Telescope or microscope

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TELESCOPE OR MICROSCOPE

by

Ellen Mary Siebers

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 2012

Thesis Supervisor: Professor John Dilg
CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Ellen Mary Siebers

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Art at the May 2012 graduation.

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To my family; James Peter Siebers, Joan Marie Siebers and Benjamin James Siebers.
For their limitless love and support.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOR HAROLD BLOOM</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TELESCOPE OR MICROSCOPE</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE ARTIST BOOK</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. River Window I</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. River Window II</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Sunrooms I</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The Carving Block</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Untitled</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Pearl's Garden</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Crossbill/Sweet William</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Totem</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. IA Falls River St</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Sunrooms IV</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. The Hawk/The Hollyhock</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. The Awk/The Orchard I</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Croissant Fox/For Rebecca</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Sunrooms III</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. The Egret</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Spread 3 of Crossbill/Sweet William</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Spread 3 of Science Words</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Spread 2 of Adaptations</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Spread 4 of Adaptations</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Spread 2 of Cyst</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Spread 3 of Cyst</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
22. Altarpiece Book

vi
INTRODUCTION

My studio practice involves two distinct yet inseparable methods or working. The photographic image and the idea of the catalogue have remained consistent interests of mine throughout my practice; for the past two years the idea of catalog has shifted to the formation artist or single-edition book. The presence of the mediated image and the gestures of construction and arranging these images eventually settle into the form of a painting or a book, as the processes hinge and inform each other.

I will address the paintings and the books in separate sections in this document, as both art forms are essential to my working process.
FOR HAROLD BLOOM

-A.R. Ammons

I went to the summit and stood in the high nakedness:
the wind tore about this
way and that in confusion and its speech could not
get through to me nor could I address it:
still I said as if to the alien in myself

I do not speak to the wind now:
for having been brought this far by nature I have been
brought out of nature
and nothing here shows me the image of myself:
for the word tree I have been shown a tree
and for the word rock I have been shown a rock,
for stream, for cloud, for star
this place has provided firm implication and answering

but where here is the image for longing:
so I touched the rocks, their interesting crusts:
I flaked the bark of stunt-fir:
I looked into space and into the sun
And nothing answered my word longing:

    goodbye, I said, goodbye, nature so grand and
    reticent, your tongues are healed up into their own
    element
and as you have shut up you have shut me out: I am
as foreign here as if I had landed, a visitor:
so I went back down and gathered mud
and with my hands made an image for longing:

    I took the image to the summit: first
I set it here, on the top rock, but it completed
nothing: then I set it there among the tiny firs
but it would not fit:
so I returned to the city and built a house to set
the image in
and men came into my house and said

    that is an image for longing
and nothing will ever be the same again
TELESCOPE OR MICROSCOPE

My recent body of work is one that revolves around the awkward, disconnected, violent and loving relationships that exist between the natural world and myself. As a child I was often unable to recognize the order and requirements of nature. This disconnect is still evident in my life in the way that I mirror similar gestures of my adolescence. I long to feel at home in nature yet, ultimately, my attempts fail or slip beneath my feet.

The gestures that I am closest to are the act of carving and the act of framing. “Carving” in that it is an attempt to physically imprint something human onto a natural object. “Framing” in that it is an attempt to selectively identify an illusion or image, while signifying its importance. Yet a framing device ultimately removes the viewer from the identified image. I also associate the frame with the history of photography. This is important in my work because the weight of the pre-meditated image, as well as experience itself, both have an impact on how I internalize environments first-hand. The mechanical basis of photography is also important in that it is about capturing a split second through light. This speaks to my goals as a painter, as well.

The figures in my paintings are often references to historical, natural pursuits, which I adapt from my reading of biographical accounts of how natural and human worlds collide. I am interested in stories of expeditions in which assumed knowledge of conditions ultimately failed the members involved.

The figures and figurative references serve as vessels for self-exploration. I extrapolate stories from the lives of these references and interject my own
experience of disconnect to create the myths of my life. The inherent narratives are meant to circulate around a visceral moment experienced, not a sequential event. The imagery is meant to emulate the kind of information gathered in a side-glance. It is my aim to capture, slow-down and quiet these momentary visceral disconnections. In doing this, I hope to make a contemplative space where the viewer can meditate on a moment that usually passes very quickly.

