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BETWEEN PSYCHE AND REALITY: AN INVESTIGATION OF
CONTEMPORARY LANDSCAPE

by

SHANNA STILES

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in Studio Art
in the College of Arts and Humanities
and in The Burnett Honors College
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term 2015

Thesis Chair: Carla Poindexter

Abstract

This body of work explores the emotional aspects of my life through the metaphor of landscape. It is a contemplation of the genre of landscape in the contemporary art dialog. By exploring the materiality of paint and the physicality of working large I discovered the question of contemporary relevancy is no longer my primary reason for this investigation. My growth as an artist has come from exploring historical and contemporary influences and how they have affected my processes and visual aesthetic. Thus, a large series of work has emerged from an unexplainable desire to connect and share the crucial moments of my life through paint.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my parents for their strength, love, and support through it all. Without them, none of this would be possible.

I would like to give my sincerest gratitude to my thesis committee chair, Carla Poindexter for her guidance and knowledge over the last two years as constant mentor and friend. Your support means more to me than you could ever know. I would also like to thank Ke Francis for giving me the gift of your unforgettable stories and spirit to guide me on this lifelong journey. Also, my heartfelt thanks to Jason Burrell for always challenging me and being such a wonderful mentor.

Further, a huge thanks to my amazing group of friends that have participated in countless all nighters, critiques, and motivational talks in this studio that has become our home.

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Prologue

I have been lost in a traumatic storm. I have lost to the storm. The extent of my possessions were rashly swept away beneath the bough of an old oak tree, a sibling was rolled away as the storm clouds grew upon the horizon. I have battled through the illnesses of those closest to me. I stood in an emotional haze and witnessed the excruciating pain my parents felt as they buried my sibling. These various storms tore through the terrain of my life but they have provided insights that have inspired my work.

Introduction

I wish to explore the moments that impacted my awareness of the world around me. Overwhelmingly, these moments come from nature. I grew up spending summers on the seacoast of Maine or nestled in the smoky mountains. I gazed out of the windows as hurricanes barreled through my Florida hometown year after year. In these experiences with nature I become the most at peace and aware. It is in these moments that I realize what is out of my control. Thus, my work becomes a reflection of the places I have experienced and the desires to paint and share these connections with others.

These misty landscapes become the best way for me to metaphorically express my paradoxical mental states of past and present, and as a means of exploring the familiar yet inexplicable and complex. For in the end, nature has no limits; we have no ability to control it, only the ability to respond to the impact.

In my work there is an omnipresent darkness that carries a significant weight. Although the darkness is sometimes overpowering, there is always a sense of light that serves as a counterbalance and a beacon of hope. While my paintings are a reflection of my internal emotions, they are also an exploration of my humanness in which I strive to harmonize the depiction of an empirical place with the mysterious and ever changing thoughts of my mind. Thus, this becomes an enigmatic space between psyche and the realities of the outside world.

My goal going forward is to explore contemporary landscape painting through the use of various formal and emotional visual responses. I want to investigate the relevancy of the

landscape genre in today's contemporary art world. Is it possible to defy countless critics that refer to landscape as an anachronistic genre?¹

If I can look at an artist's painting from decades before and feel what they felt then I would hope that sometime in the future my work could impact someone in the same way. That is what my work intends to be: the universal human connection that transcends time. What better way to approach this than through the one thing that connects us all?

¹ McKenna, Kristine. "Portraits of Two Artists: Present and Past: April Gornik : The Allure of the Dark Side." Los Angeles Times. May 20, 1990. http://articles.latimes.com/1990-05-20/entertainment/ca-254_1_april-gornik. (accessed 12 November 2014)

Process and Development

My paintings start from a foggy memory of a place I've been or a moment I've experienced. Normally, I have a rough idea of where the horizon line will be placed and then by employing chance, intuition, and mark making the final formations begin to emerge. Through the use of extensive layering techniques and varying brushwork I create an image that focuses on the formal aspects of space, time, and atmosphere that stands in for a larger metaphor of emotion.

