Places on Earth

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Places on Earth

Documentation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Interdisciplinary Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Artist Statement

My textile work is about noticing the beauty of natural creation from extreme perspectives. I reference the patchwork quality of landscapes by finding the lines, patterns and color fields in aerial photography and translating them into a textile medium. Looking at land and water from an airborne vantage point feels like reading a good poem. I can’t quite determine the precise meaning but the individual phrases and their arrangement in a composition send a shiver of pleasure up my spine. In the same way, I can’t exactly identify what I’m seeing from afar, but the beauty of the parts relating to the whole rings true.

At the other end of the spectrum, I am fascinated with the idea that tiny particles assemble in millions to create those patches of land and riverbed threads. It strikes me that the microscopic, enclosed, underground or hidden elements are closely connected to the larger more overt images of nature. I can’t fully see the seeds within the pod’s protective shawl, nor the connecting trails of underground invertebrates. However, with close inspection and imagination, I suggest the shape and color, texture and trajectory of these agents of change.
Places on Earth

Introduction

One aspect of my job as an elementary art teacher is to guide students in experimentation. I observe my young students as they take artistic risks with media, techniques and imagery and celebrate with them as these experimentations open up doors of artistic expression. When I took a Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (MIS) Off-Campus studio art class, through Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), I felt first hand the thrill of artistic risk-taking. The class required twenty-five experimentations with media and techniques. Taking a cue from my exuberant young students, I dove into the assignment with energy that bordered on reckless abandon. Narrowing down from the field of my experimentations, I made monoprints on heavy decorator fabrics that I constructed into a textile collage of an aerial landscape. This piece and the four that followed in the series feature an undulating line that cuts a swath through the rest of the composition. That line reappears in different media and in varying scale in many of my subsequent artworks.

With the wind from that class in my sails, I applied and was accepted into the MIS program. I hoped that this course of study would provide both the nudge to work with creative abandon and the requirement to work within a structure. This seemed to be the tension I needed to best develop my artistic voice.

Those initial experimental collages set a tone for my choice of imagery while working in varied media. The land and its complex beauty, from an aerial or microscopic
perspective, piqued my interest and imagination. My connection with the land and the interconnectedness of all species grip me with an awe and reverence that I attempt to express in my artwork.

Experimenting with paint, ink, dye, pigment, glass, thread and textiles has stretched my experience and honed my skillful expression. I like to think that the MIS program has led me the way of the whale in the analogy drawn by collage artist Romare Bearden (1911-1988), who said,

I think the artist has to be something like a whale, swimming with his mouth wide open, absorbing everything until he has what he really needs. When he finds that, he can start to make limitations. And then he really begins to grow. (Berman, 60)

The MIS program provided me with “mouth wide open” experiences. Somewhere along the way I needed to then apply limitations and start growing.

**Heartland**

The land has been making a late claim on my life, and on my art. I grew up in Iowa, America’s heartland, but was eager to leave after college. Now, aerial views of farmland, shadows cast on parched earth and erupting seed pods sending their contents to receptive soils are images that frequent my textile art. Simultaneously, I have become very interested in issues centering around taking care of the environment. For me, being a good steward of the earth, and especially the land of my community, includes both behavioral adaptations and artistic expression.

Wendell Berry (b. 1934) is an artist whose honored essays, novels and poems contain an underlying theme of knowing and respecting the land on which one lives. He
has been one of the foremost writers on sustainability issues for the past thirty years, long before the term “sustainability” was commonly recognized or understood. The points in his essays are well supported and argued, while his poems paint abstractions that are beautiful and challenging at the same time. I’ve been responding to Berry’s writings in my textile work, often without knowing it until after my painting and stitching are well underway.

The first expression of Berry’s influence on my work began three years ago with a series of artworks based on photographs taken from an airplane window while flying over the Midwest. Not only the shapes of the patchwork fields but the organic line of rivers and the circular pattern of irrigation systems provided images that I worked together in painted and printed fabric collages. The arresting line that cuts through Midwest Meander (Appendix I, 1) became a repeated and emphasized element in subsequent pieces. The line suggests movement but is actually representative of the rivers seen from above. Both Whisper of Vigor (Appendix I, 2) and Bliss of Blue Erosion (Appendix I, 3) feature a line element that undulates through the composition and then ends before completely dissecting the picture plane. I made five of these fabric constructions with these linear elements, and months later found Wendell Berry’s poem Letter. (1982) (Appendix II) which begins with a quest:

To search for what belongs where it is, for what, scattered, might come together,

This phrase mirrored my initial quest in making this first series of artworks. I focused on the composition of the parts and how they related to each other while allowing the imagery to take a secondary role. Starting with photographs taken from an
aerial vantage point, I looked for interesting shapes or line patterns and created sketches based on those elements. I sometimes combined one portion of a photograph with shapes, lines and textures captured in another. My sketches may have blurred the actual image completely but often retained a suggested correlation to the distant earth. Most importantly, the final sketches needed to be well-arranged compositions of parts belonging, as Berry described, just “where it is.”

