

Rock Paper Charcoal

By Sara-Jeanne Bourget

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Being here

Before moving to British-Columbia to pursue my studies in the Masters program in Fine Arts at Emily Carr University, I devoted my artistic practice to depicting the landscape. It is only through the east to west move that I was faced with my great ignorance of land politics, of the various entangled histories and issues relating to geographies and of the continual colonial romanticization of the land and nature, which also crept into the words I was using. I have been blindly following western conventions of picturing landscapes which engage a history inherent to appropriations of the land. I have been ignorant of the political ramifications of my own identity, as a white woman, descendant of French colonizers. Today, being situated on these lands, I must acknowledge my status as an uninvited guest on the unceded traditional territories of the Coast Salish peoples, specifically the Musqueam, Squamish and Tseil waututh nations. Yet, repeating this statement is not enough. In this paper, I will avoid using the term “landscape” because of its colonial history. I choose to refer to what would be understood as “landscapes” as “sites”. The word seems more neutral, yet it has evocative qualities. Site sounds like sight, which is the primary sense that guide my explorations. Moreover, recognizing the environment I extract from by opening myself to learn from it is an in-sight/site-ful method and a grounding strategy. In this document, descriptions may appear analytical—this is merely to counteract a too easy romanticization of my artistic practice.

Being here has been empowering; it has made me aware of my identity, both as an artist and as a French-Canadian woman. I am thankful to be continually introduced to traditions and histories, to ways of knowing and craftsmanship, to people and communities that incessantly shape my artistic practice and everyday life.

Context

I come from a rural town in the province of Québec. The formerly tiny town once known as Pintendre (now as Lévis) is the site where I grew up, alongside my four siblings in a house still owned by my parents. To this day, behind our home is a forest that survived residential expansion. Most of my childhood was spent in it, mixing a suburban life with the wonders of nature. This tiny forest is one of the sites where I began learning my elementary skills in terms of subsistence outside of the domestic setups. To this day, I find pride in building a fire to provide for my needs. It empowered me as a young girl and left me with a proneness to spend time in the natural world.



(Fig. 1) Making Charcoal at Levette lake

Using the creative force of a fire quickly became of interest during my undergraduate studies. I started producing material from found elements in nature when I was camping or spending time outside. I naturally started researching charcoal and exploring its material possibilities. This simple process of fabrication has become a foundational aspect of my practice.

Preface.....

My drawing practice raises the larger theme of representation in image-making. I understand representation as a spectrum, its form fluctuating between infinite blur and complete clarity. Representation is intrinsic to drawing, and vice versa, since both give meaning to the world that surrounds us through pictorial form. This interest in the possibilities of drawing to make meaning through and with representation have raised important questions in my practice: How does a deeper understanding of a material, charcoal for instance, from its fabrication to its use, affect the production of representations in image making? And, how is drawing a gateway to research, conceding that an iterative process in image-making is its prime method?

My inquiry begins with accepting that a deep-seated awareness of materials is rooted in the intimate knowledge of their provenance, production and uses. From that fact, I question if representation in image-making exists depending on how extensive is the knowledge of materials used for its formation. A greater material sensitivity alongside a deep understanding of the parts that compose an activity, drawing for instance, are the foundational elements needed to create representations. Exploring the potential of charcoal as material, medium, mark and subject as well as pushing the boundaries of drawing as a reactive method are the basis for the creation of representation. It is important to note that the word “representation” is repetitively use throughout this text to speak to all form of process-based creation of images.

The dissection of my material-making practice (making charcoal) and the many iterations of drawings (activities) that unfolds in the studio describe the methods that are allies in my research based practice. The residual trace of one process is the starting point of another. First and foremost, drawing is the thread that weaves together all the parts. I am using specific terms to speak about it, which have evolved to be significant to me, such as “representation”, “depiction” and “image-making”. Representation is everywhere, existing as a result of image-making. It may take shape through abstract or realistic images. However, when it holds realistic qualities, depiction is then used to describe the image or process of image-creation. These terms will be defined again alongside examples of my work. In brief, this document acts as a witness testimony of my partnership with drawing over the years, with specific emphasis on my recent practice.

Drawing

The central activity taking place in my studio is drawing. My walls are covered with large sheets of paper where marks are made with the intention of creating images. Philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy devoted a book, *The Pleasure in Drawing*, to unravel the felt qualities of drawing. “Due to its nature, no doubt, drawing is represented, experienced, and experimented with a compulsion, like the effect of an irresistible impetus.” (Nancy 15) Opposed to a formal descriptive investigation of the discipline, Nancy explores the emotional and perhaps visceral content of drawing. In accordance with this way of investigating a subject, it is my love of drawing and my comfort with it that has pushed me to explore its manifold possibilities.

