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Glacier

Leah Katz

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GLACIER

By

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Thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Fine Arts

The University of Montana
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Introduction

Paradox has become central to my life philosophy over the last five years of living in Montana. Paradox is in the essence of what meaning I have found while spending vast amounts of time hiking in the wilderness. Simply put, I have found myself to be simultaneously a part of and distinctly apart from nature. Union and separation are themes I convey through symbols and abstraction in my artwork. Nature reveals us to ourselves. Nature’s ability to inform us about life questions is central to the writings of Paul Shepard. Shepard’s studies in child development reveal that a child separated prematurely from his birthmother “experiences a pronounced sense of duality”¹ and tends to surround himself in his own reality later in life. This is the case of Odilon Redon, great painter of the symbolist movement famous for his cyclops, symbolic of the observer. Redon, separated from his parents as an infant, spent his childhood outside observing clouds. I spent my childhood outside climbing trees. After being adopted I found comfort in my backyard woods and have always seen things as black or white.

I took a year off in the middle of my art studies to earn an International Permaculture Certificate at a Kibbutz in Israel. Permaculture refers to permanent culture and uses nature as a model to structure sustainable living practices. The permaculture symbol involves an egg and a tree portraying “that quantity of life which cannot be created or destroyed, but from within which all things that live are expressed.”² My travels have informed my artwork about my home in countless ways. My paintings are symbols that express a dual meaning, half parallel to the symbol of permaculture, and half acknowledging the destruction of life on earth. Permaculture is based on human union with nature.

¹ Shepard, Deep Ecology.
² Mollison, p.xi.
Modern society is based on human separation from nature. Art is a reflection of the artist’s world. My home in Glacier lies somewhere in-between modern society and permaculture. My home in Missoula is urban, with the majority of my time spent on pavement and in buildings between downtown and the University. My thesis work is informed both by my time spent with nature (in Glacier) and apart from nature (in Missoula). Paradox of union and separation found in myself, in wilderness and civilization, and in my paintings may be summed up by painter Arthur Dove: “I look at nature, I see myself. Paintings are mirrors, so is nature.”

Figure 1. Cover of Permaculture: A Designer’s Manual by Bill Mollison

Figure 2. Cover of The End of Nature by Bill McKibben

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3 Cohn p.1.
Historical Influences

My art is about my relationships with the natural world. My relationships with the natural world are first and foremost influenced by the time I spend outside. My conscious interpretation of my surroundings has been heavily influenced by the writings of Paul Shepard. Ecological anthropology creates the base for my perception of the world and my place in it.

Despite majoring in Fine Arts for my B.A., I have a strong academic background in Geology, Ecology, Zoology, and Environmental Studies and have enjoyed a career working as a Naturalist. Currently I work a seasonal job as a Backcountry Permit Ranger at Glacier National Park in north-western Montana. I essentially prepare people for their wilderness experience in Glacier and send them off into the woods. My artwork is about my experience exploring Glacier's landscape, but after talking to thousands of backpackers every summer, I believe my experience is a common one. Having traveled and lived in many states and countries, I prefer to perceive the world through Glacier. The particular geological, ecological, and anthropological history of Glacier's landscape all influence the reality I find there.

In 2004 I entered the Masters Program in Fine Arts at The University of Montana painting plein air representational landscapes, best categorized as Fauve. My work attempted to show how I felt while sitting in and looking at Glacier's landscape. I was inspired by female artists with a spiritual connection to land, primarily Georgia O'keeffe and Emily Carr. My representational landscape paintings contained qualities of O’keeffe’s sensual, saturated color and Carr’s undulating, radiating brushstrokes.