My process in taking the sketches to completed pieces of art was to create fabrics by painting and printing with pigments, and then to cut pieces and fit them back together. For these large aerial landscapes I adopted a process where I first painted large remnants of decorator fabrics. Next, I painted with my fingers or paintbrush onto slick printing surfaces such as Styrofoam plates or wax paper. These became the printing plates for transferring second and third layers of pigment to the painted fabric. This painting and printing process was done with a generosity of energy and movement. The only limitations were those of keeping within a defined color palette for each piece. Once I had produced a large variety of fabrics, I then started to cut them apart into geometric “field-shaped” pieces. My work surfaces would often be covered with a spread of many fabric pieces, which “scattered, might come together.” Guided by my small sketches, I began to lay shapes next to each other at a much-enlarged scale, creating final works that measure 40”x40.” The sketch and the manipulated fabric worked together to inform my composition decisions. My tempo slowed considerably as I made exacting determinations about which colors and textures to place where, and which shapes would dovetail into other shapes. All the time, I had my winding-river-organic-line-image in mind, the
fluidity and movement expressed by Berry in *Letter*:

> I leave you, my mold, my cup;  
> I flow from your bonds, a stream risen  
> over the hold of its stones.

This flowing line would be my last addition to the construction of each piece in this series, although it was a design decision I would weigh throughout the entire process.

*Letter* ends with:

> Now in the long curve of a journey  
> I spin a single strand, carried away  
> by what must bring me home.

Berry’s written imagery parallels the consistent organic strand seen in this series. It can suggest a body of flowing water leaving its source and gathering momentum. It also could describe the experimentation process that carried me into to a type of making art that felt right and full of promise.

**Single Strand**

I continued to find ways to both experiment and refine my artmaking. As I tried new ways of mark making, I came up with a technique for creating subtle lines by making monoprint rubbings with pigment on plain cotton fabric laid over cotton string. The resulting random lines created a web of pathways that I cut apart and matched up to lines on other piece of fabrics. I sometimes think of these organic flowing and fading lines as underground tunnels, unseen to the human eye but connecting all of nature’s different species together, as suggested in *Nine Patch Landscape* (Appendix I, 4). These faint linear elements are much more subtle than the organic line of my first series of
work. But fabrics made with this monoprint technique show up often in my work, adding continuity and suggesting a fragile web of connectivity.

In *Spoonwood Pink* (Appendix I, 5) I painted transparent pigment on a plexiglass plate and printed layer after layer on top of each other on one piece of fabric. I experimented with the transparency of the pigment and the use of subtractive printing methods, finally determining that I could print up to twelve times on one piece before the color became muddied or over-saturated. The result was landscape imagery that recedes in some areas and advances in others, depending on the saturation of the pigment. The pieces in the series feature the multi-layered monoprinting process and are embellished with metallic and satin threads, machine embroidery and free motion quilting. The lines of the stitching accentuate the horizontal aspects of a landscape. This decorative use of thread works to highlight the movement suggested where my hands and fingers wiped away the pigment from the plate before printing. The relationships of the shapes next to each other and on top of each other became important and part of the puzzle to piece together. However, working at a size that could be fully covered with one plexiglass plate felt constraining to me. With this series, which ranges in size between 10”x17” to 15”x19”, I felt caught in between the expansiveness of large landscapes and intimacy of small nature studies. I decided that from then on when working with textile media I would work in either a large make-a-statement scale (over 36”x36”) or a small come-look-closer scale (around 12”x12”).

In *Topo Trail* (Appendix I, 6) I used aerial photography to establish imagery, then manipulated it in Photoshop and printed the result onto fabric. By this time I had
discovered the contemporary photography of Maxwell MacKenzie, who steers an ultralight flying machine with his feet while he operates cameras with his hands. *Markings* (2007) is a volume of aerial photographs taken in MacKenzie’s home state of Minnesota. Flying close to the land, MacKenzie was able to record the line of cultivated crops, the trail of a plow and the texture of vegetation in beautiful and careful compositions. Like MacKenzie, I searched for the organic line of a river and the repeating contours of the land in my photographs. These lines informed my hand and machine stitching, techniques that had increasing prominence in my work as I progressed. I had always leaned toward using textiles and sewing, but the integration of disciplines in the MIS program encouraged more breadth in which to express myself. Stitching became part of my imagery, not just a function of construction. Embroidery echoes topography and quilting creates texture in many of my most recent works.

