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Embodying nature

Rachel Jeanne Singel
University of Iowa

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EMBODYING NATURE

by

Rachel Jeanne Singel

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 2013

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Anita Jung

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Graduate College
The University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Rachel Jeanne Singel

has been approved by the Examining Committee
for the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts
degree in Art at the May 2013 graduation.

Thesis Committee: _____
Anita Jung, Thesis Supervisor

Robert Glasgow

James Snitzer

David Dunlap

Sue Hettmansperger

Timothy Barrett

To Dad, Mom, Kati, Robert, and Ryan

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
call to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting –
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

Mary Oliver
Wild Geese

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Finally, thank you to those figures in my education who first introduced me to printmaking at the University of Virginia, Dean Dass and Akemi Ohira. My experience working with them sparked a key shift in my art-making 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.

ABSTRACT

My imagery comes from what I see in nature. From a hollow in a tree to a break in the clouds, absence is a recurring motif. These spaces intrigue me, and I begin to wonder where they might lead. The structures becomes one rounded, spreading volume.

By printing on both sides of the paper, two images intertwine: one drawing attention and the other subtly shifting beneath the surface. The work becomes an expression of the intricacies and depth of natural forms. Ultimately, I want to take on the processes of nature and embody them in my own works of art.

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CHAPTER I

A COMMITMENT TO LINE

At their core, my images attend to the lines that show both the basic symmetries and irregularities in nature. The printmaking process allows for a technical consideration of how these lines are distributed throughout the work, with the weight of each line relating directly to how much time it etches. Their physical qualities are significant; they do not descend into the paper but protrude from the surface.

The types of line derive from both description and invention—between the combinations of the straight and the curved line are many interpretations of the varied expressive contours found in nature. Reducing elements into similar motifs emphasizes the overwhelming multiplicity of line that make-up natural structures.

The lines change direction constantly—contracting and splitting apart. The undulating line stretches and contracts to exaggerate the impression of growth. It is the building block of my world. Lines develop into curves, from curves to semi-circles, and from semi-circles to the full circle.

CHAPTER II
LINE ENCIRCLING SPACE

The stylistic tendency of the circle comes from an interest in openings in nature—those places around which nature’s complex forms develop. Close studies of natural objects reveal holes in their surfaces. These spaces can recur in nature as variations of a circle—a euclidization of a central element in nature. The space is a source of weight—a fulcrum point that seizes attention by giving the illusion of an even deeper space, seeming to recede to infinity. In the words of the philosopher Gaston Bachelard, “a center of concentrated solitude is so strong, so primitive, and so unquestioned.”¹ The lines radiate out from these seeming voids—the starting points for infinite variation within my work.

¹ Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. France: Presses Univeritaires, 1958) 92.

CHAPTER III

THE PROGRESSION OF THE LINE INTO A SPIRAL

My progression away from the perfect circular form has led to the recurrent use of the spiral. An unfurling tendril conceived of as a spiral is one approach to illustrating a complex form. Nature's structures depend on these types of coherent frames, even though surrounding growth is unbounded. I, too, rely on these principles. As each line extends outward, the form begins to resemble how it occurs in nature: subject to the elements around it. This may be a vine sharply changing direction in response to competing growth, a tree trunk consuming a barbed wire fence, or even the clay that once made-up a riverbank eroding away during a flood.

CHAPTER IV
DEVELOPMENT INTO A FIELD

My work grows organically as the lines begin to engage one another and knit together. While capturing the physical shape of the subject, the lines envelop the surface—exempt of all limits. After all, such complex systems are not constituted merely by the sum of its components, but by the intricate relationships between these components.² This is the edge of chaos, a place that is “the constantly shifting battle zone between stagnation and hierarchy.”³ Formally, the question that I try to answer is: what might growth do if it were to exceed its limitations?

² Cilliers, Paul. *Complexity and Postmodernism*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1998). 2.

³ Waldrop, Mitchell. *Complexity: The Emerging Science at the Edge of Order and Chaos*. (New York: Rizzoli International Publications Inc, 1984).

CHAPTER V

MULTIPLE LAYERS

Networks of line are piled one on top of the other, seeking to recall the surface of a growing form. The rings of a tree are a reminder of the numerous layers that can exist beneath the exterior skin. The lines that I print on the back of the paper are exposed intermittently behind the lines on the front that draw most of viewer's attention. The work serves as an expression of an object's intricacies and surface. My intent is to use these layers to embody nature and mirror it, acting as a channel through which the creations I observe in nature are reinvented as art.

