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IRVINE

*Lidija in the Buttermilks —
Alabama Hills;
Mono, Convict, June*

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in Art

by

Andrea Welton

Thesis Committee:
Professor Monica Majoli, Chair
Professor Daniel Joseph Martinez
Professor Kevin Appel
Professor Amanda Ross-Ho

2019

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS	iv
INTRODUCTION	1
THE EASTERN SIERRA	4
PROCESS	6
EXHIBITION	8
RESPONSE	18
BIBLIOGRAPHY	19

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1	<i>Lidija in the Buttermilks, As they Climb</i>	8
FIGURE 2	<i>Sabrina to Blue Lake, the Silence is Deafening</i>	10
FIGURE 3	<i>Alabama Hills to Bishop, I Keep Calling the Elements She</i>	11
FIGURE 4	<i>June Lake, Across the Frozen Floor</i>	12
FIGURE 5	<i>Fossil Falls in Coso Range, I Drift</i>	14
FIGURE 6	<i>Convict Lake, A Thorn Pokes My Side</i>	15
FIGURE 7	<i>Mosquito Flats, Lines Cross Through Like Tree Roots</i>	16

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Lidija in the Buttermilks —

Alabama Hills;

Mono, Convict, June

By

Andrea Welton

Master of Fine Arts in Art

University of California, Irvine, 2019

Professor Monica Majoli, Irvine, Chair

What is nature? What is the difference between land and landscape? A moment: micro versus macro. I drive down the 395 — the drive, the snowcapped peaks, the wildflowers. My paintings are made through a romantic, highly utopic lens of the landscape; of nature. The work touches on the beauty, strength, and drama of the landscape as well as the sincerity and adoration I have for the outdoors. My process allows me to have a full experience both physically and naturally with my materials. It is imperative that my practice takes place in both nature and the studio. What is the difference between the two or are they one and the same? Organic. Natural materials versus store bought. How do I manipulate the paintings to seem like they came to be naturally? The lack of control yet so much control. The loss of the artist's hand.

INTRODUCTION

Starting when I was three, I began to travel into the landscape, first with family camping trips, and later with backpacking. I started painting when I was six. My paintings, mostly landscape paintings, referenced photos from family trips; each photograph represented a memory. The landscape was absolutely overpowering, and left me intoxicated, even at a young age. However, these paintings never truly captured the emotions I felt about the outdoors - they were renderings of images, nothing more. As I grew, my skills sharpened, but realism can only progress to a certain point before it plateaus.

As an undergraduate, I began painting abstract expressionist paintings, again referencing photos I had taken of the landscape. These paintings allowed me the mental and physical freedom I needed, particularly in the way I was able to move my entire body to create a lasting mark. Abstract painting let me drift away from the image and allow emotion to seep into the work. For the first time, I truly felt that my work began to feel more accessible and vulnerable - something that had been missing from my previous works. The feelings I had for the landscape, a romanticized idea of an escape from reality, were finally surfacing. Carolyn Merchant, author of *The Death of Nature*, touches on this in her chapter *Nature as Female*, stating “pastoral poetry and art prevalent in the Renaissance presented another image of nature as female — an escape backward into the motherly benevolence of the past. Here nature was a refuge from the ills and anxieties of urban life through a return to an unblemished Golden Age.”¹ Beauty is never tiring; beauty is always rejuvenating. During difficult times I can escape to a landscape filled with crisp air, clear blue skies, blinding snow, vibrant wildflowers, and unique geological formations. I

¹ Merchant, Carolyn. *The Death of Nature*. New York, HaperCollins, 1980. 7

immerse myself in these places, which allows me to feel a sense of clarity. This is why I feel a sense of urgency to be in the outdoors: nature instills in me my only calm.

