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Here: Drawings and Paintings

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by

Amy Colleen Marinelli

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Abstract of the Thesis

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I make drawings and paintings about my relationship to places I consider home. During my three years of studio practice at Stony Brook, however, my definition of just what home is has shifted considerably. My work has evolved accordingly.

These shifts involve: the expansion of subject matter and content from that of a single house representing home, to home as a complex amalgamation of relationships, including body, landscape and the natural world; a move away from oil painting and towards total engagement with drawing; increased abstraction in the imagery; the incorporation of a growing range of very particular materials, and the materials becoming more and more integral to the content, or meaning, of the drawings.

Here: Drawings and Paintings documents the development of subject matter, content, and materiality in my artwork, including the relevant personal history preceding my entry

into the Master of Fine Arts program at Stony Brook University, and each subsequent major stage of progression resulting from full immersion in my academic, cultural, and studio environs over the past three years.

For Christopher Watkins,
my love, my partner, my home.

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Acknowledgements

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Introduction

In this thesis I will trace the evolution of my art from prior to the time I entered the Master of Fine Arts program at Stony Brook University through my contribution to the final Thesis Exhibition at the University Art Gallery (Spring 2008). This will include discussion of major themes and issues at the core of my work, as well as my motivations and influences, processes, criteria for evaluating the work, and contextualization in the broader scope of past and present artmakers. A rough chronology of development will provide the framework for addressing these topics.

Currently, my art production centers on drawing, and requires studio-based, hands-on activity. The materiality of the work is essential. The drawings range from small-scale to large-scale (from 4 inches up to 112 inches) and are usually charcoal on paper, layered and worked over time. Cutting, abrading, and erasure are a part of my process, and their evidence —as touch, as time, as decomposition— is as important to the finished drawings as is that of the varied applications of pigment.

While the imagery in my body of work has changed radically over the past three years —becoming increasingly but not entirely abstracted— the thematic content has remained constant: I make drawings and sometimes paintings of the place(s) I consider "home." More specifically, the work is about my experience of, and relationship with, these places. It is psychological as well as physical/material. This thematic focus began in my first month of residency in the MFA program here, and was initially manifest in various views and interpretations of a single anthropomorphized house (the house in California in which I grew up).

———————

First of all, it seems important to establish that my work is not and never has been theory-derived. This is not to say that theory cannot be applied to the work, nor that it lacks that kind of context— but I make the work first, and only after that does theorizing and related analytical kinds of cerebral work come into play. In other words, the making comes first and the theory (sometimes) follows— not vice versa.

The successful works, at least, come from of-the-moment intuitive, emotional and material processes. "Of-the-moment," of course, has a lot to do with what has preceded: the issues I am engaged in for the longer term, the particularities of the previous drawings or paintings, my recent and long-ago experiential histories, my physical condition and mood, the myriad of sensory impressions that may or may not have been consciously registered, the availability and selection of certain materials in my studio, and so on.

As I set out to delineate my work's development during my studies as an MFA student, I must also provide some relevant background on my artistic development and general biography that preceded my arrival at Stony Brook. Who I was and what I did previously as an artist and person have played a major role in determining my artistic agenda and progress, and they continue to. Background is a relevant discussion in any case; but I think it is particularly essential when one makes work that is so directly rooted in one's own very subjective personal experiences. I put myself into the art, so in this sense my life and work are not separate, and an honest discussion of one cannot omit the other.

Pre-Stony Brook University

My background is relatively atypical for an MFA student. I did not go to "art school" as an undergraduate; instead, I received my B.A. in the Social Science Field, which was a broad and interdisciplinary arena of study at the University of California, Berkeley. What I learned there and have retained since is an understanding that every single thing in this world is interrelated, that everything exists only in temporal form, in relation to and subject to the ever-changing condition of its context. (Somehow this is what I extrapolated from years of being shown how economic conditions affect culture, culture affects politics, politics affect history, and history affects economies...) This is a world view, even a philosophy, that I continue to hold, and that imbues my work. To be fair, it was not solely derived from my undergraduate course of study; it began there, however, and has been confirmed and evolved through numerous and varied life experiences since.

In San Francisco in the late 1990's, I began making black and white photographs at the end of the workday. (I was freelancing full-time as a Project Manager at advertising agencies. I had bought an old manual camera and rented time at a local darkroom.) In retrospect, I am able to identify this period, and the medium of photography, as that which first allowed me to concretely articulate my particular point of view. Only with an accretion of images (and the helpful comments of a few select people) was I able to start the slow process of recognizing, let alone developing, my own visual language.

Within the year, I was enrolled in a one-year multi-medium art program in the rural West of Ireland, at the Burren College of Art. There I was able to expand upon my photography practice, as well as produce drawings, paintings and sculpture full time. I was also completely immersed in village life, which meant a close involvement with nature and the benefits and difficulties of existing with much less environmental mitigation than that which cities provide. If it was a cold, damp evening in County Clare, it was a cold, damp evening inside the living room of my stone-walled home there. If it was calving season, I knew it, because the bike path to the studio edged the fields of livestock, and I saw and heard and smelled them every day. I learned that you can smell a male mountain goat's presence from at least a half mile away. Many types of wildflowers

there have ridiculously brief blooming periods— They take a one-week turn, then disappear while another color takes over.

I became a self-taught artist before I became an "art student." During the first several years of making art —including my time at the Burren College of Art and other places where I was enrolled in art courses— I received very little technical instruction. Most courses ended up providing mainly the structure of time and space for me to trial-and-error my way into learning how to use oil paint, for example, or how to achieve a particular visual effect.

This is relevant because when I committed myself to becoming an artist and was accepted into serious, advanced- or graduate-level programs, including classes and residencies (not only at the Burren, but also at places such as the School of Visual Arts, Vermont Studio Center, the New York School of Painting and Drawing, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago), I approached each opportunity with a deeply entrenched sense of inferiority. It seemed to me that everyone around me —my peers, as it were— were in fact not my peers at all, but brilliantly equipped, technically and verbally fluent art students. I assumed that everyone came from an art college or art major (most did), and that a craft foundation was built into their previous education. Subconsciously, at least, I entered each new opportunity feeling that I would have to play "catch up" and accelerate the development of my work in order to be on par with others. This sense of inferiority may have had a positive effect, in that it may have helped contribute to the strong work ethic that I have always brought to my studio practice. On the negative side (or at least more complicated side), it is an issue of identity that colors how I saw, and see, my studio practice and art: I did not consider myself a legitimate artist even as I was making art full time.

