

BETWEEN BEING

By

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the thesis of LAUREN CHRISTINE MCCLEARY find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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BETWEEN BEING

Abstract

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My work is a nod to the imagination, propaganda for wonder. People are consistently absent from my imagery, but the work speaks to our humanity. For thousands of years the land and the animals have been our greatest teachers. It is the silence of each that says so much. The land constantly gifts visual surprises and stirs a curiosity that can't be found within closed walls. Places I have seen, been, and imagined layer my mind. The work is made to share with others these things in which I take delight. I want the audience to recall a time when they looked at the world with wonder, I ask them to ponder the mystery of reality, hoping for it to sink in and stir.

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DEDICATION

To the people and places that inspire me.

And to Waldo because I have dedicated everything to my pets since I was 5.

BETWEEN BEING

Prologue

Philosopher Martin Buber says it is neither the artist nor the canvas that is important. Rather, it's the possibility BETWEEN them. This is the space I am interested in, the between, neither here nor there.

Every walk, every conversation, every pile of paper, every shifting shadow offers inspiration. The following stories, thoughts, memories, and moments have, in some way, formed the path of my creative sojourn.

PAPER HORSES * Annie Dillard says the lover and the knowledgeable can see. (Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 1974.) The first thing I could draw was a horse because it was the first thing I could truly see. My eyes consume every intricate detail of this creature. My whole self is held captive in its presence. In the suburbs there was not a single horse, yet I was still surrounded by them. No bike, bench, or chair arm was safe from growing four legs and a mane. Every blank paper was an invitation to sketch a horse and maybe cut one out to carry in my pocket. Growing up I had horses.

WOLVES * I see them plain as day. They are on the playground, mostly on the football field, a bunch of running, leaping, whirling mangy grey coats. They are wolves and they belong to my best friend and me. What a thrill it was to be greeted by a whole pack of wolves during recess while the other kids were left with monkey bars and games of tag.

When and why did I stop playing with wolves? Entering my mind's eye, I can remember them, and see them...but they were never "real." They are abstractions of things read or seen in books and movies. The interaction only happened in the space of the mind. How many spaces and places are known only in the mind?

MAP * In preparation for the trip to Iowa, I gather all the markers and sit down to make a map. Each state shape is drawn and colored in; the only rule is under no circumstance can shapes of the same color be touching. I will follow this map tomorrow sitting in the back bucket seat staring out the window.

The homemade maps were made prior to a family road trip. They were a nonsensical puzzle of color, but even then I liked the idea of picturing myself traveling across a map. In a way, my map made as much sense as the imaginary lines and borders we set up to know where we are and what belongs to whom. I view my placement in the world on a map in my head, an aerial view. It's as if I transport up through the air, and look down to another me, before being able to gain my bearings.

SHADOWS * A shadow does not have a physical reality. We know it is there only because we can see it. It depends on light for its existence. It is subject to change with the flip of a switch, a breeze, or the rotation of the earth.

Yesterday.
Outside your window
My grand production.
First a gorilla
then bison, whale, jiggly jello.
I'm quite the deceiver,
shape-shifter.
A black silhouette migration.
A narrative induced transportation.
For you.
On a red brick terrain.

PLAY * Play is the most basic and natural form of learning. Through the act of play the imagination is used to problem solve, think abstractly, and master new skills. Play is usually a visceral experience. When play involves an object the object is held, felt, sized. The hand absorbs the tactile qualities and the mind begins to develop stories, scenarios, explanations, and theories.

Play is a release, a chance to be anything or be anywhere.

FLYING * Land from above, from the air, seems at once unbelievable and vast, yet manageable enough to hold in my hands. Run a hand along the spines of hunkered down animal mountains. Peel up the shape of a lake and tack it to the wall. Trace a pencil along the lines of roadways. Cover my bed with quilted farms. Line up the buildings like dominoes and watch them knock each other down.

DRIVING * We drive through tunnels of tall pines to reach the trailheads. Shadows and landmasses are hard to decipher through windows made of tree trunks. To better explore our new place we set off on foot chasing the sun who teased us around every bend, moving ahead just as we caught up. Shrubs, grasses, and trees tuck us in and let us know we are standing up straight. Every now and then the walls open and reveal heaps and hills and mountains as far as I can tell. All that everything makes us acutely aware of our microscopic presence. The world is very still from here, but I use my mind to zoom in and spy on its endless activity. We spend the next while tracking a Northern Pygmy Owl through binoculars as he appears, ducks, and shifts from limb to limb. The existence of the world outside the border of my binoculars' reach ceases to exist. I cease to exist. There is only this owl and his forest.

RIPPLE * Feeling confined by the size of the desk I pinned paper lengthwise across the studio and painted the bear sideways. There were only a few clues as

to what this bear would do. It would be large. It would have long shadowy legs. It would almost look realistic, but not quite, as hours would not be spent painting every strand of hair. Nothing foretold the photograph of a blue elephant.

Everyday the bear became more landscape than animal. One day he asked to be cut out and lay across the worktable. Small plastic animals already inhabited the table waiting to be painted blue. I watered down the same blue paint and let it pool, flow, and drip as it pleased overtop the hillside of bear and onto the floor. Each drip and pool absorbed light from the window and became a spectacular production as it traveled along. Soon, a duck, panther, wolf, and moose traversed together through the trails of blue.

The rivers dried, and the life evaporated. The paper was rolled and stashed away. A lone plastic elephant remained on the floor. This elephant had found its way to an elephant shaped splat of blue river paint. These two were meant for each other, but their meeting could not have been planned. It required a journey.

