

# Wayside

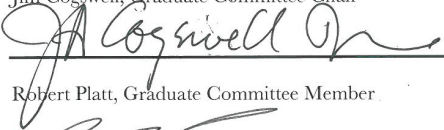
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Master of Fine Arts  
Penny W. Stamps  
School of Art and Design  
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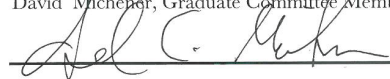
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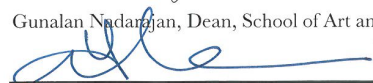
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Letters on the  
Wayside



Figure 1) Swillind

An accumulated array of roadside imagery in states of dissolution;  
sunflowers, thistle and mullein are devoured by worms that transform into plastic pipes.

## **Abstract**

My nose inches from the ground, the texture of chalk in my mouth. Movement that has been frozen in time, like a rabbit's reaction to a snapping branch. Water that is no longer wet to your touch, while the muck from the morning's walk still clings to my boots. Primal knowledge, to need, to see, to feel these things before we go.

Visceral experiences like these come to life in my assemblages where highly detailed images of nature and debris become fragmented landscapes. When making these assemblages, I am mining my materials for unseen connections to create an experience with nature that is often unobserved.

Experience becomes space in this highly exacting process. A collage is a layering of experiences, most of which are felt and not seen in their absence. Images that hold tense conversations, textures that rub shoulders, the weaving composition that holds these complexities while also guiding direction. It is a complicated and layered understanding that is reminiscent of lived experience and wormholes in memory to recall where we have been and the things we have seen.

Through a dialogue in the epistolary form I become aware of all the subtleties around me, which open a new world into ways of looking. This text is presented as ancillary to my creative output; it parallels my discoveries and my art making process.

## **Introduction**

On close investigation, my immense landscape paintings reveal themselves as fractured combinations of complex layers of paint, collage material and photographs. My installations extend the space of my paintings by using unlikely material I have collected from the roadside, drainage ditches, land between buildings and marginal places. The glitches of my own mental processing help me imbue these scenes with new meaning and a sense of wonder.

Perceptual processing of information is the lens through which we make sense of the vast array of our sensory input (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch). For a person like me, with dyslexia, slow sight processing affects both visual attention and information storage capacity. While the resulting distortions of memory are an academic challenge, the same distortions and unexpected combinations of objects can artistically reveal the overlooked and make me aware of all the subtleties and nuances around us.

The collage process in my paintings and installations gives access to the glitches of my mental processing, while taking advantage of my enhanced ability to disassemble, rearrange and reconstruct dimensional objects within my brain. I use methods of self-similarity and fractal scaling to compose images that resonate beyond their singular parts. Alchemy is alive in the work, transforming dirt, pipe, fence, worm and plastic into an imagined world, engaging the common as extraordinary and suggesting a new lens for viewing life in overlooked places.

Simple acts of engagement with my surroundings have profound consequences for my work. My daily commute by bike guides my investigations in the studio. The slow pace and openness of my commute allows me to take notice of my environment. I can quickly dismount from my bike to take photographs and gather other forms of documentation while immersed in nature and roadside debris.

In my studio I use these materials to transform the emotional experience of biking into a tangible form. As viewers explore the environments I create, I hope they become absorbed as spectators within the spectacle of my invented landscapes, traversing my collages as they would a commonly

ignored landscape next to the street. In this way I can communicate my physical experience of crawling around in the bush, making connections and touching everything I encounter. Prioritizing these experiences as research, at the same level as making, allows me to internalize the knowledge and physical process of art. I recognize what I've called "research" is truly an integral and active part of my art practice that is original in its approach.

These investigations started in my childhood. Always curious, I saw the forest as a playground, freedom from the challenges in school with my dyslexia and a place to gain courage to trust my intuition. I grew, my boundaries widened and passion for art and nature remained. I traveled to Ecuador, Peru, Cuba, Italy and Greece in search of inspiration for my art. Once at the University of Michigan I used my international traveling funds to explore Indonesia. Without conscious effort the experience has manifested in my thesis work and still changes the way I look at things that surround my daily life. I received a Smuckers-Wagstaff grant in the summer of 2013, funding an ambitious 800+ mile bike ride from Ann Arbor to Marquette, Michigan in the Upper Peninsula. For two weeks, I cycled along county roads, cow pastures, corn crops, and Michigan's beautiful lakeside, collecting imagery and material for upcoming paintings inspired by growth and decay in the natural world.

I hope the insight into how I perceive my surroundings will give others time for pause and reflection into how they interact with their environments.



Dear Reader,

I should start by explaining why the thesis is important to me beyond the context of the institution and degree. I see my written thesis as an access point for the viewers of my artwork who are interested in the succession of ideas and experiences that have informed my work. The personal benefits of documenting my process are that it has encouraged me to question my working methods, simplify my ideas and discover ways in which I can develop as an artist.

I'm not willing to present the writing to you in a way that is hard to understand. It is the simple solutions that I remember and carry with me, the real and visceral moments that make my cheeks burn and a laugh tumble from deep inside.

My written thesis is a series of letters, journal entries and poems to people I admire, people who inspire me, and people who have foresight and wisdom in some cases far beyond their years. These people live life by following their noses, exposing their vulnerabilities on a daily basis and being translucent in their beliefs about life. These people are old and young; they are artists, dancers, writers, poets, farmers and cooks. One thing they all have in common is their passion for being in the moment, for looking far longer than is socially acceptable and for asking the questions that linger long after the conversation has ended.

I hope that by using the epistolary form for a thesis I could tap into something idiosyncratic and more personal than a strictly academic paper, allowing one side of a complicated two-way dialogue to be exposed. This correspondence offers access to a relationship between two people that is understood over time. The letters I received in return are tender and real, but your only access into the intimate lives of these people is through my letters.

I am proud to call this eccentric group of people my inspiration.

The organization of the material reflects my artistic development as well as the development of my thesis. Letters and journals are organized by stream of consciousness as I stumble over ideas and make various connections between my life experience, studio work and writing practice. As time passes and the thesis show approaches, important ideas solidify and build chronologically. My thesis writing in turn becomes more focused as it progresses to capture major turning points in my process.

As a reader you are now a part of this work. If it makes you slightly more observant or inspires an interaction with things that surround you, it is worth my time to find the words.



(Figure 2) Studio shot

Dear Ruth,

I was on my studio floor surrounded by collage material, painting and lost in the color of my palette that had effortlessly taken form. I stood up to get a clean brush and laughed out loud. The painting had become one with the floor. My color choices of mauve pinks, earthy siennas with touches of dusty blue, were camouflaged within the dirty oriental carpet. The proximity of the things around me unknowingly had invaded my world.

Dear Jim,

Autumn seems so far away. The rich smell of decaying leaves and residual scent memory of sunscreen lingers only in the images I am using in my studio.

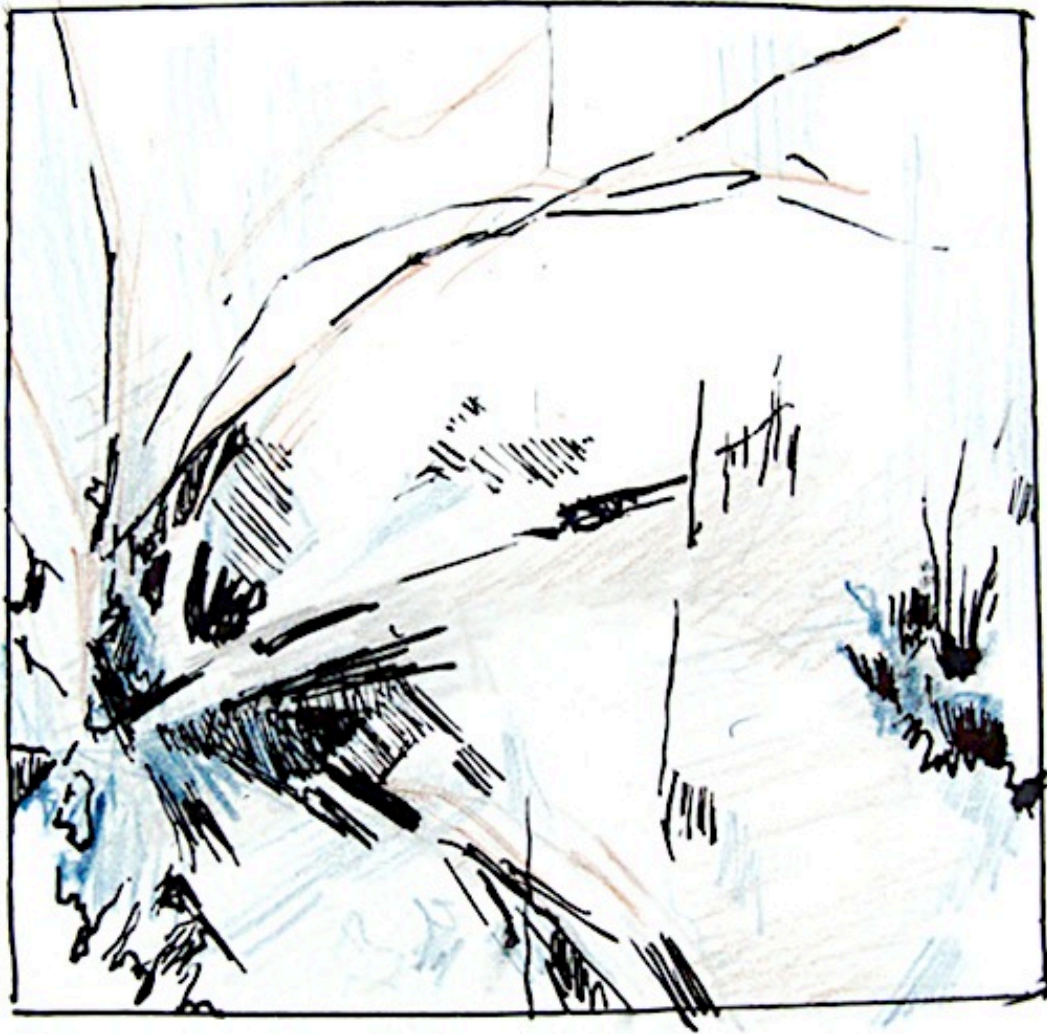
The trees look dead as winter continues its course. It is chilly but not cold with little to no snow, meaning the bugs will be bad next summer.

The changing seasons add unexpected layers of translucent color to my palette as I have a habit of turning to my window for clues to a solution. In the cold month of February my most recent painting is gray and monotone, triggered by flashes of yellow that has been unmistakably on my mind.

As I biked home in the dark, over snow-pocked cement, my high beams catching the glints from the dashed lines on the street, it hit me where my interest in the saturated yellow must have come from.



(Figure 3) Loor  
Knotted roots, stems and fish scales woven into a tangled mass  
don't carry traditional associations of beauty or the sublime.



(Figure 4) Sketch for the painting *Drift*

What if winter stops coming back to lie upon us and hold us in hibernation.  
What if the memories of the dead are lost, held deep in their graves when the next generation  
forgets about snow.

We adapt to live, for that moment only lasts a very short time.



Dear Ollie,

I am so glad we got to talk on the phone. There's something wonderful about a conversation over food preparation, the ramblings of which seem to twist, mingle and congeal faster than food gets cooked.

I've been thinking about the crisp line that came up in conversation. The power of using a straightedge when depicting the natural world, making all other fluid marks simultaneously more organized and chaotic like leaves next to pine needles or the sidewalk next to matted grass. It's a wonder that I can see anything when I look at the ground beneath my feet. There are so many layers of information that are in constant flux and effortlessly exposed. There's no pretending it is anything but what it is: dirt, grass, leaves and an endless combination of those very elements in different stages of breakdown.

I spend so much time trying to tame and organize the complex specificity of nature's inexhaustible combinations of form. The lines create a certain structure both in the natural world and within the collage material in my paintings.

With art you can see the struggle, know the problem, yet still be unable to find the right solution. What a breath of fresh air the clean cut of scissors can be. So much clarity in the new found borders of a drawing, in your case, and painting in mine. It's so funny that it happened in the same day, the same means of solving a problem but in very different places and completely unaware of the other's simultaneous solution.

How many times must that happen, people coming to solutions within the same 24 hours without conversation or knowledge of the other person's thought process or action? It makes me think... take a simple action, not one that happens every day but common; a glass of water dropping on the ground or the tingling of crisp fall air on once warm cheeks. Those happenings that bring you into the moment could be occurring to so many other people in a multitude of places but most of the time the connections are not made and the moments left unspoken. In one of my favorite books, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard says, "Seeing is of course very much a matter of

verbalization. Unless I call my attention to what passes before my eyes, I simply won't see it. It is, as Ruskin says, "Not merely unnoticed, but in the full, clear sense of the word, unseen."

I believe that the strength within your work and mine is capturing a moment unseen by most. Taking the time to look and maybe in the process getting numb fingers, or a muddy canvas and in both cases feeling a little lost and stiff before the connections are made.

Speaking of fingers, mine are stained with beet juice from the soup I made and leftover paint from my day at the studio. I feel so lucky to live off of what my hands create.



(Figure 5) Edouard Vuillard, *Foliage- Oak Tree and Fruit Seller*

Dear Ruth,

I took a trip to Chicago to pick a painting up from the Zhou B. Art Center this weekend. I carved out enough time from my weekend studio routine to spend an afternoon at the Art Institute of Chicago.

I always feel a bit out of place in museums, mainly because I have a hard time not wanting to touch the paintings. I have learned to hold my hands behind my back, so I don't get too carried away, but still get consistently reprimanded for getting too close to the surface while looking.

As I was walking through the impressionistic paintings on my way to the contemporary wing I took a moment to sit with a small Vuillard that had caught my attention. Vuillard has intrigued me since my first trip to NYC when I saw his painting, *Album* in person. It took years before I had the painting vocabulary to put words to the amazing things he was doing with paint.

Vuillard's paintings from a distance look soft and dappled with light. On approach, the camouflaged images fall apart, breaking rules of western perspective. The majority of his paintings are of patterned interiors. He is referred to as a decorative painter, but I believe there is a difference between a decorative painting and a decorative pattern that inspire a complex space in a painting. When I see his work the complexity of decorative patterns seems to be a starting point and permission to distort space with a multitude of dense colors.

I was shocked at the sheer number of Vuillards at the Art Institute of Chicago. I was unprepared for my reaction as I turned the corner and saw *Foliage—Oak Tree and Fruit Seller*. I stood in shock at the paintings' quiet command of space. Vuillard's awareness of nature's inexhaustible combinations of form and pattern seemed to corrode on approach to the painting. The surface is so thick with texture and color that I lose the composition completely when I walk up to the painting. The marks bridged figure and ground ignoring the hierarchy of a human figure as the central focus and its environment as secondary. Plant became figure; sky, fence, light and plant again. Space opened into atmosphere and simultaneously contradicted itself with its implicit pattern.

I frantically fumbled in my sketchbook recalling a quote I had written down; the feeling of Vuillard's painting correlated with the reason collage is important to my paintings. "The uncertainty of vision, the horror of the fixed, the dissolution of the present, the intricacy of beauty, the pressure of fecundity, the elusiveness of the free, and the flawed nature of perfection." (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard)

In my paintings I have been striving for something similar to what I see in Vuillard's work. So much is different in our work, from medium to cultural context and, of course, time period, but for both of us there is an obsession with what Dillard referred to as "the flawed nature of perfection." Something that is lost in the translation of looking that becomes a roadmap of process.

I sat with the painting for an hour lost in the practice of looking. There are few times in my life I can remember having such a strong reaction to a piece of art. I returned to the painting before leaving that day wanting to savor the marks, not to burn the image into my brain and keep it with me.