Scale has a vital role in my work. Mainly, I work on large five-foot by five-foot canvases. This format allows me to enter a fictitious world I create while painting. When standing in front of the canvas my vision is consumed by the colors and brushstrokes I am making. The large format lends itself to its role in my process of painting. It calls for the use of large paintbrushes, rags, and buckets of water. I brush paint on and rapidly lift it off. I make a mark and quickly remove it to only leave small remnants of the color on the canvas. Other times, with the sweep of an arm, a mark will last in its entirety. The painting goes through multiple stages, appearing and disappearing. These techniques and practices help me realize my role as a painter. I do not desire to copy a photograph or depict true realism; rather I wish to show the artist's hand in creating a lasting "object" that has been "tangibly and materially produced".²

It becomes a struggle: when to stop and when to begin again. Working on large canvases leaves me physically exhausted by the end of the day. I am constantly moving back and forth, viewing the painting from up close and twenty feet away. I stand on stools, I squat on the floor. It

² Elger, Dietmar, *Gerhard Richter Landscapes* (Cantz; New York, NY 1998), 20.

becomes a dance. Ultimately, it becomes an effort to make the materiality of the paint function hand in hand with the process and concept.



Figure 1: Shanna Stiles, *After the Storm*, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60 in.

After the Storm

I began this work after experiencing a large scale April Gornik landscape painting, firsthand. I distinctly recall being in awe not only due to its large scale and formal qualities but because there was an emotive quality to the painting. Coming from a strictly figure based school I had no desire to work in the landscape realm until I experienced the immersive emotional content that April Gornik was able to convey through her dreamlike painting. This opened a flood of questions for me. What makes Gornik relevant to me while other landscape painters are not? How could she take a genre that is seemingly old-fashioned and make it relevant to present day society? Interestingly, when Gornik addresses her influences she disregards the Hudson River School painters and instead turns to artists such as Casper David Friederich, Albert Pinkham Ryder, and Frederic Edwin Church. For her, Ryder and Church are separate in the way that,

“Church depicts man as overwhelmed by the grandeur of nature, while Ryder gives a more psychological reading—he projects himself onto the landscape and shows it in his own terms. Ryder’s is the more modern approach and that’s more in line with what I do.”³

These questions involving April Gornik opened up a desire to explore the same themes and concepts in the genre of landscape that fits for me.

³ McKenna, Kristine. "Portraits of Two Artists: Present and Past: April Gornik : The Allure of the Dark Side." http://articles.latimes.com/1990-05-20/entertainment/ca-254_1_april-gornik. (accessed 12 November 2014)



Figure 2: April Gornik, *Storm Field*, 2008, Oil on Linen, 75x7 8.5 in. Danese/Corney Gallery (copyright © April Gornik; photograph provided by Danese/Corney)



Figure 3 Albert Pinkham Ryder, *Moonlit Cove*, early to mid-1880s. The Phillips Collection (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by WikiArt)

April Gornik's work led to my first painting in the series, *After the Storm*. It became my goal to create a landscape painting that held the same emotional qualities as Gornik's but in my own fashion. I went to be inspired directly by nature. I drove out to the country and meandered through old dirt roads, decaying farmland, and vast open fields with power lines. Along the way I stopped to document moments with a camera. The haunting feeling of this vast and void land brought me to my painting *After the Storm*. The large billowing skies and symbolism in Gornik's painting influenced me to create a piece with a low horizon line and a large ominous sky.

I chose to symbolize this theme of human versus nature through the light blue violet trailer and transparent tree. The sky is made up of earthy browns, blues, and grays. By using many layers of transparent subtle color and mark making the final visual texture of the piece becomes similar to that of worn leather. While Gornik uses natural elements of trees and bushes for symbols, I created these metaphors of isolation and despair through the use of a manmade object (the trailer) and natural elements (the tree and sky).



Figure 4: Shanna Stiles, *Bithlo*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60 in.



Figure 5: Shanna Stiles, *Salvage*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60 in.

