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Encountering landscape: printmaking & placemaking

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University of Iowa

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ENCOUNTERING LANDSCAPE: PRINTMAKING & PLACEMAKING

by

Nicole Susonne Pietrantonio

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Master of
Fine Arts degree in Art
in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

May 2010

Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Anita Jung

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Graduate College
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Nicole Susonne Pietrantonio

has been approved by the Examining Committee
for the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts
degree in Art at the May 2010 graduation.

Thesis Committee: _____
Anita Jung, Thesis Supervisor

Isabel Barbuzza

Sarah Kanouse

Leighton Pierce

Susan White

For Devon.

And yet, if everything is moving where is here?
Doreen Massey
For Space

What distinguishes a technological world is that terms of nature are obscured; one need
not live quite in the present of the local.

Rebecca Solnit
River of Shadows

But there is more to the present than a series of snapshots. We are not merely sensitized
film; we have feelings, a memory for information and an eidetic memory for the imagery
of our own pasts. Our layered consciousness is a tiered track for an unmatched
assortment of concentrically wound reels.

Annie Dillard
Pilgrim at Tinker Creek

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Finally, an important figure in my education about the possibilities of screenprinting is attributed to Dennis O'Neil, who I worked with at the Hand Print Workshop International in Washington, D.C. The experience sparked a key shift in my artmaking and continues to shape the work I create today.

I am grateful to all of these individuals for the lasting impressions they have left upon my artwork and me.

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CHAPTER I

ENCOUNTERING LANDSCAPE

Encounters

The landscape has long been the focus of my artistic research. Yet no matter how often I return to it, I continue to wrestle with how to engage, respond to, and conceptualize landscape and my place in it. I recognize “that which is real (the actuality of one’s experience) butting up against the forms of cultural representation that encode it.”¹ There are two primary ways that I encounter landscape: 1) through my body and a phenomenological orientation; 2) through layers of discourse, stories, and representations. This first orientation engenders a private experience of landscape—I look to the landscape for solace and meaning, for a “sense of place.” However, this romantic view is made problematic by the acknowledgment that I am connected to a broader constellation of narratives—the landscape as a constructed space, shaped by an ongoing accumulation of stories and representations, of problematic histories and cultural value. While the landscape and its features may be neutral space and objects, it is a site fraught with highly charged stories and competing systems of representation, narration, and perception surrounding the same events, time, and place. Encountering the landscape and conceptualizing place—perhaps then experience itself—is an ongoing process of negotiation. These encounters are a dynamic interaction between the landscape, myself, and the narratives I tell myself in this relation.

To this end, my thesis is guided by the following questions: what stories shape my interaction with and understanding of landscape and nature? How have I been disciplined by cultural and historical scripts, media, and technology? How does a lineage of art history influence a particular way of picturing and framing the natural world? And

¹ Brian Wallis, *Land and Environmental Art*, p. 43

finally, what stories do I perpetuate or contribute in my work as an artist to this discourse about landscape?

Landscape and its Discourse: Place as an Accretion of

Stories-So-Far

If significance rests not in the space itself, but in the stories that people tell about the space, then it is this discourse that I am interested in exploring. If places are accumulations of stories, then it is this layering of stories that people tell about their relationship to the landscape that I seek to observe and study in others as well as in myself.

In my art I seek to engage the landscape not as a hermetic object of study, but as a dynamic, active, and shifting site. The cultural geographer Doreen Massey's work serves as a model for this way of conceptualizing place— "place as an accumulation of stories-so-far, not as points or areas on maps, but as integrations of space and time."² Place then cannot be reduced to a single image or a proper name, but has a mutable identity that is perpetually becoming.³ Massey writes:

[W]hat is special about place is not some romance of a pre-given collective identity or of the eternity of the hills. Rather, what is special about place is precisely that throwntogetherness, the unavoidable challenge of negotiating a here-and-now (itself drawing on a history and geography of thens and theres); and a negotiation which must take place within and between both human and non-human... This is the event of place.⁴

This concept of place as a constant negotiation counters the authority of a fixed or single narrative frozen in time. Hence, I recognize that my endeavor to create work about place must be considered an ongoing dialogue built up of "heres and nows and thens and

² Doreen Massey, *For Space*, p. 130-131

³ See Mark Godfrey's article, *Roni Horn's Icelandic Encyclopdia*, in which he references DeLeuze's concept of 'becoming' from *One Thousand Plateaus*.

