

# **Experience of Place**

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**Abstract**

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My work in painting, drawing, and sculpture has been informed by an interest in human presence and architecture in the landscape as well as my own experiences of place. I present some of my history leading up to my thesis work as well as my exploration of place through an interdisciplinary approach to painting. I discuss the studio constructions that I began in my first year, my interest in Gothic painting, and discuss my work painting in the landscape and how that developed into the piece *Palace Pelagic*.

The landscape and my experience of place has been woven throughout my work in various ways—through painting primarily, but also through sewing, sculpture and experimentation in the realm between. I will attempt to form an image of where I was coming from in my years before returning to graduate school. I lived in Seattle, Texas, Arkansas, Vermont, and finally returning to Arkansas for three years. These moves and the returns to places are worth noting because my work is primarily about trying to process these experiences.

My work went through a major shift when I moved to Arkansas from Seattle the first time. I had this recurring imagery running through my work often exploring the figure in the context of the landscape—landscapes of the mind with a symbolic and often psychological subtext to them. Moving into a little cabin in the woods I felt as though I had walked into one of my drawings but a livelier version. I experienced culture shock, intense closeness with nature, diversity of bugs, lack of firewood, no running water (moved in the middle of winter and the pipes froze), and an armadillo living under my house (named Charlie).

Through these experiences I developed a distinctly new way of being domestic which involved building, and basically seeing my house as a very important protective barrier between me and the bobcat outside screaming. How different forms of building spring up regionally and throughout history, due to resources, social movements, and innovation interested me then as it does now. I have always been a scavenger of materials for my art but I'd say there was some sort of turning

point when I lived in Arkansas in the woods that sparked an interest in the vernacular architecture of that area, as well as the writings of back-to-the-landers, and the methods of making from Foxfire books. I spent a lot of time finding sites of abandoned houses and using the materials to make clothing or a collage, or my screen porch studio. I was interested in the way these sites made me feel the presence of history. I could see the resourcefulness that this kind of building was rooted in. I was reading about Ozark vernacular history as well as being informed by finding objects in the ground. Behind this house there was an old homestead that contained many layers of history, skulls and bones that some past inhabitant had collected and an array of other materials and objects.



My cabin with screen porch studio that I built (right), view of the site upon my return years later after it had been torn down (left)

I also lived in the woods in Vermont, working between memory and my experience of that landscape. Toward the end of living in Vermont I had returned to the landscape of the Pacific Northwest through a body of paintings made from memory of a space under some piers on the west side of Seattle, a site that I revisited and painted from last year. Before leaving Arkansas for graduate school I predominately

worked in sculpture for the summer creating a reliquary. This piece was my attempt to deal with my tendency to collect found objects and become attached to them. I tried to rid myself of the attachment through casting them and building a space to house them as a kind of time capsule for my experiences over a period of time.



Reliquary, 2013, exterior and interior



Ambrogio Lorenzetti, City by the Sea, 1311-20, Siena Pinacoteca

I see a lineage from this tower that I built in Arkansas to my first responses upon returning to Seattle for graduate school. Partly I was responding to living in a more urban environment again that has been changing and developing dramatically since I left. I wanted to deal with the presence of a destructive force that seems like an important force to confront in the studio. This idea was being partly informed by studying Mondrian. He wrote “I think that the destructive element is too much neglected in art” (*Mondrian: The Art of Destruction*, p. 51).

I collected materials made available through demolition and construction around the city and began scabbing on to the architecture in my studio using palettes, found shutters, and doors. The construction and the paintings made from observation of the construction were a re-staging of the past in a new place, creating spaces for these objects and materials that had personal meaning for me, as well as developing a new relationship to this place. There is always something lost in moving forward and growing, and I think this first work was a holding on a bit and trying to understand the past in a new place. Studying Kurt Schwitters and his Merzbau piece had a profound effect on me, and this idea of embedding your life into a structure that grows around you stems in part from his ideas about Merz.

I was also looking at architecture in paintings of Giotto, Duccio and other painters of the Gothic period--specifically how the spaces in these paintings relate to the scale of the bodies in often strange ways and are stage-like—one Borassa painting a copy of which became embedded in the structure almost seems like a still from a b

horror movie in its depiction of the beheading of John the Baptist. The sense of gesture in these paintings has had an influence on my work as well.



