What Registers in the Body: Place and the Physicality of Painting

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What Registers in the Body:
Place and the Physicality of Painting

A Thesis Presented

By

ELIZABETH HOUSTON

MAY 2020

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What Registers in the Body:  
Place and the Physicality of Painting

A Thesis Presented

By

ELIZABETH HOUSTON

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Bridgewater State University  
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Master of Arts in Teaching  
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ABSTRACT

In this project, I explore the relationships between place and body, landscape and figure, and the transference of bodily experience through the physical act of painting. The thesis consists of an 18 month studio investigation resulting in an exhibition of lyrical, gestural imagined landscape paintings. The environs of Glens Falls, New York including the Hudson River, the forests of the Adirondack Mountains, and the logging and paper industries that developed around these resources are my primary influential landscapes. Through a combination of intuitive, gestural mark making and deliberate decision-making, these embodied landscapes become the content for the invented landscapes of my paintings. My work is contextualized by an examination of the Hudson River School painters and their exploration of the picturesque and sublime and the physical action and connection to place of the American Action Painters. I conclude with a discussion of specific ways that my process and experience as artist-learner informs my practice as an artist-teacher.
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Introduction

Brief Artist Statement

I paint imagined landscapes that oscillate between representation and abstraction. The paintings are constructions of landscapes that I have observed, lived in and felt. The paintings are inhabited by figures, either overtly as formal elements, or intrinsically in the muscularity and movement of the brushstrokes.

My painting style is gestural and vigorous in an effort to imprint the physical exertions of my bodily engagement with materials. I primarily use acrylic paint applied with brush (sometimes palette knife); I also stain and paint paper and then collage cut or torn pieces onto the canvas to mingle with the brushwork and vary the character of the color and marks. My paintings are similar in scale to my body, with their long edges ranging from four to seven feet. I am 5’ 3”, and the homologous scale of the work facilitates my physical engagement with the canvas. Characterized by immediacy, movement, exaggerated vibrant color, and energetic marks, my paintings are rooted in the gestural expressionism of American Action Painting that developed after World War Two. In my work, I explore how place is registered in my body and how the physical action of painting transfers bodily experience and the embedded sense of place as content into my invented landscapes.

The two most influential landscapes for my work are: Glens Falls, New York, defined by the Hudson River, the forests of the Adirondack Mountains, and the timber industry developed in relation to those resources; and the natural spaces of Eastern Massachusetts, in particular the wooded wild spaces of Stoughton and Easton, and the
manicured garden estates built on their outskirts. I make observational studies in pastel, ink, or pencil to sharpen my connections to the dynamics of specific landscapes, but not as compositional plans for painted works. When I paint, I engage directly and intuitively,

Fig.1: *Tip Toe Ever Green*, 2020, acrylic, spray paint, and colored pencil on canvas, 60” x 48”
activating the canvas with swift movements to establish an essential character of the painting and its illusory space of the image. I then compose the imagined landscape, and my decisions are informed by a stream of sources including my sketches, photographs, and bodily embedded impressions.

As I recast sensations of these real and imagined spaces into my work, I appropriate traditions of the Hudson River School landscapes that incorporate both the picturesque and the sublime. In some works the landscape opens into expansive space with dramatic topographical change. These works evoke land features defined by natural forces, such as canyons and waterfalls, or those formed by aggressive human actions, such as quarries, open-cut mines, and archeological dig sites. I am interested in that which creates awe and registers as physiological excitement. For example, in one piece I use contrasts in scale (both in the description of space and the proportion of figure and landscape); vibrant, amplified and unnatural color; and a destabilizing swell in the compositional structure, to evoke excitement that is simultaneously fear and exhilaration.

**Relationship to Teaching**

At the core of my teaching philosophy is the belief that to be a visual arts teacher one must be a practicing artist. My work as an artist informs my work as a high school art teacher. My experience as a graduate student engaged in artistic investigation within the University MAT, Creative Arts program, provides new footholds for understanding the experiences of my students and the dynamics of learning in my classroom. A critical component of this thesis, therefore, is an examination of my process and experience. I
draw on a record of the journey through my studio journal, notes from the critique process, and photographic documentation of painting work -- both that which is fully realized for the thesis exhibition and the many trials along the way -- in order to reflect on the impact of this experience as an artist-learner on my work as an artist-teacher, focusing on my efforts to cultivate in students the practice of “critical making.”

In the following chapters, I provide a description and analysis of the work in the thesis exhibition, including an account of technique and the conceptual and material processes of creating it. I examine the historical and contemporary influences of my work and discuss possibilities for future studio investigations. Finally, I explore how the studio investigation has impacted my understanding of myself as an artist and discuss the connections between this experience and my professional practice as an educator.

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Extensive Artist Statement

Content

The body of work presented in this thesis explores the relationships between body, landscape, and the physicality of painting. Through this work, I explore what is encoded in the body through the experience of physically inhabiting a place (body sensation, visual impression, memory, and association) and how that code is unspooled and transferred through the physical action of painting.

The paintings are imagined landscapes through expressive, gestural mark making with acrylic paint on canvas. Moving between representation and abstraction, the paintings are poetic constructions of landscapes that I have observed, lived in and felt. The paintings are inhabited by figures, either overtly as formal elements, or intrinsically in the muscularity and movement of the brushstrokes. The thesis exhibition comprises ten works on canvas ranging in size from 2’ x 3’ to 5’ x 8’. The artwork is primarily acrylic paint applied with brush, and also incorporates painted paper collage, spray paint, and water soluble colored pencil. The pieces in the exhibition are selected from approximately 36 paintings created during an 18 month studio exploration. Most were created in the last six months reflecting the honed intentions for the body of work, informed by my broader trials and discoveries. Early in the investigation, the paintings were on smaller canvases (most under 40”) and tended to describe landscapes as dense spaces. Increasing the scale of the canvases led to experimenting with the relationships between occupied and unoccupied space on the canvas. It facilitated opening the pictorial spaces, allowing the viewer’s eye to move more freely through the paintings. Changing
the scale of the works also changed the physical relationships between me, the painting tools and the canvas; larger canvases led to bigger brushes (thus, a wider range in the scale of marks) and invited bigger physical movements in the application of paint.

To some extent, the imagined spaces in the paintings evoke two defining physical places where I have lived: upstate New York and eastern Massachusetts. The first, Glens Falls, New York, where I grew up, is a small community on the Hudson River in eastern New York at the foothills of the Adirondack Mountains. The city is encompassed by a wooded landscape of deciduous hardwoods and white pines. Within the city itself sits Coles Woods, approximately 50 acres of forest with walking and skiing trails on the terraces of Halfway Brook².

The Hudson River played a defining role in the history of Glens Falls and its development as a community. The city is located 50 miles north of the state’s capital, Albany, at a bend in the river where a drop in elevation creates rapids and falls.

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Fig. 2: Seneca Ray Stoddard, *Dam at Glens Falls*, ca. 1905, unmounted gelatin silver print, Seneca Ray Stoddard Collection, Courtesy of The Chapman Historical Museum, Glens Falls, NY.

As early as the mid-18th century, the Quaker settlers in the area harnessed the moving water to turn water wheels for granaries, lumber mills, and limestone quarries. The Feeder Canal was completed in 1832, connecting the Glens Falls region to Albany and New York City, providing a way to get goods to the marketplace and contributing significantly to the area’s prosperity. The bend in the river slowed the passage of the logs facilitating easier sorting, and the Feeder Canal provided a staging area for sorting logs to
Fig. 4: Seneca Ray Stoddard, *Log Jam Above the Finch, Pruyn & Co. Sawmill*, ca. 1890, photographic print, Seneca Ray Stoddard Collection, Courtesy of The Chapman Historical Museum, Glens Falls, NY.

the various mills. In the spring when the water was high, “[t]he river drives brought hundreds of thousands of logs to the area, earning Glens Falls the reputation of being the lumber capital of the United States.” In fact, “[a]t times there were so many logs in the river, men could actually walk from shore to shore without getting wet.”

By the late 19th century, enabled by the surrounding forests and the waterpower generated by the 60 ft falls, the economy of Glens Falls was defined by the lumber and

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related paper industries, both for the laborers who settled by the river around the mill and a growing wealthy class:\(^5\)

The falls provided inexpensive power, and the men who owned the mills owned the wood lots in the mountains, invested in the canal, and owned the canal boats that ran on it. All this development produced a large number of millionaires for such an isolated community.\(^6\)

The most prominent company, Finch, Pruyn, and Co., was founded by Jeremiah and Daniel Finch and Samuel Pruyn in 1865. The mill sits at the bottom of a hill on the low plane that hugs the river, just below the falls. Originally founded as a sawmill lumber yard and limestone quarry, by 1900 the company had acquired more than 100,000 acres of Adirondack forestland and was the largest lumber business on the Hudson River.\(^7\) In 1904 it also began producing paper, and by 1929 was manufacturing paper exclusively. By 1950, Finch Pruyn was the largest private landowner in New York State with 202,045 acres of timberland.\(^8\) In 1957 the company opened a new $3.5 million pulp mill and bleach plant with a capacity of about 70 tons per day, and coinciding with its 100\(^{th}\) anniversary in 1965, underwent a major expansion which doubled its production capacity.\(^9\) With continued expansion, by the time that Finch Pruyn was sold to Atlas Paper Holdings in 2007, it produced 250,000 tons of paper annually and employed 1,000 people.\(^10\)

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\(^8\) Ibid.