⁴ Massey, *For Space*, p. 140

theres.” What I find problematic is that the heres and nows are so slippery. I find myself attracted to the idea of the parallax view—that perception is contingent upon a subject’s position. This is particularly useful in framing a discussion about place, namely that it is defined not by the place itself but by our orientation to it.

We have imposed a system of coordinates onto the earth—an invented grid that points North, South, East, and West. Throughout recorded history... constellations of impressions have gathered around each direction, impressions defined sometimes poetically, other times politically. And there persists, both globally and locally, stereotypical ideas about Southern character, whether referring to the southern hemisphere, of the southern edges of a particular country, be it Germany, Italy, or the United States. These regional generalizations lead to a realization: a compass point can only be defined relatively, from the spot where you stand. By definition it points over there, to an Other place, to a not-us.⁵

Place as a “collection of impressions gathered around each direction” is a fitting metaphor in my work as a printmaker. This metaphor can be extended to say that material place—the land, the landscape, the buildings, our bodies—is like a plate or a matrix capable of producing multiple impressions. As Julie Cruikshank writes in her book *Do Glaciers Listen?* “Humans persist in transforming seemingly neutral spaces into places of signifiacnce.”⁶

The space may be neutral—the material stuff in the landscape—but the impressions that people gather from these same places and events have varying meaning and significance in relation to each individual impression. A dozen tourists can each take a photograph from the same scenic view, but every photograph will be different and every person will have a different story to tell about their experience—each will have a different impression of the same place.

⁵ Jennifer Blessing, “Dis/Enchanted: Ideas of North,” from the exhibition catalogue *True North*, 2008, p. 12-13

⁶ Julie Cruikshank, *Do Glaciers Listen?* p. 11

The work I create is only one small but integral view in a complex and forever shifting group of narratives and images. What constitutes the slippery nexus of place then is the multiple—the multiple points of view, the multiple voices. An additional layer to these “first person encounters” are the multiple representations—the replications of photographs, videos, and stories that point back to these initial encounters.



Figure 1: *Gathering*, photographs from the Greningwick Glacier Dossier, Alaska, August 2009

A Constellation of Impressions

Given the conceit of place as an accumulation of stories-so-far, my research and artmaking methodology is to gather hundreds of impressions of a specific place in the landscape, which accumulate into a dossier. This is akin to the traditional notion of a dossier as a collection of detailed, objective, and “factual” documents about a particular person or subject. My accumulation of photographs, ephemera, sketches, and written text are the impressions of a place. Along with this information, I research regional geology, land use, and ecology through reading as well as casual conversations with local community members. This approach allows me to investigate not only the things I see and find, but to engage the cultural and social dimensions of place and placemaking.

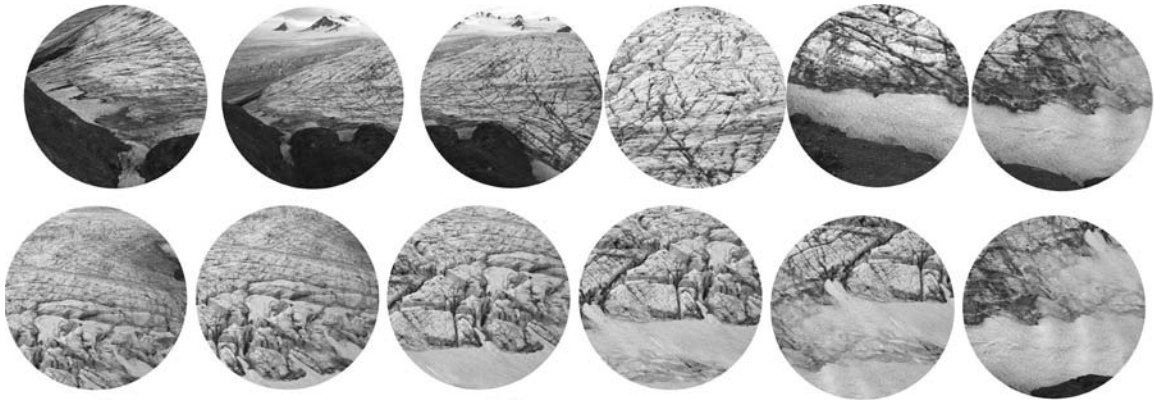


Figure 2: *Gathering*, photographs from the Greningwick Glacier Dossier, Alaska, August, 2009

