Encounters in Placelessness

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ENCOUNTERS IN PLACELESSNESS

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
Visual Art

by
Carolyn Grace Kerecman
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Accepted by:
Todd McDonald, Committee Chair
Andrea Feeser
Anderson Wrangle
ABSTRACT

*Encounters in Placelessness* features an inherent tension between the observational and the invented. Each painting operates as inquiry, examining how space can be rationalized in the intricacy of human existence. Seeking to reconcile the physical with the existential, these landscapes become a tangible extension of the internal self. They are constantly shifting, changing, transforming, their placelessness reminding one of the ever-changing reality before them. Each moment becomes a collection of a multitude of experiences.

My studio practice is intuitive, sifting through old photos, drawings, mementos, as memories seemingly bubble over. Components of different places once called home are collaged together, synthesizing a composition that is simultaneously whole and disjointed. Their dichotomous nature is complimented by working in differing methods of depiction, stylistic changes becoming a motif for the liminal. These imagined landscapes act as the bridge between the internal and the external, the paint giving physicality to imagery that is in itself placeless. With a father in the U.S. Air Force relocation was a regular childhood routine. As a result, I seek stability in the nature of that which is ever-changing. To create these paintings is to ground these fragments of time, reasoning with land and all its sublimity.
DEDICATION

I dedicate this body of work to my parents, Jay and Linda Kerecman, my sisters, Sarah Elizabeth and Natalie Jane, and my brother, Daniel Jay. This imaginary world, built of paint and pastel, would not be possible without the life on the road we’ve shared. To my siblings, thank you for being my greatest companions throughout this adventure. Though we live apart now, I carry you with me each place I go. To my parents, thank you for your unwavering love and encouragement, and for always welcoming me home with open arms, wherever home may be.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the entire faculty of the Clemson Department of Art and Design for their kindness and wisdom, and for allowing me the opportunity to know and learn from them. I would also like to thank my committee chair, Todd McDonald, as well as my committee members, Andrea Feeser and Anderson Wrangle. My time with this committee was full of deep, insightful feedback, as well as joyful conversation much needed in such an unusual year. I would not have been able to complete this body of work without their knowledge, guidance, and support.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

When I began my research for this thesis, I came across a passage that resonated deeply with the concepts I wanted to explore.

“Sometimes from above me, sometimes from below, the forest tries to threaten me. Blowing a chill breath on my neck, stinging like needles with a thousand eyes. Trying anything to drive this intruder away. But I gradually get better at letting these threats pass me by. The forest is basically a part of me, isn’t it? This thought takes hold at a certain point. The journey I’m taking is inside me. Just like blood travels down veins, what I’m seeing is my inner self...the spider web stretched taut there is the spider web inside of me. The birds calling out overhead are birds I’ve fostered in my mind”.

In Haruki Murakami’s *Kafka on the Shore*, the forest operates as a symbol of existential refuge. Kafka, one of two main protagonists in the novel, delves into the woods in order to escape a chaotic world, and in turn finds himself connecting with his own inner essence. While Murakami’s storytelling goes on to unravel tales of violence, heartbreak, and the pursuit of wholeness in a dualistic existence, I remain intrigued by the notion of landscape as an external representation of the internal self. Growing up with a father in the U.S. Air Force, most of my childhood was spent on the road. Despite our often only staying in place for no more than two or three years at a time, I became quite attached to each home in its own right, collecting photos and mementos as if they were a part of myself. My experience with home and land became ever-changing, and with such

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constant flux, it felt as though my identity continually changed as well. Though my formative years were spent on the island of Okinawa, Japan, my American heritage and later years in the states presented a dual experience in my worldview. These places would form the adult I became; and yet, as an adult I’m now unsure how to piece them together, or how I fit into each place. This remains to manifest in the studio as an exploration of how space can be rationalized, reordered, and reduced, as a means of conversing with overwhelming complexity of human presence.
CHAPTER TWO