We live in a society where entropy rules. The demise of ~~our~~ the landscape as we currently know it is inevitable. Today we humans have caused our sixth mass extinction, the Anthropocene. We are living through an extraordinary, yet also terrifying moment. Humans have taken advantage of and exhausted Earth's resources. "Most significantly, people have altered the composition of the atmosphere."² As a result, my paintings are focusing on the fact that we have continued to neglect these extraordinary landscapes that Earth has given us to behold and respect. My paintings celebrate these gifts, bearing witness to the spectacular beauty of these places.

The journey is the destination.

A meadow that used to resemble a swamp in the summer has turned into a field of gold. I sit here listening to the flowing water and the rustling of the wind. Butterflies dance between the blades of grass. A crow perches on top of a small tree to my left. I'm at peace here.

My time at UC Irvine began with the same style of painting I created during my time as an undergraduate. These paintings were never fully resolved; full of beauty, but lacking intellect. There were marks I knew were successful, but there was no challenge or risk-taking involved. Each canvas consisted of small marks and layers. Nothing was erased or scratched away. The paintings created depth, but there was always something missing. During my second year, I began to play with textures from acrylic mediums and incorporated them into the paint. My use of pumice related to nature in a different way than the oils and acrylics had. The ink I began to use allowed for a sense of beauty and romanticism that I had always wanted to achieve.

² Kolbert, Elizabeth. *The Sixth Extinction*. Picador, 2014. 108.

In the summer of 2018, I attended PLAYA Summer Lake, a residency in Summer Lake, Oregon. Months prior, I had been toying with the idea of using foraged materials in my paintings. Natural materials born from the earth without additives as opposed to store bought materials. It was not that the acrylic mediums I had used before were not enough - I simply realized that I had been far too afraid of failure, staying only in my comfort zone, during my first year of graduate school. I felt a strong desire to challenge myself with a material that was not historically used in painting. More importantly, my material exploration grew parallel to my ethical relationship to the landscape. During my time in Summer Lake, I created a painting a day on Arches 300 paper using foraged materials that I had collected on hikes and daily strolls throughout the surrounding area such as Cattail, Cottonwood, Mullein, and mud from the playa. I handled the materials the same way I use paint: mixed, poured, and layered. The results were successful. The materials did not look haphazard, as if they had just been slapped on - instead they looked cared for.

These new paintings are made in response to the lived experience of the body in nature. I consider them scores of the landscape, choreographed compositions of the landscape in painted notation. In both the landscape and the studio, I consider the use of my body, materials, and paint. The work is an investigation of both natural and synthetic materials and pushing the limitations of historical materials to initiate new boundaries. Through a highly utopic lens, I sincerely ask: How does one construct a relationship with the land? As an extension of myself, my paintings express my values and adoration of the outdoors, relaying both a physical landscape, as well as an inner landscape.

THE EASTERN SIERRA

Have you ever driven down the 395 during the winter? The highway is framed by jagged mountain tops slathered in snow. You are surrounded by snowcapped peaks, and the road in front of you is endless. The first time I ever drove down the 395, in the winter of 2013, is a moment that is forever ingrained in my memory. This singular drive shaped my current practice. I could drive that road repeatedly, and I do. In the summer of 2018, I returned to my studio after a residency in Summer Lake with the intent of choosing a location to forage from specifically for my thesis exhibition. The chosen location was important because of both the materials I would forage and the sentiment. I chose the Eastern Sierra for multiple reasons. First, I was familiar with the area, and even though I had been there multiple times, the landscape always had something new to offer to me. Secondly, the Eastern Sierra experiences changing seasons, meaning that the materials available to me would be subject to change. The constant evolution of the paintings piqued my interest as the paintings would have to change with the materials. I am invested in pushing the materials past their immediate properties and historical boundaries. Third, the Eastern Sierra has extremely different terrain throughout. The beauty of the area is such that in a small distance, the landscape can change in a blink of an eye.