Today, the heart of the city’s small downtown sits just above the mill. From downtown, the paper mill is largely hidden from view by the hill and the civic center built in the early 1980s, but the smoke stacks rise above both. At night the lights of the mill heighten its presence in the landscape by illuminating the smoke billowing from its stacks.

The rhythms of my childhood landscape, of which the forests, river, and mill are a part, are physically and psychologically encoded in me. Since childhood, wooded spaces have always been my places of recreation and retreat. Even as a small child, I played in the woods at the periphery of my suburban neighborhood. Throughout my youth I hiked, whether short ventures on nearby trails or day climbs in the Adirondack peaks, and cross-country skied in Coles Woods. The pattern of light and shadow in the canopy of
trees, the gesture of branches in a seventy year old forest, the changing rhythm of plants in the understory at the transition from forest to field -- these woodlands are imprinted sensations.

As a child I would accompany my father to the woods on the outskirts of town to collect firewood from the remnants of the commercial timber clear. We would drive up the logging roads of West Mountain to small clearings. While my father sifted through the downed timber and bucked up logs with a chainsaw, I would explore. I recall climbing over large uprooted stumps, tiptoeing the length of decaying trunks, and lifting small logs in search of salamanders. At the time I made no connection between the firewood collection and the paper mill, though the connection is apparent to me now.

Similarly, when I was a child the theatricality of the rolling swells of white vapor coming from the mill’s smokestacks captivated me; only as an adult have I come to understand the degree to which the imagery and sensations associated with the mill were imprinted in me. Even the sickly sweet smell of the mill, which permeated the air on certain days, lingers somewhere in the recesses of memory.

Viewed through a phenomenological lens, the body and perception cannot be separated. The body is the place where consciousness and reality come to occupy the same space.11 In this framework, “...awareness of myself, others, objects, all of the things that make up my works -- is rooted in my experience in the world and this experience is, in turn, rooted in my body.”12 As the French existential phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes, the body is a “permanent primordial horizon of all of my

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experiences.” Moreover, while not denying the existence of mental processes, for Merleau-Ponty, perception is a reciprocal experience in which the body both engages with the world and is acted upon by it. This idea is explored in his essay, “Eye and Mind,” as Merleau-Ponty recalls an idea from the painter Paul Klee:

In a forest, I have felt many times over that it was not I who looked at the forest. Some days I felt that the trees were looking at me, were speaking to me…. I was there, listening…. I think that the painter must be penetrated by the universe and not want to penetrate it…. I expect to be inwardly submerged, buried. Perhaps I paint to break out.

As an adult, this interaction and the pull of natural spaces, particularly woodlands has strengthened. Though now I spend my time in the woodlands of Easton, Massachusetts, such as those found at Borderland State Park, the landscape is similar to that of my childhood home -- mixed forest with paths that meander through the woods along babbling brooks. My experiences of Easton re-activated submerged memories of my childhood because of this similar topography.

While the influence of these places is clear in the content of the work, the paintings are not created with the intention of accurately capturing a real place. Rather, they render the environments and surroundings that are inextricably encoded into my memory and now exist inside me. In that sense, therefore, the landscapes in the paintings become a representation not of a literal place, but of an internal emotional experience and recast sensations. In the phenomenological framing, the artist “looks to the world in such a way as to allow it to move her body rather than to describe it” and by “lending her

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body to that which will be painted, the painter changes the world into painting.”¹⁶ The paintings “function like a description of perceptual experience” and “give[s] us insight, not into how our experience of the world is produced, but into what it is actually like.”¹⁷ My gestures in mark making are intended to mimic the movements of my formative place such as the flow of the river, the lilt of a pine branch, the lift and fall of the topography.

Underlying both the form and content of all of the paintings is oscillation between opposing forces -- those in nature, in psychological experience, and physical form. The work is characterized by flux between opposing states: tension and release, trepidation and thrill, intimacy and vastness, akin to what Edmund Burke described as the sublime in *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* in 1757:

> Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling ...¹⁸

As Burke explains, the pinnacle of the sublime is in the experience of terror. However, the meaning of sublime has changed over time, broadening to encompass overwhelming sensation that creates an aesthetic experience. Though at times my work plays with an experience of danger that is akin to Burke, increasingly I am interested in creating a sublime experience for the viewer that is immersive and engulfing.

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Within the exhibit, the earliest piece is *Yellow Field* (fig. 6). It is the most traditional landscape. The painting depicts a New England field which rolls towards distant low hills. Yellows pervade the autumn scene, from light golds to saturated orange-yellow hues of acrylic paint applied as opaque, billowy brushstrokes or translucent glaze. The canvas is 48” wide by 30” tall. Its horizontal format is reinforced by the compositional relationships. Just above its midline, yellow sky meets yellow earth at a horizon running parallel to the canvas from left to right edge. In contrast, four vegetative stalks stretch vertically as crooked burgundy lines; the downward curl of their branches resists the direction of their growth. The sparse stalks create a close foreground and function as an open screen providing a view into the space, parting at the center to
allow the viewer to move through it. Thin delicate lines drawn with water soluble colored pencil in blues and pinks travel out of the painted stalks through the field and sky. Though evocative of roots, grasses, and the edges of clouds, their primary function is rhythmic, undulating with the field. The lines emerge and fall back from the surface through washes of paint, like veins though pale skin, suggesting an energy network for the lifeforce of the landscape.

Fig. 7: Night Mill, 2019, acrylic, collage, and colored pencil on canvas, 24” x 36”

Night Mill (fig. 7), the smallest work in the thesis exhibition, is a riverscape characterized by saturated hues, agitated marks and a vortex-like structure. The painting is grounded in warm pink which emerges through washes of paint, flipping between positive and negative space, to define river banks, rocks, and moments of turbulent sky.
The composition spirals inward, nesting sweeping arcs to create an illusory space that is in flux. A wide serpentine swath of egg yolk yellow carves the sky from the top edge to its midpoint. Near the top it reads as a rising, billowy trail of smoke; at its base it rounds to form the last bank around which the river bends back. On the right side of the canvas, the sky glows in saccharine pinks silhouetting a dark blocky form identifiable as a mill by its smokestack. Sharp thin lines at the upper left edge evoke the overhang of bare branches. Similar line intersects at angles traversing a hill at lower right, converging at the black mill where a pair of angled marks juts up to become the raised elbow of a crane. A tumult of marks accumulate to define a dark band at the bottom of the composition. They swell at left and give way to a single brush stroke of inky blues which curves up solidifying as monolith – a brief pause at midground. The dark rock directs the viewer back to a large shard of cool blue that is cantilevered over the river bend. A small calligraphic stroke of dark grey suggests a figure isolated atop the truncated bridge, framed by the encircling marks, humble to the power of nature.

The image of *Night Mill* emerged spontaneously; for this piece I set the intention to work faster and with more immediacy, which led to the surprise of stronger contrasts than in prior works. Subsequently, my painting process is a conscious oscillation between intuitive gesture and analytical, at times agonized decision making. Across the continuum of planned and spontaneous making, there is constancy in my understanding of composition, rhythm, balance – issues of aesthetics informed by decades of art making.

*Divide* (fig. 8) conjures a vast space through which a central river meanders from distant mountains, bounding over stepped topography toward the viewer. A channel of
open space flowing from top through to bottom, merges sky and rushing water, their misty coolness emerging from the pale periwinkle blue underlayer of the painting. The channel of blue divides the painting into contrasting sides. The left side is permeated by dark reds. The right side is a tumble of short strokes in moss green, sandy yellow and grey. Both sides contain shifts between painterly passages of color and drawn line. At left, negative space is used to generate a silhouette of a female figure who reaches her arms outward. She emerged in the painting as my stand-in – a representation of my imprinted bodily memory on the landscape. Her gesture is expansive; her outstretched limbs cast an angled line that bridges the pictorial space from close to distant. The

Fig. 8: Divide, 2019, acrylic, collage, spray paint, and colored pencil on canvas, 48” x 60”
woman is framed and anchored by a dark mass – a patchwork of blue-greys – which forms a wall of rock rising to a plateau just above her head. From below her hips spills a voluminous skirt with a ruffled edge. It sweeps around, rising and then dissolving into the surrounding space. Magenta and alizarin red dominate the upturned dress and continue into the surrounding environment, moving from satin fluidity to a staccato thicket of vegetation in the upper left corner of the painting. The figure seems to hover, lifted by the froth of the river and undulation of the skirt. The upward forces on the left side of the composition – heaving rock, elevated arms and rising skirt – play against the downward forces dominating the right side – linear flow, round rocks increasing in scale from the midline to the bottom of composition. Both the invented space and the figure take on a theatricality in their exaggerated scale, color, gesture, and movement. The form of the skirt echoes the form and energy of the rolling river and falls. The figure feels one with the mountain and the water; body and landscape coalesce.

