and fauna. In the Victorian era the yew, cypress and willow became the traditional trees of mourning pictures and cemeteries. Their drooping tropical feel was a manifestation of loss. The animals and insects of the swamp elicit fears, founded partly in superstition and partly truth. The mosquito in particular, as a carrier of malaria, has been a major cause of the swamps connection with death. In the past it was thought that the disease was caused by the bad air or "mal-aria" of the swamp and merely breathing it could cause contamination.

The term swamp is American in origin. The word itself holds onto negative connotations that wetland, marsh and glade do not. The swamp has been historically impervious to human development and in the 21st century it has become a symbolic last vestige of un-dominated land. But the swamp is by no means immune to development.

In fact what remains today are only small pockets of the original scope of our wetlands. After World War II, over 10 million acres of wetlands were destroyed for commercial use (Wilson 173).

{Figure5: *Cypress Swamp*, 48 x 104", 2007}



In the painting, *Cypress Swamp* (fig. 5), the bald cypress trees create a patterned swamp similar to wallpaper. The all over format and color flatten the surface completely, while the decorative spacing between trees reinforces the pattern. In the absence of figures, the tree forms have become personified, bending and exaggerating the form of the cypress. The piece has an intense darkness that is civilized by the decorative format. The morbid tree forms become delicate, and the decaying swamp water turns into a pristine black laquer-like surface. Wallpaper pattern, a reference in much of my work, is easily identified in *Cypress Swamp*. The reduced palette is taken from historical wallpapers, particularly French scenic papers. Medieval block printed

and early American wallpapers provide odd color combinations and flattened landscape elements.

The state of Connecticut has a surprising amount of wetlands and I remember them as untouched pockets of wilderness between neighborhoods and malls. All my early impressions of nature, aside from backyard exploration, came from the car window. In the crowded Northeast, every part of the landscape is “accounted for”, and homes or commercial buildings are often built right up to the edge of wetlands. The swamps of Virginia have a very different personality than those of New England, and much of my work has been sparked by their peculiar, sentimental quality.

The swamp is associated with the primordial earth -- the idea that the world began as a swamp or mire and swamps retain some of that mystery of creation (Miller 122). Ecologically, wetlands are teeming with life and sustenance, creating an ecosystem of abundance. This Edenic quality of the swamp is at odds with its negative connotations in Gothic traditions. As a symbol, the swamp still retains allegorical meaning, both good and evil. The dichotomy of the swamp as both idealized and unsettling matches its actual makeup -- for it can be categorized as neither truly land nor water. Fittingly, the Powhatan word for Tidewater swamps is “poquoson” which translates to “trembling earth”. In my work, all landforms have become fragmented to depict some type of swamp or unstable ground.

The swamps in Virginia are fed by a confluence of rivers flowing in to the Chesapeake Bay. My impressions of the local ecology in the Tidewater region are