Bithlo & Salvage

After the first painting in the series I went on to paint two more that contained structures. The canvases continued to be large format squares with low horizon lines and misty foreboding skies. The first painting, *Bithlo*, employed the use of a similar trailer for a symbolic device. The palette was made up of rich blue-violets, light blue-violets, and muted yellows. The next paint, *Salvage*, displayed an old junkyard full of dilapidated cars, trucks, and fragmented pieces.

The paintings were painted in reply to a class assignment to create works in response to and confronting environmental issues. I looked to the contemporary photographer Todd Hido for inspiration. Hido's photographs explored solitary residential homes in suburban landscapes. Soft light, slight tonal ranges, and a strong sense of atmosphere illuminate the photos. I was motivated by his work to understand a larger metaphor for a sense of time, place, and home. I went to rural towns outside of Orlando and photographed run down mobile homes, farms, and salvage yards. Although I had a positive response in critiques for both paintings I was not content.

The initial paintings in the series used my photography as reference. This was due to my immaturity as an artist at the time. I did not have the expertise to create these images formally without using this device. The cars in the foreground of *Salvage* were painted too large, ultimately taking away from the grandeur of the threatening sky and clouds above. Also, the trailer in *Bithlo* was not painted as well as the rest of the atmosphere in the painting. The light in the window did not succeed in exposing the metaphors I was intending to create.

Following the completion of these two paintings I felt disappointed. During the process I became aware that I wanted and needed to express parts of my past through the use of landscape. I had not abandoned the lofty skies and low horizon line, but something was lacking. For me, the

emotive qualities that I had first experienced when standing in front of the April Gornik painting at the museum were missing.



Figure 6: Todd Hido, #2479-A, 1999, Photograph, Chromogenic print, 8 x 48 in. Bruce Silverstein Gallery (copyright © Todd Hido; photograph provided by Artnet.org)





Figure 7: Shanna Stiles, *The Field*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 24 x 24 in. panels.

The Field

My search turned inward. Out of frustration from my lack of success in expressing my emotions in my previous paintings and a failure at my first attempt of printmaking I urgently grabbed six 24"x24" pieces of wood late one night. In a fit of rage I set up three easels with the pieces of wood on them. I put the song, "The Field", by Mason Jennings on repeat for the entire night. Hurriedly, I mixed colors, applied paint, and invented imaginary landscapes directly inspired by the rhythms, words, and emotions of the song. Each beat became a mark. Each chord became a color.

*"Every step I take takes me farther from you
Every move I make reminds me that I'll always love you
Since you were a child we built our lives around you
How am I supposed to live in this world we made without you?"*

*Sometimes late at night I go to the field
Is that where you are? Are you a shooting star?
Can you say my name? Darling can you hear me?
Tell me where's your heart now that it stopped beating?
It's right here, it's right here, it's right here"⁴*

This was the first time I allowed my hand and heart to work simultaneously together. For once, I let go of preconceived notions of assignments and painted what I felt by using landscape as my impetus. I worked the entire night without stopping until morning. I was dirty and exhausted but I left the studio with six completed paintings that I believed truly expressed how I was feeling.

⁴ N: Mason Jennings, "The Field", *Blood of Man*, Brushfire Records, 2009



Figure 8: Shanna Stiles, *Elevation*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 60 x60 in.

Elevation

Elevation was created in response to a physics presentation exploring the intersection between the scientific, psychological, and spiritual aspects of near death experiences. This was the first piece that I began to consider a landscape of the mind. I started to realize the potential of turning into myself to create landscapes that differed from the previous set of paintings. The early poet Francesco Petrarch was the first person to understand and write about nature “bifocally: as an empirical place and as a place of the mind, simultaneously.”⁵

Through the use of translucent layers and an ambiguous distance between light and dark I tried to explore the concept of looking at the energy, neural states, and thoughts inside the human mind. By, portraying the four elements of earth, water, air and fire I subtly merged the concept of landscape with a physiological state of mind and a sweeping sense of abstracted realities.

By abandoning the need for any type of building or structure I was able to free myself from the constraints of making a typical landscape painting. It was at this time that I became increasingly influenced by the work and philosophy of Gerhard Richter. Richter drew from the words of Caspar David Friedrich, who stated,

“When a landscape is covered in mist, it appears bigger, more sublime, it reinforces the strength of the imagination and excites the expectations, exactly like a veiled woman.

