

DRIFT, ASCEND

by

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Jessica Lynn Mongeon

April 2013

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ABSTRACT

I aggregate multiple experiences into large-scale India ink and acrylic paintings on paper, building up calligraphic marks, and large strokes of color to create a visual journey through the veil of time, distance and action. My paintings are based on personal experiences of hiking and backpacking in alpine environments. This thesis examines the influences of history, art, science and culture on an individual's understanding of nature, especially in America. The role of illegible writing is also discussed in relation to my paintings, as well as other artists who have influenced my artwork formally and conceptually. I believe that nature has an intrinsic value that should be celebrated and protected. As viewers begin to understand their emotions and perceptions in relation to nature, perhaps they will discover something new about themselves.

This exhibition is based on my experiences of the natural world, filtered through the processes of time, space and imagination. Rather than depicting a specific landscape, I aggregate my feelings from multiple personal experiences and seek to communicate those emotions to viewers. My research has been centered on understanding the role of landscape in art throughout history, societal perceptions of nature, especially in the United States, and how language impacts our understanding of the world.

Physical research has been an important element of my work, specifically hiking and backpacking in the Rocky Mountains of Montana and working from field sketches and journals that were completed during those journeys. I believe that nature has an intrinsic value that is unmatched because humans cannot replicate true nature, and it is in limited supply. To me the most accurate way to communicate my relationship with nature is to start with a system of mark making and a collection of memories and fuse that experience with the direct intuitive aspect of working in the studio. A new actuality is created for the viewer that speaks not to the physical features of a place, but to its emotive, transformational and creative potential.

Historical Contexts of Landscape Painting

My paintings are directly related to my experiences in the outdoors, specifically National Parks and wilderness areas. This relationship connects them with the history of landscape painting, a socially relevant genre that has varied greatly over time. Before the 1600's landscapes as we know them were very rare in European art. Painters tended to focus on religious scenes or allegories, with humans as the major subject matter. During

the Renaissance, artists began to deal with relationships between humans and nature, and specifically began to depict the wilderness. For Renaissance thinkers, wilderness could be one of two things: one a raw, fallen wilderness, the other being a form of a divine perfection. Wilderness was often seen a place for spiritual change or penance, an example being Giovanni Bellini's "Jerome in the Wilderness." Divine perfection was often associated with order rather than chaos, and this ideal led to the construction of gardens. Gardens were incorporated into Italian renaissance villas as people began to idealize the natural world because their cities were becoming polluted and crowded.¹

A more recent example of the garden aesthetic is illustrated in the design of New York City's Central Park by the first landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmstead, who specialized in the picturesque. Central park was designed as an, "oasis of mazy contours and rural surprises in the midst of a relentlessly rectilinear urban design."² Nature was seen as a non-utilitarian space and a vacation from city life. However much as it was a constructed nature, Central Park was built to be a retreat from the commotion of the city for people who could not afford to travel to the countryside.

Going back to the late 16th and 17th centuries, landscapes and maps were put together, especially in Northern European painting, to expand the readers knowledge, or "stretch their spiritual horizons." However, maps were considered to be instrumental and informative so they were placed below the newly respected status of landscape painting.³ Historically maps included identifiers for the unknown as descriptors of the intelligible.

¹ Andrews, M. *Landscape and Western Art*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999. p. 30-31.

² Andrews, Op Cit. p. 74.

³ Andrews, Op Cit. p. 91.

In contemporary society it is unusual for us to chart what we do not understand or know, and art bridges the known to the unidentified, as illustrated by my paintings. Maps coordinated cities with natural environments while a pastoral landscape separated the two.

Pastoral landscapes are often associated with French painter Claude Lorrain, who worked from outdoor sketches, but then idealized them in his studio paintings. A primary aspect of the picturesque is a human presence in the landscape. Other characteristics of the picturesque are uniformity, delicacy, and framing. Framing is meant to separate the viewer from the landscape and to provide a set point of view. A way that my paintings connect to the picturesque is the inclusion of mapping symbols such as the “Google pin” to denote a human presence. The landscape seems more manageable and understandable when viewers can see themselves as part of the landscape. My work is then transformed from referencing the sublime to referencing the mundane.