Perhaps because of my age (I was twenty-nine years old when I began making art full time) and background, I had a sense of what I wanted to communicate in my work before I had the skills to make successful work; my ideas were ahead of, but continued to evolve with, my technical skills. However, I believe that much of the art I produced for many

years suffers from an unacknowledged bias towards proving to myself and others that I could make a technically good painting or drawing. Execution was occupying my energies to the extent that the conceptual development may have been suffering. By the time I was a couple of months into the Post-Baccalaureate Certificate Program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, it had finally, and only recently, become clear to me that, a.) professionals in the art field viewed my work as being more than technically competent, and b.) technical proficiency mattered absolutely not at all to most of the faculty with whom I was working. That is to say, it mattered, but was considered a negative trait. (Faux-naive awkward handling, cartoony visuals, and depiction of genitalia were categorically of interest. My work contained none of these.)

The Chicago program was 2004-2005, and by the time I arrived there I had been evolving my work by maintaining a studio-based practice, and through short-term intensive residencies at the School of Visual Arts, the Vermont Studio Center, and the New York Studio School. I had a body of work including paintings and drawings that were primarily semi-abstracted figurative portraits, invented, intuitively and expressively rendered. Fortunately, my year at the Art Institute functioned in the way that one's first year of Graduate School is supposed to function: I tore down what I had built. I experimented with visuals, materials, subject matter, working methods and ideas that were so far outside what I had been doing that they were not even recognizable as my own. I made ugly, stupid work. It was totally ungratifying at the time, and exhausting and unnerving. It was like continuing an affair with someone you hate, making out with them every day in spite of the alternating nausea and flat despair it brings on.

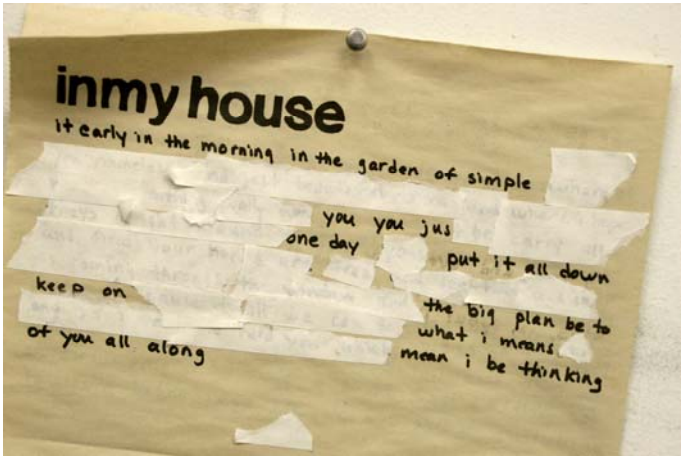
I had also felt so ostracized and frustrated by the critical environment at the Art Institute that I was finally able to let go of any trace of caring about what others thought of my work. In fact, critical feedback including comments such as "What your work needs is a gimmick" helped me realize and stubbornly strengthen my position regarding what I wanted my art to do, and what I think art in general should do. (I am entirely anti-gimmick.) By the end of the academic year there, I had completely dismantled my previous way of working...and then built it anew, with a distilled but much more flexible, more mature visual vocabulary and clarified sense of what I wanted my work to say and do. The last two months of the program I made a series of "stain paintings" that came out

of a desire to make work that mattered to me, that felt emotionally accurate, that I could connect to, that had everything to do with touch and the sensuous and temporal real world. These aspects, manifest in this series, continue to be at the core of all of my work.

I was very fortunate to have been through this experience prior to my first year in the MFA program, rather than during it, as is more the norm— Instead of starting the artistic dismantling process when I got to graduate school, I had just completed a huge portion of it. I arrived equipped rather than entrenched, ready to move my work directly forward upon arriving.

(Re-?)building—First Year

in my house
it is early in the morning in
the garden of simple
you you jus
one day put it all down
the big plan be to
keep on what i means
mean i be thinking
of you all along



in my house (after adam pendleton) (detail), 2005
tape on pre-printed newspaper
17 x 12 inches

Beginning the MFA program at Stony Brook meant beginning in a new studio, beginning in a new geography/culture (Stony Brook area, Long Island), beginning in a new home. It also meant a new start for my work.

I have relocated (moved homes) about a dozen times in the past fifteen years; a few of these were international moves (San Francisco to Milan, Italy, and back a year later; San Francisco to Ballyvaughan, a small town on the West coast of Ireland, and then Ballyvaughan to Denver), and several were interstate (Denver to Brooklyn, Brooklyn to Chicago, Chicago to Stony Brook). In between, there were many intra-California moves.

In spite of the frequency with which I have moved in the past, I have not become accustomed to this kind of change. I always find it to be radically disorienting —quite literally, wholly dislocating. I do not adapt quickly.

Every time I have moved studios, my work has changed significantly. Perhaps this is partly because much of my art-making process is intuitive, and includes unconscious response to my immediate environment, among many other things. In any case, the kind of re-start that comes with a new studio space is both a scary and exciting thing to contemplate when in the midst of it. I decided immediately upon arriving at Stony Brook that I would do my best to speed along the adapting and "settling in" period in my new studio; I did not want to waste time, so I began inhabiting the workspace by making new drawings. Almost as soon as I set to making work there was an immediate emergence of the theme/content that still continues in my drawings and paintings: that of *home*.

That first semester, and through my first year, home was not only the content but also the depicted subject matter. A house, or a view of part of the house, was featured in every drawing. The house was highly subjectively rendered, though, and appeared animated, often in motion, anthropomorphic. I made a series of about ten relatively large drawings of the house. Each drawing had dimensions between approximately four and six feet, and most were made of charcoal on paper.

untitled (House I), 2005
charcoal on paper
48 x 50 inches

untitled (House III), 2005
charcoal on paper
52 x 55 inches

Several factors came together to enable and spur me to make this kind of work. First, as mentioned, I brought with me to graduate school a sense of urgency for accomplishment, and a knowledge of my own working methods: I knew that sometimes the best way to find one's ideas is to stop thinking and start drawing; the ideas will eventually reveal themselves in the work even before one is conscious of what they are. I also knew that I needed privacy in my studio. Historically, I have never been able to make good art when I am conscious of another person's presence— It interferes with my relationship to the development of the work. Here, luck came to my assistance: I had been slated to share my studio with another incoming student, a condition which, had it become actual, most likely would have prevented me from making these particular drawings. (This is not only because wall space would have been much more limited, but more significantly, because the work was very personal, and with another person in the room I would have been self-conscious and unable to produce it.) Fortunately for me, the studio mate never showed up, and I was able to continue working in privacy.

I had also arrived with a mental commitment to make work that was honest, that was about things that mattered to me, and that were neither defensively nor self-protectively hiding behind mostly formal, mostly craft-type issues. I recall deciding in the studio the first week that I would make work that was about what really mattered —to me. (My experience at the Art Institute had been difficult, but had equipped me to risk more in my new work; I no longer cared much what others thought, which freed up a kind of directness and honesty regarding the content of my art.) As I was re-orienting and committing myself to this kind of work, reinforcement was found (perhaps coincidentally, perhaps not) in the midst of a Graduate Painting course: I took note when the instructor, Professor Melvin Pekarsky, told a fellow student that he could not "see" that student in their work. This criticism touched precisely on my own concerns at that moment, and served as a warning and an affirmation of my new agenda. I would risk self-exposure in my work.