⁵ Juan March Fundación, *The Abstraction of Landscape: From Northern Romanticism to Abstract Expressionism*. 18.

The eye and the fantasy feel more attracted by nebulous distance than by, which is close and distinct in front of us.”⁶

Gerhard Richter challenges the notions of abstraction and landscape. He uses a “photographic blur” in his landscape paintings to expand upon this statement of mystery and continues to say, “Landscapes question the use of beauty and its role as a lure.”⁷



Figure 9: Gerhard Richter, *Davos*, 1981, oil on canvas, $19 \frac{7}{10} \times 27 \frac{3}{5}$ in. Stefan T. Edlis Collection. Foundation Beyeler. (artwork copyright © Gerhard Richter; photograph provided by Artsy)

⁶ Jean-Philippe Antoine. *Gerhard Richter: Landscapes*. New York: Zwirner & Wirth, 2004. 9.

⁷ Jean-Philippe Antoine. *Gerhard Richter: Landscapes*. 2004. 11.



Figure 10: Shanna Stiles *Rupture*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60 in.

Rupture

Rupture decidedly intends to blur the perception of a landscape. The horizon line has been diminished to simple brushstrokes only suggesting the forms of land. The use of exaggerated color emphasizes the emotional impact of the painting. Haunting forms of rain, light, and darkness move through the canvas.

The contemporary artist Anselm Kiefer influences this imbalance and ambiguity. Kiefer declares that he recognizes the interchangeability of above and below.⁸ By leaving a certain amount of indefiniteness I make the viewer aware of himself or herself. The obscurity allows each person to bring to the painting his or her own life experiences and thus interpretations. Further, Kiefer presents the viewer with information that is “spatial and temporal, material and physical, literal and metaphorical; they take him-and us-into depths of memory and wishful historical oblivion and radiate from those mental states into communal experience of good and evil.”⁹

⁸ Michael Auping, *Anselm Kiefer: Heaven and Earth*, (Fort Worth, Tex. : Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, in association with Prestel, 2005.), 173.

⁹ Ibid.



Figure 11: Anselm Kiefer, "*Nigredo – Morgenthau*" 2012, acrylic, emulsion, oil, and shellac on photograph mounted on canvas, 74 13/16 x 149 5/8 inches. Gagosian Gallery. (artwork copyright © Anselm Kiefer; photograph provided by Artsy)

My Faith is Broken: Musical Influence

At this time, I was in a long-term relationship with a musician. Visibly, music began to have a major impact on my work. Our art began to take shape as collaboration. Working together he would write a song based on the psychological experience of my painting. Likewise, I would paint a painting only listening to the song that he wrote. Similar to the earlier painting *The Field*, the colors, movements, forms, and mood of the painting became a direct reflection of the song I was listening to and experiencing. *Rupture* was painted in response to the song “My Faith is Broken” by Nicholas Leahy.

*“Another day of questioning
my ability of calming down
and keeping both feet on the ground.
I get no answers,
no voices in the back of my head
Proclaiming there will be life after I’m dead.
How can I get my spirit to sing?
Why do I let these doubts clip my wings?
If there’s a path my feet aren’t on it,
My eyes aren’t open,
My faith’s been broken. ”*



Figure 12: Shanna Stiles, *While There's Time Left*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60 in.

While There's Time Left

During the summer semester of 2014 I began an independent study. At this time I was forced to dig deeper into the meaning of my paintings. Why am I painting these? Why is this work important? Who am I painting this for?