{Figure 6: *James River Oysters*, 15 x 22", 2007}



{Figure 7: *North Bank Trail*, 15 x 22", 2007}



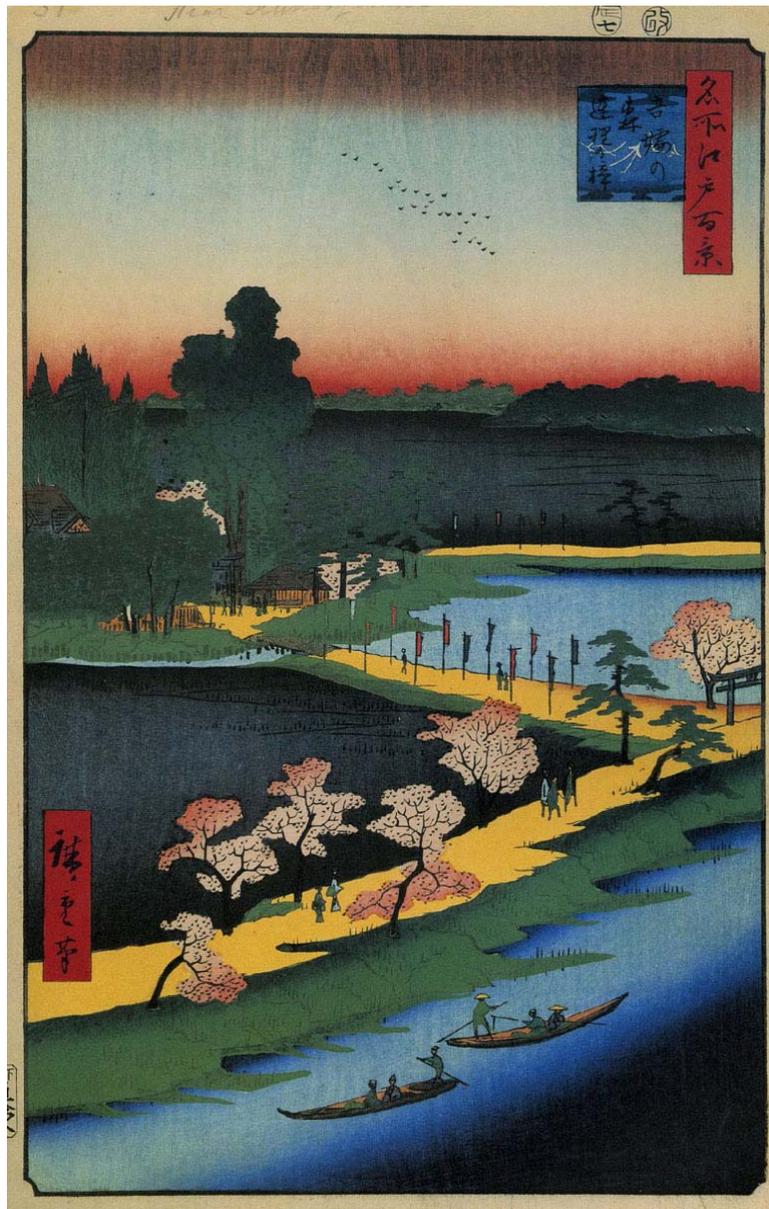
comprised mostly of my experience along James and York Rivers. In the early 17th century, Captain John Smith wrote that oysters in the Tidewater rivers “lay as thick as stones.” (qtd. in Jacobsen) 100 years later, Swiss explorer Francis Louis Michel observed, “...The abundance of oysters is incredible. There are whole banks of them so that the ships must avoid them...” (qtd. in Pearson 218) *James River Oysters* (fig. 6) is another direct link to a literary source. In this case the passage spurs an imagining of what once existed around the James and the combining of that history with a contemporary experience of the river. The profusion of life that these explorers saw is comparatively absent from the river today. Instead, the yellow and purple sky in *James River Oysters* creates a heavy atmosphere where pollution is thick, with a palpable darkness over the abundance of the river.

James River Oysters is among a series (fig. 1,6,7,8) that can be closely identified with Japanese woodblock prints. The polluted sky uses a "rainbow roll" inspired by the bokashi inking technique found in ukiyo-e woodblocks. In *North Bank Trail* (fig. 7), the palette of the sky is adapted from the works in Hiroshige's *100 Views of Edo* (fig. 8), and becomes the atmosphere of the James.

The viney luxuriant landscape of *North Bank Trail* depicts the growth that seems to take over everything along the river in the summer. The drooping foliage presents a feeling of decay with its mournful shape. True to the nature of the swamp however, it is actually teeming with life. Experiencing the local landscape in summer brings reality to the Southern Gothic. Sites like the Gothic Pump House, James River Park and

Hollywood Cemetery are overrun with nature, and have a feeling of "faux" antiquity. In the humid climate of the South, vegetation seems to take over abandoned places more quickly, resulting in an amalgam of ruins, all of questionable origin.

{Figure 8: Utagawa Hiroshige, *Azuma Shrine and the Entwined Camphor*, 1856}



Architecture

While the swamp is the embodiment of the Southern Gothic landscape, a good Gothic tale often needs a more concrete place to inhabit. Minus the classic medieval castle, there are plenty of architectural options around to further develop a Gothic scene.

The architecture of Richmond is similar to Northern cities, with Federal, Italianate and Georgian Revival structures. But added to that is a distinctly southern feel, with porches on every home and traces of French Colonial ironwork. Much of the parkland is riddled with strange architectural ruins. However it is not the quintessential Richmond architecture that attracts me most, but the oddballs. Richmond is home to a large number of Exotic revival buildings (mostly Egyptian and Moorish Revival), strangely set in the Southern landscape.

The most remarkable pyramid in Richmond is the Confederate memorial in Hollywood Cemetery. The rough cobbled pyramid is a memorial to Confederate soldiers and is unusually tall and thin. Its form is closely echoed in the Fredericksburg Battlefield monument not far away. Richmond also has one of the finest examples of Egyptian eclectic architecture in America, the Egyptian Building at the Medical College of Virginia. Nothing could be further from Southern culture than ancient Egypt. However for constructing a Gothic landscape it is an oddly appropriate fit. The pyramid

form has directed my research to memorial architecture, and also opened doors to mystical connotations that tie in with Gothic themes.

{Figure 9: *Monument Avenue*, 15 x 22", 2007}



In both *Monument Avenue* (fig. 9) and *Temple Mound* (fig. 3), the pyramid is key in transforming the scene from pastoral to Gothic. In *Temple Mound* the pyramid in an overgrown landscape can call to mind not only ancient monuments, but modern secret societies and the "all seeing eye", the cryptic symbol of the United States.