The focus on "home" in my new drawings came from my particular needs and emotional state at the time, coupled with the commitment to allow the work to be personal. I was experiencing an acute sense of dislocation and alienation on the heels of so many geographic moves, and so much change. This was exacerbated by a slightly

chilly reception at my new school: I had deferred starting graduate school for one year (in order to attend the Post-Baccalaureate Program in Chicago), and upon entering Stony Brook it slowly became apparent to me that this was, perhaps, unofficially frowned upon. This made me feel isolated and disoriented, which fed into the subject matter of my work.

I began using imagery based on my memory of the house I grew up in (located in Aptos, a town near Santa Cruz on the central coast of California) simply because I had committed to making drawings about something I cared deeply about, and this house matters quite a bit to me. I also wanted to see how a drawing of this place would look. This house was something I knew very intimately, but I was not able to produce very concretely representational drawings. Instead, memory, my feelings about the place, and my own mark-making yielded highly interpretive renderings. The larger drive, however, unrecognized by me at the time, was a need to make contact with "home."

Part of making contact was literal— putting hands on charcoal and paper, and making images of a place I still to some extent consider home. By making an image of the house, I was (re-)creating the house in a way, making it real rather than a memory. I could touch it.

I was not just relocating the house, however. I realized as I made more drawings that the house represented "home" in all its broadness and complexities: The drawings were manifesting home not only as a structure or shelter, and as locale, but also as self, as family, as personal history. I was making contact with these things, analyzing them, and in the process, finding a way to deal with the disorientation and dislocation I was experiencing at the time.

untitled (House VII), 2005
charcoal on paper
57 x 60 inches

Materials: The Matter of Making

The series of house drawings that I created during my first semester at Stony Brook mostly consisted of charcoal on paper. The materiality of the work, and particularity of these materials, were and are very important to me. Charcoal and most of the papers used in my work are organic: both are made from once-living plant materials. Of course, what was once alive is dead —plant life has been burnt to become charcoal, pulped to become paper— but is nonetheless useful in its transformed state. Its very nature makes tangible the issue of temporality and transformation, even before we deal with the particularities of image.

The choice to use charcoal on paper was also pragmatic. It is the medium with which I am most fluent. Using charcoal allowed me to make immediate, direct, expressive drawings; I was not slowed down to self-consciousness. This was crucial, and let me effectively explore the motif and discover the meanings as they revealed themselves in the accumulation and variety of images. I was able to generate (relatively) rapidly, with

each image intuited, morphing in the process of making, and finally leading to the next one.

Charcoal also allowed me to be very physical in the act of art-making. Most of the drawings were relatively large: between five and six feet wide, and usually almost as tall. Making marks that traveled any distance across the picture plane (defined by paper stapled to the wall) required the involvement of my entire body, coordination and the transference of a fair amount of energy. The charcoal pushed onto and into the paper, all of the marks that went into the drawings, revealed rather than mitigated the physical engagement at this scale. This kinetic aspect of course references the body (specifically, my body) as well as the act of making, and I hope locates the drawings and their subject matter in the human, the real, the experienced material world.

The images that resulted reinforced the core content, but this was only achievable because of the particular properties and possibilities inherent in the materials. The final imagery had to "read" and function as active(-ated) and not static in order to support a conceptual and, ideally, affective humanism. Because charcoal and erasure on paper is so direct and can reveal the nuances of an individual's unique touch, movements, and mind-changes, it served my purposes well. The viewer can see the rapidity or slowness as well as the pressure applied in the making of any given line, or group of marks or swaths of tone, that together form the drawing in its entirety. The resulting imagery is not just made from organic materials, but is itself organic: line, form, and in most of my drawings, even the edges of the paper/picture plane are intuitively and unevenly, nonrigidly shaped. (I do not like hard geometry in art; I do not repond to symmetry; my work is not concerned with the much-addressed "grid" of the modern Western tradition of painting. To me, these feel anti-organic, digital, dead.) The result is images of an animated house, or parts of a house, that seem to threaten morphing, or decomposition, or collapse. Everything has been touched, exists because of touch, but nothing appears stable.

untitled (House IV), 2005
charcoal on paper
55 x 60 inches

The above discussion of materiality pertains not only to this early series of drawings, but to my core practice as continued and evolved through my three years at Stony Brook. The issues remain embedded in and relevant to all of my current and, I expect, future work. The fundamental and organic nature of charcoal on paper is why these materials remain at the center of my studio practice.

Stain Paintings

As the semester progressed, I began making a group of works which was secondary to, but developing simultaneously with, my primary practice of creating the house-focused images. I consider this group an extension of the stain painting series I had begun the previous Spring, at the end of my year at the Art Institute of Chicago.

The stain paintings are all abstract works, and tend towards minimalism. Image-wise, it would be difficult to link them to my other works; but conceptually, they are intrinsically connected: They rely on organic form and materiality, and are about the experience of touch, our existence in the sensory world, and temporality.

Each of these paintings consists of paper stretched and anchored to a wooden frame. The pigment used to stain the paper and create the image consists of wine, coffee, or whiskey; or sometimes a combination. One painting was made from my own blood. These staining elements are non-art materials— They are borrowed from my broader life. (One might even call them "sustaining" when in their usual context.) I select them also for their sensory aspects, because of their colors, viscosities, and even scents. The papers, on the other hand, are entirely of the specialized "art world," albeit with a tangible and not-forgotten connection to their originating plant life. They are most often 100% cotton rag sheets, or sometimes high quality printmaker's paper, made from a pulp with very little, if any, sizing in it. The absorptive properties and look of the surface are important, but the greatest criterion in evaluating and selecting the papers I use is simply how they feel in my hands; They must positively engage the senses, especially the sense of touch. I prefer soft, smooth (non-toothed), thick surfaces, at least 140-pound.

Like the charcoal drawings, each of these paintings is generated via intuition and my hands' direct manipulation of the materials. However, these paintings rely to a much greater extent on chance, or a serendipity that is prepared for but is not fully within my control. After stretching the paper, the staining liquid (nonlightfast ink, or coffee, blood, whiskey, or wine) is poured onto the paper; the pouring gesture can be slow and careful, or rapid and aggressive. I shape the image to a certain degree by manipulating the pooling liquid with my hands, as well as angling the paper in various ways throughout the drying process. These are rather limited interventions. Unlike with my charcoal drawings or oil paintings, there is no reductive aspect to the image-building— it is all additive. If I judge the final image to be a failure, the piece is destroyed rather than edited.

The nature of the pigments I use in the stain paintings re-emphasizes the focus on the organic and temporal. The images I make with these materials change over time: the blood darkens, the coffee fades slightly, and the wine colors lighten and lose saturation, "browning" a bit after a few months, and much more so after a year.