I found talking about the past experiences that influenced my work to be extremely difficult. Much to my dismay, to some, the paintings came across as simply beautiful paintings of skies or clouds on the surface. This couldn't be further from what I intended. By using the sky and clouds-our universal human connection-I wanted to express the feelings of tragedy, sadness, death, danger, joy, hope, and ecstasy that life had given me so far. It is my goal to as authentically and honestly as possible communicate these emotions with the viewer. Ross Bleckner concluded that "I don't create the mood of my paintings, the conditions of my life do. My paintings reflect the anxiety and sadness of my mood. I don't create it, it creates me."¹⁰

While There's Time Left, is the first painting of the series to abolish a definite horizon line. Ultimately assuring the concept that it is a landscape of my mind rather than simply nature. This becomes the first step in my struggle between what is real and what is a dream. Dark, foreboding clouds of deep blues dominate the canvas. From the darkness, slight glimmers of light, hope, and rain emerge. With these long downward brush strokes and drips my paint is seemingly crying. The heaviness of the darkness would be too overpowering if it were not for the aqua and glazes of white in the lower half of the picture plane.

¹⁰ Fischer, Peter. 2000. *In The Power of Painting: Warhol, Polke, Richter, Twombly*. New York: Scalo. 40.

While There's Time Left: Musical Influence

The painting was completed as my previously mentioned relationship was deteriorating. *While There's Time Left*, was finished after we saw each other for the last time. The guilt of the ending of the relationship had fallen on me. This was the mark of our final collaboration as a couple and as artists.

*“Oh brother tell me
How long it's been since you were
Part of this story?
I try to rewind
Every time you come into my mind
But I don't recall
We don't know who we are
Until we find every missing part
When will that be?
I need to see you
I need to feel you
Rewrite this story.”*



Figure 13: Shanna Stiles, *Depart*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60 in.



Figure 14: Shanna Stiles, *Strife*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60 in.

Depart & Strife

A noticeable change in the process of the work took place after the completion of *While There's Time Left*. The painting *Depart* works as a painting but ultimately became too decorative. Overall, the painting becomes overly soft and blended. This was the first painting that I completely abandoned the use of music on. Subsequently, I lost some of the passion. My life was in turmoil but this was not being displayed in the painting. Unfortunately, I lost the impulsive mark making and transparent layers that had been seen before. In most areas the paint became excessively opaque and heavy. By entirely ridding the lower portion of a horizon the painting becomes too indefinite.

Strife was created shortly after. This painting became the ultimate battle for me. *Strife* was my attempt at reconciling the emotions I had failed in portraying in *Depart*. I painted with large house painting brushes. It was my goal to focus on mark making. I employed the use of lifts by painting a dark color on top of light. Quickly, I applied sopping rags of water to the surface to reveal the light beneath the darkness. I worked aggressively and passionately. In the process paint dripped and colors fused together. The formal qualities are still lacking. It becomes the most abstract of the paintings I have painted to this point. However, upon completion I felt I had succeeded in displaying my honest human emotion on a canvas with pigment.

This would become one of my biggest struggles for the remainder of the work. My paintings are intended to be a reflection of my internal emotions. They are a document of a particular moment in time to communicate these collective sensations with the world around me. Yet, how do I merge the real and unreal into one image?

The Contemporary Sublime

It is impossible to paint a landscape with a great sky and low horizon line on a large canvas and not address the sublime. According to Paul Crowther in *The Contemporary Sublime*, “Sublimity in the familiar artistic sense involves characteristically large canvases which, through evocations of wild natural grandeur, limitlessness, or intense painterly means, seek to express ultimate truths about the individual’s relation to the world.”¹¹

Constable, Turner, the Hudson River School Painters and the Color Field Painters of the 1950’s and 60’s are a few examples of artist that have grappled with the sublime in art history.¹² Importantly Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* explored the notion of the sublime in art. Kant characterized the sublime in art as “the awful, the lofty and the splendid” and “a subjective conception-something that happens in the mind.”¹³ Furthermore, Kant states that the sublime can be originated in the terrorizing aspects of nature or “provoked by an experience so complex that our inability to form a clear mental conception of it leads to a sense of inadequacy” and likewise “a void between the actual experience and the thoughts we are able to have about it.”¹⁴

During the 1970’s and 1980’s contemporary thought became influenced by Marxist, psychoanalytic, and feminist theory.¹⁵ The sublime fits into this social constructionist argument when Society no longer turns to “eternal essences or values” and we “still often sense that our

¹¹ Crowther, Paul. *The Contemporary Sublime : Sensibilities of Transcendence and Shock*. (New York, NY: Academy Editions 1995) ,7.