Detail of Studio Construction, 2013-2014

In the construction in my studio I was piecing together various interests in materiality, patterns of fabric and architecture, past observations made of

abandoned and deteriorating structures, as well as architectural icons from the Gothic period, and alter pieces such as the Ghent alter piece.



Detail of studio construction, oil on panel, 2014

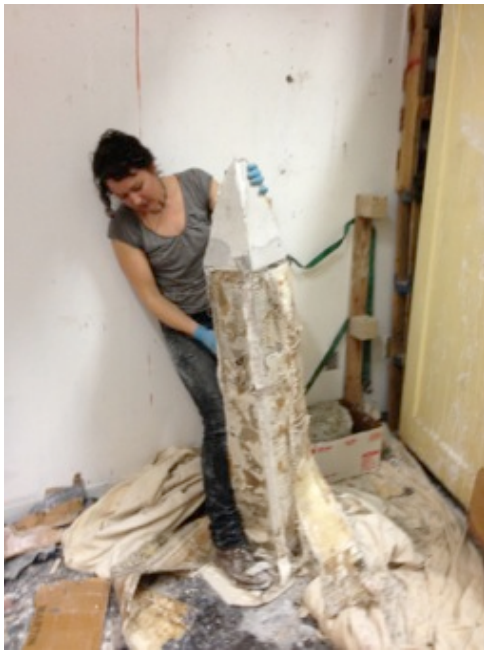
I was excited to learn lost wax casting during the winter quarter, casting bronze and aluminum objects that referenced these iconic objects combined with objects that I had collected outside. It was necessary for me to accumulate materials and cross-pollinate ideas to finally get to a place where a pattern recurs, something clicks and can be incorporated in many ways such as this diamond pattern that is now in many pieces.



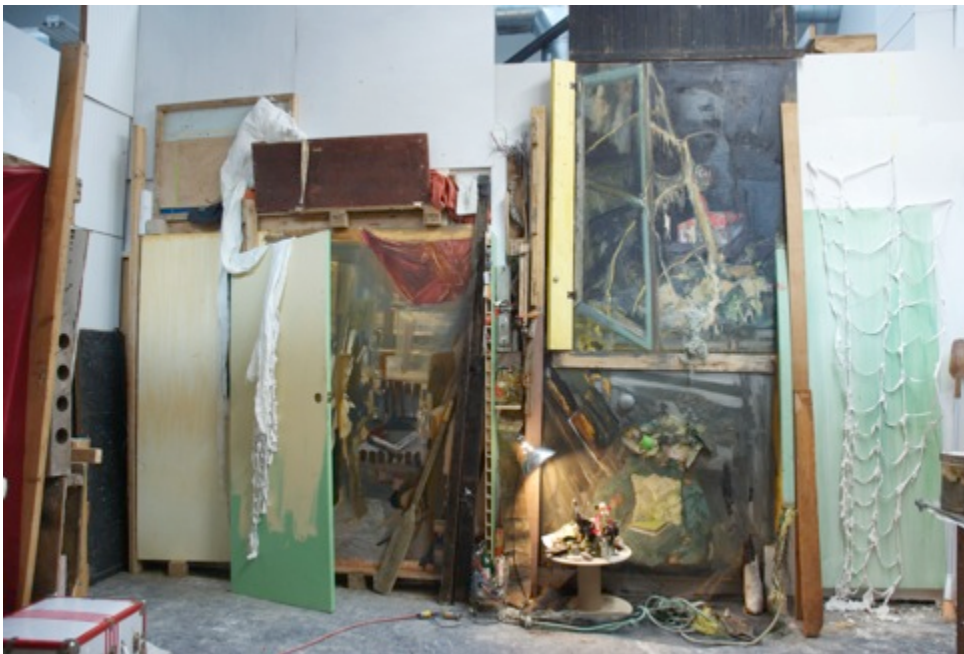
Detail from *Palace Pelagic* (left), *Metal Box with Net*, oil on panel (right)

This pattern first entered the work when I found a bunch of netting in the dumpster behind our studios. I was thinking about casting a small tower or obelisk form in plaster and decided to apply different materials and objects to the inside of the mold to embed the textures into the piece. Opening it up was exciting (and scary) and like an excavation in that I didn't know what was going to be present. This sense of discovery of something unknown is something that is very important to me. I try

not to work from a preconceived idea—things are found through the process of making and looking, whether it is found like on this rock, or been pressed into the surface of clay, plaster or paint.



