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

by

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Abstract

Television static represents the absence of a legible image and the presence of something iconic and disturbing – a sinister abstraction. These repeating rhythms also occur in the Hail Mary prayer, in the houses in my neighborhood, in large crowds, and in my mother’s crochet patterns. The unsettling aspect of repetitive mark making in my drawings mirrors in part my psychotherapy, in which the past is revived over and over, as well as the idea of penance absorbed through my Catholic background.

Since moving away from Mexico I have been using imagery related to the United States: rivers, mountains, and landscapes. But in the final drawings this subject matter remains distant to me; I connect to the work only through making marks on paper. On one level, specificity is important: which river? or which mountain?, but another kind of connection
is made when the images cease to be legible. As information accumulates on the surface, I am interested in a purely visual and phenomenological effect that briefly defies the emotional nature of my source material.
Introduction

I usually have an ideal of the drawing that I want to build; the first step that appears in my mind brings reflexions that are far from being revelations or perfect acts. On the other hand, I see these projections of my mind as imperfect, the kind of imperfection that all utopias are made of. They are imperfect in the sense that what I want from them is to become tangible pieces and not just thoughts. Since I don’t have an internal camera to photograph the instant in which these ideal images are living in my head, the journey to build them step by step has to be tied to wonder and curiosity and the slow motion process that is required to decide where to begin and where to end, which materials, how fast, how many times, how many days, horizontal or vertical, dry or wet.

The two kinds of paper that I have been using are not that different from the “Bond” paper that I used in elementary school to take notes. The surface is smooth and there is not much texture -- a regular paper in appearance but with specific industrial procedures giving it a certain weight, coloration and texture. I make both large and small drawings, with consistent dimensions -- either five by six inches or seventy-two by eighty inches. The consistency of these windows allows me to transfer information from one drawing to another, helping me to create links and an open dialogue with the work and the viewer. When one piece is lacking in resolution, the next one offers an opportunity to answer
previous questions, even while it fights for its individuality. The independence of the pieces is important but I also look for symbiotic relationships that suggest continuity.

In 2007, while visiting the show “Georges Seurat: The Drawings” at the MOMA, I vividly experienced these connections. Seurat’s attachment to a specific kind of paper was a new revelation of his pointy decisions. His consistent use of the materials from one drawing to another gave me as much information as any individual work by itself. In fact, I realized that many other the artists that I highly respect have a similar relation with their materials. Toba Kedhoori, Vija Celmins and Ed Ruscha all use the white of the paper and the texture as a beginning to create spatial relations. The lightness of the paper surface allows the work to be loaded thoughts that portray spaces - both architectural and mental, all with a defined tendency to show vastness. Paper, is not able to handle heavy materials (although Gordon Matta Clark with his thick paper constructions proves a different point than the one that I am here addressing). I enjoy the limitations of a piece of paper that induce me to think of written language and the suggestive power of symbols interacting on a plain surface. The edges of my drawings are well demarcated, and follow the idea of a window, a screen of many kinds, or a bo
Small Drawings

For a long time I have been keeping a small sketchbook where the marks and stains act freely. There is no clear modus operandi, although the approach is similar to the surrealists’ free association. Usually these small drawings manifest a catalog of battles, between armies or different qualities of graphite, between different kinds of ecosystems. The ideas are based on opposites: two worlds, two countries, groups of ideologies against each other, a fight among emotions, a fight across borders. But in the end the explicit sources are always private and do not need to be revealed in order for a viewer to experience the drawings.
I found the perfect small almost square pad in an art store when I moved to the United States in 2005. People still refer to them as little square drawings, but the paper is actually a rectangle (an ‘imperfect’ square). This not-quite-perfection is what I enjoy most about them, apart from their thin off-whiteness, which always calls me to go there. I feel comfortable and seduced by the pad as an object, and have been working at this scale, on the same kind of paper for the last three years.
American and Chinese Landscapes

Right before entering graduate school, I received a very large piece of paper as a present (14 x 10 feet), and though it was not the highest quality and non acid-free, I embraced it as the perfect support for recording my early impressions when I moved to the States. I immediately understood the orientation to be horizontal: a suggested landscape. It was larger than me and fit perfectly on one of the main walls of my new studio. With the large piece of paper I wanted to give the intimate marks of my small drawings the opportunity to be more public.
During the first year that I lived in the US, I collected the commemorative state quarters, and started making small drawings based on the miniature landscapes etched into the back of each one. I was absorbing my new surroundings, and managing the new currency was an important daily ritual. Fascinated by the heroic landscapes and figures, I selected imagery to weave into my own version of an American landscape.

