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# **Laying out a Space: Spectral Geographies, Fictions of the Soul**

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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My parents, who made completing this program as a single mother possible.

And, my daughter Beulah, who is in all my 'inner geographies.' As the poet says "the Daughters of Beulah follow sleepers in all their Dreams /Creating Spaces lest they fall [...]"

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## Abstract

*Laying out a Space: Spectral Geographies, Fictions of the Soul*, arises out of my artistic practice, and thoughts behind my current project and MFA exhibition, *Spectral Geographies*.

Linking the problem of the world ‘out there’ or external space, to inner experience through painting as both medium and practice, my work expresses what I call *inner geographies*, spaces where intimate immensities, folding inside and outside, find expression. I think of my paintings as beginning with this gesture of *laying out* a between-space where the intimacies of waking dreams and visions are opened by, and grow into, actual places, events, and geographies. In this sense they are real fictions; real because they make room for, and respond to a real otherness, unknown or excessive forces—spiritual, affective, historical, material, social.

Most of the paintings in my MFA exhibition, *Spectral Geographies*, were made working with red dirt from Oklahoma, where my family has generational roots, and are based on actual places familiar, yet distant to me. They also take up the mythology of the American west, and the “western” in various ways. Dyeing canvas and using earth as pigment allows me to work with shapes and textures already present that push against me and inform my images; the canvas becomes an *inner geography*—a meeting place of inside and outside.

Against the on and on of westward expansion, the manifest destiny of conquering and possessing lands/space, *Spectral Geographies* imagines an experience of being ‘possessed’ and arrested by intense inner movements and visions, images hiding within everyday figures and forms of settlement, conveying a specter of paralysis—“a stutter in the plot”—of history. I’m interested in what the poet Susan Howe, referring to women’s experience, called the *stutter in the plot* of American mythology: “of what is silenced or not quite silenced.”<sup>1</sup> Images that lie on the fold, so to speak, of inside and outside; spectral images that unsettle, found in the ruins of what was.

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Howe, *The Birth-mark: unsettling the wilderness in American literary history*, (Wesleyan University Press: Middletown, CT, 1993), page.

## Vita

Erin Yerby currently lives and works in Richmond, VA. She holds an MFA from VCU (Painting and Printmaking, 2023), and is a trained Cultural Anthropologist (PhD Columbia University, 2017). Her painting practice draws on ethnographic methods, archival research, and writing. Yerby credits her long-term fieldwork, on the animate sensory mediations involved in North American Spiritualist Mediumship, with propelling her toward painting. Exploring how the familiarity of place, home and body, is displaced by external forces, spectral returns, and fugitive sensations—Yerby abstracts shapes/figures to open latent meanings, allegorical signs and visionary, inner geographies.

## Intimate Immensity

At times when we believe we are studying something, we are only being receptive to a kind of daydreaming.

—Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*<sup>2</sup>

The daydream needs a space, a shelter. “The house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer,” says Bachelard.<sup>3</sup> This phenomenology of *The Poetics of Space*, constructs a *topoanalysis* of the spaces where our daydreaming is set aflight—external spaces that “protect the dreamer” and draw out that intimate, internal space within us where images take hold. Bachelard connects the formation of this inner space to the hidden places of childhood, where one loses oneself in waking dreams (the house, the attic, the tent, the shell). By extension, I want to say, the spaces we lay out in ritual, and in art, repeat this gesture. Maybe it is enough to say that images need a space. What interests me as an artist is this link between space and image, and what it means to think of painting as a gesture of ‘laying out a space,’ to invite images in.

My practice circles around an experience of how space takes up a place inside of us, a place where images are allowed to unfold. Externalized as paintings, inner experience of space becomes something else again, finding traction and release in the material accidents of canvas, paint, and, in my case, dirt. Painting, for me, follows a movement back and forth between inside and outside, with the body in the middle—the medium of this movement, the place of a ‘reverberation’ of images that emerge where intimate space touches an outer immensity. I like the term Bachelard uses for this coincidence of opposites—an “intimate immensity.”<sup>4</sup> In my painting practice I am after this ‘intimate immensity’ of space, where ‘the two kinds of space, intimate space and exterior space, keep encouraging one another [...] in their growth.’<sup>5</sup> A space that grows between inside and outside, where an inner expansion meets and undoes seemingly objective limits. This way of encountering the outside world, makes things “open up”: “to give an object poetic space is to give it more space than it has objectivity; or better still, it is following the expansion of its intimate space.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston Mass: Beacon Press, 1994), xxxviii.

<sup>3</sup> Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 183.

<sup>5</sup> Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 201.

<sup>6</sup> Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 202.

An always unexpected surfacing of inner sensory forms and intuitions, put in motion by the movement of eye and hand, and direct contact with the materiality of paint and dirt. Thinking the body as zone of contact for the emergence of images, reflects what Walter Benjamin called, with reference to photography and film, the “physiognomic aspects of visual worlds.”<sup>7</sup> Behind this phrase is the mimetic relation between images as ‘copies’ or resemblances, and images as zones of ‘contact’ or contagion—the visceral relation between the image and what the image is an image of. In other words, Benjamin’s understanding of mimesis, as fueled by that desire to “get close to a thing by way of its likeness, its reproduction,” belies the sensuous relations congealed within images—where images not only ‘resemble’ or ‘represent’ things in the world, but are signs that carry the traces of a *contact* with the bodies and things they are images of—that mysterious link between image, percept and material world.<sup>8</sup>

I see painting as engaging both sides of this deep, primordial desire to mimetically relate to the cosmos: the problem of image making as matter of making something *similar* to what we encounter, a resemblance, and the image as a zone of *contact* with the sensuous, material realities of which it is an image. Alienated by the excess of virtual images that occupy our everyday sensorium, through painting I re-connect the many ‘dead,’ virtual images that pass through us daily, like phantasms, to inner experience and material reality. My practice brings me closer to a conscious experience of the body as medium and media of images, by drawing near estranged or alienated images.

Directly linking the problem of the world ‘out there’ or external space, to an inner experience, painting, for me, becomes a space where intimate immensities, folding inside and outside, can find expression. I think of my paintings as beginning with this gesture of laying out a between-space where the intimacies of waking dreams and visions are opened by, but also grow into, actual places, events, and geographies. In following this movement between inside and outside—an outside at once mundane and spiritual—flimsy and ephemeral ‘inner’ sensory images, affects, and visions meet ‘outer’ landscapes of experience, while collective histories become fragmental archives of image-events. Through painting, otherwise ephemeral images that pass through us become congealed, and thus made to endure, in a material—to *materialize*—and experienced as material images linked to bodily experience. I think it is this strange

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (Routledge: New York, 1993), 19-23.