Drawing is a complex activity to decipher since it has an ambiguous status. It is historically loaded, universally understood as the first gesture to convey ideas. Drawing is ubiquitous, frequently used as a pedagogical tool leading to the mastering of other mediums such as painting or sculpture. Drawing is too often only perceived as a way to harmonize the eye and the hand. Yet, as artist-writer Derek Horton has observed in his introduction to *Beside the Lines of Contemporary Art - Drawing Ambiguity*:

drawing exists at an interface: the interface of an idea and its representation; of the hand and the trace of its action; of the image and its viewer. This interface is a place with its own autonomy, its own ability to generate new results and consequences, essentially an area in which choices are made, not a simple and transparent site, but a fertile nexus, ripe with ambiguities. (Horton 3)

Understanding drawing as an interface means welcoming its various manifestations. One of them takes form through a material-making practice, which encompasses the handmade fabrication of charcoal in the natural sites I visit¹. When charcoal is brought into the studio, a series of processes is initiated. Depictions, which I understand as pictorial translations of a photograph, become ways to re-experience a site through the performativity of drawing. I use the term “depiction” to describe the attempt to represent a visually accessible physical reality, often brought in the studio as a photograph I took of a site I experienced. The directness and performativity of drawing, which for me is also an act of depicting, are explored through my physical engagement with drawing as well as the subjects I am dealing with.

¹ This activity will be described in the section “material-making practice”



(Fig. 2) Cabin in Chilliwack BC – Making a fire – Preparing the sticks for carbonization



(Fig. 3) *The Mad Gardener Planted a Forest of Dust* / 2018 / red alder charcoal on Fabriano paper

In February 2018, I stayed 4 days in a very rustic shack in Chilliwack, BC. (Fig. 2) This extended visit on this specific site was dedicated to making charcoal as well as documenting the natural environment. The drawing series (Fig. 3), titled *The Mad Gardener Planted a Forest of Dust*, reveals forest-like compositions. Even if I was drawing from photographic sources, I was re-living my experience of the site where the charcoal was made. Impenetrable spaces in nature, where our physical bodies are denied access due to a lush wall of vegetation, intertwined branches and rock walls, hold my interest. As a result, this series of drawing is an attempt to deny landscape conventions: usually, the viewers are given an entrance point in a space supported by the far away horizon line. In my drawings, marks are applied as to create the illusion of impenetrability (Fig. 4).

How one pictures nature stems from human exceptionalism², which reinforces the romanticization of experiences of nature. As environmental historian William Cronon has noted, the concept of wilderness is a human creation. "(...) We too easily imagine that what we behold is Nature when in fact we see the reflection of our own unexamined longings and desires." (Cronon 1). My work plays with our inability to really see or understand nature outside of these hopes and desires by emphasizing its impenetrability. Viewers are denied access to the pictorial space of my drawing, immobilised in a state of observation. Through the process of drawing, I learn more about my subject. I thought I had experienced natural sites while in fact, I too was restrained by my lack of knowledge of the tree species and by my own body, which isn't very agile in the forest. Consequently, my body is stopped by the wall on which I draw the compositions, replicating a prior experience of nature. However,

² Human exceptionalism can be understood as an Anthropocentric vision of the world, which places human at the center of all experiences and understanding of the universe.

leaving traces of my hands, creating textures and elements resembling natural features with my fingers are ways to connect myself with the representations of the site (Fig. 5).



(Fig. 4) *The Mad Gardener Planted a Forest of Dust* / 2018 / red alder charcoal on fabriano paper
59" X 59"



(Fig. 5) *The Mad Gardener Planted a Forest of Dust / 2018*
red alder charcoal on Fabriano paper / detail

In Chilliwack, charcoal was made using the already fallen branches of red alder trees. I was able to identify the tree species since I carried with me *Plants of Coastal British Columbia*, a book that records most trees and plants alongside their descriptions and various uses over time. The red alder tree bark was used by indigenous people to make red and orange dye. Knowing this fact supports my observation that red alder tree charcoal has a particular pigmentation. Unlike the regular grey, red alder charcoal is warm, varying from umber browns, to darker tones of brown and greys and taupe browns. (Fig. 5) The specificity of the charcoal further connects the drawings with the site from which they are inspired.