In the 19th century Salvador Rosa changed the role of landscape art by communicating the sublime. The sublime “dramatizes human powerlessness” by subverting order, forgoing structured organization and invoking fear. It is also gendered as the male version of beauty, rugged, and patriarchal rather than conveying the smooth and delicate submissiveness of the beautiful.⁴ During this period people did not understand natural processes and felt dwarfed by nature. Today, a sublime nature is difficult to communicate since humans have advanced so much scientifically and technologically. We often think of the earth as a declining planet rather than a source of

⁴ Andrews, *Op Cit.* p. 132-135.

unknown powers. My work could be considered to be sublime because it has a sense of overwhelmingly shifting spaces. However, in today's context I believe that it fits within the realm of the beautiful, in between the picturesque and the sublime.

Turner was a British romantic painter in the 19th century whose work I greatly admire. He insisted that the authentic, direct experience of nature was most valuable and studied storms, rain and fog. He is credited with raising the status of landscape painting with his romantic sea and landscapes. His paintings were contextualized as a precursor to impressionism because of his observational skills; however his subject matter was not impressionistic. His paintings often dealt with expressing spirituality in the natural world, rather than simply observing and recording nature and light.⁵

The 19th century was also the advent of the discovery of geological time, which made landscape an even more desirable subject, and this observation of nature led to open-air painting. Open-air painting was a way for artists to create an immediate record of their environment, often based on fleeting light and emotion. Impressionist painter Paul Cezanne wrote, "all that we see dissipates, moves on. Nature is always the same, but nothing of her remains, nothing of what appears before us. Our art must provide some fleeting sense of her permanence, which the essence, but appearance of her changeability."⁶ I agree with that statement because my outdoor sketches only capture a small part of the moment. The rest I hold in my mind, but it is abstracted by time and

⁵ Barker, E. "Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851)". In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000.

http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/trnr/hd_trnr.htm (October 2004).

⁶ Andrews, Op Cit. p. 180-181.

space, as many of my paintings are completed weeks or months after I complete my source drawings.

Meanwhile, 19th century American artists were cultivating their version of the sublime. Luminism is a term that describes this “polished and meticulous realism” of 19th century American art that contrasts with the dissolving forms of impressionism.⁷ For example, Bierstadt’s “The Rocky Mountains, Landers Peak” (1863) contains a domestic foreground and a sublime background. These landscapes were painted without signs of European civilization or history as a way to further assert America’s independence and position in the art world.⁸ The next largely “American” labeled art movement was abstract expressionism in the 1950’s, which gained more attention than the subtle, realistic painting of luminism. My work can be connected to the process-oriented paintings of abstract expressionism, but the concept of my painting relates more directly to a contemporary form of luminism.

Perceptions of Nature In America

Americans are unique because nature provides an authority as part of the American identity.⁹ In the past, politicians, businessmen seeking to acquire control of resources and land, and even conservationists forged this evolving American identity with decades of branding for various purposes. The idea of nature in America evokes

⁷ Canaday, J. 1980. "John Canaday on art." *New Republic* 182, no. 17: 25. *Points of View Reference Center*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 21, 2013).

⁸ Andrews, Op Cit. p. 159.

⁹ Price, J. *Flight Maps: Adventures with Nature in Modern America*. New York, NY: Basic, 1999, p. 119, 70.

many spatial metaphors that start to describe our complex relationship with land. Americans relationship with nature is affected by the agrarian myth, which vilifies industry and urban living and exonerates country life. In addition, America has the politics and conflicting ideas of wilderness to contend with. Our history has involved America's population moving further West in search of land, wealth and opportunities.¹⁰ Many 19th century paintings of the Rocky Mountains were created as propaganda for the railroad, to further promote these ideas.¹¹ Today's Americans have to deal with the various myths of our past and also consider the realities and challenges of our changing environment.

