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The purpose of this body of work is to communicate the personal experience of a place through perceptual drawing. The work is *plein air*, taking place in the woods surrounding Lake Brandt in Greensboro, NC, and on Fort Meade, MD. Formal decisions are used to support a way of looking specific to the human eye. The drawings explore ideas of time, investigation, and the unexpected.

DRAWING THE PERCEPTUAL AND EXPERIENTIAL LANDSCAPE

by

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DRAWING THE PERCEPTUAL AND EXPERIENTIAL LANDSCAPE

Tramping through the woods and stopping to admire the view for a few seconds before moving on is gratuitous; self-indulgent. Such behavior says, “Feed me – I want to see something pretty.” Having only seen that place for three seconds, what do you really know about it? Nothing. A brief image, half-forgotten by the end of the hour and completely dismissed by the end of the week. That sort of looking focuses only on taking in, for the happy feeling that emerges from it. We remember being happy and enjoying the outdoors, but little else. I want something deeper- a deeper knowledge of a place, the complexities hidden from the outdoor tourist. I want to be confronted by the barriers and challenges the woods throw up, to meet what they demand of me in order to traverse them with ease. Being in the woods requires paying attention, and pay attention through drawing. Created over many visits, each drawing reflects a time-based experience of place.

My work is grounded in the *plein air* exploration of wooded landscape. Working on site enables me to directly experience my subjects, and leads to a greater personal understanding of each place. The experience resulting from this practice is physical, visual, and emotional. For me, drawing is the physical expression of seeing. The hand moves in concert with the eye, physically

translating visual distances, shifts in direction and careful contours. Drawing makes possible a more intense focus, a multilayered exploration that viewing alone cannot offer. The experience is also enhanced by my emotional reactions to the environment around me. My manner of engaging the subject matter is often affected by my mood and by my reaction to a particular place on a particular day. Areas of value do not focus on describing light, but instead act as descriptors of structure, form, and architecture. To help support this perceptual decision, all works are black and white. By ignoring color and fleeting shifts in light, I can concentrate on experiencing the physicality and structure of a place over a period of time. In addition, the mark-centric nature of the drawings allows each mark to serve as a record of my experience of that place.

A key idea in the exploration of drawing as experience is the importance of drawing perceptually. Perceptual drawing requires an awareness of how the human eye sees, as opposed to how the camera sees. Several choices during the making of the work help to communicate my personal visual experience accurately. These choices are: perspectival shifts, focal points in varying depths, cropping, expanding compositions, and scale. I work by sitting on a tarp on the ground, so perspective becomes very important as I describe elements extending away from and towards me. In works such as The Crossing, I compress multiple perspectives - looking down, looking across, and looking up, into one picture

plane to give the viewer the sensation of looking in multiple directions while sitting in the same place.

If my eyes were a camera, I would have four options regarding focal points: focus on only the foreground, the middle ground, or the background, or to put everything in the picture plane in focus. However, I have noticed that when looking at my surroundings, I don't restrict my focus to any certain distance. My eyes flit from strange branches 30 feet above, to a bank 200 feet on the left, to a leaf two feet away, and next to a stand of trees 50 feet in to the right. There is no depth hierarchy, and I do not proceed from one depth of focus to the next with any preset order; my eye is seeking out the interesting, no matter where it sits in space. I translate this into drawing by creating focal points in all depths of field, rendering areas I find interesting, and leaving uninteresting areas next to them more open and ambiguous. This is a departure from the traditional drawing method of showing depth through value. Here a focal point may be far in the background and surrounded by light areas, yet rendered as dark as any focal point in the front. As a result, the viewer is cued in to the nature of the space by the turns and orientations of forms, not shifts in value.