Material-Making Practice

To fabricate my charcoal, I visit a site where a fire can be made. The length of stay varies around two to three days since making charcoal is durational as well as experiential. As soon as the perimeter is assessed, the extracting begins. It is difficult to identify every type of tree I harvest from since I prefer already fallen dead and dry branches. Nevertheless, this lack of knowledge is significant—it makes me reflect on how we³ move through space without knowing what surrounds us. Perhaps it is due to a lack of curiosity or a loss of necessity. When it is impossible to refer to specific tree species, the resulting charcoal is later labeled with its geographical provenance, as well as its physical attributes. Beforehand, each branch is de-barked, simply by using a Swiss knife. This repetitive process is achieved while the campfire is stoked. The naked sticks are then tightly piled in a metal box, which is put into the fire. A big rock is rested on the lid to prevent flames from creeping into the box. Carbonization occurs with the absence of oxygen; it takes approximately an hour, depending on the size of the sticks in the box. Relying on past experience and intuition, I just kick the box out of the campfire when I feel it is ready. I quickly empty its contents and bury it under sand, snow, soil, or whatever can act as a shield from the inevitable contact with oxygen. Doing so stabilizes the sticks into their new form: charcoal. This entire process does not follow scientific method but rather conforms to a set of acquired methods that are dependent on my experiential knowledge. The resulting charcoal is inconsistent, unequal, and sometimes fragile or too hard. Yet, it is rich, shiny, colourful, soft, perfumed and its various shapes are what fascinate me the most. The inner fibrous

³ The use of “we” implies a generalization. “We” refers to industrialised people, which rely on modes of production that are powered by capitalism. I will use “we” throughout this document, but a “we” that has lost its knowledge of how things are made, of natural processes, of matter’s intense specificity outside of its common domestic uses.

quality of the diverse types of wood submitted to intense pressure activated by heat reacts in various ways: twisting, straightening, curling...



(Fig. 6) Charcoal sticks in my studio



(Fig. 7) Four types of charcoal. Left to right respectively are:

- A charcoal stick, which was originally drift wood found and carbonized on the shore of Lillooet lake near Pemberton. The texture is soft, due to the porous nature of drift wood. Its colour is light grey, very shiny.

- A charcoal stick made of arbutus tree, which grew and was carbonized on Salt Spring Island. The texture is very hard. Its colour very dark, almost black, sometimes with shades of dark amber.

- A charcoal stick made of yellow cedar branches found and carbonized in Chilliwack. Yellow cedar is a fibrous wood, very flexible when the tree is alive. Yet, the texture of its charcoal form is hard, similar to graphite; same for its colour.

- A charcoal stick made of vine, which grew and was carbonized on Salt Spring Island. The vine charcoal retains its former attributes; it is twisted. It's texture is medium-hard and colour is regular grey.

As writer Rachel Jones describes in her contribution to the book *On Not Knowing – How Artists Think*:

Wonder is the passion that can accompany not knowing, providing we recognise that the object we encounter is not the same as what we already do know. Wonder arises before we know enough to make utilitarian calculation about whether an object might be pleasing or useful to us (or not). (Jones 19)

Charcoal retains this ever surprising effect—the process invites the unexpected. As much as it could be argued that wonder is found in most artistic practices, it is important to embrace its manifestations, whether it be a piece of charcoal that has dark brown tones in it or a crumbled piece of paper. The little, unexpected outgrowths of my use of charcoal speaks to a curiosity and engagement with the natural world deepened through a material practice.

I keep going back to an understanding of the Anthropocene⁴ in my writing for many reasons, but mostly because I can't avoid its theoretical weight and alarming manifestations. In comparison, my material-making practice seems so slight, specific and self-engaged. However, it is a way to speak to an environmental crisis, restructuring the world around us, through a specific, ever growing inspection of materials and processes,

⁴ A commonly shared view on the Anthropocene is: "The recognition of the concept of a recent human-dominated age that is materially different from its predecessors, (...) which signifies the growing influence of human thought and action in shaping its own future and the planetary environment." (Malhi 1) Ecosystem scientist Yadvinder Malhi approaches it as a concept emerging from the intersection of a plurality of disciplines, yet falling under systems of nominations/conventions of geology. His text is both a scientific/historical examination as well as a critical review of the concept of the Anthropocene. In regards to critical investigations of the term, or re-organizing the concepts at its core, Donna Haraway asks: "How can we think in times of urgencies *without* the self-indulgent and self-fulfilling myths of apocalypse, when every fibre of our being is interlaced, even complicit, in the webs of processes that must somehow be engaged and repatterned? (Haraway 35) In her writings, she advocates for ways to re-think the fixity of a term that only describes the climate crisis we are in. Haraway urges us to live within the debris of a world in metamorphosis. I will use the term Anthropocene in my writing, keeping in mind that it is not a neutral term, but that it exists within a web of definitions and should always be the source of critical analysis.

and a recognition of the ethics of making. Charcoal, an earthly medium, is interconnected beyond the tree it is made from and the drawing it is part of; it connects to a multitude of histories, communities, (natural) processes and practices across borders.

