From the Ground Down

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Abstract

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In this thesis I examine concepts of identity, time and space as I have investigated related influences and methodologies within my studio practice, during my time of study at the University of Washington, Seattle's School of Art, Painting + Drawing Graduate Program. My thesis projects, exhibited at both the Henry Art Gallery and Sand Point Gallery, represent my interest in the effects of our geological and biological history and the inspiration of the natures and inherent behaviors of water and earth.

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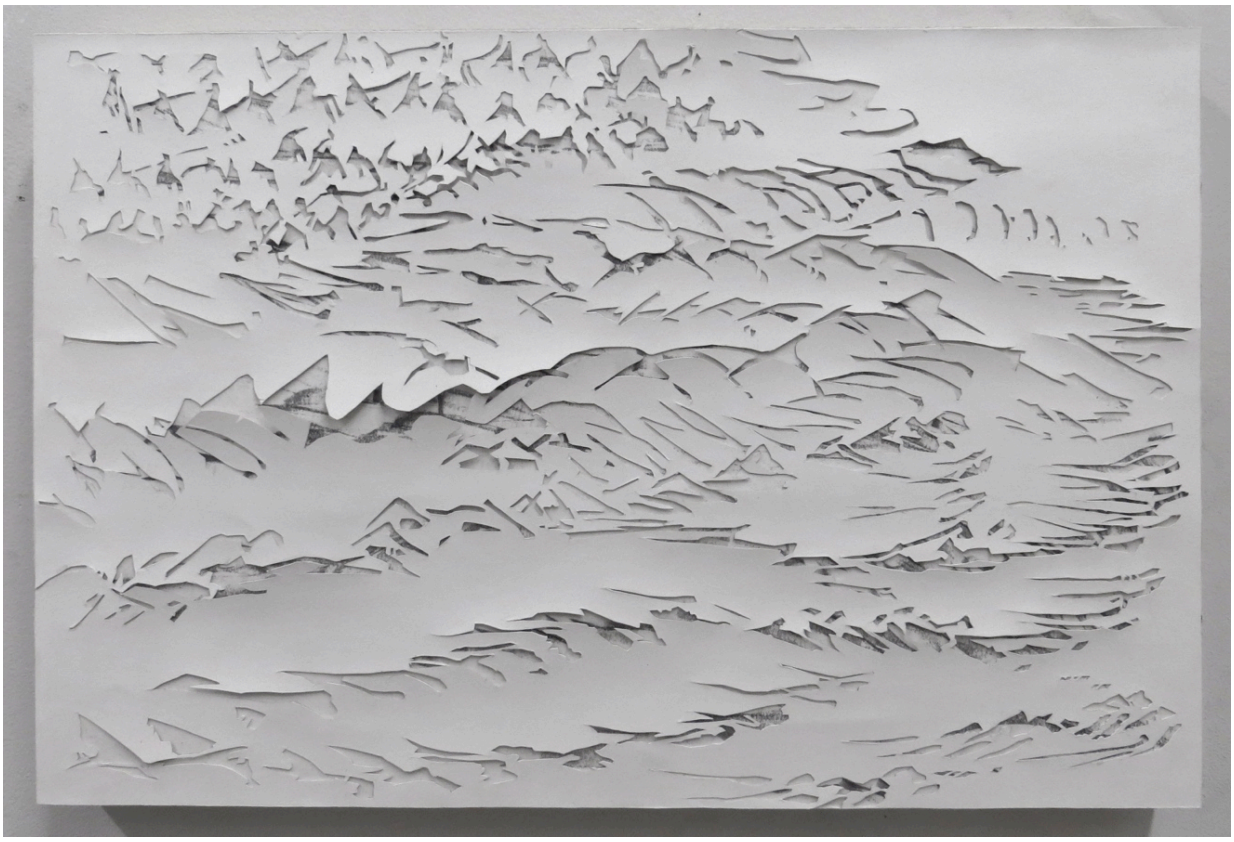

