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My work explores the psychological gap between humans and nature. Also how humanity is a parcel of nature and that the philosophy of spirit of place can create oneness through imagery, describing the landscape while also encompassing the 'larger frame' within the aesthetic. These transcendental moments connect with not only the landscape but to earth as a spiritual entity. My work is a response to the landscape and these moments.

SPIRIT OF PLACE: BRIDGING THE 'EPISTEMOLOGICAL GAP'

by

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## SPIRIT OF PLACE: BRIDGING THE 'EPISTEMOLOGICAL GAP'

Sometimes you look at an empty valley like this,  
and suddenly the air is filled with snow.  
That is the way the whole world happened—  
there was nothing, and then . . .  
—*A Valley Like This*, William Stafford

In late August of 2000, I traveled with friends to Alaska to spend two weeks canoeing on the Noatak River. Although the trip was self-guided we still had to be flown in on Cessnas by the outfitter. Late on the evening of departure, with plenty of daylight left, our gear was weighed and we were loaded onto three-seater planes. After securing seatbelts and latching the doors, we began our ascent into the Brooks Range which is a mountain range in northern Alaska. Flying in such a small plane immediately revealed how vulnerable we were, and as we climbed in elevation my self-awareness heightened. Eventually our plane became a small speck of light moving through the massive mountain ranges. Despite our obvious vulnerability in the tiny planes, I was completely relaxed. The Alaskan landscape spread out below us and the mountains towering above us evoked an undeniable spiritual awareness or *spirit of place* in me.

The Chinese-U.S. geographer, Yi-Fu Tuan studied how humans feel and think about space and place. He wrote that location can acquire high visibility and meaning because it harbors, or embodies, spirit. This “spirit” can represent a psychological connection to a place, such as a neighborhood or home. Tuan suggested that place is

security and space is freedom: we are attached to one and long for the other. (TUAN)  
For me, this spiritual connection is transcendent and most tangible in the landscape where I feel both at home and free. My time spent in forests, mountains, or on rivers, has established certainty and comfort built from my memories and or acquired through time, attentiveness and absorption of these landscapes.

During my second semester of graduate school, I began to work directly from the landscape in Grayson Highlands Virginia and in the Western North Carolina mountains. I have spent many years hiking and backpacking in both landscapes. These places differ in many ways, but it is their rock formations that interested me the most. The variety of surfaces, open and closed spaces, size and mass, interest me, but it is their overall presence that impresses me the most. Despite storms, strong winds, and ice the rocks remain silent, massive and sentinel-like, evoking an intangible connection. Even in the most challenging elements my time in this landscape is spiritual and this experience: this “spirit” of place is the quality I wish to capture in my work.

Throughout my time in graduate school, I continued traveling back to these places to make small drawings and take photographs. Working in the studio did not offer enough of a connection. Instead of being in the studio and thinking about the landscape, I began to think about being in the studio while out in the landscape. This shift reinforced my working more directly in the landscape. I also made drawings on site and from the photographs once I returned to the studio. In the fall of my third semester, I began making small stone lithography prints from the drawings.

Stone lithography is a process of printing from a limestone that has a completely smooth surface. It involves naturally “painting or drawing” on the flat stone with a greasy substance like litho crayons and tusche. The stone receives and holds the greasy

medium and is then etched. The stone is moistened with water then ink is rolled onto the stone. The ink adheres to the greasy areas of the image but not to the negative areas. For me, working this way is a more tactile, physical and linear process than drawing and because the process is so physical, I began to experiment with different materials and their applications on the stone.

Although I was hiking into and climbing over many of the rock faces, I was still creating drawings from a distance. Since my experience in the landscape is physical I began experimenting with ways to employ a more palpable way to create the images. I used a more physical direct method by rubbing over the fabric on the rocks. The rock rubbings offered a way to work more authentically with the rocks but also to work directly in the spaces. This more intimate, full engagement relates to what David Seamon called being *fused* with nature. He wrote, 'For the most moments of daily living, we do not experience the world as an object—as a thing and stuff separate from us. Rather, we interpenetrate that world, are *fused* with it through an invisible, web-like presence woven of the threads of body and feelings.(Seamon) Artist Richard Long's earth works involved working directly in the landscape although he saw choice of place in more practical terms instead of romantic or poetic ideas. But still a psychological connection is present. His works done in Africa or Alaska can be formally similar to works done near his home in England 'but it is different because the place is completely different in spirit and scale.' (Fuchs)

