

# The Embodied Confluence



## **Terminal Thesis Report 2015**

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## The Embodied Confluence: Perception, Painting, and Landscape

By Anne Magratten

*How can we not look for correlations? Once, at a time that I suffered from intense anxiety, I dreamed I was a hillside. The sun struck my sides and the clouds passed over me. At first this simple content seemed empty of human experience, yet in the days following the dream my anxiety abated.*



### I. Introduction

The following report maps my work in relationship to the subject and experience of landscape and its connection to painting. It begins with my ruminations on landscape historically and the undiscussed yet problematic elements of its uses. Next I address landscape as a continuous physical and perceptual experience and alternative ways this can relate to painting. Finally, I address my own studio practice and painting process. I ask the readers' patience with regard to the difficulty of correlating inspirational/formative experiences with artistic outcomes as they are often indirect and slippery.

### II. Questionable Relationships: Power, Gender, and Racism within Landscape

Why own a painting of a landscape? Who can remain unmoved by a great view or expanse? Those seemingly simple quadrants of beauty house endlessly complex relationships to power, ownership, and progress. The genre of landscape conflates the ability to own land and the ability to own a work of art. The desire to own is not inherently perverse but is also not devoid of certain implications. For example, what does it say about the desire to control or dominate? How is it situated within the historical narratives of progress? No simple answers exist. Within my studio practice I do not wish to ignore these complications, but rather let certain questions and thoughts be like stones that I turn over and over again.



Is it the mix of awe, through beauty and terror, which enlivens ownership with both pride and imperative? Is it the mixed feeling of admiration and uneasiness that prompts humans to try to subdue nature? Is it the same feeling that makes one want to own landscapes? It is unlikely that these impulses would ever be regarded on a conscious level. However, there are subtle cultural connotations that affect our reception of these works relating to gender, race, and progress.

Consider the amorphous notion that the land is our mother. That thought associates women with the base corporality of the land. It also creates a dynamic where the feminine (land/women) must be rightfully subdued by the father figure of progress, manifest destiny. Cultures with a tighter knot of relationship to the landscape are often cast as less evolved or incapable of progress. This line of thinking has enabled exploitation and unthinkable abuses. Landscape paintings can also promote nationalism catering to a sense of superiority based on place. For example, let us consider the landscape *Entrance into Monterey* a work by Albert Bierstadt painted in 1876. The larger structure of the painting is composed of dark green rolling hills that extend out to the sea and sunlight breaking over the water. Upon closer look, a group of Native Americans bow to the cross and flags of settlers who have disembarked from their boats in the harbor. The light on the water which begins to break on the shore can then be perceived as the light of God, knowledge, and reason expanding out into the dark wilderness. The tranquility of the scene denies the violent physical and spiritual colonization, disguising it as an accepted gift. Landscape paintings can appear deceptively neutral yet they, like any painting, can be used propagandistically; to display wealth, power, or engender superiority. *Entrance into Monterey* is now owned by the U.S. House of Representatives and publically displayed<sup>1</sup>. Treated in this uncritical manner its presence within the U.S. government reinforces a false or desired narrative. Mythological landscapes also fall victim to this use in crafting fictional origins within the march of progress.

Perhaps for the contemporary subject the landscape still houses residual disquieting questions about divinity and knowledge. Its presence can be an embarrassing reminder of our “primitive” origins (a time

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<sup>1</sup> “Thoroughly American: Albert Bierstadt’s Landscape Paintings.” History, Art, & Archives United States House of Representatives. Accessed on May 15, 2015. <http://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/Bierstadt/Paintings/>

that we lived in direct relationship to the land). Our dependence upon it undermines our desire to perceive dominance over it. These concerns should not be ignored and it is imperative that they should not be regarded as the only way to relate to work within the genre of landscape. We find ourselves at a pivotal moment with global climate change. Could work about the landscape help to contextualize our relationship to it in new ways? What outcomes would arise if we blurred the perceived perimeter between self, landscape, and art?

### III. Other Ways: Perception & Embodied Experience

My work before graduate school reflected on the body in relationship to narrative, religion, femininity, and crisis. I have, for the moment, avoided my tendency to deal with the body directly, instead focusing on embodied perception in the landscape and painting. I persistently question the role of vision in perception, the possibility of separating the senses, and the privileging of one sense over another.

