

To be like a field

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Abstract

To be like a field

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I am compelled by a tremendous, and unconditional love.

I want to learn from a field, on how to be. Because to be like a field is to be:

open

malleable

vulnerable

soft

forgiving

fertile

vast

playful

free

A field models a life practice informed by a love ethic, tenderly shared through its poetic form.

## Walking

In the morning, I walk to the studio from my apartment down the block, and past the construction site for a row of new and identical houses. Enclosed by a temporary chain-link fence, the construction produces scrap materials that appear in a disorganized scattering; stakes, rope, wire, mesh, logs, and branches accumulate along the fence-line. I pick up some of these scatterings. The walk continues and I contemplate:

“what can a rope be?”

“what is a line?”

“what is a circle?”

An animal control truck drives by:

“what does it mean to be wild?”

I continue my walk and enter the community park’s athletic complex, greeted by two small marshes containing a Bufflehead pair and a flock of Redwing Blackbirds. I love the blackbird’s calls. They sound so robotic for a natural thing. The marsh pushes right up against the newly painted baseball diamond.

Today’s findings: three branches—one with thorns, a mutilated baseball, two small ropes that used to be one, and a neon orange piece of construction netting. “I’m like a modern hunter-gatherer, an urban forager. No. Not a hunter, maybe a necromancer.”

Carrying three large tree branches over my left shoulder, I walk straight through the middle of the largest field. I don't like the idea of taking the gravel path carved around its grassy center. I want to feel a bit of this field's expanse.

The air feels bigger out here, it gets deeper into my lungs like it belongs there. The crows feel more familiar here, finding their breakfast between blades of grass. You know they can remember a face? I catch one's finicky gaze and search for recognition. Meanwhile, the sky looks down at the field with her big, golden eye. They face each other, equivalently, and go on in all directions, past the marsh, the baseball diamond, the construction site, and my apartment.

The field is not wild or undisturbed. It is used by humans for sports and recreation. It is often very green and short, and certainly not an oasis for wildlife. I've noticed it takes about the same amount of time for this field grass and my fingernails to grow too long, before they get cut.

This field is the widest expanse of land I have met in my Seattle neighborhood. And I realize that when I talk about this field, I am talking about all the fields I have known in my life. Like the one directly next to my childhood home in Michigan, with the odd yellow house on the other side; or really, any lonely acre, which are much more common where I come from. When you're used to seeing large swaths of untouched land each day, it becomes very apparent when it's missing.

Facing a field, and breathing in the air carried across its distance, I recall freedom and peace in my body. A sensory connection, knowing both the field and I are moving to the same breeze. And it feels strange, but accurate, that these are also sites which accumulate a collection of human debris and refuse. Such openness cannot mask anything. These are sites of evidence for an intense entanglement with the living land. And it is not totally romantic, as it points to a much more complex, dark dilemma: what has become of this entanglement?



Fig. 1. The field on various days in Spring 2023. March 15, 2023 10:18 AM - May 9, 2023 3:42 PM.



Fig 2. Me carrying foraged materials across the field, and into the street. April 7, 2023, 1:35 PM.

## Love

I make art for the same reason I visit bodies of water for clarity.

The same reason I collect stones, sticks, and feathers.

The reason a beaver builds her dam.

The reason, also, does not have to be called by any one name. But I often think of calling it love.

I grieve because I love, I care because I love, and I sing because I love.

Love is open

vulnerable

malleable

forgiving

soft

fertile

vast

playful

free.

Love is a field in which I want to sow every seed.

And I hope you do not think this is a foolish wish. I am not naïve. The field of study on love in ethics is the source of fantastically profound and revolutionary ideas on social and political reform. A massive contributor to the field, and a writer so dear to my heart, is bell hooks [sic.] Her book, *All About Love: New Visions*, has become a guiding light for me in navigating how to be in the world as it is today. hooks illustrates love as radical, quiet anarchy:

“Awakening to love can only happen as we let go of our obsession with power and domination. Culturally all spheres of American life (...) should and could have their foundation as a love ethic. The underlying values of a culture and its ethics shape and inform the way we speak and act. A love ethic presupposes that everyone has the right to be free, to live fully and well.”<sup>1</sup>

It happened rather organically, the influence of these writings on my work. Before bed, I would read bell hooks’ thoughts on love and awake with her sentences still lingering. Love is not weak: it should be taken seriously as a powerful, transformative force. For this series of paintings, *To Be Like A Field*, my effort, scale, material sourcing, sentiment, and productivity (literal production of artwork), became directly informed by the ideals of a love ethic.