I went through a year-long period of experimentation, guided mostly by the influence of environmental artists. Inspired by Andy Goldsworthy’s ephemeral sorting of
natural objects in their natural setting, I brought natural objects into my studio to discover what marks they left on my canvas. Goldsworthy used his hands to organize nature, and I used nature to disorganize my painting. As Goldsworthy’s resorting of nature made hidden beauty blatant to any human eye, using nature to resort the processes of my art making helped make the hidden truths of abstraction more apparent to my overly-literal mind. I used vegetation and rocks as a vehicle for laying down paint. My paintings took on their first sculptural qualities with the use of clay spread on board. I also used clay to create a literal landscape relief map of Glacier National Park. Laws of nature began to take control of the final expression of my work. Using literal earth to manipulate my painting was an attempt to bridge a gap between the image of the subject and the subject itself. Using earth materials in my process brought me a step closer to distilling the essence of nature for physical expression.

In fall 2006 I found symbolist painting/mixed media composition to be the most effective mode of communicating my ideas. The Symbolist movement in fine art arose during the Industrial Revolution as a direct response to the mass movement of people from village to city, resulting in a loss of meaning and change in value of life. Personally, I have struggled to find meaning in life. I attribute this painful struggle to the disconnect of humans and their origin: nature. The origins of this disconnect are complex but the Industrial Revolution was the beginning of its exponential growth. Symbols emerged from a necessity to express something absent from our perceivable reality. Loss of life’s meaning was expressed by symbol during the symbolist movement. My paintings express a reclamation of meaning in life upon return to nature. The underlying mood of the symbolist
movement and my work is “nocturnal, autumnal, and lunar”\(^4\) rather than solar. Symbolism is dreamy, striving to express the inexpressible.

Figure 3. Odilon Redon, The Cyclops, Oil on Wood, 25 X 20 inches, c.1898

My current thesis work is influenced primarily by Arthur Dove and secondarily by Odilon Redon and Georgia O’keeffe. I see Dove’s work as symbolic of the essence of nature. Dove’s Theosophical beliefs parallel my own. I strive to reach Dove’s goal of capturing the “life force” on the pictorial plane through the reduction of observations of nature to essential unseen energy of existence. This goal is expressed in my stylized flat presentation of the tree form and oval/egg shape surrounded by layers of currents of color. Redon’s later work simultaneously possesses a joy and a “contemplative melancholy”\(^5\), a

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\(^4\) Gibson *Symbolism* p.59.  
\(^5\) Gibson *Odilon Redon: The Prince of Dreams* p.15.
paradoxical quality present in my double-sided trees and bright yet rough surfaces. The frontal, somewhat centered, and floating design of my picture plane shares the compositional qualities of O’keeffe’s work. My macro photos of details in the landscape are reminiscent of the details of macro flower abstractions in O’keeffe’s paintings.

Figure 4. Arthur Dove, Golden Sunlight, Oil on Canvas, 14 X 10 inches, 1937

Figure 5. Georgia O’keeffe, The Lawrence Tree, Oil on Canvas, 31 X 40 inches, 1929
Yann Arthus-Bertrand, Ansel Adams, and Will Landon inform my photography. Landon’s panoramas of Glacier Park have inspired me to take 360-degree panoramas on every peak and exceptional viewpoint in Glacier that I have visited. Many photos in my paintings are small sections of such panoramas. My panorama sections of grand landscape vistas are full-color echoes of Adams’ most famous work. Viewing Arthus-Bertrand’s traveling exhibition “Earth From Above” in London was simultaneously uplifting and devastating. The exhibition was a selection from three hundred and sixty-five photos taken around the world. Environmentally focused information, such as inequalities of human living standards, was typed as a subheading for each magnificent photo. His environmental focus and his use of a single photo as a unit of measurement for one day parallel the structure and meaning of my thesis work. The patterns found in Arthus-Bertrand’s bird’s-eye-view of natural landscape are similar to texture and color found in my beeswax paintings.