Memories of childhood also permeated the way in which I approached the drawing. Throughout elementary school in Mexico my teachers had us reproduce over and over again the backs of the coins where the mythical eagle is devouring the snake. This curious and retrograde way to learn about Mexican history ultimately functioned as a precedent for seeking academic precision in the drawing. When drawing the “Nevada” wild horses, for example, I attempted to fully recreate the detail and modeling of the original engravings.

That first exercise was a combination of playful marks and precise and academic ones. With this idea, I knew that my engagement with the surface was going to require an extended period of time. The open field of white paper and the lack of rules brought both an element of playfulness and the chance to see the paper slowly transform.

Things began to change following a studio visit with Stephen Westfall. Westalls interaction was a fast and anxious, precise and generous. His main observation about the American Landscape was that the marks were floating on the surface and never really
integrated into the paper. In other words, the marks acted more as figures against an ‘atmospheric’ paper ground. He suggested that I look into the possibilities of integrating marks and atmosphere by looking at Chinese ink paintings from the seventh to the thirteenth centuries.

Ink was their material of choice -- appearing as water, sky, rocks and trees. Discovering the mutable qualities of ink inspired me to look closer at all the graphic materials I had been using. The Chinese artist desire to commune with nature comes across in the fluidity of the materials. At the same time the capricious forms do not illustrate the ‘real’ Chinese landscape but more the character and spirit of the artist. The ink was the perfect vehicle to suggest “mind landscapes” (a kind of calligraphic brushwork) that goes beyond representation.

Following my encounter with Chinese landscape painting I became obsessed with the inherent qualities of my drawing materials (mainly graphite and charcoal) as geological, extravagant, and mysterious matter coming from the center of the earth. I was struck by the parallel existence of delicate pieces of art dispersed in museums, collections, and galleries around the world and the dark caves where crystallized carbon lives naturally. I needed to integrate the mark making with the paper surface, to create an atmosphere beside or beyond the paper. Graphite dust helped me to develop the idea of penetrating the surface of the paper as a new ideal.
When I was little, I put my eye right up to the TV screen, expecting to see a magnification of the details of the characters – a microscopic view of skin texture, hair, and fabric. But what occurred in reality was a dislocation, as the image disappeared and was replaced by horizontal and vertical bands of flickering light. During the first year I lived in the U.S., before entering grad school, I turned again to television: this time to the proliferation of reality shows. It started as a fascination with characters, as a way to have virtual relationships; I even had a series of drawings based on my memories of the shows’ most
impacting moments. While continuing to behave as a regular T.V. addict, I began to observe the light coming through the layers of the monitor. Behind that ‘reality’ there were continuous electron emissions that were accumulated, stored, and released during scan cycles. I became fascinated by the presence of phosphorous and graphite, both of which are non-metallic elements that function as electrical conductors. The absence of a legible image became the presence of something iconic and disturbing – a repetitive abstraction.