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<sup>1</sup> hooks, bell. *All about love: New visions*. 87. New York: William Morrow, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2022.



Fig. 3- 4. Details of the materials used in the paintings.

## Materiality

*“The principle underlying capitalistic society and the principle of love are incompatible.”<sup>2</sup>*

I have thought a lot about this quote from Eric Fromm, because I like how it highlights greed as antithetical to love. Love is billowing abundance, casting shadow on greed. I want to think more in the way of abundance: I already have everything I need.

The field’s human detritus is directly woven into the structure of my work, either with plaster, paint, or thread. Practically, this serves as a means of documentation of my honest and recurring findings in the field. I’m calling this my “ground-work:” evidence of the apparent reality in the immanent and observable field. It is also a completely free material source.

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<sup>2</sup> Fromm, Erich. “Chapter IV: The Practice of Love.” In *The Art of Loving*. Continuum Pub., 1956.

Found materials serve more than a practical function. They serve more than a conceptual function, as well. They carry something incorporeal: an energetic history. They have been shaped by the tides or winds or will of some being, and still harness the aftermath. It is something I would be incapable of reproducing. It *has* to come to me by chance.



Fig. 5. *To Be Like A Field*, 2023, plaster, acrylic, and sumi ink on cardboard, 8 x 8 in.



Fig. 6. *To Be Like A Field*, 2023, plaster, acrylic, oil pastel, sumi ink, and dried eucalyptus on cardboard, 8 X 11 in.



Fig. 7. *To Be Like A Field*, 2023, plaster, acrylic, sumi ink, pumice, and wasp nest on cardboard, 6 x 6 in.



Fig. 8. *To Be Like A Field*, 2023, plaster, acrylic, sumi ink, oil pastel, and wasp nest on cardboard, 5 x 7in.

Not every material used was completely found by chance, out in the world. The cardboard is from my own recycling bin. The plaster is the same kind used in medicine for casting broken limbs. Both actions I associate with care. I think of this as I wrap flimsy cardboard in a cast, strengthening its integrity.

bell hooks refers to M. Scott Peck’s definition of love “as the will to extend one’s self for the purpose



of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth.<sup>3</sup> But hooks specifies the word ‘spiritual’ as: “referring to that dimension of our core reality where mind, body, and spirit are one. An individual does not need to be a believer in a religion to embrace the idea that there is an animating principle in the self—a life force (...) that when nurtured, enhances our capacity (...) to engage in communion with the world around us.”<sup>4</sup>

Fig. 9. *To Be Like A Field*, 2023, plaster, acrylic, and charcoal on cardboard, 11 x 14 in.

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<sup>3</sup> Peck, M. Scott. *The Road Less Traveled, 25th Anniversary Edition: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values, and Spiritual Growth*. 81. Simon and Schuster, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> hooks. *All about love: New visions*. 13.

Making art is extending myself to others—an extension of one’s self out into the world. It is important for me, in my practice, to implement love in concept, form, and process. Love is a healing, nurturing, and transformative power: love as action, love as verb, love as a philosophical project. I act with love to my body, love to my painting, love to the materials I use, and love to the thoughts in my head. Love is as much a medium in my work as is the physical or material manifestation.



Fig. 10. *Sprout*, 2023, cut shrub leftover from landscapers, mutilated baseball, beach rocks, plaster, daisy.



Fig. 11. Installation view of half the room at the Henry Art Museum. Seattle, WA. 2023.



Fig. 12. Installation view of five paintings at the Henry Art Museum. Seattle, WA. 2023.

## A Field, A Methodology

*“As my legs carried me past the last of the phone lines and into the thick of the forest, as the shadows deepened and the exclusively human world fell behind me, a great remembering shuddered through my muscles, as though a soul long buried were striding to the surface. My own real creaturely life, at last, was what was smelling those dank scents and hearing the pines rub against each other.”<sup>5</sup>*

When I say, “I want to be like a field,” I am talking of the emotional, spiritual, historical, geological, and literal characteristics. Yet, I already am a field. And so are you. We are already so interwoven into the fabric of the land. I believe that the recent human departure from that vital connection is the source for vast amounts of anguish, trauma, and confusion in modern human society. We need to remember. It is why we need to spend more time in nature; to recall that we are a vital, powerful, and influential part of nature. In this series of paintings, if you are patient, you will notice a feeling of interconnectedness. Also, a oneness: a non-duality.