**Design Approach and Technique**

When I paint, I engage directly and intuitively, activating the canvas with sweeping movements to establish the essential character of the imagined landscape space. My compositions are the result of a back-and-forth of spontaneous, bodily expression and deliberate decision making. They are informed by a stream of sources including found images, photographs, drawings, memories and bodily embedded impressions.

Depending on the season, I walk in my favorite natural spaces daily or weekly. Often, I consciously seek and collect visual relationships to bring back to my painting
work. I collect these by photographing or by analyzing what I see, describing to myself in my mind (only rarely writing them down). Though I take photographs, I use very few of them. Instead, the act of taking the photograph increases my mindfulness of the experience. The photographs do not capture how I see – the visual vitality and painterly dynamics do not translate – but the photographic images provide some visual specificity to trigger sensation or reconnect me to feelings of prior experience when I paint. As the artist Paul Klee put it, the art “does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible.”

I also make plein air observational studies in ink, pencil, or pastel. These sketches do not serve as compositional plans for painted works. Rather, they sharpen my connections to the dynamics of specific landscapes by closing the distance between my experienced sensation and artistic action. Last summer I made a collection of pastel drawings in the woods around my home (fig. 9). They record moments of observational and expressive specificity. Despite my knowledge of their observed sources, when I view the drawings my perception of place shifts and I read different, more emotionally charged landscapes.

When I paint I keep printed images near my palette in a loose stack or a book with movable pages. When I painted *Yellow Field*, the stack included photographs I took in Bridgewater along my drives between school and home and photographs of weeds that I recall grew in the right-of-way where I played as a girl. It also included found images of places I have never been, such as archaeological sites and ancient ruins in Central and South America. The influence of sources and their recognizability in the paintings varies.

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Fig. 9: *Plein air studies*, 2019, pastel on paper, each 24” x 18”
I read and understand *Yellow Field* as a New England landscape, yet it is imbued with feelings of my childhood in upstate New York. Similarly, in other works I painted that fall, there are no representational images of structural ruins, nor overt depictions of archaeological digs, yet the idea of personal excavation is embedded in the pieces and the form of descending, carved terraces reappears in many works throughout the thesis body. My awareness of connections between what I choose to activate as sources and what they stir (internally and in the work) develops during the act of painting itself.

![Fig. 10](image1.png) (left): *Drivers at the ‘Big Boom’ on Hudson River in Glens Falls*, ca. 1890, photographic print, Collection of Adirondack History Museum, Elizabethtown, NY.

![Fig. 11](image2.png) (right): *Timber Drive*, 2019, acrylic and collage on canvas, 40” x 36”

When I painted *Night Mill*, the reference to a paper mill emerged intuitively. Curious to better understand the mill’s allure, I began my research of Finch Pruyn and the history of the Adirondack logging industry. At this time I discovered a loop of echoing visual and conceptual relationships from what I discovered in archival photographs, what
I was painting in the on-going landscape exploration, and what I had made previously in artistic trials but had hidden away. Though perhaps not retained as conscious knowledge, that landscape and aesthetic of the place is imprinted and accessed without always knowing that it is stored from within. As the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty put it:

The painter “takes his body with him,” says Valery. Indeed we cannot imagine how a mind could paint. It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings. To understand these transubstantiations we must go back to the working, actual body—not the body as a chunk of space or a bundle of functions but that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement.20

When I begin a painting, first I fix the primed canvas on an easel and position it parallel to my torso. For most works, using sweeping movements with a broad brush, I build a foundation of light color that subtly shifts in value to create atmospheric illusory space. I layer color, varying the translucency and consistency of the paint. I start with a range of acrylic paints, from thick bodied to fluid, and mix them with various acrylic media or water to alter their working and visual properties (media such as extender and gel; properties such as matte and gloss).

I make marks primarily with brush but also with collaged cut paper, spray paint, water soluble colored pencil, and sometimes palette knife. By combining different ways of applying acrylic to the canvas, I vary the range of marks, the breadth in qualities of color, and the overall language of the painted surface. For example, Tale of Lady Waking (fig. 12) reflects the full media range of the thesis body. The landscape is an undulating topography of exaggerated color in fluttery ribbons of brushed paint and organic shapes. The marks range in scale from the six inch brushed fall of tans at the right edge, to wisps

Fig. 12: *Tale of Lady Waking*, 2020, acrylic, collage, spray paint, and colored pencil on canvas, 48” x 60”

of colored pencil at top left. Drips from washes of paint echo the linear rhythm of the brushwork; their downward pull reinforces the descending river bed. The different media enhance the oscillation between translucent and opaque color. I use spray paint to soften or partially obscure areas in hazy cool white or grey. Similarly, brushwork made on paper and applied to the canvas is interspersed with the direct brushstrokes, teasing the perception of depth and the physicality of the surface.

Throughout the thesis works, the figure inhabits landscape—an extension of
myself – not only as a representational image, but also through biomorphic form, gestural impression, and muscularity of mark. In the lower left of Tale of Lady Waking, broad brush strokes describe biomorphic contours; within the area of pinks and reds, suggestions of a body descending steps undulate on the picture plane. In the top half of the painting, thin lines of dark blue accumulate in a fibrous tangle, evoking the drooping branches of an evergreen tree. However, the exaggerated movements of its limbs are more like a human than a tree. My intention is for the viewer to perceive the body, but not necessarily to discern a specific representational image.

Over the course of the investigation, there were tangential experiments that took me away from the direct application of paint media and the physicality that is central to my intention. For example, I spent considerable time working on a series of pieces featuring silhouettes of myself with arms extended, initially as if to balance, and later, as if falling or leaping. I experimented with direct drawn monotypes, leaning into the gesture of the figure, and then with painted paper collage with figures characterized by crisp edged shapes (fig. 13). The collaged works explore imagery contained in the painting Divide; silhouetted figures wear voluminous skirts cut from paper. Painted energetically with brush, they suggest the ruffled tiers of a 19th century lady’s petticoat as well as the froth of tumbling water.

Though these experiments diverted me from the technique that is ultimately represented in the thesis work, they informed future treatment of the relationship between more representational figures and their environment in my paintings, with figures suggested within negative space. These experiments also clarified formal and aesthetic
motifs that are present in the thesis body, such as the form of the skirts echoed in the form of rushing water, the rhythm of tumbling downward, and the visual tension of balancing. Similarly, these experiments helped me to clarify the ways in which I wanted collage to operate in the landscape paintings.

My use of collaged painted paper pre-dates the thesis investigation. I had constructed works on wood panels, collaging the whole surface with interlocking shapes cut from painted paper. When I began my thesis exploration I put aside collage, intending to paint directly on canvas, using the brush as an extension of my body. When I allowed paper collage to enter the thesis exploration, I wrestled with its role with the active
brushwork. I discovered ways in which it could partner with my desire for directness and physicality (as in the mingling of brushed and collaged strokes), and new ways it serves my process of developing the painting image. Once I attuned to the Glens Falls paper mill as a significant influencing landscape for the thesis paintings, the presence of paper as material became more vital.  

Paint behaves differently on paper than primed canvas. Because paper is smooth and absorbent, it enables paint to move and blend in ways that are difficult to achieve on the toothy texture of canvas. Also, translucent acrylic color on smooth white paper retains more vibrancy than on canvas. With collage I can also shift the visual language from bristly brush stroke or line to sharp edge and flat shape. Linear cuts of painted paper can mimic the brushed marks so the two media are indistinguishable, or it can defy the illusion of spatial depth, insisting on its materiality on the surface of the picture plane.

Over the course of the investigation, there were several developments that were pivotal changes in my design process. One significant evolution was the change in color palette. In the earlier works, my color palette was predominantly pale yellows and blush pinks, particularly as underlayers. Night Mill was a departure; with this small piece, I introduced more saturated pinks and yellows which contrasted with near-black purples. When beginning Dwell in the Falls of Fenimore and Finch (fig. 14), my intention was to stretch my color palette and increase speed and spontaneity, as I had with Night Mill, and also work at a larger scale. My strategy was to destabilize the foundation color and force a different response in how I built the landscape. I began Dwell by laying the canvas flat

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21 In the paintings I have created since September 2019, I have used paper produced by Finch Paper in Glens Falls, NY.
on a table to interrupt my mind’s projection of traditional illusory space on it. I collaged large pieces of painted-paper in verdant greens and slate grey to break up the canvas surface. Once upright, the improvised forms defied perception as a traditional landscape, challenging me to engage more aggressively with it to realize its final image. The new palette of cool saturated colors and stark contrast evoked mossy forests, wet rock, and rushes of smoke and water, focusing the primary landscape source for the remainder of the thesis exploration to Glens Falls.