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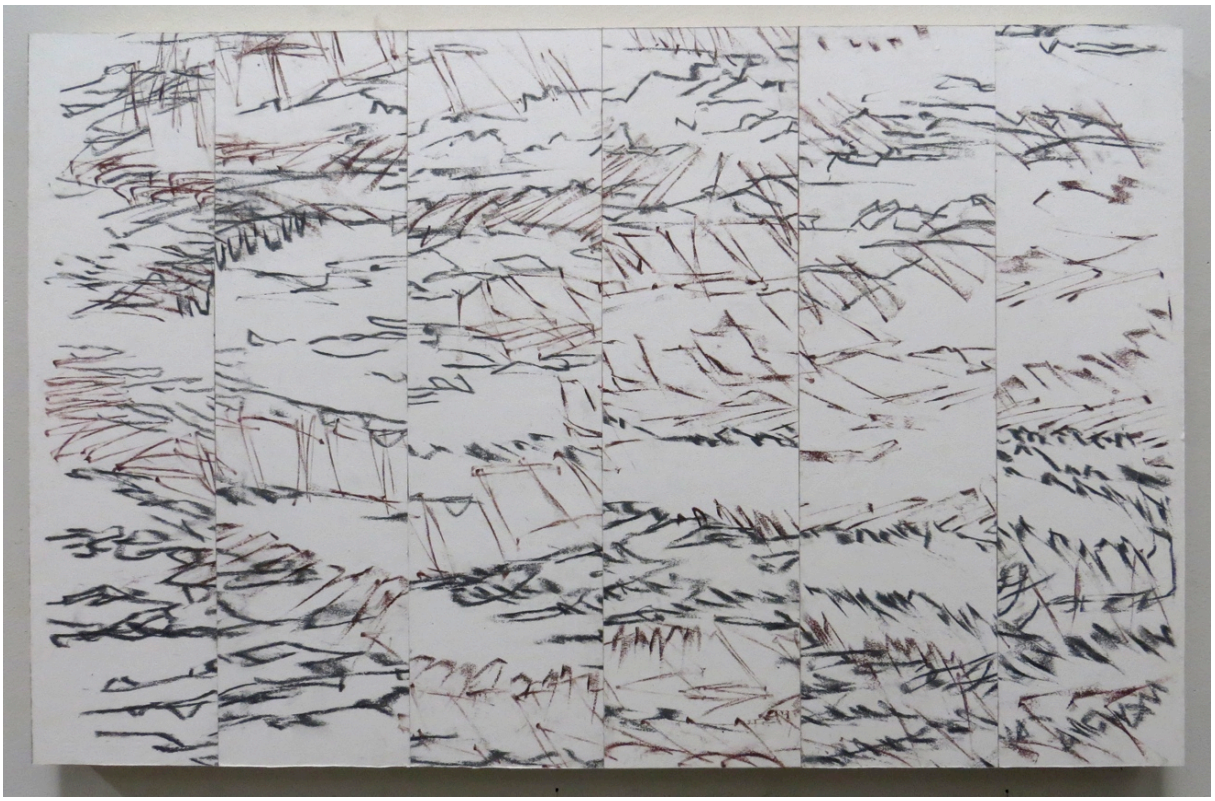