¹² Crowther, Paul. *The Contemporary Sublime : Sensibilities of transcendence and shock*. 7.

¹³ Morley, Simon. *The Sublime* (Cambridge, Mass: Whitechapel Gallery ; MIT Press. 2010), 15.

¹⁴ Ibid. 16.

¹⁵ Ibid. 17.

lives are fashioned by forces beyond our control”.¹⁶ However, many contemporary artists began to stop describing their art as sublime due to a “tainted association with both malevolent politics and inauthentic mass culture.” By leaving out attributions to such “lofty and grandiose intentions” artist allow the viewer to draw conclusions about the work from experiencing it.¹⁷



Figure 15: Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps*, 1812. (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by Wikipedia)

¹⁶ Ibid. 18

¹⁷ Ibid. 19.



Figure 16: Shanna Stiles, *Shift*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60 in. Collection of the artist.

Shift

Continuing the paintings in the series, *Shift*, seems out of place for a few reasons. My intentions to become more painterly were still in progress. At this point, I became aware of the materiality of the paint I am working with. Simply working with acrylics becomes a dichotomy. Acrylic paint is an extremely plastic unnatural material to paint an organic landscape. An unsettling, unnatural deep red violet dominates the composition. Layers of oranges, reds, pinks, and violets develop to create a painting that stands in for a metaphor of life, conception, and starting over. *Shift*, formally, works as a painting. In critique, it became a favorite among classmates. I had brought the concept of the horizon back with subtle layering of brushstrokes. The painting had more depth than previously and worked better as a polychromatic painting. But emotionally, the delivery is abrupt. I became impatient with my viewer. Instead of standing side by side with the viewer and letting the painting slowly reveal itself I am screaming at the viewer, which in my opinion becomes a weakness.



Figure 17: Shanna Stiles, *Kairos*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60 in.

Kairos

The work until this point has accumulated into a process that has become intuitive, emotive, and passionate. I have grown as an artist to understand my working habits and my best hours for working. To avoid being around a busy studio I have started working primarily in the middle of the night. This is when I am best able to enter a state between dream and reality. I am now able to create a fictitious world of light, color, and illumination. I have left behind the need to blend the painting to represent a realistic cloud formation. Now, the mark making is working simultaneously with the concept and metaphor of impending danger and death. The sickly yellows and burnt oranges are veiled by the looming darkness above. By offering the light blue violet on the bottom between the horizon line and the yellows I extend a sense of hope to the viewer and emphasize the contrast between this being an internal mindscape versus a place in reality.

Mark Rothko: Influence

Mark Rothko's grand paintings directly influenced *Kairos*. Rothko used large canvases not to be "grandiose or pompous" but to contrastingly, "be intimate and human"¹⁸ By taking out the representation of a human subject and painting large he paints so "you are in it, it isn't something you command."¹⁹ This becomes about the somatic response when standing in front of

¹⁸ Rothko, Mark, and Miguel López Remiro. *Writings on Art*. (New Haven: Yale University Press. 2006), 74.

¹⁹ Ibid. 74.

the painting, “larger pictures take you into them...-human scale.”²⁰ By reducing the composition to simple shapes and poignant forms of both fullness and a void I make a stronger image.

Similar, April Gornik states her reason for leaving out humans in her paintings is to make the “scale unclear”²¹ She concludes that “how big or small you feel in relation to the image tells you something about yourself.”²² Importantly, Gornik says that by eliminating the human element and allowing the landscape to take lead “it becomes more about the landscape of the imagination than anything we could locate in the real world.”²³



²⁰ Rothko, Mark, and Miguel López Remiro. 2006. *Writings on art*. 74.

²¹ McKenna, Kristine. "Portraits of Two Artists: Present and Past : April Gornik : The Allure of the Dark Side." (accessed November 12 2014)

²² Ibid. (accessed 27 March 2015)

²³ Ibid. (accessed 27 March 2015)

Figure 18: Mark Rothko, *No. 14, 1960*, 1960, oil on canvas, 114 x 105 in. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (artwork copyright © Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)



Figure 19: Shanna Stiles, *Final Let Go*, 2014-15, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60 in.

