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## Extremities

### **THE INTRODUCTION**

I have always enjoyed looking at maps, reading about geology, and observing the world in its physical form. I grew up in Ridgewood, New Jersey, which is a suburb thirty minutes outside of New York City. New Jersey is unique for many reasons—one being its geographical diversity, yet it is only about 8,722 square miles. There is farmland, mountains, beaches, valleys, and multiple bodies of water. Jersey is known for its humid meadowlands, but also its breezy summers down the shore. It's a place I never appreciated until I lived elsewhere.

The natural world has inspired artists for thousands of years, yet I can't help but think that I view it from a unique perspective. I've never been particularly interested in wildlife or botany, but rather the visual landscapes as a whole and how all of these elements come together to create complex ecosystems. Each part of a landscape is unique and crucial to its surroundings. I am intrigued by the visual relationships between these elements. I love the edge that is formed by a narrow tree branch contrasted with a bright white sky, or the soft edge formed by water gently kissing the sand, only to be interrupted by the corner of a wooden beach house. There are countless edges and boundaries that collide, mesh, overlap, and communicate with each other. Both natural and manmade, these borderlines separate and bring together our surroundings in this massive visual encyclopedia.

These relationships inspire the edges and boundaries created within my paintings. I am constantly observing the lines, limits, and bleeds that exist around me while learning

how I can transform these relationships into my own abstracted landscapes. In addition to observing my surroundings, I look at topography, geology, and plate tectonics. My project is a series of abstract paintings that explore the edge relationships in both man-made and natural landscapes, in addition to the exploration and accumulation of knowledge that is gained through experimentation and attention to formal elements. By working with these visual elements, I use painting as a chance to reinterpret what it means to live within the spaces and boundaries that are both visible and invisible.

## **CONTEXTUAL DISCUSSION**

### **I. Maps**

I look at topographical maps in order to see both natural and man made lines, such as state boundaries vs. changes in terrain, which come together to create unique compositions (figure 1). These lines are endlessly layered to create another kind of abstract landscape. Was the natural edge defined first, or the man-made edge? How does one edge affect its surrounding edges? In my process of painting, layering is extremely important. Topographical maps allow me to see the possibilities of layering and how line can serve a different purpose in a different context.

In addition to topographical maps, I use geological maps to see the depths of a certain space (figure 2). Geological maps allow me to see borderlines and edges, plus the dimensions, space, and textures of the land. Texture is another crucial element within my paintings. I use various mediums to build upon the surface in order to create space and dimension. Geological maps help me observe texture and physical space, and how I can

use materials to layer in different ways. So, not only do I use line as a layered element, but I also use physical texture.

To layer means to cover up a surface or body. Naturally, what is covered up in the layering process is equally as important as what ends up on the surface. I enjoy looking below the surface at the edges and boundaries we cannot see, such as plate tectonics (figure 3). Plate tectonics is the theory that the Earth's outer crust is divided and broken up into various plates that glide over the mantle (the more rocky, inner layer above the outer core). On different areas of the planet, the terrain and structure is different, and the various maps and natural landscapes we see today are a result of these shifts and cracks. This invisible element directly influences the land and space we interact with every day.

Not every edge and boundary is rigid and defined, even if it's manmade. These hard edges are in dialogue with other organic edges. Near my home in New Jersey, I am close to some extremely toxic waterways, such as the Passaic River (figure 4). This river faces one of the toughest clean up efforts in the country. From my perspective, the Passaic River does not look polluted. Water flows downstream, and I am unable to see all of the waste at the bottom of the river. However, there's an official ban on eating fish from the lower 17 miles of the river. I feel connected to this river and the different layers it has beyond its initial aesthetic appeal. The pollution within the river is not always physically visible, but it contributes to the river as a whole. Thinking in the margins of edges and boundaries, this type of organic edge adds a completely new element to this visual landscape.

## **II. Abstract Expressionism**

My stylistic approach primarily stems from abstract expressionism. Artists in the abstract expressionist movement made work right after WWII in the 1950s, with a new approach that broke free from figurative work to convey “the human condition” through large scale, expressive paintings. The motivation behind this new style was eye opening for me because it allowed me to think about my own work differently. In the past, I felt as though my paintings needed to be representational in order to hold validity and purpose. However, by learning more about abstract expressionists, I was able to reevaluate what was important to me, and learn how content doesn’t have to be something tangible and relatable within the physical world, but rather something that exists only within the confines of a painting.