The stain paintings are a very important part of my practice, but at this point remained a mode of working entirely separate from my drawings and the oil paintings I began shortly after. The single exception is a house drawing (it remains untitled) completed towards the end of the first semester. This work is a medium-sized charcoal drawing that

in all ways fits with the larger series of house drawings (subject matter, imagery, materiality, scale, approach), except that after working on it for about a week, I threw a pot of coffee on it —or actually, *at* it; the "staining" happened out of frustration bordering on rage. The integration saved the drawing, but I did not combine the practices again until the very end of my studies at Stony Brook.

untitled (House VI), 2005
charcoal and coffee on paper
61 x 60 inches

End of First Year Group Exhibition: "Posset"

For the First Year MFA Group Exhibition (April, 2006), I selected and exhibited five small oil paintings and three small drawings. All of the work was made after the larger series of charcoal house drawings discussed above, and deals with the same motif, this house as home: as shelter, as locale, as container and concealer; but also as a metaphor for myself and my body; my mother; my family and extended familial relationships. What was depicted was views of the house from the front, the back, and several iterations of the view from under the deck.

In terms of communicating the complexity of the content I was after, the paintings functioned better as a group, I think, than individually. It was important to me that each work be affective, that it relay a very particular, almost tangible mood or "feel," even if that mood were inarticulable.

All of the paintings except one were oil on museum board (four-ply archival cotton rag board), and were quite small: between 3.5 x 5.5 and 5 x 7.5 inches. I was after intimacy, and liked the almost postcard-like scale of some of the work; it was one way to reference memory's role in the image-processing. At the same time, they were activated in a way that went beyond the two-dimensional imagery, as they were installed to float about 5/8 of an inch off the wall.

Most of the compositions were directly, if loosely, translated from photographs to paint. This series represents the first time I had ever painted from photographic sources in a way that I was satisfied with— In other words, in a way that resulted in subjectively interpreted, varied images that did not seem static or overworked. I had gone to photography as source material for this group of work simply because I had been at a point, during the previous winter, where I was having trouble continuing to invent. (It seems to me that I am not good at conscious, imaginative invention.) In the paintings, I wanted the house to be recognizably this particular house, but to appear alive, anthropomorphized, looming, protective, and perhaps unstable.

[It did not occur to me at the time, but in retrospect, I now see a parallel between these aspects of what I wanted the work to do, and my own experience of a particular work of modernist art many years earlier. Visiting the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, I had stood among the legs of one of Louise Bourgeois' giant spider sculptures, a sculpture so affective and successful that one did not need the title ("The Nest") to know what the work was about.]

Color played a significant role in this series of oil paintings. I wanted to employ it as a tool in controlling, or at least suggesting, the mood of each painting. My use of color in this group was not at all about naturalism, although one of the paintings did stay relatively true to the color of the source photo. This was an anomaly and the only instance where I felt the colors and light reflected in the photograph had exactly the kind of strangeness that I wanted to try to replicate in paint.

Home (Back), 2006
oil on museum board
4.5 x 6.5 inches

All of the other paintings had color with which I took great liberties. For example, in "Home IV," I wanted to create an unarticulated discomfort, a slightly repellent ugliness in the abuttal of the green sky with a different kind of green in the face of the house. And jangling below this, the aggressive red of limb-like deck supports.

Home IV, 2006
oil on museum board
5 x 7 inches

By contrast, I wanted the colors to sparkle, to suggest a fresh, magical and enticing place in "underdeck IV," a view from under the deck. Certainly home, and my relationship to it, were conceptually complicated and multi-valent, and I wanted the individual works to have the kind of diversity that, when viewed as a group, would support this. Home can be chock full of barely buried tensions and a kind of tilting strangeness; home can be a beautiful, safe haven, too.

underdeck IV, 2006
oil on museum board
3.75 x 6 inches

This painting, along with two of the three charcoal drawings, were indicative of the direction my work would head in the coming year. First, the view, the depicted subject matter, was shifting from the structure of the house to the landscape surrounding it. Second, the drawings "under the deck II" and especially "under the deck I" show an increased emphasis on abstraction in the balance between abstraction and representation.

underdeck II, 2006
charcoal on paper
10 x 12 inches

underdeck III, 2006
charcoal on paper
10 x 12 inches

Second Year

During the summer of 2006, prior to starting my second year at Stony Brook, I had had to move my studio and then my house. These relocations were massively disruptive to my practice, my psyche and even my body. (In the process of moving the contents of my studio, I injured a tendon in my hip.) However, the new start seems now to have ended up being beneficial, inasmuch as it expedited the evolution of my work. A new physical space always demands an appropriate re-initiation, and therefore re-definition and refining, of one's practice. Moving house kept me experientially immersed in the issues I was dealing with in my work —those of home— and allowed me to continue to clarify them through changing visual articulations. The new studio space itself —another kind of home for me, I realized— demanded new work.

Throughout this year I focused almost entirely on making drawings. While the drawings continued to have as their subject my relationship to home, the imagery shifted significantly from that of the previous year's work. First of all, what had been centered on views of the house shifted (mostly) to views of the surrounding landscape. I began focusing on the broader context of place —especially as indicated by land— as home. It makes sense to me that specific aspects of land and the natural world are not separate from the house that I had been featuring, and that these new drawings were not at a remove from the thematic content of my previous work. The house and the land are interrelated, and are of the same materiality. Or at least my relationship to the house cannot be considered without dealing with my relationship to the place it exists in, and vice versa. The following might be relevant in helping to explain my perspective: My parents bought land at the edge of a State Park when I was in third grade. I got to know the land before the house existed, as we spent every weekend at the property while my parents planned and then began the year-and-a-half long process of getting the house built there. I know what the house is made of, I know how the various stages of wood and concrete and sheetrock smelled and felt. I learned about pvc piping, and how to dig trenches. I still recall the pattern of the criss-crossed foundation beams that I used to climb on, and the exact angle of the now-hidden, sloping earth below the house. I recall

the noisiness of roofers that is not separate from the hammer echoes shot back from the treeline below the house and meadow. So I know the house; and I know it does not exist outside the context of the landscape it sits on and within.