Other useful perceptual tools are cropping and an expanding composition. Cropping allows the viewer to feel as though the scene continues beyond the picture plane. Heavy cropping in landscape became prevalent in France with artists such as Gustave Courbet and the Barbizon School. The recent emergence

of photography resulted in the photographers and painters working side by side and borrowing from each other. (Jones 160-161) One of the results of this exchange was aggressive cropping, which had not been much utilized in landscape up to that point due to the popularity of panoramic, sublime vistas. (Morton 52) For the first time, viewers felt a part of the landscape, not removed observers of it. I strive to achieve the same result in my work. An expanding composition is another tool; it involves starting a drawing at a single point on the page and expanding the drawing out from that point, using what has been drawn already to determine where the next lines should be. The composition is not planned in advance, and the exact placement of objects is not determined until they are reached by the expanding composition. This manner of composing is truer to the human eye than a planned composition, because it requires the eye to pan slightly with each new addition. A planned composition is structured from a steady gaze, and risks flattening the picture plane.

The last perceptual element in my work is scale. My use of scale applies to both the size of the paper, and the size of elements within the drawing. Most of the drawings are 22 inches by 30 inches or larger, and some incorporate multiple panels. The multiple-panel pieces in particular use scale to make the drawings more accessible to the viewer. The greater surface area of the page makes the drawing difficult to absorb in one glance, and as a result the viewer's eye meanders through the work in the same way it might through the actual space. I

also find that in the course of the drawing, it is easier to follow the natural expansion of the work if I can't see what I'm drawing all at once. The scale prevents me from compressing the space into a planned composition. Scale of specific elements within a drawing can also bring the viewer into and through a space. For example, in Juncos' Sinkhole, a strongly foreshortened fallen tree grows incredibly large as it approaches the viewer, with one branch of it disappearing off the top of the panel and seemingly over the viewer's head. Another branch meanwhile, continues forward and slightly to the right before passing the viewer and beginning to recede again.

Apart from communicating a perceptual experience, the work strives to connect the viewer with a sense of place. The places represented in my work are chosen based on four factors: wildness, safety, visual complexity, and uniqueness. When I choose a place for its wildness, it involves looking at a place and feeling that wildlife might be found there. Safety describes the sense of calm or uneasiness that a place engenders, its possibilities as a refuge. Largely instinctive, this factor is most affected by the presence or lack of sufficient cover. If I feel exposed, my focus becomes split between working on my drawing and listening for anyone approaching from behind. The best places are the ones where hikers pass by twenty feet away without having ever known I was there. Safety is tied largely to a place's wildness; if an area is exposed with little cover, or enclosed with few escape routes, there's a strong guarantee that wildlife will

not linger there. I naturally drift to areas where there are wildlife, because those places feel more welcoming, natural, active, and private. Visual complexity is an aesthetic requirement, and is the most open to change. Many times I stumble upon poignant configurations that I would never expect. As a result, I never search for a new site with a particular motif in mind. Commonalities of my preferred “visual complexity” are forms of varying shapes and sizes, directional elements, and angles. Because they fulfill all three, tangled branches and fallen trees are often of interest. Empty, deep space is generally avoided. The last factor is uniqueness. Uniqueness is related to visual complexity, and describes a certain character or individuality that distinguishes a place from the surrounding area. Uniqueness can be a result of differences in a place’s elevation, forms, flora, inhabitants, material, or function.

Time becomes an important factor in the making of the work. Over the course of each panel, I return to the site several times, in varying conditions. By visiting a place repeatedly, in varying weather and at different times of day, I gain insight into its functions, the myriad of life forms within it, and the subtle changes brought by the progressing season. These insights help me to establish a relationship with each place. One aim of the work is to describe this relationship, and to give the subject matter of each drawing a sense of having been experienced over time.

The medium of choice in this body of work is a combination of lithography crayon and water on sealed paper. Litho crayon is commonly used for drawing on limestone in lithographic printmaking, but I prefer to use it directly on paper. The majority of the works are on BFK Rives, but two of the smallest works utilize Yupo paper. BFK Rives is a strong rag paper with a mild tooth normally used for printmaking. Before I begin a drawing, I prime the Rives with matte medium to seal it. Yupo is a paper with a thin coating of plastic on either side, originally created for industrial purposes. It is prized for its smooth, toothless surface, and the sealing function of the plastic – marks are not absorbed, and can be easily wiped off. The sealed nature of these papers allows the marks to sit prominently on the surface, causing them to feel more substantial. As a result, the whole drawing has more immediacy, as if it were leaning forward catch the viewer's eye.