Throughout my process, natural and unnatural landscapes serve as inspiration for the edges, lines, layers, and patterns I create. However, when looking at my paintings, one might not immediately identify these references. Abstract paintings are comprised of marks, forms, and strokes that are unique to the artist and rooted from various inspirations. The abstract expressionist I am most influenced by is Clyfford Still, who was a frontier of the movement (figure 5). Being one of the first to transition from figurative to abstracted work, Still used color and surface to create variation and illusions of layering. He used thick paint and hard edges, which reference natural forms such as stalagmites and foliage. When viewing his work, one might not necessarily recognize these influences. However, they serve as a launching point for his finished pieces. Learning about his unique approach allowed me to develop my own style and inspirations.

### **III. Contemporary Artists**



Spills, boundaries, and layers have been explored by many contemporary artists, but through different outlets and inspirations. When reading about various water bodies, I discovered the photographer William Miller, who takes captivating photographs of the Gowanus Canal located in Brooklyn, New York. Miller highlights the physical beauty of this river by framing it (quite literally) in a new perspective (figure 6). He creates these striking abstract compositions that allow the viewer to appreciate it for all its visual complexities. Through soft and hard edges, Miller gives the river a new purpose in his photographs.

Keltie Ferris, a Brooklyn based painter, pushes the boundaries of abstract mark making by exploring the opposition of rigorous and blurred edges (figure 7). She combines hazy fields of color with blunt, patchy squares to create layers and dimensionality. There is balance and symmetry within Ferris' work that seems almost like a grid, but it doesn't quite fit. The squares within her work resemble the pixels and shapes in computer games such as Tetris. Ferris once said in an interview, "I like the feeling of looking through things to a world you can't quite access, or a residue of a former world that you can't quite get to, and I try to have that in my paintings." Her attention to color, juxtaposed elements, borders, and lines successfully coexist within a shared space.

Another contemporary painter, Jackie Saccoccio, explores edges related to the body, and the impermanence and invisibility surrounding us (figure 8). Saccoccio is inspired by traditional portraiture, yet her paintings visualize abstract, expressive portraits. Her paintings feel celestial and transcendent, yet precise and well thought through. Saccoccio focuses on the idea of "emotional abstract portraits," using the hard

edges of dripped paint and shapes against spilled, ethereal clouds of color. There is a relationship between the artist and canvas as well as the edges within the canvas. I appreciate her ability to take inspiration from realistic elements, and abstract them in a composition that is reflected through process and emotional attachment.

## **METHODOLOGY**

I felt a lot of pressure at the beginning of this project to make every mark and layer perfect. I initially created small studies where I tried to utilize every accessible material while simultaneously channeling all of my interests (figure 9). This was pretty overwhelming, but as I made more studies, I was able to see what inspirations and visual components were most appealing to me. These studies allowed me to do quick experiments while accumulating my own set of marks I could reference in my final, larger paintings.

I am in a constant dialogue with my paintings—pushing and pulling, taking and giving, acting and reacting. I make precise and meticulous marks, only to take them back with a wash or spill (figure 10). By making the dimensions of my paintings 3.5 ft x 7 ft, I feel proportionally equal to them. If they are too small, there is not enough creative opportunity. If they are too large, it is too encumbering. I initially discovered my personal process through experimentation, and by recognizing what methods pulled me back in. My process is repetitive and cyclical. Each mark is in response to what came before it, with reference to my inspirations. I usually start with a thin wash of oil paint mixed with a large amount of turpenoid. I then respond to this spill with some sort of line or dense color field. Afterwards, I add another spill, followed by textured forms, and so on. This

process repeats and continues as I build upon these edge and spatial relationships. I learn as I go, remembering my previous steps in order to move forward efficiently.

I am consistently exploring how materials can work to my advantage. Although I primarily use oil paint, I use other materials like pouring medium, salt, water, and tempera paint. I enjoy learning how materials interact with one another, especially when they aren't necessarily designed to. The combination of oil and water based materials creates a beautiful resistance that I love to experiment with. Through trial and error and keen observation, I've learned how to predict the outcome of these materials in order to make my visions come to life. By layering and experimenting with various textures, the first few layers are almost unrecognizable by the end, but they are equally as important as the final layers.

## **CREATIVE WORK**

My final project is a series of three 3.5 ft x 7 ft paintings, named in sequential order as *Extremities I* (figure 11), *II* (figure 12), and *III* (figure 13). It was important for me to create paintings that worked together as a collection, but also as individual pieces. Through repetition and layering, I was able to make decisions that influenced each painting independently and collectively. There are specific elements in each piece that are both unique and repeated, and by creating this balance, the viewer is able to discover and interpret these similarities and differences.

In *Extremities I* and *III*, I wanted the viewer to focus on the large textured forms that were inspired by the Gowanus Canal and Passaic River. While working on these pieces individually in the beginning stages, I subconsciously used a similar composition.