**Scale and Perspective**

As I observed the compositional beauty of the lines and shapes of rivers and land forms from the air, I considered that my perspective from that distance blurs my recognition and comprehension of what I’m actually seeing. This abstraction has facilitated my art. I also wanted to explore how the miniscule and even hidden elements of nature directly affect the distant, aerial and abstract view. Careless handling of seemingly minor participants in our natural world can collectively cause blight, drought, erosion or even extinction. I wanted to draw attention to the small and hidden contributions to nature’s grand vistas.
In *Locust I* (Appendix I, 7) I began my inspection and expression of seed pods. I liked the idea of the protective casing relinquishing its contents at just the right time for the seed to take root and start to grow. In vitro photography illuminates the development of a human, but do we know what happens inside a pod? The mystery of the inner pod and the movement of its released seeds are the subject of this series. Working in an exaggerated scale was a conscious decision to draw even more attention to this small but important cycle in nature. The finished piece is 40”x52” with leaves, pods and seeds spilling over the edges of the rectangular picture plane. I chose to work in lush greens, blues and browns that suggest vegetation and undergrowth. Long vertical pod-like shapes march across the piece creating repetition and rhythm. Oval seeds float on top of the pods suggesting a swirling movement off the top of the piece. Those oval spiraling shapes are echoed with both paint and thread in the background.

*Locust II* (Appendix I, 8) features those same oval seed shapes, accentuated with spirals of pigment, appliqué and embroidery. Again, they seem to swirl off the picture plane but the focal point here is a bloom sitting on leaves, the recognizable components of a plant’s growth cycle. A complementary color scheme broadens the palette further in this piece. Stitching with variegated and satin threads adds illusory depth and texture to the leaves and flower.

The oversized scale of the botanical elements in these pieces reminds me of the make-believe and slightly menacing jungle environment in the children’s book *Where the Wild Things Are* (1988) by Maurice Sendak. In this ever-popular story, Max gets sent to his room without dinner, where he imagines travelling to an imaginary land where large
and lumbering monsters crown him King of the Wild Things. The illustrations begin with Max in a small detailed drawing surrounded by a large border of “white space.” As the story progresses the illustrations grow larger and the border decreases in size until the culminating coronation where the wild things engage in monster merry-making but barely can squeeze into the space of the two-page full-bleed illustration. *Locust I* and *Locust II* also look like their components can hardly remain contained in the confines of the image area. The pods nearly dance off of the picture plane, creating movement that brightens the otherwise deep dark jungle atmosphere.

With ever more attention to accurate detail, I next created Thermofax screens with which to print on fabric. Thermofax machines were first introduced by Xerox in the 1950s and used infrared technology to create duplicate copies and overhead transparencies. Long since replaced by updated photocopiers, Thermofax machines have various other applications, including the creation of a type of plasticized silk screen. A specialized film is run through the machine along with a photocopied image, and the infrared light burns through the emulsion wherever there is ink toner. The emulsion opens up even the finest of lines and the screen can then be used to print with most pigments and inks. I used old botanical drawings as my imagery when creating Thermofax screens. In *Crimson Seed* (Appendix I, 9), pods that resemble curled up porcupines and flat flying saucers are juxtaposed with hand-printed and shibori-dyed fabrics. Spirals created by a Slinky® interjected into the folded shibori process are echoed with hand embroidered spirals and solid circles. This smaller work (13”x13”) has a more intimate feel and begs closer inspection of the printed botanical drawings.
Community and Kinship

As I moved through making series of art that explored near and far vantage points of the earth and hidden and exposed elements of nature, I often posed the question: How do I respond to and interact with the earth in these varying vistas? In my quest for social and environmental responsibility I’ve realized that a drive to care for the earth must come from an inner joy and passion rather than be imposed externally. Pamela Michael, co-founder of River of Words (ROW), creates educational experiences that invite children to integrate art and science in experiences that build a connection to their home places. She defines ROW’s mission as “helping children fall in love with the earth. Because people protect what they love, this is a powerful prescription for stewardship, and ultimately, we hope, kinship.” (Michael, 116) As I made my way through this program, I became increasingly sensitized to my surroundings, considering how I might photograph a cast shadow or replicate certain color combinations seen in a variegated leaf. I found myself on high alert for interesting lines and textures as I walked through my school garden. I requested window seats in airplanes, and made sure I scheduled flights during daylight hours so I could snap grainy aerial shots of the land below. I made mental and then sketchbook notes of color combinations I encountered on my daily bike ride to work. I then stretched the ways I could represent these observations by adopting differing perspectives and materials. In looking at the earth in different ways and expressing what I saw through the vehicle of art, I fanned the flame of my love for the earth and strengthened my kinship to it.
Considering this kinship with the earth, I began using photographic images of shadows of myself and of my daughters cast on a parched desert floor. In *Shadows on the Earth* (Appendix I, 10), the distinct human form looms large in the center of a small piece. The cracked ground of the desert is accentuated with machine embroidery and echoed in the stitching on the plain inner border as well as the hand-dyed panels. The stitching is dense but subtle, allowing the emphasis to remain on the human form and its relationship with the earth. The shadow becomes part of the earth and references the darkness humans can impose on the land.