<sup>8</sup> Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, 20.

materiality of the image in painting, its paradoxical status as both image and object, that propels my practice.

## Mediumship and Painting

My interest and experience with painting draws deeply on my anthropological research and long-term fieldwork among North American Spiritualist mediums. I've come to see my fieldwork on mediumship as not unlike a prolonged attention to waking dreams. Through my own mediumistic training and experience, historical research, and most importantly, the narrative accounts of other mediums, I studied the sensory techniques of mediums—honing experiences of ephemeral imagistic affects and sensations, and the conversion these to communicable public 'evidences.'<sup>9</sup> I came to understand spirit experience as foregrounding an inner space of experience seen as irreducible to subjective feeling; rather, inner space becomes the site of congress for intense figural presences and atmospheric sensations passing through the medium, yet coming from an immanent spirit world, at once within and without. I situated American mediumship within a wider constellation of early settler-colonial and modern, 19<sup>th</sup> century ideas around bodies considered vulnerable to 'possession' by spectral forces, and thus a threat to established orders. (i.e. Black and Indigenous bodies, Witches, Hysterics).

Mediumship as a practice, I proposed, foregrounds experience of the body as a medium and media (or 'instrument' as the Spiritualists call it), extending our inner images and sensations. As site mediating spirit presence, the body becomes a space in communication with something outside of itself—a way of thinking about the body that has profoundly influenced my artistic practice. I find mediumship and painting share deep affinities—not least because painting, like mediumship, redirects an experience of images back toward bodily sensation and extension: the body as medium and media. In this sense, I see painting as a way of resisting the alienation of experience long ascribed to a mechanized modernity, while understanding the body as 'media,' and thus itself mediated by outside forces. Painting seems ever more relevant today, when the body as a 'site' of agency—in labor, experience, knowledge, image-making etc.—is increasingly viewed as replaceable by virtual communication technologies and artificial intelligence. Painting, as a practice, redirects me toward an attention to my body as an energetic center of image generation and mediation; it does not cover-over this primary relation between image and body,

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<sup>9</sup> Erin Yerby, *Spectral Bodies of Evidence: The Body as Medium in American Spiritualism* (10600760) [Doctoral Dissertation, Columbia University] ProQuest.

or allow the image to transcend the sensuousness relations that make-up life, to echo Marx's analysis of the commodity-form.<sup>10</sup>

In retrospect, my research and training in mediumship brought me toward painting as a way of trusting inner experience, and the animate images that unfold: forms of feeling, figures of memory, and milieus of time, space, light, that together compose intensive, spiritual expressions of external forces, social and cosmic. At the same time, my training as an anthropologist through ethnographic participant-observation, attending to what is said, unsaid, done, and otherwise performed within 'culture,' has influenced a tension in my paintings between inside and outside—inner intensities and a desire to stay close to some sense of 'social facts.' I've come to see my painting practice as a kind of inversion of ethnographic practices. Ethnography turns outward, through methods of attention, participant-observation, close listening etc. to worlds out there, the lives of others—and is a peculiar kind of knowledge that arises out of a process of estrangement of the familiar—one's own language, thought and everyday habits. Painting, for me, becomes a kind of inversion of this outward turn—a turning inward, toward an inner geography, however strange—that begins slowly to unfolds another language in form, color, material etc. It is an internal place of otherness, of estrangement—a *real fiction*—where you follow the breadcrumbs leading from image to image, from sensation to sensation. It feels like a form of ek-static thinking; ekstatic because it is a turning outside-in, and later, in painting, inside-out, taking the body with it. The inner sensorium become a geography, a setting for an inner theater, a spectral geography.

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<sup>10</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. *The Marx-Engels Reader*, Second Edition. (W.W. Norton & Company: Boston, 1978) Capital Vol. 1, 294.

## A Fiction of the Soul, an Inner Geography

This figuration of space is also, then, located at the threshold of the mystic discourse. It opens, in an imaginary mode, a field for the development of this discourse. It makes a theater of operations possible. [...] It also constitutes an internal theater. In an artificial field of representation, “objects” are articulable, the traces of a mute and ineffable interiority. In this displaced place, the metaphors of (secret) movements that do not take place (or space) are produced.

— Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*,<sup>11</sup>

I would like to realize paintings as peculiar kinds of image-spaces—spaces that realize a “fiction of the soul” to borrow a phrase from the sainted seer, Teresa of Avila, and her *Interior Castle*. What Teresa of Avila called a “fiction of the soul” names a space, an inner architecture (or, interior castle) that must be laid-out within, to make room for communication with God (a divine outside that is also inside). The spirit, says Michel de Certeau, in his reading of *The Interior Castle* as mystical speech act, is in “search of a place, a vacant space, after the manner of phantoms [...]”<sup>12</sup>

The soul is described by de Certeau as the site of an ‘an inner speaking,’ an answer ‘in search of what it is an answer to.’ Speaker and responder are separated, for the soul is a response, a mirror, an echo of God who is Unknown, yet of the soul. Teresa of Avila describes the soul as a “moaning” or a “murmur”—always already a response to an Unknown address. A space must be imagined: “this fiction” is likened to “an image of an echo—the image, since it is spatial, like a page to be written upon, a circle to be played in, a garden to be walked in.”<sup>13</sup> The soul lacks a space, a space to be heard. This fictive space becomes an imaginary condition for an “expression of speaking that has no place of its own in which to make itself heard.” I think of this fictional soul-space as a space where a stuttering forth takes place—of those fleeting images, sensations and pasts that are continuously omitted from the ‘script,’ inner experiences given no ‘room,’ no place to land or be recognized within the constraints of everyday life. It is as if for something to be heard, seen, or in any way recognized as a sign, it must be concretized in some space, some second-body, as fictional container that could make it endure. “Therefore, the image that offers

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<sup>11</sup> Michel De Certeau, *The Mystic Fable: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, Vol. 1. Trans. Michael B. Smith (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1992), 188.

<sup>12</sup> De Certeau, *Mystic Fable*, 189.