As writer Donna Haraway writes in her book *Staying with the Trouble*: “To think-with is to stay with the naturalcultural multispecies trouble on earth” (Haraway 40). Her intent is to highlight the multitude of stories that composes a phenomenon and how these interact in a plethora of ways. She advocates for “geostories” as opposed to human-centered histories since they are written by the critters of the Earth, not by the subduing forces that constitutes systems of powers. For Haraway, “geostories” give space to the overlooked and will change our understanding of problems and concerns that may seem insurmountable. The philosopher Timothy Morton has similar concerns that he expresses in his essay “Subsistence”: “whole and parts are just as real as one another. It is simply that the whole is less than the sum of its parts.” (Morton 4) Morton is simply arguing for a re-imagined conceptualization of holism, a token description of eco-systems on earth. By adopting Morton and Haraway’s logics, it becomes perhaps easier to deal with monstrous, impalpable, intangible concepts and problematics by paying attention to what may seem invisible at first glance.

To zoom back on my artistic practice and contextualize what has been stated above, what making charcoal allows is an investigation into the multivalent nature of the material itself. The point is to unveil the material possibilities that a long-standing relationship with charcoal permits. I approach materiality through an ecological thinking that respects the

fluidity of matter, welcoming its limitations and connections. I understand the Anthropocene as a critical disposition of the state of the world we live in; I speak to it through a material practice. It helps to build an ever-growing knowledge of the subtle networks and relationships that form my world, and the world I share with so many other species and communities of beings.



(Fig. 8) A display of handmade charcoal sticks in my studio.

I use the display presented in (Fig. 8) as a charcoal palette; an organization of the materials I make by texture, colour and origin. The aesthetic of knolling⁵ refers to a method of organization that highlights every singular object while allowing a view of the ensemble. It gives agency to the “parts” of the “whole”. Knolling best describes my attempt to develop

⁵ A design student who came across the display of handmade charcoal in my studio (Fig.8) introduced me to this word, which is part of the lexicon of the design world.

my relationship with each piece of charcoal and their specific material characteristics. This orderly display allows for the quick selection of the pieces required for specific textures or darkness in my drawings. Strangely, it also functions as a composition, a drawing per se. Every stick is a mark, which eventually is erased and replaced.

Indeed, my charcoal is removed from the industrial manufacturing procedures due to its handmade fabrication. Yet, the crafted quality of the charcoal that results in imperfections and random features interrogates the production line, which places material in this ambiguous state of infinite reproduction of identical objects. Capitalistic streams of production affect our relationships with materials, removing us from their formations. Most artists lack the knowledge required to produce their own materials. Not knowing your materials, how they are made and their compositions, makes it harder to recognize the consequences of the environmental ramifications of their productions and ecological footprints through time. Developing a set of relationships outside of the regular flow of production of materials is critical. It forces a familiarization with practices and histories that are typically overpowered by the manufacturing industry.

Making charcoal is a way to address its origin and the limits of its use since I am then confronted to consider the labour it takes to fabricate it and how accessible are the resources and the sites where it can be made. I share this view with Lucy Lippard, art critic, activist, feminist, curator as well as writer. In her book *Undermining: A Wild Ride Through Land Use, Politics, and Arts in the Changing West*, Lippard addresses the capitalistic modes of production that power our relationships to places and things. She writes: “Today living off

the grid is a political statement as well as a metaphor. Every rejection of the national, corporate, electric grid is a declaration of independence from capitalism.” (Lippard 16)

Producing “off the grid” means contemplating limitations, reducing the distance between a maker and her medium. In my own practice, I am examining the capitalistic norm through my engagement with charcoal. By avoiding industrial manufacturing and producing my own medium, consumption and consequences it may have are regulated.



(Fig. 9) *Topography of the many infinitesimals* / 2018 / charcoal sticks on panel / 24"X24"

Additionally, the hand made charcoal is also an elaboration on materiality. In her essay “The Force of Things: Steps toward an Ecology of Matter”, political theorist and philosopher Jane Bennett pushes the definition of materiality by recognizing “the agential power of natural and artifactual things” within “the dense web of the connections with each other and with human bodies” (Bennett 349) . What she calls “Thing Power” acknowledges the exchanges and sets of relationships existing in the general encounters between matter/things and human/non-human bodies. This perspective acts as a comprehensive tool to examine charcoal as more than a medium. In *Topography of the many infinitesimals* (Fig. 9), charcoal pieces are tightly glued together on a panel until they become a new surface. This moment reveals itself as the unification of formerly separate parts: the surface, the medium and the drawing (understood as the performative act as well as the representation). They are now equal players, existing as a whole. “Thing-power is this: a material body always resides within some assemblage or other, and its thing-power is a function of that grouping.” (Bennett 354) Resulting from this assemblage is a new representation, one that re-qualifies charcoal as a mark as well as a surface and medium.