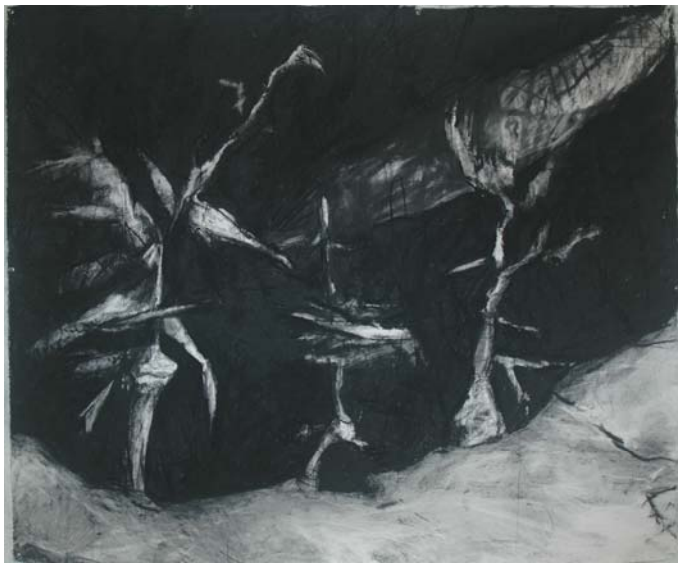
In addition to a shifting view, the new drawings showed a big increase in scale from my previous work. This partly came about as a reaction against the physical constraints of making the small paintings and drawings in the First-Year Group Exhibition. I needed to get more physical and make larger gestures in the studio again. Mainly, though, I wanted to create work that the viewer could feel they were participating in, that could be related to as environment as they stood in front of it. (This is in contrast to the small works that, I felt, had to be looked *into* in a way.) I wanted myself, while making the drawings, and later the viewers, while looking, to be implicated in each composition.

The compositions were subtly influenced by the unevenness of some of the edges of the drawings. Most of the paper supports were hand-cut from rolls, which resulted in edges that sloped up or down (or were slightly arched or jagged), and rarely did corners appear to be squared off at ninety degrees. I wanted these non-neat, organically shaped edges to help suggest movement, and set up a tension for the drawn imagery —and adjacent straight, geometric edges— to interact with.

As in some of the previous work, the new drawings featured a co-habitation of abstraction and representation. As this series continued to develop throughout the Fall of 2006 and Spring of 2007, it became increasingly abstract, leaving behind the structure of the house, and complicating even the landscape references. Forms were breaking apart more, morphing or flattening in places, but tended to still include recognizable passages: boulders, trees, and/or anthropomorphized objects.

The space, too, was flat in some areas and infinitely atmospheric in others, and relative distances sometimes illegible. I wanted these aspects to provide visual information that could be read as ambivalent (not ambiguous, but ambivalent; multivalent), to emphasize temporality and the complex, inconsistent nature of subjective experience.

december, 2006
charcoal on paper
55 x 50 inches



three trees (dark), 2006
charcoal on paper
41.75 x 50 inches

aptos, 2006
charcoal on paper
60 x 90 inches

I wanted the co-existence of illusionistic space/form with abstracted areas/components to offer, in the form of visual art, what to me are the kind of healthy tensions we find in our experience of the real world.

"here"— Second Year Solo Exhibition

In late January 2007, I mounted my second year solo exhibition in the gallery at Melville Library. I put a good deal of thought into the exhibition title, partly because I simply like language and the specificity as well as layering of meanings words can contain. Partly, too, I see titling as another way to try to enhance the audience's understanding of the conceptual side of my art. I think that too often viewers make sweeping assumptions about work based solely on its medium. There seems to be a bias, or at least a predisposition, towards assessing electronic-based art in conceptual terms, for

example, and what some call "traditional mediums," such as charcoal on paper, in purely aesthetic terms. To me, this is a terribly flawed approach, and misses the point, purpose, and possibilities of art. I believe that all good art must contain *both* concept and aesthetic articulation, and that they are never separate, that they tend to support each other. (Communication of concept —of ideas, or points of view, or even feeling— can only be achieved through aesthetic means if the work is to be considered "art." And aesthetic rendering that lacks meaning is design, not art. This is my opinion.)

I titled the exhibition "here: new drawings." Making "here" the focus of the title was meant to support the content of the images by referencing place, of course, and specifically home, where one locates the self mentally and/or physically. I also intended "here" to function as an action, an offering (as in, "here it is" or "here you go"), which is what I believe an exhibition is, or should be. Finally, I wanted "here" to include an aggressive nuance, and in addition to offering the work, to also be an active request to others to really *look*.

The exhibition included eight drawings on heavyweight paper, from about 25 x 19 inches up to the largest work I had yet produced, 60 x 112 inches. These works all require a slow read, as their content is revealed as much in the details and nuances as in the overall compositions that are legible from a distance. They contain a great deal of layering, erasure or obfuscation, and evidence of surface activity. In this sense, I think of them as being like paintings, both in terms of how they are made (because of all of the reworking, some of the drawings took several weeks to make), and in how they are seen. (Again, the details and shifts that occur courtesy of an extended engagement with the materiality is something that I hope these drawings share with the kinds of paintings I like to look at.)

With this set of work, I expanded the drawing materials I used to include a much wider variety of charcoals, graphite pencils, erasers, cutting tools, and abrading techniques. I employed soft, medium, and hard charcoal pencils, as well as vine charcoals, compressed charcoals, and large hunks and sticks of non-compressed charcoals, from many different makers. I used a range of pencils as well as vinyl, gum, rubber, and kneadable erasers. For the first time, all of my drawings had at least as much

erasure as tonal application; there was an enormous amount of "on/off" activity in the making.

Incisions in the paper, courtesy of a sharply pointed steel metal stamping tool and/or a razor blade, contributed a unique quality and fragility of organic line to many of the drawings. These scratch-like lines cut across or through imagery or forms in the drawings, interrupting rather than building illusionistic space or objects.

bonescape ya ya (detail), 2006
charcoal on paper
24.5 x 18.75 inches

The intended effect is to pop the viewer out of accepting a singular view of the representational aspect of the drawings. The static-y lines flatten the space, or at least seem to flicker between different spatial planes, functioning as abstract components while calling attention to the fact that they are made of the same stuff (lines) as that which goes into making illusionistic form and space. Hopefully this complicates the visual and provides the kind of tension I am after.

Home is, after all, a place of refuge, but also of anxiety. It is a complex and uncertain world, and the places we know best in it are not exempt from these conditions. The final visual whole of the drawings must insist on this. However, somewhat ironically, uncertainty cannot be evidenced in the act of making the works; this only results in failure. One needs a sure hand, even when creating intuitive, process-oriented work wherein the imagery is determined only through the act of making (and is not concretely pre-determined, and cannot be counted on to succeed the way one hopes).

Color, on the other hand, was stripped down in these drawings, and would be in most of my future work. Technically, it could be argued that they are monochromatic, although I see not only various tones but also a range of subtle hues, and cool and warm shifts, among the applications of the many different kinds of charcoal and graphite in each drawing. I wanted to use as minimized a spectrum of chroma as possible to achieve real color effects, to communicate a sense of light, however skewed, and to provide the kind of point of entry for emotional engagement or experiential reference that color can. Basically, I wanted the range of "black" charcoal pigments in my drawings to be experienced as color by the viewer.