<sup>13</sup> De Certeau, *Mystic Fable*, 189.

the otherwise ‘mute’ soul a space in which to speak can only be a fiction— “a “turn,” a way of “turning” silence out from within, a “mystic sentence.”<sup>14</sup>

I borrow this laying out of a fictional soul-space, also referred to as a “borrowed habitation,” as a way thinking about painting related to what I’m calling an *inner geography*— always provisional, always wed to an experience of time, this inner geography is a space folding inside and outside, where intimacy and immensity touch.

This gesture of laying-out a kind of spiritual, inner geography, at times an imaginative map-making, would then be a *real* fiction; real because it makes room for, and responds to a real otherness, unknown or excessive forces—spiritual, affective, historical, material, and social. As strange form of mapping, it lays out a fictional and provisional foundation for those realities that have no foundation.

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<sup>14</sup> De Certeau, *Mystic Fable*, 189.

## Ground and Spirit

Most of the paintings in my MFA exhibition, *Spectral Geographies*, were made working with red dirt from Oklahoma, dyeing canvas and using earth as pigment. This allows the material accidents of the dyeing process to form a geography beyond my control—one that meets me and pushes against me, so to speak, laying out a field of shape, texture, and light that informs the images I plan for my paintings. In working with shapes and textures already present, the canvas becomes an *inner geography*—a meeting place of inside and outside. Viewed here as inner geography, painting opens onto a specific temporality of visionary experience; not as a sudden, imagistic event within the body (like Caravaggio’s St. Paul, blinded by a vision of God on the road to Damascus), but as an experience that unfolds, spatially, through the time of mark making. Intimate ephemeral ‘marks’ and ‘movements’ of the soul meet the material of the earth and paint forming thick atmospheres: inner theaters of sensation communicated through hand, eye and color, releasing “presences beneath representation, beyond representation.”<sup>15</sup>

Bathing my canvas in red dirt, and manipulating the dirt to form different effects, is a process that brings the surface (of the canvas) closer to my body. Working with red dirt has been a way for me to ‘unearth’ my own generational roots in Oklahoma, as much as a way of *grounding* dis-placed or place-less experiences – and is maybe a way of reclaiming the healing power of earth that sustains and ‘grounds’ us.

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<sup>15</sup> Gilles Deleuze, Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation, trans. By Daniel W. Smith (University of Minnesota: Minneapolis, 1981), 45.



Image of dirt dyeing process

Rose rocks, as familiar regional forms I remember from childhood, have also been important in my work. Their familiarity betrays a temporal otherness, as crystallized signs of deep-time—congealed after-images of receded primordial ocean— signs as objects that meet us at the surface, where we share ground with the past. Rose rocks sometimes appear in my paintings as portals—vaginal, primordial entryways—leading us into *depths* of time, or, more frequently as ‘surface’ signs, redirecting the viewer, through repetition and pattern, to the painted surface as *surface*. In this movement between rose rocks as painted images that invite us to contemplate material depths, or as prints that direct us to the surface, they become allegorical—in Walter Benjamin’s sense—where *allegory*, as I understand it, does not simply name an aggregation of signs, but foremost marks an experience: a sudden apprehension of transitoriness, the finitude of the material world.<sup>16</sup> For as a kind of sign, allegory points back to the moment when a sign becomes a sign—in other words, to the passage from physical world as referent, to its dematerialization in becoming sign. Against the grain of understanding allegory as a ‘whole’ or total sign tells a story or reveals a moral truth, allegory for Benjamin conveys an always “fragmentary and enigmatic” experience of time. Allegorical signs redirect us back to the link between sign and signified, as designating an always “fragmentary and enigmatic” experience of

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<sup>16</sup> Bainard Cowan, “Walter Benjamin’s Theory of Allegory,” *New German Critique*, No.22, Special Issue on Modernism (Winter, 1981): 109-122.

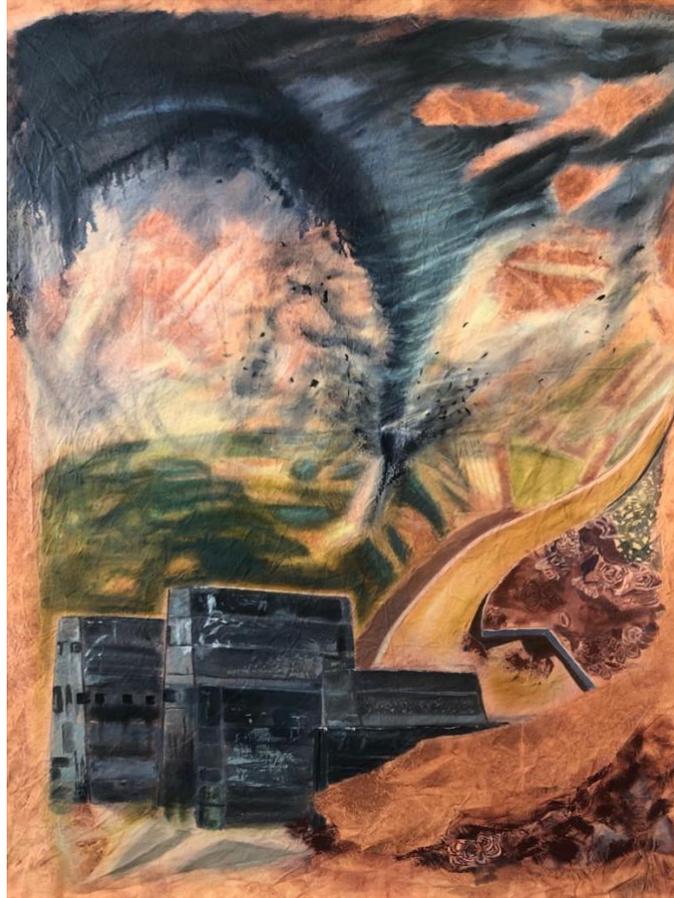
the world—one that marks, but also rejects any absolute line between the sensuous, physical world and the world as sign.<sup>17</sup> Rose rocks are allegorical for me in that they carry this double, inseparable significance as nature and culture—at once deeply physical, as crystals embedded in red earth over time, and as surface signs called “rose rocks,” holding different meanings, and belonging to the mythology of Oklahoma. In my paintings, rose rocks become allegorical in an even more direct way—in that they not only point to the transition of something physical becoming-sign, but also, by using earth as pigment, the rose rock as sign/image visibly retains something of the sensuousness of the physical world.