*To Be Like A Field* was a philosophical project. I have learned about myself, that I am an artist who cannot create without an intense fascination in my studies and readings. These studies must pertain

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<sup>5</sup> Abram, David. *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology*. 111. Vintage Books., 2010.

to how I experience daily life. It also has to be witnessable, in some form, by my senses: my body has to respond. For me, language can cloud, but the senses can clarify. That is why the field, something I encounter each day, had effortlessly become the focus for this project. The field engages all my senses and inspires my mind into tunnels and passageways which have long been felt by my atomic memories.

I try to straddle this balance of intellect and intuition, as I find it often shifts the immediate accessibility or engagement one way or another. I have found this especially hard to do in academia, which can often be competitive or showy. I have the desire to be neither. My work is firstly for me; the pieces are devotions, prayers, condensations of thought or story, and they don't need to be any more specific. My work betters my quality of life and is the closest thing I have known to a daily spiritual practice. What a blessed creature I am.

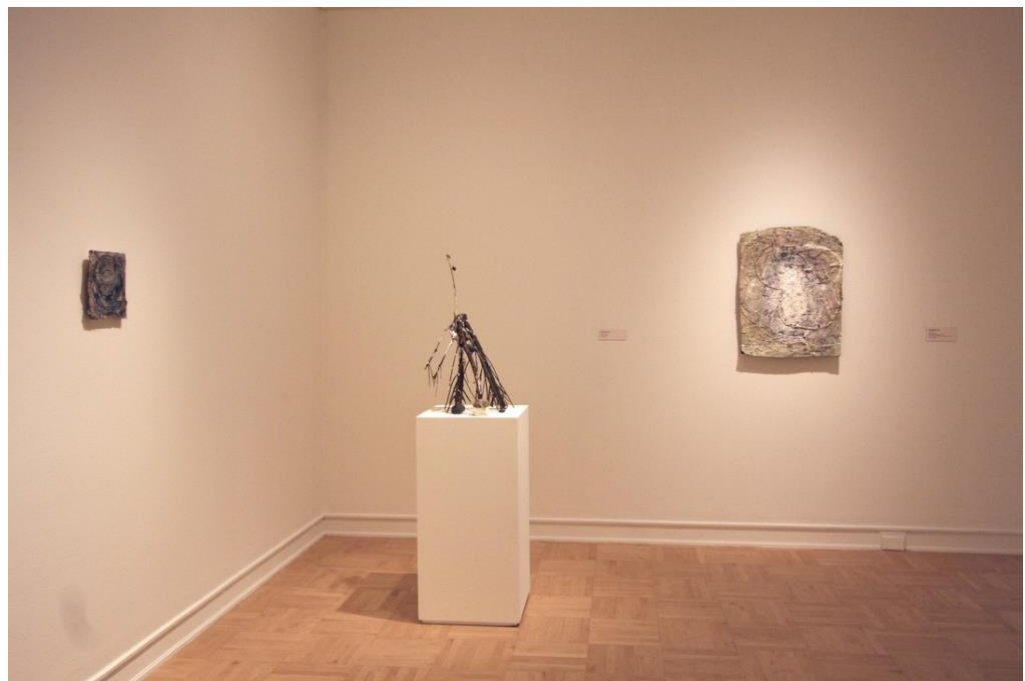


Fig. 13. Installation view of half of the room at the Henry Art Museum. Seattle, WA. 2023.

I would be remiss if I did not include a poem by the inimitable Mary Oliver, who has carried me near and far, past and recent, in her guidance and apparent love for the land. Therefore, I will leave you with this, which does with words what I wish to do with paint.

## The Sun

have you ever seen  
anything  
in your life  
more wonderful

than the way the sun,  
every evening,  
relaxed and easy, floats toward the horizon

and into the clouds or the hills,  
or the ruffled sea,  
and is gone—  
and how it slides again

out of the blackness,  
every morning,  
on the other side of the world,  
like a red flower

streaming upward on its heavenly oils,  
say, on a morning in early summer,  
at its perfect imperial distance—  
and have you ever felt for anything

such wild *love*—  
do you think there is anywhere, in any language,  
a word billowing enough  
for the pleasure

that fills you,  
as the sun  
reaches out,  
as it warms you

as you stand there,  
empty handed—  
or have you too  
turned from this world—

or have you too  
gone crazy  
for power,  
for things?<sup>6</sup>



Fig. 14. *To Be Like A Field*, 2023, plaster, acrylic, ink, field daisies, dandelions, strawberry leaves, and mica dust on cardboard, 24 x 30 in.

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<sup>6</sup> Oliver, Mary. “The Sun.” In *New and Selected Poems: Volume One*. 50. Beacon Press., 1992.

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