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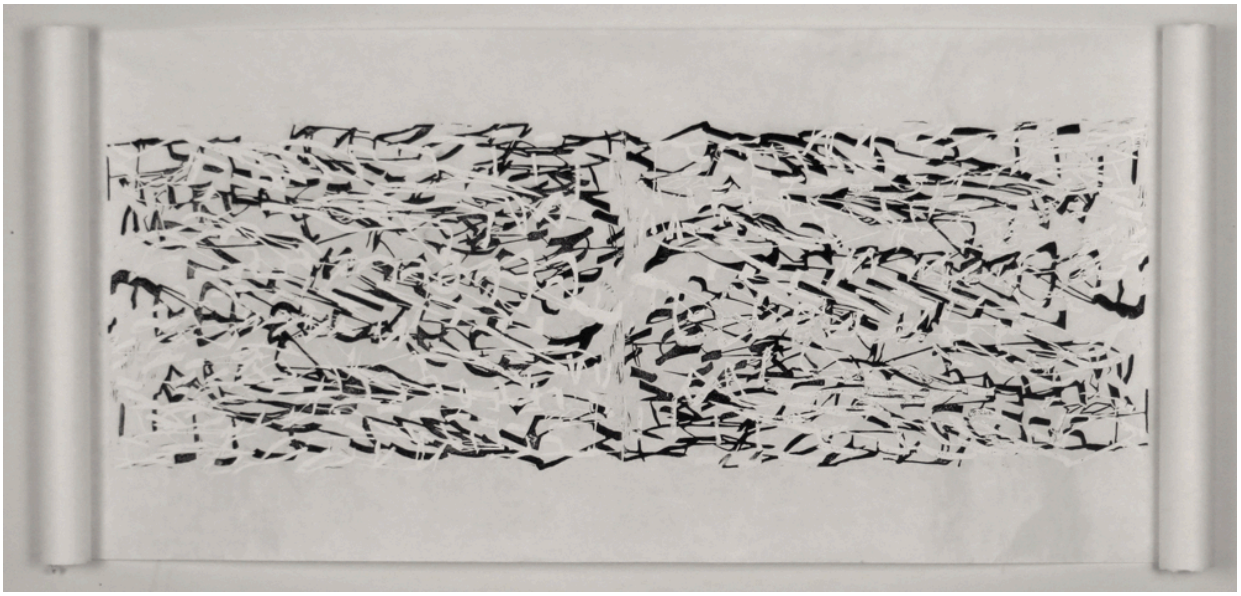

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Every physical location hides a history within layers of material memory—maps of distant stretches of time, evidence of natural processes and cycles repeating, and artifacts of unique and mysterious events. When stripped away or viewed from fresh perspectives, these layers can reveal the secrets of a place's formation—and indicate possible, intriguing futures. The appearance of weathered earth speaks to its evolution, offering a backward glimpse at the original form, and also a suggestion of shapes yet to be seen. Within these strata I find a persistent allure in surface cavities, larger voids, and the phenomenon of empty space—the absence of a perceptible subject—becoming its very opposite as a result of chance shifts in context and perspective.

I create multimedia art inspired by the natures and inherent behaviors of water and earth. Through my work I explore transitions—both physical and metaphysical—occurring in landscapes, and consider matters of identity, time, and space from new perspectives. I am fascinated by the immeasurable, ever-expanding scope of our universe, and strive to visually comment on how we as individuals relate to the cosmos. Utilizing processes inspired by nature, I hope to discover and illuminate relationships between patterns in the natural world and my and my family's lives as its occupants.

Over the past two years, my primary mode of work has shifted from figuration to abstraction, and I now eschew faithful depiction of place in an effort to better capture the subject's essence. My objective is for the work to offer a viewing informed by familiar historical implications, but ultimately offer a unique experience. I begin with close observations of water currents in outdoor settings, often captured as digital video, followed by transcription of these movements and rhythmic repetitions using graphite or charcoal on paper. I then take the work through progressions of abstraction, paring my subject down to bare essentials—marks on paper

mimicking the spirit of water. This indication of motion, extracted from the landscape, becomes my drawing language. With it, I construct and deconstruct new works.

Who I am today is the result of the elaborate series of events that comprise my past—as well as the pasts of those who came before me. I constantly seek symbolic connections between my artwork and historical hardships associated with my family's South Carolina farmland, as well as the lives of my ancestors whose very survival was dependent upon it. My family's rich agricultural roots—and tragic events, which occurred on the same soil—provide the context for current and planned projects in my studio. By adapting related techniques—such as manipulating materials with my bare hands and simulating the effects of natural forces—I hope to create work that reveals deeper insight into my own origins and personal evolution.