*Dwell in the Falls of Fenimore and Finch* is also a significant point for the increase in the scale of the paintings. *Dwell* began as a 36” by 48” canvas – what is now the middle and right side of the work. While painting it I felt hampered by its size, wanting the work and my movements to stretch. So, I added a smaller canvas on which,
as an isolated thought, I had brushed pools of turquoise. Early in the investigation I painted on smaller canvases and the landscapes were dense. As the work evolved my scale increased. Larger canvases changed my physical relationship to the work. They gave me more space in which to act, which led to engagement with bigger brushes (thus, a wider range in the scale of marks) and invited bigger physical movements in the application of paint. The compositional relationships in the larger pieces also allows the viewer to move more freely through the illusory space. The largest paintings (7’ and 8’ long) are not easily experienced as a single image, but have to be seen by moving eyes and body. These panoramic pieces, such as West Mountain Logging (fig. 15), engulf the viewer creating an experience closer to that of the sublime.22

Fig. 15: West Mountain Logging, 2020, acrylic, collage, and colored pencil on canvas, 48” x 84”

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22 As described by Frederick A. Sweet in The Hudson River School and the Early American Landscape Tradition, the sublime refers to an element of beauty that connotes “all the phenomena of which one stood in awe -- vastness, infinity, darkness and solitude, surprise and terror.” p. 6.
The change in scale is inherently related to a third significant discovery that began with *Dwell in the Falls of Fenimore and Finch* and is evidenced in *West Mountain Logging*: the use of multiple panels as diptychs, triptychs, and hybridized single works. Prior to the thesis exploration, I had created diptychs to achieve a larger scale whole, using two smaller substrates. Sometimes the impetus had been purely practical – I wanted a bigger work than any single surface at hand, or needed the mobility possible with multiple small pieces but not with one large canvas. Other times, when an intriguing relationship between two or three in-progress pieces emerged, I combined them. In this investigation, however, I have had the impulse to hybridize disparate components. The unexpected connections between seemingly unrelated thoughts have invited poetic constructions; the resulting paintings better capture my embedded experiences of place and evolving experiences of self.

The use of multiple canvases within one work creates an undeniable disruption. When the border between two substrates of a painting is at an uneven interval, rather than in the middle (which might suggest equality or a comparison of the sides) the surface interruption can suggest shifts in thought, time, or point of view, creating a sense of multiplicity or simultaneity. The American Action Painter, Joan Mitchell, also created multi-panel works, sometimes not seeing a painting in its entirety until it was assembled in a gallery or museum because her studio wasn’t large enough to position the canvases side by side. She described the relationship between the individual canvas panels and the whole painting as being like stanzas to a poem.\(^23\) This idea, likening the paintings to

poems, resonates for me. By bringing together disparate elements, the poet-painter finds understanding and creates new meaning. For me, the physical juxtapositions in the paintings parallel mental juxtapositions inherent to my source feed.

*Leave the Lady Slippers Be* (fig. 16) conjures a wild species of orchid that grows in Northeastern forests, Cypripedium Acaule Aiton, commonly known as the Pink Lady Slipper. The presence of the Lady Slipper is firmly encoded in me both because of its beauty and sensuous form, as well as childhood memories of my parents’ admonishment against picking them as they are a protected species. With *Leave the Lady Slippers Be* I let the relationship between images on the two adjacent canvases oscillate between continuation and interruption. The foundation color of light green-yellow is very similar between panels, but not quite matched. To the right of the boundary, lyrical brushstrokes accumulate, largely in two rolling horizontal bands. They create pathways that invite a

Fig. 16: *Leave the Lady Slippers Be*, 2020, acrylic, collage, spray paint, and colored pencil on canvas, 48” x 96”
read of the painting from right to left. At the boundary of panels, some color and form continue from surface to surface; a few shapes end abruptly at the edge. From right to left, loose figuration gives way to abstraction. On the left panel, shapes, primarily of cut paper, dominate and contrast with the sumptuous curving brushstrokes pervasive in the larger right side panel. A gently pointed organic shape framed in the negative space on the left converses with a similarly shaped grouping of opaque light torn paper, collaged on top of translucent paint at right. These visual shifts between panels, both gentle and abrupt, open up perceptions of scale and time in how the landscape is read.

The physical process of creating Leave the Lady Slippers Be excavated sensory memory. The ribbon-like brushmark is like the basal leaves and pillowy blooms of the flower, both of which are embedded in my past experiences. In the course of this investigation and research, I discovered a fact that may serve as a metaphor for my work: “From the time a seed is first dispersed, it can take 10-17 years for a Lady’s Slipper to bloom in the wild.”24 Similarly, this imagery of the Adirondacks, long since implanted in me, has emerged in my paintings.

Historical and Contemporary Influences

The Hudson River School: The Picturesque and The Sublime

At the beginning of the 19th century, American artists and writers were demonstrating a sense of national identity and pride in their surroundings, including the new nation’s scenic wonders. An American philosophy surrounding the importance of nature and the natural wonder of the country formed in the works of writers such as William Cullen Bryant, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry Thoreau. In 1821, Washington Irving published his Sketchbook with its tales from the Hudson River Valley. In 1823, James Fenimore Cooper published The Pioneers, a story exalting the frontier, followed three years later by The Last of the Mohicans, a romantic novel set in upstate New York during the French and Indian War, that contains a detailed description of the cataract and cave underneath it now referred to as Glens Falls. Within these circumstances of “new-found American poets, novelists, and philosophers…[America] began to accept her landscape painters.” This interest in American landscape paintings coincided with a period of westward expansion and the emergence of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny -- the belief that American expansion throughout the continent was inevitable and divinely intended. By the 1820s, touring itineraries of picturesque landscape sites were popular, and American grandeur and natural scenery “was perceived as a source of national moral worth and identity.”

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27 Sweet, Frederick A. The Hudson River School and the Early American Landscape Tradition, 11.
Within this context emerged the “Hudson River School” of which Thomas Cole is now considered the leading figure. Indeed, romantic landscape painting in America was born in “the obscure works of a mere beginner.” Born in England in 1801, Cole immigrated with his family to America at age 19, originally settling in Philadelphia. He and his family later moved to Steubenville, Ohio where Cole worked in his father’s small wallpaper factory and as an itinerant portraitist. In the spring of 1825, Cole moved to New York and set up a studio in his father’s attic, determined to make landscape painting his life’s work. He was “already in love with the natural beauty of America, and had not been in New York long before he was moved to paint the majestic scenery of the Hudson…” As luck would have it, his career took hold almost immediately, when his early work was purchased by three influential artists, John Trumbull, William Dunlap, and Asher Durand. As William Cullen Bryant described:

[What an enthusiasm was awakened by these early works...the delight which was expressed at the opportunity of contemplating pictures which carried the eye over scenes of wild grandeur peculiar to our country, over our ariel mountain-tops with their mighty growth of forest never touched by axe, along the banks of streams never deformed by culture and into the depth of skies bright with the hues of our own climate.]

Cole embraced the European models of landscape painting for the United States, particularly the British tradition. As explained by art historians Tim Barringer and Jennifer Raab in *Picturesque and Sublime: Thomas Cole’s Trans-Atlantic Inheritance*:

His practice of sketching on walking tours in the mountains continued the British tradition of the picturesque, which emphasized wild, roughly textured foliage, rocks, cliffs, and valleys, seen as if by a traveler who

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31 Ibid. 10.
has chanced upon the view. But his finished paintings are more
demonstrably engaged with the sublime, a category of visual experience
in which the viewer senses danger and is impressed by the force and
might of nature.33

Cole’s stewardship of the picturesque and fascination with the sublime is evident
in arguably his most famous work, View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton,
Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm (fig. 17), also known as The Oxbow. At over six
feet wide, it is large for a landscape painting of the time, taking on the grand scale of
history paintings. Cole positions the viewer at a high vantage point overlooking the
Connecticut River Valley. The painting is divided diagonally from top left to lower right,

Fig. 17: Thomas Cole. View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a
Thunderstorm (The Oxbow), 1836, oil on canvas. 51 ½” x 76”, The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York.

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through bold contrasts – dark and light, near and far, wild and cultivated. The foreground heaves up and to the left, ramped by a tilted tree modeled in high key golds and browns. The stark tree form leads the viewer’s eye into an expanse of dark voluminous clouds. Like a theater curtain being drawn, the roiling storm clouds, fringed in rain, roll back to reveal a clear sky. Far below, the surface of the meandering river reflects the blue sky above it; both are calm and still after the storm. Were it not for the painting’s title, (“...After a Storm”) one might think the storm is moving towards the peaceful valley.