ENTERING THE FOREST

My explorations began with the idea of liminality, which in its own right, has persisted as an undercurrent in the way each composition operates. In *Maple*, tension between the overlapping of foreground and background induces a simultaneous invitation to, and rejection from the space. Shades of deep red foliage compete with the central green, which appears to both sit on top of, and behind the frame of red. As a result, the positive and negative forms are manipulated in order to replace one another depending on how the viewer regards the composition. The inky red is void-like, and the light logic arbitrary. Contrary to the organic subject matter, the image isn’t quite naturalistic. Instead, the viewer is left to question the reality of the space, existing somewhere in between the real world and the imaginary.

Similar void-like qualities take shape in *Tottie’s Place*, where masses of lush green plant life pile onto a murky ultramarine. Their high key doesn’t appear to suit the quality of the setting around them, and yet, subtle transitions in temperature suggest light moving throughout the scene. The role of the void is recurrent in these paintings, immediately removing the scenery from any natural location and instead placing it somewhere vaguely reminiscent of both place and absence. Considering how a place could simultaneously operate as placeless is of great interest to me, as it feels a fitting stage to examine the transitory. Cue the forest as a recurring motif in this body work. As different aspects of location and self are investigated, imagery reminiscent of shaded woods continues to introduce an untouched, otherworldly quality to the paintings. This
practice originated from reference images I took of the wooded areas around roads and highways here in South Carolina, often left unexplored as drivers go about their daily routes. Capturing these areas in the evening in particular provided a stark, dramatic lighting, street lamps just barely illuminating the scene. Everyday foliage becomes unfamiliar in the artificial light, introducing a world all its own. Manipulating these references by exaggerating the quality of light, colors of the scene, and even the scale of the forms further emphasizes the uncanny in *Tottie’s Place*. All the while, perspective is manipulated in order to portray the scene as further away from the viewer than in previous works, establishing a romantic quality that became a major theme of this body of work. By presenting said romanticism, the reality of the scene is immediately in question; to romanticize is to idealize (as will be discussed in a later section of this thesis). Thus, the site being approached becomes something to be organized and depicted selectively so as to convey a new sense of location, rather than be composed from direct observation.

Claire Sherman and Jules de Balincourt were notable influences when exploring modes of conveying these forested scenes. In his painting *As Far West as We Could Go*, de Balincourt breaks up a populated park with dark, elongated palm trees. The repetition of these trees presents an intrusion into the otherwise open space, blocking the viewer from full view of the world before them. The orientation of the viewer is somewhat distanced from the figures that populate the painting, allowing for a feeling of observation rather than immersion. Claire Sherman’s *Ferns and Vines* presents a different perspective for the viewer, quite literally. Often depicting abundant greenery from
unusual angles, Sherman’s composition places the viewer below a tower of leaves, almost as though they were beholding it from below the ground. Melissa Messina writes of Sherman’s work as “vast entanglements, synthesized mixes of plant life and geographical phenomena that in their detail maintain a sense of specificity but in combination intentionally do not scribe an exact location. They are every place at once or no place at all”. The result is an immersive effect quite contrary from de Balincourt’s detached observation, each presenting its own relationship with landscape. Each artist accesses a certain sublimity in their work, reminding the viewer of loneliness, awe, and placelessness as time passes on.

Playing with the tension between immersion and detachment establishes a necessary duality in my own work, revealing the push and pull of a landscape, or self, in flux. Big Pink Blanket illustrates a snowy woodland serving as reference to my family’s current home in Maine, an entirely different sort of land from the ones I once grew up in. The viewer is situated slightly above the field below, as if standing on a hill. A large pine runs through the right of the picture plane, its scale suggesting it’s far larger than the trees ahead. The application of paint to this pine is thick, with lines of graphite carving stylized bark into its trunk. Such detailing is adopted from the traditional stylings of Japanese woodblock prints, most particularly from the works of Katsushika Hokusai. His print Mishima Pass in Kai Province displays a massive tree in the center of the composition, pressed against the background in shallow space. The graphic quality of the markings on