The casting of the small tower in progress  
At the time I was looking at Egyptian obelisks, Irish round towers, and Roman architecture



Studio Constructions. 2013-2014

## **Landscape**

Going out and painting on site has been a large part of my research. I have been interested in certain sites that are somewhat peripheral to the urban center but where one might find important pieces of visual information to better understand

the cities geography and history--both a natural history and cultural history. While making repeated visits to Discovery Park to make paintings on the beach I found that the walking down there and the thoughts had while walking became a part of the nature of the piece. One book that influenced that idea was Rebecca Solnit's *Wanderlust*, in which she talks about the history of walking in a variety of contexts. She says "Walking the streets is what links up reading the map with living one's life, personal microcosm with the public macrocosm; it makes sense of the maze all around." She speaks of the political act of walking, and how changing property rights and shifts in land usage and development sometimes create obstacles to walkers. She also speaks of the fact that the act of walking alone as a woman has often been seen as immoral or at the very least dangerous. This book made me think of how empowering it is to be able to walk the city alone and think, or walk through the woods to paint--a luxury that I might not have had in say the 1800's.

Working with fragments of the whole view, I paint in a way that reflects my experience of a place on many different days—the weather, the stuff on the beach, how the mountains loom some days and other days are completely shrouded in fog. This repetition of going out is an assertion that I am present in the world and finding my relationship within it, both perceptually and physically.

M. Merleau-Ponty speaking on perception says

“Perception is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them. The world is not an object such that I have in my possession the law of its making; it is the natural setting of, and the field for, all my thoughts and all my explicit perceptions. Truth does not ‘inhabit’ only ‘the inner man’, or more accurately, there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself.” (*Phenomenology of Perception*, p. x-xi)



Detail of *Palace Pelagic*, oil on panel, 2014

I made small paintings on the beach over the course of the spring and summer, focusing on my relationship to the horizon as well as a large barnacle encrusted rock near the shore that was revealed only at low tide. In this piece I was interested in mapping the horizon, the movement of the sun over the course of the day, cycles of the moon, tide patterns, and the experience of being there over time. I began building a curved structure to reflect the

curvature of my field of vision and get closer to the experience of this place. I have been exploring the relationship between constructed space and painted space, between the body and architecture, and the nature of how we construct and interact with space and with materials.

In the current state of the installation *Palace Pelagic* I have continued the curved structure, spiraling it inward like a shell. The ways in which Gaston Bachelard speaks of the spiral form in his *Poetics of Space* resonates with my contemplation of this form. In his chapter on the dialectics of outside and inside he states “Thus, the spiraled being who, from outside, appears to be a well-invested center, will never reach his center. The being of man is an unsettled being which all expression unsettles. In the reign of the imagination, an expression is hardly *proposed*, before being needs another expression, before it must be the being of another expression.” (*Poetics of Space*, p. 215)

The interior of the piece has transitioned from paintings of the Puget Sound from Discovery Beach, to paintings of collected objects and other materials related to this site. I have been making bricks and carving plants of this area into them, which I am incorporating into the piece along with re-claimed bricks I have collected.



*Palace Pelagic* in progress in studio



Paintings of objects going into the installation



Brick carved with relief of native plant, in studio



Working drawing for *Palace Pelagic*

Alongside this project I am working on several paintings that relate to this installation—through bodily relationship to landscape and architecture, found through accumulated experiences and observation. I am thinking about poetic classification, the desire to record experiences of a place, and the impetus to find and preserve meaning.



*Gleaner* (in progress), oil on canvas, 2015



*Gleaner* (later version in studio), oil on canvas, 2015



*Palace Pelagic*, mixed media, 2015 (in the Henry Art Gallery)



*Untitled*, oil on panels with collage, 2015



*Interbay*, oil on canvas, 2015



*Promontory*, oil on canvas, 2015

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