REAL * But how do we know-how could we know- that the real is there? By what freak chance does the skin of illusion ever split, and reveal to us the real, which seems to know us by name, and by what freak chance and why did the capacity toprehend it evolve? (Dillard, *For the Time Being*, 1999).

In less than the blink of an eye, the future becomes the past. We live in an

ephemeral present. What, then is real? Our minds become storage space for every second experienced, memories build layers and layers. They become our only trace of what happened, but they are subject to change, or fade, or exaggerate. The reality of the experience changes with the memory. The imagination constructs a new reality.

KAMIAKE * Today the world above my head was very alive. I watched a pocket of sunshine filled with birds and insects. The walls of their world were made of shadows. Sitting, I feel small, miniature beneath tall lanky trees, strange protrusions from the ground, experts at balance. Needles fall as if choreographed. When looking down at the intersections and highways they make on the dirt, I feel big...giant. I am simultaneously miniature and giant. The art is already here. Everywhere I look I see it. What is my purpose?

WHIM * Speaking on the creative process, during her lecture at the TED 2009 conference, Elizabeth Gilbert recounts ancient Greek and Roman notions that artists are not creative geniuses, but rather collaborators with a disembodied creative spirit called a Damon. Instead of seeing creativity as an internal battle to get out what is inside, they believed they were to simply do their job and hope the genius spirit assigned to them would show up.

I have walked into my studio intending to do a drawing, and instead attached a

toy horse to a hula-hoop with orange yarn. Often, the “art” shows up somewhere during the process or off to the side in the form of a pile of scraps. Whether these moments are collaborations with a disembodied creative spirit I’m not sure, but it does feel like collaboration with something beyond my own thought. I can’t count on it happening every time, so I collect items and materials that strike me, and keep them around until they begin communicating with something else in the room. In the process of installation I leave the same room for communication, and expect to be surprised by the unforeseen.

I tend to be drawn towards materials that allow for immediacy. When the idea comes, I like to get it out quickly, to see it right away. Cutting paper is a bizarre blend of extreme patience and immediate gratitude. Along the way the imagery appears exactly as it is in the simple contrast of positive and negative shape. I patiently anticipate the introduction of light, which reveals a whole new realm. The surprise is the reward.

COLOR * Color has the ability to travel time. Certain colors hearken thoughts of particular decades or places. My greatest inspiration stems from moments outside so it is only natural for me to bring that palette inside. A great presence of white is simultaneously about absence and possibility. The absence of color invites the viewer to spend more time imagining.

TRUST * The pursuit of honest work means continually traveling in new directions. When something becomes too formulated, I flee. The “getting to know you” stage of working with a material reveals the process and the investigation. Coincidentally, constantly moving in new directions means constantly trusting in the unknown.

BALANCE * What appears in my art is a combination of experiences in and out of the studio walls. One cannot exist without the other. The answer always seems to be balance. Quiet, meditative acts like cutting paper provide calmness in contrast to quick, gestural acts that provide release. In the collision of these two working methods an interesting dialogue appears.

SKIN * Justin Vernon spent three months in a secluded cabin one winter with no intention to make an album, he just wanted to gather himself. In that cabin he found a way to make music that went straight from his heart to his hand without getting caught up in his head. The music he made there has been my constant companion and frequent inspiration this past year. I don't know every lyric or metaphor within each song, but it's the mystery that moves me with every listen. It feels awkward and strange to work without music playing. It provides a rhythm to my method. Music has the ability to inspire the act of making, it sinks into my skin and stirs.

AFRICA * On the last night in Soroti we had a big farewell dinner on the porch. Ann, Joseph and Beatrice had decided to surprise us all with an individual gift. Each gift was presented with a sincere explanation of the reason they had chosen it for that person. When my turn came, Ann placed in front of me a beautiful woven pencil bag. She told me the red on the bag was a joyful color, and that with art I had the ability to share joy with other people.

This moment constantly rings in my head.

SHINING PARTS * We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime, within a man is the soul of the whole, the wise silence, the universal beauty; to which every part and particle is equally related, the eternal ONE. And this deep power in which we exist and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object are one. We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree, but the whole, of which these are shining parts, is the soul (Emerson, *Over the Soul*, 1841).

Moments when another person's thoughts or words collide with my own in a moment of clarity reveal the lines running through time and distance holding us all together. My work is always about the visual relationship between the parts and particles, as well as the psychological and spiritual relationship to the parts and particles. The installation or the frame allow "the thing seen, the seer

and the spectacle” to become one whole. Standing at a trailhead you appreciate the land before you as a whole from a distance and then you move in to explore the intricacies.

BECAUSE * The making process is like an adventure or an exploration. A setting out with a general idea in mind, constantly waiting for the hand to do something that will surprise. The work comes together in pieces, much like a collage, each individual element will find its place and communicate with the others. A piece is finished when through lighting, shadow, installation, etc. it takes on a life of its own, and I explore it just as someone would who did not create it. Installation allows me to set the stage, and orchestrate an experience.

My work is a nod to the imagination, and propaganda for wonder. People are consistently absent from my imagery, but the work speaks to our humanity. For thousands of years the land and the animals have been mans’ greatest teachers. It is the silence of each that says so much. The land is constantly gifting visual surprises and stirs a curiosity that can’t be found anywhere within closed walls. The places I have seen, been, and imagined layer my mind. I make the work to share with others those things in which I take delight. I want the audience to recall a time when they looked at the world with wonder, I ask them to ponder the mystery of reality, hoping for it to sink in and stir.