We can think of ourselves as part of nature or as completely separate. Denis Cosgrove wrote that when the landscape becomes an environment for the painter, the relationship becomes more complex. The "emotional truth" of the landscape is subjective rather than objective. He explained, "'Inscape' is what emerges when the 'landscape' is penetrated, intellectually and emotionally, when the organic material forms of the natural world are understood as manifesting certain laws of energy."¹² This is what happened to my work when I moved to Montana. The first year that I lived in the mountains I painted as a tourist or observer, but over time as I got to know my environment, my paintings changed accordingly.

¹⁰ Tuan, Y.F., *Topophilia: a Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values*. New York: Columbia UP, 1990. p. 193.

¹¹ Spassky, N., *American Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1985. p. xxiii.

¹² Andrews, Op Cit. p. 193-195.

This understanding is often described as a sense of place. E. Relph of “Place and Placelessness,” wrote that place involves an integration of elements of nature and culture that serve as geographical “mirrors” for humanity. The meaning of a space, which on its own is “amorphous and intangible”, is derived by its place, which provides a context. For example, I can imagine being in Thailand, but until I spend a significant amount of time there, I cannot understand what is like to physically be there. Landscapes are just collections of geographical features without a human observer. The ways that we experience place involve memory, imagination, your present situation, and interpretation. Genius Loci is “a living ecological relationship between an observer and an environment, a person and a place.”¹³ The type of places that I have focused on during my time in Montana largely consist of alpine environments.

Mountains are fascinating to me because they are parts of the earth that are far away from human intervention. The same can be said of the deepest parts of the ocean, which have been explored more recently because advancements in technology were not available in previous centuries. People often seek the wilderness is to get a glimpse of the ‘other’ and in the process learn more about themselves in the face of a challenge. Mountaineer Jean Proal wrote, “In the zone where the rocks and glacier begin the mountain has lost all trace of what one might call its humanity. It is not superhuman, it is ahuman. It does not reject man, it ignores him.”¹⁴ This feeling helps me to let go of my “first world” problems and realize that there is something bigger than my daily life.

¹³ Relph, E. *Place and Placelessness*. Pion Limited, London. 1976, pp. 2-66.

¹⁴ Relph. Op. Cit. p. 128.

I feel that preserving wild places and natural areas for future generations is important. I believe nature provides a space of “becoming,” where we have the space (literal and mental) to think about our lives from a new perspective and develop new ideas. Society has not shaped those spaces into a specific purpose, so the possibilities are endless. Also, it is easy to feel like my own life is the center of everything, and being in nature puts everything else into context. When I am backpacking and I am few days from “civilization” sometimes I feel that I am completely in sync with nature, and other times I feel like an ill-adapted alien in a hostile world. This ambivalence about nature is a normal part of the human experience. Eastern culture has made an especially strong effort to communicate and understand nature.

Painting Processes and Influences

Chinese landscape painting has been an influence in my painting practice. I especially identify with the organization of space in traditional Chinese landscape painting. The space is often organized vertically, rather than horizontally or through linear perspective. The Chinese term for the artistic landscape is “shan shui” or “mountain and water” with mountains being the most important element.¹⁵

French philosopher Christine Buci-Glucksmann wrote a succinct statement about Chinese painting and refers to a previous text by German writer, Walter Benjamin:

“Benjamin says the great lesson of Chinese aesthetics is that a surface or a plane can—through virtual signs—create non-sensitive resemblances that sway through like a mirror or a veil. In [between the] sign and the figure an uncertain space solicits the slippage from the visible to the readable,

¹⁵ Tuan, Op. Cit, p. 128.

from the painted to the thought. The image beyond reference and context into a kind of suspense—a gauze veil—or into a reflexive musical mirror and its resonances.”¹⁶

The treatment of space and light inside of a painting is something that I have been working to achieve in my work. Using washes of transparent ink to create layers is a technique that I have developed through my process of experimentation and by studying Chinese painting methods. Whether the marks that I make are signs depends on the specific painting and is up to interpretation by the viewer. This ambiguity is an important conceptual aspect of my work. Buci-Glucksmann coined the term “metamorphosis” to explain the space in between the visual and the thought process. It is based on proximity, attraction and repulsion, as well as “reflecting and creating differentiation-in-co-emergence and accompanied by shared diffuse and minimal pleasure/displeasure.”¹⁷ Open-endedness is both a freeing and necessary part of art, which parallels our complex understanding of nature.