Figure 6. Yann Arthus-Bertrand, Queensland Australia
Process

All of my paintings are on wood board mounted onto a stained pine box frame. Dead trees are physically the base of all paintings in the Thesis Exhibition. Most paintings have a preliminary collage layer of a section of a photocopied topographic map and printout of a digital picture. Collage elements are adhered to the board with wheat wallpaper paste. A thin layer of acrylic paint defines a general composition of tree, oval, and background. East side paintings start with cool colors (green, blue, purple) while west side paintings start
with warm colors (yellow, orange, red). After the paint has dried the entire painting is coated with Chief Mountain Beeswax obtained on the east side of Glacier Park. The beeswax is softened by a natural citrus solvent for about one week until it becomes the correct buttery consistency. The citrus odor is reminiscent of the sub-alpine fir while the beeswax smells like dirt and pollen. The layer of beeswax hardens for up to one week before multiple layers of oil paint are applied to complete the painting. The color selection begins by choosing opposites: the east side paintings initially are covered with warm oil colors while west side paintings are covered with cool oil colors. This method quickly captures the essence of opposites: bright warmth of the east side and the cool dark of the west side. Often the top half of the tree is the same color as the background in the bottom of the painting while the bottom half of the tree is the same color as the background in the top half of the painting. In the final stages of painting, color selection becomes more intuitive: color application is influenced by emotion rather than rationalization.

Particular areas of my paintings are rubbed with a cloth to reveal earlier layers. Sometimes the rubbing is aided by citrus solvent, leaving patches of paint reminiscent of organic decay. Using a pin to scratch continuations of contour lines and/or forms echoed out of the photo is sometimes a finishing touch. A high-gloss resin is also used sparingly on select paintings to accentuate the oval shape or other important forms within the painting. A special glaze of stand oil, cobalt drier, and paint is used in most paintings for the provocative ‘shriveled’ surface it produces. The texture of this surface is reminiscent of both the natural and the unnatural: the texture resembles satellite photos of Earth’s surface and lichen, but also resembles toxic chemical spills and the drying-up of a once healthy life.
Figure 9. Three major stages illustrating the process of creating each Thesis painting.
**Thesis Work**

My thesis work is about nature’s ability to give meaning to life. My Thesis Exhibition is a celebration of and a fear for the landscape that is my home.

In white American history, images of landscape, particularly western landscape, are symbolic of rugged individualism. Although I am an individual I am not alone when surrounded by nature. The delicate balance of the life cycle is saturated with paradox. After years of exploring landscape I have found communion with its existence. Sense of place has become essential to my well-being after five years of living in Glacier National Park. Along the continental divide the combination of sun and wind, rain and snow, sedges and lilies, bears and bighorns is ever-changing. Each day of walking in the wilderness is unique, yet each day leads me to a common understanding.

I live and work near the shore of Lake McDonald at the west entrance of the park. When I am unable to spend my time in Glacier, I paint about my experience there. I paint symbolically because representational landscape is not an effective way for me to convey my experience exploring *in* the landscape. Each painting is a combination of acrylic, oil, and beeswax, integrating both external and internal elements: memory of the physical landscape and memory of personal emotional response to interacting with the landscape.

Since all of my thesis work was done in Missoula, it reflects more of my inner consciousness rather than my external experience of the land in Glacier. Both the internal and external are necessary components of my work, but since most of the work was done in absence of Glacier, the internal aspect dominates. The internal is more abstract and universal, making the work more powerful to a wider audience; yet the work cannot exist without Glacier as a springboard for departure. Glacier is where I experience nature. Everyone has their own Glacier, whether it be a city park or simply a potted plant in an
apartment. The internal experience of exploring nature for meaning is the universal abstraction found in all of my paintings.

Layers of symbolism are used to convey the universal internal nature experience in my work. There are four general sizes of paintings (ten, eight, six and four inch width) which make the group versatile for exhibiting in many venues, as the paintings may be assembled like building blocks. The paintings all nest into each other, making the physical structure compact and easily transportable—lending a level of function to the form. The number four is indicative of the four directions (north, south, east, west) and the four elements (earth, fire, water, air).