Bits of charcoal are continually falling on the floor, they are a drawing’s sedimentation. A charcoal stick is used until it either crumbles on its own or simply becomes too short for my fingers to hold. Over the past several months, I have been collecting these pieces. Their formal impracticality poses a challenge, yet it is resolved through their repurposing. As opposed to making marks, the charcoal bits become the strokes of a topographic image. Each one is carefully chosen to embrace the silhouette of the charcoal previously put in place. It becomes a charcoal mosaic, an assemblage, a collage, or a sculptural drawing.

Topography of the many infinitesimals (Fig. 9) stands as an almost monochromatic sculptural drawing; an ode to fallen charcoal. It embodies my deep desire to show the handmade charcoal, to present its unique qualities. Ultimately, the collage points to a long term relationship between maker and medium, from the handmade fabrication and collection over time of charcoal sticks, to the careful and final lengthy assemblage.

Geological time / natural processes.....

Charcoal provides a sense of temporality. From its handmade fabrication to its state of dust on a surface, charcoal resists archival properties through its inevitable decay. A natural process is used as a base for creation, inviting the unknown into the equation. Carbonization occurs respecting distinct timelines. Natural carbonization, like fossil formation for instance, goes beyond any human timelines. Only the thinnest layer of carbon, the residual organic matter left from a once lively body, resists decay. In contrast, I manipulate this natural process of carbonization through the little control I have over fire (heat and pressure), expediting the conversion of wood into charcoal in less time. Thereafter, I crush this newly form material into fragments while drawing. The residue that forms an image is dust on a surface that recalls fossilisation; a vestige, which stands as a representation of an erstwhile event (a visit of a site or the act of drawing).

Similarly, research-based artist Ilana Halperin's practice is deeply intertwined with natural processes that depend on time at a scale rarely exploited by artists. In *We Form Geology*

(2012-13)⁶, she left a design carved out of wood using laser cut technologies in calcifying water where limestone slowly grew. The varied iterations of her alliance with natural processes speak of her engagement with materiality as well as scientific methods such as her careful studies of the chemical attributes of the environments in which she leaves her objects. Halperin situates drawing (a growth of limestone on a surface is a drawing) as a tool to measure the unperceivable (time). Materiality is the quantifiable element she relies on to situate the work within realms of space and time.

Processes and engagements with materiality, elaborated on above, depend on the fluid notion of time. Time in terms of geological measurements or time in terms of instantaneous consumption. The former is intangible and dependant on tools to be made clearer. As an example, we can theorize the age of the Earth from the studies of rock formations. The latter, speaks to capitalistic ways of transforming materiality, ignoring temporalities inherent to matter, for a quick consumption or re-configuration. Obvious examples are petrol and coal, which we consumed at an accelerated rate knowing that they take millions of years to form. In *The Geology of Media*, new media theorist Jussi Parikka states: “geology is an excavation into earth and its secrets that affords a view not only to the now-moment that unfolds into a future potential of exploitation but also to the past buried under our feet. Depth becomes time.” (Parikka 13) Layers of time, stacked as compressed materiality (stratigraphy) become visible through the technological advancement of our media culture and pursuit of knowledge in geological studies. Etched in rocks are temporalities and stories that we are only beginning to read.

⁶ An Image of *We form Geology* can be found at <https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/ilana-halperin-interview-geological-phenomena-volcanoes-drawing-photography-gallstones>.



(Fig.10) *Dust Standing over its Eventual Sediments*
2018 / charcoal on Fabriano paper / 60" x 95"

My interest with geology and stratigraphy have escalated lately, forming a space for metaphorical interpretations as well as physical explorations. It is another way to study the concept of impenetrability, when our bodies are literally stopped by natural formations (previously addressed in my drawings (Fig. 3-4-5)). Slow metamorphoses, erosion and geological growth are impossible to capture; our only option being a careful, scientific study of the mineral compositions... or drawing. Through my physical engagement with drawing, through gestures and an accumulation of marks, I am attempting to portray the instability of what seems like the most stable matter on earth. It is a way to acknowledge an invisible impermanence, which is dependant on a concept of time that we cannot fully understand.

After visiting Utah in the summer 2018, I came back with an extensive amount of photographic documentation of geological formations. Facing these rocky walls, the existence of which implies timelines beyond the imaginable, shifted my experience of that landscape from horizontal to vertical, asking me to consider my body. This corporeal realization parallels my experience in the studio where I draw impenetrable compositions, facing the wall on which the paper is hung vertically. I climb up and down a ladder to cover the surface with marks. As French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty states:

We also find that spatial forms or distances are not so much relations between different points in objective space as they are relations between these points and a central perspective – our body. (Merleau-Ponty 370)

