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Between Rock and Breeze

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Between Rock and Breeze

by

Lena Schmid

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of
Master of Fine Arts Studio Art, Hunter College
The City University of New York

2017

May 22, 2017
Date

Thomas Weaver
Signature

May 22, 2017
Date

Drew Beattie
Signature of Second Reader
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between Rock and Breeze</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image List for Thesis Show</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thesis Show Images</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures

Worrying about being heard.  
Worrying about being seen.  
I went back, back to Fiske.  
I went back, to the places I been.  

When I threw her in there were berries on the bush.  
Water so low you could walk across.  
I watched her sink with the summer sun.  
We're all going down.  

I went back, back to Fiske.  
I went back, to the places I been.  
See what's come up.  

All the time is here, on the lake.  
Yellow light won't shake me now.  
Those two old birds haven't quit,  
yelling their song.  
They rang like this when I saw her last.  
I rose and she fell.  

I went back, back to Fiske.  
I went back, to the places I been.  
Come wash me off.  

This song, *Fiske*, is one that I recently wrote. The song holds two meanings. On the outside, it is a song about disposing of a body in a lake and returning to the scene of the crime to “see what's come up.” However, couched inside that story is the feeling of leaving parts of myself in a place. I am both the person disposing of the body, and the body being left.  

Fiske Pond is a quiet place on state owned land in Western Massachusetts. Few people swim there because there is a larger lake with lifeguards and a sandy beach just a half mile away. The pond is frequented by a few locals and their dogs. Paddle-boards
are left there in the summer so anyone can glide them out into the middle of the lake. I used to visit Fiske almost every day after work in the summer for a cooling swim.

In order to get to the pond you park your car on the road and walk a short, worn path through a field with buzzing insects and long grasses. The hot, sideways heat of the late afternoon sun is tempered by the woods surrounding the water. There is nothing I miss so much as the promise of that water. Swimming is one of the only things that gives me relief from my painful body, one of the only kinds of movements that doesn't hurt or aggravate the chronically inflamed muscles in my head, neck, arm, and leg. Swimming at the end of the day is a sad gift. After a painful day it is some sweet solace to wash away sweat and embedded aches. To float on your back with your ears in the water, listening to the muffled sounds of water and birds, and watching the sky. Much of the music I've written is composed at the water, after a swim.

One of my favorite albums is Robbie Basho’s *Visions of the Country*, from 1978. Basho was an American folksinger who played his guitar like a sitar and sang like a concussed opera singer. *Visions of the Country* was written on his travels across the US and in response to the land. In the song, *Orphans Lament*, he sings over a swelling, percussive piano, “I'll be waiting there by the river, my love/ I'll be waiting there by the trees/ Will you wait?” (Basho) The lyrics and melody are reminiscent of Irish folk songs, but the way he sings and plays creates a world totally to itself. This swelling, insistent, needed, embodied nature is what I am trying create in my drawings.

I am interested in expressing the collusion of body and landscape. When I dive into cold water, it puts me inside of my body and outside of it at the same time. My skin seems to jump into place with an awareness of the all-over-chill, but my mind travels up
through the back of my head. This kind of embodied experience of nature, and its
palliative, expansive abilities are what I want my work to hold. I am searching for forms
that can signal this space in which nature and body fuse.

In my time at Hunter, I have moved through multiple bodies of work, but
investigated only a few major forms: drawings and monotypes focusing on circular
forms and mark-making, and music. I started making circles shortly after beginning
graduate school.

![Fig. 1](image)

The circles are constructed of thousands of fingerprints made by applying ink to my
fingertips and pressing them onto the substrate. Sometimes I push the ink around with
brushes or plastic wrap, but mainly it is applied with my fingers. Often the circles are
concentric with one or two sitting inside each other. Their shapes allude to breasts,
mountains, rocks, eyeballs, planets, and eclipses. Their textures contain the same kind
of mutability that is found in moss, a rock, or a puddle.

I used to make very action-based works that engaged my whole physical body by
recording its movements. As my body has become an increasingly painful shell to
inhabit, my work has changed. It’s no longer meaningful to make drawings with the
same exuberant movement as before. My body has become bounded, so my work also
has become bounded. The circles are meant to concretize this in-between space of flesh and rock and breeze that I now inhabit.

I am interested in the Western esoteric tradition of the circle. Circles manifest themselves in the curious paintings and drawings of Hildegard of Begnin, Robert Fludd, Hilma af Klint, and Emma Kunz. All of them used the circle to depict transcendent visions. The circle is also used in traditional folk music to evoke eternal connections. The traditional folk song, *Ezekiel's Wheel*, which refers to a, “Wheel in a wheel a whirlin,” is about Ezekiel's vision of an ophanim, a type of angel that cannot be seen directly, but is instead perceived as a multiplicity of circles.

I have made circles on paper, gessoed panel and directly on the concrete floor of my studio. This process is time consuming and not meditative. However, the textures that I am able to create using this technique are irresistible to me, and the circles allowed me to investigate this texture within a form that leant itself naturally to gentle illusion.