My research trips began at the end of October 2018. I created a timeline with the distinct areas I wanted to forage due to material differences. The first research trip was near Mammoth Lake, and I began at the trailhead named Coldwater George to Emerald Lake. During this time I collected the bark of Douglas Fir and pine cones from the Tamarac Pine. I also started the first of many journal entries that would take place on these hikes:

Everything has started to die. Everything around me is brown. I've never been on this hike. I noticed on this hike I've been drawn to the roots and bark of trees. The way the trunk wraps around itself creating an archaic spiral. I'm drawn to the lines creeping through the bark. Some of the trees on this hike have growths that look like tumors. I

keep walking. Emerald Lake is brilliant. I can see how it got its name. Although the lake isn't frozen, ice covers the meadows nearby. I repeat my steps to hear the crunch beneath my feet. I have always been fascinated by the way an object can become embedded in ice yet not frozen over. I lean down to grab a leaf, its imprint left behind in the ice.

I started to write about little moments that had always been important to me, such as objects being embedded in ice and the imprint left behind when an object is picked up or the way quartz veins wrap the mountainsides. Moments that others may find mundane, I find breathtaking. Heidi Zuckerman, CEO and Director of the Aspen Art Museum, formerly curator at UC Berkeley Art Museum and the Jewish Museum, recently published *Conversations with Artists*. In conversation with Liz Larner, a sculptor that uses geology within her works, Zuckerman made a statement about minerals that has influenced my current practice:

Looking at the sculptures that incorporate Colorado minerals, they take something that is outside of traditional art forms, but could equally be considered one of the first art forms — the earth as the creator of beautiful objects. It celebrates nature in the way that it informs culture — versus the traditional approach, where culture informs nature.³

These little moments I write down are my way of archiving. My urgency to share my work stems from these beautiful objects rapidly leaving the earth.

³ Zuckerman, Heidi. *Conversations with Artists*. Aspen Art Press, 2017. 134.

PROCESS

My process begins with deciding what to collect, how much to collect, and where to collect. Through foraging, there is a direct physical connection between the artist and material. Once I arrive at the location of the research hike, I begin to forage. From here, sketches are produced on site which experiment with the limits of each material. The final paintings are created in the studio based off of these sketches as well as photographs and research findings. Each work relates to a specific place through material, color, and textures. The paintings stay flat until finished, beginning with an ink spill. Then, depending on the size of the canvas, my whole body is involved. Most of the natural materials collected are crushed with a sledge hammer to become a part of the painting. The process is performative. I establish a physical connection between the materials and my body. I consider the use of the sledge hammer that I use to crush my materials similar to the way Gutai artists sometimes enacted violence onto their substrates. “Like a scar or a welt, the work indexes the material’s history, its physical response to the artist’s assault.”⁴ Guilt bubbles to the surface every time I use the sledge hammer. It is the same guilt that I feel when collecting materials from the landscape. As an artist I am constantly questioning my intent and my use for the material. I’ve cultivated a relationship with the land and in the same way human relationships work there will be emotions that surface that I have to learn to cope with in order for the relationship to continue. After the materials are crushed they are still recognizable - I treat them the same way that I use paint. The materials are mixed into different acrylic mediums and are applied thickly onto the canvas. The natural and synthetic interact. Both are poured onto the canvas and react to each other slowly, finally intertwining as they begin to dry. I have personalized unique techniques through the use of both the foraged materials and the

⁴ Tiampo, Ming, and Alexandra Munroe, compilers. *Gutai splendid playground*. New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2013. 57.

acrylic mediums. I mix the two together to create distinct reactions and textures that are atypical of their historical properties. For the most part, however, I do not use a brush. In Gutai artist Shimamoto Shozo's essay, "Killing the Paintbrush" he writes, "It is only once the paintbrush has been discarded that the paint can be revived."⁵ In my thesis exhibition I used a paintbrush a handful of times. By allowing drips, pours, and other forms of devices to be used other than the traditional ones I allow myself to break from the historical constraints of the paintbrush and paint itself. There is an intentional loss of the artist's hand in this series of paintings.