Moving between ground, as substance and metaphor, allows me to play with the figure/ground relation, as much as the tension between the inner ‘spirit’ and meaning congealed in images, and the materiality and object-status of painting. In this sense, my practice develops the tension between *ground* and *spirit* through a vernacular iconography—scenes grounded in the familiar and everyday yet shot-through with abstract forces—natural, spiritual, imaginary, and mythological—that displace, haunt and undo what was settled. I understand this tension in both figural and literal terms, moving between ‘ground’ as vernacular scene or narrative, and using earth (dirt) as dye or pigment to ‘ground,’ but also open onto unexpected images in the painting. In this way my paintings move between image and material object, figure and ground, expressing imagistic scenes as material bodies, that make sensory experience *endure* in pigment, oil, and cloth.

For example, in *Tornado* (2023) working with the canvas as ‘ground’ already covered in dirt, and the accidental marks of the dyeing process, is a way of inverting settlement’s gesture of laying borders and boundaries (as if from above) on land violently cleared, to realize an imagined terra nullius, a tabula rasa.

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<sup>17</sup> Cowan, “Walter Benjamin’s Theory of Allegory,” 109-122.



*Tornado, 2023*

I want my paintings of the west to compose, instead, inner geographies of the west that begin as a “kind of incomprehensible *stopping place* in the spirit, right in the middle of everything.”<sup>18</sup> Against the outward on and on of westward expansion, the manifest destiny of conquering and possessing lands/space, I want to create imagined, inner geographies that express in an experience of being ‘possessed’ and arrested by intense inner movements and visions, images hiding within everyday figures and forms of settlement, conveying a specter of paralysis—“a stutter in the plot”—of history. I’m interested in what the poet Susan Howe, referring to women’s experience, called the *stutter in the plot* of American mythology: “of what is silenced or not quite silenced.”<sup>19</sup> Images that lie on the fold, so to speak, of inside and outside; spectral images that unsettle, found in the ruins of what was. Put another way, images that might discover

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<sup>18</sup> Gilles Deleuze, 43.

<sup>19</sup> Susan Howe, *The Birth-mark: unsettling the wilderness in American literary history*, (Wesleyan University Press: Middletown, CT, 1993), page.

other “manners of speaking” and “styles of doing” amid a world in seeming spiritual and ecological collapse, whose orders and meanings have lost their power. As Michel De Certeau described 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century mysticism, I am in search of a visual language for “the night of bodies that can no longer find orientation in the signifiers of an established cultural tradition.”<sup>20</sup>

In this other west, forms and figures abstracted from experience put in relief a ‘hysterical’ space—an inner ‘theater’ possessed by an excess of layered meanings and forces that insert themselves among the ruins of dominant cultural space. This other space opens within the spectral ruins of the present—ruins ecological, economic and cultural—inheritations of the boom and bust cycle of oil history, the failed American dream, and the violence of settler colonialism. A spectral geography emerges in this layering between inner ‘theater’ and actual places. I use the term ‘theater’ here to play on the idea of the hysteric’s “inner theater” (articulated in Freud and Breuer’s *Studies in Hysteria*) as a theater of traumatic repetitions and dream-like atmospheres. This inner theater is also set in mimetic opposition to the American west as “theater” of settlement’s violent clearings, dramatized as “manifest destiny,” while also confronting the mythical desires in representational genres of the Western as dramatic, epic space. In this layered “hysterical” theater of the west, we are all possessed, vulnerable to an excess of spirits, images and social forces—possessions that unsettle this possessed landscape, through affects and sensations and other ways of imagining into space, that bring ‘settlement’ itself into doubt.

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<sup>20</sup> Stefania Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul: Madness, Psychoanalysis, Islam*, (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2018), 9.

## Shaping a geography

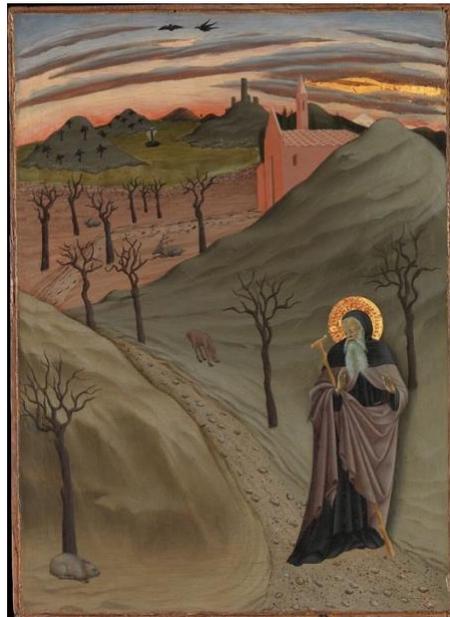
My recent work is informed by a long love for the strange geographies found in Sieneese Renaissance paintings, roughly between 1420-1500. In my first ‘landscape’ paintings about Oklahoma, entitled *Wewoka Picnic 2021*, I experimented with different compositional elements influenced by Sieneese School—in particular a work by the Master of Osservanza, *The Meeting of St. Anthony and St. Paul*.



*Wewoka Picnic, 2021*



Master of Osservanza, *The Meeting of St. Anthony and St. Paul*, c.1430/143



Saint Anthony the Abbott in the Wilderness c. 1435

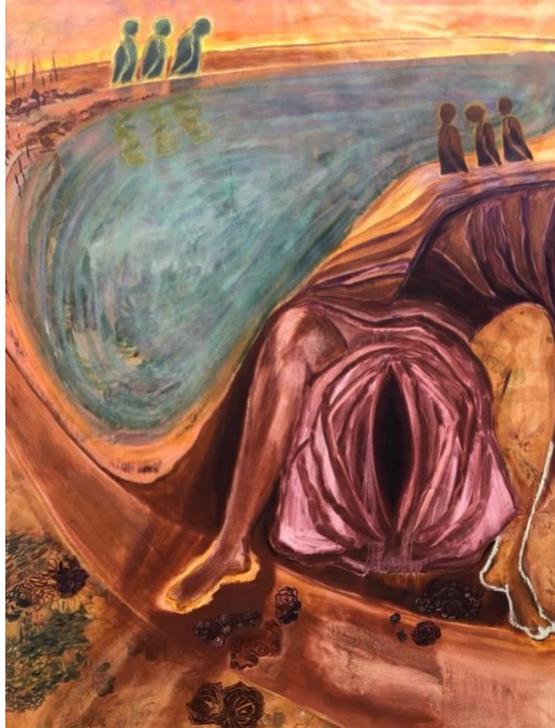
When I first saw Sieneese Renaissance paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art many years ago, I had no idea they would figure so strongly into my work. What attracted me was the surprising feeling of presence in otherwise emotionless, flat, proto-renaissance figures and

spaces. These iconographic landscapes are not so much animate as they convey the intensity of imagined spaces dreamed of and forgotten. Strange and flattened ways of figuring space without renaissance perspective seem to lend these landscapes a dreamy immensity, in which color and form seem at once specific and eternal. What comes across is a contextualized, yet timeless atmosphere, capable of leaping out of the enclosure of the pictorial/narrative. I am also struck by the tension the paintings hold between contained, very still spaces (arches, corners, houses) and the affective movement of a sacred, narrativized experience.