This statement embodies the definition of phenomenology, a philosophical theory that places the body and its senses/one's bodily experience at the center of consciousness. I draw on Merleau-Ponty's words with the intention to connect distanced events into one layered experience. These events, happening in distinctive spaces at different times follow a

similar (vertical) logic. The bodily experience of the impenetrable rock walls in Utah is not unlike the performative act of drawing, nor is the experience of the viewer, immobilised in front of a drawing on display. *Dust Standing over its Eventual Sediments* (Fig. 10) is the re-enactment of multiple sensorial events. Yet, it is also the material depiction of fragile, yet durable sandstone monuments that have been subjected to erosion for millennia. I saw the rock monuments, sitting in their own sediments, which have slowly accumulated at their foot. In my studio, the opposite occurs. I manipulate dust, a manifest form of charcoal, to draw the dark cracks and fissures; the armature of the massive geological body. Artist Robert Smithson powerfully compares earthly features to our human attributes in his essay “A sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects”. “The entire body is pulled into the cerebral sediment, where particles and fragments make themselves known as solid consciousness.” (Smithson 1).

Dust Standing over its Eventual Sediments (Fig. 10) is an elaboration into the physical, vertical and impenetrable experiences of a site and/or the wall of my studio and/or the experience of the viewer. Yet, it is also a depiction of a physical reality. The realistic aspect of the drawing is due to the charcoal’s ability to resemble the rock. Some marks were applied with the intention of creating a sense of roughness and weight. Other marks are left open, signalling the performativity of a gesture and pointing to an eventual continuation of the composition. The drawing seems unfinished since the top and bottom of the composition are left un-rendered. This tension between finished or unfinished, between controlled or loose mark is generative: the depiction holds both the performative aspect of drawing as well as the photographic details of the site on which it is based.

Depictions

As mentioned previously, representation describes all forms of process-based images, which also includes depictions. Yet, I am depicting when I am drawing from a visual source which are often a photograph and an object/form I can see and hold. In her essay “See for yourself: Drawing (Out) the interior of vision”, research-based drawing artist and writer Lynn Imperatore deconstructs the act of drawing from a visual source:

We suspend cognition of the known, take the sensory data of vision apart and put it back together, but differently, reimagined and reinvented. We reach through the layers of seeing; beyond culturally acquired assumptions of representation, beyond habits and expectations that typically direct how we look upon the world (Imperatore 4)

Imperatore suggests that even the attentive reproduction of pictorial data, passing from the eye to the hand to an exterior surface, holds a unique quality that is dependent on the artist’s subjectivity. Vija Celmin is an artist whose work is fully dedicated to the depiction of physical worlds, mostly inspired by photographic images that emerge from either science, historical archives or personal documentation. She depicts textures, landscapes, objects with an incredible precision. Her drawn depictions are so close to reality that it fools the eye for a moment. Yet, it is through a longer interaction with the artwork that the deeply profound nature of her hyper precise drawings is unveiled. Celmins, speaking about her work, argues:

When you’re further away you think ‘Oh, yes, this is an image and it’s a sky image.’ And then you come up very close and it becomes just dust... charcoal that has light in it, light and charcoal, light and the

absence of it. When a viewer approaches the drawing, the whole thing is revealed. (Celmins)⁷

As a drawer who uses charcoal, I recognize the material's poetic invitations; charcoal is dust, applied on a surface as to allow starlight to represent our idea of the universe. Vija Celmins's statement brings me back to the intrinsic values found in the act of depicting the world with charcoal. Handmade charcoal further manipulates the quality of these depictions. An image I draw is dependent on a mastering of the medium, which is achieved through a deeper understanding of the fundamental features of charcoal.



(Fig. 11) collage



(Fig. 12) Odds and Ends/ 2019 / charcoal on Stonehenge / 30X30"

⁷ January 1st 2019, I visited the MoMA in San Francisco where Vija Celmins' work was exhibited. *Vija Celmins – To Fix The Image in Memory* (Dec 15t 2018 –March 31 2019) consist of five decades of artworks that are presented alongside written descriptions and the artist's own words. I borrowed this quote from Vija celmins from a wall text in the museum.