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the tree convey texture, while flattening the scene in the same moment, impacting the overall experience of the space. Though this stylistic technique is present throughout Hokusai’s imagery, it stands only in the foreground of Big Pink Blanket. Thus, the foreground is situated as separate from other elements in the painting- yet still exists as a component of the world presented. Beyond this, the stylistic references to Japanese woodblock in what is primarily a Western contemporary style landscape painting creates a dichotomy representative of personal, dualistic worldviews and experience. Style has become one of multiple conventions used to visualize this internal experience of place and self. As the painted woods are traversed, manipulated, distorted, they become peculiar in their representation- almost as if from a dream rather than any current reality.
CHAPTER THREE
THE ROMANTIC

As prior mentioned, romanticism can take on a number of organizational approaches. When Idealizing nature, one is selective, choosing some parts over others, often editing them out of the larger picture entirely. Upon first glance, this statement may seem quite contrary to the principles of Romanticism; as Erica Trapasso writes, “the styles and methods used in the Romantic period are anything but idealized”. Trapasso elaborates that Romanticism sought drama in response to the cool logic of the Enlightenment, valuing human emotion and a return to nature as a response to the sublimity of a quickly industrial world. Nonetheless, as many Romantics abandoned the classical stylistic conventions of the time, composition and color are carefully manipulated in order to communicate and emotional experience, thus operating as highly subjective and editorial. This is present in the likes of Grenoble from the River Drac with Mont Blanc in the Distance, by J.M.W. Turner. In his efforts to convey the sublime beauty of the natural world, the landscape is reduced to hazy, dramatic forms. Strong contrast in temperature creates a boundary between foreground and horizon, as if to exaggerate to the viewer the wide expanse ahead. Tuner’s imagery is infused with light, seemingly ethereal in its intensity. Though the pursuit of individuality in Romanticism can make it challenging to singularly define the formal qualities of such a painting, their

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purposeful approach to conveying nature indicates an unexpected selectivity in what makes a landscape desirable to the Romantic eye.

The same principle of reduction in idealization is traditional in Eastern landscape painting, but with different conceptual origins. As opposed to the Western Romantic tendency to “conquer” land, or view it as an extension of man’s bounty, Eastern landscape traditions frequently focus on capturing the essence of nature as its own cyclical entity. Tracing back through history, the roots of landscape painting can be found in early China. The term *shan shui*, translating to “mountains and water”, refers to a branch of Chinese painting revered for its union of physicality and spirituality. Contrary to Western landscape conventions, *shan shui* paintings do not aim to convey a scene in exactitude. Rather, the process of painting becomes an active dialogue between the artist and the natural world. The process is reflective, asking the painter to unify their internal awareness with a vision of nature’s physical essence. Thus, the objective becomes to unify an inner reality with the natural world.

*Shan shui* paintings typically lack the spatial conventions rendered in Romantic Western landscapes, instead emphasizing the fluidity of the space. This technique is visible in the work of Guo Xi, a Chinese painter of the Northern Song Dynasty. Xi’s opus includes what he coined the “angle of totality”, a method of conveying a land scene from multiple simultaneous perspectives (rather than a singular observed perspective). In

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4 “Landscape in the Arts - Landscape East And West.” *Landscape East And West - Nature, Bridge, Western, and Visual* - JRank Articles.
5 “Guo Xi's Early Spring”, *A Visual Sourcebook for Chinese Civilization.*
Early Spring the viewer is placed in front of a series of mountains, each twisting and turning in space. The rocks that make up the foreground outline a path for the viewer to cross into, built from precise calligraphic brush strokes. A tree blocks the viewer from further access into the picture plane, which appears to melt in and out of the warm-toned paper. Sections of the middle ground seem to disappear almost entirely, the mountains fading into an invisible atmosphere, only to reappear far in the distance. The scene flows in and out of itself, complementing a philosophical fascination with balance in nature.