Final Let Go

Ending the fall semester of 2014, I painted *Final Let Go*. This painting became the most expressive painting I had done yet. At this point I began to disregard the use of brushes and turned to abnormal tools. Sponges, Rags, auto squeegees, paint taping knives, and large house brushes made up the process. *Final Let Go* becomes the most successful painting I have done to this point because of its use of color, mark making, form, and emotive qualities.

This is due to finally having a sense of confidence of myself as an artist. Dark blues and violets are rapidly layered on top of the numerous layers of aqua and pink beneath. Oranges and pinks emerge from the darkness. Setting myself the freedom to make a single mark and leave it to describe a form was liberating.

Final Let Go, marked several transitions in my life. I was now entering my final semester as an undergraduate. The painting became about painting. *Final Let Go* is a direct reflection of my emotions. Ultimately, it is an acknowledgement of the light and hope coming from the darkness and despair that has occurred in my life.



Figure 20: Shanna Stiles, *Time is Dancing*, 2015, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 72 in.

Time is Dancing

Going into my final semester, I moved up in scale. Five-foot paintings were no longer large enough to evoke my intentions. By moving up in scale I no longer am practicing easel painting. The work becomes more reflective of sculpture. It is about building a lasting object. From start to finish the process becomes more cumbersome.

To assure the stretchers are built to last I drive to a lumberyard many miles away to purchase kiln dried Poplar. I then spend weeks cutting, constructing, and finalizing the large stretchers for transportation. From there it becomes a weighty task to get the frames from the woodshop I build them in to my studio. Stretching the canvas leaves my hands destroyed-cracked, sore, and bleeding. These steps taken just to begin the painting ensure that I will full heartedly attack the canvas.

The physicality of working larger became apparent. For this, the work became stronger as a reflection of my current state and emotions. With the sweep of an arm a paint doused auto squeegee would poetically move across the surface. Other times large brushes scraped, jabbed, and pummeled the surface leaving remnants of paint behind. At this time, I began taping my fingers to paint. The process led me to take paint straight from my palette and apply it with my hands. This left no room or tool between artist and canvas. Thus, allowing for the most honest, direct, and personal application of paint. I drew influence from Cy Twombly who worked with his “hands and fingers” to call attention to the “extreme physicality of these paintings and the actual figure behind the brush”²⁴

²⁴ Rondeau, James *Cy Twombly : The Natural World, Selected Works, 2000-2007*. (Art Institute of Chicago ; Yale University Press. 2009), 34.

Towering spaces of energy dominate the composition. Toxic, murky, yellows, greens, and blues overlap and respond to one another. By approaching the subject of clouds and skies in an abstracted way I ultimately communicate the tragic and frightening moments I have experienced. The interiors of my mind are reflected on the canvas while the physical world “remains the spark that ignites the flame.”²⁵

Abstract Expressionism: Influence

Time is Dancing became increasingly influenced by Abstract Expressionism. Robert Rosenblum summarized that “The capacity to blur the landscape and religious painting, between the natural and the supernatural” carried on much past the Romantics and well into the twentieth century.²⁶ Following the Second World War, the Abstract expressionists resurrected an art that could “convey sensations of overpowering mystery.”²⁷ Many of the leading Abstract Expressionists such as Still, Newman, Rothko, and Pollock’s images were seemingly abstract, but in fact “elicit metaphors within a range of natural, organic phenomena rather than evoking the rational constructions of the intellect”²⁸ Rothko addressed the question of abstraction versus representation by stating

²⁵ McKenna, Kristine. "Portraits of Two Artists: Present and Past: April Gornik: The Allure of the Dark Side. (accessed 27 March 2015)

²⁶ Rosenblum, Robert. *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko*. (New York: Harper & Row 1975), 196

²⁷ Ibid. 197.

²⁸ Ibid. 203.