Formally, this exhibition has been influenced by Gerhard Richter’s paintings. He manages to create atmospheric, process-oriented paintings that are about the materiality of paint, and also hyperrealist landscapes and portraits. I have grappled between abstraction and realistic portrayals, and Richter has found a way to succeed at both ends of the spectrum. He has solved the problem of deciding which subject matter to use by working from photos that are meant to ignore a conceptual narrative. I have also been influenced by the work of Julie Mehretu, particularly by her drawings that are

¹⁶ Jonathan, H. *Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Painting: Hybridity, Hegemony, Historicism*. Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2003. p. 68.

¹⁷ Jonathan, Op. Cit. p. 68.

examinations of striated space, overlap and architecture. Her drawings are based on architectural renderings, with straight lines and sharp angles, while mine are constructed from organic curves and gradations. I also relate to Mehretu's work on a conceptual level. She deals with power structures, globalism, and a personal narrative in her work. While I am concerned with the power structures of how humans deal with nature, she is communicating through the man-made structures of society. Her interests in the multifaceted layers of place, space, and time that impact the formation of personal and communal identity are similar to my conceptual goals.¹⁸

Visual artists are not my only source of inspiration; literature is a great source of creative thinking and often translates easily to visual processes. Gary Snyder is known as a beat generation poet and environmentalist of the 1950s. Snyder has connections with the Beat generation because of his interest in Eastern Religion (especially Buddhism) and a passion for environmental conservation. Snyder has had an interesting life, working in the forest service as a logger and eventually pursuing his interest in poetry and religion by traveling to China. Snyder explained his reasons for people venturing from their homes to camp and otherwise experience the outdoors. "This sort of encounter with the other—both the inner and the outer—requires giving up comfort and safety, accepting cold and hunger, and being willing to eat anything ... It grants freedom, expansion, and

¹⁸ *Julie Mehretu: Drawing into Painting*, 2003. Walker Art Museum, Minneapolis, MN. <http://www.walkerart.org/archive/2/AF7361E991C363206165.htm>. Accessed February 26, 2013.

release. Untied. Unstuck. Crazy for a while. It breaks taboo, it verges on transgression, it teaches humility.”¹⁹

The act of walking is addressed in Gary Snyder’s book, “The Practice of the Wild,” as a key aspect of Zen Buddhism as well as Native American cultures. One thing that I enjoy about walking is that it is a democratic, non-product oriented pursuit. Walking can be done without a purpose or an end goal in mind, and it is a way to organize or avoid my thoughts. Walking can also be done as a form of protest or to make a statement. In contrast, hiking and backpacking largely depend on purchasing certain products and require an amount of leisure time and money that are not available to everyone. British artists Hamish Fulton and Richard Long create their work through the act of walking outside, which has also become integral to my process of creating art. Long and Fulton do not seek to conquer the land in a capitalistic way, which has been a criticism of the American land artists like Robert Smithson. They bring the experience to the viewers by collecting objects or acquiring photo documentation that is presented in a gallery setting, or create subtle markings on the land. Rather than depict a specific landscape, I aggregate my feelings from multiple personal experiences and seek to communicate those experiences to the viewer.

¹⁹ Gary, S. *The Practice of the Wild: Essays*. San Francisco: North Point, 1990. p. 179.

