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Playful Re-imaginings of the Natural Environment Cultivated Through Exploratory Mark Making

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By

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## ABSTRACT

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Western Carolina University (November 2015)

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Through a series of exploratory and layered mark-making, I create abstract images depicting a “re-imagining” of new spaces which relate to the natural environment and man made boundaries, such as gardens. This imagining includes both my physical and psychological reactions to place as well as the matrixes and designs humans impose upon nature. In these bodies of works, I play with several opposing elements simultaneously. These dualities manifest themselves through my process, subject matter, use of color and presentation (automatic, expressive drawing vs. structured grids, neon synthetics vs. natural dyes, and microcosmic vs macrocosmic components). The images that result are visual documentations or “blueprints” of my personal journey in the attempt to balance and fuse these contrasting components into a unified whole.

## INTRODUCTION

*“To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
And Eternity in an hour.”-William Blake*

Primary subjects of my thesis work are gardens – as macrocosms with microcosmic components. Holistically thinking, gardens are biological worlds in miniature. They are their own ecosystem – just as each plant within the garden is its own universe. I have always been in awe of the natural world as it can be seen in so many permutations of self-contained and connected smaller worlds. As with many visual artists, I struggle with wanting to capture and exclaim nature’s beauty but also with the realization that it that will never be completely possible.

The reason I began looking at gardens as way to ‘focus’ on nature’s overwhelming mysteries is that gardens are really human-made as both an aesthetic idea or even a practical phenomenon. I have often wondered if designed gardens are really natural or not? Because gardens exist to amplify color or certain fruitfulness, they simultaneously use nature to distort what really wild nature would never allow. Why do we as humans feel the need to organize organic life –even if into grids and other systems? What does such design say about the human condition? What does this say about our ideas of beauty and aesthetics?

My work is influenced by travels in nature via hiking, backpacking and kayaking and the contrast of this exposure with nature as confined or manipulated. Of course, I am shifting between these paradigms -- the emotional sensations of nature’s sublime and the opposite notion of trying to possess or capture this in art or even landscaping which leads to something very unnatural.

## PROCESS/METHODS

I begin my work intuitively, freely, spontaneously, using abstraction as a way to synthesize my vacillating viewpoints of how I see the natural world. Atop splashes of colors and organic forms, I make marks that define and obscure. I often bring back natural objects found while I bivouac and draw from these or actually use them as drawing or stamping tools. The use of water and staining are also key elements in my work.

The process of each work is a journey and learning experience. I start with broad washes of water and color which consist of layers of watercolors and inks-mirroring an atmospheric quality. This is an extremely exploratory and playful process which calls for a certain awareness in the present moment, echoing a meditative state. It is in this state in which my decision making and drawing is fairly intuitive. Through this creative process I have found that the unconfined flowing properties of water media allows for an unbridled movement of energy and expansion on paper that I cannot imitate otherwise.

I feel this interplay of 'nature' and a certain unpredictability of how pigments will react to water, temperature, surface and so on is so important. As we all push to find answers as quickly as we can with the aid of technology and the ever expanding rush of the digital age, I need to be linked to that instinctual process that involves some levels of unknowns.

While many people have suggested that I try sculpting or working on the computer to achieve the translucent, organic gestures within architectonic frameworks that I find desirable, I choose to paint and draw completely by hand. I need to engage with the art materials even if what I am continually delineating is the tension between nature and making art about it.

I use a very expressionistic, searching line in my drawings and paintings, and work all over the paper or film at one time, filling it up as much as possible and then breaking it back down. I draw back onto the paint and vice versa, building up the surface until I feel it is finished. Every piece is approached freely and evolves greatly from its initial inception. In some cases I will even extract portions of one 'drawing' and use these to comprise another piece as a conglomeration. To me this recognizes the idea of impermanence but also the continuation of some parts of the natural world.

It is also important for me to recognize that my work does not seek to be a carbon copy of nature in terms of the materials I use. I enjoy the conversation between the gaudy, manufactured neon colors in my work and the stains of natural homemade dyes sourced from various plants, berries and trees that can be found locally. The interaction between these elements is purposeful as is my attention to the chaotic aspect of nature gone wild and the overlaying grids that seek to contain it.

I have also contemplated the best way to present my work as continued analysis of the paradigms that I mull over. I often work on traditional rectangles or squares as these straight edged geometries/symmetries appear in traditional western gardenscapes in particular. In this thesis exhibition, I am also showing work that exceeds these geometries/boundaries by either showing them as a rustic grouping or by literally defining and obscuring elements of my processes via translucent layers. When is a work complete? When is it finished-if ever? These questions are always on my mind when creating and my thesis work explores the boundaries of what is completed and what is not-creating a sense of uneasiness in the viewer. I enjoy this space of ambiguity-I want the work to evoke questions of an aesthetic nature. Therefore, in this exhibition, I have played with the idea of formal presentation. I have chosen a non traditional

material to use (blue tape and clear tape) as both a framing and compositional mark making device. The tape works as a physical and metaphorical constituent which fits into my ideas of man made boundaries in the natural environment.

## ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

I believe the works of Julie Mehretu and Matthew Ritchie connect with and inspire the works included in the exhibition. Although each artist approaches their processes differently (sculpture, drawing, painting, installation), their collective use of play, cartography (the science and practice of drawing maps and grids), layering and varying scales, create a new sense of imagined pictorial space in relation to the viewer. Cartography in the contemporary sense is defined as a graphic representation that facilitates a “spatial understanding of things, concepts, conditions, processes or events in the human world” (Ljungberg 308). Indeed, the artists mentioned are all influenced by this graphic, spatial perception of the world, using layers of matrixes, grids, mathematics, and both real and imaginary maps to push the boundaries of not only painting itself, but also reality. Maps and grids have long been revered as an indicator of fact and science, of order. By simplifying mass amounts of complex information into decipherable text, symbols and graphics, the traditional map is able to communicate a sense of place to a vast amount of people from diverse backgrounds. In the work of the artists mentioned however, the map is repeated, enlarged or shrunk, imagined, and de/reconstructed in order to create new universes or new spatial or environmental aware nesses-thus propelling the viewer to be “swallowed” by the work itself.

My work doesn't necessary use specific maps to guide the viewer, but I use layers of blueprints of ornamental Western gardens and grids in order to “anchor” or “structure” the works. Sometimes these maps are completely obscured, with just hints of shapes and geometries peeking through the surface. I layer the grids of gardens with intuitive mark making-creating a sense of chaos and energy. Like Mehretu, these abstract marks “occur in a no-place, a blank

terrain, an abstracted map space”. Mehretu de/reconstructs layers of architectural spaces and maps both drawn from real life and also imagined, striving for new ways to “reconfigure the world”, along the same lines I approach my own work (Ljungberg 11).

In conjunction with Mehretu’s work, Matthew Ritchie also utilizes grids and formulas to construct paintings that immerse the viewer into the artists’ surreal environment. Drawing from mythology, history, and philosophy among many of his source materials, Ritchie renders several drawings and layers them to create massive, multi-structured paintings, paintings which sometime break free from the frame and envelope the room as structural pieces. Using linear, grid like structures to demonstrate cyclical realities, Ritchie combines narrative and abstraction in a way that questions painting’s identity in a contemporary way (Joo 77). By scanning the drawings into the computer, Ritchie can manipulate the images through playing with scale, breaking them down and reconstructing both two dimensional and three dimensional forms. In an interview he states: It’s literally like pulling the narrative out of overlaying all of the structures. That’s how I end up with this structure. It’s derived from a series of drawings that I scan into the computer and refine through various processes...” I enjoy this sense of play and innovation that I strive to attain in all the works presented in *'gär-d<sup>n</sup>*.

## THE WORKS: GARDEN AS METAPHOR

All the works in the exhibition explore the idea of the garden and its metaphorical qualities in terms of process, content, and presentation. In each, I try to push the traditional ideas of aesthetic beauty as perceived in nature and in art. I often wonder what will happen in our world when we (humanity) have outgrown the gridded existence we've made for ourselves. Are land-based boundaries real or actually ridiculous in terms of nature's tenacity to survive and push through these?

In Stephanie Ross's book, *What Gardens Mean*, she describes differing definitions of gardens and brings up the question of boundaries in relation to the natural environment. While viewing a beautiful view in nature, for instance, she asks "does admiring it or putting a fence around it make it a garden?" (Ross 9). "Gardens are shaped by their makers," states Ross, and a "designer who reshapes the existing garden in fact creates a new one". As part of my process, I see myself, the artist, playing the part of the gardener, who spends time "weeding, pruning, mowing raking and otherwise counteracting the changes taking place" in my designs-knowing I cannot completely control the unexpected happenings of chance within my process (Ross 19).

Along with the ideas that Ross presents on the topic of gardens, the book of essays titled *The Aesthetics of the Natural Environment* also offers fascinating viewpoints that line up with my philosophies of nature and art and is represented in the thesis work presented. Another key theme to my process includes play and imagination-which is motivated by the natural world. In Emily Brady's essay "Imagination and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature", for example, Brady discusses the controversies surrounding contemporary aesthetics of art and nature in relation to imagination. Looking at ideas of Ronald Hepburn and Dewey, she explains that the

“enemies of the aesthetic are those experiences of the world that are conventional, hackneyed, humdrum, and inchoate”. Brady points out that both Hepburn and Dewey see imagination as the human capacity that enables us to create fresh perspectives on the world. “Imagination, along with perception”, quotes Brady, “is an important resource for taking up the aesthetic challenge offered by our natural environment” (Brady 160).