The drawings that followed my observations were oriented to TV static as an icon -- impressions of the standard HBO intro to all their original programming, and the 1980s film Poltergeist. As opposed to the velocity with which a monitor creates images, I constructed the drawings slowly, often excruciatingly so, through the repetition of numerous small marks erased from an even surface of graphite dust. The idea of subtracting material (through erasing) related to my childhood memories. In my first drawing classes we were taught that ‘erasing’ was the action of adding light. Both then and now, I was attracted to this simple axiom, and went about removing the darkness from the surface, like a form of penance. This process connected me to existing feelings of anxiety then conducted that anxiety into mark making where it became constructive as an image.
Following years of individual therapy, I began to believe in the unconscious. I recognized the sinister as a disturbing self-reflection, which Freud talks about as a mirror. Perceiving the different levels of transferences, I utilized my dreams to dig into the very dark and hidden places in my psyche. Eventually, aspects of the therapy process began to filter into my drawings.
During the summer 2007 between the first and second year of graduate school, the social dynamic, which was so consistent throughout the semesters, virtually disappeared. Vacation brought a sense of stillness. Issues that had been surfacing in my therapy remained floating in my mind. It took two months to ground them (for my therapy had taken a hiatus as well). These issues were a constant noise; they were everywhere - while washing dishes, drinking water and of course while sleeping. Since much of my thinking goes to the process of resolving an image, the recurrence of thoughts entered into an abstract and purely phenomenological terrain, not unlike the small drawings. For my next drawing, Medium Love I pictured a solid color, a spot of light and veils.

As long as I have known her, my mother has been absorbed in working with a type of embroidery. It is called Deshilado in Spanish: a minute technique that consists of the subtraction of strings, and their readjustment to create geometrical forms. Recently I have been curious about the purity and esteem that people bestow on these objects. In part this is because they mirror Catholic rituals -- prayers, self-immersion, rosaries and what is most interesting to me -- an urgency to cleanse. These ideas resonate in particular because of my own Catholic background and because of my personal issues with the figure of my mother.

Medium Love is the piece that introduced me to color and the physical effects of marks and light, beyond representation. Though abstract in nature, the drawing was based on a representational image: a blue print that came from a Xerox of one of my mother’s
*deshilado* patterns. I translated the marks from the print in to the drawing as a way to move from one language to another one. Horizontal and clean lines of graphite covered one of the layers in Medium Love. The milimetric order of the lines remind me the texture of the acetates were before experiencing the music the acetate has a level of redundancy, a continuum and texture.
Working with Stephen Vitiello in the fall of 2007 drew my attention to artists that work with moving image and sound. I was interested in the possibility of making an intimate work that was associated with technological devices -- a work that containing sound, motion and light while being limited by paper and simple materials. Steina Vasulka in her video “Violin Power” 1978, appears in the foreground playing the violin. TV static and sound, one influenced by the other, distort the image. The waves of sound make a drawing of the vibrations while the snow of the monitor periodically creates a monochromatic
atmosphere. The result is the transmission of a kind of harmonious mistake. “Violin power” introduced me to topics of perception and the viewer. *explain

In addition to my aesthetic belief was the need to leave space for the senses. I have been fascinated by the power of opera singers, country, Fado and Nina Simone in the piano. Then Holly Morrison introduced me to Meredith Monk, which was a perfect addition to my list. My curiosity pushed me to directly explore sound and performance.

TV static, informed a new context for considering prayer as a combination of reverberation, trance, and anxiety. There is a meditative moment in the drawings, which happens in the making -- in the experimentation with materials, through the building of surfaces and layers. Before coming up with the idea of actually performing, I was working toward bringing sound to the drawings only with marks, color, and graphite – not in a representative way, rather striving to achieve a synaesthesia through visual elements alone. Different kinds of marks were each making very specific sounds. VCU professor Peter Baldes asked me what these sounds were I resolved to sing my drawing literally.