Each individual painting represents the experience of a single day composed of factors that will never be repeated. Paintings in the Thesis Exhibition are displayed on either side of a doorway in the Gallery. This doorway is symbolic of the continental divide. All exploration on the west side of the continental divide is displayed on the wall west of the doorway while all exploration on the east side of the continental divide is displayed on the wall east of the doorway. East side painting’s frames are stained a light red because of the more open and exposed landscape found on the east side of the divide. West side painting’s frames are stained a dark brown because of the more closed and dense landscape found on the west side.

The same pattern is used to display the paintings on the west and east wall. The pattern is most simply described as a cross. The horizontal and vertical components of the cross represent a fusion of opposites. The horizontal is a visual manifestation of separation while the vertical is a visual manifestation of union.

All paintings are vertically oriented to accentuate the stretch to connect earth and sky. The horizontal component contains paintings displayed in a mirrored tapering line.
This traditional display references vanishing points of the horizon line which separates earth from sky. The vertical component contains paintings stacked on top of each other to form a literal connection from ground to ceiling. This column of paintings is wide at the base and top and slim in the middle where it bisects the horizontal line. Visually, the column echoes the shape of the tree in each painting.

Each painting contains a tree symbolic of nature. The tree is uprooted and may be viewed as upside-down or right-side-up. I see the tree as upside-down: alive but in distress arising from a general lack of human interest in the tree. Many paintings begin with a base of a topographic map of the area explored and contain a small photograph of something seen that day. I often use topographic maps to aid in navigating through Glacier’s wilderness. I often take pictures during exploration to remember what I encountered. Documentation is important because Glacier’s landscape is changing as global warming progresses. The lines in the map are echoed by the growth rings exposed on the frame. The knots embedded in the growth rings on the frames also reference the egg shape embedded in the tree form that is central to every painting. The egg shape on the tree is usually a photograph, but sometimes the egg shape encircles a specific location of importance on the topographic map. This functions to stress the presence of a map as the base of the painting to encourage the viewer to delve further into the layers. The egg shape of the photograph is symbolic of many concepts that fit my purpose, but the original inspiration for shape and placement comes from seeing faded oval photograph portraits of people on their gravestones.

In each painting I simultaneously celebrate and mourn for this place I am connected to. My Thesis Exhibition is simultaneously a preemptive funeral and a joyous ceremony in honor of the landscape that is my home. My work is symbolic of my reconnection with
nature and therefore my origin. I believe many people in Montana have a similar experience of reconnection. The best possible outcome of my thesis show is to encourage people to fully enjoy the present moment in the landscape with which they are connected. My paintings may be viewed individually but their greatest strength is in their value as a collective presence.

Figure 10. “West side” wall of Thesis Exhibition
Figure 11. “East side” wall of Thesis Exhibition
Figure 12. Mt Brown, 21 X 10 in.

Figure 13. Upper Kintla, 22 X 10 in.
Figure 14. Floral Park, 22 X 10 in.

Figure 15. Mt. Grinnell, 21 X 10 in.
Figure 16. To Francis, 23 X 10 in.  
Figure 17. To Brown, 23 X 10 in.
Figure 18. Ahern Pass, 22 X 10 in.

Figure 19. Avalanche, 22 X 10 in.
Figure 20. Ellen Wilson, 20 X 8 in.

Figure 21. Beaver Woman, 19 X 8 in.
Figure 22. Rogers Meadow, 19 X 8 in.

Figure 23. From Oberlin, 20 X 8 in.
Figure 24. Belton Hills, 18 X 8 in.

Figure 25. Arrow, 18 X 8 in.
Figure 26. Snyder, 15 X 6 in.

Figure 27. Apgar, 14 X 6 in.

Figure 28. Akokala, 14 X 6 in.

Figure 29. John’s, 10 X 4 in.

Figure 30. Quartz, 10 X 4 in.
Figure 31. Huckleberry, 17 X 6 in.

Figure 32. Numa, 17 X 6 in.