Monument Avenue presents a different and slightly more sentimental role of the pyramid. Though set in a bucolic landscape, this pyramid draws more from the governmental architecture of Washington, DC. The compositional elements are in the

tradition of Victorian mourning pictures (fig. 10), pastoral landscapes that used specific symbolic elements to commemorate death. Again the weeping willow, bare of its leaves is a common mourning tree, and the river setting connects it to the passage of time. But to a contemporary audience, the monument cannot have only one meaning. Its' perfection and sleek white exterior seems to exude an alien presence (another connection to the pyramid form). This science fiction aspect of the pyramid can suggest a setting that is both ancient and futuristic.

{Figure 10: Rachel Gay, *Untitled Mourning Picture*, 1833}



The use of many types of abbreviated architecture in a landscape ties naturally to folly gardens, the craze for tiny pastoral temples and ruins in 18th century Europe. The tradition embraces a huge range of architectural styles and miniaturizes monumental building ideas.

Follies were built as "eye-catchers" in landscape gardens. They served as points of curiosity or distance goals in one's walk. They took many forms such as temples, gothic ruins (or "sham" ruins), Chinese Pagodas or fake hermitages. A folly could be a rustic cottage that gave the nobility a place to play at being peasants, or act as a working structure such as an ice house. Their primary function however was to decorate the landscape, with a mood that was "at once cheerful and morbid" (Jones 1).

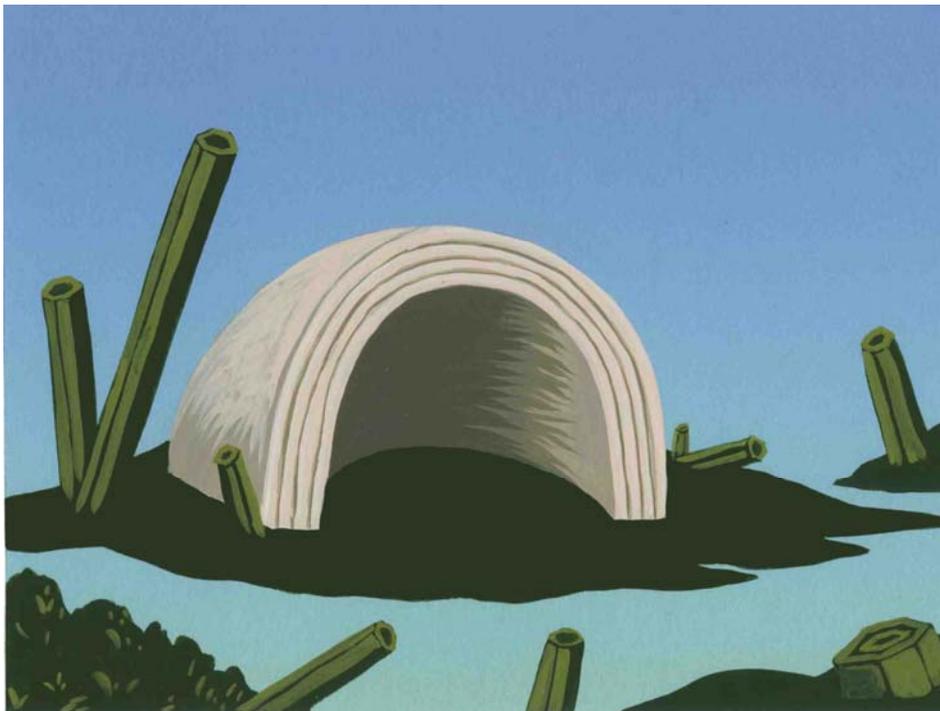
Garden Follies turned the landscape into a picture, being best viewed with a dramatic weather element or sunset. Inspired by Gothic/Romantic painting and poetry, they are the "translation of the picturesque from poem to reality" (Jones 24). Not only are they mysterious when depicted in paintings, but in reality they were equally so. After making the trek to a folly or eye-catcher, what seemed unique and inviting was often undersized and empty. The disappointing interiors were little more than dirt floors.

Sugar Loaf Folly (fig. 11) depicts an actual folly from an English estate named for its conical towers that resemble sugar loaves. The combination of forms makes this structure similar to African Islamic architecture, which is an odd association in the English countryside. *Sugar Loaf Folly* and *Grotto* (fig. 12), are among a series of "postcards" -- small pieces whose color, composition and size mimic early American color postcards (fig. 13). The influence of architecture in the series is not limited to buildings, but infuses itself into plant forms as well. In *Grotto*, the plants are more like beams or minerals that grow geometrically from the ground. Their architectural look lends a sort of rampart or industrial quality to the image - an orderly overgrown jungle.