Two conflicting perspectives inform my personal feelings about attachment to land. My father's Scottish ancestors have maintained South Carolina farmland in their name for over two centuries—even throughout the upheaval of the Civil War—while the historical context of my mother's Sioux lineage challenges that very concept of land ownership. I was recently asked to ponder the question, "Do I own land, or does land own me?" This ethical quandary is one I plan to continue exploring, and I find it to be symbolically embedded in the relationship between the artist and the artwork, and it plays out in a physical dialogue with the material as I interact with it. The material reacts—dries, shrinks, curls back, soaks up water, and so forth--and as I respond in turn, the cycle continues; an ongoing conversation of inquiry and discovery. (figs. 1-3)

Part of my family's livelihood has historically come from the thinning and clearing of timber from our forested farmland. This transformative act has become an underlying theme in

my work. My emotional response to timbering comes from both my personal interest in the place, and dismay over the ultimate sacrifice of a natural habitat.

The South Carolina land where I collect my raw, natural material has been transformed by water runoff, and lacks topsoil in select areas. Once fertile cotton fields, these ranges are now rolling hills of bare ultisol, a red clay soil rich in iron oxide. While the land's previous agricultural potential might be diminished, and its layout as an identifiable, functioning farm might have been obscured over the past few centuries, the essential substance of the earth remains intact. Ultisol, while lacking in the calcium and potassium required for crop cultivation, and vulnerable to erosion, will withstand new soil formation and continuous weathering. It endures wherever it is indigenous. As the physical foundation of my family's history, and as a material saturated with metaphorical relevance to my artistic objectives, I deem this soil essential to the physical makeup of my artwork.

Where my work once presented precise documentation of a landscape, it now relies upon metaphorical allusions to weathering and aging to visually describe the same environments. I think about land fragmentation—the effects of land ownership and use—as I excavate the material surfaces of a piece. This line of thought leads logically to the subject of habitat fragmentation—a process brought about by increased human encroachment upon wild areas.

The relationship between my work and me feels symbolic of the interconnectedness between an animal and its environment. Every species leaves a trace behind in the form of physical tracks or shed debris. In either case, a residue develops—an occurrence, which manifests both conceptually and physically in my work. My fingerprints leave behind their own mark, in addition to the byproducts of other processes and techniques performed by hand on various projects in-progress in my studio. (fig. 4)

I want my artwork to embody a sense of time experienced cyclically, reflective of natural growth cycles and disruptions on Earth from the removal, reclamation, and reuse of materials. In both of my works on exhibit at the Henry Art Gallery, *A History of Land* (fig. 5) and *Chance Currents* (fig. 6), the residue and fragmentation of materials are present along with their counterparts—a large oil painting and a 14-panel wax relief. An 8-foot long pile of oil and red clay soil paint shavings lies directly beneath *A History of Land* (fig. 5), on the gallery floor. This pile is derivative of the painting's surface, formed over the course of approximately six months. I layered marks of red clay soil, which had been mixed with linseed oil and made into my own unique supply of oil paint. With the earliest layers scraped away, I rubbed coarse soil mixed with oil paint onto the newly weathered surface. What I found with each swipe of my joint knife was the skeletal structure and old, buried bones of my original painting.

The simultaneous processes of covering, unveiling, and generating marks were symbolic of weathering processes on land. Hence, water remains the driving force in my studio, both as source material, and as suggestion of a new methodology of constructing and deconstructing structures and surfaces. Water travels across obstructions on land and anything else in its path. It is a force of nature, rushing—or barely trickling—in seemingly random movements. Ripples, currents, and waves reveal a constant state of flux, like time itself.

Water's form has many transient qualities, and thus serves as a platform for infinite possibilities in conceptual and visual form. The Italian philosopher Raffaele Milani talks of water as presenting "…itself in a spectrum of wavelengths and qualities: it may be clear, crystalline, fresh, or pure, but it may also be muddy, fetid, marshy, turbid, salty, effervescent, or aromatic."

(Milani, 135) I observe that fundamental components of the physical world can be seen either in harmony or conflict with one another, much like water.