(Figure 6) Edouard Vuillard, Detail of *Foliage- Oak Tree and Fruit Seller*



(Figure 7) Studio shot of collage material and Itō Jakuchū print

My Dearest Guppy,

There are so many commonalities between food and art. Food preparation, visual arrangement on a plate, ingestion, digestion, and consumption all correspond to an art practice. It's almost laughable. To chew is a form of collage. To break down the colorful vegetables in one's mouth is so similar to what happens in my studio. Ripping up collage material, in a sense, becomes a form of digestion. Whether with the mind or stomach acid, the desire is the same, to reconstitute its specific nature into another form or energy.

I was making Gado- Gado the other day, an Indonesian dish I learned to make when I was visiting Bali, the summer before last. The sensorial connection to that food through taste, touch and smell while I am cooking transports me back in time and space. I have been influenced by another culture without being sued for copyright and fuse the new flavors with those I am accustomed to.

At my last meeting with my advisors I was told once again that my images have an inherent eastern quality about them like Chinese brush paintings or Japanese screens. As we all stood around gnawing at the idea, observations entered the conversation, like the loose canvas surface I have been working on could reference a screen in its materiality. The marks I was making with Xerox copies of a plant called snake grass seemed faintly like the stroke of a bamboo brush.

Since I have been at graduate school I have been continually influenced by the work of Itō Jakuchū. I have made a habit of carrying around a torn page with three of his images printed on the surface. I place the image in my pile of collage materials, and as my painting develops inevitably I come across the Itō Jakuchū print. It's my way of reminding myself to find a balance between complex imagery and places where a painting can stay quiet. His work is a beautiful example of how to successfully flatten a landscape and push that distortion as I do with collage.

Collage was never discussed as a reason for this Eastern feeling in my work, but I'm starting to believe that is one of the strongest continuities. I have been reading an article by Sergei Eisenstein



who speaks about the structure of composing film in his book *From Film to Form*. He proposes yet another way to collage or “montage” as it is called in cinematic terms. The article discusses Eastern and Western landscape perspective. In the west we want the rectangle to reveal the whole picture, a rolling scape from one corner to the next. A Western mindset is drawn to a scene that seamlessly tells the story with a clear and linear trajectory. In Japanese cinematography there is an interest in “cutting out a fragment of reality by means of the lens.” When I read this it seemed so spot on! I realized that it is almost a direct excerpt from one of my artist statements.... As I read on, aspects of the article brought to light more common interests.

“Close up and long shots. Fragments traveling graphically in different directions. Fragments resolved in volumes and fragments resolved in places. Fragments of darkness and light... Etc. Lastly there are such unexpected conflicts as the conflict between an object and its spatial nature and the conflict between an event and its temporal nature.”

This is where it gets really interesting. I believe a massive shift occurred in my work when I moved from painting plants like they were objects to approaching a canvas as an atmosphere. Although it may seem like an inconsequential shift and one that I find myself continuously pushing to reverse, I believe it is the conflict between object and atmosphere that so enamored me. When working with photographic collage imagery, I can hint at known objects or distort them without providing the whole image. A slice of steel wool can look like moss because of the similarity in texture. So object becomes ground cover or cement can look like magnified dust in the air. Visual imagery can transform depending on placement; something literally concrete becomes ethereal and atmospheric.

Coffee, black pepper, garlic and honey rubbed on steak. Flavors that hold their own but build such a wonderful taste when placed together.

Dear Jim,

I do not think, make or live life in a linear fashion. My brain does not make its connections on a tight rope. Memories appear at the draft of an open window, disorganized like the shoebox of family photographs under my grandmother's bed.

My thoughts seem to jump.

How many times have I awoke from a dream to recall it making perfect sense, while on verbalization it skips and distorts into fractured settings of people, places, sounds and emotions?

Disconnects are my life.



(Figure 8) Cadence

Continual motion informs the transmutation from snake to native prairie plant.  
Through the process of decay, the skin dissolves into atmosphere.

Dear Renee,

I have been flipping through our book, *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime* by Gilbert- Rolfe, and in normal form am hesitating to start, not wanting to commit to the reading. As a poet and writer, words are your medium, your choice expression and freedom. Words have haunted my life, especially in childhood. Too many written or spoken words would leave me with my hands over my ears begging “no more words, please no more words” This visceral fear still shows its face when I sit down to write or read, even though I have learned to cope with my differences.

As I flipped through the book I was reminded of the sheer excitement that coursed through my body when I read Burke’s theory on beauty and the sublime. I was made aware of the aspects of the sublime that I had been working with in my studio unknowingly, the texture and roughness of paper pulp, angularity, sense of terror, unnatural tension, and vastness in combination that create delight.

I’m aware of the same sense of vastness that I find when taking collage photographs. I am on my hands and knees on the side of the road photographing an ant colony or mound of grass and tap into another universe on a different scale. Italo Calvino writes “If you lie down on your back so that you see nothing but the sky, separated from the earth, you will have a far less pleasing feeling than if you look at a landscape, or look at the sky in proportion and relation to the earth, integrating them from the same point of view.”

In 1977 Charles and Ray Eames made a film called the *Power of Ten* that brings awareness to the co-existing worlds in our universe at micro and macro levels. The video zooms out from a picnic in the park, retreating every 10 seconds at 10 times the distance. The camera then zooms back through space into the picnickers and keeps magnifying into one of their hands. Both extremes are so similar, where through distance or close investigation there is a sense of expanse that in turn makes me more aware of my “in-scale” perspective.

There are other experiences that tap into vastness through the reduction of information, whether with the blackness of night or the intensity of the sun before your pupils have constricted.

Snow, fog, rain, all forms of water visually simplify a landscape as well; they act as negative space, a blanket or shroud. In all cases, they connect the sky to the ground. The lack of information demands attention, as a place once known shifts under a veil of mystery, reducing your sense of sight to a minimal spectrum of color and form.

Everything, even grass becomes ethereal, placid and dangerous in the fog. In a still image fog could mean fire, smoldering ash, steam, shift in weather patterns or early morning before the sun has burned off the moisture.

Rain creates the same effect with much larger droplets of water impeding vision. The transition between land and sky is much more abrupt, as the water settles on the earth and creates a film that reflects the sky. The reflection can be eerie and disorienting when you try to decipher which is the real world. Sometimes I wonder if reflections are more real than what they are reflecting.

Snow cloaks the land and, as it melts away, leaves pockets in the resting world underneath. The crispness of the snow simplifies forms, heightens contrast and creates a visceral experience of temperature, the memory of which creeps into my bones and locks up my joints.

Physical, metaphoric, psychological, deeply embedded fear and awe tap into so many aspects of my life and work.

And the sublime comes down  
To the spirit itself,

The spirit and space,  
The empty spirit  
In vacant space.  
What wine does one drink?  
What bread does one eat?

- Wallace Stevens, *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime*

So with that I will close this letter. It is because of my admiration for you and your creative practice that I wanted to exchange thoughts and philosophies. I am so looking forward to our discourse.

danced in the cool night  
spun round brushing my shoulder  
plastic bag caught wind

Dear Gubby,

It is often the closest experiences that are invisible but can teach us the most.

I took a walk in an in-between place with trees and a creek, bordered on all sides by parking lots. The place reminded me of being in the woods when we were kids. It was late winter or early spring, the time before any signs of green life. The underbrush was gray, the sky was gray. From a glance there was no way to tell what was living or dead. The last year's branches reached out and snapped, brittle to the touch as I moved through the brush. A few whipped back, still alive under their gray disguise exposing new buds.

On close inspection I found objects with other lives, a Styrofoam cup brittle with age, a cigarette filter once pressed to someone's lips, cast proof of our existence. These objects are held in transition as their original use and value disintegrates. This detritus becomes mingled with trees, fallen branches and leaves from a year past. In-between spaces are a breeding ground for invasive plants and a few native varieties making a comeback. Wait long enough and you will witness a teeming network of animals, birds and insects following daily routines so much like our own.

Looking down by my boots, an ant struggled to bear the weight of an object multiple times its own size. Unable to get a proper grip it swiveled the pink fleck, round and around in circles, unsuccessful in its forward movement. I sat with it for almost an hour wondering if it would give up, thinking about helping it out but not knowing which way it wanted to go.

Whether consciously or not, the daily struggle is what makes our lives and what we long to forget.



Dear Jim,

My studio floor feels like a safe place to write. I sit with pages of my words. Printed out, cut into fragments, highlighted into group and thought patterns. Categorizing writing in piles; the dichotomy of simplicity and chaos turns blue, decay turns green, my love of paint is yellow today and all the sensation words are categorized with purple.

As if this puzzle weren't thick enough I have an overwhelming feeling that I never have enough words in my stockpile to meet the creative force of my mind. I have formed a deep friendship with metaphor that becomes dysfunctional at times.

I cut up my words to make them less complex and more coherent.  
I cut up my photographs so it takes longer to read them.

Both are consumed with the minute details of the simplest story that becomes complex after processing.



(Figure 9) Studio shot of writing process

Dear Renee,

It fascinates me to think about how our brains differ, both of us so creative, and yet your natural talent is my Achilles' heel. There are times in my life I would've given up my so-called gift of a dyslexic brain for the ability to write a normal sentence. Most call it a learning disability, for good reason. For instance, last night I couldn't remember a word I needed. This happens frequently, stopping the train of thought to search for a simple word that I have used commonly for years. In the moment of need, it refused to come to my lips. Frustrated I picked up the tape next to my desk and dropped it, creating the physical movement of the word. I remembered before the tape hit the desk: "gravity"!

As a tactile and kinesthetic learner, all of my brain's connections seem to be made through physical action and work backwards towards language. Whether or not it is a challenge for you to give life to words, your letter was so descriptive and insightful that I had to read it time and again. You give such attention to details in your writing; they take form slowly until the reader understands the arrangement of words as a whole. One of the biggest gifts of having dyslexia for me is that I have devised multiple strategies to disguise and compensate for my weaknesses. One such strategy is writing letters instead of a thesis. Creative letters break down the writing into manageable chunks and employ friends as a source of fresh insight and companionship through the struggle of writing.

To hone and exploit my greatest strengths has proven to be one of my best strategies. As my art practice has developed over the years, I have always had a large capacity for understanding space, though I had no name for what I was doing. My constant obsessions with self-similarity, fractal scaling and pattern repetition were guiding my art practice.

I started reading an inspiring book titled, *In the Minds Eye*. The author, Thomas West, describes aspects of dyslexia, one of which is "visual thinking". West defines this sort of thinking as a "form of thought in which images are generated or recalled in the mind and are manipulated, overlaid, translated, associated with other similar forms (as with metaphor), rotated, increased or reduced in size, distorted, or otherwise transformed gradually from one familiar image into another. These

images may be visual representations of material things or they may be nonphysical, abstract concepts manipulated in the same way as visual forms.”

I was blown away by the definition. It described my ambitions when painting and the complexity when translating the experience into words.”

According to Howard Gardner in his book, *Frames of Mind* “spatial intelligence”, another attribute of dyslexia, “entails a number of loosely related capacities: the ability to recognize instances of the same element; the ability to transform or recognize the transformation of one element into another; the capacity to conjure up mental imagery and then transform that imagery; the capacity to produce a graphic likeness of spatial information; and the like”.

These ideas were never taught to me in my academic school classes. I was never given room in the classroom to develop and hone spatial intelligence and visual thinking. I believe the smartest thing I did, as an unhappy seventh grader in a Catholic school was to beg my Mom to let me homeschool. At age thirteen I started to develop a studio practice that gave me the confidence to attack my fear of reading. I guided my academic learning around my visual strengths, eventually allowing me to tackle more challenging academic obstacles. For example, I needed to learn history but could not retain the names, dates and timeframe in which the historical events were unfolding. So, I taught myself how to drape historic clothing from studying an archival clothing manuscript that I had researched. The tactile nature of sewing helped me retain the historic information while I listening to books on tape. In this way I was able to push my own limits.

The language of paint and color is not mandatory to functioning in normal society. Most of the time one of the first classes to be cut from a financially challenged school system is art. I would have been lost without its teachings. Although we are not taught art's importance, people are affected everyday by the power of color, form and perspective. Art gives me the confidence to conquer fear that is palpable, crippling vastness of hard decisions and the ability to navigate loss.

I am sure you can find the same strength in your creative words to cope with the things that frighten you. Just keep writing!

Dear David,

The letter you wrote to me at the end of last semester hits nerves so deep, I think it's time I explain the “wrestling” I face when unable to clearly explain myself.

I loved stories growing up, still do, but reading was always a challenge. Starting with the first sentence and having to decode several words, on reaching the end I had no memory of what was discussed in the beginning. This is, of course, assuming that I was even seeing the words I was trying to read and not making up ends to words that I didn't understand. I would change the meaning of words; reverse their direction and at times it would take upwards of 4 or 5 re-readings before I understood what was being discussed. If the information I was trying to decode was intensely simple there was no payoff in wrestling the words.

From the research I've done this is a common but perplexing occurrence in dyslexic students. The students have trouble breaching the hurdles of the “basics” but tend to shine in the advanced concepts and thinking.

As a child I remember holding my head in my hands with the frustration of not being able to explain my thoughts coherently, coming home from school with pounding headaches and fevers from the mental exasperation of not being understood, not understanding what I knew was “simple” and not being able to verbalize what I needed.

Imagine what fun homework like crossword puzzles were when letters and words move up, down, sideways and flipped on their own accord. These games felt time-consuming and petty.

Although I was reading at first grade level in fifth grade my teacher put me in the advanced reading section. We read *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I had developed an intense stutter while reading out loud so my teacher allowed me to listen as each student took a turn reading and the words

filled my world. Atticus Finch said “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... Until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it.” I understood the stories and it opened my mind to the joy of knowledge and learning.

At an early age I learned to beat myself up for not understanding the little things. My world was always on the edge of panic and ruin. This fight with dyslexic students is examined by Tomas G. West: “These people live in a world that teeters on the verge of collapse at any moment.... constantly liable to being exposed and thus being discredited. The chronic anxiety that this provokes is a variant of the phobic state”

There are things we battle with from early childhood that follow us like a shadow through the rest of our life. At times the shadow cast by the stress is dark, stark and well defined, at others it is almost nonexistent.

That day before our critique I had been fighting myself. My mind was writhing with frustration over my incoherent direction, tired of not being able to find the words to explain structure around my ideas. You wrote, “ I see you wrestling: possibly with your doubts and fears, possibly with unarticulated visions that drive your creative energy. I hear you voice this wrestling as ostensibly helping people “to look”, which is a different construct than “to see”. I think you may mean that you are trying to express and engage the viewer with a way to think about the process, rather than finding a preset construct that you’re visually narrating (a construct that’s not there, for those on that fool’s errand). What a profound challenge you have undertaken as a teacher, an artist, a human – to understand – to probe, not just describe – to categorize the superficial. Your wrestling feels epic.”

One thing I have taken from my struggle with dyslexia is persistence. Although, at times I do lack the discretion to step back and get perspective it is this need for clarity in a vastly complex world that drives me to share that story with others, which becomes the “art”.

Thank you for your words.

April 20<sup>th</sup> 2013

I started my ride this morning and as soon as I got on the road the sky became overcast and gray. The air became thick with water. It wasn't raining but the air held an amazingly daunting feeling that something very bad was going to happen. I've ridden in the rain a lot in my time commuting but there was an exaggerated feeling of threat out on my own in the middle of the countryside, without cover for miles, with all my equipment on the verge of a good soaking. I wanted, needed to ride as fast as I could to my destination.

In stark contrast to my anxiety, the sky had turned to a deep-sea ocean blue, the clouds moving fast, tumbling on top of each other. And in the distance I could see a hazy curtain of rain being drawn across the land. My heart was beating and I couldn't stop to take in the scene because of the rush of adrenaline in my chest. The storm sat on me most of the day, like a cat playing with a cornered mouse; the anticipation of what was coming was tangible.