Throughout the progression of enlightenment the mind was elevated over the body and vision was favored over the other senses. Vision has been equated with truth, rationality, and distance. Yet vision has its instabilities. Reflecting on this Foucault stated, "My head, for example, my head: what a strange cavern that opens onto the external world with two windows. Two openings--- I am sure of it, because I see them in the mirror, and also because I can close one or the other separately. And yet, there is really only one opening--- since what I see facing me is only one continuous landscape, without partition or gap."<sup>2</sup> My paintings engage this fiction and fact of unified vision. Foucault also said, "My body is like the City of the Sun. It has no place, but it is from it that all places, real or utopian, emerge and radiate."<sup>3</sup> He implicates the whole body in the act of perception and acknowledges the body's paradoxical qualities. This also points to the body as an origin of experience. Rather than a fixed source of information he acknowledges the body as continuously perceiving and changing. The perceiver is not self-centered in some sort of narcissistic way but aware of their subject position, their process of being in the world.

This is what landscape is for me instead, the process of being in the world, desirous of experience, being permeable to my surroundings. In *Passage*, the viewer is situated in the shaded portion of the image. The foreground is has a blueish cast appearing slick and moist with dew. Beyond the field and rock crests, warm light catches the far cliff side. My desire to paint this image was informed by the physical longing I felt for the heat of light while hiking. The viewers must perpetually wait for sun to reach them or accept the warmth of the atmospheric abstractions which intersect with the image. I use simple physical experiences to inform the content and process of my paintings.

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<sup>2</sup> Caroline Jones, "Introduction" and "The Mediated Sensorium," in *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology and Contemporary Art* (MIT, 2006)

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In *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, Rebecca Solnit combines landscape with association, personal narrative, and emotion. She writes, “For many years, I have been moved by the blue at the far edge of what can be seen, that color of the horizons, of remote mountain ranges, of anything far away. The color of that distance is the color of an emotion, the color of solitude and of desire, the color of there seen from here, the color of where you are not. And the color of where you can never go. For the blue is not in the places those miles away at the horizon but in the atmospheric distance between you and the mountains.”<sup>4</sup> Eloquently, she carves away at the impossibility of articulating experience, physical removal, and optical longing. Reality not tied to fixed point but still a specific (if transitory) bodily experience. She is a source of inspiration to me because of her gentle consideration of detail and the way she comingles the personal with the general. Within my landscapes I have tried to build a sense of openness and even at times emptiness for the viewer to extend into optically or associatively.

Let us contrast the experience of looking described by Solnit in the previous paragraph with that of artist and media theorist Laura U. Marks on haptic visuality. Marks writes, “Haptic visuality sees the world as though it were touching it: close, unknowable, appearing to exist on the surface of the image.” Vision and touch are intimately related. I address this connection within a group of small abstracts featuring cuts and eruptive gushes of paint. They thrust out toward the viewer as a disruptive third option beyond figure and ground yet open up to the space beyond the picture plane. This paint is haptic, in that calls attention to touch in a sculptural way and points to the paintings as increments. There is a distinct connection between the visual longing of Solnit and the visual touch of Marks’ theories. Marks declares, “There is never a complete division between haptic and optical. Rather they slide into one another. For example, our vision moves from optical to haptic when we admire our lover. Haptic visuality has a strong sense of the material connection between vision and the object. It is thus mimetic: it presses up to the object and takes its shape. Mimesis is a form of representation based on contact, getting close enough to the other thing to become it.” Utilizing Mark’s contribution we can conceptualize the gazing

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<sup>4</sup> Solnit, Rebecca. *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. New York: Penguin, 2006.

subject as traveling out into visual space not as a particular bearer of power but as vulnerable to what they look out on<sup>5</sup>.



I am compelled by the possibility of a physico-visual extension into space as formative and touch oriented because it implies a different set of power relations. It is a relationship where the looker with the fluidity of water fills the negative spaces and enmeshes themselves in a bodily way with the seen. What is this sensation? Solnit writes, "I wonder sometimes whether with a slight adjustment of perspective it could be cherished as a sensation on its own terms, since it is as inherent to the human condition as blue is to distance? If you can look across the distance without wanting to close it up, if you can own your longing in the same way that you won the beauty of that blue that can never be possessed?"<sup>6</sup> Such sensations can be at times unsettling but Solnit directs us to the richness possible in the optical journey.