Once I became aware of this, I tried to use it to my advantage. I asked myself, how can I make these paintings frame the middle piece, yet still make them visually stimulating? I strategically placed a hard stripe on the outer edges of both paintings to frame the triptych. I wanted these pieces to be loud with high density to distribute the viewer's attention.

I wanted *Extremities II* to primarily serve as a transition between *I* and *III*, focusing more on line. Many of the same elements are repeated, including texture, but are arranged differently with a more central composition. I wanted the elements to be more dispersed and spacious. In this piece, I was more attentive to the elements within *I* and *III*. I wanted the transparent yellow color block in the upper section to be in conversation with the transparent pink stripe in *III*, while I wanted the thin opaque grey stripe right below that to be in conversation with the thin, opaque grey stripe at the top of *I*.

In all three pieces, there are three elements I wanted to explicitly repeat: a pink stripe, opaque white spill, and the color yellow ochre. However, these three elements serve a very different purpose in each piece and stem from different inspirations. My final pieces are an accumulation of all my references and experiments that come together to visualize my own dialog between these formal elements. By working on each of them for several months, I was allowed to move slowly and analyze all of my decisions in order to best demonstrate my skills and personal style.

## **CONCLUSION**

This project helped me learn more about myself in eight months than in the last 21 years. Yet, aside from physically creating all of this work, writing about it was by far

one of the hardest parts. Coming into this year, I knew that I was painter, but that was about it. I never had to explain myself as long as my paintings were successful. In addition, I've always viewed abstract painting as this untouchable cloud of famous names and unexplainable concepts. Abstract expressionists didn't *have* to explain every mark they made, and meaning didn't *have* to be understood or relatable to everyone. So, why do I have to talk about it? Can't it explain itself? I was looking at this from an immature and simplistic perspective, though. Talking about abstraction is important, and it is rich with content, even if that content isn't universally applicable.

I am still in the process of fully understanding this meaning for myself. I initially felt pressure to uncover some life changing purpose in my work, but what I really needed to do was narrow my interests, and focus on just a few things that were most important to me *now*, and that I could further investigate. Experimentation is a huge part of my process, and that requires chance and discovery. The artist must give up freedom to the materials, and then re-claim it, which is both nerve racking and liberating. This is what keeps me on my toes, and this is what propelled me to create my final pieces.

Everything that has inspired my work, like maps, are just pieces that make up the full puzzle, and I don't need the viewer to recognize all of those pieces. I've learned how to be in touch with these passions and inspirations even if it isn't evident to everyone else. Concept is evident in different ways, which means discussing my work requires a different approach. In the future, I hope to expand upon these passions in order to make my paintings more successful. The possibilities of abstraction are endless, and I am excited to continue to be a part of the conversation.