CHAPTER VI

EMERGING SPONTANEITY

Even though its systems follow a sequence, nature is ultimately subject to competing and corrosive forces. When surfaces crack through the dynamic action of drying, warping or pressure, they often do so chaotically, creating a number of diverse forms. My work experiences a similar phenomenon, leading to abstract images subtly exposing the circumstances under which they were created.

After printing on the paper, printed lines are covered in washes of pigment. Over time, the mixture settles and moves, reacting to the constantly changing temperature, humidity, and airflow around it, as well as the texture and incline of the surface on which it rests.

CHAPTER VII

ARTISTIC INTERPRETATION

According to Paul Klee, through knowledge of the elements in nature, an artist can begin to apply its laws in their art. Klee believes the artist becomes a creator like nature, bringing into being images that did not previously exist.⁴ The real and the abstract collide as naturally occurring shapes that are used to construct various compositions.

The paper continues to be worked on, printed on and then stained again, overlaying images from multiple plates to integrate them into the forms generated by the drying pigment. In this way, I seek to situate myself into a realm that nature has created through its own devices. Ultimately, my work is about discovering, then understanding, and finally expressing an attitude toward nature.

⁴ Mendelowitz, Daniel. *Drawing*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967) 297.



Figure 1. *Nest*, intaglio on handmade gampi paper, 2013.