When I started exploring doing the rock rubbings I used a small roll of paper. I drove up to Grayson Highlands and hiked in to the first large rock face. This is an open exposed area where the wind is almost always present, pushing you from behind or meeting you face to face. The paper proved to be too flimsy, and I was only able to

retrieve a few small images. I used charcoal and graphite, which also proved to be problematic since it smeared and was too delicate. On my next trip I switched to muslin and lithography crayons. Muslin is a lightweight, breathable fabric that conformed to the rocks and received the crayons well. The litho crayons are sturdier and contain a grease base that will not smear or break down like charcoal or graphite. Creating the image through rubbing the crayon across the surface was a completely different experience than drawing the rocks. My immediate interaction with the rocks and the space became tactile and more intimate. This involved navigating up and around large formations that are not easily accessible especially if there is snow and ice. When I encounter the landscape in this way I understand and react to their surfaces, spaces, lines and mass differently than I do drawing them from a distance. My experience becomes a more realized experience. Thoreau wrote about searching for a way to 'bridge the epistemological gap between the observer and the observed, between the perceiver and the place—of being in the landscape and not just upon the landscape.' (Schneider)

The process of working on the rubbings like *Wiburn Ridge, (Detail)* (figure 1) put me 'IN the landscape.' Not only was I working on the rocks, I was completely absorbed in the present moment, grounded with an immediate sense of freedom. In our houses, cities and cars, we become so detached from what is at the "heart of humanity: our biological roots, which plunge deep into the natural world; ...an anchoring in the beautiful landscapes..."(Lambin) Retrieving the image from the rocks was a quiet and deliberate process. I want the entire landscape to unfold through the surface textures, lines, spaces, relief and gaps of the rocks without actually drawing the landscape. The day I began this piece was a very still day. In a place where trees lean to one side due to the amount of wind they have endured, this stillness was unique. While working I heard two

birds fly past me by the sound of their wings pushing against the air. This reinforced my sense of being in the landscape instead of merely upon it. Tuan states, 'One's total immersion in an environment means to open one's pores, as it were, to all its qualities.' (Tuan)

The collagraph prints I am currently making, offer a different way of drawing and printing which includes a physical process of building up a surface from which to print. This surface creates depressions, ridges and relief areas in the print which are further enhanced by how the ink interacts with each area. I collected small rocks from many of the rubbing sites to create a surface on masonite boards which I then use as my plates. I scrape and break the rocks apart to create dust and small particles to use on the surface of the boards then spray it with a fine layer of shellac. I add fine layers of spray paint on the front and back of the plate then cover the front and back with additional layers of shellac. The ink is applied with a small rubbing-type tool and my hands. This allows me to work the ink into small recesses and around relief areas. Once the ink has been applied, I begin to wipe the plate with a heavily starched tarlatan rag, an open weave material similar to cheesecloth. This will remove most of the unwanted ink. From there I begin to employ a hand-wiping technique using the outside heel of my hand. This technique is a more sensitive approach that allows for better control in more detailed areas. This way of printing creates a more tactile, three- dimensional piece with nuances in surface, texture, gradations and layers.

All of us experience landscape in different ways. I want these images to evoke an emotive, intangible experience for the viewer. In his essay, *The Beholding Eye: Ten Versions of the Same Scene*, cultural geographer, D.W. Meinig, states that we all do not see the same landscape since our associations and meanings with that landscape

differ. He notes that one version is landscape as nature, “primary, dominant, enduring... and tempted in his mind’s eye to remove man from the scene, restore her to her pristine condition, to reclothe the hills with the primeval forest, heal the wounds, mend the natural fabric...”(Meinig)

My curiosity, affection and respect for the natural world has given me valuable experiences toward an understanding of that connection and oneness. Western philosophy is more about living apart from nature while many eastern philosophies teach more about being a part of nature. ‘Sensory boundaries are loosened between humans and nature in contemplation and takes humans closer to the sublime and perfect union, the oneness between humanity and the natural surroundings.’(Schneider)

These transcendental moments of either flying in a Cessna through the Brooks Range, standing near a raging river during a rain storm or walking through a 13,000 foot mountain pass with wild sorrel in full bloom are all paths lessening the gulf between man and nature and potentially leading to a *spirit of place*.

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APPENDIX A

FIGURES

Figure 1

*Wilburn Ridge, (Detail). Litho crayon on muslin, 10'x15', 2013*



Figure 2

*Walnut Cove, NC 1. Collagraph print, 26 x 40", 2013*



FIGURE 3

*Parkway (North), NC.* Collagraph print, 36 x 48", 2013