Painting landscape as an impression, or a snapshot of the essence of the natural space, emphasizes a deep regard for the power of nature. Landscape becomes something that unfolds on its own accord, as opposed to something to be organized and controlled.

This tension is pivotal in the way my work operates. A recurring question of control appears, as compositions teter in and out of chaos. This is prevalent in a series of ink paintings produced as early inquiries to spatial conventions. How can a place be fragmented, suggesting a space and time all of its own? A Thousand Summers presents a scene that finds rhythmic harmony in its repetitive organic imagery. The presence of the transitory is a major component of this work, as the eye follows along areas of lush foliage, only to be intermittently interrupted by void like spaces of deep sepia ink. The plane presented lacks obvious spatial continuity- there’s no steady horizon line, nor is there an obvious foreground for the viewer to place themselves in. Yet, the visual language used to depict the space suggests harmony in the existence of its elements. Bushes, trees, and other flora come together in a flattened, compressed manner. They exist in high contrast with the cavernous background they seem to sit on, but their
consistent presentation in the plane suggests this is only natural and logical for the space.

There is an orderliness to the disjointed nature of the image. Taken a step further in *Nettle’s Park*, the elements fall away into moments of ambiguity. While the composition begins to the left with a similar compressed, high contrast collection of foliage, it begins to disintegrate into sparser wisps of land, the forms become more oriented in mark-making than in shape. Finally, they fade away into white at the edge of the paper, suggesting an expanse of empty light beyond the plane. No semblance of human presence exists in the world conveyed- this is a realm left untouched.

Memory of a place is automatically subjective, as the mind is naturally selective in the way it processes and retains information. Similar to the ways in which a locale can be approached as either something to organize rationally or interpret spiritually, so can one’s memory be warped to maintain or explore certain ideologies. Peter Doig exemplifies this expertly in his paintings, encapsulating worlds imbued with a dreamy quality. In an interview with The New Yorker, Doig, discusses the process behind the making of *Pelican(Stag)*. Upon observing a man struggling with a large bird at the beach, Doig sought a way to recreate the menacing encounter. After being dissatisfied with the drawings he produced in response to the event, he eventually came across a postcard of a man dragging a fishing net. This postcard would become the model for the eventual painting, producing the posture of the man as Doig saw it in his memory.\(^6\) Doig’s process

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\(^6\) Tomkins, Calvin, and Joshua Jelly-Schapiro. “The Mythical Stories in Peter Doig's Paintings.” *The New Yorker*
is intuitive, responding to the elements of each composition as they develop. His work reflects an inner world built from photographs, recollections, and perceptions of the physicality around him. It is not uncommon for his work to include a number of references to movies, literature, art and experiences, cumulating into a bridge between the inner world and the outer. This methodology envelops Romantic ideals from both East and West, as Doig edits and rationalizes the space through his emotional and recollective responses to it.

_Sandbar_ works to a similar effect, reorganizing past experiences into singular frames. The elements are structuralized, each contained in its own aspect. Though evidence of the hand remains consistent throughout, differences in depiction suggest a dichotomous space. Similar to previous adaptations of Japanese woodblock as mentioned in accordance to _Big Pink Blanket_, the imagery presented is in direct reference to modes of conveying place in Japanese landscape. In the middle ground, the viewer finds a body of water replaced by details reminiscent of such tradition. Flattened blue trees, mountains, and clouds fill the area, formed from stylistic contour lines and calligraphic mark-making. Deep green trees grow in front of this area, maintaining the same visual language as the faux water. However, other components of the site exist in contrast to these elements. In lieu, areas like the grassy foreground speak to more contemporary processes, involving soft, shape oriented blending, and trees built from heavily textured impasto. In playing between these conventions, the space is manipulated while simultaneously speaking to a number of moments in time. Memories of place become
romanticized, idealized and edited into a world that can be unified, rather than operating in the confusion of the constantly shifting.