*The Oxbow* and many of Cole’s works explore opposing forces and achieve sublimity through their tension. *The Oxbow* features dramatic contrasts in states of nature, from the sudden change in weather to the abrupt drop in elevation. Cycles of growth and destruction are embodied in the prominent tree at foreground; its older branches are reduced to splintered nubs as if torn violently by wind; its twisted trunk is overtaken by plants in the understory yet it is topped by young branches, green with new growth. The depicted scene contrasts wild and cultivated landscapes, simultaneously bathing the untamed mountain vegetation and the farmed valley in romantic warm light. Cole also explores the opposition between untouched and human-occupied nature by painting himself into the scene, nearly hidden from view in the foreground greenery. He is perched atop the mountain with his painting easel (along with the easel of an artist colleague). The figure’s diminutive scale relative to the grand landscape suggests Cole’s humility and awe in nature’s magnificence.34

Perhaps second only to Cole as leader of the Hudson River School was Asher

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34 Cole explored the tension between nature and culture in many works, including his allegorical painting series, “Course of Empires”, 1833–1836.
Brown Durand, who worked as an engraver in the 1820s. Then near 1830, he was inspired by Thomas Cole and patron Reed Luman to turn to landscape painting. Durand celebrated the American landscape in luminous, richly detailed paintings. Though similar
to his Hudson River School colleagues' work in their use of romantic light, Durand’s paintings are distinguished by their naturalism. He embarked on summer sketching excursions to the Adirondack Mountains, sometimes in the company of Cole, and returned to his home in the Catskills to synthesize the visual information he had gathered.

Durand’s *In the Woods* (fig. 18) draws the viewer into a lush forest interior. Towering trees bend inward forming an archway of delicate vegetation through which filters ethereal light. At the end of the vaulted space, Durand frames a distant view of a lake and mountains, but the splendid articulation of detail within the forest holds the viewer closer. Textural precision throughout the whole painting – not just in the foreground – augments the way we perceive in real space contributing to a transcendental expression of nature’s divinity and sublime immersion.

Many Hudson River School artists, including Thomas Cole, were influenced by the sublime paintings of English painter Joseph William Mallard Turner, which they saw in print reproductions in the United States and experienced in person during travels in Europe.\(^{35}\) Turner’s work realized the emotional potency of Romantic landscape painting through dramatic light and atmosphere, and turbulent compositions that often depicted ships in peril. Turner dissolved form in space, manipulating paint for expression rather than illusion. His treatments of surface and the materiality of paint foretell breakthroughs of modernism.\(^{36}\) Strikingly, the agitation of Turner’s surfaces and the tumult of his later compositional structures also excited the American Action Painter Jackson Pollock.


American Action Painting

Abstract Expressionism or the New York School emerged after the end of World War Two, and helped to shift the center of the art world from Paris to New York. For generations, American artists had worked to define their identity “either by inadequate assimilation of European models or by spurning those sources in favor of a truculently chauvinistic and retardataire mode.” While many American artists at this time responded to the challenges of the 1930s -- economic collapse, the rise of fascism abroad -- by adopting social themes for their work, other artists began to approach their work not as a reaction to these issues, but rather from personal experience. In the decade before World War II, there were several new venues in New York to experience avant-garde art from Europe. The Museum of Modern Art opened in 1929, exposing artists to exhibitions of new work including retrospectives of Matisse and Picasso, among others. The Museum of Non-Objective Painting (which would later become the Guggenheim), opened in 1939, with its collection of Kandinsky’s. There were also many leading European artists who had emigrated to the United States including Marcel Duchamp, Arshile Gorky, and, arguably the most influential teacher of modern art Hans Hofmann (1880-1966), many of whom were located in New York. In Hofmann’s teaching, he introduced “an element of bodily involvement in which painting became ‘an affair of prodding and pushing, scoring and marking, rather than of simply inscribing and covering.’” In 1944, Hoffman stated that after years of “sweating out Cubism” he believed that “the highest in art is the irrational” and that the task of the irrational was to release “the potential inner life of a

chosen medium, so that the final image resulting from it expresses the *all* of oneself."\(^39\)

This idea aptly defines the direction of the New York School.

Though not a formal association, the artists of the New York School created something “new, distinctively American, yet universally valid out of the modernism inherited from Europe.”\(^40\) They broke away from accepted conventions in technique and subject matter, creating work notable for its scale, vigorous application of paint, and oscillation between figural and abstract imagery. Many of the Abstract Expressionist artists, such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Lee Krasner were employed by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) creating murals, expanding the scale of their individual painting processes. The scale change both facilitated and necessitated new ways of engaging physically with their work. While some New York School artists, such as Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still created large scale paintings comprised of simplified, color-dominated fields, other artists, such as Pollock and de Kooning, created works characterized by loose, dynamic gestures, painting in sweeping or slashing brushstrokes and an improvisational approach defined by the artist’s action.

In 1952, the most influential art critic of the time, Harold Rosenberg, coined the term “Action Painting” to describe the work of Pollock, de Kooning and others, and in doing so “defined both a movement and moment.”\(^41\) As John Russell explains in *The Meaning of Modern Art*:

> Both words count. ‘Action’ stands for the particular physical involvement which characterizes the work; and it also stands for a

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determination to get up and go, rather than settle for nostalgic imitation. ‘Painting’ stands for the belief that there was still a great future for the act of putting paint on canvas. The way to realize that future was, first, to assimilate the past; second, to open out the act of painting in such a way that it became, in itself and by itself, one of the most capacious forms of human expression.

For Rosenberg, Action Painting represented a break from the earlier abstractionists of Europe and America. According to Rosenberg, American Action Painting did not represent a school of painting, per se. Rather, he asserted that “what they think in common is presented only by what they do separately.”

He framed the movement in terms of how the work was created. The action painter, according to Rosenberg, worked without a predetermined image and created paintings that were not about reproducing nature, nor expressing an object:

At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act -- rather than as a space in which to reproduce, redesign, analyse or ‘express’ an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.

Rosenberg distinguished Action Painting from earlier abstraction in terms of how the artist thinks of the canvas. Inherent to Rosenberg’s articulation of Action Painting was the idea that the painter “no longer approached his easel with an image in his mind; he went up to it with material in his hand to do something to that other piece of material in front of him.” In this conception, the artist affects the canvas by making a mark, and the canvas in turn impacts the artist who determines what mark is to come next. As Rosenberg explains, "Each stroke had to be a decision and was answered by a new

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44 Ibid., 22.
45 Ibid., 2.
question.”46 While the artist’s work is characterized by spontaneity, it still takes place within the framework of this back and forth between the artist and the work. The image would result from this encounter.

An important aspect of Rosenberg’s conception of Action Painting was a new sense of the artist’s biography. As he explained, while some American painters were “Marxists” trying to paint society and others were trying to paint Art (Cubism, Post-Impressionism), the “big moment came when it was decided to paint...Just TO PAINT. The gesture on the canvas was a gesture of liberation, from Value, -- political, aesthetic, moral.”47 Within this framing, the artist’s biography becomes important. The act of painting becomes inseparable from the artist’s biography and the artist is “guided by visual and somatic memories of painting he had seen or made -- memories which he did his best to keep from intruding into his consciousness -- he gesticulated upon the canvas and watched for what each novelty would declare him and his art to be.”48

While making the connection between Action Painting and the artist's biography, Rosenberg did not explicitly connect the idea of biography and place. Even in abstraction, however, the echo of formative landscape is present in many of the Action Painters’ work. A prime example of this idea is the work of Franz Kline. Kline grew up in the coal-mining region of eastern Pennsylvania. His early works were clearly influenced by the landscape of his youth, with some works referring to specific locations and others clearly influenced by memories of particular environments.49 Palmerton, PA

47 Ibid., 22.
48 Ibid., 48.
(fig. 19), for example, depicts a coal train traversing the titular town’s muted brown and green hills. The painting is dominated by acute angles, some of which zigzag from top to bottom, suggesting the path of the train from mountain, to bridge, to nearest track, and others created by clusters of multistoried buildings and a horse drawn cart; the angles fuse together structuring the composition like trussed beams. It is an image of a place driven by industry – the mechanisms of manufacture and physical labor. By the 1950s, Kline evolved from the Social Realism of his earlier work to more abstracted subject matter – a route similar to that taken by Pollock and Rothko, too. (Kline possibly came to his mature style by looking at projected enlargements of his sketches and details of his prior works. Unlike his peers for whom abstraction resulted from automatism, Kline arrived at abstraction through analysis and decision.)

This later work typifies

Fig. 19 (left): Franz Kline, *Palmerton, Pa.*, 1941, oil on canvas, 21” x 27 ¼”, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC.

Fig. 20 (right): Franz Kline, *Mahoning*, 1956, oil on canvas, 6’ 8” x 8’ 4”, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

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characteristics of the Action Painters, representing the transference of bodily action on the canvas and the physical movement of the brush, “[expressing] perfectly the idea of gesture and action in painting as a value system.”

Though his later work no longer portrays recognizable subject matter, “his abstract pictorial structures tended to evoke the snowbound, coal-stained industrial architecture of his native Pennsylvania.” Mahoning (fig. 20) is a bold, synergistic interplay of black line slashing through white space in impasto paint. The black brushstrokes traverse the canvas horizontally and at angles and intersect with shorter oblique marks. With economy and force, the painting evokes the natural and human-made landscape of a Pennsylvania coal mining town – topographical shifts, soot, strength of steel and muscle – and, though the title Mahoning refers to a different town, the finished painting is like the exposed armature of Kline’s earlier piece, Palmerton, PA. An absent representational image, activated by sweeping gesture, Mahoning is a distillation of the dynamics of Kline’s formative landscape.