An aspect of this work that is important to me, is considering how I incorporate the natural materials into the painting so that they do not look like an afterthought, but rather an extension of paint. My performative painting practice is nearest in motivation to that of the Gutai group. The Gutai Art Association (1954-1972) was concerned with performance, painting, and interactive environments. I reflect on founder Jiro Yoshihara's manifesto when creating my work. The Gutai used the concrete nature of materials to tap into chance and spirit. The purity of the material was important to them – they did not want to change the material, but wanted to use it for what it is. It is important to me not to allow the matter to compromise itself. My paintings, like the paintings of the Gutai artists, exist in a "space between abstraction and representation, seeking to embody both the exterior world and the interior subjectivity of the artist."⁶

⁵ Tiampo, Ming, and Alexandra Munroe, compilers. *Gutai splendid playground*. New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2013. 57.

⁶ *ibid.* 56.

EXHIBITION

My exhibition consists of five large scale paintings on canvas in a range of sizes over 72 inches and two 12x12 inch paintings. Scale and room to breathe were of the utmost importance when deciding how to hang the exhibition.

Figure 1: *Lidija in the Buttermilks, As they Climb*



Lidija in the Buttermilks, As They Climb was the first completed painting of this recent series. This was the first painting of this size that I created with natural materials. The natural material used in this piece are quartz and feldspar collected from *Lidija*, a boulder in the Buttermilks right outside of Bishop, CA, located in the Eastern Sierra. The Buttermilks consists of large boulders moved to their present location by flowing glaciers over time, throughout at

least three glacial periods.⁷ *Lidija* is located in the Pollen Grains on the backside of the Buttermilks main region. The site is littered in quartz and feldspar pointing to the age of the geologic formations.

The boulders tower over me, I feel like an ant when standing next to them. They feel ancient, full of wisdom. Even though they are made of granitic rock, I feel comfort next to them. Their rock face: smooth and jagged depending on where you touch. Quartz is littered all around me, glittering in the sunlight. The air I'm breathing in is revitalizing. I don't believe in religion, but consider me blessed.

Sabrina to Blue Lake, The Silence is Deafening is a painting created in early 2019 in response to a hike from the Sabrina Lake trailhead to Blue Lake in the Eastern Sierra, a five mile loop full of switchbacks that, at the time of my research, was covered in ice. I was the only person on the trail after the first mile. I felt insignificant as I became aware of myself in the landscape. I was surrounded by jagged mountain tops. The silence was deafening yet brought a sense of tranquility. Hiking on your own, you can take all the time in the world to reach your destination. At that moment however, I also was thinking about weather and light. The weather in the Eastern Sierra is subject to change at a moment's notice. I made my way up the trail, stopping to photograph interesting textures, the colors of winter, and to forage materials. This painting, however, is from the moment when I reached the end of the trail and came across Blue Lake. I was all alone; save for the voices of the birds. I sat at the edge of a rock and looked into the crystal blue lake. The sunlight was reflecting off of the surface, and there was a slight breeze moving the water. I momentarily entertained the idea of jumping in, but the temperature of the frigid water stopped me.

I can hear my own heart beat. The silence is deafening. At first it's alarming but then a peace takes over. I sat at the lake listening to the silence. Every so often the water

⁷ McKee, Edwin. "Mineral Resources of the Buttermilk Roadless Area Inyo, California." United States Department of the Interior, 1982.

gurgled as it hit the rocks. I'm not afraid anymore. She may be bigger than me but she's here to teach through the beauty she provides. Teach us kindness.