I have located profound parallels and an historical context for my agenda in particular philosophies embedded in traditional Chinese landscape painting, especially that of the T'ang dynasty onward, when monochrome ink painting as "finished" landscape is said to have been invented (Lee 16). The early Chinese art historian Chang Yen-yuan, writing about this kind of work in the ninth century in his *Li Tai Ming Hua Chi*, illuminates my attitude and approach here better and more beautifully than I could:

> The mysterious evolution of things goes on without speaking and the divine work of Nature operates by itself. For grasses and trees spread forth their glory without depending upon hues derived from cinnabar and jasper; clouds and snow whirl and float aloft and are white without waiting for ceruse to make them so. Mountains are turquoise without needing the color "sky blue" and the phoenix is iridescent without the aid of the five colours...One may be said to

> have fulfilled one's aim if one can furnish a painting with all the five colours by the management of ink alone...[1]

Or, in terms of my agenda, "...by the management of *charcoal* alone." The link between Chinese ink and Western charcoal is tangible. The inks employed in this kind of landscape painting were usually made mostly of pine soot and dried into cake form (to be used with water and ground on ink stones to achieve the great variety of tones). Most of the charcoals I employ are pure charred wood; what in other forms we might call ash or soot. (The compressed charcoals do have binder added, often clay-based.) The traditional inks and my contemporary charcoals exist in different forms, then, but are of essentially similar natural material.

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[1]Chang Yen-yuan, *Li Tai Ming Hua Chi*, trans. W.R.B. Acker in *Some T'ang and Pre-T'ang Texts on Chinese Painting* (Leiden, 1954), p. 185, as cited in Lee, p. iii. Note: For clarity, I have eliminated the parentheses that appear throughout the translator's text.

Third Year

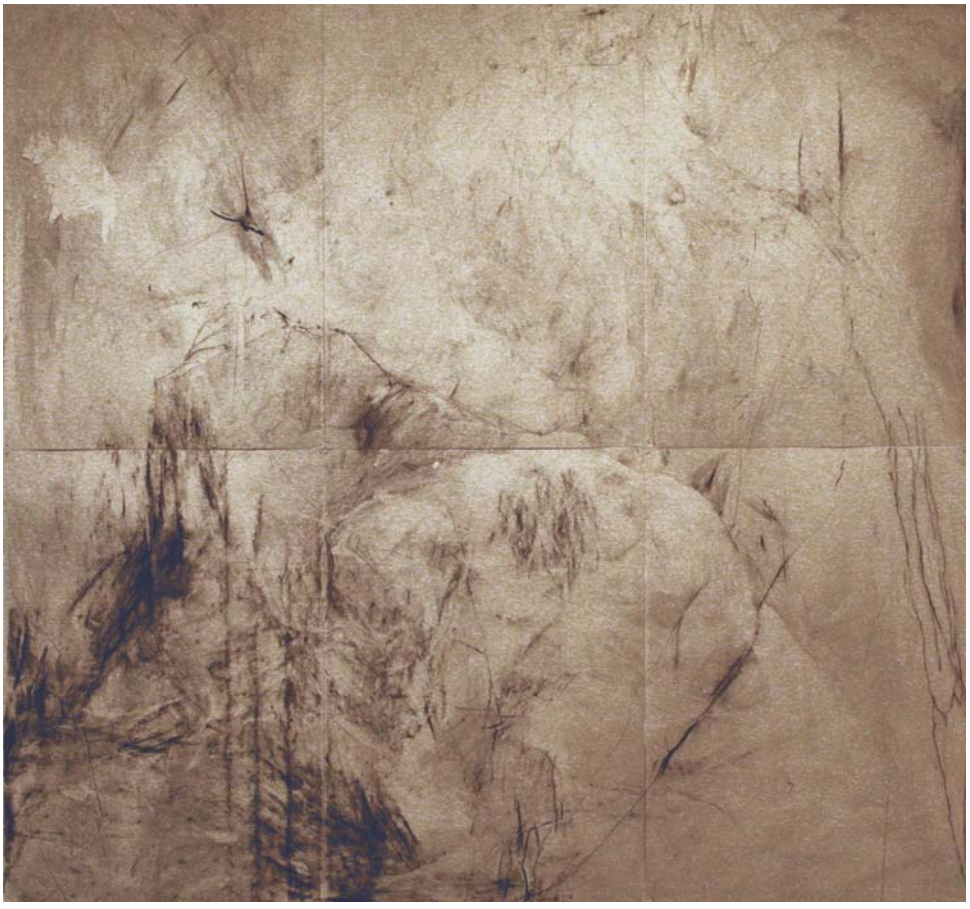
Solo Thesis Exhibition: "Everything is Temporary"

For my solo thesis exhibition, I approached the term "thesis" literally. I wanted a title for the exhibition that would make a statement of my philosophy, that could summarily express, or at least suggest, some of the thinking and feeling that goes into my work and the way I live. I was willing to be a blunt about what I wanted to communicate, and titled the exhibition "Everything is Temporary."

In spite of the bluntness of the statement, I nonetheless was hoping that the philosophy might resonate on multiple levels, and function more poetically than dogmatically, especially in tandem with the artwork exhibited. Mainly, and perhaps most obviously, I wanted to emphasize that change or temporality is a constant, perhaps the only constant, condition of life, of nature, and of art. This is a somewhat spiritual or metaphysical take on material existence. It is something I try to keep in mind, as a reminder to let go of certain things or states of being. (As I mentioned, I tend to have a difficult time with change —specifically, I cited moving house— and remembering that "everything is temporary" helps me to at least begin to release attachment.) The philosophy is pragmatic, in a sense; it can be both elevating and grounding: It asserts that nothing dramatically bad or good will stay that way. This lends perspective, by either giving hope when one is mired in hopeless depression, or providing a humbling reminder when one is carried away by some incidents of success or positive attention. Finally, the philosophy supports, and is supported by, the approach of the work I was exhibiting, as the very means included assertions of temporality: drawing with lots of erasure, redrawing, destruction of the paper in areas, and so on. The imagery, too, I hoped, contained passages that might be called atmospheric or ephemeral, and forms that dissolved or morphed, and were neither singularly identifiable nor static. In these ways, the work itself posits a view of the world that emphasizes temporality.

