

ABBOT, ISABELLE PEYTON, M.F.A. *Painting and the Experience of Place in the Southern Landscape*. (2011)
Directed by Barbara Campbell Thomas. 18 pp.

Through painting, I investigate the experience of *place* in the landscape. I define *place* as a location made significant by human interaction and appreciation. Oil painting on site is the means to discovering the signifiers of *place*. I work from life in landscapes that, through specific qualities, communicate the essential characteristics of the region. In this body of work, I paint on vertical canvases tinted with a colored ground. Using mark and color to capture the scene, I explore the space between illusion and the surface of the painting. The resulting pieces are abstract, suggestive of the landscape but also engaged with formal issues and the history of painting. Additionally, they are in dialog with the literature of the South, which uses the specificity of *place* to communicate universal truths.

PAINTING AND THE EXPERIENCE OF
PLACE IN THE SOUTHERN
LANDSCAPE

By

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A Thesis Submitted to
The Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
2011

Approved by

Committee Chair

To my Grandparents, Anne and Bob Buford, as a tribute to Nepenthe, the homestead they created for our family. And to my parents, for their unwavering support throughout this program and their unconditional love throughout my life.

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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Date of Final Oral Examination

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to recognize the support of my thesis committee, Barbara Campbell, Jennifer Meanley, Nikki Blair, and Richard Gantt. I would also like to acknowledge the O'Briant family, as well as Barbara Campbell and Christopher Thomas, for their generosity in allowing me to paint on their property.

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PAINTING AND THE EXPERIENCE OF PLACE IN THE SOUTHERN LANDSCAPE

Southside Virginia is tobacco country; farmland that swells and rolls through piney woods, dips into the crevices of creek beds, and eventually meets the sky at a low, hazy horizon. It is a landscape of deep shadows and soft, southern light; small towns and back roads. This is the setting of my grandfather's childhood. A boyhood spent moving from small town to small town, crisscrossing the border between Virginia and North Carolina. In the Depression years, his father followed the jobs, while he lived with his mother in rented rooms in other people's homes, moved from school to school, and made do. He did not enjoy the privileges of choosing where he made his home or resenting his father for always being gone. Instead, he worked as the soda jerk every day before and after school to help support his family. He shared a bike with his twin sister. He joined the Navy to put himself through college. And through the accumulation of all these experiences, he acquired a dream to someday own land. Not just any scrap of earth, but a place that would become a homestead; a beacon to bring together the children and grandchildren of his future.

I grew up with the story of this dream and its realization. My sisters, cousins, and I were raised on the legend of our grandfather working his way up, achieving more and more, always with the goal of owning a piece of mountain

property. We were blessed with the fruit of his labor and grew up with that property as our second skin. We spent every holiday and summer together on the mountain, following deer trails through the tangy scent of fern beds, climbing stunted oaks twisted by the mountain top wind, naming rock outcroppings after our games. In the summer, we braved the gnats and snakes to discover waterfalls and Indian burial mounds. In the winter, pushed our way through Siberian wind and ice so we could come home to hot chocolate and card-games by the fire. We knew the names of the animals and the plants, not to take the dogs near the cattle, and how to find our way if we got lost. We were never afraid. We were home.

The story of my grandfather's life and the homeplace that he created shaped the person that I am and therefore my interests as a painter. His life and the mythic proportions it took on instilled in me a belief that land itself held the highest value. It was what you worked for and worked to maintain. It was where you built memories, connected with your family, and found yourself. Making that connection to a *place* is the driving force pushing me to paint landscapes. *Place* is more than location. Any location can become a *place* when human appreciation and connection lift it out of obscurity and make it significant. The site can be ordinary, a potholed back parking lot at a roadside gas station, a hillside power line cut overgrown with briars and sumac. But when that spot triggers someone's memory, or we spend time there and that landscape becomes

meaningful to us, it transforms into a *place*. Through the act of painting, I create *places*, connecting to the various landscapes in which I find myself.

Growing up, I located myself by the mountains. The ridgeline to the west oriented me and by it I knew which direction I traveled, where the weather came from and even how the light in the evenings would fall across the valley. The landscape shaped and moved me through it, determining the paths I followed, how I traveled, and my understanding of the ways light illuminates a place. However, I was unaware of this relationship between central Virginia and myself until I moved away. The Piedmont region of North Carolina unsettled me. I felt exposed without the Blue Ridge at my back. Being used to roads that followed old deer trails through hillier country, I got turned around in the grid of city blocks. The same unsettled feeling followed me to every new place I lived or traveled in—Italy, Ireland, and the American West. However, I loved journeying, seeing new parts of the world and experiencing their particular landscapes. Painting became a way of understanding each place and thereby orienting myself within it.