The drawing line leads the way through the paintings, working to dissect and restrict the figurative from the natural elements. I aim to create physical space in the paintings through glazing techniques. Flattened space and quick gesture are also important, as they relate to the space or environment of memory or internal experience. The metaphor of carving and framing are also proposed in the paintings through their presence in paint handing. I often work reductively, physically carving back into the paint to reveal previous layers or to create drawings within the layers of paint. The gesture of framing and the physicality of the framing device manifest themselves in actual, flattened barriers and planes of paint. Some paintings are created upon marble ground. The absorbent material lends itself to physical carving back into the surface, or heavy sanding.

Both gestures of carving and framing are also investigated through the physical object space of the painting panel. Often the images are executed on shaped panels in which the exterior edges are beveled at a 45° angle. These panels may be flipped to use either side as image surface; each revealing the inherit frame of the birch plywood or, inversely, used to present an invisible edge (as the edges are beveled inward). The side that utilizes the outward beveled edge presents the
viewer with a framing device but also works to push the image toward the viewer, while simultaneously reiterating the gesture of carving through material evidence. The invisible edge speaks toward a purer, unmediated illusion, as the edge relies upon its cast shadows.
Figure 1. *River Window I*. Oil on Shaped Panel, 28” x 28”. 2011
Figure 2. *River Window II.* Oil on Marble Ground, 28” x 28”. 2011
Figure 3. Sunrooms I. Oil on Marble Ground, 28” x 28”. 2012
Figure 4. *The Carving Block*. Oil on Canvas, 10” x 10”. 2011
Figure 5. *Untitled*. Oil on Shaped Panel, 18” x 18”. 2011
Figure 6. *Pearl’s Garden*. Oil on Canvas, 12” x 12”. 2011
Figure 7. *Crossbill/Sweet William*. Oil on Canvas, 29” x 36”. 2011
Figure 8. * Totem. Oil on Shaped Panel, 12” x 12”. 2011
Figure 9. *IA Falls River St*. Oil on Canvas, 26" x 30". 2011
Figure 10. Sunrooms IV. Oil on Marble Ground, 12"x12". 2012
Figure 11. *The Hawk/The Hollyhock*. Oil on Marble Ground, 18" x 18". 2012
Figure 12. *The Awk/The Orchard I*. Oil on Canvas, 24” x 30”. 2011
Figure 13. Croissant Fox/For Rebecca. Mixed Media, 18” x 24”. 2011
Figure 14. *Sunrooms III*. Oil on Marble Ground, 14” x 14”. 2011
Figure 15. *The Egret*. Oil on Shaped Panel, 12” x 12”. 2011
THE ARTIST BOOK

The construction of the artist books occurs at the same time as the other works on paint and paper. They work to help me investigate my relationships to photography, mediation and the framing device in a different manner, since the structural parameters of the book are unique. The book also lends itself to a paced and individual experience for the viewer, which I feel is important to provide in conjunction with my other work.

The books utilize photography (both found and my own), mixed drawing media and text. The photographs are often buried within the pages of the books; they are exposed through cut-outs in the paper or are congealed to the page through acrylic gel transfer. The negative space of the paper is often used as a framing device or thought of as a similar flattened space that is found within the paintings. The books are, ultimately, an opportunity for me to physically enact and perform my relationships with the mediated image; as the images are duplicated, photocopied, applied and obscured.
Figure 16. Spread 3 of *Crossbill/Sweet William*. Drum leaf Single edition book, 6” x 11”. 2011
Figure 17. Spread 3 of *Science Words*. Drum leaf Single edition book.
11” x 22”. 2010
Figure 18. Spread 2 of *Adaptations*. Drum leaf Single edition book, 6” x 12”. 2011
Figure 19. Spread 4 of Adaptations. Drum leaf Single edition book, 6” x 12”. 2011
Figure 20. Spread 2 of *Cyst.* Drum leaf Single edition book, 6” x 12”. 2011
Figure 21. Spread 3 of *Cyst*. Drum leaf Single edition book, 6” x 12”. 2011
Figure 22. *Altarpiece Book*. Mixed Media Portfolio. 11” x 36”. 2011