{Figure 11: *Sugar Loaf Folly*, 5 x 6.5", 2007}

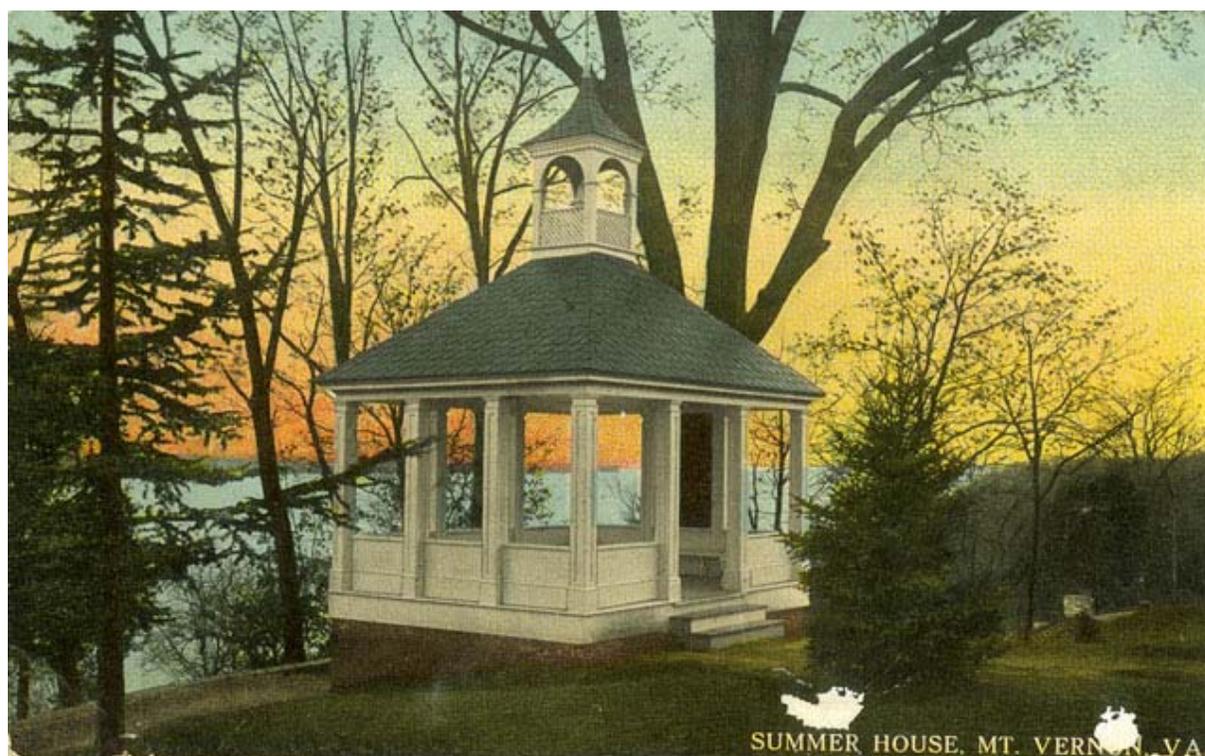


{Figure 12: *Grotto*, 5 x 6.5", 2007}



The little pyramids, temples, ziggurats, crypts and hermitages in my work suggest civilization, but at the same time belie the presence of humans in their world. The duality of their diminutive size and mysterious purpose links with the Gothic. The haunted, decaying Gothic castle is only hinted at in the tiny, futuristic buildings. Like the trees in *Cypress Swamp*, the architecture becomes personified as the only inhabitant in the landscape. Instead of reviving the past, the moody climate of the architecture seems to haunt the present.

{ Figure 13: postcard, Mount Vernon }



Conclusion

At the beginning of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*, the narrator travels through a gloomy landscape to the home of Roderick Usher. He finds his destination in possession of all the mysteries of a Gothic scene. Replete with haunted mansion, stagnant lake and the prospect of madness, Usher's estate seems to warn the narrator's intuition against his planned "sojourn of some weeks" (Poe 113).

Though not as glaring, there is part of this same dread in the landscape of America today. The rampant development and loss of our natural landscape seem to face no end, and are as frightening as any Gothic tale. As we reach crucial point in the 21st century, grim environmental consequences are becoming clear, and "the hideous dropping off of the veil" (Poe 113). - our Gothic reality is coming into focus. As the narrator reins his horse, he reflects on the scene:

What was it—I paused to think—what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? I was forced to fall back upon the unsatisfactory conclusion that while, beyond doubt, there are combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth. It was possible, I reflected, that a mere different arrangement of the particulars of the scene, of the details of the picture, would be sufficient to modify, or perhaps to annihilate its capacity for sorrowful impression; and, acting upon this idea, I reined my horse to the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled luster by the dwelling, and gazed down—but with a shudder even more thrilling than before.... (Poe 113).

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