

BOUNDARIES: NOTIONS OF LAND, SPACE, AND MEMORY

BY

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the thesis of Michael B. Baum find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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## Abstract

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My work explores the notion that the landscape we inhabit and interact with leaves an impact on our perception. I am interested in the boundaries between the intellect and the senses, a position where artistic and systematic methods of analysis interact. My work is a means to investigate the nature of image making through the combination of various ideas, influences, and objects relating to both natural and constructed environments. Through "reorganizing" our perception of the world, I explore the process of reconstructing what is familiar. These characteristics in turn allude to something new. A territory that becomes an artistic practice to define, and generating meaning by transforming the perceptible into what is legible. It is this synthesis or visual residue which echo both environment and origin, providing a point of departure or a position of arrival regarding how we can perceive reality.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iii
ABSTRACT .....	iv
SECTIONS	
I. DRAWING .....	8
II. STUDIO PRACTICE .....	9
III. THE BODY AND LANDSCAPE.....	10
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	13

## I. DRAWING

"The essence of drawing is the line exploring space."

Andy Goldsworthy

*Boundaries* is a series of drawings that explore the language of the landscape and its abstract nature. The impetus for this body of work has been my longing to reconnect with the wild spaces of rivers, valleys and mountain ranges that have influenced my artistic intuitions. These drawings and tracings explore the notion that the landscape we inhabit and interact with leaves an impact on our perception. This work provides a means to investigate influences, and forms relating to both natural, as well as, constructed environments. This becomes a territory that is the artist practice to define, generating meaning by transforming the perceptible to what is legible.

I'm interested in various spaces and surfaces that are continuously being weathered and eroded by the forces of nature. This process leaves behind a visual residue comprised of abstracted shapes and patterns within the surface of the land and stone. The breaking down of the stone, as well as, the landscape symbolizes a cycle. It is a pattern of deterioration resulting in cracks and spalling, which in part becomes one of the visual components that influence my practice. The fractures not only indicate structural weaknesses, they display the aesthetics of an imaginary line, a line which can be transcribed by the movement of the body through drawing.

These drawing, much like cartography have the means to communicate on multiple levels. A cartographic document is built on the premise that we can model reality in ways that communicate spatial information . It lends itself to a form of sculptural interpretation. A map provides an individual with the ability to orientate themselves into the physical body of the landscape. Humans have the capacity to understand various systems of measurement, continually retracing our relationship to the land. This process of retracing the landscape, existing as both a

recorder of space and time, further establishing the opportunity to imagine both place and origin. The cartographic document is built on the premise that we can model reality in ways that communicate spatial information.

I'm interested in breaking down and synthesizing the information between place, origin and reality. The word "synthesis" invokes a process of bringing elements together, suggesting a whole greater than the sum of its parts. The act of merging this information or visual residue, echo both environment and origin. This connection between the drawings and the landscape, further provides a point of departure or a position of arrival regarding how we can perceive reality. The work serves as an artifact, with the intention of evoking that which is formless or remote, that which can only be perceived. The act of drawing provides starting point, the ground one stands on, there will always be a starting point which determines the result of the experience.

## **II. Studio Practice**

"In the general sense, phenomenology is the belief that all knowledge and truth derives from subjective human experience and not solely from things themselves."

Edmund Husserl

I never know what the end product will become, since they are not premeditated. The process of gathering information from field observations, involves recording and drawing from a specific location. The various visual elements and pieces I find compel me to explore these spaces through rubbings, and tracings to create a pliable structure for intuition and change. The action of collecting and cataloging these drawings allows me to further process their formal qualities and abstract nature.

The act of layering information, embodies traces of past thought and action. They become metaphors for the way in which memories impose themselves on all perception and thought. The drawings and rubbings demonstrate the process of referencing a physical space, an environment

which is real. They depict the touch and the translation of one surface onto another material. Yet, these drawings are never didactic reflections, but more or less portray imperfect translations of an illusionary space.

### III. THE BODY AND LANDSCAPE

“Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature’s peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their freshness into you and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves.”

John Muir

Maurice Merleau-Ponty emphasized the importance of recognizing bodies as the entity through which we experience the world and emerge as individual subjects.<sup>1</sup> The rubbings, tracing and topographical language in my work are reconstructions of the elements I have gathered at specific locations. They refer to spaces which appear and act like physical spaces as we may understand them. These reconstructions function more as a surrogate, that hover between the physical and the temporal. However, these intuitive spaces exist in opposition to the rules of real physical space. When we yield to the intuitive, it can dramatically change how we perceive the environment around us. There is a creative power in the body to which we fail to do justice when we persist in seeing. I try to work from this place, to reawaken this experience. The intuitive can thus be seen as a dramatic change in various forms of representation, space, and images as we have known them.

The rubbings and tracings I make on paper and mylar, exists at a scale of 1:1, recording a specific location. The rubbings establishes a basis of questioning, debating not only what we know about ourselves and the world around us, but how we know it. According to Tim Ingold, author of *The Perception of the Environment* (2000), meaning is gather up from the environment

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<sup>1</sup> Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, Chapter 4, “Reproduction and Visual Technologies” from *Practice of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, (Oxford University Press, 2009), 135.



in which the body is immersed, and there recursively regenerated. This sensing body makes meaning directly through its performance in the environment rather than waiting for direction.”<sup>2</sup> This action attempts to bridge the gap between subject and surrounding, through what essentially becomes an inter dialog during the physical nature of drawing. Furthermore, the body and its position within the geology of the landscape trace physical movements, using the self as a recording device, upon which to draw from the earth’s surface.

The relationship between the body and landscape becomes evident as the body responds to the transformation and act of recording the land. As the land is observed by the viewer, the aesthetic value of the landscape is constructed. According to E.H. Gombrich’s ground-breaking study *Art and Illusion* (1960) he argued, ‘all thinking is sorting, classifying. All perceiving relates to expectations and therefore to comparisons.’<sup>3</sup> By drawing on perceptual psychology, Gombrich reinforces the argument that we carry prefabricated mental templates with us and that we continually see and reflect upon these templates.<sup>4</sup> Thus, what the mind translates to a new experience is always compared to what is familiar. The observer gains a richer understanding of the places he/she occupies, and a deeper understanding of his body’s position within the landscape. This understanding and connection with the land is embodied by the drawings, not only in the action of recording, but also by reconstructing what is familiar.

Furthermore, the drawings establish a direct link to the concern for human conduct and nature’s role in affecting that conduct. We can argue that the natural epistemology of human activities can be conditioned by nature. This work provides an objective lesson in the way that

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<sup>2</sup> Tim Ingold, review of *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling, and Skill*, by Joy Parr, *Technology and Culture*, April, 2002, 43.

<sup>3</sup> Gombrich, E.H., *Art and Illusion* (London: Phaidon Press, 1960), 254.

<sup>4</sup> Malcolm Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 4.

nature, and the artist, can shape our understanding of experience. The drawings confront us with issues of time, space, geologic features, and relationships between the body, perception, and nature.

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