Science and Landscape

The act of walking is a way for the body to move through a landscape. I can feel the rocks on the ground, the air on my skin, smell the moss and pine trees, hear leaves rustling and see the landscape move around me as I walk toward the horizon, all simultaneously. Our physical relationship with the environment is important, because we experience everything through our bodies. Science helps us to understand how we perceive landscape and art. The way that humans see influences landscape preferences and emotional reactions to what they view. The human eye is binocular, meaning that we see in double images. This can philosophically cause us to see the world in dichotomies and conflicting ways.²⁰ Our eyes tend to follow flat and vertical lines because horizontal lines are not seen in double images. This means that we find horizontal lines to be more calming and use them to orient ourselves. I purposely avoid obvious horizon lines in my paintings to contribute to a sense of ambiguity and chaos. Some perspective cues include texture, density of patterns, perspectives of size; convergent lines, amount of blur, and size relationships. I use a variety of these cues in my paintings to provide visual signs for the viewer to see spatial relationships.²¹

Rebecca West wrote that the artist is like a nervous system and selects certain details of the environments and manipulates them to confirm some sort of experience of the world. The external object that is produced is the image of an experience, fantasy,

²⁰ Shepard, P. *A Historic View of the Esthetics of Nature*, University of Georgia Press, 2002. p. 7.

²¹ Shepard, Op cit. 14-15.

schema or construct.²² My paintings are the physical manifestation of that process within my mind and nervous system.

Implications of Illegible Writing

Spatial relationships and color interactions are not the only visual symbols in my paintings. Language is another way that people communicate their experiences. However, I choose to hint at language rather than use it to directly communicate. Indistinguishable text, also known as asemic writing, is a way to turn language into a way of making marks or to create a drawing. In my work the words are often recognizable as cursive writing, since I project my journal entries backwards in order to subvert the meanings. Humans have the desire to understand and to know, and by writing text that is unreadable, it draws the viewer into the work but can also be frustrating. That frustration or confusion relates to my relationship to nature, since I can often recollect experiences of nature, but they are more feelings and images than words.

While examining paintings by surrealist artist Andre Masson, Roland Barthes explained that, “an illegible writing foregrounds its true—as opposed to its functional meaning. It draws the readers’ attention to its material nature, rather than the instrumental one.”²³

²² Rebecca, W. *Preface: Selected Poems of Carl Sandburg*. New York, 1926. p. 24.

²³ Kawakami, A. *Illegible Writing: Michaux, Masson, and Dotremont*, *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 106, No. 2 (April 2011)

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5699/modlangrevi.106.2.0388>,

Accessed the 23 of January, 2013, pp. 388-406 (388).

From the 1950s to the 1970s artists and writers wanted to communicate something more authentic, and the sign was considered to be inauthentic. By taking writing away from being a referent, or sign, it could be more 'pure.' Often their writing was meant to be anti-Western and was understood from an orientalist perspective, which could be seen in the work of Andre Masson. Roland Barthes responded to Masson's show in Tours (1973) that had the most writing of all of his work. This body of work could be thought of as orientalist; however Barthes argued that in the postmodern context, appropriation is welcomed. In addition, Masson's paintings use Chinese techniques, but the content of his painting is "Western"²⁴

Another artist who used illegible writing during this time was Belgian poet Henry Michaux. Michaux visited China in the 1930s and was fascinated by Chinese calligraphy. He began writing illegible or partially legible poetry that was partly in French. However, he did not seek to copy Chinese characters in his work, and tried to create his own marks that were in between pictograms or letters.²⁵ Kawakami writes, "Michaux's interest in the gestural dimension of writing, the physical act which results in the sign, links the written word back to its source, the living body."²⁶

The early work of French artist Jean Degottex involves rapid writing, which was the result of "unconscious automatism," according to surrealist Andre Breton. However, automatic writing was only one influence in Degottex's work; he was also influenced by calligraphy, Eastern philosophies and abstract expressionism. "Writing is here understood

²⁴ Kawakami, op. cit. p. 396.

²⁵ Kawakami, op. cit, p. 388-390.