After riding for several hours with the same intense anxiety biting at my heels I stopped to take cover in a restaurant and within 10 minutes the windows were pearled with rain droplets. Naïvely I thought I had beaten the weather at its own game. As I finished my lunch, procrastinating the whole time, it became clear that I was going to have to face the storm. I paid and made a move for my bike and the road.

As I walked out into the mist I was hit with a feeling of relief; the rain felt cool on my skin. My attitude had changed towards the experience. I don't believe it was just the difference between being caught in the rain unwillingly and deciding to tackle a storm. There was a creative impulse that redefined my story of that storm. This observation became even more evident when the storm truly broke, my body had slowed its progression and my imagination took over. My mind was on rapid fire with memories of dreams, childhood and a collision of visual images. John Dewey says in his book *Art as Experience* "There is always some measure of adventure in the meeting of mind and universe, and this adventure is, in its measure, imagination."



(Figure 10) Writh  
Natural material becomes pools of shadow in high contrast to the rest of the landscape that twists with white grass.





(Figure 11) Studio shot of worm garden

grass blade winds rusty screw  
in a land of chipped pavement  
stubbed toe adventures

May 15<sup>th</sup> 2013

I am told that as a child I was my father's shadow. If he was around I was not only by his side, but I would mimic the things he did. Deeply content in the garden and shirtless, he would break soil with his hands in the dirt. Not two steps behind, covered from head to toe in dirt, copying his movements, my little white chest also soaked in the warm afternoon sun. When his work was slow, I spent time with him in his wood shop, sitting on the bench with the scraps of wood and glue, piecing together the discarded shapes. To this day, the smell of sawdust, chewing tobacco, and day old sweat triggers a longing for home so palpable I can taste it.

Unfortunately for my mother's sanity, I was a curious child and exploring was one of my favorite games. I collected worms, rocks, feathers, and acorn tops, keeping them safe in the pockets of my overalls. I loved the textures of these treasures, putting them in my mouth, rolling them around until I could make sense of them.

One of the earliest memories that I know belongs to me and not pictures or retold stories unfolded in a place off limits to my adventures. My father had three beehives that stood on sand mounds in one of the corners of the property. I found myself sitting in the warm sand that surrounded the hives, fingers searching out the cold wet grains deep below the surface, deep in play but unaware of my place. I remember the humming all around as bees busy about their work sped to and from the hive. I was just as busy and content as they were, pulling piles of coarse sand over my bare toes.

Everything changed as swiftly as the storm clouds do in the spring. My mother was suddenly screaming for me, screaming for my father to come, pacing up and down the driveway. Bees smell our anger and fear, but they can't distinguish between the two. They think they are being attacked, so they attack first. Confused, I called for my Mom. She broke into a run. My father came barreling across the yard and intersected her, covering her mouth with his large rough hands.

There was not enough time for me to understand the danger I was in, or the fact that I was the

one for whom my mother was screaming. As far as I knew, I was safe. The bees however were becoming more aggressive in protection of their queen. The sudden stinging pain I felt was disorienting, and I ran. I don't remember how far, but I can feel my father's arms sweeping me up. I recall my mother, red tear-streaked face, and the spent expression in her eyes. The wooden chair in the hallway where I was forced to sit for what seemed like the rest of the day was my mother's effective and preferred form of punishment.

My father had his own methods for discipline, simple and subtle. He raised his long wispy eyebrows exposing his blue eyes in warning, a look that would send me into tears if directed my way. "The look." I didn't receive the look that day, just fear that I have rarely seen on my father's face.

After my sixth birthday, my parents got a divorce; my dad left home and his work became his new life. I started to take his place, as confidante to my mother and caretaker for my younger sister, stubborn glass jar opener, leaky drain fixer and dead rodent remover. I was bequeathed these jobs as well as a striking resemblance to my father's looks: same blue eyes, height and build, his strong hands with finger bitten nails that could build anything but also quiver ever so slightly.

One thing I would eventually learn from both my parents is how to face and overcome fear when I naïvely stumble into unexpected situations. This continues to be important to my art and adventuring practice, my choices to live a less conventional life, to overcome my struggles with learning and so much more.



(Figure 12) Documentation from underwater dive

Dear Summer,

About a year ago I was jumping a plane to Indonesia, unaware that my path would cross yours. After parting ways, I became strangely aware of what having a traveling companion meant to me. The vulnerability of traveling alone opened the door to the experiences good and bad that I had on the trip. Even when we were traveling together I would leave for daily diving expeditions, to take underwater photos for my paintings. The fear was a personal journey.

I was warned of the many highly poisonous creatures that lived on the ocean floor. As a precaution we were taught to wave a hand above a rock to assure our rock did not swim away or attack us. I was lying on the sandy bottom of the ocean watching a clump of coral and found a pair of eyes on what I thought was a rock that turned out to be a scorpion fish all but a yard from my face. At times this fish is referred to as a stonefish; they are well camouflaged and have venomous spines on their fins as a defense against predators.

On a night dive, I saw moray eels hunting, squids squirting ink, an octopus that pushed its way through a crack that was several times too small. I was dazzled as my group and I turned off our flashlights, waved our arms around in the dark water and watched as the phosphorescent plankton lit up like blue stars all around us.

It's funny to think how important a bit of danger is to the excitement of adventuring. I know I am a bit naïve to the danger, but that naivety makes these experiences possible for me. I trust my nerves to kick in, my adrenalin to take over, and that fight gets me out of most bad scenarios.

There was no fight underwater. The fish seemed more curious of me than afraid as they emerged from the colorful coral to investigate me. I was mesmerized by the colors underwater. The land in comparison looked dry and dead, especially the endless coral shards that lay like bones on the beach. I realized I don't care about the grand picture unless I can see what it is made of. The little experiences, nuances and snippets that make up life as a whole are often dismissed, but on closer inspection capture the impact of its true essence.

In my itinerary for Indonesia I spoke of the art, stories, and culture I would see on my trip. In retrospect I realize the choices I made on the fly lead me further from my itinerary and closer to the lasting memories that I cherish from the travels. These experiences had a profound effect on my artwork, the level of which I didn't fully realize at the time.

After my first scheduled destinations, I started choosing places that most tourists would have avoided. I made an exception for taking underwater photos of the reef. The coral reefs seem tourist friendly until you realize the full devastation that is part of the story. Warming temperatures are bleaching the coral reefs, killing the coral and myriad interdependent living creatures that live in that ecosystem.

Sumatra was one of the harshest places I have ever been due to the tsunami devastation visible on the land and experienced by the people in 2004. The intensity of the destruction created by the shifting weather not only left scars on the land and architecture, it seems to have a lasting impact on the people's openness (a common attribute of Indonesian culture).

I was once asked at an artist talk I was giving "You talk about how much you love the natural world, I would think you would be making images of butterflies and flowers". There is much beauty in the natural world and it is a refuge for me. However the beauty in the natural world comes with the harsh and dangerous realities of its power. Hurricanes, tornados, and tsunamis are part of the natural world, too. The reality of nature's delicacy and beauty become more intense when partnered with a more realistic assessment, which includes fear, loss and destruction.

There is a reason we build elaborate boxes for ourselves. We build homes to live in and cars to drive, shells that protect us from the natural forces that are becoming more extreme by the year.

This became much more apparent in Indonesia's landscape and caused a closer investigation of the landscape of my daily commute on my return and the inspiration for my current work.



(Figure 13) Trash on the beach





(Figure 14) How Wise are the Young  
Fleshy baby mice, flower petals, sharp shards of coral and bones hold tension  
in this landscape of images from my trip to Indonesia.

How wise are the young,  
with their pink fleshy bodies unprotected from harshness of the wind, rock and water  
How wise is the gut that knows where to hide  
How wise is the instinct to know when to let go

Dear Gubby,

“Beauty itself is the fruit of the creator’s exuberance that grew such a tangle, and the grotesques and horrors bloom from that same free growth, that intricate scramble and twine up and down the conditions of time.” (*Pilgram at Tinnker Creek*, Annie Dillard)

I see the beauty of death and decay in my paintings. My work for years has been connected to death and life. I asked myself how to show that decay as a way to elicit light from a life, to make life’s immersive and visual experiences more expressive and joyful.

I don't believe I have to paint gravestones to visualize the preciseness of the moment, life and death as integral cycles. There is, however, an importance in acknowledging the decay of things that surround us every day. In an almost inconsequential cycle plants, trash, and cement, whether naturally occurring or in a man-made flux, in time breakdown. The gravestones break down faster than some of the trees die and certainly the pavement has resealed before the gravestones lose their names.

My dear friend Parisa suggested I look at the photographs of Tanya Marcuse, in particular a series called *Fallen*. The photographs are an inventory of natural material, plants, decaying fruit and a snake that weaves through a few images. The practice of arranging material to build a tangled space happens effortlessly in Marcuse’s photographs. The methods are similar to how I use collage in my paintings but simpler because she only has to deal with natural material. She seems to build a narrative that departs from the Garden of Eden to make a link to nature’s momentary existence that speaks directly to our mortality.

How we work our soil trying desperately to avoid the unraveling edges.



(Figure 15) Tanya Marcuse, *Fallen*



(Figure 16) Death on the road

July 27<sup>th</sup> 2013

The road is hot and you can smell death wafting from the cement. You can no longer see the physical decay of the dead animals that are crushed into its surface but the smell lingers on these death roads. When you do occasionally see the carcasses they are rigid, contorted and ripped up by the weather as well as the cars. They look so void of life it's hard to imagine these broken bodies once had breath.

July 23, 2013

I left Ann Arbor for a two-week cycling trip through Michigan. I started packing for the trip in last week's seemingly endless heat wave and had to repack yesterday because the temperatures dropped last night into the low 50s. I grabbed a red hat to ward off the morning chill, and headed west toward Lake Michigan.

I decided to travel alone. The road and I were constant companions. I camped most nights in the little tent and sleeping bag I carried on my bike. I had a sparse assortment of necessities with me including spare clothes, a flashlight, a zip lock with camera, recorder and electronics, bike repair kit, a bottle of mace given to me by my sister and a stack of maps.

I also carried a book with me called *Persist*. It is a book about the author's creative writing practice whose process was much like a journey across the land. In it I read, "The lighter I travel the further and faster I go". This couldn't be more true, not only physically but mentally as well. Every day on the road I felt lighter, more confident, decisive and powerful.

I have never felt so dually strong and vulnerable to the unknown: the weather, bad drivers, exposure to cars, wild animals and insects or my own interrupting mind that seemed to spin faster than my gears could shift at times. Every mile my confidence grew and within a few days had built a determination that crippled most fears that would slow my progress. "You know you're alive. You take huge steps, trying to feel the planet's roundness arc between your feet." Annie Dillard

I had tapped into so many visceral experiences and feelings I had no idea I was blocking out. When it arose, my own fear was unexpected and unanticipated, such as a primal panic and yearning for safety. This fear became more serious with the reality of facing unseasonably cool nights with temperatures in the upper 30's in wet clothing. I slept with damp socks, a soaking fleece jacket and longjohns in a soggy sleeping bag through several rainstorms.

The semi-trucks gave me a run for my money. On a forty mile stint through the Upper Peninsula the locals call the “Seney Stretch”, I rode on a two foot shoulder while trucks barreled past at 55 miles an hour sending a spray of dirty road water and gravel in my direction. The wind from one of the trucks approaching from the opposite direction hit me so squarely in the chest, it knocked the breath right out of me.

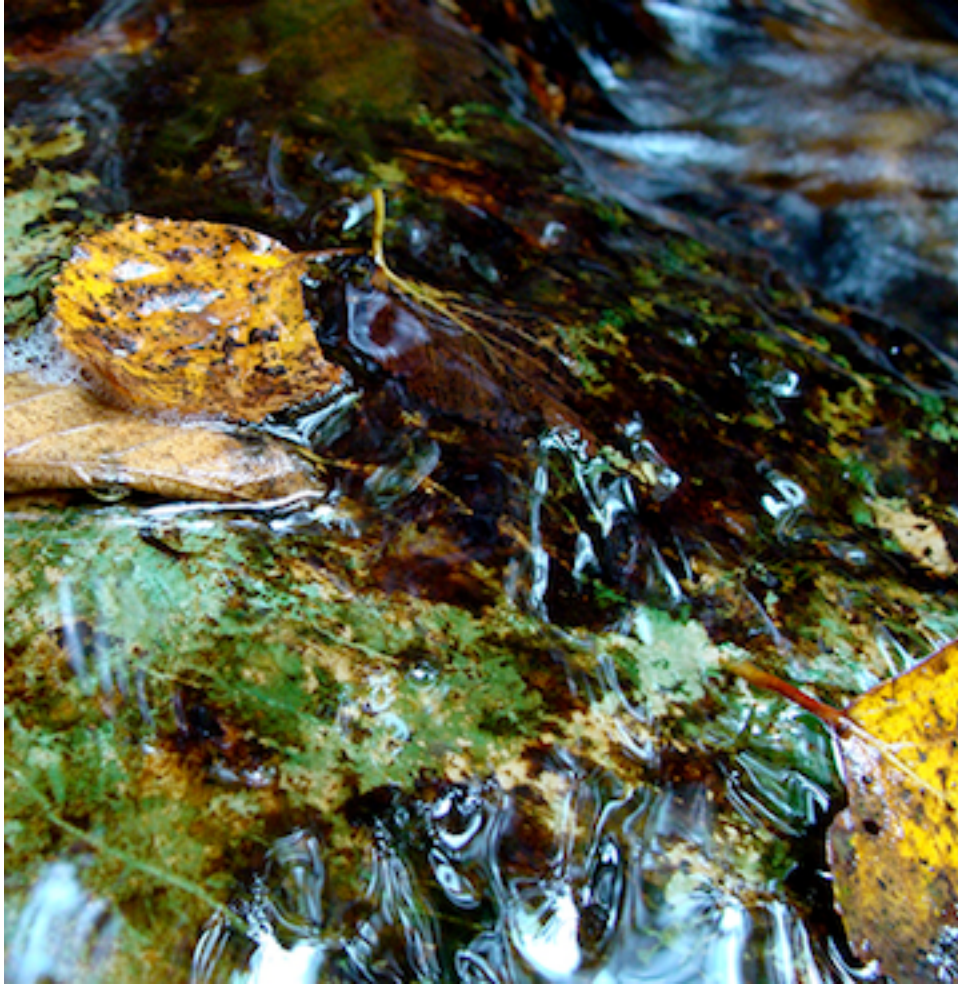
As planned, I collected dozens of photographs on the roadside. However, in comparison to the visceral experience of traveling, the photographs seemed detached and void of all of the experiences that kept my senses pulsating.

As a result of this journey, I'm now interested in depicting movement in a still image. I want to capture the feel of a strong head wind, the bend of the grasses and spray of car tires in a two-dimensional surface: the grasshoppers that had wings and would fly alongside my bike, glimpses of yellow that highlighted their wobbly flight, the mist that settled on the road obscuring all the forms before the sun had time to burn it off. How do you catch the swift changes in the sky from a placid stillness to a wrenching mass of billowing clouds that unfold in front of your eyes?

Correspondingly in the fast paced, sealed off way that we live, it is rare to spend time seeing what is in front of our eyes. This is not only a practice of looking; it is the act of being in the moment fully immersed. This subtle change to a heightened sense of awareness engages life and has had a huge impact on my choices.

“It’s all about play, about the interplay between the human senses and the human heart, about the dance- or sometimes, more painfully, the hand-to-hand combat- with medium. It’s about learning to listen before saying; it’s about not knowing and the adventure of finding out.” (*Persist*, Peter Clothier)





(Figure 17) Creek bed in the Upper Peninsula

August 2, 2013

My life becomes stagnant when I don't let myself experience the things around me. The pressure and grind create a seemingly necessary bubble of consistency that becomes mundane and makes me fear the uncontrollable nature of life outside that protective skin.