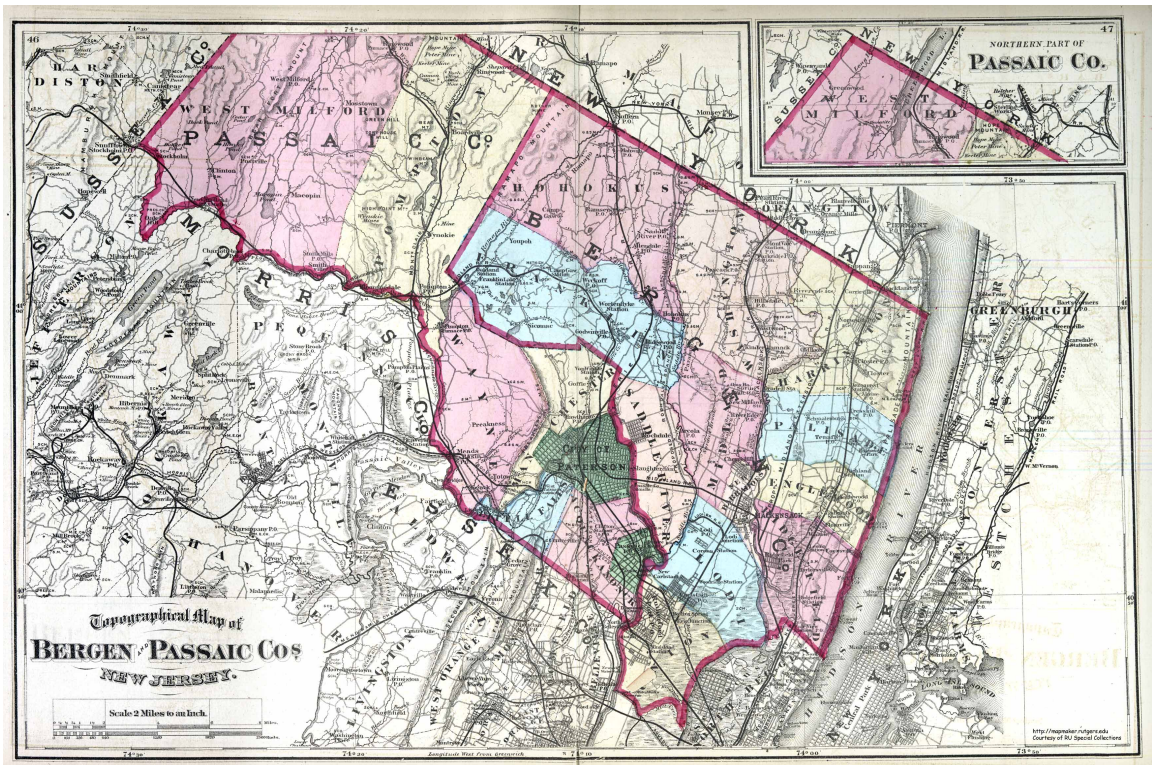


Figure 1: Topographical map of New Jersey

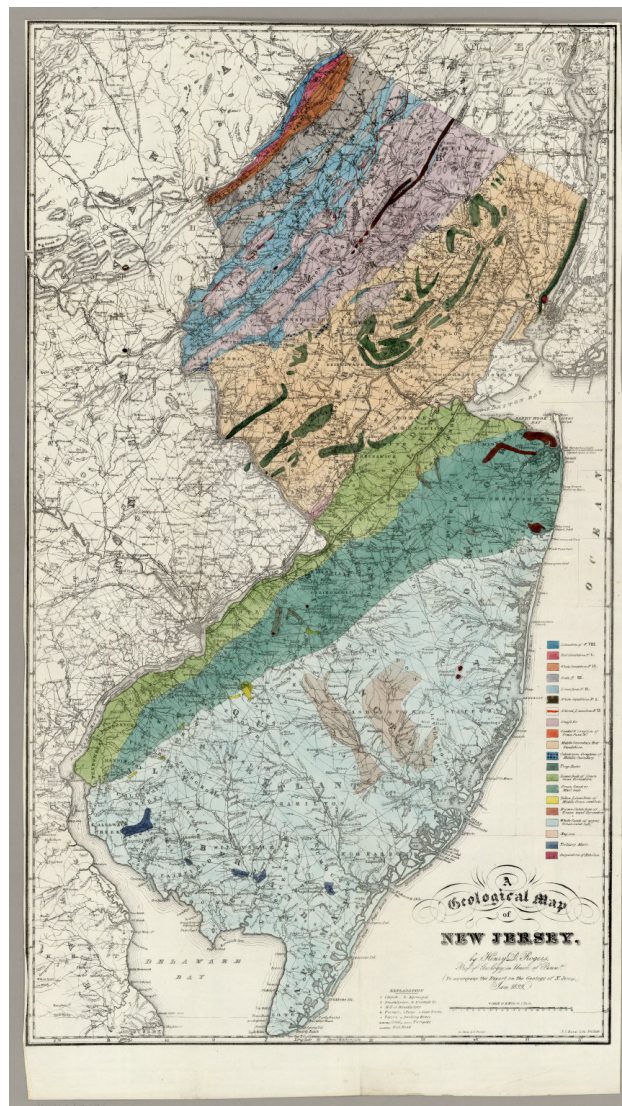


Figure 2: Geological map of New Jersey



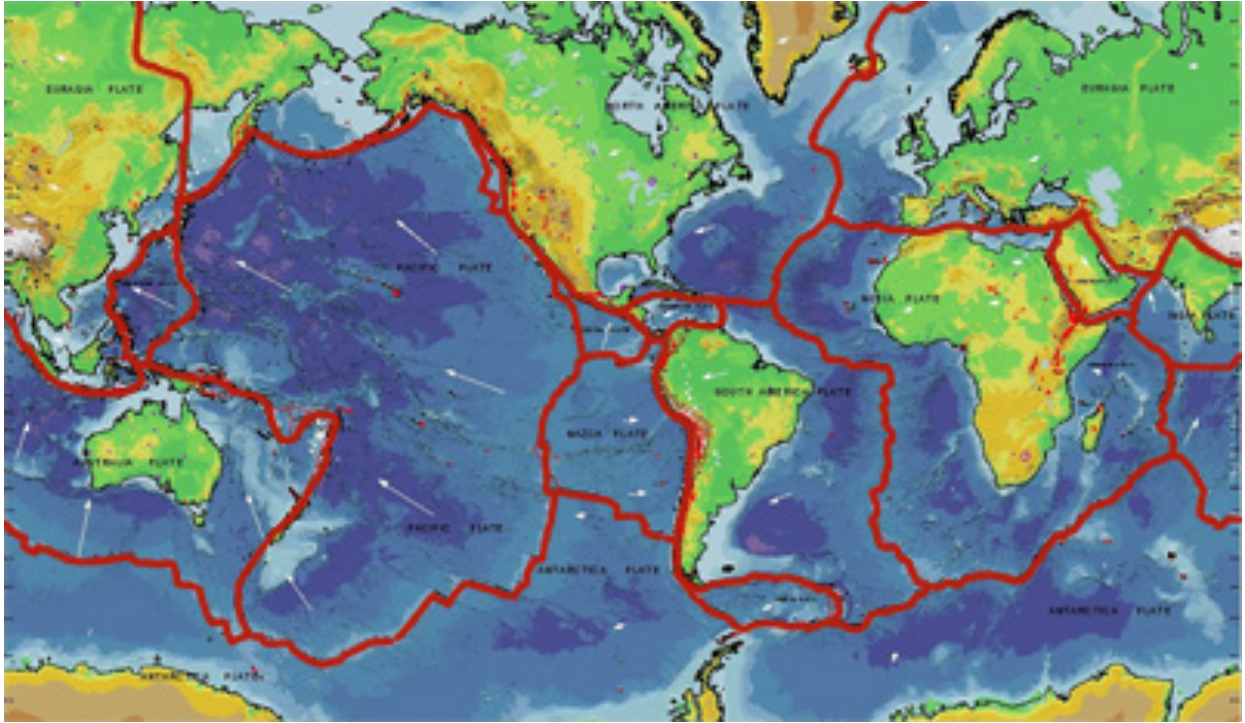


Figure 3: Plate tectonic map



Figure 4: Pollution at the bottom of the Passaic River





Figure 5: *PH-129* by Clyfford Still



Figure 6: *Untitled (Gowanus Canal)* by William Miller