Every landscape has its own qualities, specific light, atmosphere, colors, and forms. As you traverse a place, it affects you in a unique way. The topography of the land shapes the paths you walk. The air touches your skin, cool or warm depending on the day and guided by the dips and swells of the terrain. Shadows and light fall across the ground and through the trees, leading your eye. By painting, I not only discover the essential qualities of a place, I am

able to locate myself in it and understand my physical relationship to it. By using mark to reconstruct the terrain, color to capture light and atmosphere, and brushes as surveying tools, I paint my own visual and physical experience of that landscape.

There is no exact science in my choosing a site to paint. I drive down side roads or wander through the woods until a particular moment captures my attention. In that moment, form and light come together in a way that moves me. I connect to it because it communicates the specifics of the place, the essence of a region. This essence is comprised of the lay of the land, the way the ground falls away from me or rises above me, the light of that particular season and time of day, and the local vegetation or architecture. From the initial impact of seeing all these elements come together, I compose a painting, framing it so that the movement of the land and the qualities of the day are highlighted.

I paint almost exclusively on site, which gives an immediacy to the paintings that adds to the sense of vitality and movement I am striving for. Painting *en plein air* demands a rapidity that helps me achieve these qualities. Working out in the landscape, there is a wealth of information available to me, details and specifics that I could never invent or mimic in the studio. However, that information, the colors and forms, are constantly in flux as the sun moves across the sky, the wind shifts branches and leaves, and clouds pass overhead. Because everything changes quickly, my hand is forced to move rapidly and my

eye to edit down to what is most important, all the signifiers that describe when and where I am. Thus, the process itself helps me discover the essential forms and colors that make a place specific. Additionally, working in this way leads to a necessary abstraction of the landscape, which communicates the true experience of being out in the world as opposed to simply looking at it.

Once I have found the place in which I want to work, I set up easel and canvas. The surface I work on is not merely the support for the painting, but an important factor in the process. I generally paint on a vertical format because I feel that it heightens the sense of movement and energy in the piece. These vertical canvases range from 26" x 29" to 33" x 35", sizes that are manageable to travel with but large enough to allow for the physicality I'm striving for. Instead of traditional canvas, I paint on muslin or cotton duct, fabrics whose smooth surface allows the brush to move quickly and the paint to move and breath. Additionally, I tint the ground. Starting with a colored surface adds to the sense of light in the finished painting. On a bright day, I often start with a dark or cool ground to heighten the sense of deep shadows and compliment the bright colors. Inversely, if the day is overcast, I begin on a bright canvas to contrast the cool colors and capture the sense of light and space that occurs even on a dark day.

I use oil paint as the vehicle for my experience. Because oils are slow drying and malleable, I can move them around the canvas, scraping them off or adding more as needed. Using turpentine and poppy oil as mediums adds to the

viscous nature of the paint, increasing its suppleness and flow. I am also drawn to oil paints because they come from nature. They are tactile, rich materials made from natural elements that link them both to the land and to people. They are simultaneously earthy and fleshy, of nature and ultimately human. Thus they are an appropriate medium to describe the human experience of the natural world. And beyond these physical properties, oil painting is part of a tradition that I want to be linked to. I want my paintings to be part of a history, to share a lineage with the past and to bring that past into the present and future.

I start to paint by opening the surface into a pictorial space that I move into in much the same way that I move into the landscape. Mirroring my experience of the site, I begin by loosely recording the first thing I noticed about the place. That could be larger relationships of light and shadow, or the detail of a specific color of seed pods on a maple tree. However large or small the element, it is the first building block. From there, I use marks to construct the space. I consider painting to be as much a sculptural process as a drawing one. The dimensionality of the material and its malleability on the canvas feels akin to molding clay. With a paint-laden brush, I can follow the contours of the land, leaving marks that describe the physical journey into the space. Simultaneously, the visual beauty of the paint and its tactile qualities pull me back to the picture plane, creating tension between illusion and surface. The variety of marks adds to this experience. Thin drawn lines describe tangled branches, thicker brush strokes

capture the way sunlight falls on uneven ground, and layered washes suggest the surface of water. I discover these marks through the painting process, responding without premeditation with the necessary means to capturing the place.