Figure 33. Harrison, 16 X 6 in.

Figure 34. Adair, 12 X 4 in.

Figure 35. To Bowman, 12 X 4 in.
Figure 36. Upper Nyack, 15 X 6 in.

Figure 37. Highline, 16 X 6 in.

Figure 38. Hidden Meadow, 13 X 4 in.

Figure 39. Lincoln, 13 X 4 in.
Figure 40. Past Poia, 22 X 10 in.

Figure 41. Firebrand, 21 X 10 in.
Figure 42. Siyeh to Wynn, 23 X 10 in.  
Figure 43. Rising Wolf, 23 X 10 in.
Figure 44. Scenic Point, 22 X 10 in.  

Figure 45. Painted Tepee, 22 X 10 in.
Figure 46. Napi to Otokomi, 21 X 10 in.

Figure 47. Through the Tunnel, 21 X 10 in.
Figure 48. From Trapper, 22 X 10 in.

Figure 49. Above Nahsukin, 19 X 8 in.
Figure 50. Swiftcurrent Lookout, 20 X 8 in.

Figure 51. Grinnell Glacier, 20 X 8 in.
Figure 52. Medicine Grizzly, 20 X 8 in.

Figure 53. St Mary South Shore, 20 X 8 in.
Figure 54. Whitecalf to Kupunkamint, 19 X 8 in.

Figure 55. Cosley, 20 X 8 in.
Figure 56. Heavy Runner, 18 X 8 in.

Figure 57. Hidden Lake, 18 X 8 in.
Figure 58. Slide Lake, 20 X 8 inches.

Figure 59. Below Summit, 19 X 8 in.

Figure 60. Slide Lake Detail.
Figure 61. Near Natahki, 17 X 6 in.

Figure 62. Helen, 16 X 6 in.

Figure 63. Siyeh Pass, 16 X 6 in.

Figure 64. Near Natahki Detail.
Figure 65. Stoney, 16 X 6 in.

Figure 66. Kootenia, 17 X 6 in.

Figure 67. St. Mary North Shore, 15 X 6 in.

Figure 68. Grinnell Lake, 10 X 4 in.

Figure 69. Piegan Pass, 10 X 4 in.
Figure 70. Triple Divide, 17 X 6 in.

Figure 71. Matahpi, 16 X 6 in.

Figure 72. Never Laughs, 15 X 6 in.

Figure 73. Cracker, 10 X 4 in.

Figure 74. Dawson-Pitamaken, 10 X 4 in.
Figure 75. No Name, 12 X 4 in.

Figure 76. Upper Two Med, 12 X 4 in.

Figure 77. Iceberg, 13 X 4 in.

Figure 78. Piegan Mt., 11 X 4 in.

Figure 79. Lee Ridge, 11 X 4 in.
Figure 80. Falling Leaf, 13 X 4 in.  
Figure 81. Shangrila, 13 X 4 in.  
Figure 82. Thesis Exhibition, Gallery of Visual Arts, The University of Montana
Summary

I live in Montana because its land is as pristine as it gets in the lower forty-eight. Unfortunately, the best of this ‘last best place’ will be the first to go. According to U.S. Global Change researchers, “alpine meadows in the Rocky Mountains are likely to disappear entirely in some areas.”¹ Some forests across the United States are expected to begin dying due to the change in climate and their inability to adapt or physically relocate fast enough. Some Americans are not likely to notice since “the outside world has become an abstraction filtered through television, just as weather is an abstraction filtered through air conditioning.”²

Some environmentalists argue that nature has already ended because of human induced alteration of climate. I’m no activist, but I do see the positive side of taking on such a negative view. My thesis work has taken the same stance. People often do not appreciate or notice the value of something until it is gone. It is necessary to acknowledge the death of nature to make its renewal possible: a terribly lovely paradox of separation and union.

¹ Climate Change Impacts on the United States, p. 9.  
² Putman, p.224.
Bibliography