It is essential to note the presence of the figure in this painting as well. I have frequently gone back and forth between adamantly excluding the figure so as to create a world separate from reality, or including the figure for the sake of recognizing that these places are ones my family and I once traveled. Each of these methods bears its own results, with the majority of the paintings exemplifying a solitary mood that compliments the reflection on the internal landscape. However, Sandbar’s introduction of the figure, as is also present in Big Pink Blanket, presents a pair of figures that roam the space. All of the sudden, human presence has entered this imaginary world. And yet, simple, minimal rendering combined with a distorted scale minimizes the presence of the figure in this scene. Those same silhouetted, emerald colored trees tower over the figures, diminishing their physical presence. They seem to lack the agency the landscape has, instead wandering around as though a ghost, a temporary part of an everlasting cycle.
CHAPTER FOUR

TANGIBLE/INTANGIBLE

Throughout the development of this body of work, ideas of the liminal and the transient have persisted as underlying inquiries to space, time, and self. Within this, concepts of the tangible and the intangible become of equal significance to the work. Exploring the physicality of each painting becomes a way to ground these intangible notions—though these compositions are imaginary, constructing them in turn gives them physical presence. By reducing the complexity of landscape into simplified, abstracted imagery, the material and the ephemeral are reconciled. A large component of this work deals with one’s place in nature, and how to find meaning in such relationships. That is to say, nature becomes an anchor of sorts, bringing the existential back down to Earth.

Linking physical material with transitory imagery offers another method of operating in this duality. Ongoing experiments in ink provide a compelling process, as scenery is constructed from thin washes and rich color. The semi-transparent quality of ink as you dilute it in water allows a multitude of layers, each influencing the next. Playing between differing amounts of opacity in *Under a Strawberry Moon* accentuates shape and value as descriptors for the space at hand. Sitting on an opaque maroon background— and therefore placing the scene in its own void of space and time—delicate renderings of conceptually collaged woods begin the composition. The opacity of the background they sit on only enhances their wispy quality, drawing the eye to details hidden behind each most recent application of ink. The elaborate modeling of more luminous areas again calls to mind a more direct representation, yet placing this
representation in flat, shallow quality of the maroon instantly causes the viewer to question the space as fiction presents itself as fact.

Utilizing a diptych format works in reference once again to Eastern painting traditions, as it was customary in Chinese landscape to paint on a scroll. In order to be enjoyed, the scroll was to be unraveled slowly, each aspect of the painting being appreciated before moving to the next. As the Metropolitan Museum writes:

“Looking at a handscroll is an intimate experience. Its size and format preclude a large audience; viewers are usually limited to one or two. Unlike the viewer of Western painting, who maintains a certain distance from the image, the viewer of a handscroll has direct physical contact with the object, rolling and unrolling the scroll at his/her own desired pace, lingering over some passages, moving quickly through others.

The format of a handscroll allows for the depiction of a continuous narrative or journey: the viewing of a handscroll is a progression through time and space—both the narrative time and space of the image, but also the literal time and distance it takes to experience the entire painting. As the scroll unfurls, so the narrative or journey progresses”.

The diptych alludes to a similar effect, as the viewer treats the piece as though it were a passage, continuing through each detail. However, the diptych simultaneously interrupts this flow, as the composition is physically split between two surfaces. Thus, the scene is paradoxical, both hinged on its continual movement, and interrupted in its continuity. Tension is inherent in this concurrency, as each half of the diptych exists to inform the other, despite their ability to stand alone.

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Notions of duality remain ever-present in my body of paintings, whether that dualism be in concept, depiction, or experience. Another on my list of references as I investigate these polarities is Maia Cruz Pallileo, who explores duplexity through a different lens. Interested in her family’s retellings of their life in the Philippines, as well as the history of colonization of their land, Cruz reexamines and recerates their narratives. Cruz is interested in how “stories and memories [that] are subjected to time and constant retelling become questionable, bordering the line between fact and fiction, while remaining cloaked in the convincingly familiar”.  