Figure 2: *Sabrina to Blue Lake, The Silence is Defeaning*



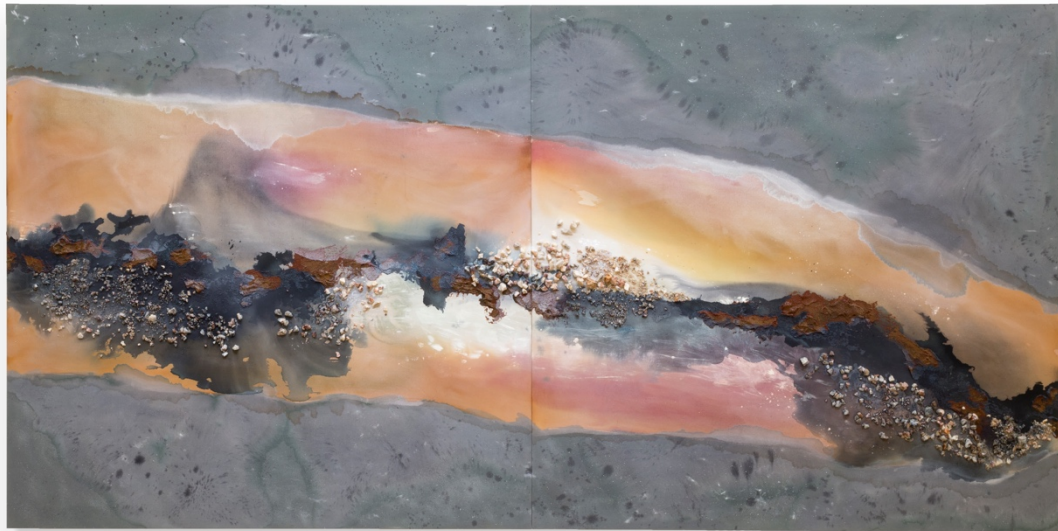
This painting is this exact moment: submergence, calming, floating, and capturing light. The granitic rock used on this painting is collected from the area surrounding Blue Lake. Granitic rock is more dominant in the Eastern Sierra than in other parts of the Sierra Nevada mountain range. The paint is a mixture of acrylic mediums: pumice, glass bead gel, self leveling gel, and tar gel. I used both acrylic based ink and high flow acrylics. The texture that makes up the layered blue is a mixture of self leveling gel and ink using a squeegee. It is a texture I have mastered since I began my graduate studies and one that I have used in many of my recent paintings.

Alabama Hills to Bishop, I Keep Calling the Elements She stems from a passage I wrote after driving down the 395 towards Bishop, California after a research trip to Alabama Hills. Alabama Hills is BLM land located west of Lone Pine, California as you turn down Whitney Portal Rd.

There's a line that wraps all around the granite rock face. Make that two. A pale coral with lichen green dusting the sides and sometimes racing through the middle. I keep calling the elements she. She brings a sense of calm. I could stare at her for hours even with her jugged, sharp edges.

Strength, chaos, beauty, bigger than me.

Figure 3: *Alabama Hills to Bishop, I keep Calling the Elements She*



The mountains flanked both sides of my drive. The quartz vein pulsing through the sides of the mountains added a touch of delicacy to something majestic and powerful. I call the elements she because each time I reread this writing I am reminded of many women in my life.

“In both Western and non-Western cultures, nature was traditionally feminine. In Latin and the Romance languages of Medieval and early modern Europe, nature was a feminine noun, and hence, like the virtues, personified as female.”⁸ This painting is a diptych, each canvas measuring 84x84 inches, that was made to be centered specifically on the freestanding 22 foot wall in the University Art Gallery (front gallery), but later changed to a longer wall, allowing the painting room to breathe as well as continuation of gesture. It is meant to envelop the viewer, to make them feel small, just as the mountains on my drive made me feel. *Alabama Hills to Bishop, I Keep Calling the Elements She* consists of ink, acrylic, pastel, pumice, granitic rock, quartz, and feldspar.