²⁶ Kawakami, op. cit, p. 393.

as a temporal, non-narrative, and non-metaphorical mode in which the implication of writing and surface inscription is the measure in which the work unfolds into visibility.”²⁷

Unlike the abstract expressionists, Degottex did not think of the gesture as subjective, rather he felt that he was creating pictorial signs. Degottex also cited Roland Barthes that “art has a scriptural origin and not an expressive one.”²⁸ I am especially interested in that statement, because I contextualize the text in my work as it relates to ancient scripts and the desire to communicate. Other widely known artists who used asemic writing inspired by Asian calligraphy include Franz Kline, Mark Tobey and Robert Motherwell.

A major difference between my asemic writing and those artists is that my mark making is based on a separate experience and not the immediate act. They are also projected backwards rather than spontaneously created from my imagination. However, I do allow some spontaneity to evolve with the thickness and thinness of lines. The way that I create the lines with a brush, combined with my rushed handwritten source material often gives the appearance of another language. It implies a desire to communicate with an open-ended deferral of prescribed meaning, referring perhaps to the insufficiencies of language in enabling "true" understanding.

An artist who uses asemic text as well as various other means of mark making is Cy Twombly. Twombly’s work contains both readable and unreadable text, and his drawings contain many signs that may be apparent to the viewer or only understood by

²⁷ P. Armstrong, L. Lisbon, S. Melville, *As Painting: Division and Displacement*. Wexner Center for the Arts, The Ohio State University. 2001. p. 94.

²⁸ Armstrong, Lisbon, Melville, op. cit. p. 94.

the artist. Twombly's work differs from his predecessors' writing because of his use of detached words and his application of legible text to imply a narrative. Much of Twombly's work was inspired by works of literature such as "Leda and the Swan" (1962), which is a story from Greek mythology.

Another characteristic of Twombly's work is his sense of lightness and the buoyancy of his mark making. Twombly's "Rome Paintings" were larger works that he created while living in his studio in Rome in the late 1950s. His marks began to "drift" or "lean [from] lower left to upper right, which he carried on throughout his career."²⁹ Art historian Kirk Varnedoe wrote a particularly moving summery of this phenomenon in Twombly's work, "...the edges of the works, especially at the top and bottom, become significant zones of activity, and this along with the drift, evokes the sensation that a gentle wind lifts and deflects the long, grass-like strokes as they rise across these surfaces. Gravity and its absence become, more than ever before, an issue in play."³⁰

Many of his paintings from Rome were inspired by graffiti on Roman Walls and monuments. This was considered to be an "anti-aesthetic gesture," in the context of 1960's European art, which was attractive to general public. His work was seen as a continuation of abstract expressionism and also the antithesis. Graffiti could mean personal expression or it could speak to an "objective engagement with a common, social language; to be of today and yet agelessly ancient."³¹ This melding of history (a characteristic of European art) and the artist's current experience of the world

²⁹ Varnedoe, K. *Cy Twombly: A Retrospective*. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. 1994. p. 27.

³⁰ Varnedoe, Op. cit, p. 28.

³¹ Varnedoe, Op. cit p. 28-29.

(referencing Abstract Expressionism) is a theme in Twombly's drawings and paintings that spans his work. Varnedoe wrote:

“For all the complex linguistic structure of his aesthetic and the rich web of his references, what his achievement may ultimately depend upon most heavily is the power he has drawn from within himself and from so many enabling traditions, to isolate in a particularly raw and unsettling fashion that primal electricity of communication, in his apparently simplest acts of naming, marking, and painting.”³²

The process interactions of paint, ink, and resist are essential to the completion of this exhibition, since every mark has an immediacy, enhanced by the physicality of the paper. Some attributes of my paintings that I hope to communicate in “Drift, Ascend” are gravity, motion, power, vastness, control and loss thereof. Perhaps viewers will have an experience of being transported to a strange environment where understanding is just out of their grasp, transfixed by color and motion, able to construct their own associations and meanings. Nature is important to humanity because it connects us to the universe, a sentiment that is summarized by Barbara Kingsolver in her essay, “Knowing our Place:”

“People *need* wild places. Whether or not we think we do, we *do*. We need to be able to taste grace and know once again that we desire it. We need to experience a landscape that is timeless, whose agenda moves at the pace of speciation and glaciers... Wildness puts us in our place. It reminds us that our plans are small and somewhat absurd. It reminds us why, in those cases in which our plans might influence future generations, we ought to choose carefully. Looking out on a clean plank of planet earth, we can get shaken right to the bone by the bronze-eyed possibility of lives that are not our own.”³³

³² Varnedoe. Op. Cit. p. 51.