It is in this vein of philosophy that I create and approach choices related to presentation, arrangement and display. The work in my exhibition embodies this idea of imagination and intuitive reaction, allowing for mistakes to be made, as I constantly push and pull aspects of my work simultaneously in order to discover something new. The way I select to present the works challenges the viewer to realize a new aesthetic of beauty and formalism-why do we feel the need to “pretty up” art? Using tape as both a framing device and mark making device, I push to question the aesthetic of design and boundaries, usually making last minute, playful decisions in relation to the work and the space it inhabits. *The New Versailles*, *Neonscapes I and II*, and *Compost/Sift*, are all series of works that exemplify my research in this area.

In *The New Versailles*, for example, a 3.5’x16.8’ scroll-like work on paper, I play with the idea of forced control and expressive imagination. Like the architect, landscaper, or gardener, I attempt to “tame” the chaotic wild mark making through the layering of popular designs which fit into a certain perceived notion of what is aesthetically pleasing. The piece is comprised of several different components residing in the same 2-d plane. Renderings of gestural floral forms, created by dripping inks and paints, sprawl and dance throughout painted yellow neon paper, which I allow to converge and mix to create unexpected reactions. On top of this cliché floral imagery I use charcoal and graphite to create expressive marks that evoke aspects of landscape which clashes with the ridged grids and outlines of an aerial view of the Versailles gardens.

What results is a dizzying view of multiple vantage points and horizon lines-fragmenting the space, flattening depth as well as highlighting it. Blue tape acts as a raw framing mechanism as well as part of the playful mark-making-giving the work an accessible tactility that would otherwise be lost if the work was framed behind matte and glass.



*Figure 1. Cozens, Mary. The New Versailles (exhibition view) Mixed media + tape on Rives BFK. 2015. 3.5'x16.8'*



*Figure 2. The New Versailles (detail) Mixed media + tape on Rives BFK. 2015*

While *The New Versailles* consists of one large work that describe a new kind of space with microcosmic and macrocosmic components, the *Neonscapes* series are made up of several separate entities displayed in conglomerate rows or grids. Like *Versailles*, these works illustrate a personal reimagining of future “views” of nature and place through mark making that conveys my emotional and psychological reactions to real physical natural environments. *Neonscapes I* is comprised of five 24”x36” “plots” each made up of layered drawings and paint on drafting film, while *Neonscapes II* consists of twelve individual plots measuring 7”x7”.

Each “plot” begins with a visceral ink and charcoal rendering of a specific landscape or natural scene that I have personally visited. The marks are fleeting, raw, and circulate the film construct, giving the scape depicted a fluidity of movement, and bring to mind aspects of

traditional Japanese ink landscapes. The subsequent sheets that layer on top also contain this enthusiastic mark making, but primarily consists of spirited evanescent neon color decoration or obscured garden plan imagery that dips and dives between the multiple surfaces, sometimes taking on a faint surreal architectural feel. With this high contrast between nature and man made constructs, and slightly concealed view of the original subject matter, a sort of ephemeral effect is achieved.



*Figure 3. Cozens, Mary. Selections from Neonscapes I: Plot 1, 2, 3. Charcoal, ink, fluorescent acrylic, blue tape on layered drafting film. 2015. 24"x36" (individual)*



*Figure 4. Cozens, Mary. Selections from Neonscapes II. Charcoal, ink, fluorescent acrylic, tape on layered drafting film. 2015. 7"x7" (individual)*



*Figure 5. Cozens, Mary. Neonscapes II (detail)*

This ephemerality continues in *Compost/Sift*. This interactive piece is made up of multiple layers of two dimensional work, draped on top a table like object. Strata of studies and unused work is piled in the center of the room. Viewers are welcome to sift through these materials and contemplate the re-cyclical aspect of the creative process in relation to processes that occur in nature itself. Juxtaposed between the both *Neonscape* series and *The New Versailles*, this piece again demonstrates yet another example of the artist/gardener playing with display and presentation. It offers a segway to conversation-

What is finished? What is in process? The line is blurred.

Both the layers and pervasive fluorescent marks in the '\gär-d⁰n\ exhibition serve as a sort of metaphor of aesthetics that projects the idea of superficiality and disillusionment in contemporary society and culture-referring to man made controls imposed upon nature, such as lavish gardens and overdevelopment of the land. I use layers in order to distort, veil and blur lines between perception and reality. Although most of the layered *Neonscapes* series contain multiples layers of rich mark making, the viewer can not access these deeper layers physically. They must peer through the top layer and search for clues (or artifacts of some kind). I acknowledge this frustrating aspect of my work and embrace it. For me, this encompasses my overlying views of our reality in general in view of the media driven society we reside in. Sometimes we cannot know all the answers-the truth is obscured from us. It is up to our gut instincts and primal intuition to guide us in times of uncertainty. Imagination and play are vital to keeping us connected to our humanness and offer us a way to continue searching for better “spaces” to inhabit-either it be physically, emotionally or psychologically.



*Figure 6. Cozens, Mary. Compost/Sift (exhibition view). Drafting film, paper, mixed media. Dimensions vary.2015*

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