

Katie Barrie

Integrative Project Thesis

Down by the Water, Immersed in the Forest

“I paint objects as I think them, not as I see them.” –Pablo Picasso

Through a series of oil paintings, I am investigating personal histories of the landscapes I have grown accustomed to, re-imagining them through expressive abstractions and distortions. Throughout my life, I have lived in many different places, and over time, I have found that the natural scenery of a location, constantly in flux, becomes more intimate and familiar than the solid structure of a house: the soft sand and rocky shores of Lake Michigan; the tree shaded walking paths through the woods of Vermont; the salty marshes of northern Florida; the wild, intoxicating flora of Hong Kong; the quiet snow blankets that rest upon the meadows of Ohio. A family may move, a house may be sold, but the woods surrounding it can be revisited. My goal is to immortalize this relationship by using specific color palettes, built up texture, and larger canvases that encompass the viewer. Visually, the work then becomes more about the movement found in the brushstrokes, the relations of the colors present, and the space revealed through gazing at the canvas. Just as I am a product of my time spent in all these different locations, these paintings serve as a form of self-portrait.

By working primarily in abstraction I am clearly battling with contextual issues found throughout art history. Landscape painting has always held a firm tradition in

history, in every culture of the world. My idea of being inspired by, and having a close personal connection to, the natural world is certainly nothing new. The ancient Chinese rendered their lands with ink upon scrolls, while the impressionists took to the fields and seashores of France. Henri David Thoreau devoted himself to his pond at Walden, while Gary Snyder backpacked mountain after mountain, writing poems of his experiences. The act of applying paint upon a canvas is a loaded tradition unto itself.

Furthermore, abstracting nature, be it in art, writing, dance, theater, or music, is again nothing new. I have drawn much inspiration from Richard Diebenkorn and his "Ocean Park" series, in which he spent years exploring abstractions of his home scenery. Using layers of thin washes of paint in geometric forms, his work appears to be both controlled and spontaneous, something I am continually striving for. By using landscape as inspiration, but painting non-objectively, Diebenkorn believed he had "total artistic freedom without any recognizable imagery." (Buck, 42)

I also cannot ignore the work of Helen Frankenthaler, as she mastered color with her enormous collection of abstract expressionist paintings. Her use of heavily diluted oil paint soaking into the canvas greatly altered the colors she mixed, leaving each canvases looking quite different once they were dry than when she applied the paint. Regardless, the artist had a keen eye for color, as it was the core of each painting, creating form, light, and special relationships. To elaborate, "Frankenthaler uses color, then, not only to generate the picture, but to create space. Color does not establish visual rhythms within a preconceived format. Quite the opposite: the component shapes of pictures are forced into spatial relationships *because* of their color." (Wilkin, 69) Like Diebenkorn, Frankenthaler uses nature as source material, though much of it remains so abstract, the

viewer cannot truly tell what the artist had in mind while she was working.

While many artists have created landscape art (be it representational or abstract) in the direct presence of their source material, I on the other hand am referencing the environment of areas in many different states, not to mention on the other side of the world. For me, this work is just as much about distorting and glorifying the natural world as it is about reflection and memory. An excerpt from an interview with Peter Doig that I believe helps to explain why I am doing this series of paintings:

"Peter Doig: It was an escape to make these paintings in the studio, because what was outside the door was so different. The work then became a different world. Perhaps that's always the case but it was exciting trying to find this other place in my urban studio and in my head: the canoe paintings, the ski paintings, things like that.

Chris Ofili: Why would you paint those works when you're not in the place?

Peter Doig: Because it's about thinking about the place.

Chris Ofili: Through distance." (Nesbitt, 117)

Like Doig, my process is rooted in the idea of "thinking about the place" and what visuals, emotions, and conflicts arise from that. It's a form of escapism: traveling to the shores of Lake Michigan, or hiking through the mountains of Hong Kong, while working in a studio in chilly Ann Arbor.

Aesthetically, this body of work is both about imagery and the act of painting and exploring techniques in my process. This has involved using traditional materials like oil and acrylic paints, mediums derived from linseed oil, liquin, and turpentine, upon duck

cotton canvas stretched over wood frames, and exploring the great ranges of possibilities that exist in these basic materials. I have been working with acrylics as the base for each painting, since they are more malleable for thinner washes and melding with other materials. Layers of thick and thin oil paint are then built upon these bases. What has remained consistent in my artistic process is that I begin each painting by mixing all of my colors first, placing great emphasis on the color palette and the mood it creates. This is a constant battle as I strive for richer colors and hues in order to achieve more exciting work.

As I create this new body of work, I have slowed down my pace in order to truly consider and build up each canvas with layers of materials working with and against each other. In order to create a somewhat unified aesthetic, I have been working on several canvases at once. I have found this to be an excellent method in that it allows me to spend more time on each painting, while keeping each work fresh and relevant to its counterparts. This has proven to be an effective way to tackle the age-old issues of color, form, and texture in relation to scale and brushwork. While I paint very intuitively, I rely on select source material to get my ideas flowing. This is comprised of drawings and photographs of the scenery of my past. The majority of which is gathered from the landscapes of northern Michigan: dense woods, vast lakes, sand dunes, and so on. Others are drawn from the exotic plant life of Florida and Southeast Asia: beech trees, hanging moss, oversized leaves, wild flora. The freedom to combine these vastly different terrains allows me to create engaging compositions. Abstractions of sand dunes paired with dark forests and monsoon rainfalls provide juxtapositions of my identity in addition to battling scenery. Subsequently, these are densely layered paintings, combining thin

washes with chunky blocks of paint and built-up texture. I view these paintings as one inclusive piece: one painting leads to the next, while each work influences the outcome of another. When displayed together, each painting becomes more complete in the context of being surrounded by other paintings in the series.

The landscape in flux is forming my identity: continually evolving, yet always attached to a particular root. As my process develops, my work is becoming more abstract, loose, and messy, thus allowing the varying landscapes that I am working with to melt into one another. While my goal is to immortalize these places through abstraction, it is also just as important to create an overall mood of serenity and disarray for the viewer. My color has become even more specific as I work with spatial relationships: something that has taken a higher preference lately over ensuring the suggestion of nature in each piece. Still, artistically interpreting the natural spaces of my past has allowed me to become more intimate with this scenery. Details become obscured, yet the overall feeling of the place remains embedded in the mind.

Bibliography

- Buck, Robert. Richard Diebenkorn: Paintings and Drawings, 1943-1976. New York: The Buffalo Fine Arts Academy, 1976.
- Nesbitt, Judith, ed. Peter Doig. New York: Distributed Art Publishers, Inc, 2008.
- Wilkin, Karen. Frankenthaler: Works on Paper, 1949-1984. Italy: Sagdos, 1984.