As with *A History of Land* (fig. 5), I worked on *Chance Currents* (fig. 6) in two stages—the first additive, the second reductive. (This process also serves as a reference to the effects of seasonal transitions on the natural subject of the work.) I began by transcribing water movements observed with the naked eye with graphite on paper. These drawings were then adhered to wood panels of three different sizes. I arranged collage elements of cut graphite marks from previous drawings on top of the new ones to match similar gestures in mark-making, without gluing them down. I then poured liquid beeswax on top of the loose, collaged marks, so the wax would arrange and fix them by chance. After the wax resumed a solid form, I carved away at the surfaces of each, around the collaged elements and down into the drawings, or in some cases, the top layer of wood. Through this excavation process, I unearthed unique gestures in time. Some panels remained heavy with wax, while others were stripped bare, retaining a faint residue of yellow lines.

I'm currently finding inspiration in making connections between temporary and permanent natural materials. The milk in Wolfgang Laib's *Milkstone* is in a constant state of evolution on a motionless surface that is marble. The Italian art critic Danilo Eccher describes the work as "…a surface that inflects the faces of nature in the delicate veining of a stone reflected within the liquid that covers and envelopes it. A liquid that maintains the same immobility but that harbors its own vitality, its own time, its own limits." (Eccher, 61)

During the process of developing *Chance Currents* (fig. 6) I collected my beeswax debris, and transformed the shavings into a log, 16 inches in length. This byproduct, entitled

Nurse Log (fig. 7), is exhibited on a white shelf beneath the horizontal spread of panels. I carefully constructed the log in the natural manner of tree growth—one shaving at a time—to form a circular ring around itself, expanding outward. The core of the wax log is an actual wooden branch, which over time will elementally break down within the wax encasement, leaving a hollow cavity. From the beginning stages to its final developments, this project has been brought to life through the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of chosen materials.

Gravity's governance influences my work, end-to-end, from the initial record-taking to the final stage of a material settling into place. My pieces start with mapping out the push and pull of water's movement as streams, rivers, and oceans, and the final identity is often forged when I allow gravity to physically alter them. A liquid element might solidify and displace cutout marks, while another material might sink in a liquid environment, its ultimate resting place determined by its own weight. (figs. 6 & 1)

I sometimes begin a larger drawing in segments—or later cut a whole drawing into fragments—to discover surprising visual harmonies and implications of motion across the panels. I am most satisfied with the tiny moments where marks align by chance. On occasion I will orchestrate the piecing together of a work on paper by applying a system that mimics the push-and-pull of water. These drawings serve as both preliminaries to future paintings, carvings, or new media, and at times are finished works of art on their own.

In the drawing *A History of Water* (fig. 8), after slicing the surface into six panels, I swapped each panel with its neighbor on the right then adhered every other panel an inch higher or lower than the next. Most of my observational drawing is executed "blind", where I record

gestures of water without actually looking at my drawing surface. I am interested in how lines and dots will lie on the page in relation to other marks. Diane Upright describes a similar method found in Ellsworth Kelly's work, *Cite* (originally *A Painting with Infinite Variations*), which significantly influenced my own process: "…space yields to surface in the artist's increasing wish to avoid composition." She states that he "succeeds in utilizing chance as a method of composition, while remaining true to the natural appearance of the subject—reflections on water." (Upright, 14)

I create surfaces through processes of burning, soaking, cutting, carving, and sanding. (figs. 9 & 10) Whether with a single surface or multiple segments of manipulated planes arranged side-by-side, what I most seek to convey is an evolutionary sense of time. I want my processes in making artwork to be apparent, so a sense of its history is foremost in the viewer's mind.

Experimenting with linoleum block printing revealed it to be a compelling medium for representing the actions of water movement—unfolding, overlapping, reversing, repeating, etc. (figs. 11 & 12) I'm able to speed up the process of repetitions on a surface, allowing additional time for further manipulation of the mark-making or the surface it's printed on. In both works displayed at the Sand Point Gallery thesis exhibition, *Gully Crust* (fig. 2) and *Runoff* (fig. 10), I printed with blocks on canvas or rice paper, then submerged the latter in baths infused with red clay soil. The point where the waterline meets dry paper marks a shift in linoleum block printing. Segments of blocks printed and layered atop one another meet other rounds of prints, resting side-by-side without overlap. This movement from slow- to fast-moving gestures of calligraphic lines is also representative of the time I spent handling a particular area of the paper or canvas.