In *Sedona Sylphs* (Appendix I, 11) I chose to use monoprinted fabrics with intermittently connecting and fading organic lines. This suggestion of the fragile interconnectedness of life becomes the backdrop for shadows rhythmically appliqued onto the surface. Free motion quilting lines serve to emphasize the inclination of the silhouetted figures. As these flattened human forms relate to and are contained by their background, they nearly appear to be tangled up in the lasso-like monoprinted lines. Humanity is tangled up with the land it inhabits, and whether good or bad, we are stewards of the earth.

Both these pieces are diminutive in size (13”x13” and 13”x15”) but the shadow of man (or in this case, woman) looms large within the space. In making these pieces, I chose to focus on the kinship or companionship we as the human race have with the world in which we live. Again I turn to the poetry of Wendell Berry in another poem entitled *From the Distance* (Appendix III). Its first stanza reads:
We are others and the earth, 
the living of the dead. 
Remembering who we are, 
we live in eternity; 
any solitary act 
is a work of community.

Berry’s outlook that assumes we are part of a community of ancestors and heirs, living on and with the earth, resonates with me. Remembering and learning from those who lived before us, and respecting those who will live after us, we make choices in how we live today. Every “solitary act” contributes to this eternal community. The art I make is an effort to reflect this beautiful fact.

Conclusion

As I journeyed through the MIS program, I liberally experimented and then carefully limited my art making, often reminding myself of and referring to Romare Bearden’s metaphor of the whale. As Bearden predicted, with the limitations came my growth as an artist. The beauty of composition struck me in early pieces and I endeavored to make each piece of art sing like the lyrical beauty of a good poem. But the more I looked at vistas of the land and water from a distance, and the more I magnified and exaggerated miniscule parts of the earth I also considered the implications and meaning of creating works of art that showcase nature. In the same way one might dissect a poem and understand the spare phrases by connecting rhythms and implied meanings, I began to dissect my own observations and give words to what the resulting compositions and imagery meant to me. Critical thinking and journal writing were two ways that I imposed philosophical limitations on my artmaking. Reading literary works by Wendell Berry
helped fine tune my opinions and dovetailed my expanding commitment to making sustainable lifestyle choices with my growing passion to create art that communicated the beauty of the earth I want sustained.

The words of Bearden, Berry and Michael have prompted me during my journey through the MIS program. I would alter Pamela Michael’s thesis to conclude that people “express” and protect what they love, and that this combination is a powerful prescription for stewardship and ultimately kinship. This kinship with the earth, and the community with its inhabitants before and after me, has informed, impassioned and enriched my artmaking.
Bibliography


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Appendix II

Letter

1. To search for what belongs where it is, for what, scattered, might come together, I leave you, my mold, my cup; I flow from your bonds, a stream risen over the hold of its stones.

2. Turning always in my mind toward you, your slopes, folds, gentle openings on which I would rest my song like an open hand, I know the trails of absence, comely lives I must pass by, not to return, beauties I will not know in satisfaction, but in the sharp clarity of desire.

3. In place with you, as I come and go I pass the thread of my song again and again through the web of my life and the lives of the dead before me, the old resounding in the new. Now in the long curve of a journey I spin a single strand, carried away by what must bring me home.

Appendix III

From the Distance

1.
We are others and the earth,
the living of the dead.
Remembering who we are,
we live in eternity;
any solitary act
is work of community.

2.
All times are one
if heart delight
in work, if hands
join the world right.

3.
The wheel of eternity is turning
in time, its rhymes, austere,
at long intervals returning,
sing in the mind, not in the ear.

4.
A man of faithful thought may feel
in light, among the beasts and fields,
the turning of the wheel.

5.
Fall of the year:
at evening a frail mist
rose, glowing in the rain.
The dead and unborn drew near
the fires. A song, not mine,
stuttered in the flame.

Holly Kae Smith

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Master of Interdisciplinary Studies  
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**Teaching Experience**

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Professional Organizations and Memberships:
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2007-present Virginia Art Education Association
2007-present Surface Design Association

Exhibitions:
2010 Scheduled, *Places on Earth—A Brush with Nature*
Master of Interdisciplinary Studies Thesis Exhibition
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
Artspace, Richmond, VA

2009 *Art Educator as Artist Annual Art Exhibit*
St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Richmond, VA
**First Place Award**
Amanda Robinson Khodabandeh, juror

2006 *Church Hill Activities and Training (CHAT) Art Exhibition and Auction*, Richmond Hill, Richmond, VA
**Honorable Mention Award**
Fiona Ross, juror