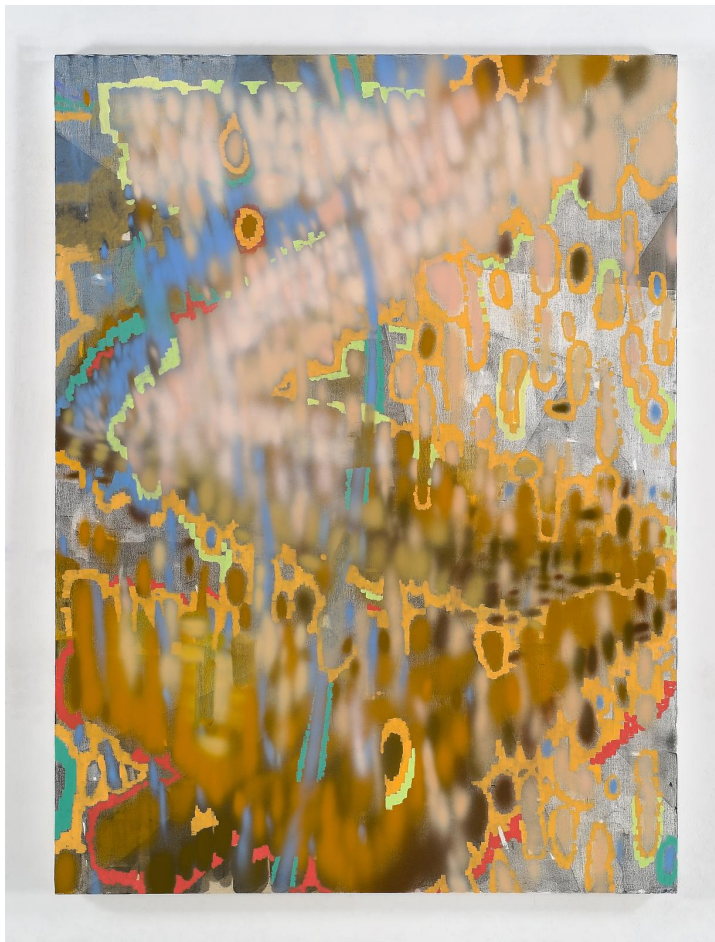


Figure 7: .:\* by Keltie Ferris



Figure 8: *Portrait: Beast* by Jackie Saccoccio



Figure 9: 4 in x 4 in studies



Figure 10: Mason jars used to create spills





Figure 11: *Extremities I*





Figure 12: *Extremities II*





Figure 13: *Extremities III*

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