Meanwhile I am on a bike, completely exposed to the weather, animals, cars and a possible target for people with ill intentions. This is not what consumes my thoughts. I am threading the land with my bike, the valleys and hills. I am meeting so many people who have watched out for my well being, given me food, shelter and shared their stories. I'm seeing badger, bald eagles, loons and prairie dogs that I didn't think existed this far north. I've spent the last week sleeping under the stars. I've passed fields upon fields that keep changing like I'm passing through the seasons as I bike north. My body is changing in front of my eyes and I am not sore but grow stronger every day.

As a reminder to myself when I go through times of fear that is crippling, when I am back in the daily grind of worry compounded with inaction I want to remember this: Listen up, this experience traveling has opened a sense of expansiveness and freedom that I feel so palpably it is strange to think it would ever change. I am old enough to know it will and when it does I want you to remember how amazing it is to meet assumptions of what is dangerous or challenging head on, to walk away empowered, unscathed and so alive you glow.

I am glowing, don't forget.

slit, the milk weed pod  
seasonally the waterlogged  
deploys fluff for flight



(Figure 18) Silt

Started in the early spring when green looks almost radioactive, this painting was a reaction to an oil spill found en route to my studio.

Dear Ruth,

A few months ago, I was speaking to my advisor Hannah about my exciting summer plans, a collection bike ride ending at The Porcupine Mountain Artist Residency Program. We were speaking about the best approach for making the most of my time and the challenges of making work in a cabin in the woods without electricity. I have been completely reliant on a printer to create collage material and was busy brainstorming solutions. Printing images had become a central ritual that had grown and developed to feed my painting practice. Hannah asked how long it had been since I had made a painting without collage material and if I thought it would be beneficial to take a select choice of art supplies to the mountains: watercolors, colored pencils or just a sketchbook.

It made me question whether collage had become a habit or if it was still a vital part of my practice. I hate the feeling of being held to one mandatory process. I need to play and experiment. That question, that so frightened me at first, spurred a resolute decision to take twelve small canvas-covered panels, a tote bag of acrylics, masking tape, an X-Acto knife and three cans of spray primer to the residency. In one fell swoop I made a choice to break my previous habits.

I am now in the woods to flounder, make mistakes and refine a practice that I had lost. I am so glad you are here to flounder with me.

So far it has been surprisingly easy. In my past work I have been determined to tell a story with the specific plants, animals or materials that existed in my photographically constructed landscape. In my stripped down process, my focus has been on playing with my new materials. For instance the crisp lines and shapes I can create with my masking tape looks like collage but feels fresh. The natural world around me continues to be my inspiration. Instead of taking a photograph away from the field to print and use, I simply sit down in the field, start working and move when I need a new subject.

On my first working day I set out armed with a board, masking tape and an X- Acto knife. I used the knife as a pencil, drawing the rocks, twigs and grasses, sketching over the blue masking tape and pulling up the areas that needed a new layer of paint.

Yesterday I hiked back to the pond we found and sat on a bridge. I drew the reeds and their reflection on the still water. After working for 3 or 4 hours I packed up and hiked back to the cabin and used our experiment area on the step of the back porch. Flinging paint on to my carefully taped board, I have learned to spray primer areas that needed to be lightened and simplified.

It is fantastic to be without a clock. Although I catch myself trying to guess the time by the subtle amount of light that filters through the trees or the grumbling of my stomach, both seem unreliable.

After my dinner routine, I will go survey my panels. One of the most exciting parts of my day, it's like unwrapping a present to peel back the tape to uncover my new composition. Then, the luxury to sit back at our wooden table and spend my last moments doing some light reading and looking up at my day's work, totally content. Certain areas will be taped over so I can add another layer of information, a technique that is similar to the resist art of batik, a practice that I observed on my travels to Indonesia.

With the lack of collage as a structural device, I have found ways to give fluid paint geometry. I have been developing a conversation of straight lines, simplified shapes like circles, shards of triangles and stable rectangles. The composed shapes give order to the space to allow observed natural form, soft transitions with spray paint, and a variety of layered splashes take form unencumbered by hesitation because of the masking process.

I am so grateful for the encouragement to dive into paint in a new way. Hannah has a keen awareness of when she needs to push a student and when to let the student's practice do the

pushing. I have the utmost respect for the amazing professors who have mentored me through graduate school.

It has been dark for a while now as we write by candlelight. After a day of endless outdoor adventures sleep takes me fast. As I retire to bed and drift away, your silhouette is imprinted in my mind, hunched over and still reading, while the candle flickers in the darkness.



(Figure 19) Stalk 5  
Inspired by the reeds and their reflection on the water,  
I painted this image sitting on a bridge overlooking a lake in Porcupine Mountains.





(Figure 20) Strome  
A landscape swarms with bald face hornets, glass, moss and a blight that produces bulbous forms.

Dear Ruth,

Just thinking about you and wondering how life is... I went back up to the U.P. this past weekend and saw you everywhere. The white flower mushrooms had gone black with the change in weather. Stayed in a cabin on the lake and went caving by day. The caves look like your paintings in some ways.

I have a new fascination for galls, fungal de-formations on plants. A twig with this malformation either looks burnt or bulging until it blisters and oozes. They remind me of bulging in flamed gums with hints of teeth still visible; on the twig the buds still protrude from the engulfing mass. These bulbous forms are so violent and visceral I have to look.

On a ride from the studio to the hardware store I spotted some crusty black on an oak tree and dismounted to investigate. As I got closer a hum filled my ears and my eyes focused on a flurry of activity around the tweedy blisters. There were high contrast white and black hornets mixed with an assortment of hues, orange to red from Asian beetle wings. I had experience in the past with the Asian beetles, or biting ladybug imposters, but the black-and-white hornets were new to me.

Completely relaxed and humming to myself with pleasure I took hold of a limb and pulled myself up to my tiptoes. My nose inches from the clusters of fungus, hornet wings and pill sized beetles I cozied in and became one with the action. The insects were circling around the fungal clot, and I moved in closer. My head was surrounded by the humming of hornets who seemed completely unaware of my presence. I knew I had found key imagery for new set of paintings and rushed back to the studio to look up information on this mystery hornet.

On return to the studio, I got on the internet. With shocked amusement I discovered the black-and-white insects were highly aggressive bald face hornets. The intense imagery that I pulled up with a Goggle search was of contorted, bulbous human flesh. Just like the galls the insects were swarming around on the tree, the blistered skin was unrecognizable. Bone structures of hands were lost to puffy red skin, cheeks and knees were engorged several times their normal size. I had ignorantly put my head into the branches of a tree buzzing with the fury of dozens of these

poisonous creatures that had inflicted many hospital visits. Fortunately, not every lesson we learn comes the hard way.

I took color to my canvas to harness as energy the anxiety from the experience Vivid red, yellow seared the painting, sharp lines sliced the color and aggressive use of spray paint created a path through the chaos. The hornet imagery, now informed by the mental images from the internet had informed had the same violent action in the now hostile paint. Within a few hours the unresolved collage exploited the experience of fear immersed within a true serene encounter with collecting.

As I pack my bags to leave for the day I glanced down at my work to realize how aggressive and one-sided the image looked. The color, the mark making and the imagery were all aggressive.

I arrived at the studio in the morning with fresh eyes and new intention. The composition was set but the tone was wrong. There was no surprise when I walked up to the painting. My interest in viewing paintings is that they unfold over time and distance. The aggression in color, mark and imagery left nothing to be discovered. It was also in contradiction to what I experienced with the hornets in person, an experience of calm and serenity.

I set to work again repeating the forms of wings and spherical fungus with a cool white and more subtle de-saturated pallet. I finished the painting and was pleased with the contradiction between the aggressive imagery and mark making set against the cool, serene atmosphere of flickering wings. The surface had a built-up history of smooth flat planes with sharp edges that trigger the nappy texture of moss.

This relationship in texture is formed with the most basic attention to detail. The observation of paper edge is important to the images I've been making. There seem to be two lines gifted to paper, the cut and the ripped. With the ripped line the pressed paper fibers are pulled apart, like the way the earth splits in a quake, a gap in the earth meandering without concern for people's homes, roadways or cars. As the crack divides the landscape, so the split in the paper corrupts my understanding of the whole.



(Figure 21) Collage material

Dear Ollie,

To start, I think your words comparing the artistic process and the formation of Sleeping Bear Dunes were insightful.

The golden nugget that continues to roll around in my mind is “the sands are still shifting”. There is no end, no perfect solution, no time to worry about completeness because there is no definition for such. You are there in the moment and aware enough to see the changes. The one thing we can count on with nature and her “now you see it, now you don’t” trick, is how it teaches us to be elastic and acknowledge the singular moment of the present.

This letter will be my ode to the rocks, stories of stones and sand that have shifted and persisted. Rocks have taught me many lessons. Though stoic and for the most part silent, their murmurs have informed my practice in photographic representation and metaphoric grounding.

A few weeks after my return to school from my bike tour of Michigan and artist residency in the Porcupine Mountains I was invited to return to the Upper Peninsula. I was asked to join my advisor, Robert Platt and his class to go spelunking in Michigan's only cave. As a side note, Robert is keenly aware of my need to explore and shares the desire for exploration to inform his practice, the kind that engages every muscle and creative impulse in its action.

Stepping back into the woods of the Upper Peninsula felt like I had never left, like I had fallen asleep for a while and was awake again. I started to wonder if that's what happens when we have too many deadlines, stress and pressure: we fall asleep, we stop looking, our senses dull down and we exist without wonder.

In the cave my senses were alert. Even as we turned off our headlamps, my eyes searched for the light, seeing for the next ten seconds a deep burgundy that eventually faded to black. After five minutes or so my eyes had grown more accustomed to the darkness and I was able to see a dull light slice into the darkness from a sinkhole around the bend in the cave. As we moved on, I removed my gloves and let my fingers run over the scalloped edges of the cave walls, limestone

pits carved out from rushing of high-level water. The marks went to the ceiling, extinguishing my curiosity as to what might happen if we were caught in a cave when it rained.

Robert was right when he said the cave was like an eye. The cave became human; we walked in to the orifice. Deep underground, the walls resembled intestinal lining and cracks in skin. The sediment and build-up of iron residue, slick under our feet, were digestive juices that could be pushed around with a finger.

Over time the walls of the cave had cracked and shifted, gaping open just enough for human form to contort and wriggle through. I longed to move into the next tight space, the exhilaration of claustrophobia opening to a pit in the cave that in comparison felt like the vaults of a cathedral. The space felt holy and wise.

Layers of years were evident and to a knowledgeable set of eyes, could tell stories. My eyes were that of the child's, for most of my observations were made without much existing knowledge. As we moved through the cave, the confined spaces forced us down on all fours and eventually to our stomachs. The smell of the rock was now so close, almost musky and cool as the air rushed into my nostrils.

I had a flashback to a dear friend of mine, who as a child slept with rocks as a comfort device. He very commonly overheated and there was something soothing for him in the smooth cool surface of a stone. Although it seems strange to say, the cave had a similar calming effect for me.

Back in the cave, and back on our feet, I was leading our small caravan. As the gap widened, sounds became muffled and rang against the walls of stone. It sounded as if the cave was whispering, but you couldn't quite make out the words.

Joy Harjo wrote a book of poems about earth and rock called *Secrets from the Center of the World*. She writes, "These smoky bluffs are old traveling companions, making their way through millennia.

Ask them if you want to know about the true turning of history. You'll have to offer them something more than one good story, and need to understand the patience of stones.”

As we made our way closer to the mouth of the cave, the light felt blinding. As our eyes adapted to the over exposed world, I felt thankful for the intimate experience with something as old, rich and complex as stone.

To end where we began, with your wise words that inspired this tangent “I see traces of the creative process, the incremental steps, the period when the grind stopped, the ice thawed, and the rhythms of waves and wind took over. They carved out coves and blew sand high atop the headlands. Sleeping Bear Dunes was not formed in an instant, nor can it be captured in an instant. Because here’s the real beauty: the sands are still shifting.”

P.S. Found this rock when I was in the Upper Peninsula and thought you might like to hold on to it for a while.



(Figure 22) Robert Platt cave painting in Michigan's Upper Peninsula



pulpy black pumice  
wood knows death better than I  
their story carved in stone

Dearest Ruth,

I went for a thirty-mile bike ride yesterday. It's the first time I have been out of my studio or apartment for weeks. Time is moving like a typhoon that rushes in and I imagine when it sets me down it will leave debris in its wake. The pace at which it is moving is both terrifying and exhilarating, a contradiction in every way to our time in the mountains.

When I get on my bike even for a short time my body remembers the ride this past summer. All of the empowering experiences of that trip come flooding back to the present. It has become a way for me to recalibrate and remember what is so easily forgotten.

On my ride yesterday I was taken with three things. The first was simple, a broken side view mirror that was reflecting the roadside and plants. It reflected the red of my bike paint, a flat color that effectively activated the neutrals of the roadside.

Soon after I saw a crushed and equally shattered snapping turtle. It looked like the lens of a kaleidoscope. The tail was the only thing intact, stretched long and prehistoric looking on the street. I wonder what the person who hit it was thinking and why they wouldn't stop to pull the large body out of the street before it was pulverized. That brings me to the last on my list but the most consistent on my ride, deer.

The deer get hit every day and thrown to the side of the road, but I have never seen so many in different stages of decay. Fresh kill to rib bones protruding from dry grass, hair matted into gravel, bugs, bones and contorted limbs. It seemed less disturbing to me because of my awareness of their deaths in cycle. Bizarrely natural as if the cars were a 21<sup>st</sup> century wolf pack leaving remnants of their consumption.

As I've been painting, the unnatural objects have become important because of commonalities between the shattered mirror of the car and the broken shell of the turtle. These objects offer a variety of associations, visual diversity, controlled geometry and, in most cases, glossy quality of plastic or the double refraction in glass. I believe this juxtaposition is important in the work as it

certainly seems to connect the images to the present-day and creates an uneasy tension between the natural and man-made objects. I believe it's this relationship that is so intriguing both visually and conceptually within my paintings. The man-made is represented in the photograph, the geometric edges, the sparsely used saturated colors, the glossy pools of paint or oil or tar that creep into a painting and linger. It is these moments that put the natural landscape on edge.

My interest in natural objects stems from my awe of the natural world; my interest in unnatural objects is not cultivated by the same appreciation. The detritus turns the unnatural materials on by allowing us to make connections through form. This builds associations between the objects especially when they exist side by side. The trash amplifies nature and nature amplifies trash, but they both resolve in the same way: decay.

Later on my ride, I stood on the side of the road next to a thick grove of trees that I longed for, but they were out of reach because my eyes were distracted. Bright orange construction tape marked an electrical line or a place to dig and created an intense tension in relation to its surroundings. The color slapped me in the face and I was made aware of the disconcerting fact that we live on marked land.

This unsettles me and yet I'm a part of the marking. It reminds me of the dual characteristics of the natural world, its fragility and its power to break through cement. There is a sense that as humans we need to fix things, but I think the natural world will repair itself if we can take a step back and develop creative ways to live a simpler life. This core belief connects to the fracture between the natural and unnatural materials in my paintings that viewers' perceptions almost fix, as they observe them in the same space.

I started to paint this morning but had to stop to write to you. You were on my mind. It feels like so long since we have talked. Miss you like crazy.



(Figure 23) Fract

Hollow snake grass breaks through cement and splinters into color and jagged form throughout this painting.



(Figure 24) Trash in Indonesia

Dear Summer,

I can't believe you're back in Indonesia! How I wish I were there. I am realizing more and more how my current direction and interests in my paintings were set into motion because of my travels to Indonesia. On my collection ride about a month ago I tried to harness the same intention, spending time watching and internalizing the interactions of nature and how it was impacted by the surrounding human culture.

On the roadside this impact is left in the form of natural debris, trash, road kill and the insects that those materials attract. It occurred to me that I was aware of similar observations in Indonesia: the abundance of trash, the huge number of ants that appeared everywhere I journeyed, and my experience of a death ceremony.