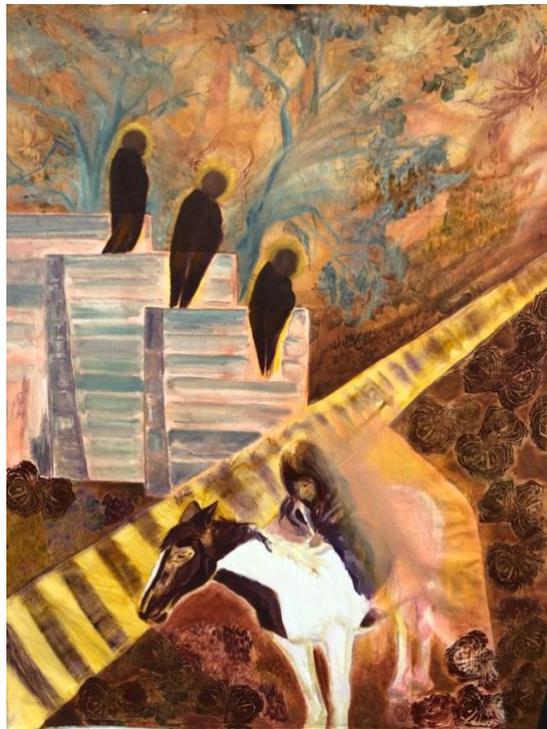
The above paintings by the Master of Osservanza informed the recurrence of the curving path and cave shapes (here becoming a rose rock/vaginal portal of sorts) in my recent triptych entitled *The Assistants*.



*The Assistants, 2023*



*Detail, The Assistants 2023*



*Detail, The Assistants, 2023*

In the central painting, the curved path is also drawn from a family photograph of a path leading to my uncle's house in Oklahoma. The unfolding of abstracted shapes that map-out and create the space—the curved path, the railroad, the rose rocks, the horse, the ruin) become important sites of repetition—allowing me to find strange resonances between art historical images, dreams/unconscious images (as in the bird/assistants/angels, the rose rock as vaginal shape, a glowing, spiritual light), imagination and lived experience. The Assistants evokes the bird-like figures, angelic and earthly shapes, that move between worlds. I think of them as witness to something as yet uncertain—a vision unfolding, the lines of which can barely be made out. They are “unfinished” as Walter Benjamin said the many ‘assistants’ that appear in Kafka’s stories.<sup>21</sup> This unfinished quality is echoed in the materiality of the painting, which is a found fabric, dyed in earth, in geological time, its edges cut and unstretched.

My paintings often begin with references to photos, which seem increasingly less relevant, or less determinative of the final image. It is important to me that these are images grounded in my own experience, or at least in proximate experiences. Photographs become like entryways; I move from place-based evidential images of *outer* realities (familial, historical, documentary, ethnographic) to *inner* visions and unconscious forms and back again, releasing unexpected associations and contiguities. What interests me is how an outer experience, captured referentially in a photograph as ‘indexical reality,’ is finally folded back into inner experience—where it grows into a space, an atmosphere, an *intimate immensity*.

Within the Sieneese tradition, the work of Giovanni di Paolo has been the most important to me. Giovanni Di Paolo was seen as ‘translator’ of visionary experience. Of his series of icons on the life of St. Catherine it is said that “he alone was capable of translation Saint Catherine’s mystical visions into visual images in which the logic of perspective is suspended, and the fictive space of the architectural settings is willfully blended to enhance the narrative content.”<sup>22</sup> It is this “willful blending” between the fictive yet vernacular spaces of Sieneese architecture, and the imaginative, narrative content, that interests me.

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<sup>21</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. and intro by Hannah Arendt, “Franz Kafka, On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death,” (Schocken Books: New York, 1968), 111.

<sup>22</sup> Keith Christiansen, Lawrence B. Kanter, and Karl Brandon Strehlke, *Painting in Renaissance Siena 1420-1500*, (Metropolitan Museum of Art: New York, 1989), 11.

It is always surprising how one's intuitive connection to certain artists and materials turn out, only in hindsight, to share deep resonance with one's own thinking and practice. I now realize that my interest in foregrounding a 'vernacular' language in my paintings (grounded in my own experience, and the specificity of place), was specifically articulated in the Sienese tradition—giving these paintings a vernacular that differed from the then dominant influences of Florence and Rome. Bending borrowed and inherited structures to more imaginative and personal feeling, Giovanni di Paolo has been described as an 'imaginative' painter who stretched the conventions of a Sienese vernacular. Di Paolo's works allow time-space to be joined and flattened to provide room for narrative repetition, and to release allegorical meaning. I like the relative stasis of these de-naturalized, almost abstract landscape forms that express an imagined, sacred geography. The relation here between inside and outside, inherited 'structures' and vernacular conventions, and imaginative leaps, resonate with what I am calling *inner geographies*.

This painting, *St. John the Baptist Entering the Wilderness*, influenced the structure of my *Tornado* (2023) painting. Here I was interested in how the stillness and flatness of such landscapes can be juxtaposed with the excess of 'outside' forces (tornadoes, winds, spiritual events).



Giovanni di Paolo, *St. John the Baptist Entering the Wilderness*



*Tornado, 2023*

By using red dirt to dye my canvases, I encounter the surface not as an ‘empty’ territory but as a space of abstract marks and shapes as an ‘outside’ that meets me. Working with these shapes, I lay out scenes and figures that find their place in this more abstract ‘ground.’ Similarly, I found that Giovanni di Paolo borrowed existing structures and compositional elements, using these to create spaces as “ready-made schemes ready to be imbued with personal meaning,” a process considered “a completely medieval approach to painting that produced pictures strikingly modern in effect.”<sup>23</sup>

I can return to Giovanni di Paolo’s work of 15<sup>th</sup> century Siena to think how ‘ready-made’ structures are used as leaping off points to realize, and ground, an imagined pictorial space—a tension that prefigures, in many ways, the questions Duchamp and his generation would ask of

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<sup>23</sup> Christiansen, Kanter, and Strehlke, *Painting in Renaissance Siena*, 11.

painting.<sup>24</sup> In other words, it seems to me that painting as medium might integrally recognize a tension within itself between material and image—as much as space and image—and that this tension is repeated, differentially, throughout art history.