#### **IV. Process**

Reference:

I regularly collect images while I am hiking, later using them as a reference. I'll linger various places trying to commit to memory the temperature, how my body feels in the space, and what colors are behind the light. When painting or traversing a hillside I am overcome by the simultaneous desire to pick apart what I see and make it whole. Part of my work is to ask how far we can ride the edge of recognition, association, and tedium. I am drawn into the ordinariness of certain locations because they allow an associative opening. There is perhaps some humor in the notion that landscape paintings are like a great stage on which nothing is happening. This has more to do with human expectations of time and event. I have limited myself to topics which are extremely subtle like light passing over a space, or a

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<sup>5</sup> Laura Marks, "Haptic Visuality: Touching with the Eyes," *Framework: The Finnish Art Review* 2, (November 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Solnit, Rebecca. *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. New York: Penguin, 2006.

wave rolling in. These things verge on trite but they also provide an opening for memory and an opportunity to interject personal experience.

Cut:

Physical as well as associative openings have become a substantial part of my work. Painting on wood panels I develop the painting until I reach a certain cohesive moment. This moment is what I seek to interrupt not because it is inherently bad but because it signifies an end of artistic options. I then take the panel to the table saw and begin my cutting. When I cut a painting I do not know what the result will be. I only know that I will create an opening in a once unified pictorial space. Each pass of the blade deletes more of the painting's surface and support. Even if fitted back together it will never quite read as seamless. From here the order can be changed, distance elongated or shrunk, and other elements may be interjected.

My smaller abstract paintings continue my thoughts on landscape. Each panel becomes like a land plot or ground. Have you ever drawn a line in the dirt with a stick, the fulfillment of your mark disproportionate to the rudimentary tool? Using the cut as part of the basic language of line, the opening becomes about direction and duration across the surface. These gestures are very minimal almost a meditation on mapping or charting. They become about directional tension and counter tension in the panel. They are paths walked without intersection but these amblings degrade not just the surface but the substrate as a whole.

In both groups of work the cut draws attention to the physical form, to the base material presence of paintings as objects. The cut undermines the dominance and intangible nature of painting by aesthetically incorporating physical degradation within the conventions of painting. Dividing a once unified surface materially dispels the fiction of unified vision and permanence.

Color:

My palette has grown exuberant. In the years before I came to graduate school I painted mostly in black and white or with very muted colors. Why then so much chroma all of the sudden? Careful observation of the landscape can yield intense almost pulsating color. Cézanne wrote to Camille Pissarro, "The sun here is so terrific that objects appear silhouetted not only in white or black, but in blue, red, brown, violet..."<sup>7</sup> He sounds on the verge of madness. Yet it is actually a form of sensual interrogation that often causes our expectations to collapse. Another reason for experimenting with high key color is an unresolved question about if mass mixed acrylic paint available at home improvement stores does not have different psychological and bodily impact. Particularly, in contrast to oil paints. All my large landscape paintings use both distinctly to create further contrast and tension.

Think of bright sunlight and then of squeezing your eyes shut. Impossible colors and shapes flit across your eyelids. You reopen your eyes. Only, where does one sight end and the next begin? To take in the space of my landscapes you must ignore the vibrant abstractions. Conversely, to make sense of the

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<sup>7</sup> "Cézanne From The Courtauld Collection Under The Hammer At Christie's." Artlyst London. Accessed April 12, 2015. <http://www.artlyst.com/articles/cezanne-from-the-courtauld-collection-under-the-hammer-at-christies>.



undulating abstractions you must blot out the landscape. The third option is to perform a paradoxical visual marriage of depth and flatness.

Installation:

Every room forms a rhythm and I used this cadence to heighten the viewers' awareness of their body in relation to my work. I arranged the installation with special sensitivity to how it could be traversed by viewers. Across the walls, I interspersed large works like *Where We Stood* (4' x 10') and *Passage* (8' x 6') with my smaller (23" x 23") square paintings. The physical process of looking then invited the viewer forward and backward several times. *Where We Stood* wrapped around the corner of the room, enveloping the viewer if they came close. The painting also had the effect of waxing or waning when walking through the room heightening the transitory quality of light and the undulation of the brushstrokes. Down on the floor, I arranged one large school of cut panel paintings to the left and a second smaller grouping to the right. Each panel was supported by a sliver round of ducting only visible from certain viewpoints. The low lying bursts of color necessitated attention to one's footing which added a greater spatial component to the installation. It also disrupted the tendency when viewing paintings to visually privilege the wall over the ground.

## **V. Conclusion**

I could not hope to reproduce the feeling of being outside but I seek to paint beside those sensations. I think of painting not as representational but as possessing an interpretive function for both artist and viewer. Attending to the perception of space and troubling the traditional perception of paintings are significant objectives within my terminal thesis project. However, the concurrent visual information within each work and potential for embodied experiences are just catalysts for work that will gain meaning beside the lives of others.