Figure 2. *Bones*, intaglio on handmade gampi paper, 2013



Figure 3. *Socket*, intaglio on mulberry paper, 2013



Figure 4. *Seed*, intaglio on handmade gampi paper, 2013

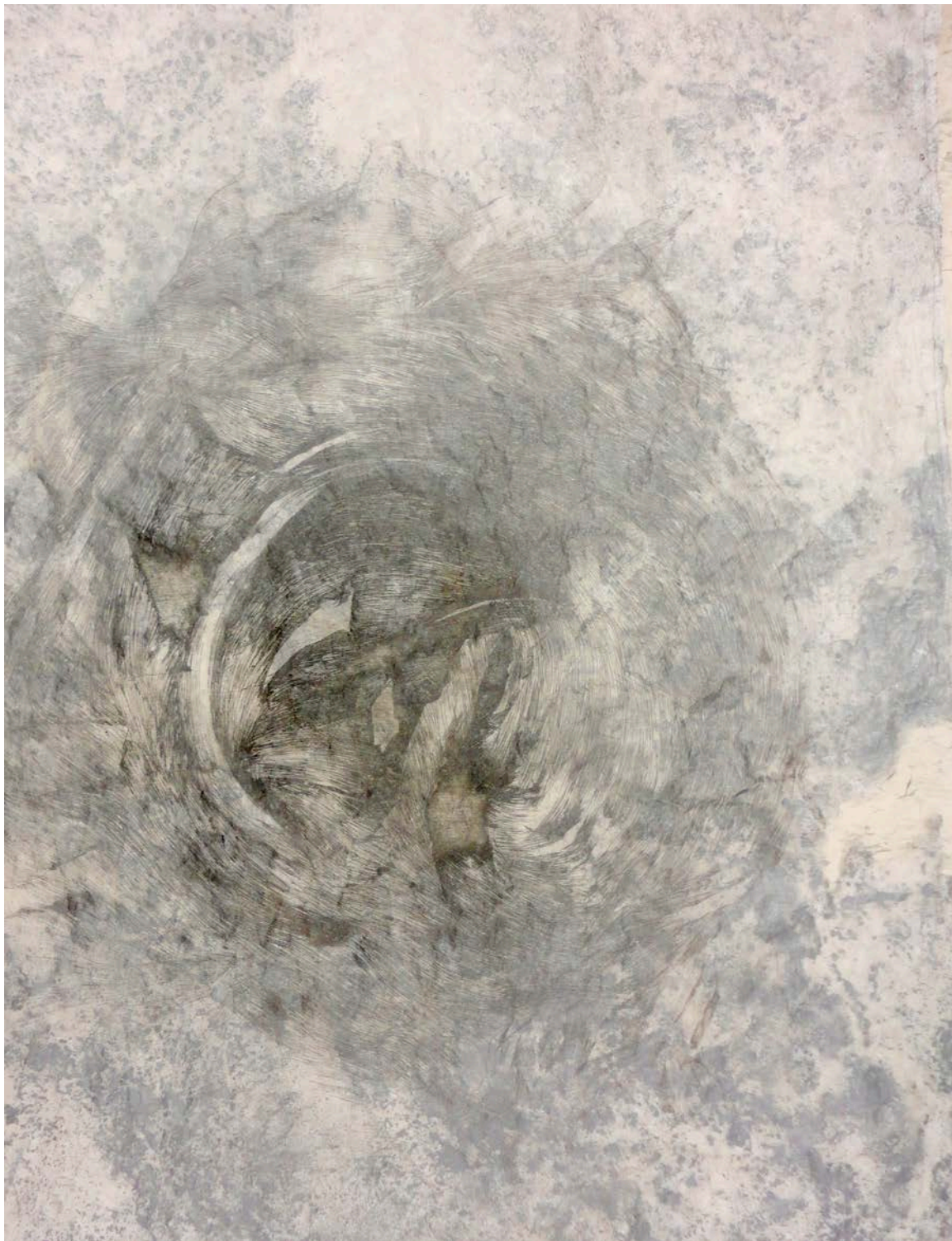


Figure 5. *Void*, intaglio on handmade cotton paper, 2013