While I was making the circles, I was also writing songs that are thematically linked to my visual art. I began to investigate how and if this text could become a part of the work. Text is something I have put into my drawings on and off for many years. Its inclusion usually marks a desire to make visual art that contains the content of the words. I was considering whether it was the words themselves, or their content that I wanted to express. For instance, in the piece, *Where Does Light Come From?*, the text is only legible when the panel is hit by light at a certain angle.
The most successful inclusion of text came in the form of a book, *Some Sour Chance*. It is a hand-bound, hardcover book of original monoprints containing images and a poem. The text is a love letter to my lost health, but also an exploration of what I value in artwork. Like any good folk song, there is another meaning hidden inside a recognizable form. The text reads:

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STAY AS LONG AS YOU WANT
I DON’T CARE ABOUT ANYTHING NEW
SO LET’S JUST DO WHAT PEOPLE HAVE ALWAYS DONE
THE THINGS THAT DON’T CHANGE
ARE MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE THINGS THAT DO

AND IT’S JUST SOME SOUR CHANCE
YOU LEFT AT ALL

I PICK UP ROCKS
HOLD THEM IN MY HAND

BECAUSE THEY’RE BETTER THAN THE REST
```
OF THE FEW SHORT THINGS IMPORTANT TO ME
YOU WERE THE BEST

I placed the book on an easy chair behind the illuminated painting, *Untitled*. The installation and the content of the book invite the viewer to spend time with the artwork in an intimate and private setting.

*Fig. 3*

My current body of work is an attempt to focus more directly on the collusion of the body and nature, in order to provide the viewer with the same kind of embodied experience. I am making monoprints whose forms reference clouds, grasses, parted hair, feathers, bodily openings, rocks, and the passage of time. I am trying to shake at the boundaries of the human body and the natural world, so no one form sits tidily in either category. Our bodies are not simply the shape of ourselves; they are also comprised of our perceiving senses. I am keenly interested in how the sense of touch can be communicated through texture.
Fig. 4

The monoprints are roughly symmetrical, like the human body. They depict forces without action: bending and cleaving as both hair and hillside, and opening and closing as clouds and eyes. They share a kinship with other forms of symmetrical spiritual abstraction including the artwork of The Transcendental Painting Group and Indian Tantra drawings.

The work is also tied to Romantic notions of God in nature, longing, and the natural world as a site for redemption. It is easy to fall into cliches when trying to define and explain the connection between our bodies, the natural world and The Other. Words always fall dumbly and inadequately short. For all my interest in the assuaging possibilities of nature, my experience of it is largely defined by longing. Longing to know it and myself and to be relieved of the petulant hole inside me. In his Romantic masterpiece the *Book of Hours*, the poet Rainer Maria Rilke writes about his search for God:

All who seek you
    test you.
And those who find you
    bind you to image and gesture.

I would rather sense you
as the earth senses you.
In my ripening
ripens
what you are. (Rilke,169)

This is the kind of searching I am doing in my paintings. I am after a space that feels like that known connection between your body and senses.

I am also interested in the depiction of vibrations, both heard and known. When we hear a sound, our body literally accords with it. The inside of the ear vibrates at the same frequency as the noise. This is why music is so affecting, why it makes us cry, smile, and move our bodies in time. This is the affect of heard vibrations, but there is also an affect of known vibrations. There is a way that information is carried and perceived that has nothing to do with rational cognition, and everything to do with tuning into our world. Sound vibrations and waves of light directly activate our nervous systems, linking our senses to the world. I am interested in using music and visual art to show how waves of vibration and other tactile events tie us inexorably to the world.

In his poem, Cosmic Equation, the musician Sun Ra writes about vibrations and understanding:

Then another tomorrow
They never told me of
Came with the abruptness of a fiery dawn
And spoke of Cosmic Equations:
The equations of sight-similarity
The equations of sound-similarity
Subtle Living Equations
Clear only to those
Who wish to be attuned
To the vibrations of the Outer Cosmic Worlds.
Subtle living equations
of the outer-realms
Dear only to those
Who fervently wish the greater life (Sun Ra, 110)
The painter Agnes Pelton said about her paintings, “These pictures are conceptions of light - the essence of fire, not as we see it in the material world but as the radiance of the inner being. They are produced from that state of consciousness from which the creative impulse is a unified expression and solidified to the presentation of the material forms of the natural world.” (Ressler, 154) These are the kind of vibrations I am interested in, the ones that are neither felt or heard, but still register in your body. This confluence of radiation, light, vibration and being is what I am after in my work.
Works Cited


1. Send a song on the wind to deliver me, 2017, oil on paper, 60 inches x 70 inches.

2. Trouble Anymore, 2017, oil on paper, 60 inches x 70 inches.

3. Remembering Mountains, 2017, oil on paper, 60 inches x 70 inches.

4. It most certainly seems some disease of the dream’s been going around, 2017, oil and collage on paper mounted on linen, 86 inches x 70 inches.

5. Dark Turn of Mind, 2016, oil on paper, 40 inches x 30 inches.

6. Goodbye Old Pain(t), 2017, oil on paper, 40 inches x 30 inches.


3.