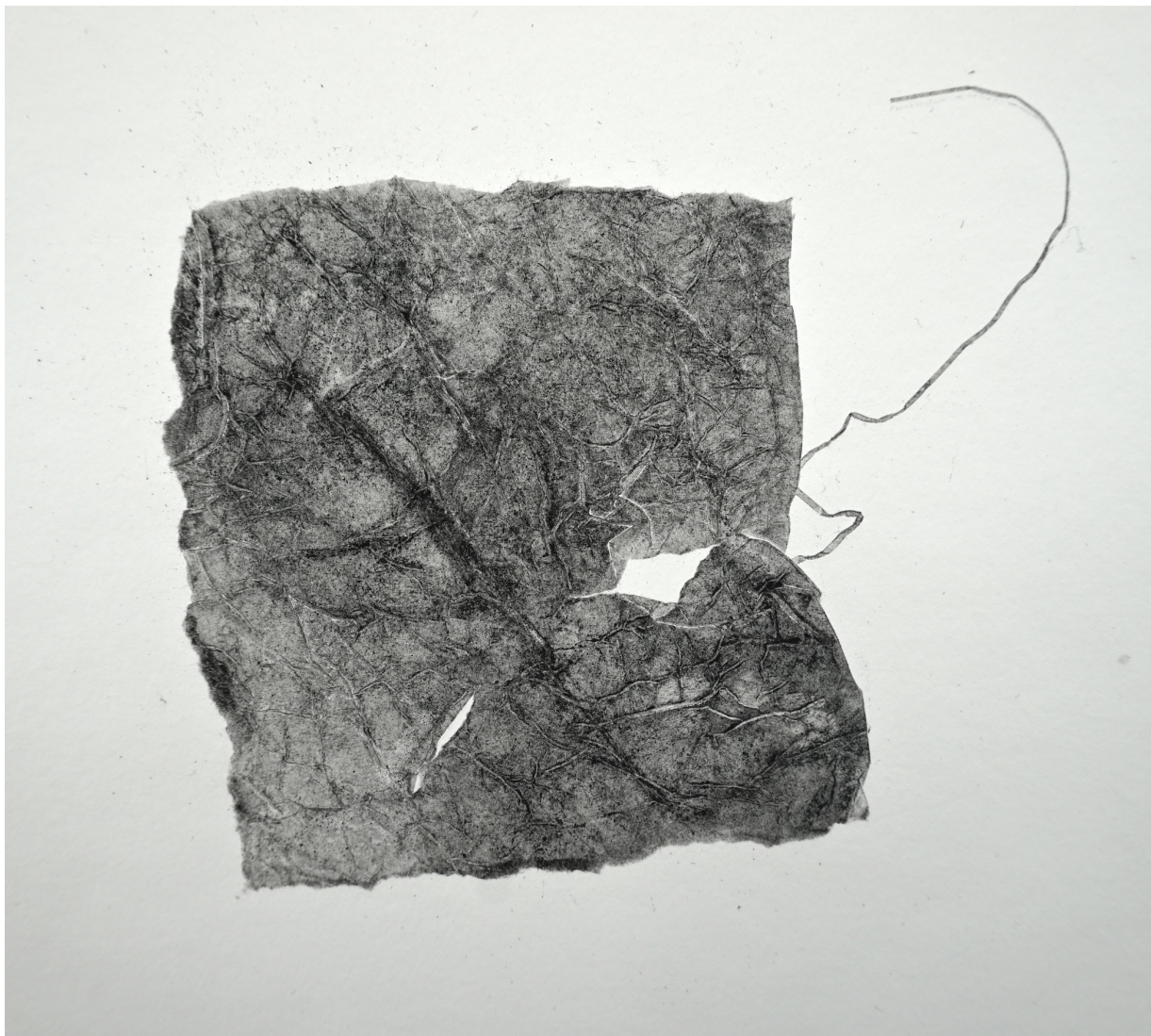
Odds and Ends (Fig. 12) is based upon a collage of two fragments (Fig. 11). The assemblage, which is then scanned and acts as a physical reality from which the depiction is made, has two distinctive parts: one is a piece of crumbled paper covered with charcoal and the other is an old printed photographic source. While drawing *Dust Standing over its Eventual Sediments* (Fig. 10), I was holding that photographic source; my sustained hold affected the paper, which over time became riddled with cracks. The new image that emerged from this interaction (my hand holding the object) now stands as the record of the experience of drawing in the studio. It brings to light paper as an undeniable variable in the equation. Like charcoal, paper helps the creation of marks, supports the formation of representations and more importantly, holds an image through time.

Consequently, it must be said that paper has agency. Unlike charcoal, which I make in natural sites and develop a deep relationship with over time, paper is a material I am still discovering even if it is an undeniable part of drawing. Earlier in this document, I elaborated on the ethical-political-ecological ramifications of my material-making practice, which was focused on charcoal. I clearly don't have the same relationship with paper despite the important roles it has played in my work through the formation of representations, as matrixes, surfaces, supports, objects, sources and more. Paper is a new subject of examination, a material deserving the same attention as charcoal. Consequently, a new technique was developed, that uses the materiality of paper as a subject of investigation.