The exhibition opened in October, 2007, and included nine drawings, from postcard-size to approximately eight feet high by five feet wide. These drawings continued to push

in the direction of the work immediately preceding. Any representation of the original house form was now totally gone; there was no sign of it remaining in the new imagery. In terms of content, all of the work continued to deal with my relationship to places I consider "home." It included a visual conflation of references to nature and place (especially boulders or rocks I had encountered in the Burren, Yosemite, even Rocky Point on Long Island, as well as trees, fog, creeks and ocean from Aptos and some of these other places); and body (bones, flesh); with a good dose of biomorphism and anthropomorphism throughout. As with my previous work, I wanted these images to feel alive and temporal, and for the objects and environments to be inseparable, but also to project personality, a kind of animated character. (I mean to reference its Latinate source when I cite "*anima*ted" —soulful, alive— and absolutely do not mean cartoony).



jetty, 2007
charcoal and graphite on paper
79 x 84 inches

getting there, 2007
charcoal on paper
30 x 22 inches

As with previous work, the particular materiality of the drawings was inextricably linked to the content. I continued to use a variety of charcoals, erasers, graphite, and abrading techniques. Overall, this exhibition contained works with a greater breadth and variety of marks, gestures, scale, and paper types than the previous exhibitions. (The papers included a small piece of dun-colored museum board; 290-gsm Coventry rag; cover-weight printmaking paper, cut from 50-inch cool white and 60-inch warm white rolls; large fleshy-beige rag sheets by an unidentified maker; 140-pound Magnani cotton rag paper that was soft, toothless, and a cream color that looked buttery in certain light.) I believe this resulted in finished work that, when viewed in the context of a single exhibition, allowed for the communication of a wider range of moods.

three trees, 2006-2007
ink, graphite, whiskey, on museum board
4 x 6 inches

untitled (trunksea), 2007
charcoal and graphite on paper
93.5 x 50 inches

Group MFA Thesis Exhibition: "what we wished for"

My final exhibition as an MFA student at Stony Brook University —and my first exhibition at University Art Gallery at Staller Center for the Arts— opened the end of

February and ran through the end of March, 2008. The four of us who make up the graduating group decided to title our exhibition, and agreed upon "what we wished for." The title was meant (optimistically) to point to a successful exhibition, the culmination of our three years of studio work, as well as the impending completion of MFA degrees for all of us.

This title was selected by the group from a set of proposed titles, and happens to have been one I proposed. I admit that it carries additional layers of meaning for me personally, and for my work. First of all, the phrase came directly from the title of a poem written by my fiance, Christopher Watkins, a published poet whose work I am deeply engaged in, and with whom I sometimes collaborate in various ways. So the phrase already had another very meaningful but separate existence as a poem, with attendant and nuanced associations. Second, the title "what we wished for" explicitly linked to sources of my image-making. In particular, I interpret it as pointing to emotions, including most obviously desire. Desire has much to do with my relationship to home as place, and home as body, and I think shows up with other subconsciously generated elements in the work. It is also manifest in the way I make the drawings: touch is absolutely crucial; throughout the process of making, I have my hands directly in and on the pigments and papers. Touch, it seems to me, is a very human enactment of desire, among other things.

Finally, for me "what we wished for" references a celebration of artmaking, of getting to make things real through drawing and painting. Having the opportunity to engage daily in the activity of artmaking is, quite literally, what I have always wanted, and expect to always want. It is not just about the end results (an exhibition, a graduation), because this is not the end; even as we celebrate one kind of arrival, I recognize that it is the continuous and continuing journey that represents what I wished for.

My allotted space in the gallery was a single, expansive wall, approximately fifty feet long and two stories high. Knowing how challenging it can be to one's work to "hold" such an enormous wall, and at the same time seeing it as an opportunity, I originally considered creating a single huge drawing. However, I had seen monumental work dwarfed by this wall, and knew that if I wanted the work to appear large in the gallery space, it would need to be several times bigger than my studio walls would support. Making such a drawing would require that I work on it in sections, with only a piece of it

visible at any given time. In the end, I felt this would have sacrificed the intuitive working processes that I employ to try to make drawings that have meaning and go beyond design; I was unwilling to sacrifice this for the visual bang of a huge drawing. I decided instead to take what felt like a greater risk: to continue the rigors of daily studio activity, and continue to advance the body of work one drawing at a time, trusting that an evolved next stage would emerge. After much consideration, I knew that I wanted this final exhibition opportunity to be less about finding the best way to simply summarize or reiterate my work, or to showcase "greatest hits," and instead to function more as a springboard for continued development.

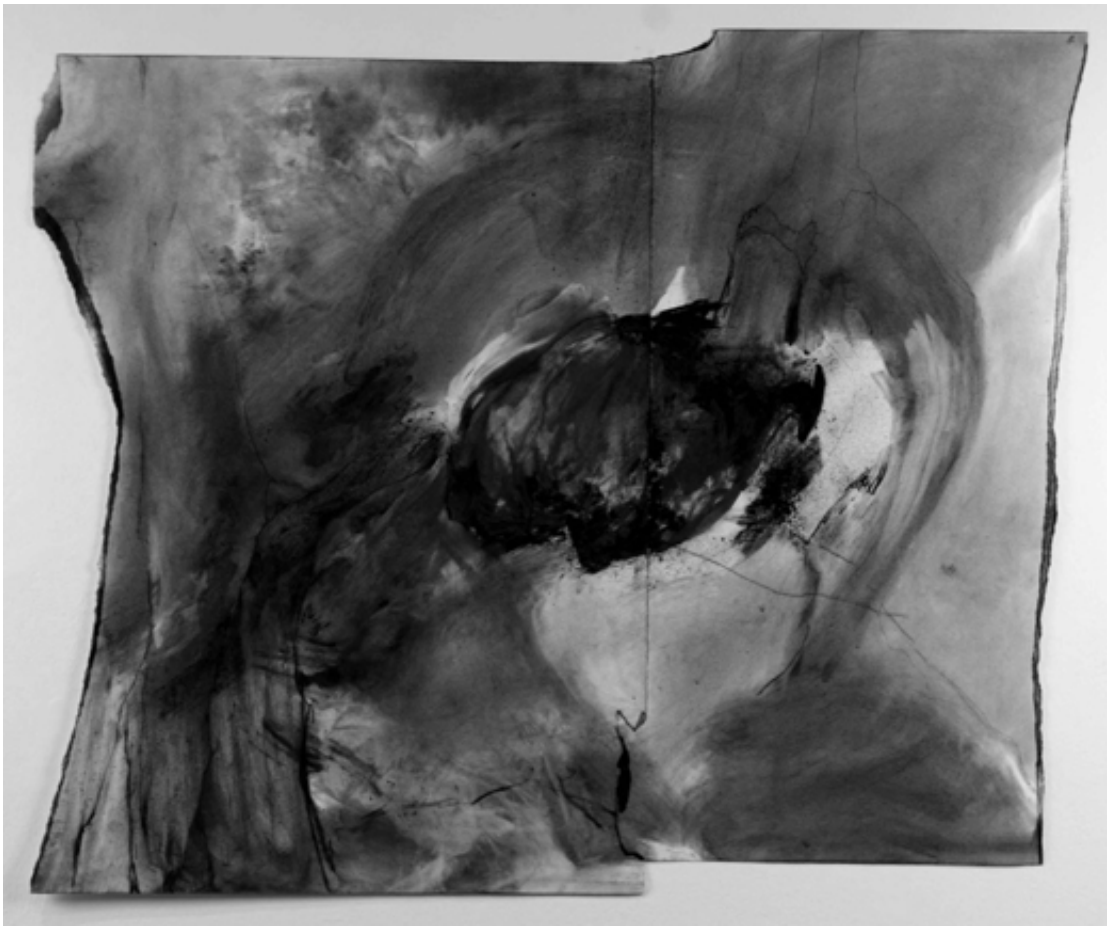
To a large extent, each drawing that I produce carries with it the history of all of the preceding work. Each new piece spins off of the one made prior to it, whether I am conscious of it at the time of making or not. All of the drawings I selected to hang in the final MFA Group Thesis Exhibition were quite new. They had all been made in December, January, and the first week of February, right up until installation began in the second week of February. Curating for the exhibition was more challenging than usual. I do not know if this is because the work I was selecting from was so new, or because the imagery was so varied from drawing to drawing, or because of the particularities of the gallery space itself. The selection of specific drawings, the quantity and order in which they were arranged, the spatial relationships, the hanging methods and materials, and visual aspects of other artists' work as it was installed in the gallery had to be considered. They of course all affected the mood, the rhythm, and the non-narrative story that are quite particular and crucial to what I want to present in an exhibition. It took me two weeks, and much consulting with others, to finalize the installation.