**Artist Statement:**

More than ever before, I am interested in the material qualities of paint and painting supports. One thing I have absorbed from formalism is that the content and the physical outcome of a work of art are always housed in the materials used. It was a deeper investigation of materials that allowed me to test the limits and possibilities extended to me by those very materials. The group Supports/Surfaces of 1960's rural France have been of increasing inspiration to me. I share their desire to continually reflect on what makes a painting (a surface and a support) and how to reinvigorate those elements. For example, I began testing the ability of acrylic paint to be both a surface and a support. This is especially evident within my pealed church architecture series where there is no canvas or panel, only paint. My process began with brushing acrylic house paint onto a large glass window allowing it to form a thin opaque layer over the surface. Next, I used oil paint to render different views of church spires. Last, I use a razor blade to slowly peel the paint off the glass in a sheet. I had observed these churches while traveling and orienting in a new urban place. I drew a parallel between the constantly shifting surface of my paint skins and fluctuating relationship of body to architecture. In their finished state they resemble a crumpled sheet or tarp yet still communicate with the historical conventions of religious art and painting.

I also allowed the quality of my materials to stretch the conventions of painting with my cut landscape series. Using wood as my support, I created a series of representational landscape paintings that I later cut on the table saw. Making the cuts after fully rendering the painting added both an element of risk and greater possibility. The sawed openings allowed me to simultaneously challenge the unified picture plane and the seamlessness of perception. Later, I began splicing in cut sections of vivid marbled abstracts to create further associate openings, disrupt the privileging of either representation or abstraction, and introduce a playful element. These works oscillate between coherence and rupture as the eye either combines all the separate elements or regards them individually.

Questioning how to form new definitions of painting and finding more ways vitalize the contributions of centuries of painters remains of inspiration to me. Of recurrent importance is my desire to engage with the viewer through a direct bodily experience with my art and provide new openings for physical, intellectual, and emotional experiences.

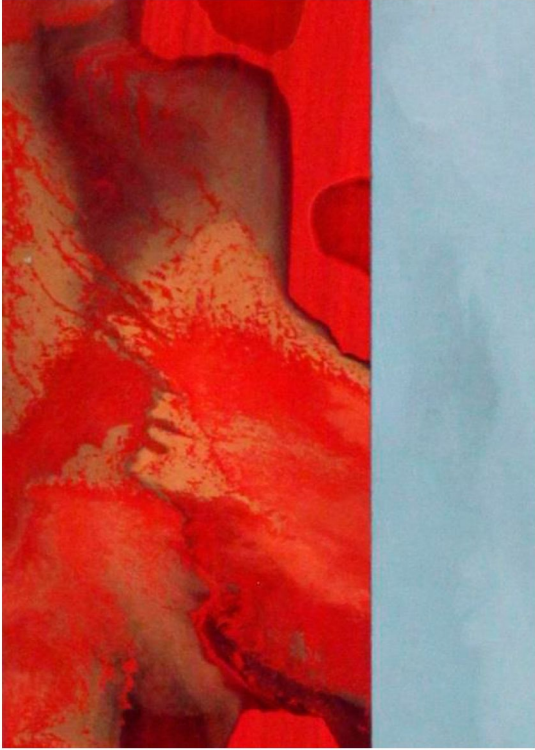
Image List:

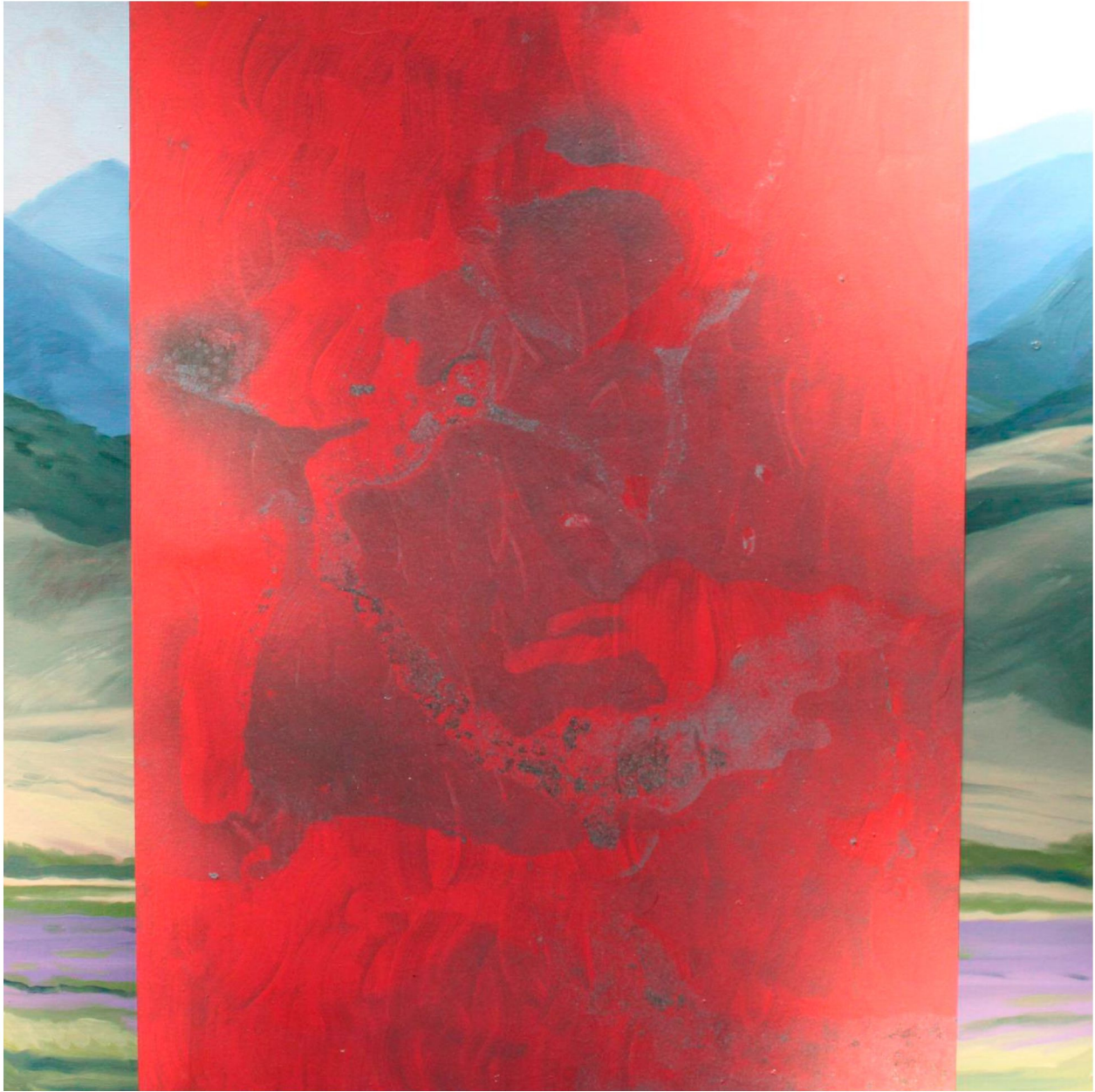
1. *Confluence*  
Oil & Acrylic on wood panel  
23" x 23"
2. *Confluence Detail*
3. *Red Sky*  
Oil & Acrylic on wood panel  
23" x 23"
4. *Red Sky Detail*
5. *Scintillation in Pink*  
Oil & Acrylic on wood panel  
23" x 23"
6. *Scintillation in Pink Detail*
7. *Gold Bang*  
Oil & Acrylic on wood panel  
23" x 23"
8. *Gold Bang Detail*
9. *Passage*  
Oil & Acrylic on wood panel  
8'x6'
10. *Windy Hill*  
Oil & Acrylic on wood panel  
23" x 23"
11. *Windy Hill Detail*
12. *We Stood Here*  
4'x8'  
Oil & Acrylic on wood panel
13. *We Stood Here Detail*
14. *We Stood Here Detail*
15. *Installation View*
16. *Installation View*
17. *Installation View*
18. *Installation View*
19. *Installation View*
20. *Installation View*







































## References:

1. "Thoroughly American: Albert Bierstadt's Landscape Paintings." History, Art, & Archives United States House of Representatives. Accessed on May 15, 2015. <http://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/Bierstadt/Paintings/>
2. Caroline Jones, "Introduction" and "The Mediated Sensorium," in *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology and Contemporary Art* (MIT, 2006)
3. Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. New York: Penguin, 2006.
4. Laura Marks, "Haptic Visuality: Touching with the Eyes," *Framework: The Finnish Art Review* 2, (November 2004).
5. "Cézanne From The Courtauld Collection Under The Hammer At Christie's." Artlyst London. Accessed April 12, 2015. <http://www.artlyst.com/articles/cezanne-from-the-courtauld-collection-under-the-hammer-at-christies>.