On the Island of Lambongan, once every five years, twenty-five bodies are exhumed from their graves. I witnessed hundreds of people gathering for this event. As the bones resurfaced they were lovingly cleaned by hand. Family members passed the skull of their loved one in a circle, rejoicing in the reunion. They pressed the skull to their forehead in greeting. After much celebration and many gifts the families mourned and gave their final farewells. The bones were set into elaborately decorated paper horses that were then set ablaze. This cremation process ended on the coast as the families set the ashes in a coconut shell to float off to sea.

I was in awe of this death ritual. It is so different from how we deal with death in the West. When a person's heart stops beating it is believed they are gone. It seemed to me the Lambongan people saw this time differently. Their loved one was departing on a trip, due to return in five years time. The graves in those five years were built up with gifts. TVs, food, flowers, money, never removed, accumulated over time, looking from an outsider's point of view like a trash heap.

I found myself fleeing the local's call of "Hey Mista" to try to sell their goods and services. I dodged the thick traffic and *bachuks* (local bike taxi) in the cities for the equally trashed but slower paced villages. Meeting Indonesians, eating street food wrapped in banana leaves, taking pictures for hours while walking occupied a lot of my time.

In a culture that appreciates craftsmanship and beautiful things, I was stunned by the amount of trash in the streets, rivers and along the beaches. Trash was everywhere, and there was little or no way to dispose of it besides burning it or throwing it to the ground when the need would arise. This left a history of waste for me to discover, plastic bags, sealed cups of water, bottles of all shapes and sizes, juice boxes, individually wrapped slices of bread, clove cigarette butts and old stapled offering baskets dusted even the most picturesque views. I was captivated by the lack of concern for the colorful trash confetti that seemed so out of place in a land with such awe-inspiring natural beauty.

The other thing I noticed in the slower pace of the villages was the sheer number of ants, trailing in lines up the walls, climbing through the books I read, in my back pack, food and on every surface where one might sit or lean. It seems like a connection to nature that is present in every moment of the day no matter the place. In the western world ants would be sprayed and controlled but in Indonesia they seem to be as normal as the sun rising to the dozens of roosters in the morning. I spent a lot of time resenting and avoiding them but by the end of my trip, I realized that they were more important to my experience than most of the temples, shrines and art museums I visited. The ants seemed to be a constant reminder of the natural world that we are trying to separate ourselves from in western culture.



(Figure 25) Documentation of a grave on Lambongan Island





(Figure 26) Phoss  
Photographic stems and grass are shattered with drips of phosphorescent paint.

discarded refuse  
stems and roots that remember  
and hold time under thumb

My Dear Ruth,

It was good to talk yesterday. I miss our daily conversations at the artist residency in the mountains. I often think about the simplicity of those few weeks, especially in contrast to my busy life in school.

The feeling of missing is intense; the distance that is created by mobility is almost a requirement for people living in today's transitory existence. I think the pain comes from memories of a person or place at a certain time. My professor David said in my critique yesterday "Sometimes we can't go back but we can always go home" It was so comforting to hear those words, moving intentionally through life is home, peace is home, the people I love are home.

There is a pang I feel in my bones and a hollowness in my gut that feels like a barometer of distance. It is as real a feeling as the moisture in the air before it rains. I've spent most of my life trying to desensitize from this awareness for productivity's sake.

My practice is all about awareness. There have to be moments of slowness to gather inspiration. In the studio with paint and scissors there is utter freedom for me play. Painting in my studio is an uncomplicated practice that fills me up. When I'm removed from it I ache.

Lately my time in the studio has been stretched because of a hunch that I need to be working on installation. This, of course, is in addition to teaching, taking classes, writing a thesis, applying for opportunities after school and painting. I spent the day hauling wood, making structures and collecting material. Although these are all things I do in my paintings I have not found an access point into three-dimensional objects that is as developed as the space and choices I make on canvas. The work at the moment feels hollow and draining.

Last semester an independent curator and artist named Julie Lazar came to speak to my class. She told us an artist can only do two things really well. Additional projects break down your energy and nothing reaches its full potential. Her words have been ringing in my ears and I wonder what will get cut as I move through my last semester. I don't know how much farther I can stretch...



(Figure 27) Rhododendron

The net as a symbol has a complex dual relationship somewhere between restraint and protection, holding the leaves and fragments of skin.



(Figure 28) Drift  
A briar bush holds painted driftwood and leaves printed over decaying flesh.

Dear Guppy,

Lost in the forest, I broke off a dark twig  
and lifted its whisper to my thirsty lips:  
maybe it was the voice of the rain crying,  
a cracked bell, or a torn heart.

Something from far off it seemed  
deep and secret to me, hidden by the earth,  
a shout muffled by huge autumns,  
by the moist half-open darkness of the leaves.

Wakening from the dreaming forest there, the hazel-sprig  
sang under my tongue, its drifting fragrance  
climbed up through my conscious mind

as if suddenly the roots I had left behind  
cried out to me, the land I had lost with my childhood---  
and I stopped, wounded by the wandering scent.

Pablo Neruda

I keep reading and rereading the poem you sent me. It's so full of death, life and moments of amplified awareness. This intrigue with death started young for me and I dare say for you, too. The death that is a part of a cycle, that never truly ends but pushes against the living; your poetry and cooking, my painting and gardening.

You and I grew up in a graveyard. It sounds funny to say, but think of how many hours we spent accompanying my mom on her daily walks. The reminder of death was of crucial importance to our awareness as children. Morbid or not, when I looked over that endless grid of graves across a landscape I was reminded to live in the moment.

Do you remember the grave rubbings we did so often, copying the words and the old names down on our papers with crayons of different colors? I can't assume it helped you learn to read but I am certain this tactile rubbing of names cemented words and letters in my mind on a new level. Tracing over the letters I could arrange words in correct order as opposed to relying only on my eyes that would jump.

Besides words I remember the forms of the stones, counting the different graves, organizing the protruding shapes from the mossy ground while looking for commonalities between headstones. There were tiny graves with sleeping lambs that had been rubbed out almost completely by the weather. These marked the babies that were stillborn or lost after birth.

Do you remember choosing names from the gravestones to name our own future make-believe babies! Only now on reflection do I realize how disturbing this practice might seem to an outsider. The graveyard, however, was not a place to go to think about death for Mom, or for us. It was a means for living and the strange intersection where death became a transitory reality.

By transitory I do not mean purgatory or journey to an ethereal place in the sky but as a way to transition to another stage in your life. From what I know of energy, it doesn't disappear but transfers into other forms, whether that be the body that loses breath and cools until the warm stench of decay reactivates the dead cells into soil, or something happening far beyond what imagination can conjure, the momentum of energy lives on.

I like to think of it in terms of paint. A wet brush with a tint of ultramarine blue starts its life fresh and vivid as it is dragged across the surface and melds with different colors. Eventually that stroke of color will disperse from the brush. But the action of the stroke still lives and continues to make its mark with dry bristles digging into other colors and making an impact on the canvas as a

whole. The brush will run off the edge. It is not the end, but a breath, a gesture slicing the air to pick up more color.

When I was home over break I went for a walk in Spring Grove Cemetery. The weather felt almost balmy for December and I was thankful to avoid the intensity of the holiday season for a few hours. The rush of Christmas is a great reminder of our fleeting understanding of time. One moment you could be absorbed in the “problems” occurring in life, on a sliding scale from getting packages wrapped in time to family being hospitalized the week before Christmas. The day after, the chaos is over and you have a week of calm before the new year.

A blue heron flew over my head and came to rest on the edge of a pond. It brought me back to the moment; to the woods, the smell of the moss I had been cupping in my hands. There is a constant churning in material on this earth. If framed appropriately it can affirm the acceptance of life in the presence. A professor of mine sent me this poem by Whitman, with a suggestion that it is “best recited aloud.”

“When you can hear the sea caressing / soothing / flailing / beating / lapping against the sandy shore in every phrase. You’ll hear these shifts swell and ebb in the voiced cadence. Note what the sea chants last - as she endlessly rocks the cradle of creation.”





(Figure 29) It's only time before waves of sand speckle their feathers and carry them deep into the ground.  
Dreams are shattered when remembered: a broken land of reeds, rocks and grebe carcasses  
longing to stretch their wings to take to the sky.

Through the window of the memory that is shattered from the night before  
broken land, walked one foot in front of the next  
carcasses lay at my bare toes wanting to stretch their wings to take to the sky  
whistling, clicking reeds to rock  
lapping water of a saltless sea at my back  
you cannot hide from the illness in our water  
it's only time before waves of sand speckle their feathers and carry them deep into the ground.

Dear Ruth,

Just spent four consecutive twelve-hour days in the studio. I felt so connected to my process and the excitement of making. I was so eager at points that I ran from spray booth to open space (where I have been working on my bigger paintings) because the walk seemed too long of a wait to make my next mark.

You know those points in life when you catch yourself laughing for no reason. I find myself crawling around on the cold cement with paint-covered hands; something triggers a laugh in the back of my throat that gurgles up and hisses out my nose. On the good days I leave the studio with my cheeks hurting from unconsciously smiling.

My paintings have gotten so large I find myself absorbed into the landscape while making, as I sit in the center of a loose canvas. I crawl over the surface with carefully placed knees to bridge wet paint and extend my reach over unglued collage material. There is little in this world that brings me to the present like moving pigments on a surface.

The practice of large-scale painting is not always comfortable. Hours of unacknowledged abuse compounds over time. I resorted to bolstering my aching bones with paint splattered couch cushions. Like a pregnant woman trying to find the right position in order to get a good night's sleep, I stack and pad, shift and re-adjust till I find it, and then can't reach my paint: the necessary discomforts of delivery.

Up on the ladder looking down at the floor below, teetering with paint and brushes high on my perch, I finally get the perspective I need on the raw piece of canvas, making notes and little sketches to remind myself of my next strategies. As the hours advance, my butt bones grind into the plastic grooves of the top step; bare toes twist around aluminum legs as I drift in and out of concentration. I squint, turn the lights off, flip my perspective and stare.

My work is the practice. The daily exercise of a fresh, deceptively simple looking is my achievement, in the studio and out. It has neither beginning nor end but exists in the moments when life gets absorbed. I have a language to make sense of those moments through paint and an eye for composition, like punctuation clarifies meaning and tone.

Hope you find your way to the studio today. I am off to teach.



(Figure 30) Studio shot, getting distance from a collage

Dear Ollie,

I have been working on the three large paintings, the central images for my thesis. It was a challenge to get far enough back from the images. I could walk back through the space but objects would intersect my line of vision. I've found the catwalk to be a useful perch. I sit and look through the bars. It gives me enough distance to see the image as a whole. Seeing the image now in a slightly different way allows my eyes to pick out the areas that are creating issues.

You will be pleased to hear I have finally gotten some distance from the Masonite surface I so cherished for years. The canvas was completely frustrating at first and for weeks my trips to the studio felt foreign. I felt like I had become a person set in my ways who was traveling to a place where I don't speak the language, understand the customs, or enjoy the food. All I could think about was pulling a sheet of Masonite from my studio to enjoy the marks I so missed, the way gesso would slide across the wet surface, the possibility for unexpected marks made by puddles of colors. The puddles would start to dry around the edge while the wet pigment in the center could be wiped off with a paper towel, revealing unexpected color relationship and a thin crisp line.

The marks on the textured canvas surface are completely different. There was a point when I stopped comparing them and started viewing the canvas as a new experiment that would benefit my practice in the long run. The shifting mindset opened a willingness to tackle and enjoy canvas unto itself.

One of the major frustrations with the canvas was how it buckled under wet paint and collage that was drying at different rates. This left the canvas rippled with puckered pockets that pulled away from the wall. After a while this negative attribute started to become interesting to me. It made the painting more ethereal and transient, adding to the movement of the subjects in the image like grass blades or wire whipping in the wind. The painting feels less fixed, like it could blow away with its subjects. When teaching, we suggest the students take a step back to see what they are painting. It is funny to think I have to climb a flight of stairs and retreat across a warehouse sized studio to get distance.

Dear Jim,

I enjoyed our conversation today about the work from the Porcupine Mountains Artist Residency. Those twelve panels I made during the summer have become a huge influence on my thesis work. It was the first time I allowed geometric form to be present as shape within my compositions.

In my mind I was creating a landscape with simplified natural forms that slowly became more geometric in their abstraction. I'm sure most viewers would not see a traditional landscape within my more abstract compositions. At the fundamental level a landscape tends to have a horizon line, distance and some kind of accessible space. In my images the space is fairly shallow and graphic. With their black-and-white photocopied ground, the images almost look like drawings. The perspective shifts from a downward gaze, to seemingly gazing at the sky, which gives it an atmospheric quality.

The structure of the images is not the only major change. The way I have been using materials and my willingness to experiment has shifted, too.

The ripped line of the paper collage adds diversity to the cut lines. It has a softening effect as the paper fibers pull apart and become more transparent towards the edge of the rip. When that piece of collage is pasted down the ripped area becomes even more transparent, creating a subtle haze along the edge of the line. In other areas there are sharp lines created both by the collage and paint techniques. The sharp line seems more stark, aggressive, and ironically less obvious when in conversation with the ripped edge.

Variety is extremely important to my painting practice. I have spray-painted areas, glazed areas, areas where acetone breaks acrylic, or spray paint is applied to a pool of wetness and swirls till the water dries. There are many substances that don't allow paint to mix or dry at the same rate; they create unexpected diversity and interest.

The paper has a completely different language depending on thickness, surface texture, transparency and absorption. I use several different types of paper, everything from excess prints and recycled paper to Epson archival matt paper. Rice paper has a beautiful translucency; you can see the grain and strands of rice pulp especially when the paper is subtly stained with color. I was given bulk paper from the printing lab at school to do large experiments with tape and splashed paint, so that I could experiment on paper instead of on my painting in progress. Experiments with blended paper result in a pulp that I can throw down on the canvas, a spit wad of forceful almost aggressive action. I then lay delicate glazes over those areas. You can see the duality of intention in the different applications.

The other day I mixed black paint, some wax and the bristles from an old paintbrush and let the tar like substance drip down a pane of glass to photograph the texture, shape and movement. I then pressed paper to the surface, collecting the paint for more experimental collage. That collage stayed on my studio floor and was walked over multiple times before taking the bulk of a spill of green paint. That accident of spilled color was needed to complete the material. The experiment gone awry is now part of the paintings.

This practice of producing experiments for collage material has grown more diverse over the past year. I make marks on a canvas or loose paper that I then document through photographs that will become collage material for a particular painting or for others in the future. I can shift the scale or color of the marks in Photoshop before reintroducing the pattern to the painting.

It is hard not to see everything as input in this type of studio work. I have no idea what could inspire the next experiment. This is the reason I believe my biking commute became so crucial to my images. I would leave the studio primed for looking and would find all of my answers along the side of the road. The collage material became central to the body of work I have produced for my thesis.



I tend to shift the colors from my roadside images to build continuity and focus within my chosen palette. For a long time I used the images as I found them. This practice tied me to the seasons and made it a challenge to break outside of natural tones if I so desired.

The representational roadside images have a way of mimicking those experimental images I produce in the studio. Looking for commonalities between materials is a rich part of my practice. When bark looks like paper pulp, when acrylic mixed with acetone splashed on the surface of rice paper resembles ants, when drips read as cords, blades of grass and roots systems, the similarity of forms becomes a game.

I feel like I'm exposing my daily practice as an act of following scattered breadcrumbs into these large canvases and trusting the practice will produce a feast.



(Figure 31) Stalk 4  
Painted from an assortment of natural material: mushrooms, seeds and branches,  
as planar forms, in the Porcupine Mountains Artist Residency Program, summer of 2013.