The companion to mark is color. Finding the individual colors of a place is essential to communicating all the specific qualities that make that place recognizable, for example the light and atmosphere of a particular day, or the foliage of the season. Locating a place in time gives the painting truth and makes it a record of the actual experience of being there. Color also describes space. Saturated or desaturated, cool or warm, the relationships between the hues and values on the canvas either pull space forward or push it back into the picture plane. Color opens the surface of a painting into a space for the viewer to enter. Additionally, working with these color relationships enables me to draw attention to the elements of the landscape that I want to highlight. Thus, color not only communicates the qualities of the place, it is also a tool for capturing my personal experience in that landscape.

Discovering this working method was a combination of personal investigation and studying the painters I most admire. The Luminist movement of nineteenth-century America has been an important influence. I look to these artists, especially John Fredrick Kensett, for their technical mastery of capturing light. Not only do Kensett's paintings beautifully convey the specifics of time and

atmosphere, he also exemplifies editing for the sake of conveying emotion. His pared down compositions communicate the calm and reverence he felt in the landscape. Capturing emotion in paint is my ultimate goal as well.

I also look to Richard Diebenkorn and Joan Mitchell for guidance. These two painters were important figures in the Abstract Expressionist movement in the middle of the twentieth century. They both pulled their inspiration from the natural world and walked the line between abstraction and landscape painting. I am most drawn to the physical qualities of their paintings, the energetic texture of the paint, the inspired use of color, and the evidence of the painting process that they allowed to show in finished works. Their paintings are clear records of their individual experience of the world, and I want mine to also function as a personal account of the way I see and move in the landscape.

It is equally important that my paintings record a specific time and region. For this quality of landscape painting, I look to artists such as Rackstraw Downes, Stanley Lewis, and Richard Crozier, whose work is grounded in the local and regional. In their paintings, they represent a true and very specific place. I want that same quality of honesty, that belief in the viewer that this particular landscape exists out in the world.

In addition to looking at painters for guidance, I also turn to Southern literature. The writings of William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and Wendell Berry have been extremely influential to my aesthetic and my understanding of the

Southern landscape. These authors understood that specificity, the rendering of human experience in a particular time and place, communicates universal truths. Thus their work, which is located very explicitly in the South, speaks to the broader world, across boundaries and centuries. Each has impacted my work in individual ways. Faulkner describes light as a physical event, a heavy, tangible substance that lies on the ground or moves through the atmosphere. I hear his descriptions whenever I lay down a thick, broad swath of color to represent sunlight or shadow. Welty is a master of moving her stories through the landscape. She starts with a place, and then allows that landscape to shape the journey of her characters. Those characters move slowly along the deep banks of the Mississippi, or languidly across the hot expanse of the Delta. In every case, the landscape determines their path, and it is by moving through it that her characters experience the world and come to understand who they are. Painting takes me through the landscape in the same way. And it was by reading Welty that I came to understand that it is by moving through a space that we can locate ourselves in it.

Wendell Berry's work impacts me in a slightly different way. Reading his essays and novels is not a visual experience in the same way as Faulkner and Welty. However, he argues for the value of land and of a rural experience in the modern world. His work, along with authors such as Barbara Kingsolver and Michael Pollan, ties into the local movement that has recently grown more

prevalent. In my community, and in communities across the country, there is a desire to reconnect with the land, to grow backyard gardens and shop at Farmer's Markets. Berry shows how this agrarianism is not a nostalgic effort to travel back in time, but relevant and important to both contemporary communities and individuals. I feel that I am a better person when I am connected to the land under my feet, when I spend my days outside and I take time to appreciate the world around me. Painting landscapes helps me feel present, aware of both myself and of my part in the greater world.

I view landscape painting as a means of supporting Berry's arguments, as well as a continuation of the investigation of place found in Faulkner's and Welty's writing. Painting leads me to a deeper understanding of human relationships to the land and the importance and value it holds for me. It is the ground where we build memories, the site where we connect with each other, God, and ourselves. Through painting, I attempt to understand this singularity, to understand how to construct meaning, how to form a memory. Every painting is an attempt to slow the passage of time, to distill a day and make it significant so that a simple location becomes a place that I can travel back to in my mind or carry forward as a touchstone. The actual process of painting is as important for me as the finished product. However, the completed painting is the record in which the viewer can share in my experience and appreciation of a place. While the method leads to finished works of a fairly abstract nature, it is important to me

that viewers can sense something familiar and recognizable in the paintings and believe that each piece is a true account of the world. Through my own childhood experiences, I learned that the place we grow up shapes us and influences our experience of the world for the rest of our lives. In every location where we live or travel, we look for the familiar while we build new connections. Through the paintings, I communicate my search for the tangible, essential qualities that define a landscape and connect us to it and to ourselves.

CATALOGUE OF IMAGES

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