Working with the earth, with dirt, is a way of entering this tension more directly—the question of which pole a painting belongs to— that of being a material object, or an image figuring or ‘resembling’ some external reality. This opposition, and siding on one pole or the other, seems like a refusal to hold these poles in tension—a tension that may be said to belong to painting as a medium. Further, this opposition between painting as material object—and thus also ready-made, non ‘crafted’ object—or as image (seen as ‘additive’ gesture of creating resemblances), only repeats a deeper opposition, largely rejected today, of nature and culture. Such opposition, hypostasized in modern thought, makes nature stand outside of us, as something to be used, instrumentalized, or harnessed. On the other end, the desire simply to claim, on ontological terms, that there is no opposition and then to treat this as a social ‘fact,’ ignores the fact that in dominant cultural configurations under global capitalism, nature and culture have long been shaped by a history of opposition. This is why I understand my practice as both acknowledging these dialectical antinomies (between material and image, nature and culture), and at the same time refusing to collapse painting into one pole or the other. It feels important that my paintings foreground their status as material objects and as images, not least because this is my experience—I live through and in images, and also feel that this mediation of images inside me comes from direct contact with, and in some sense congeals, the material world. Images come from somewhere, they are in the world, and it seems to me they are in things, or mediated by things we encounter in the world, as much as they arise within us. You have only to have had your own quasi-Proustian experience of tasting a madeleine, to know that images are involuntarily excited in us, and return us to the past as space of encounter. The epicurean philosopher Lucretius thought of images as ‘flimsy films’ given off by actual material beings (like a double, a phantasm) that then combine in the ether to produce the fantastical combinations we find in dreams.

Dirt may be my madeleine—but beyond exciting specific involuntary memories of place, contact with the earth also invites us into layers of time (human and nonhuman) never directly experienced. What has struck me about these ‘western’ scenes, grounded in the red dirt of

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<sup>24</sup> Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*, an October Book (MIT Press: Cambridge, 1996), 151.

Oklahoma, is how they are intertwined with my own inner geography. Touching, caring for and attending to the iron oxide rich, and sometimes blood red dirt of Oklahoma connects me to bodies not my own—the dead, as decomposition of life into time—and becomes a material way into the imagined portals, paths and pregnant geographies found in my paintings.

## Contemporary Artists

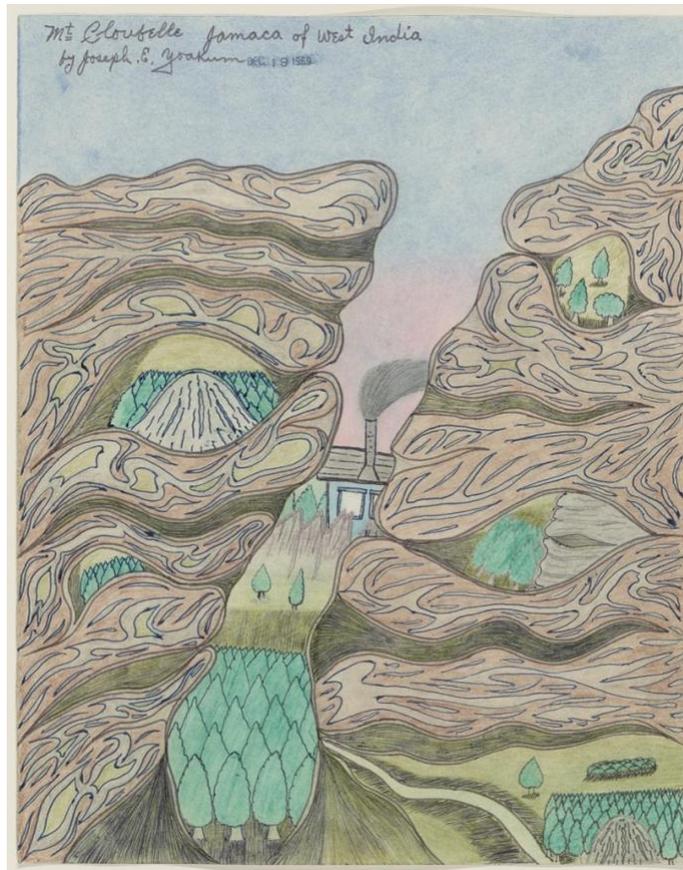
In a more contemporary vein, I am in conversation with the work of Joseph Yoakum, Peter Doig, Noah Davis, and Portia Zvavahera.

The almost nervously active lines that make up the shapes in Joseph E. Yoakum landscapes have influenced my sense of how to depict space. Born in 1891, to parents of French, African-American and Cherokee ancestry, Yoakum's drawings have been situated within the wake of the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries "crisis of certainty," realized with the emergence of new communication technologies, especially photography, and the realization that even 'evidential' images could be faked or manipulated.<sup>25</sup> I would add that the emergence of Spiritualism also spoke to this crisis, connecting spirit 'experience' to 'evidentiality.' Yoakum's process is based on his extensive travels and moves across the country—being witness to a place in time—yet far from mere 'descriptions' these geographies feel incredibly dynamic as intimately imagined scenes of pattern and color and have been described as "memories of places he had seen blended imperceptibly with fantasy."<sup>26</sup> Drawing on my experience using ethnographic methods to get closer to what is unfamiliar, I feel Yoakum's drawings resonate with a certain interest in locating one's experiences in the world, "to get close," to quote Benjamin again, "to a thing by way of its likeness, its reproduction." Yoakum makes a record of his experiences, but this record does not attempt to 'represent' the world as much as it seems to realize that such witnessing creates lines of resonance with our inner landscapes—what I'm calling inner geographies. The mostly pastel palette invites you in, but also contributes to a sense of dreamy distance from a more 'realistic' rendering.