³³ Kingsolver, B. *Small Wonder*. Harper Collins, New York, 2002. p. 40.

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Image 1 – Borealis

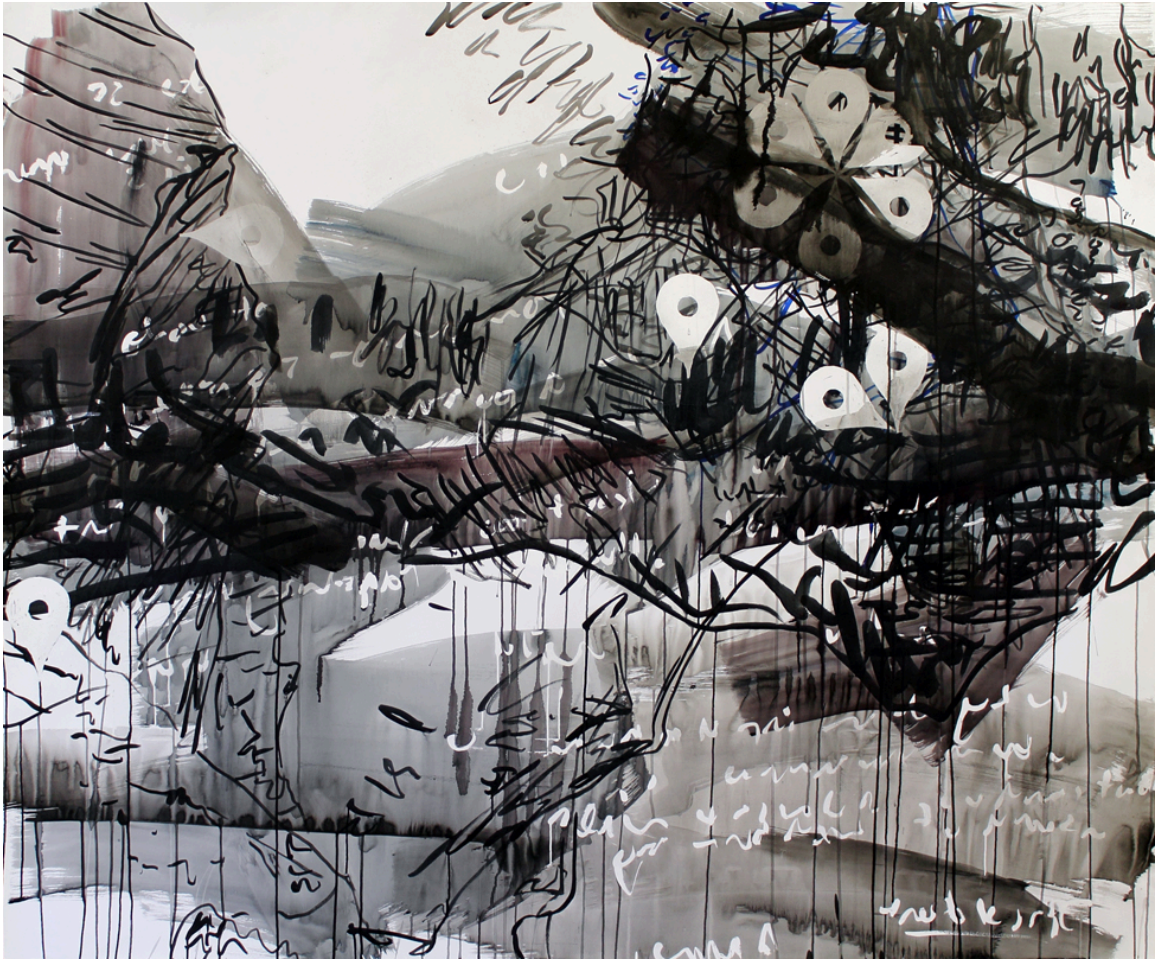


Image 2 – Disorientation



Image 3 – Discordant Fiction



Image 4 – Drift



Image 5 – Float



Image 6 – Tectonic



Image 7 – Slickrock Macrocosm



Image 8 – Gravity



Image 9 – Spring Temple