All works are black and white, employing black marks and gray washes on white or cream-colored paper. The decision to exclude color was a conscious one. Focusing on black and white media allowed me to pursue a deeper investigation of form and line. Without the distractions color presented, I was able to create drawings that communicate a sense of movement, liveliness, and an atmospheric quality of place.

The accidental plays a large part in both the work and my choice of media. Lithography crayons are oil-based, yet they have a curious ability to dissolve in

water. Used alone on a toothy surface, litho crayons tend to make slightly broken lines, or grainy areas of value that allow the tone of the paper to come through. For dark, even lines, a firm pressure is needed, with an average three or four passes to achieve the continuity of value desired. In early experiments, these methods alone caused the drawings to feel stiff. Gesture and expressive line quality are difficult to achieve in a slow line drawn five times. Fortuitously, I discovered that litho crayon dissolves in water. This opened a doorway to many possibilities that were not available to me with litho crayon alone. By dipping the tip of the crayon in a cap of water and then drawing with the wet crayon across the page, I was able to achieve the smooth, untextured lines that I desired. Water also proved a useful eraser; by dissolving marks already on the page, it provided the option to rework certain areas and shift parts of the drawing as necessary. Soon it became apparent that the constant dipping of the crayon into the water cap was tinting the water. I incorporated washes into the drawing, using brushes and tinted water directly from the cap. I also began putting layers of dry crayon directly on the page and dissolving it into a value wash with several passes of a very wet brush.

When working with wet media on a vertical surface, gravity inevitably plays a part in the work. Drips can be found in all my drawings, and in many dissolved areas, the value gradations shifted based on the amount of water used, the direction of wet marks, and the tilt of the paper. When a mark is thinned or

lightened with water, I do not have precise control over how the oil will dissolve and bleed. I have a basic assurance, which is that the line will get lighter, but the water introduces small passages of gradation and value shifts that I do not expect, and cannot plan for. Often, a line or passage will appear differently after it has dried and the water runs its course. Some areas along the bottom of a drawing may be affected by the drips of washes added to the top. All these occurrences are happy accidents. In addition, the visual texture of the drips and washes has an organic quality, and in the context of a landscape drawing suggests extremely convincing flora and natural textures. Nature delights in presenting weird and unexpected combinations; in this way, the unpredictability of the medium reinforces the subject matter. Navigating when to edit the accidental and when to preserve it places me in conversation with the work. Learning to leave myself open to the unexpected helps me to be less dictatorial and take full advantage of the possibilities offered by the medium.

To create large drawings as final works is a contemporary idea. In the Salons and Royal Academies of the nineteenth century, artists who wanted to be considered for a medal understood that they needed to paint. Drawings were often small, and had no purpose beyond studies and having a readily available source of information once a painter returned to his studio. Even in the mid-twentieth century, painting took precedence over drawing. However, after the Abstract Expressionists, this idea started to change. Though they were painting,

the Abstract Expressionists felt that the mark was incredibly important. Original and spontaneous, the marks were believed to have a sense of truth to them, for the relation they had to the artist's hand and individual experience. Though Abstract Expressionism eventually gave way to other aesthetic philosophies, the emphasis on mark and immediacy remained. Since drawing naturally lends itself to immediacy and expressive mark-making, in recent years it has been embraced as an acceptable media for the undertaking of large, final works.

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CATALOGUE OF IMAGES

1. Burrow Hill, 2010, lithography crayon on Yupo, 14"x20"
2. Untitled, 2010, lithography crayon and water on sealed paper, 17"x22 ¾"
3. The Crossing, 2011, lithography crayon and water on sealed paper, 22 ¼"x30"
4. Juncos' Sinkhole, 2011, lithography crayon and water on sealed paper, 22 ¼"x90"
5. Eating Post, 2011, lithography crayon and water on sealed paper, 40 ½"x30"
6. Marsh Grazing, 2011, lithography crayon and water on sealed paper, 14"x20"