John Cage stated, “I don’t tend to think of a foreground and a background. I think whatever appears does so by virtue of the emptiness of space.” (Brown, 50) In much of my work, I would like my viewer to consider the power of positive and negative space. I would posit that all space in my work is active, whether the space in question is a surface, within a window of a paper cutout, the relief or recession of a painting, or the space around and beyond the literal or implied rectangle. Cage’s statement that “everything in the world is made up of moving, changing particles” validates this notion in my practice. (Brown, 50)

With regard to empty space, I should discuss the importance of my spectator’s presence, in addition to the making of the work. The audience completes a cycle that starts with the singular experience of me relating as an artist to my environment, becomes one of interaction between the material, and me and finally finds the viewer forming their own relationship to the work.

I want to compel my audience to contemplate the role of the passage of time in the creation of the work, and to observe the ways in which it manifests physically in the final pieces. The viewer’s experience changes with proximity to the work’s surface—another time-specific observation. From different points in the room, independent, seemingly unrelated elements of the work might come into focus or cohere into new images and patterns. (figs. 2 & 10)

When working on paper, utilizing vertical and horizontal scroll formats is another way for me to suggest a concept of time with no end or beginning. (figs. 10-12) I hope to acknowledge an ancient Eastern art form within the context of the contemporary Western art world with this practice. In addition to Chinese scroll paintings, which are intended to be

experienced in small increments, I reference musical scores, which employ shifts in tempo, rhythm, and pitch to mark specific moments in a longer journey. Thus influenced, the progression of my work—as with the musical ebb and flow of water currents or the fluid rise and fall of symphonic movements—will find moments of rest complementing dramatic flourishes, conveying a narrative of time passing. (fig. 6)

Brice Marden's "drawn-painted-written" approach, developed under the influence of Far Eastern calligraphy, helped guide my attempt to achieve lyrical and gestural qualities of my lines by free-handing each drawing of water. (fig. 8), (Keller, 22) This process served as the first stage of each cutout, photograph, painting, and linoleum block print in my studio. As in my drawings of water currents, the gestures in Marden's painting *The Muses* "…have become bodies flowing and dancing in space, bodies that do not take figurative shape or describe an external reality, but rather linear notations of dynamic movement. The lines…emerge as if unprepared; they intersect, continue into seeming infinity, and acquire spatial energies." (Keller, 23) In my practice, I feel that I am creating my own correspondence with mark-making in a lyrical spirit akin to Marden's inventive dance.

My work is also inspired by memory, which, like the physically exposed layers of a piece, can reawaken past experiences, formative stages of identity, and attachments to a place. As I've grown older, the red, rolling hills of Blackstock, SC feel less towering and intimidating than they did as a child. My visual sensitivities have developed, and my more mature powers of observation have revealed new details of the landscape. In my studio, engagement with materials collected from the farmland supplement my memory. Whether I'm digging my fingers into the

soil, breathing in the aroma of a red clay bath, or appreciating the sight of its burnt sienna color, I am taken back in my mind to my childhood spent roaming and playing on the land.

My conflicted feelings regarding the practice of timbering on our family farmland have surfaced in my studio in a new way in the wake of the tragic and total loss of my childhood home to fire. Controlled burns fuel new growth. When burned, a forest's charred trees will drop seedlings, simultaneously fertilizing and supplying the ground with nutrients by the fall of ash. Our world depends on disruptions to progress. Through the power of artistic metaphor, the loss of my childhood home ushered in a new period of creativity in my studio practice, and instilled in me a renewed trust in the resilience of the natural world. Amidst the charred remains of our house, nature thrived. Months went by and weeds grew taller than the ghostly, fragmented structure. I lost possessions, family memorabilia—even pets—but the surrounding acreage appeared vast and intact. Surprisingly, I grew emotionally stronger in the aftermath of this great loss. It was as if the hardy, perpetually-fertile land was telling us, "onward".