A Catholic mass is a place where people go to connect with their good and where the accumulation of individualities generates a community. It is often possible to hear the prayers -- they are quiet and redundant -- inhabiting a place between intimacy and publicity. For the performed drawing I used the idea of a prayer, and took from the drawing the anxiety and beauty found in my mothers crochet.
While drawing I felt that I was moving from one language to another (synaesthesia) by the mere act of drawing. To some degree, I was trying to understand my mother’s map and the evolution and reproduction of mark making. The process of language assimilation happens mainly through listening. There is a moment in the mind where words have to make an anguished sprint, assuming different versions until one fits the social or intellectual necessities. I assigned sound to the two main elements in the drawing (the blue diffuse horizontal bands and the ink marks). During rehearsals the sound grew more specific. It was necessary to integrate in the chanting some of the specific aspects of the Spanish language. One of the most characteristic sounds in Spanish is the one generated by the letter “r”. This sound is not a guttural one as it is in English language; rather it comes out from the very surface of the mouth where the position and the rolling of the tongue are crucial. I looked at myself as a recording and speaking device. The performance allowed me to control volumes and improvise tonalities that otherwise would have feel lost in the hands of a mechanical recording machine. In addition to the recording aspect, I was also curious about my presence, as performer, in front of the work and the audience. As with most of my work, the perception of the piece, the visuals and the sound, were more important than the specific details of my motivations to make the project.
Around ten years ago my father surprised me by giving me a book that previously visited in an exclusive bookstore in Mexico City. “Emotions and Relationships” compiles the photographic work of the Boston Group (Nan Goldin, Mark Morrisroe, Philip Lorca-diCorcia, Jack Pierson and David Armstrong). Although pixilation and blurriness have been common visual strategies in the arts for a long time, I was strongly affected by the technical photographic possibilities. The exploited grain in the work of Mark Morrisroe was the newest effect for me. The landscapes that Nan Goldin photographed after living in a addiction recovery home became an entrance into the atmosphere and emotion of color. I
depicted fragments from *Sun hits the road, Shandaken NY* (1983) and mixed them with the colors coming from of Fragonard gardens and Pissarro landscapes.

*Park* is about memory, but distilled from reproductions and the curious emotionality that as a teenager or child were generated in those images. Intertwined with the pictures from the books “Emotion and Relationships” and “Couples and loneliness” I had some other recurring visual obsessions -- a specific landscape of Pissarro and the Romantic gardens of Fragonard. My father owned a reproduction of *The Wheelbarrow* (1881) a Pissarro’s landscape. I was five or so and sure that the image came from the park that used to be in front of my house. Somehow, without doubt, the park and Pissarro belonged together. I ignore the Piagetian explanation for such associations. The parks in Mexico City always felt like an oasis; they were always contained within the city but very isolated.

Recently, after encountered the work of Moira Dryer, I came back more directly and assured of the emotion as a source. Before, I positioned the emotional involvement of the work in some past tense. Somehow I was validating those states as true just because they were related with the past. Now I see the emotions contained in a work are closer to other sources like Nan Goldin photographs or my mom’s crochets. Pieces like *Having a Hate wave* (1991) or *Poison* (1990) are marked with ideas of desire and pain, but the image cease to be just dramatic when specific and control marks invite the viewer to think about precision while experiencing a degree of turbulence.
It is important to assert the differences between nostalgia and emotion, while the former has a length on time, an expiration date, the later is a quality, always attached to the work.

While making Medium Love, I took notes on what I wanted the piece to be about. Sweetness and madness appeared on the list, as did fear and anxiety. I realized that in the same way that I collect visual or theoretical information I also gather emotions.

I remain interested in the physics of graphite, a non-metallic conductor of energy, and the ways it resonates with elements like phosphorus (another non-metal), which works in conjunction with electrical particles to generate light, as in the case of a television screen. This scientific curiosity is starting to intertwine with earlier drawings exploring television static. Memory and photographic sources such as Nan Goldin or Fragonard landscapes as they are experienced through reproductions are also linked to my new additions of color and a more undifferentiated surface. To apply color, I use a sponge, which recreates the texture and consistency of graphite. I expect from the materials both the physical and the conceptual to transmute. I am aware of the qualities of the graphite, ink and acrylic, but what drives me forward is the excitement of seeing the materials stop being what they are and briefly becoming something else. If the viewer gets confuse about identifying the materials, that is part of the sensorial experience -- seeing dust where there is graphite, or dryness where there is moisture. The materials and the image have the possibility to exist in different tempos, in different minds and embrace but sometimes overcome their mundaneness.
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VITA

Born in 1978 in Mexico City, Distrito Federal or Gran Tenochtitlán. Later in 1997 moved to Xalapa, Veracruz close to the Mexican Gulf. Since 2005 lives in the U.S with a status of Permanent Resident.