Image 10 – Bucket List



Image 11- Duality



Image 12- Mesmeric Cataclysm



Image 13- Organic Sweep



Image 14 – Installation View



Image 15 - Installation View

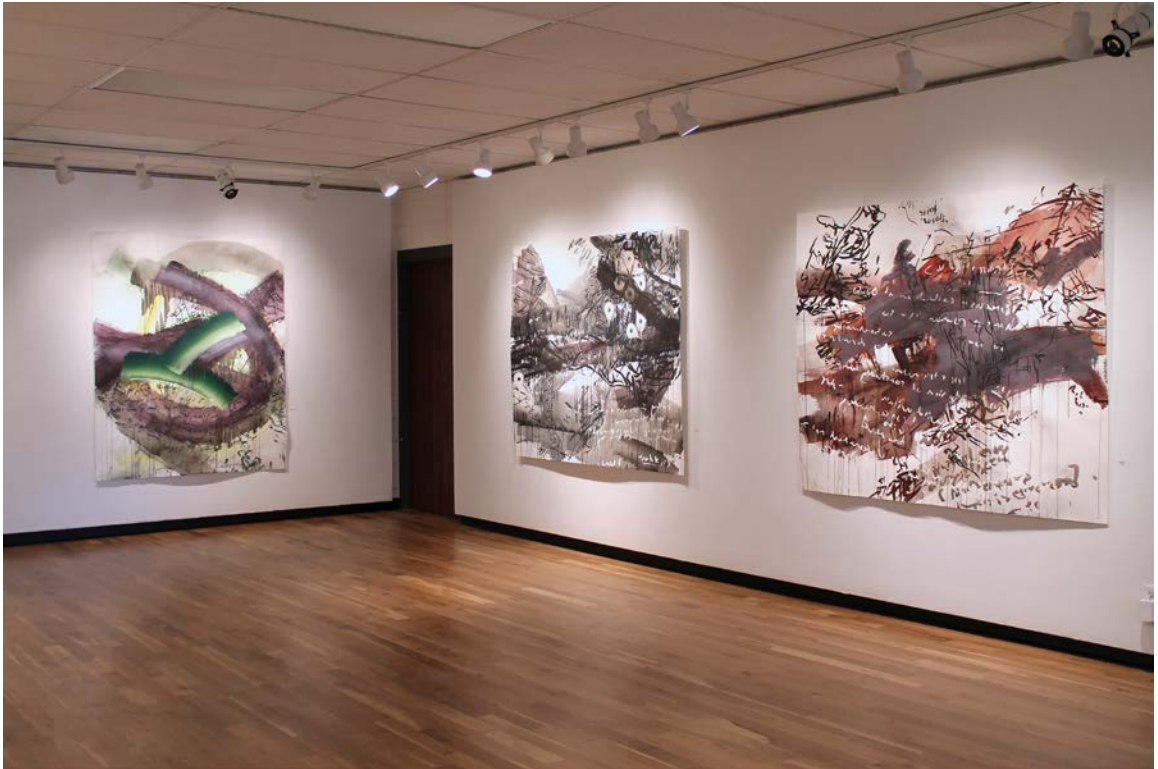


Image 16- Installation View



Image 17 - Installation View



Image 18- Installation View



Image 19 - Installation View



Image 20 - Installation View