The dossiers of photographs, audio recordings, and other research and video are later transformed into prints, animations, and installations. The process of replicating and connecting all these impressions through making a print is analogous to what I see happening in the landscape—I create layers of information through the repeated deposits of ink, dig into the paper through the pressure of objects run through a printing press, and

sand away ink and cut out images—the print is site that can be built up, layered, excavated, and interpreted.

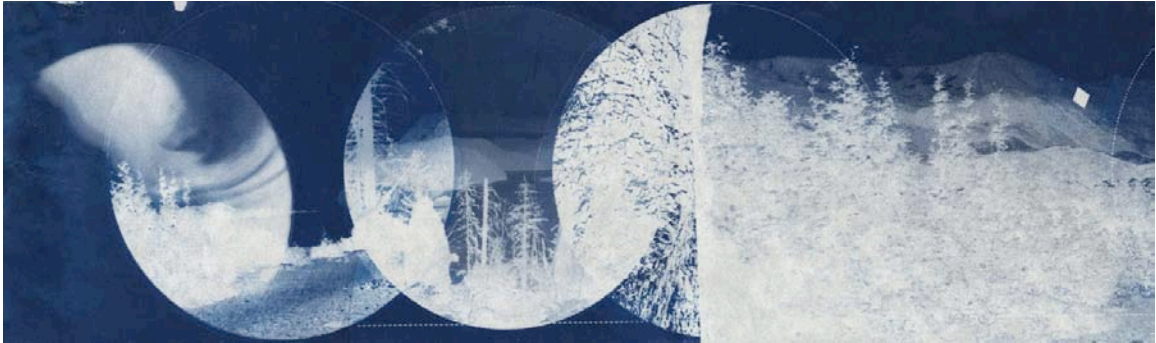


Figure 3: *Persistence of Vision*, cyanotype based on Greningwick Glacier Dossier, 5" x 18", 2010



Figure 4: *Persistence of Vision*, cyanotype based on Greningwick Glacier Dossier, 8" x 15", 2010

The Body and Time-Based Media: Pinning Down the Heres
and Nows

In my artistic practice I have only recently begun to recognize that the view from behind the camera offers a zone of comfort and a means of distancing myself from the landscape and experience. Photography, video, and audio recording enable the replication of time-based events; however, these tools greatly alter the way we experience place and the we make pictures of it. Amelia Jones writes in the essay *The Body and Technology*:

[A]s the speed and intensity of technologically mediated modes of being have accelerated in recent years, visual theorists have come to recognize that technology not only transforms our ways of doing things, it profoundly conditions our experience of ourselves and others.⁷

This awareness was piqued on a hiking trip in a remote region of the Greningwick Glacier in Alaska. My traveling partner and I came to fast-paced rapid that could only be crossed by a small pulley and cart that had been constructed by previous hikers—the cart was suspended over fifty feet above the rapids, connecting two cliffs of a gorge. I was not strong enough to pull our body weight, so my partner grabbed hold of the rope and laboriously pulled as we swung from side to side and inched our way across. Terrified, I grabbed my camera and started taking pictures. The camera miniaturized the world in front me. Conditioned by film and other visual culture, the view from behind the camera lens is now very familiar—it is not real. The experience became safe, filmic. Seen through the lens, I was now watching a movie of the experience—I was not there at all.

⁷ Amelia Jones, *The Body and Technology*



Figure 5: Photograph of Greeningwick Glacier, Homer, Alaska, August 2009

Responses and Responsibility

Initially this paper considered the question of how does one engage, respond to, and conceptualize landscape and place. As an image-maker in an image-saturated world I feel a responsibility to ask these questions considering that much visual culture and representations of the landscape and nature tend to exoticize and simplify place—whether in advertisements, movies, tourist brochures, or fine art. Along with this, technologies such as cameras and video allow for a distancing of one’s experience in a space. In a time of melting glaciers, rising temperatures, and rapid changes in the physical landscapes across the globe, I question how artists might contribute new ways to engage the landscape, visualize place, offer alternative narratives and perspectives about our relationship to it.