Similarly, Wyoming-born Jackson Pollock, one of the most prominent American Action Painters, grew up in Arizona and Southern California and the impressions of these landscapes were undoubtedly part of his unconscious, if not conscious, experience. For example, he described “his delight as a youth at seeing the Western Landscape, immense and illimitable, unroll before him from freight trains or his old Ford.” When Pollock described the energy and motion used to create his paintings, he connected it to his inner world:

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51 Hunter, Sam, John Jacobus, and Daniel Wheeler. Modern Art, 272.
52 Ibid., 272.
53 Ibid., 273.
The modern artist it seems to me is working and expressing an inner world -- in other words, expressing the energy, the motion, and the other inner forces.

energy and motion
made visible --
memories arrested in space

Though absent of an explicit pictorial image, Autumn Rhythm (Number 30) (fig. 21), evokes ideas of landscape through its name, geologic colors and elongated horizontal format. The painting, monumentally scaled at nearly nine feet tall and over 17 feet long, weaves enamel paint in black, white, sand-gold and turquoise, on an expanse of raw duck cloth to build a complex surface and airy illusory space. One of Pollock’s “drip paintings” created using the radical process he began in 1947, it is a meditation in

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Fig. 21: Jackson Pollock, Autumn Rhythm (Number 30), 1950, enamel on canvas, 105” x 207”, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

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contrasts: light and dark, organic and geometric, and thick and thin both in terms of width of mark and in depth of the paint on the surface. There is an overall impression of spontaneous movement created by the irregularity of brushed, splattered, and pooled marks, inherent to Pollock’s process of working with the canvas on the floor in order to bodily engage with the painting. As Pollock described in 1947:

On the floor I am more at ease. I feel nearer, more a part of the painting, since this way I can walk around it, work from the four sides and literally be in the painting. This is akin to the method of the Indian sand painters of the West.55

In *Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)* straight lines form right angles that intersect like spokes of a turning machine. They are layered with a network of darting black marks — drizzled, flicked and flung — and luminous paths of white that capture Pollock’s movements like light trails in a long exposure photograph. The totality of marks hovers within the bounds of the rectangular substrate — matter perpetually stirring in place.

Whereas for Pollock and many members of the New York School pure abstraction was the ideal, Willem de Kooning did not believe in the rejection of figuration. Though credited as one of the originators of American Action Painting, for de Kooning, abstraction and representation were not mutually exclusive. As he said, “Even abstract shapes must have a likeness.”56 He worked from observable sources, most commonly the human form and landscape, but rather than aiming to translate what he saw, he gathered

impressions in “flashes” and painted with the “emotion of a concrete experience.”

Content, if you want to say, is a glimpse of something, an encounter, you know, like a flash – it’s very tiny, very tiny, content...from some fleeting thing – like when one passes something, you know, and it makes an impression.

His painting process was an oscillation between conscious, analytical thought, and intuitive, spontaneous gesture. For his Women series, 1950-52, he started each painting with a mouth he cut from pictures in magazines.

I don’t know why I did it with the mouth. Maybe the grin. It’s rather like the Mesopotamian idols, you know. They always stand up straight looking to the sky with this smile, like they were just astonished about the forces of nature, you feel – not about problems they had with one another. That I was very conscious of; and it was something to hang on to.

The energy of the Women paintings suggests that they were made quickly and improvisationally, yet between gestural actions, de Kooning contemplated the work, analyzing and sometimes agonizing to realize his next move.

De Kooning’s overt references to landscape were fed by the environments of his immediate experiences, not just by encoded landscape memory, as with Pollock and Kline. He painted Asheville (fig. 22) in the summer of 1948 when, invited by Josef Albers, he was a visiting artist at Black Mountain College near Asheville, North Carolina. Asheville is a relatively small work, under 2’ x 3’, on cardboard in oil and enamel. Though unusual in scale, it exemplifies de Kooning’s vocabulary of drawn line and biomorphic shape which were influenced by friend and mentor Arshile Gorky.

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58 Ibid.
60 In 1926 following art training at Rotterdam Academy in his native Holland, de Kooning moved to the United States and was employed as a house painter. Subsequently de Kooning used enamel house paint in some of his artworks.
Fig. 22: Willem de Kooning, *Asheville*, 1948, oil and enamel on cardboard, 25 ⅜” × 31 ⅞”, The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

Though whereas Gorky’s marks are light and lyrical, de Kooning’s marks, applied with physical vigor, are muscular and audacious. Characteristic of de Kooning’s work, in *Asheville*, bold line structures the painting, both on the surface and emerging from layers below, as endo- and exo-skeletons of shifting bodies and spaces. The ambiguity of forms and unstable figure and ground relationships of the painting play with the viewer’s perceptions. Nudged by the title, one may read the image as landmasses and built structures specific to the landscape surrounding Black Mountain College – areas of peachy-tan unite as a tipped ground receding to a band of mountainous shapes; a cluster
of similarly sized geometric shapes at left become architectural. Yet the painting strongly
evokes the body through its shapes, color and physically activated surface, as faces, limbs
and bones. Indeed, de Kooning understood sensations of body and landscape as
inseparable. Reflecting on paintings made between 1950 and 1958, first the *Women* series
followed by what art critic Thomas Hess termed *Abstract Urban Landscapes*, de Kooning
said, “the landscape is in the Woman and there is Woman in the landscapes.”

When Joan Mitchell first saw Willem de Kooning’s painting, *Attic* (1949) at the
Whitney Museum of American Art, she was energized by its aggressive gestural
expression. Having completed a bachelor of fine arts degree at The Art Institute of
Chicago (her native city) she had moved to New York City a few years earlier to begin
her life as a professional painter (then still working with figural representation). It is not
surprising that the action and physicality so vitally present in de Kooning’s painting
appealed to Mitchell given the athleticism that had, in part, defined her youth through
competitive tennis and U.S. junior champion figure skating. Framed through the idea of
Mitchell’s past as a figure skater, the largest canvases of her mature work, might be seen
as fields of ice, bound by an agile use of white paint; the strokes of color as marks of her
skate blades recording her choreographed and improvised movements. Regardless of the
context in which they are viewed, Mitchell’s paintings are characterized by strength,
grace, and lyrical movement.

Mitchell was labeled a “Second Generation Abstract Expressionist” and
sometimes grouped within the Color Field painters, but she preferred only to be

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61 Hess, Thomas B. *Willem De Kooning*, 100.
categorized as part of the New York School. Admiring Kline and de Kooning, she sought their community and friendship. De Kooning invited her into the Ninth Street Club and its lively art discourse. The Club’s Ninth Street Show in 1951 exhibited works selected by dealer Leo Castelli, including Mitchell’s.

Throughout Joan Mitchell’s life and paintings, bridges and bodies of water were significant elements of her influencing landscape. Her maternal grandfather, Charles Louis Strobel was a renowned entrepreneur and structural engineer who designed the Chicago Stadium and numerous bridges, including some on the Chicago River. Of studying his notebooks as a child Mitchell recalled, “fabulous drawings of steel...bridges”. For most of her life she lived adjacent to water – her childhood apartment overlooked Lake Michigan; her first apartment in New York City was below the Brooklyn Bridge along the river; as an adult, she spent many summers on the ocean in East Hampton, New York; and in 1959 she moved to France, taking residence along the river Seine.

Mitchell’s work brings together the visual languages of abstraction and landscape. Echoing Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that the painter “takes his body with him,” Mitchell observed:

I paint from remembered landscapes that I carry with me—and remembered feelings of them, which of course become transformed. I could certainly never mirror nature. I would like more to paint what it leaves with me.

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63 Ibid., 20.
Joan Mitchell’s *La Seine* (fig. 23) is a grand scale work. The structure of the painting, read initially or from afar, is deceptively simple, blocky, and flat. Large rectilinear zones are coarsely defined by accumulated marks as positive and negative space. Yet, closer and longer viewing reveals the complexity and vitality of the painting. Though consisting of four panels, the painting operates somewhat like a triptych, or as Mitchell might have conceived it, like three stanzas of a poem, with two outside panels
flanking the central pair which read as one unified composition. The central composition is structured with elements of traditional landscape painting; there is a horizon created at midline where a few large shapes, set against an open area of near white, share a baseline. Below it a horizontal band of purples and blues suggests the earth’s surface as water and ground. That band visually continues into the adjacent panels at left and right which are similar to one another in their vertical, tipped spaces of rhythmic rounded forms and interwoven lines. Loose, energetic brushstrokes flow like currents, zigzagging around river rocks. The title, *La Seine*, reinforces topographic specificity.