I constructed a small replica of the house from memory. I shaped it by hand, grinding down ash remnants collected from the site and mixing them together with matte medium. For exhibition purposes, I shaped sopping red clay mud in a corner at the base of the floor in the Sand Point Gallery as part of our secondary thesis exhibition. I then pushed the small replica, entitled *Ash House* (fig. 13), into the surface of the mud, essentially submerging the structure into the earth and marrying the two materials.

I plan to use *Ash House* (fig. 13) as a means of obtaining new material for my next work--another byproduct, if you will. I envision something large and two-dimensional, a drawing of the land, perhaps, continuing on a single piece of stretched paper until the ash is completely spent. *Ash House* (fig. 13), as a sculpture and installation, no longer exists following its

exhibition, but lives on in archival inkjet prints. These prints contain the record what once filled the corner of a room, rested in the palms of my hands, and further back in time, provided shelter to my family.

I am also exploring how technology can enable me to physically and conceptually alter my work's outcomes. In transferring media I've already created using traditional methods to a work environment equipped with the tools of new media, I'm able to realize bold, invigorating translations of the original images, now crackling with modern energy. In the process of digitizing my work, I essentially strip the source artwork of its original material identity; the digital files present the images as being of ambiguous, highly-interpretable composition. I can defy conventional spatial rules, and simultaneously provide the viewer with both grounded and aerial points of view--to striking, unconventional effect.

In my two works on exhibit at the Henry Art Gallery, *Reverberation* (fig. 14) and *Echo* (fig. 15), the images have come a long way to reach their ultimate states. In the case of previously cited pieces, the final material state was identifiable as more or less organic, while these works found their identities through the use of new media techniques. Each existed for periods of time first as drawing media, then cut reliefs, and eventually entered the realm of photography. Once they became digital images, I opened them in Photoshop to make unique manipulations that echoed processes previously performed by hand—cutting, removing, expanding, overlapping, and layering marks. The flattening of physical material through new media offered a way to render surface material and reliefs even more abstract.

Homi K. Bhabha writes of that the intent behind contemporary Indian artist Anish Kapoor's "…work is not to represent the meditation of light and darkness, or negative and positive space…Kapoor stays with the state of transitionality (sic), allowing it the time and space to develop its own affects—anxiety, unease, restlessness—so that viewing becomes part of the process of making the work itself. The spectator's relation to the object involves a process of questioning the underlying conditions through which the work becomes a visual experience in the first place: how can the conceptual void be made visible? How can the perceptual void be spoken?" (Bhabha, 172) It is important in Kapoor's practice to construct emptiness or create voids in the making of the work, rather than employing more typical stylistic signatures like a grid or rectangle to signify absence. These notions of emptiness arise in his works through the viewer's engagement in the space and the physical acts of making the work, where one material touches another. (Bhabha, 172) In some instances in my work, the viewer's body in relation to the work will offer two visual possibilities—seeing a grand gesture from afar, and seeing alternating, individual phrases of the drawing language up close. (figs. 2, 6 & 10)

A part of my studio practice is discovering the ways in which the patterns of scientific order might actually be perceived as "erratic". By this, I mean that we are offered moments in time, which seem entirely unique and are never to be experienced again in the same way, despite our understanding of natural patterns and cycles. Exploring chance operations in my work offers an infinite range of possibilities, and through it I feel a profound connection to that same spectrum of possibility we find in the natural world, which I hope to share with the viewer. Guiseppe Penone's inspiration drawn from nature is an example of the poetic connection to the earth I strive for in my work. As Guy Tosatto, commenting on Penone, observed, "a secret dialogue can establish itself between the things of the universe and the objects of man, between

the natural elements and the body of the artist, between the design of the trees and the form of the statues" (Tosatto, 9)

I believe that every memory and moment is unique. It is my mission to offer this perspective to my viewer, to celebrate interdependence, and to use my work as a vessel for new experience. We are constantly immersed in and influenced by our history. Just as my family farmland is important to me, so is all of our ancestry. Our past can unveil truths about who we are, how this planet we live on came to be, and what our shared future might hold.

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