(Figure 32) Studio shot

Dear Renee,

As humans we are consistently making associations based on the order and arrangement of things. Perhaps it's a primal necessity, like knowing stinging nettle grows near jewelweed plant known for its salve that relieves the itching and irritation associated with the stinging nettle. It is more than just placement that is important in this relationship. There is a power in repetition and pattern.

Psychologists have been aware of the power of repetition on our brains since the 1960's when Robert Zajonc first demonstrated the 'mere exposure effect. "It doesn't matter whether those things are triangles or pictures or melodies; people report liking them more the second or third time around, even when they aren't aware of any previous exposure." (*One More Time*, Elizabeth Hellmuth Margulis)

In our neighborhood, there is a house that is owned by a rock collector. The owner of the house has arranged large stones in the small yard. My mom came to visit me and we happened to park next to the house. She commented on the large stones and how out of place they looked in the little yard. For the rest of the day my mother pointed out rocks all over Ann Arbor, from pebbles on the sidewalk, to a stone path along a house, rocks I had never noticed in landscaping of a parking lot that I have walked past daily. Her encounter with stones out of normal context heightened her awareness of her surroundings.

I explained that in the same way her awareness of rocks heightened after seeing them out of place, I was hoping this would happen to the people viewing my artwork. They would see common things like weeds or trash on the side of the road in a new way. My goal is not to glorify trash but to raise awareness and help people to see connections they may have become conditioned to overlook.

I think it was the first time since I stopped making figurative work that she understood what I was attempting to do in my paintings and installations. My figure had turned into the viewer, and I was setting up a network of connections for him or her to discover.

Jan 19<sup>th</sup> 2014

Last night I was leaving the studio after a long workday and I happened to pick up a painting I did in the first semester at school. Seemingly appropriate because I am now in my final semester, I realized how similar the painting was in certain ways to my thesis work but also shockingly different. Looking at my current work, my techniques have matured, the paint handling is far more diverse and the subtle pallet shifts and flat planes of color allow for movement. My necessary move to canvas has made me completely reinvestigate my attention to texture and surface. Although so much had changed it was still obviously my work. This sound like a silly realization because I feel like I have been pushing and probing my practice so much that at times I don't recognize it as mine.

On walking into the studio this morning I noticed a scrap of canvas that I had done a few experiments on; it kept taunting me. Losing focus on my large work, I walked over, and about thirty minutes later had a composition finalized. After last semester's struggles and what felt at the time like a dry spell, now working on canvases the size of entire walls, this small, fast collage seemed to come instantly and without fuss.

I walked into the spray both with a few cans of spray paint and in five minutes had two canvases covered with paint. It was like the floodgates had opened and my practice came rushing back. The canvas handles more like paper than board and needs fast, free handling on the initial layer. So simple, and I have been racking my brain like a crazy person trying to reinvent the wheel.

As Andre Gide says, "One doesn't discover new lands without consenting to lose sight of the shore for a very long time." What he forgot to mention is that you might rediscover the land you left but not recognize it because of the ways you have changed over time.

Dear Ruth,

You are right, “The fact is that you can only stretch so far before you break. And that isn't a sign of weakness. It's biology. Focus on what drives you and trim the fat!”

I broke the other day under my own constructed pressure and ambition. There were several things that had been clouding my vision. I will do my best to explain how I unearthed a very simple solution.

I've been creating installations to photograph on a small scale in my studio since my arrival at school. I was only using them as part of my process but it was suggested to me that they could be artwork themselves. I have felt too vulnerable to show them as finished work until this point, but so excited at the prospect of giving people access to these little worlds that reveal my process.

Thinking immediately of scale as I do in my paintings, I started devising ways to engage three dimensional space using the same methods. And this is where my process took a detour. I started thinking my installation needed to increase in scale to compete, as my paintings demand attention because of their large scale, variety of marks, color relationships and more. I wanted the installations to be just as intentional and evocative as the paintings and not to get lost in the large space of the gallery.

While the experimental installations have pushed me to further expand my expectations for my paintings, they have also had a flurry of negative side effects. My studio now has been filled with plant materials and roadside detritus, giving me less room to physically move and less energy to focus on my paintings. The intensity of my studio has attracted onlookers. As they peer through the door I feel like a hamster in a cage ripping up material and shitting on the things that feed me.

In all honesty I am not having fun collecting. There is an unbelievable amount of snow outside, making it impossible to collect dead material and trash on the ground. I have been sawing off live limbs and ripping out anything that sticks above the snow. These materials are deer and rabbit livelihood, food, protection and shelter for winter. Not to mention I was killing plants for art, a

bad reason in my book. I've only taken photographs in the past because I don't want to disturb the ecosystems. These collections do just that; extract dead and living material from fields on a large scale. It feels like I am ravaging the land and that is completely contradictory to my belief system.

In passing conversation with a sculptor friend, who is also a graduate of the program, it became clear to me that my studio practice was bewildering everyone. It had been a while since we'd spoken at length about art and his questions were direct and fresh. Our conversation lingered around scale. Scale is something I have been playing with and pushing to the extreme in the last few years in my paintings. My work has progressively scaled up in size but the emphasis on scale has mainly been for skewing how objects exist in the space and their proportional relationship to each other, as well as to the viewer. For example, in my paintings I can make snake grass look like buildings, relying solely on a shift in scale.

The paintings work with a complex range of scale but my largest current painting especially skews the environment as a whole. There's an immensity to the images hanging in the large studio, filling the wall and making viewers feel small. There are only hints of a horizon in the paintings, as if the composition were a close up of a mountain range. Longing for continuity in this complex understanding of scale, I stubbornly set my mind to an installation that matched the intensity of scale found in my paintings.

With all of these thoughts percolating in my mind I was asked by one of my advisors, Sara, to install a show at the School of Natural Resources and the Environment called "Second Nature". I was going to be using some of my collected material from the roadside with my paintings as a dry run in preparation for my thesis. The physical action of installing the work for my show at SNRE made it clear that I would not want to make a larger final installation for my thesis exhibition.

Back to the drawing board in the last semester of my thesis year, I'm going to do what comes naturally. I'm going to make small intimate landscapes that you can walk around and peer through at nose level. So simple and yet such a long time coming.



(Figure 33) Anarchic Ikebana,

This installation offers an uncanny understanding of nature as hybrid form; paint, leaves, cardboard, mirror, reeds and roots become more complex in relationship to the surrounding materials.



Dear Ruth,

I am on my eighth attempt at an idea for my thesis installation. I had an exciting realization that the practice of painting is becoming more similar to the arrangement of objects. Key to maintaining fluidity between my two and three dimensional work is keeping the language and working methods the same but using different materials.

I've been cutting out pieces of Masonite and am in the process of hanging those shapes suspended from the ceiling. The geometry of the circles, ovals and rectangles is similar in form to the shapes I'm using in the large paintings. I've just purchased plexiglass, half inch thick to avoid warping with weight, to cut familiar shapes out of and hang from the ceiling of the gallery. After installation I can compose experiments with roadside debris and natural materials on the floating forms.

Here is how I currently imagine the installation. It will be in the front of the gallery. Upon entering you'll be confronted with assemblages that will initiate a practice of looking before even seeing the paintings. The 3-D nature of the sculptures invites investigation through walking around them. These miniature, floating landscapes are hung at different heights so viewers have to get their nose up to the work and shift their understanding of landscape at a different scale. The mode of investigation shifts depending on the viewer's position. I want to bring the collections up to eye level to give the viewer an experience similar to how I see things on the roadside.

Most of the time, I am on my hands and knees or squatting down to get my camera close to my subject. The placement of my body has everything to do with how and what I am seeing. One step and the composition changes dramatically; it unfolds and may become more or less clear. I do not expect that my viewers will be as willing to take my stance but I feel it is necessary for them to peer into a landscape at their own eye level. Because there is a dialog between the installation and the paintings, the viewer is primed for the practice of looking once entering the main gallery. Investigation of relationships over distance is the navigator; as scale shifts similar objects unfold while approaching the immersive paintings. I feel like I am finally on the right track.

Dear Ruth,

I was wrong. I have to go back to the drawing board and rework all of my ideas for the installation. The key to the fluidity between two and three-dimensional work is not in keeping the language the same while changing the materials. My knowledge of paint is far more diverse and complicated than anything I can do with objects. Another failure to add to the list. I hope these constant failures will amount to something in the next month. Sometimes I wonder.

I think I need a form to hold the objects within a broader organization. The only good news I have: the paintings are feeling more complete. The extra time will give me a chance to tackle this sculpture.

It has been snowing in Ann Arbor for the past few days, six to ten inches, I would guess. I have never seen so much snow in my entire life. It seems like every few days we get another layer. In comparison to the last two winters that were almost deprived of snow, it is a shock to the system and has been making it really hard to bike.

I open my front door to find a completely new neighborhood. The construction equipment across the street looks like marshmallow topped toys. The snow mounds into shapes that remind me of the moss I have been using as collage material, now scattered across my studio floor. Perhaps snow is the winter moss, an instigator to simplify every sharp edge.

I left my warm apartment to make a dangerous trip to the studio and now in my studio all I can think about is going out to play in the snow. I find myself fighting the urge... that obnoxious voice in my head that is calculating productivity. The snowflakes seem to beacon at my window. I am giving in.



(Figure 34) Phoss

Twisted wires, roots and grass blades come in to focus;  
as if seen through a camera lens that fails to capture the movement as the mass curls up the side of this painting.

Dear Ollie,

I think I have resolved the large paintings that I was telling you about the other day. I suspended them from the ceiling, hovering at a distance from the wall. I was lucky to have a flood of visitors to see the work with fresh eyes. After a while I don't trust what I am seeing.

The three abstracted compositions are a mixture of geometric shapes and natural forms. I see the shapes as a close up, zoomed in versions of my landscape paintings and also landscapes unto themselves. However, from the feedback I have gotten no one sees them as landscape. I am hoping when they are hanging in the gallery in relationship to my landscape-oriented paintings the visual link will help viewers understand my intention of commenting on landscape. There is the possibility, then, of understanding the relationship of abstract painted landscape to our view of the land outside.

Each panel is handled differently in color, image and composition. The central painting bridges the left and right panels but also holds its own individuality as an image. The colors range from saturated chartreuse and cobalt blue to a variety of neutral grays and whites that give quiet spaces to the dense images. I have been introducing spray paint that creates a haze or a screen of smoke that simplifies the space when the imagery gets too congested.

It pleases me to see the viewers' consistent attempts to understand the succession of layers upon which the images were built. The surface transitions from paint to collage images of extension cords, roots, bolts, bottle tops, stems, cigarette butts, leaves, bark and coffee lids, overlapping and weaving into a dense mass. Viewers seem to start decoding the paintings by searching for the images they understand. At first the objects make little sense in relation to each other than that of a haphazard accumulation of detritus on a woodland floor. After viewers spend a bit of time with the images they start to see the relationships of form to content. The collage material is being arranged, as a florist would use flowers, for shape and color, arranging plants for their visual interest.

It seems like the next level of visual understanding opens up a dialogue between experimental paint and photographic collage. The viewer starts to understand how one informs the other, allowing the two modes to exist fluidly in fractured alignment. It was my hope that by introducing textured collage material on the canvas the viewers would be further drawn into exploring the image on a more tactile level.

My professor David said “I’ve noted my eye and mind often can’t settle on one point, element, or area. They continue to move over the surface, never back to the same place, but repeating with new variations. Incapable of breaking free from the internal logic my eyes keep moving. Continuously winding, sublime and not really constrained by an arbitrary frame the juxtaposing fragments engage my awareness. I like the challenge – it brings the mind back to use the eye to look again, and again.”

I am so excited to show you all the new work. It has been far too long.



(Figure 35) Phich, Phoss and Grust, 2014, Acrylic and photo collage on loose canvas, 144”x 96” per panel  
A composition of geometric shapes and natural forms that comprise an abstracted landscape  
of roots, bolts, bottle tops, stems, cigarette butts, and bark.



(Figure 36) Postcard for *Wayside*

Dear Ruth,

Time has stopped in a way I have never experienced in my adult life. Days feel unbelievably long and I have lost all sense of time. Outside my studio the snow makes the days feel even longer. It's like the weather is a skipping record that keeps jumping to blizzard over and over. It is making it hard to collect natural material and trash as it is all under a thick blanket of snow.

After dozens of iterations I finally titled my show *Wayside* and got my post card together. It was a challenge to pick a good image that gave enough information but left a certain mystery to be discovered. I spent quite a while cropping different images and finally ended up with a di-cut card, a circular close up of one of my large paintings. There are so many circular forms in my paintings and ironically in the metaphor of life cycles that consistently invade my work. The circle has no true ending or beginning, top or bottom. I am sure it will be a bit confusing when people see there are no circular paintings in the gallery... I don't know why it feels so right.



Dear Ruth,

I just may have it this time. If the circle is so important to me why not make the sculptures spheres?

It seems almost too simple but maybe that's good. I think that the resin that I was using on the levitating sculptures would hold the form of a sphere. I will try to use an exercise ball to build on. Another thought is to build the sphere in reverse so that the outside is smoothed using a large bowl shape. A viewer would then have to peer inside the pockets and holes in the resin to see the jagged material on inside.

I will have to go to the store to see what I can find to use as a mold and go digging in the snow for more material. I hope this is it. I am three weeks away from my opening. I need this idea to manifest in the next week or I am going to have to let it go.

It would not be the end of the world. I have learned a lot from these endless experiments, the benefits of which you can see in the paintings. As for the paintings, they're strong and will hold the large space of the Slusser Galley. All of that said, I am too stubborn to give up before the curtains rise. If there is a time to push myself out of my box, it is in graduate school.

I am off to collect material.

chewing on gravel  
cracks that widen with the thaw  
life pushes from beneath

Dear Ruth,

“We walk around; we see a shred of the infinite possible combinations of an infinite variety of forms. Anything can happen; any pattern of speckles may appear in a world ceaselessly bawling with newness.” (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard)

I spent the day at the studio yesterday building the sculpture for my thesis. I used two half-sphere plexiglass forms, light covers I found at the thrift store. In the same way that I had produced my mock-up I covered the plexiglass in wax, so the mold would release the form. Piece by piece I covered the trash and natural material in resin before setting it in place. All of the material I had found on the road--glass, plastic, branches, moss, street salt, screws, bike chains, pine needles and cigarette butts—I sealed with a glaze.

My gloves kept getting holes from all of the sharp materials, and the facemask that was keeping me safe from the toxic material kept falling off as I worked. After six hours I left abnormally tired from the day at the studio.

Early the next day I was back at work. Overnight the resin had hardened and I was excited to see the final product. However, I could not get the shape to release from the form. I used a variety of tools with increasing frustration then force, eventually breaking my mold in hope of saving the sculpture.

The structural integrity of the resin was broken and I was left with bloody hands and a pile of trash. I felt defeated as I grabbed my coat and headed to the parking lot. That was it. That was my last attempt. It was too late to start over. I sat down hidden between two University trucks as my eyes welled with hot tears.

With my back against a tire the world became blurry. The day was cold but the sun had warmed the parking lot. I looked down at the curb; the ice had melted back, creating a thin shelf of frozen lace that levitated above the warm asphalt. It looked like the resin in my original cast.

Watching the ice melt I said out loud, “ Why? Why can’t the stupid resin work look like ice?”

And stopped.

As my brain assembled the solution my body had already lurched off the pavement as I ran for the studio door.

“I can use ice.”

" 'Spontaneity' is the result of long periods of activity not truly in the moment; even the volcano's outburst presupposed a long period of prior compression, and, if the eruption sends forth molten lava and not merely separate rocks and ashes, it implies a transformation of original raw materials." (*Art as Experience*, John Dewey)

The river beneath our feet is old  
it weaves words in to the land  
finds its way back up to the clouds  
watching the world from above  
till the time comes  
to cry  
washing  
the buildup  
that shrouds  
vision.