At the heart of my artistic work I seek to listen to the multiple stories, to observe the multiple impressions, and offer one more glimpse into a forever shifting nexus of

heres and nows of landscape and place. A romantic and individual response to the landscape is not mutually exclusive from a larger and important discourse about landscape, ecology, and place. The personal encounter—the private solace and meaning found in the landscape—connects back and is integral to the shared discourse, to the landscape as public space, and a heightened awareness of my responsibility to it.



Figure 6: *The Romantic in you*, from the Build Your Own Landscape series, cast shadows created by screenprint on acrylic panel, with color moveable films, 2009



Figure 7: *This Land Was Made for You and Me*, from the Build Your Own Landscape series, cast shadows created by screenprint on acrylic panel, with color moveable films, 2009



Figure 8: *The Weather is Beautiful Wish You Were Here*, from the Build Your Own Landscape series, cast shadows created by screenprint on acrylic panel, with color moveable films, 2009

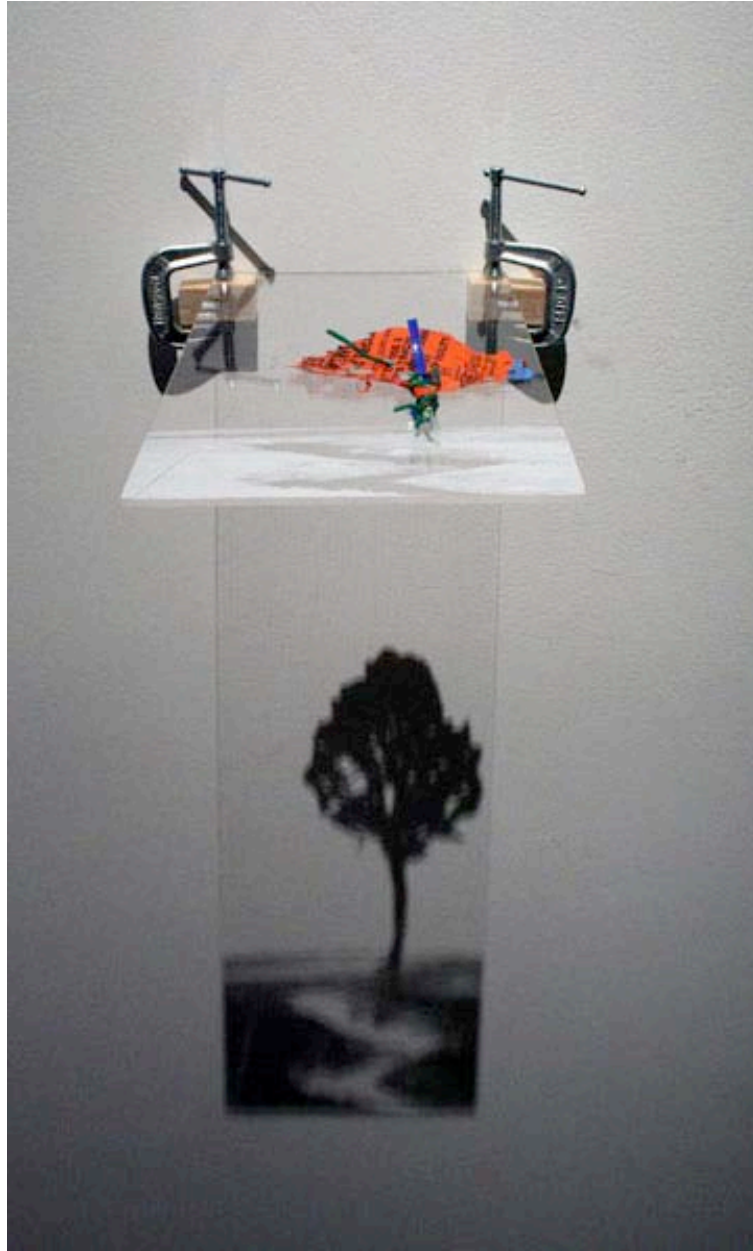


Figure 9: *The Forecast Looks Good*, from the Build Your Own Landscape series, cast shadows created by screenprint on acrylic panel, with found objects, 2010

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