“I do not believe that there was ever a question of being abstract or representational. It is really a matter of ending this silence and solitude, of breathing and stretching one’s arms again.”²⁹



Figure 21: Barnett Newman, *Onement II*, 1948, oil on canvas, 60 × 36 in, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford Connecticut, U.S.A. (artwork copyright © Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford Connecticut, U.S.A.; photograph provided by Artsy)

²⁹ Juan March Fundación, *The Abstraction of Landscape: From Northern Romanticism to Abstract Expressionism*. 186.



Figure 22: Shanna Stiles, *Taunt*, 2015, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 72 in.

Taunt

Following *Time is Dancing*, I realized my strongest work would happen when I was willing to take myself to the depths of the darkest moments in my life. I called upon memory to explore the traumatic experiences of deaths, illnesses, and loss that had impacted me this far. To this point, my “collective memory” from which I drew inspiration was always present in my images.³⁰ However, they were lacking the power to communicate these traumatic experiences to others.

At this point, the process of painting and creating the image became entirely intuitive and expressive. I tried to bridge the gap between past and the present incidents of my life. Many nights I left the studio defeated. How does one express these grand ideas onto an object? Finally, the forms, abrupt mark making, and shifting colors amalgamated into a painting that called upon the “imaginative and creative nature of memory” to involve “forgetfulness and loss”.³¹

Morris Graves: Influence

The artist Morris Graves influenced my beliefs on memory, an inner world, and consciousness. When researching Graves I found a kinship in his modes of thought. Whereas I use the sky and clouds, Graves symbolizes the fate of man through the fate of birds.³² Morris Graves introduced me to the ability to look to the consciousness of man and “what he had seen in

³⁰ Cassiman, Bart. *The Sublime Void: On the Memory of the Imagination* (Ghent : Ludion,) , pg. 5

³¹ Ibid. Pg. 5

³² Kass, Ray, *Morris Graves, Vision of the Inner Eye*. (New York: Braziller, in association with the Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C. 1983), 11.

his mind” to symbolize and metaphorically express a “vision of the inner eye”.³³ The artist is able to give the viewer “oblique glimpses at the dimensions of reality by means of painterly allusions and pictorial metaphors.”³⁴



Figure 23: Morris Graves, *Surf and Bird*, 1940, gouache on paper, 26 ½ x 29 ¾ . The Phillips Collection (artwork copyright © Morris Graves; photograph provided by the Phillips Collection)

³³ Ibid. 19.

³⁴ Ibid. 14.

Conclusion

“A painting by Caspar David Friedrich is not a thing of the past. What is past is only the set of circumstances that allowed it to be painted: specific ideologies, for example. Beyond that, if the painting any “good”, it concerns us-transcending ideology-as art that we consider worth the trouble of defending (perceiving, showing, making). It is therefore quite possible to paint like Caspar David Friedrich today.”

Gerhard Richter, Statement 1973³⁵

During the final two years of my undergraduate studies I focused on painting large-scale atmospheric landscapes. I began the journey with an attempt to metaphorically express the happenings of my life that influenced me to make art with the use of clouds, trees, cars, and buildings. The process of examining what was driving my personal influences for the work allowed the work to grow gradually. Likewise, by the continued learned practice of working with the material I was able to build the confidence to metaphorically express the inward emotions of my mind more abstractly.

Reflecting on my work, I realized I had naively become worried about the incorrect aspects of my work. Instead of questioning if the genre of landscape is still relevant today, I should have been questioning what I, as a young, female, contemporary artist could bring to the genre of landscape. I believe that through my personal experiences I am exploring the same fundamental

³⁵ Juan March Fundación, *The Abstraction of Landscape: From Northern Romanticism to Abstract Expressionism*. 218.

questions of life that many before and many after will continue to scrutinize. From the breathtaking sublimity of J.M.W. Turner's work to the profound philosophical work of Anselm Kiefer I sought a comfort in experiencing paintings that I personally connected to. I feel many of the same fears, desires, needs, and wants as they.

An unexplainable force caused me to continue painting this series of paintings for the last two years. I have firmly stood by the reasoning I continued to paint this way. Although changing slightly, the same subject matter still challenges and motivates me every day. It is my goal to continue on my lifelong journey as an artist and explore sky, land, and sea as a means of self-expression and communication.

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