(Figure 37) Building an ice sphere



(Figure 38) Melting snow

Dear Ollie,

It's early March now. As you know the snow is too deep in Ann Arbor for me to collect my material. I have taken a trip home where the snow is thin and in the sunny spots it has melted completely.

After an endless winter of frigid temperatures, the ground seems to hold the cold as the long grasses, still icy, break underfoot. The sun is warm, and there is a scent in the air of wet gravel and dirt. That specific smell has foretold the coming of spring for as long as I can remember.

I trip down the one lane road to my father's house that teeters atop the undulating and winding hills of Kentucky. Valleys on either side of the road steeply decline to muddy ponds and streambeds below. The road is pitted with potholes that well with water, oil and gasoline that swirl into rainbows in the light.

The telephone poles that patiently follow the streets in the city seem to take the shortest route when traversing the rural countryside. They cross property lines and arbitrarily tag team the road to break off through the woods to their next destination.

The fields have not been plowed under yet but hold the roots and stems of last year's crop. They don't feel empty like the abandoned parking lot I passed on my drive out. They seem as ready for the spring as I am, but unlike me are patiently waiting. It is amazing that both spaces in transition have such a different feel, one full of aching possibility and the other so trapped.

I was in search of animal bones that were unfortunately camouflaged by the pockets of snow. I slid my boots over the icy grass feeling for the spongy texture to become rigid and sharp. Bending down and picking through the grass I found bones and a few other scraps of trash to stick in my plastic bags. This type of collection has become a funny meditation. I find myself spinning stories from the remnants and lost lives I am now scavenging.



In the essay *Landscape And Narratives: Compositions and the Walking Body*, Katrin Lund makes a similar observation. "The rhythm of walking generates a kind of rhythm of thinking, and the passage through a landscape echoes or stimulates the passage through a series of thoughts."

My mind seems to be on all the time. Less than a week from the opening reception of my thesis exhibition I have been finding it harder to sleep. Reading always makes me tired so I have been thumbing through a book my advisor Robert suggested, called *Gargantua* by Julian Stallabrass. Before nodding off last night I read, "It might be strange to call it culture, but a great and subversive work of art, an immensely complex collage, is made and remade every day on the street and everyone participates in its fabrication."

What a perfect statement for my show.



(Figure 39) Kree  
Splashes of color come together to form a knot of chain-link fence that defies gravity.



Figure 40) First installment of ice spheres

Dear Gubby,

It looks like a wrecking ball, the moon, the berries on a honeysuckle bush or bald face hornet's nest. The "snow globe" holds its form even as the ice, its binder, melts away. What is left dangling from a wire is a circular nest of material that reminds me of the storm drains we would play in after a rain.

I hung the first ice sphere two days ago and it is still melting. The water makes a hollow ping when it hits the canvas like rain on a tent. As the ball melts jagged objects come to the surface, some balance and others fall onto the wet canvas. I decided to use some pigment and ink in the ball so the canvas looks more like my paintings.

The spheres reveal a part of my process that viewers don't get to see. The melting of the spheres is a natural act of making without an artist's hand. The process of melting is slow but so far it seems people are willing to slow down enough to watch the vivid colors mix with grasses, leaves, cigarette butts and other trash pile on the canvas surface.

In Julian Stallabrass book *Gargantua* he speaks of contemporary consumption. How products are products only because they can be consumed and reach the end of their life cycle by decomposing. "When objects are seen together as trash, relationships of a more poetic and intrinsic interest emerge. The qualities of the thing itself begin to appear in sharp relief like pictures in a developing tray. We see them for the first time with clarity..."

I think this relationship speaks to the natural material in breakdown on the roadside as well. And the natural material and the trash start to build a history of years and layers of back-story. Stallabrass speaks of trash as "Torn, dirtied or broken, thrown into a combination with other fragmentary objects while it remains itself, it becomes a broken shell, its meaning reaching out to its partners in a forlorn but telling narrative."

I have been using the freezer at the studio to freeze the spheres but ran out of room for storage. So I have been digging holes in the snowdrifts just outside the front entrance of the studio. I feel

like a squirrel hiding acorns for a long winter. I trust the weather to stay cold for a bit longer, although I am ready for spring.

I can't wait to see you. It has been far too long.

she tee tee tees me  
calling under falling rain  
tender and singing

Dear Jennifer,

Titles are a tricky business. Almost like poetry in their power, titles at best engage and inform the work, give a clue to the artist's intentions or add an unexpected twist. Picking a title for me is a balance between being specific in the wording and not being literal.

In the past I have used poetry to title work: *How wise are the young* and *Into the Black Earth*. In the continued pursuit to simplify I started using single words, mostly verbs, explaining the movement held within the still image, like *Cadence*, *Yield* and *Drift*.

I spent a day last week with a dictionary highlighting words that informed my nameless paintings, simple and concrete. They were fine but didn't add anything new to the work. A suggestion from my advisor Robert helped focus my search "Why don't you make up words?"

I was paralyzed. After years of being told words are spelled incorrectly, this freedom of written expression brought an onslaught of internal voices. Over the years I have learned to laugh off and disguise my dyslexia to avoid the taunts, snickers and confusion.

For instance, my nine-year old dyslexic sister Julia asked my step mom to slyzzle her toast at the dinner table. Confused Beth responded "What?" and Julia in complete confidence said, "You know... Cut the toast into fours." Beth responded, "Quartered?" and in defense Julia said "Of course" as if slyzzle was just another word for quartered. Call it an active imagination or defense mechanism, if I had been nine, I would have believed her because she is already adept at covering her mistakes.

After reflecting on Robert's suggestion of made up words, I stubbornly set to the task of breaking through the fear that had arbitrarily formed of what was acceptable in writing. After all, made up words are no more than collaging letters as I would a painting. To get over the fear I got on my bike. Moving has always helped me process words.

My best titles came from these rides to and from the studio. I would envision a painting and speak the words that came to mind: the jagged form of snow tilted in an icy puddle. As it pitched like a boat on the sea, unstable in the wind, it hesitated before falling; tilt, twitch, ditch, pitched, fall... and finally, Phitch. The word feels right in my mouth and forms connections that percolate in my mind without giving me any real concrete information.

After a while the titles started coming more naturally and the best seemed to bring multiple images to mind. Without realizing it I had stumbled over what Lewis Carroll coined a *portmanteau*, a fusion of two or more words that make a new word. The artfully written story of *The Jabberwocky* echoed in my mind. Carroll uses the common form of a hero's journey as a structure to twist our knowledge of the English lexicon. In doing so he taps into a sense of the infinite unexplored creative possibilities in communication.

John Dewey grasped the value of this creative thinking behind art when he wrote, "Philosophy is said to begin in wonder and end in understanding. Art departs from what has been understood and ends in wonder." (*Art as Experience*, John Dewey)

In my titles and paintings, I hope what has been understood as commonplace transforms because of its organization.





(Figure 41) Photo of canvas beneath ice spheres

Dear Summer,

I wish you could've made it to the opening. I know it was impossible for you to make the trip but I wanted to share with you through words what the experience was like in the gallery. The night felt almost magical to me with a flurry of friends, loved ones, and strangers. The gallery was large enough for people to actually spend time seeing the work, which is normally a challenge at openings.

On walking into the gallery you approach a wall with a painting hung rather low. The painting has a bright yellow diagonal that slices the images and spills over jagged shapes. At the top of the image worms twist around a ball of roots and green stems seem to hover as if being suspended in space.

As you walk around the wall, the gallery opens to an enormous room with three central paintings floating in the back of the room, several large paintings along the walls and an installation in the center of the space. It seems like metamorphosis and transformation would be good words to describe the paintings and installation.

The installation is a set of fifteen spheres of natural materials and debris found on the roadside. Held together by ice and pigment, all spheres were in different stages of melt. Every now and then a large object would let loose and fall, making an unexpected noise or splash and scaring a bystander. The viewers told me that the gallery smelled like the roadside in spring, a side effect of wet roadside material that I wasn't anticipating but was pleasantly surprised by.

It seemed that people moved from the spheres to the paintings. When you stood to look at one of the spheres, the painting hanging on the opposite wall would call attention to itself. In a sense, the people in the gallery become a part of the installation as they fill the gallery space between the works. The paintings, all from this past year, move from a more traditional landscape to an abstract space of woven collage and experimental paint marks.

It didn't occur to me until the show was hung how much blue I used in the paintings. A curator who came to talk to me about the work kept asking me about the choice of palette. He asked about the lack of red in my paintings and abundance of blue. I wasn't able to answer his question as thoroughly as I would have liked at the time, though I did intentionally leave the saturated and, at times, aggressive nature of red out of the paintings.

Looking back I would have said, I think the color in my paintings comes from the hazy blue of distance in the mountains in Indonesia, the aqua blue of the deep sea from my trips diving, the gray blue of Lake Michigan, the daunting storm clouds that chased me down on my collection bike ride and the emotional blue of solitude.

“The world is blue at its edges and in its depths. This blue is the light that got lost. Light at the blue end of the spectrum does not travel the whole distance from the sun to us. It disperses among the molecules of the air, it scatters in the water. Water is colorless, shallow water appears to be the color of whatever lies underneath it, but deep water is full of this scattered light, the purer the water the deeper the blue.

The sky is blue for the same reason, but the blue at the horizon, the blue of the land that seems to be dissolving into the sky, is a deeper, dreamier, melancholy blue, the blue at the farthest reaches of the places where you see for miles, the blue of distance. This light does not touch us, does not travel the whole distance, the light that gets lost, gives us the beauty of the world, so much of which is in the color blue.” (*A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, Rebecca Solnit)



(Figure 42) *Walow*, ice spheres melting



(Figure 43) Photo of canvas beneath ice spheres

March 16 2014

Today I was sitting in the gallery watching the ice spheres slow drip come to a stop after days of melting. The water and pigment now settled in large pools on the canvas had started to recede and evaporate, leaving a crust of tide lines and salt as a trace. There was a feeling of settling and expiration that the piece hadn't held until that point.

The ice spheres do something subtly different from the paintings. They keep changing after I leave. In the paintings I am aware of my hand at work, ripping, cutting, sanding, throwing paint and brushing on pigment. The ice installation starts with my hands and my choices within the arrangement of the balls. As the spheres start to melt natural forces take over the organization, disassembling my intended arrangement, eventually creating a heaping mess of pigment, trash, and natural debris. This removal of my hand creates a far more powerful statement, where the lack of control and momentary existence hold the piece in the present.

Andy Goldsworthy taps into the joy of the present moment, the immediacy of building structures that have an expiration date. He playfully arranges nature as one would if those objects were building blocks, not to destroy or change but to reorganize the things we take for granted when we walk through the woods.

In one square photograph we see a creek bed cropped and some rocks and still water filled with red Japanese maple leaves. The saturated red leaves form a circle of black water, creating a crisp line around the edge, exercising knowledge of color theory with natural materials to shift an understanding of space. There is immediacy to these built structures that have an expiration. This moment in time that holds those leaves and that water in those rocks before they move is the magic of Goldsworthy's work. The normality of the creek bed and autumn leaves has been restructured to direct our attention. Objects that we may walk past daily have a specific place in which they live. When taken out of context and reassembled they hold a new story. This brings to light all of the other spaces where those objects have existed. The organization paired with the vividness in color and the beauty in nature draws my eye. The earth becomes an open canvas for exploring the subtleties in form.

We see images in rocks and build stories for the stars that exist in the night sky. In this way we build a mythology out of our surroundings. Goldworthy's photographs are a direct link to the act of making, the practice of which turns the natural world into a playground and invites viewers to re-imagine their interactions with nature.



(Figure 44) Image of Andy Goldsworthy's work





(Figure 45) The canvases from *Wallow*, the dipping ice spheres

Dear Ruth,

It just hit me this morning that it's done. Today I started taking down the show. The culmination of the last three years of work is done. I am almost finished writing thesis letters and I will start a new life again in just a handful of weeks. The weather is getting warmer every day and the snow is gone now.

A few days after the opening I made a trip to the studio to clean up a pile of collage that had collected and been forgotten in all the chaos of the show. Next to the entrance of the studio sat an ice sphere half melted but still holding its form in the snow bank where I had been stashing them for the show. The past few years have been some of the most challenging and equally rewarding years of my life. Just as the spheres melted, time moves on with plans and hopes for the future.

I am starting to get sentimental about things and have to stop myself because I want to remember the whole picture of how my time at this program played out. All of the wonderful highs of long days in the studio, trips to other countries and my own discoveries in Ann Arbor. My experience would not have been as powerful without the days when everything went wrong, sleepless nights of wrestling with my writing or searching my brain for hopeless solutions. As I write this, my right eye has started twitching, a well-known reminder that my day of writing should soon come to a close.

One last thing before I send this off. When I was taking down the spheres, I finally got to uncover the canvases. I was shocked because the form looked so familiar. I had seen it on the road. When an animal dies and starts to decay the grass around its body dies as well. The paintings looked like those death rings but in human proportion. It was a sobering discovery.

I have seen a lot of death rings on the side of the road. With the next year's spring the grass comes up tall and hardy. I hope the same is true for my work in the years to come.

Dear Reader,

In focusing on the things I've been looking at in the studio and out in the natural world I see nothing but expanse. I believe you can live a life with eyes open, find what drives you and not be afraid to investigate it. One thing that has become clear to me in the past year is that awareness spurs change and creative solutions.

I leave you with Tatiana Argounova-Low's words from *Narrating the Road*. "Part of what makes roads, trails, and paths as unique as built structures is that they cannot be perceived as a whole all at once by a sedentary onlooker. They unfold in time as one travels along them, just as a story does as one listens or reads and a hairpin bend turns like a plot twist, a steep ascent signifies a building of suspense to the view at the summit, a fork in the road an introduction of a new storyline, arrival at the end of the story."





(Figure 45) *Wayside* Thesis Exhibition



A thank you note...

I could not have made the strides in my artwork or writing without the guidance, patience and willingness of my advisory committee, letter writers, writing editors and fellow graduate students to trust the unruly process of my art practice.

I want to thank all of my letter writers for the gift of their thoughts. This collection of writings holds the dialogue, support and forever growing companionship of friends. I would not be the person I am today without all of the people who have brought so much joy and insight to my life.

Jennifer Metsker worked as my editor to give my words clarity, a creative outlet to find joy in the writing process and a friend who stood by me in the process of writing. She has combed through this writing with me, word for word, without judgment of misspellings, grammar or lack of structure. She saw the big picture of what I was failing to say and propelled me with the questions I needed to investigate to stay on track.

Jim Cogswell and Robert Platt have both generously shared their painting practices, teaching methods and experiences of how they found their way through a non-conventional life as artists and teachers. They both changed the way I look at painting, a gift that is invaluable to my life and the way I preserve the world around me.

Jim has given me a voice with my writing, a voice I had given up a long time ago. His guidance helped me accept my writing practice as messy; like a painting it needs time to be refined and developed. He showed me that writing comes to life in the nuances that expose my art practice and give me a venue to share my experiences with my viewer. This sharing with my words instigated the need to make art that exposes process, engages the viewer's senses and invites an open form where the viewer can experience for themselves the reasons I fight to make art.

Robert has been a driving force that subtly demanded I continue to explore and experiment even when I was longing for a concrete answer. When I thought I should be focusing he encouraged me to keep expanding my images and marks, make distant connections and endlessly experiment.

His non-conformist voice is the one that come to mind when my paintings become too easy. He saw value in my haptic obsessions that others dismissed as too chaotic.

David C. Michener and Sara Adlerstein-Gonzalez brought fresh voices and eyes to the work. David consistently stunned me with his generous responses, poetic connections, foresight into pertinent information from his field and vulnerable wisdom from his life. Sara was a grounding force in the group who brought her knowledge of environmental awareness, and coincidentally, painting to the fantastic group conversations. She also encouraged me to show at the School of Nature Recourses and Environment Art Galley, which pushed me to start making early decisions about the installation that propelled my thesis into reality.