The illusory space of *La Seine* emerges from the rich surface of agitated yet lyrical mark making. Sumptuous colors evoke water, leaves, mud, gems, and viscera. Corporal red-purple courses through it; hits of hot red-pink stand in as nerve endings stimulated by their interaction with electric blue. Mitchell achieves a complex surface through layered paint of varying material qualities. It is sometimes thin, dripping or bleeding into the canvas in watery round blooms, and other times full-bodied and opaque, carving out space to conjure geological forms or seeming to hover above the canvas as ghost-like records of Mitchell’s actions and energy. The effect of the rapid accumulation of color and mark in the un-self-conscious manner is exhilarating. Flipping in positive and negative space, the painting’s image is ephemeral, like nature itself, endlessly shifting to reveal new aesthetic experiences. Viewed in person it is challenging to take in

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67 Mitchell’s mother, Marion Strobel, was a writer and co-editor of *Poetry Magazine*. She introduced Joan to great contemporary poets. Prior to attending The Art Institute of Chicago, Mitchell studied English at Smith College in the mid 1940s nurturing a love of literature and poetry that continued through her life.
the whole of *La Seine* at once. It reads as related moments or connected spaces and its entirety can only be experienced through time with the painting, contributing to its sublimity.

The American Action Painters are forebears to contemporary British-born painter Cecily Brown, who references de Kooning as one of her significant influences, and in
whose work vigorous bodily engagement and the sublimity of an engulfing scale are realized anew. As Brown relates when speaking about her work, *Where, When, How Often and with Whom*:

> When working on a large scale like this I’m very free to go with the momentum of the painting -- the painting has to tell me what to do. The painting is more or less in charge. It's always a back and forth, as most painters know -- putting something down and then not just going along in a linear way and pursuing what you thought you wanted to do but seeing what the painting throws back at you...I found that working on this scale was incredibly exciting...It was a very physical activity. People forget how physical painting is...But it’s this marriage of your brain and your body.\textsuperscript{68}

Like de Kooning and Mitchell, Cecily Brown plays with a shifting relationship between figuration and abstraction, purposefully employing disruption, struggle, and ambiguity. Brown often appropriates themes and forms of classical paintings, transmuting them through the filter of herself and the act of painting. Though the influence of the American Action Painters is strong, as critic Terry R. Myers said of Brown’s work, it “claims its own territory.”\textsuperscript{69}


Future Studio Investigations

In the immediate future, I will continue to paint embodied landscapes extending my thesis investigation and leaning into the discoveries in form, content and process that characterize the work at its best. I will continue to paint on a large scale, and I will continue to expand the size of my canvases and mark making tools while accessing and responding to the feed of my primary influencing landscapes; the thesis process has revealed these sources to be wellsprings for future work.

In addition, I am interested in pursuing a few inquiries related to the plein air pastel drawings I made last summer as stimuli for paintings. There are characteristics of those studies that excite me and that I want to achieve in works that are less transient (the drawings were made on low quality paper), and also using other media. In the original pastel studies, I activate the pages economically, using very few marks in each to create a resolved sense of space. The marks have clarity whether they serve tonal swaths or crisp edges. I am interested in scaling the mark making and compositional economy to archival paper surfaces of 4’ or larger. I would like to enlarge the drawing actions in pastel, and also in paint media. The intrinsic properties of the different media and tools, and my varying experience and familiarity with them, yield different results. I look forward to pushing the capabilities of my mark making vocabulary.

In addition to continued work with my current media and methods, I want to engage in a new body of work using oil paint. I am ready to engage this significant new variable building on the foundation of my thesis discoveries. Oil is the medium of the painters whose work most captivates me. I am intrigued by the characteristics and
associations they ascribe to it, such as in de Kooning’s assertion “flesh was the reason oil paint was invented”70 and Cecily Brown’s remark, “I love the way oil painting moves, the sensuality of it.”71 The presence of body in their paintings and their descriptions of oil paint compel me to explore the relationship in my future work.

Connections to Teaching

In *The School and Society*, educational philosopher John Dewey stated that schools must become “an embryonic community life, active with types of occupations that reflect the life of the larger society and permeated throughout with the spirit of art, history and science.”\(^72\) This idea reflects my belief that two fundamental purposes of schools are to prepare students to participate meaningfully in a community and to understand themselves as individuals and in relation to the world so that they may live a full and rewarding life. My thesis project has given me the opportunity to grow as an artist, a teacher, and as a learner. It has given me the opportunity to continue to explore and reflect on the pivotal role that arts education plays in the cultivation of artists, in students’ overall education, and in the essential contribution that arts teachers make to the overall mission of schools. As a result, I have been able to articulate and refine my beliefs about arts education, clarify the values that guide my work, and improve my practices as an instructor.

Over the course of this project, my beliefs about arts education and my values as an art teacher have evolved and are now represented by the six statements below:

I believe that all students can learn and grow as artists. Though each student brings different experiences, innate strengths, and levels of readiness to their work, an effective art teacher can help a student to expand and refine their skills, broaden their ability to think creatively and critically, improve their approach to problem solving, and develop their ability to communicate in a variety of media. On any

given day, any one of my students may make a bold discovery or experience a quiet insight.

I believe that the study of art allows students a gateway for exploring their identity, defining their relationship to the world, and understanding others. What’s more, the study of art informs, enriches, and strengthens students’ abilities to achieve across all disciplines as observers, critical thinkers, creative problem solvers and effective communicators.

I believe that a teacher owes her students high expectations for all, a safe environment in which to grow, and opportunities to flourish. Effective teachers provide their students learning experiences that are relevant to their experience, rigorous in their approach, and require that they reflect on the quality and success of their work.

I believe that a teacher has a responsibility to continuously reflect on her practice and question her approach. One of the things that I most appreciate about the teaching profession is the fact that what we do is always in a state of flux: Every year, every unit, every lesson, and every interaction with a student is a new opportunity to do things better and to assess how adjustments in my instruction, both small tweaks and sweeping changes, impact the quality of the work that students produce.

I believe that an effective teacher models the behavior that she expects from her students from her level of preparedness, to her investment in their work, to the kind and respectful way in which she interacts with the class and each individual.

Finally, I believe that learning most powerfully takes place when the teacher provides a structure and framework for students to engage in authentic work that requires contemplation, perseverance, self-assessment, and making meaning.
These ideas guide my work and serve as touchstones. This last belief statement is inherently connected to the two Latin roots of the word *education*. One root, *educare*, means “to train or to mold.” The other root, *educere*, means “to draw out.” Clearly both meanings are relevant to teaching. I teach high school art. I have taught a wide range of classes including, studio art, 3-dimensional design, graphic design, and the Advanced Placement curriculum. Undoubtedly, as an art teacher, I have a responsibility to use my expertise to train students by ensuring that they acquire important skills and content related to the elements and principles of design, effective composition, an introduction to art history, specific techniques and tools related to working with various media. However, my recent experience as an artist and as a student has resulted in my placing more emphasis on the latter meaning. As Dewey said, “Give the pupils something to do, not something to learn; and the doing is of such a nature as to demand thinking; learning naturally results.” Though he may not have been speaking specifically about arts education, this idea reflects a constructivist, student-centered approach to learning that I believe is closely aligned with the habits of critical making that are central to arts education. Studio work and the creative problem solving process is iterative and relies on a balance of exploration, trials, choices, self-assessment, and seeking feedback from others. When done well, students’ exploration in the art classroom meets them in what the psychologist Lev Vygostsky refers to as the “zone of proximal development,” that is, they are challenged to stretch out of their comfort zone, but are still sufficiently supported.