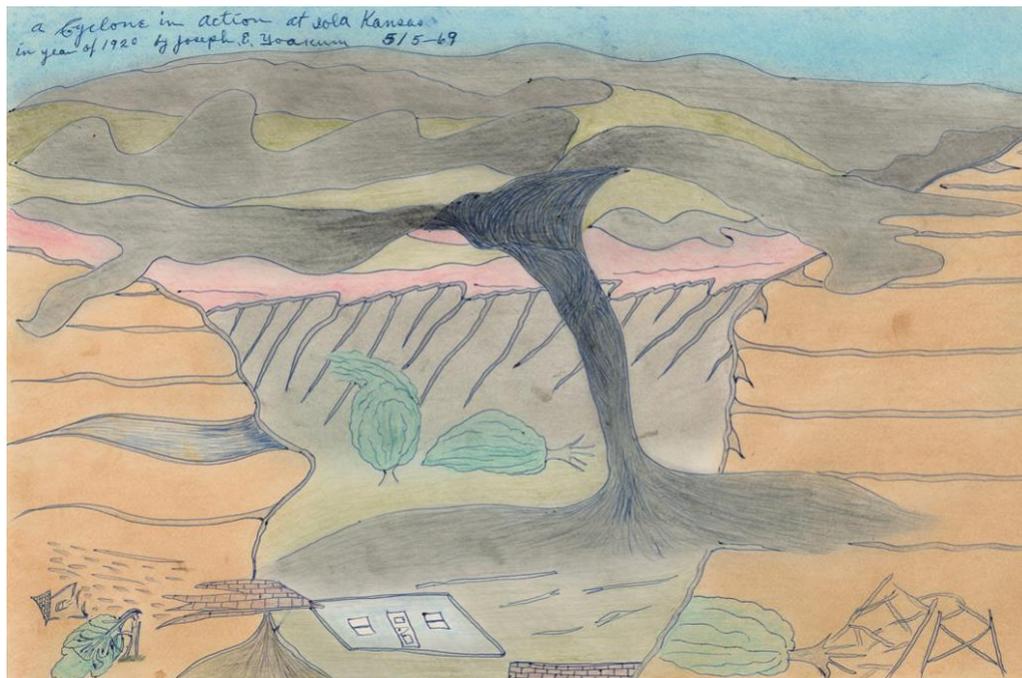
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<sup>25</sup> Joe Bucciero, "The Great Pretender," Art Forum, October, 2021.

<sup>26</sup> Bucciero, "The Great Pretender," 2021. Quoting the art historian Whitney Halstead.



*Mt. Cloubelle Jamaica of West India, stamped 1969*



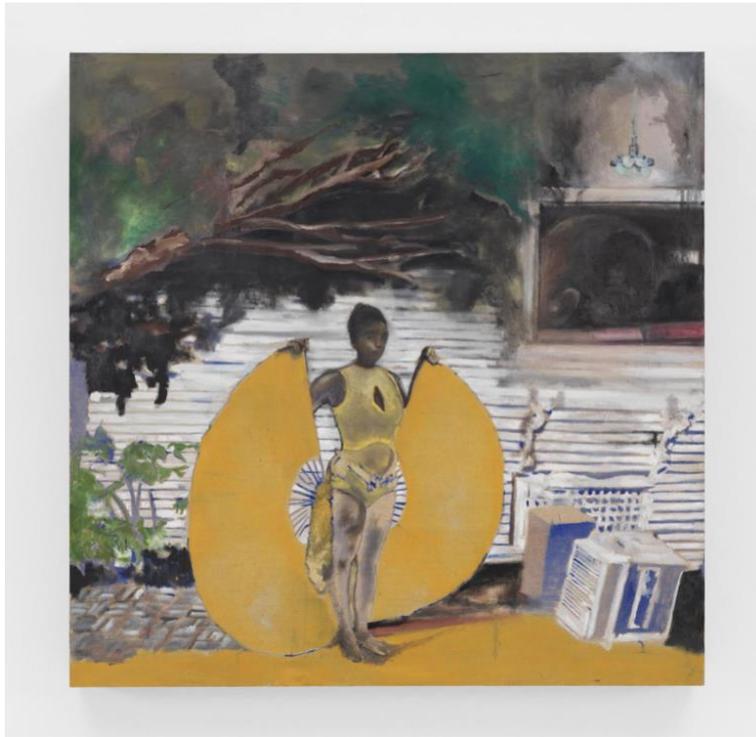
*A Cyclone in Action at Iola Kansas in Year of 1920, 1969, ink and pastel on paper, 12 × 19"*

Peter Doig's work of applying thin layers, often creating a 'veil' of atmospheric paint between the viewer and the figures, appeals to me because I think it foregrounds the fact that our experience (our memory, but also perceptual experience) is always mediated—that we are always looking through our own inner images as much as through atmospheres outside of ourselves. These thin layers of paint seem to allow Doig to build-up atmospheric worlds, which takes time. I try to paint in this slower way, building up layers, to allow for unintended accidents and sudden intuitions to unfold in the work. The work, opened to time and its accidents through the layering process, feels less determined by my initial vision for the image. Doig's work is also a reminder that painting itself is a specific form of 'mediating' perceptual and inner experience.

The same may be said of Noah Davis' dynamic vernacular scenes—rooted in intimate and public scenes of Black experience, his washy thin layers of paint take you into a dreamed of in between-spaces. The drip or the blur becomes a portal.



Peter Doig, *Blotter*, 1993



Noah Davis, *Isis*, 2009



Noah Davis, *"Untitled"*, 2015

In terms of a more direct relation to inner experience, Portia Zvavahera's work continues to compel directions in my own work. Zvavahera describes her paintings as coming from dreamed images that are communications from God. These paintings have an animacy borrowed from dramatic color compositions and the repetition of decorative patterns that become figural shapes. Zvavahera's work seems to spatialize the 'spiritual' within experience—that is, where space is extended from inner experience, as much as informed by and taking place in the 'outer world.' I see these paintings as a kind of inner landscapes; spaces that grow and emerge from the figure, surrounding the figure, as if space itself is a dream that unfolds from within us. In these works, I locate a way of allowing the figure and space to be joined, to grow out of one another, and intensify one another.