The eight drawings that I exhibited were mostly small- to medium-sized (between 22 and 36 inches), with two large pieces among them, one of which was a diptych 124 inches wide. Several of the works featured powdered graphite as the primary pigment, a new material for me. In November 2007, I had come across an exhibition by the artist Mark Sheinkman at Von Lintel Gallery in Chelsea. His imagery involved large-scale, ribbon- or smoke-like forms achieved by lifting the velvety grounds of finely powdered graphite that otherwise entirely covered the primed, stretched linen below. They were exquisitely made, and I was especially struck by the seductiveness of the materiality, the

soft richness of the graphite. Seeing his show had much to do with my adding powdered graphite to the next order of art supplies I placed, although at the time I did not know how I would work with the material, or if it would work for my agenda.

The new medium did work, allowing for a great range of tones, textures and effects, provoking experimentation, and advancing my imagery. The softness of thick, unsized cotton rag paper was crucial for obtaining the desired results. (I used Magnani Pescia 140-pound for the graphite-based drawings.) Partly, it was desirable because I found that the graphite pigment had to be hand-applied to get the nuances that I was after, and this paper is fantastically soft and manipulable. (Using tools, cloths or brushes tended to compress the graphite in such a way as to make it too reflective or glossy, and depth was lost.)

The choice of this particular paper was crucial for another effect having to do with touch: Because it delaminates so easily when rubbed with fingers, it allowed me to shape the edges of the paper in this way, and to abrade other areas, emphasizing once again the notion of temporality and decomposition. I think this naturally led to more extreme shaping of the edges of the support via tearing. Tearing the paper was a pleasurable way to let go of a degree of control (but not intention). With three of the drawings in this set, I had torn the paper and created formally organic edges for the picture planes before beginning to create the images on them. These drawings, then, were made while intuitively responding to these nonrigid edges.



touch in the outside world, 2008
charcoal and graphite on paper
31 x 36 inches

I also made cuts or abrasions that went completely through the paper in areas of a few drawings, resulting in holes. Some happened inadvertently, in the process of working the image, and others were a result of my pursuing a dismantling of the surface imagery, a deconstruction that might go beyond abstraction while simultaneously (re-)emphasizing the materiality. Oddly, in retrospect, I do not think the cuts or holes functioned to disrupt the imagery in this way; instead, the slight shadows they created (when installed flat against the wall) usually were visually absorbed into the overall composition of the piece. It required attentive scrutiny for one to notice them for what they were rather than to see them as applied, accreted marks. For example, the upper left leaf-like form in "partly, i ended up" consists of pencil marks, but is also a gouged-through area of the drawing.

partly, i ended up, 2007
charcoal, graphite, wine on abraded paper
22 x 30 inches

The two large works were highly, and each uniquely, significant in communicating, or at least trying to communicate, the breadth of facets of my relationship to these places I consider home. The largest work on my wall was the diptych, titled, as the exhibition, "what we wished for." Like all of the drawings at this point, it was sourced in an amalgamation of experiential references (specifically in this case, my own interactions with the Pacific Ocean in various places, and most recently with the Gulf Coast off of Florida). The drawing was not only the largest, but certainly the most minimal I have ever produced. Consisting of only a handful of lines and some smudging of charcoal on Arches heavyweight paper cut imperfectly from a roll, and pinned to produce shadows at top and bottom that referenced the drawn lines on the paper, the diptych, I hoped, would through economical means manage to offer a complete sense of a place, even a realistic

space. I wanted to literally and minimally delineate proximity as well as deep, distal space, placing the viewer in contact with a natural world that does not indicate finiteness. It was important that the drawing was bigger than the viewer's body. It was not important to me, though, whether the viewer experienced the depicted as landscape or seascape.

what we wished for, 2008
charcoal on paper
77 x 124 inches (diptych)

The other large piece in the exhibition could also have been perceived as either landscape or seascape (or, as one viewer put it, as "the inside of my head"). However, it is formally almost the opposite of "what we wished for." This drawing, entitled "unstable," was almost maximal in comparison to the other's minimalism. It contains a great deal of layering, emphasizes its own materiality, and has assertive darkness and contrast. It could be called "heavy" whereas its neighbor, "what we wished for," is "light." It also features the kinds of tonal shifts that support a more traditionally Western perspectival space.

unstable, 2007-2008
charcoal and wine on paper
50 x 83 inches

"Unstable" was the first planned integration of my stain painting practice with charcoal drawing. It had become very important to me to find a way to combine these modes of working by the end of my three years at Stony Brook. This drawing began with the staining of the paper with red wine. I poured the wine straight from the bottle over most of the surface area, and walked around on it in an effort to better spread the pigment. As the wine pooled and began to dry, I lifted or angled parts of the paper to roughly direct the pigment, but in the end, much control must be surrendered to nature, providence, and the materials themselves. I appreciate this about the staining process. I used charcoal on top of the stains once they dried, and over the course of several weeks built up and adjusted the image via many accumulated layers of various kinds of charcoal.

In the finished piece, I am pleased with how the materials functioned together in support of imagery and idea. The splashes and mitochondria-like shapes of the wine stains underlying the darker charcoal pushes the movement within the piece. (It remains

important to me that none of these works feels static, dead, or merely "pictured.") Also, the combination of two organic, unstable materials doubly emphasizes the issue of temporality in the natural world. The wine will darken and de-saturate (get browner) over the coming year. The charcoal's tone (or value) will not change perceptibly, but certainly its hold on the paper beneath it is, and always will be, unstable.

Yet none of this makes the image itself, and its content, subsidiary. It seems to me that before one gets close enough to recognize the materials and methods that went into the making, an experience of the image begins to take place. Hopefully one is both pulled into and pushed out of the tilting representation of highly subjective landscape.

More than anything —more than rationally understanding it, more than contemplating how it was made, more than finding a way to articulate things about it— I want the viewer to *feel* the work.

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