Figure 4: *June Lake, Across the Frozen Floor*



What was once a beach has turned into piles of white snow. I walk across to the lake’s edge. There is a space between the ice and snow where water laps at the shore. I break off a piece

⁸ Merchant, Carolyn. *The Death of Nature*. New York, HaperCollins, 1980. xxiii.

of the frozen lake and chuck the ice across the frozen floor: the sound, the score for June Lake. I look down and see a stick embedded in the ice. *June Lake, Across the Frozen Floor* measures 42x84 inches. and is made up of ink, acrylic, pastel, and birch seed pod. For this painting I was invested in the layers especially the way the ink pools around the raised acrylic from the first layer. This painting differs from the others, as it has the gesture of a blunt line crossing through the middle of the painting. The line consists of birch seed pod collected from the area, acrylic mediums, and inks. The ground consists of the technique I referred to while describing *Sabrina to Blue Lake, The Silence is Deafening* which mixes the ink with self leveling gel. However, in this painting gesso instead of self leveling gel was placed down first with a squeegee. When dry, I went back with the ink. Finally, pastel was mixed with tar gel and placed on top of the ground. I mixed the two mediums together with my fingers. At this moment I was thinking about ice, like the chunks I had chucked across June Lake earlier in the year.

I drift back to another time, thinking about the power of water, lava, and potholes. *Fossil Falls in Coso Range, I Drift* is made from ink, acrylic, and volcanic rock. It measures 96 x 72 inches. Fossil Falls is located in the Coso Range of California. The basalt rock, as black as onyx, was smoothed over by lava flow between 400,000 and 10,000 years ago. During my time in this region I continually stumbled upon perfect circles that seemed as if they had been dug by hand in the ground. These circles are potholes, formed by water that had created an eddy.

I walk across the barren landscape. Brush tickles my ankles, the earth flat. Unsure of the path I follow what I hope to be the trail for a short period of time before stumbling upon the falls. A waterfall of black basalt rock, black as the night, smooth as a baby's bottom. Such a stark contrast to the barren landscape. In front of me a hole, dug by hand or from something more powerful? I drift back to a time long before me, the power of lava and water.

Figure 5: *Fossil Falls in Coso Range, I Drift*

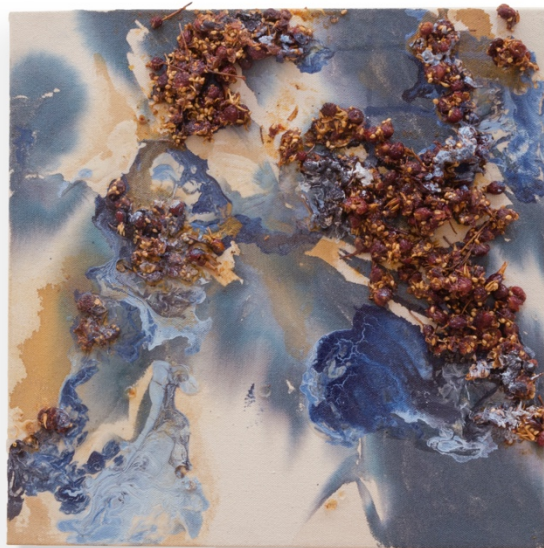


This painting is the moment I stumbled upon one of these potholes. I was invested in creating movement with the circular gesture but also in the sweeping placement of the volcanic rock. The palette was inspired by the colors of the rocks both volcanic and basalt.

Most of my research in the Eastern Sierra took place in the winter of 2018-2019. During this time the lakes were completely frozen over. The landscape was stark - made up of neutrals mostly grey and browns. I drove up to Convict Lake; the lake was so frozen over that visiting families were walking on the ice. As I looked around, I noticed the contrast of crimson against

the white of the snow. Winter berries that resembled pea sized prunes speckled what would otherwise seem to be dead brush. To reach the berries I maneuvered my body through thorns and sticks, many times getting caught in knee deep snow. *Convict Lake, A Thorn Pokes My Side* consists of ink, acrylic, and winter berries on a 12 x 12 inch canvas. I wanted the berries to be recognizable instead of my former thought of treating them as a type of dye. As the Gutai manifesto states, “the human spirit and matter shake hands with each other while keeping their distance. Matter never compromises itself with the spirit; the spirit never dominates matter.”⁹ I smashed them down with a hammer creating a jam, and mixed this with acrylic medium. Another layer to the painting was added with acrylic and ink, erasing away certain areas and allowing others to build. I thought about small icicles dripping from the brush, the possibility that I may have taken an animal’s food supply, the color of winter, the color of death.