*The Duet* portrays a woman standing in a domestic space, leaning against a piano. Pictures of assumed family members are displayed across the top of the piano, while jewel-toned leaves frame the top of the painting. Leaning against the woman’s shoulder is a ghostly green figure, with only her head visible as the rest of her disappears into the wallpaper. Their unity, along with the title of the piece, suggest a collaboration between the women. Simultaneously, differences in their depiction imply that these women aren’t quite of the same world or time. They are joined in the scene, perhaps only to emphasize the difference in their respective existences. The viewer is left to doubt the reality of the moment captured, pondering the ways in which internal narratives can affect the portrayal of a scene.

As my studio practice has evolved in this research, the work is built from layers upon layers, sometimes collaged, other times built from unending coats of paint. This not only plays upon the “constructed” nature of the composition, but emphasizes their palpable reality as well. A detail from *Over and In* exemplifies such materiality in contrast with ever-changing imagery. A thin wash of rose-colored paint is somewhat concealed by a photo transfer placed over it, the subject matter conveying woods local to South Carolina. During the transfer process, the top layer of paper was partially peeled back, exposing white paper pulp and the tint of the background. The transfer is then

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8Maia Cruz Palileo: Becoming the Moon.” *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service.
concealed by a mass of thick green paint, scraped on with a palette knife, and then away to once again reveal previous layers. The result is a play upon time, an image that captures the way the landscape shifts and changes appearance even in its visual conception. In addition, incorporating photo transfer, and therefore direct photographic imagery into the space introduces a different type of reality. The paint seeks to capture the essence of the place, while the photograph is capturing that place itself at a particular moment in time, freezing it in an eternal moment of stillness. For the first time in this collection, the viewer has direct access to the imagery that builds these pieces, as it’s buried under mounds of subjective interpretation and re-remembrance.

The scale of *Over and In* is massive when compared to the other works, standing at four feet tall, and five feet wide. A larger scale invites the viewer into an immersive composition, surrounding their vision with winding hills and trees, rather than experiencing the view from the smaller, more intimate scales of previous works. Tethering on chaos, the picture plane is hectic, bursting with depictions of place after place. When I consider each of these homes, my internal interpretations feel quite similar to this effect. With each place comes a new association, a forgotten memory, a link to some other moment in place and time. The memories feel crowded and busy, competing for attention as I work to translate them to canvas before they fade away. It is only appropriate that the brushwork of *Over and In* be gestural, capturing forms as quick references before moving on to the next interpretation of the space. Careful contours of trees and mountains contrast the frenetic quality of their counterparts, all of the elements seeking to coexist in a world spilling out of itself. Though a cavernous background communicates a way through the forest of hills and pines presented, there is almost too much imagery to sift through in order to enter this world. The moments are fleeting, immortalized on canvas in their ephemerality so as to not lose their memory in the creation of more.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

It is difficult to say whether creating this body of work answered my questions, or produced even more in its making. Painting as remembrance, as interpretation, or as simply trying to process such a complicated world brings about infinite approaches. This paper began with Kafka’s entrance into the forest, his revelation that everything he perceived was an extension of his own existence. Though this conclusion ultimately brings the character comfort, I am left in search of more answers. How does one reconcile this complexity? Recognizing such tension between reality and fiction, the tangible and the sublime, leaves me fascinated with humanity’s temporary presence. There is a quote by Guatama Buddha that states “Our life is shaped by our mind; we become what we think”. Examining the inner world produced through this research, often leaves me considering this notion, as sometimes this inner world feels rather disoriented from the outer. However, this collection of paintings has offered the opportunity to treat my surroundings with a deeper awareness of their constant cycles, soaking in each place as if it were its own moment in time. As I reconcile their complexity in what I imagine will be a lifelong journey, these moments will continue to shift and change. The imagined, internal landscape will continue to unfold.
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