Over the years a few other advisors have been so important to my development. Hannah Smotrich reminded me consistently to push my constructed boundaries, refine my choices and deny my habits to make new discoveries. She brought a designer's eye and constructive criticism to the table that spurred rich and pointed conversations.

Beth Diamond was another advisor that had an enormous influence on my work. She had an amazing ability to speak across disciplines, making fluid connections between design, painting, gardening, travel, sustainability and a cultures relationship to the landscape. Beth passed away in April of 2013 but I firmly believe her teachings live on in my work.

Lastly I want to thank the graduate students, my companions and friends who were honest, encouraging, critical when need be. I would not be where I am without this intimate group of amazing artists that feel like family after the past three years.

Thank you!



## **Literature Review**

### *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, Rebecca Solnit

This book is rich in subtle observations that offer freedom to the willing observer. How many times in a day do we allow ourselves to get lost in the unending possibilities that wandering provides. Most of my past year has been seeking guidance to deepen my practice with this type of wandering. Solnit's words were a critical guide in that learning process.

### *A Natural History of the Senses*, Dianne Ackerman

This book examines the effect that our five senses have on us, consciously or not, in our daily lives. Ackerman delves into many nuances of different cultures' sensitivity to specific senses and how those signals create challenges or strengths based on the sensory experiences available in these places. I read this book in Indonesia and it allowed me to experience the place through her words.

### *Art as Experience*, John Dewey

This book's central message is that life is a series of experiences and art at its best holds the essence of those experiences. Throughout my time writing letters I often thumbed through the pages of this book looking for some kind of guide. The writing normally sent me scrambling back to the studio where I would get enough distance from my writing through art making to tackle and solve my own stumbling blocks on the page.

### *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime*, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolf

This book explores the concept of the sublime in the twenty-first century and the ways in which it has shifted since the theory's first definitions in the romantic period. Ideas around the sublime have been surfacing in my artwork since my focus shifted towards landscapes. I chose this book to read with one of my letter writers as a way to focus and explore the conversation to be had about the sublime.

*Entropy and Art*, Rudolf Arnheim

This book discusses the dichotomy of nature's simplistic structures and chaotic disorder. Arnheim grapples with contradictions of the chaos and breakdown of death in the natural world that ultimately ends with order because of the nature of reduction through entropy. This book has been critical when thinking about order in relationship to paint, collage, structuring my writing, organizing my thesis and my interest in decay as subject matter within my work.

*Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, Sergei Eisenstein

This book was of interest to me in terms of the differences between Eastern and Western storytelling and how those relationships build a visual space in film. The topics discussed can be easily translated to refer to the visual space in a painting and more directly to the collaged images. It provided further acknowledgement of the importance of fractured images in my collage work and the parallels between the collage process and the process of cutting scenes in a film.

*From A to X*, John Berger

Berger starts this book by weaving together a structure of poetic letters sent from a woman to a man in prison. He reveals the letters are left in the order they were found and are not chronological. Berger says the prisoner used the back of the letters to write thoughts that don't correspond to the letter on the front. This complicated two-way dialogue opens a tender and real access into the intimate lives of these people. I was hoping by using the epistolary form for a thesis I could tap into something more idiosyncratic and personal than a strictly academic paper.

*Gargantua*, Julian Stallabrass

In this book Stallabrass personifies our mass culture of consumption by creating a mythical creature that he names Gargantua. He brings to light the idea that trash is contemporary; the trash we see on the road couldn't have been there 10 years before because trash is connected to the current product design. Even as it loses its identity in

the process of breakdown, trash still holds a current time reference. This is different from leaves, twigs, stones and other natural materials. There is timelessness in the natural world that doesn't exist in the ever-changing mass culture in which we live. This book made me realize the importance of acknowledging the current state of our landscape and how it is a visualization of our imprint on nature.

*In the Mind's Eye*, Thomas G. West.

West discusses topics that range from neuroscience studies to interviews with people who have difficulty learning. He gives clear definitions of dyslexia and other terms that people commonly use but don't understand. Explaining the challenges as well as the gifts, he exploits the ironies of creativity that are a byproduct of having dyslexia. This book was a needed link for me to understanding the curious nature of my learning differences and how those differences have affected my studio and writing practices.

*Landscape And Narratives: Compositions and the Walking Body*, Katrin Lund

In this essay Lund talks about the narrative that is built in the process of walking over and through a landscape. She explains that the process of walking can't be understood as a whole, but like a narrative unfolds over time on the road and through the distance of travel. This essay gave clarity to why I need to walk or bike when in a new environment, and provided perspective about how the process of moving through a landscape enters directly into my thinking about art and the things I am seeing on the roadside.

*Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition*, Robert Rosenblum

This book was a wonderful art historic reference to thinking about the Northern Romantic Tradition and how it relates to my paintings. Moving from Casper David Friedrich's vast landscape paintings to the equally expansive paintings of Mark Rothko, this book helped me to contextualize my work in terms of art history.

*Narrating the Road*, Tatiana Argounova-Low

This article is based on ethnographic research of the importance of the road to two neighboring villages in Siberia. The road becomes these people's story. Both the men and

women of the village have different relationships to the road that creates the narrative of their lives. This reading fascinated me because it breaks down people's relationship to roads and narrative.

*One More Time*, Elizabeth Hellmuth Margulis

<http://aeon.co/magazine/altered-states/why-we-love-repetition-in-music/>

This was a fascinating article to read about how the brain receives positive signals from repetition in music refrains and to patterns in art. These ideas gave me insight into my interest in self-similarity of objects and forms in my artworks that repeat.

*On Photography*, Susan Sontag

This book analyzes how photography has shifted the way we think, what we remember and how we see the world through the lens of a camera. Sontag speaks of the relationship of the photographer and subject matter as intertwined and interdependent with the photograph's message. This book gave me some basic knowledge about the history and the baggage that comes with photography, a context for understanding what happens when the baggage of photography collides with the baggage of painting, especially when composing both mediums. Even the ideas I disagreed with gave me a firm grounding in my stance in speaking about the photo collage in my artwork and thesis writing.

*Outside Lies Magic*, John R. Stilgoe

This book legitimizes the fact that others in academia have found importance in slow observation on the side of the road that can only happen on foot or bike. Stilgoe, a professor at Harvard University, has been studying the act of seeing with a purpose for over twenty years, including the relationship between imprints and the human history attached to those marks. Through teaching courses on the topic and writing many books, Stilgoe invites people to engage in their surroundings like a detective with a new sense awareness and adventure.

*Parables of Sunlight*, Rudolf Arnheim

Organized like a journal, this book is a collection of rambling thoughts, notes and observations about daily life, psychology, art and the natural sciences. The book's approach to recording daily life inspired the form of my thesis, especially the journal entries. The book's relaxed tone also kept me writing even when I was tired of writing letters.

*Persist*, Peter Clothier

This book is a collection of Clothier's lectures and thoughts about his creative writing practices. Clothier's creative process paralleled the intense experience of my long distance collection ride over the summer and was my reading companion on the road, inspiring me to trust my instincts. It also served as a survival guide to making major leaps in my art once I reached the Porcupine Mountains.

*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard

This book is Dillard's account of her time at Tinker Creek. She spends a year recording her experience of nature, stripping away her preconceived notions of how to see. This book gave me permission to see and record the rough beauty of nature that most people wouldn't choose to spend time with. It was also my guide to write about the things I was experiencing on the roadside that had been informing my artwork without my recognition of the visceral experience I was having outside.

*Reinventing Eden*, Carolyn Merchhantz

This book gathers extensive research on the topic of the relationship of nature with the Western world. Merchhantz describes the relationship that Westerners have to the story of the Garden of Eden and how that narrative has become a factor in how we relate to the natural world. By disarming the inherent views of nature as forever dystopic or highly idealized, she opens a conversation about the need for awareness to discover sustainable solutions.

*Secrets from the Center of the World*, Joy Harjo and Stephen Strom

This book is a collection of poems paired with photographs from Navajo country. The collection of images and words speaks to time passing and the mark of evolution on the sparse and mysterious landscape. The poems provided me a poetic perspective of nature's eternal presence, how it exists without us; we are just another layer in the earth's story. This book so inspired me that I started writing my own poems in the form of haikus, simple observations of the roadside, to send to my sister, which are included in the thesis.

*Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, Italo Calvino

This is a collection of five lectures that Calvino planned to deliver at the time of his death. The chapters on lightness and exactitude were especially pertinent to thinking about my thesis work. His philosophy focuses on changing perspective to lighten the heaviness of life and the gift of seeing the complexity's of life as a way to demand focus from the chaos.

*Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, Georges Perec

Perec gives a distinctive account of numerous spaces we inhabit. From space and gaps on the written page to living spaces and, the most captivating chapter for me, street spaces. The content of this book was fascinating and relevant to my research, but I was most interested in how Perec organized the book to support the visual structure of space.

*The Spell of the Sensuous*, David Abram

This book delves into the intimate relationship we have to nature and the reciprocity needed to sustain that relationship. In the process of writing Abram draws on many sources; the most beneficial for my research was his exchange with the Balinese shamanism and his own lyrical description of his time in Indonesia.

*The Writing Life*, Annie Dillard

Dillard exposes the inner workings of her practice alongside reflections on daily life. Her observations provide lucid insights into her practice and her surroundings. The writing is

simple and eloquent. Dillard shifts from metaphors to crafted prose while revealing an account of her experiences with tackling writing. This book was hugely inspirational to thinking about my practice and how it could be presented to the reader.

*Vision and Art: The Biology of Seeing*, Margaret Livingstone

<http://ne.edgecastcdn.net/000210/articulate/0500/livingstone/player.html>

Livingstone is a researcher at Harvard Medical School who studies vision and how it impacts the brain. This book and her online lecture *What Art Can Tell Us About The Brain* expanded my appreciation for the connections that are made in the brain when looking at art. As I made my thesis work I found it important to think about what my viewer was going to experience while looking at my work versus my physical relationship to the work while making it. This thinking led to my need to make the ice spheres in order to open my process to my audience and expose some of the vital experiences that inspire my work.

*Walden*, Henry David Thoreau

In much the same way that Thoreau spent a year documenting his writing practice on Walden Pond, I took the leap to let a biking trip and artist residency guide and nurture my thesis work. Thoreau's written reflections were a clear guide for me while I documented the wonders of nature that were so obvious once I immersed myself in the experience.





**Images**



(Figure 1) *Swillind*, 2013, acrylic and photo collage on panel, 95”x 147”

(Figure 2) Studio shot



(Figure 3) *Loor*, 2013, acrylic and photo collage on panel, 54" x 45"

(Figure 4) Sketch of the painting *Drift*, 2013

(Figure 5) Edouard Vuillard, *Foliage- Oak Tree and Fruit Seller*, 1918, distemper on canvas 76" x 111 1/2"

(Figure 6) Edouard Vuillard, detail of *Foliage- Oak Tree and Fruit Seller*

(Figure 7) Studio shot of collage material and Itō Jakuchū print



(Figure 8) *Cadence*, 2013, acrylic and collage on panel, 98"x 97"

(Figure 9) Studio shot of writing process



(Figure 10) *Writh*, 2014, acrylic and photo collage on loose canvas, 84"x 144"

(Figure 11) Studio shot of worm garden

(Figure 12) Documentation from underwater dive



(Figure 14) *How Wise are the Young*, 2012, acrylic and collage on panel, 48"x 72"

(Figure 15) Tanya Marcuse, *Fallen N° 439*, 2013, 44 x 54"

(Figure 16) *Death on the road*

(Figure 17) *Creek bed in the Upper Peninsula*



(Figure18) *Silth*, 2013, acrylic and photo collage on panel, 49"x 60"



(Figure 19) *Stalk 5*, 2013, acrylic on panel, 11"x 8"





(Figure 20) *Strom*, 2013, acrylic and photo collage on panel, 45"x 37"

(Figure 21) Collage material

(Figure 22) Robert Platt's cave painting in Michigan's Upper Peninsula



(Figure 23) *Fract*, 2014, acrylic and photo collage on loose canvas, 84"x 144"

(Figure 24) Trash in Indonesia

(Figure 25) Documentation of a grave on Lambongan Island

(Figure 26) *Phoss*, 2014, acrylic and photo collage on loose canvas, 144"x 96"



(Figure 27) *Rhododendron*, 2012, acrylic and photo collage on panel, 48"x 60"

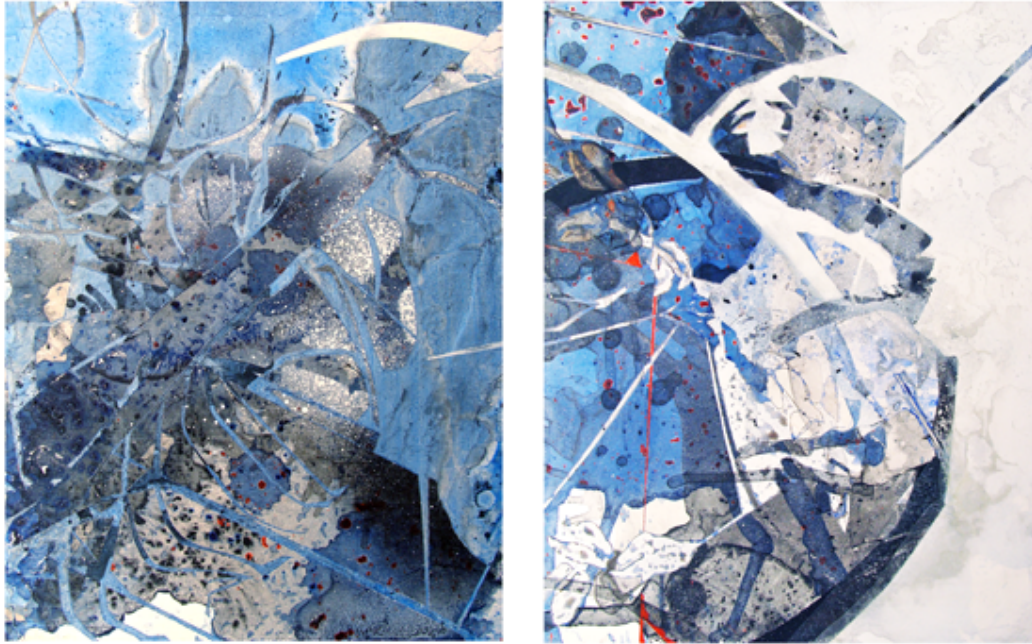


(Figure 28) *Drift*, 2013, acrylic and collage on panel, 98"x 97"



(Figure 29) *It's only time before waves of sand, speckle their feathers and carry them deep into the ground*, 2012, Acrylic and photo collage on panel, 48"x 72"

(Figure 30) Studio shot, getting distance from a collage



(Figure 31) *Stalk 4*, 2013, acrylic on panel, 11"x 17"

(Figure 32) Studio shot

(Figure 33) *Anarchic Ikebana*, 2013, paint, leaves, cardboard, mirror, reeds and roots

(Figure 34) *Phoss*, 2014, Acrylic and photo collage on loose canvas, 144"x 96"



(Figure 35) *Phich, Phoss and Grust*, 2014, acrylic and photo collage on loose canvas, 144"x 96" per panel

(Figure 36) Postcard for *Wayside*

(Figure 37) Building an ice sphere

(Figure 38) Melting snow





(Figure 39) *Kree*, (date?, acrylic and photo collage on loose canvas, 84"x 74"

(Figure 40) Installment of ice spheres

(Figure 41) Image of canvas beneath ice spheres

(Figure 42) *Walow*, Ice spheres melting (do you want to spell the title with one L or two. You change it back and forth here and in the body of the thesis).

(Figure 43) Image of canvas beneath ice spheres

(Figure 44) Image of Andy Goldsworthys work

(Figure 45) The canvases from *Wallow*, the dipping ice spheres

(Figure 46) *Wayside* Thesis Exhibition