Figure 6: *Convict Lake, A Thorn Pokes My Side*



⁹ Tiampo, Ming, and Alexandra Munroe, compilers. *Gutai splendid playground*. New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2013. 18.

My favorite hike in the Eastern Sierra starts at the Mosquito Flats trailhead. To get here you make a left at Tom's Place going north up the 395. The trailhead is at the end of the road. In the span of a few miles you'll see five lakes. The views are breathtaking and change drastically with the seasons. I usually go in the summer when the wildflowers are blooming, bears are roaming, the lakes are swimmable, the air clean. This time I went in the winter. The lakes were frozen over, snow blanketed the jagged mountains, what was once a meadow had turned into a field of gold.

Lines cross through the mountain tops like tree roots. Thick to small. Snow sinks into the crevices of the mountain as if creating its own bed. It's pure white. Fresh. The lake that we swam in during the summer has frozen over.

Figure 7: *Mosquito Flats, Lines Cross Through Like Tree Roots*



I titled the last small painting after this passage I wrote while sitting at the base of Chickenfoot Lake. *Mosquito Flats, Lines Cross Through Like Tree Roots* is made up of ink, acrylic, and quartz on a 12 x 12 inch canvas. Here I was thinking of the quartz and feldspar vein

that traveled through the granite. I think about this often. “The earth’s venous system was filled with metals and minerals. Its veins, veinlets, seams, and canals coursed through the entire earth, particularly in the mountains.”¹⁰ From the base of the lake the veins resembled tree roots buried deep within the ground. Rather than the loss of my hand, this painting focuses on mark-making. Small dots cover the substrate, quartz adhered by self leveling gel. Ink poured, Sumi ink added as another layer, scumbled onto the layer of grey dots.

The seven paintings in this exhibition and the materials foraged are centered around research that took place in the Eastern Sierra on the traditional territory of Northern Paiute, Southern Mono, and Newe.

¹⁰ Merchant, Carolyn. *The Death of Nature*. New York, HarperCollins, 1980. 24.

RESPONSE

Recently I was introduced to Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's book titled *The Adventure*. In the chapter *Adventure*, Agamben writes about the origin of the word 'adventure' in the Middle Ages when the act of taking an adventure was the same as the act of recounting an adventure.

Adventure appears in the middle of the story because, unlike the Muse, she is not the numinous power that preexists the tale and makes the poet speak; rather, she is the tale and lives only in and through it. Here, the woman is not the one who inspires the poet to speak; she is the very event of speech — she is not the gift of the tale but the tale itself.¹¹

There is a correlation between the word adventure and my use of the word escape. Just as the story and the experience in Agamben's description of adventure were one and the same, my research trips into nature and the recounting of these moments through my paintings act in the same way.

The natural materials used within my work exist, they comment on themselves but also reveal exactly what they are. They are both the subject and the object of the painting. The work has moved out of the decorative and become an embodied experience. It serves as a reminder of what we face to lose at a time when climate change, the Anthropocene, is finally gaining global attention. My thesis exhibition is a break from safety, a need to challenge myself and a need to be a defender for and champion of beauty, a need for urgency, a need to be resilient; a life's work in the wild of the mind and back country.

*"When I think of art, I think of beauty.
Beauty is the mystery of life.
It is not in the eye, it is in my mind."*¹²
- Agnes Martin

¹¹ Agamben, Giorgio. *The Adventure*. Cambridge, MIT Press, 2015.

¹² Martin, Agnes. "Beauty is the Mystery of Life." Austin Community College, www.austincc.edu/noel/writings/Beauty%20Is%20the%20Mystery%20of%20Life.pdf.

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