*Zvandiswedza (It Has Drawn Me Closer), 2017*



*Arising from the Unknown, 20*

## Axis Mundi

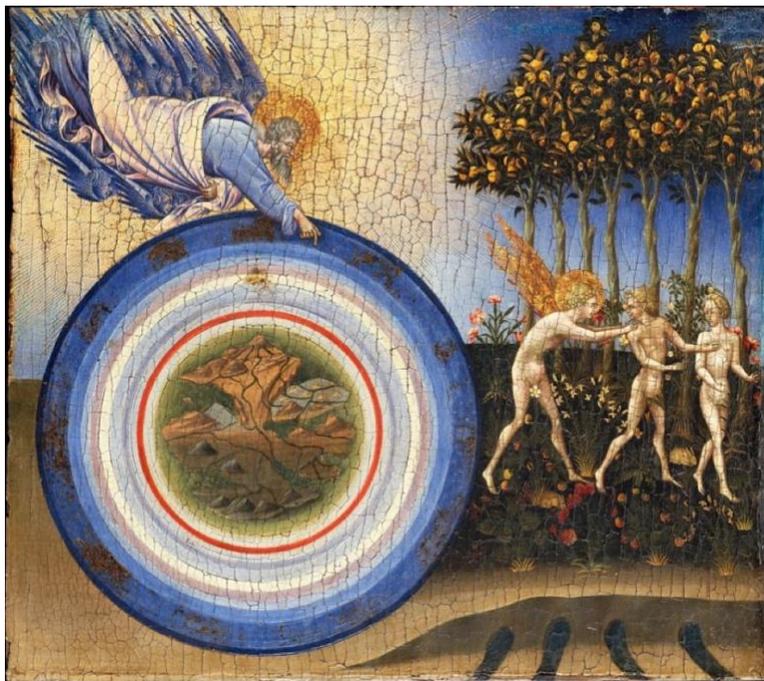
In my *Axis Mundi* (2022) series, the abstraction of familiar forms is a way of displacing immediate representational context; in order to create a between-space where figure and context can meet. Here, too, space becomes significant in relation to, and as an extension from, the figure. Drawing on photos I took of a rusty children's playground in Pawhuska, Oklahoma, Osage territory, the central axis of the carousel becomes a layered metaphor. The circle begins to take on another, more abstract meanings, as time, as compass, the mythical axis of the world, the repetition of history, but also, as “western”; the abstract logics of the frontier become plaything: the ever-expanding horizon, conquering line westward, is relentlessly turned back on itself toward the circle, and the power of the horse (as sign of freedom) is congealed and petrified in plastic form. Yet the commodified thing is also mimetically linked, in play and imagination, to possibility — and the plastic horse begins to ascend, to float mysteriously off the platform.



*Axis Mundi 1, 2023*



*Axis Mundi 2, 2023*



Giovanni di Paolo, *The Creation of the World and the Expulsion from Paradise*, 1445.



*Axis Mundi 3, 2023*

**A key, a portal: Mother Can't you see that I'm burning**



*Mother can't you see that I'm burning? 2023*

I end with this piece, *Mother can't you see that I'm burning*, as provides a kind of key with which to unlock the paintings in my show. The tension between a background that is already 'shaped' by material accidents and itself a kind of 'ready-made' painting, and the foreground of a 'figure' suggesting an 'additional' pictorial space, is both sharpened and separated out. The other paintings in *Spectral Geographies: The Assistants*, and *Tornado*, inhabit this tension. Whether using found fabric, as in *The Assistants*, or working on canvas dyed in red dirt, as in *Tornado*, both works refuse to separate background and foreground, 'ground' or material and figure/image. *Mother, can't you see that I am burning*, separates out the 'poles' of this tension, allowing the

viewer to visually enter the large rectangular hanging canvas as a territory into which they are invited to dream, while it also pushing back at our projections, refusing to be a *terra nullius*—a space always already shaped and formed by the ‘ground.’

A found object, a mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century army cot, is covered in red dirt and holds the impression of a figure—a body print made by my child. In thinking about Ana Mendieta’s body prints made by pressing her body into the ground, I decided to make a body print raised slightly off the ground, by the cot. The cot reminds me of the canvas used in the ‘sooner’ wagons of settlers, but also of the temporary beds laid out after natural disasters, in states of emergency. This piece takes up the precarity of dwelling in the American west, where the infrastructures of settlement always seem provisional, and where history is covered over, because the ‘new’ is constantly replacing the old. Oklahoma is imagined here as a place where what is settled is continuously being ‘unsettled,’ and where the frenetic temporality of oil’s boom and bust cycles, along the revenge of the environment, dramatized by the God-like finger of the tornado, has contributed to this sense of fate, chance and precarity. Allowing the dirt to spread around the floor, in this sense, speaks to the way dirt ‘gets everywhere’ and slips between the cracks—reminding me of descriptions of the Dust Bowl—our provisional ‘dwellings’ cannot keep the dirt out. The space between the figural ‘print’ in the dirt, and the floor amplifies the gap between settlement and ground—a gap that forecloses a more autochthonous, intimate, and sustainable relation to the earth, yet also marks this gap as settlement’s longing.

The work is also about spatializing a kind of traumatic repetition as tableau, as theater. The title, *Mother, can’t you see that I’m burning*, is adapted from the original title of a dream narrated by Freud, “Father, can’t you see that I’m burning?” in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Later reinterpreted by Jacques Lacan, the dream becomes an image illuminating the relationship between the Real and traumatic repetition. In my work, it is reimagined as the spectral cry of the future child and Mother earth, in crisis—the absent body marks the ‘missed event’ of the Real intruding upon our somnolence. The absent body points to a presence that is no more, an absent-presence that persists as trace, accompanied by a still burning candle; together they convey both a sense of emergency (burning, heat) but also, with the absence of the body, a sense that we have arrived to the scene too late, the event “missed.”<sup>27</sup> The dirt, and the figure pressed

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<sup>27</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI*, ed. Jacques Alain-Miller, (WW Norton and Company: New York, 1998), 53.

into this blood-like-ground on the canvas cot (itself a painting), performs and theatricalizes painting as a “borrowed habitation”; a fictive space laid out where figural moments unfold. A temporary place of rest, but also as after-image of a body ritually laid out, communicates an image of mourning—mourning an absent body. With its strange shapes, folds and textures—the dirt dyed canvas seems like an unfolded rose rock, the rectangular backdrop echoes the actual rose rocks on the ground surrounding the canvas. Or, the canvas appears like skin, always already resonant with the surface of the land, and the cartographic variations of maps. The site of an inner geography that joins ground and spirit, and maybe “makes possible the expression of a speaking that has no place of its own in which to make itself heard.” A speaking, in other words, that searches out a space where body and cosmos, ground and spirit, image and material are joined in a tensed language, a language that seems to me, intrinsic to painting.

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