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Some of the most important lessons for me as a teacher have resulted from being thrust back into the role of student and all that it entails: risk-taking, finding voice, accepting critical feedback while also striving for authenticity, and engaging in continual cycles of making and critical reflection. At times during this journey, I felt stretched beyond my zone of proximal development, overwhelmed by the task and unclear of the target. While the ability to persist through confusion and trust that struggle is part of the process is important, my recent experience as a learner has underscored for me the importance of continuing to meet learners where they are, differentiating the learning experiences, and, most critically, to reexamine the framing of my assignments for clarity. I am now especially focused on providing students with a big picture overview of where we are going from the outset and I frequently revisit that destination with them to have them reflect on where we are on the journey throughout the course of the work. When they find themselves overwhelmed, I am mindful to help them pause, articulate their successes, and identify a concrete next step. This strategy has been especially important when working with my Advanced Placement students who are producing a cogent body of work that demonstrates mastery of two-dimensional design issues through sustained, self-directed inquiry. That ability to experiment, clarify intention, let go of things that aren't working while still gleaning insights from the less successful trials, was critical to my work throughout this thesis and has provided me with new tools to assist advanced students as they develop their portfolios. At times this work involves helping students
move beyond the narrow realm of what they know or are certain of. For example, one student this year knew she was interested in creating portraits in pencil. The only thing that was guiding her was that she wanted to create a realistic likeness. I had to meet her where she was, help her attune to compositional relationships, and identify some specific visual strategies to make her portraits to operate with more intention and convey more about her subject. The conversation was both about what would improve the work and what would help her grow as an artist. More often, however, and more challenging for me as an instructor is when students are struggling to clarify intention or identify what they are trying to accomplish or communicate with the work. For example, one of my AP student’s early pieces involved images of early astronomers' observation towers and the night sky. Every time she started a new piece, she seemed to jump to a new medium or a new method of making. I allowed that exploration to continue for quite awhile until we got to a place where looking back at the body of work allowed us to start identifying commonalities, themes, and motifs. We could see that the work was about mathematical patterns and kaleidoscopic images. That discovery focused the work going forward, and she went from representational pictures of observation towers to using visual form to convey her understanding of great universal relationships. Whatever the issue, I have realized that the first step is always asking, “What’s happening here?” Once I have helped the student identify what is already there, it’s a matter or identifying what type of coaching the student needs. For some, it’s about asking specific questions, such as, “What is compositionally weak here and how can you make it strong?” For others, a broader question, such as, “Where does this need to go?” prompts the next step.
In addition, I am bringing back to my classroom practice three specific insights that will help me be more effective at helping my students draw out their authentic voices and develop their skills. First, I am reflecting on the role of the teacher in the critique process and thinking differently about how to provide effective feedback. I am trying to be mindful that critique, particularly if the teacher has a goal to help the student develop his or her own voice as an artist, has to be preceded by mutual understanding of intent. To that end, I am making sure that I explicitly talk about intent with students prior to the start of critique and not simply assume that I know what it is. I am mindful that, as with all learning, no matter how constructive the criticism may be, it has to be carefully apportioned. Too much feedback at once may overwhelm, and can demoralize. The key is to provide the right question or prompt to help the student take the next step at that moment, and to be judicious about offering too much at once. Additionally, I am increasingly mindful of the need to do more listening than talking during student critiques. I am working hard to not impose my ideas onto a student’s work, while still finding ways to contribute my expertise to their process.

Second, I am consciously structuring more opportunities for self-assessment and metacognitive reflection on the creative process. One example in the foundation graphic design class is the use of screenshots to document developing work. Students record three to five stages of their work on a design, then reviewing the progression, identify changes and their guiding intentions, look for unanticipated discoveries, and evaluate the effectiveness of their decisions. This exercise reinforces their understanding of design concepts such as emphasis, contrast, and visual hierarchy, and increases their mindful
decision-making for future work. Another example of structuring metacognitive reflection is the practice of studio journaling in the Advanced Placement 2D Design class which I initiated last year. When I began my studio work at Bridgewater State University, I set an intention for my painting. It was important that I articulate it and record it so, as the painting exploration proceeded and my thinking about the work shifted, I could return to my original ideas and recalibrate. During this thesis studio investigation, I have kept a studio journal. I have documented, in brief, what I am doing and thinking. My notes include: focused intentions at the start of a work session, ideas for new pieces or processes, observations about what is working and what is not, and mantras to coach and focus myself. The journal is a wayfinding tool. It helps me to reconnect with where I was between studio sessions, to maintain connections over time, and to make unexpected connections in examining the whole of the investigation as it progresses. I am now actively engaging my students in a similar process to document and facilitate the artist’s dialogue with self about the work.

Third, I am structuring more short learning experiences that provide opportunities for students to explore new materials, play, and develop a risk-taking, experimentation mind set. As Kelly Dobson asserts in *The Art of Critical Making*:

> In the moments when artists and designers take cues from their materials, they find themselves engrossed in this communal space. It is not about commanding material as if in a one-way relationship. Control is too fallible an assertion. Material is not passive, brute, inert, or dumb. Material has potential and activity independent of what we may see in it, make of it, or do with it. Material is as much force and energy as it is matter and volume. Materials that you think you drive could drive you. Or, you can take turns.75

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For example, in my Advanced Communication Design class, I recently brought India ink into the computer lab so that students could work with a physical medium rather than the digital tools they were most accustomed to using. This impromptu lesson was in reaction to a homogeny I had noticed in the visual character of students’ work and a seeming reluctance to try new methods of making, despite diverse professional models and my overt encouragement to do so. I provided India ink, brushes, sticks, water, and a variety of papers with different properties (cold pressed watercolor paper, rice paper, Yupo synthetic paper, and newsprint). Students stood at their work stations and I gave intermittent prompts to guide three rounds of trials. The objective of the first series of prompts was to stretch the range of students’ marks through directives about pace of mark making, handling of tools, ways of moving the body, and description of mark properties (“thick”, “delicate”). A pause to look at classmates’ work and a few professional artists’ work drove the second round of trials. The final series of prompts connected form and idea, engaging an essential guiding idea of the course-- that the visual characteristics of, and formal relationships between elements create and convey meaning. I prompted students to respond to or interpret words such as, “journey”, “authority”, and “infatuation” using only their marks, and without using symbol or representational image. Having already stretched their mark making vocabularies in the first two rounds, students worked with relative flexibility, fluency and confidence. Prior to the impromptu material workshop, students had begun developing ideas for book covers, interpreting one of the provided fictitious titles, including the option “Ink”. In some cases, the resulting work was quite different from what students had been
producing prior and led to some students taking future work in directions that I do not think they would have had we not had that lesson. For example, one student reconceived her book cover concept following the mark making exercise. She created an interplay between a hard cover and a translucent book jacket. When wrapped around the book, bold brushstrokes and washes of ink on the jacket merged with the image of a woman on the cover, weaving with her long hair and partially obscuring her gaze. The design explored ideas of hiding and revealing self; materials play with varying papers and ink facilitated discoveries that enriched the student’s conceptual, visual work. Another student, working with the title “Ground”, conceived a book about the environmental dangers of fracking. She digitally constructed letterforms to evoke a complex underground pipeline, then introduced fluid blooms of watercolor to suggest toxic ground seepage. The contrast of the crisp edged, vector-based forms made digitally, and the organic textures made by hand, heightened the sense of a breech in the pipeline.

I am fortunate to work in a school district where the members of the Art Department have an articulated value that to be an art teacher one must also be a practicing artist. This value stems from the belief that one must model the habits and orientation required to engage as a creative maker. Though I have also continued to work as an artist while teaching, clearly the last 18 months have represented a fuller immersion in that process. Similarly, as result of my graduate experience, I would also assert that it is important for a teacher to stay in touch with what it means to be a student. The last 18 months has fully immersed me in the learning process in ways that had perhaps become somewhat remote. Though at times frustrating and even arduous, it has been important to
return to the vulnerability of being a learner and to remember what it is like to both encounter hurdles and experience success. While my teaching practice has changed from this experience, perhaps most importantly my empathy and affection for my students has increased as well in ways that will undoubtedly allow me to slow down, see them as individuals, and support their learning well.
Conclusion

I have always identified as an artist. I have been confident as a creative maker across a wide range of media and applications of visual thinking. However, when I began my studio work within the MAT program, I did not identify as a painter. My prior educational work prepared me for creative engagement in very different areas than the painting work of my thesis exhibition. For undergraduate study at Rhode Island School of Design (more than 25 years ago) my major was sculpture. Though painting and sculpture share a foundation of self-directed conceptual inquiry, the skills and visual vocabularies they utilize are distinct. My professional work over the last two decades, first in communication design and then as a teacher, has primarily been in graphic design and digital art.

In the years leading up to my graduate study, I created visually dense treescapes and waterscapes by collaging pre-painted paper to wood substrates. These works moved towards painting. In truth, however, prior to embarking on this thesis project, my limited attempts with painting did not yield strong results. The narrative I had come to believe was that I was not a painter; that my facility for color and control of media with brush were relatively weak. Within the 18 month studio investigation, I have experimented with many variables and techniques that have allowed my practice as an artist to expand and my artwork to evolve. In that sense, my understanding of myself as an artist has changed. And, that evolution of pushing myself outside of my comfort zone, developing new skills, and engaging in self-discovery, provided powerful lessons about learning that I will bring back to my work as a teacher.
Eighteen months of sustained investigation has resulted in significant discoveries. Most notably, increasing the size of the work facilitated important changes. First, the expansion of scale allowed me to engage in mark making with more full-bodied physical engagement, resulting in a more potent expression of what lies within. Second, increasing the size of the work moved me to larger tools that broadened the vocabulary of the mark making. And, third, working at a larger scale, resulted in more open compositions and paintings that are engulfing for the viewer.

The title of the thesis, *What Registers in the Body: Place and Physicality in Painting*, reflects how I have come to understand my process as a painter. The process has made me better attuned to my relationship to sources that feed authentic work. The body of work created during this thesis investigation resulted from the push and pull of intuitive, gestural mark making and deliberate, intentional decision-making. The invented landscapes created represent an exploration of the inextricable connection between the memories, sensations, and perceptions that are encoded within the body and the physical mark making of a painter. Through the critical making process, I have explored how my influential landscapes are transferred through physical action and become the content for the invented landscapes of my paintings. Like Thomas Cole’s exploration of the sublimity of Hudson River landscape and Joan Mitchell’s reflection that “I carry my landscapes around with me,” my work as a painter results from an embodied sense of place that is excavated through the process of painting.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