Figure 6. *Sky*, intaglio on handmade gampi paper, 2013

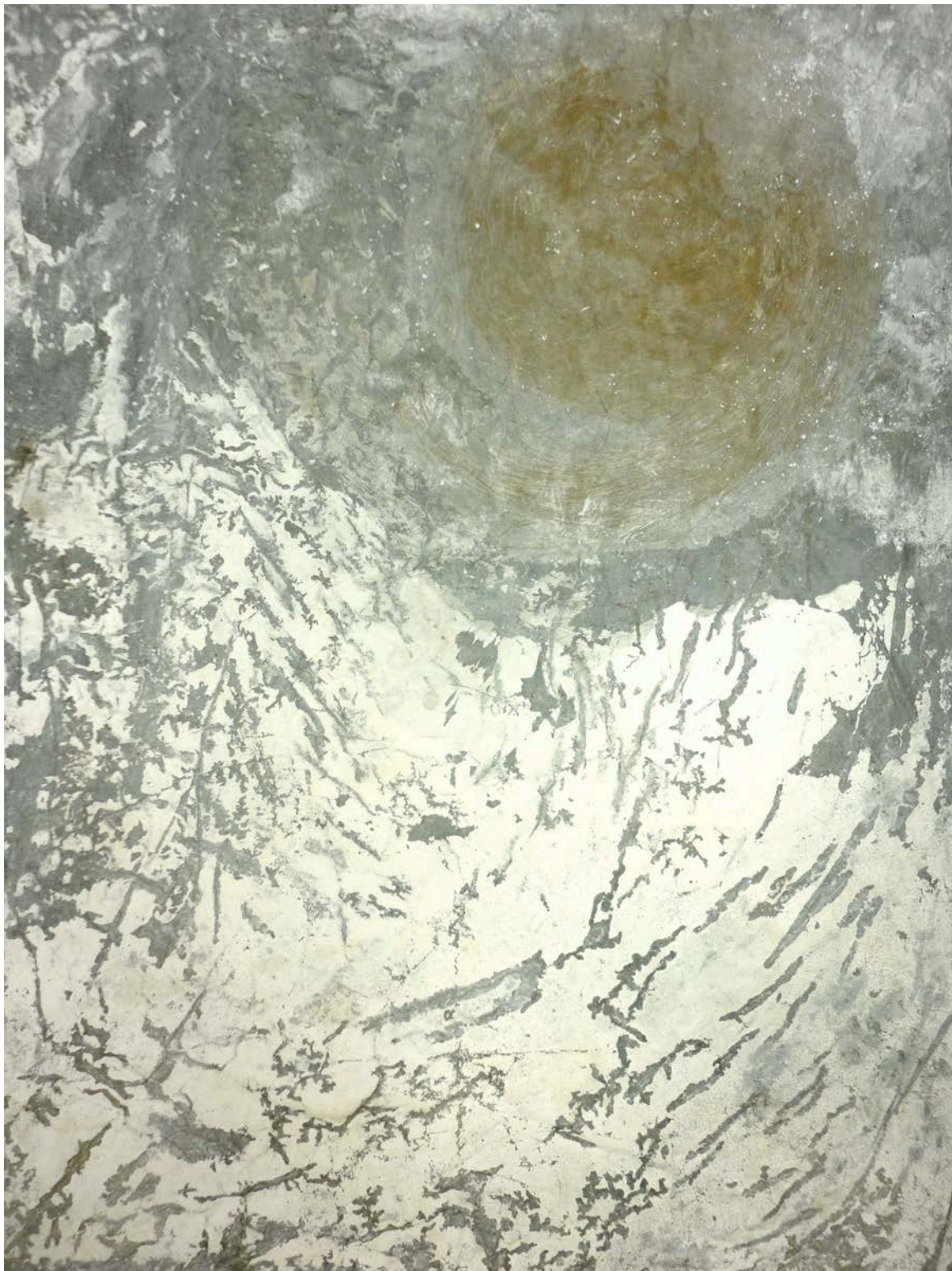


Figure 7. *Moon*, intaglio on handmade cotton paper, 2013

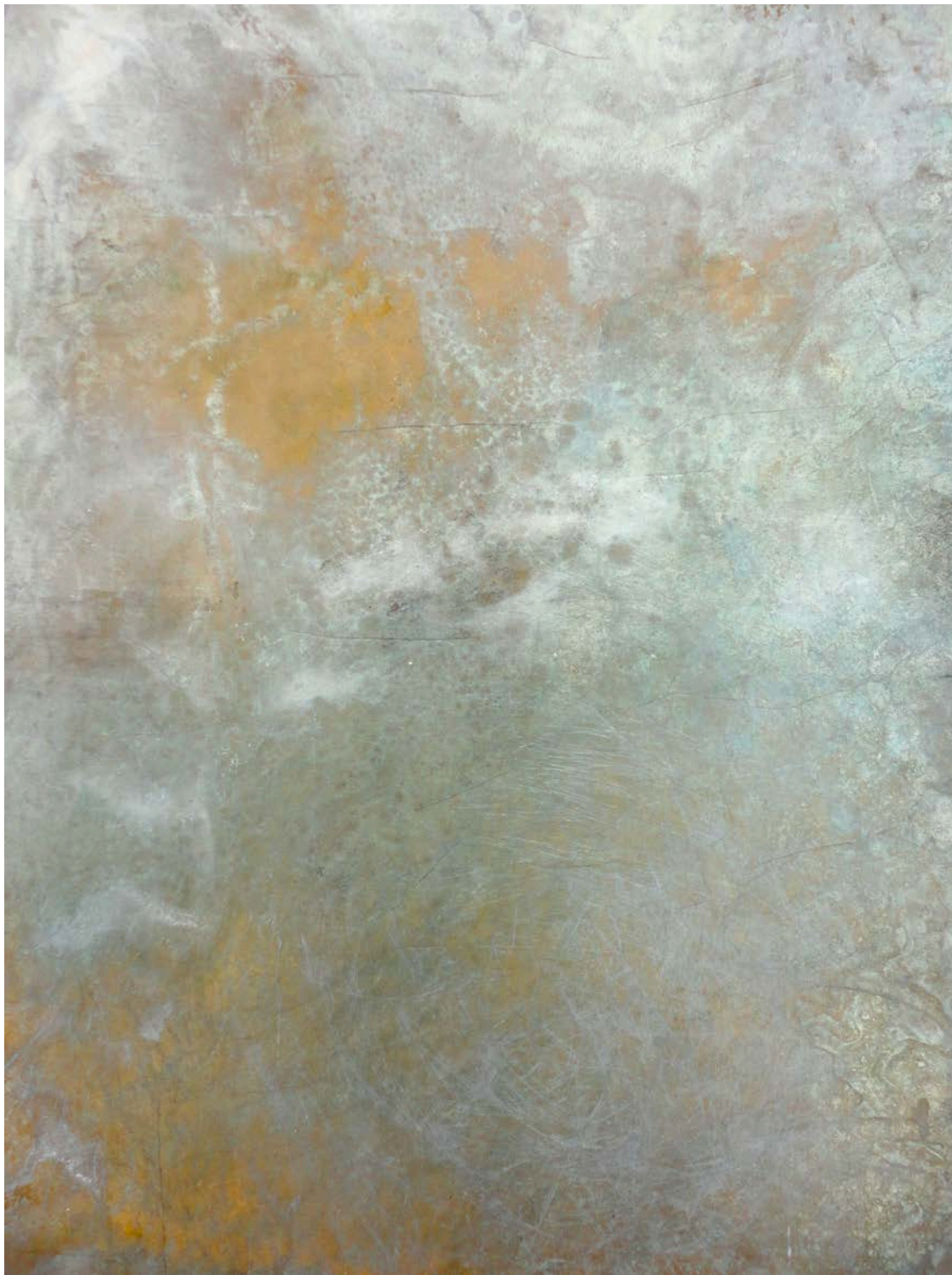


Figure 8. *Patina*, intaglio on handmade cotton paper, 2013

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