Cyclical Process

Charcoal is the specimen brought into my studio alongside various forms of documentation from the natural sites I have experienced or produced my material in. My first approach is to make a drawing which will likely be a depiction made from photographic sources of a site I visited. This first iteration of drawing generates residues that are then used in further compositions. From these newly born forms, new processes emerge and the activity of depiction expands. Multidisciplinary artist Lucy Skaer makes drawings that challenge representation through their pictorial materiality, often by the repetition of the same gesture or form. In *The Siege* (2008)⁸, the drawing is solely composed of tiny spirals, only visible through close inspection. She deliberately exposes the making of her image; the thousands of mini-gestures that eventually form the overall image. She deconstructs how a representation functions and blurs the line between figuration and abstraction. In my own work, a drawing will inspire multiple artworks, which then become referential to each other, even if the newly formed representations tend to become more abstracted.

⁸ An Image of *The Siege* can be found at http://images.tate.org.uk/sites/default/files/styles/grid-normal-8-cols/public/images/lucy_skaer_thesiege_2008.jpg



(Fig. 13) Charcoal monotype / 2019 / charcoal on paper / 10" X 10"



(Fig. 14) Charcoal monotype / 2019 / charcoal on paper / 15" X 33"

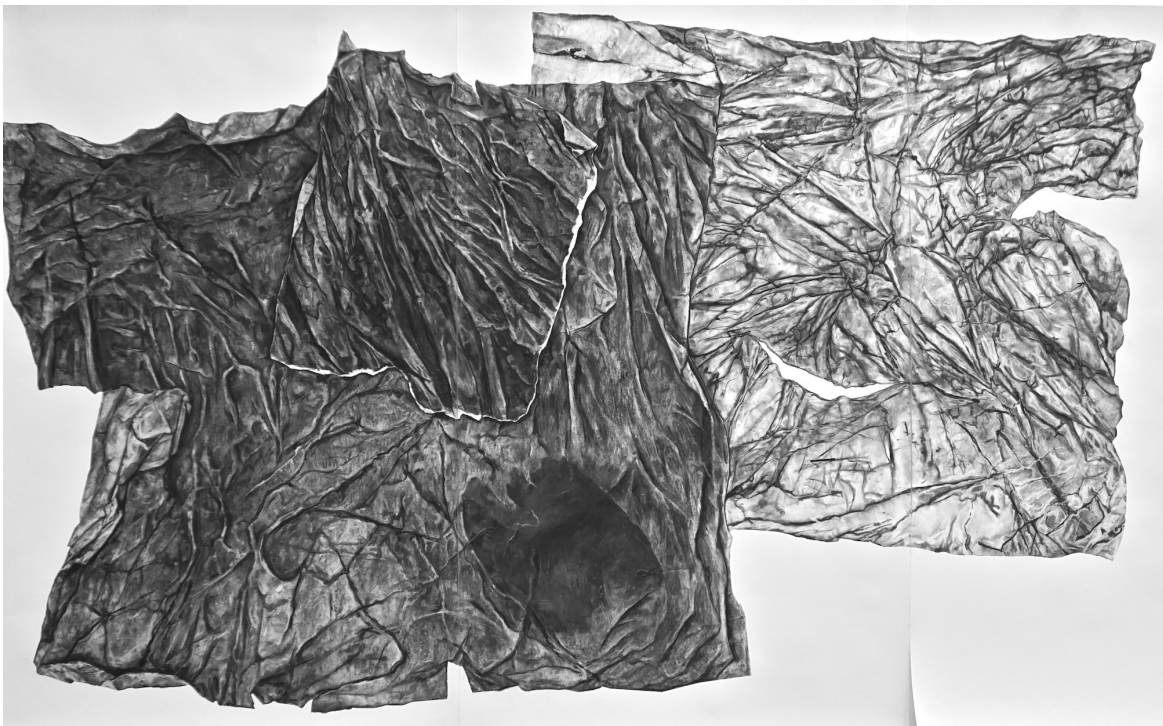
The back and forth between activities ensuing in the studio can be described as a cyclical process. Everything, from drawing a depiction to picking up the fragments of charcoal on the floor, exists as a starting point to another work. Failed drawings or paper excesses in my studio are re-purposed. They become the subject of a new technique, which speaks to the cyclical process. I start by applying charcoal on the paper surfaces, then crumbling them—a multitude of these drawn crumbled forms are made. Then, the inherent materiality of these unique drawings/crumbled forms are mechanically transferred with acute precision, through the physical pressure of a press, onto a paper support. They become charcoal monotypes, where I, the subjective power in the artistic process, am further removed.⁹ The impressions are the culmination of a collaborative process between material-medium, chance, handling and pressure. As much as they are about materiality, the charcoal and the paper being the main subjects, they also look like rock formations. The cracks and folds recall mineral surfaces, or foreign mountainous landscapes seen from above. The infinite microscopic particles of charcoal debris are transported, their density reproducing the matrix from which it is transferred; each a pixel of a high-resolution image. The charcoal monotypes are multidimensional, embossed on paper. Unlike oil based ink prints, these can easily be erased. In this new process, one drawing is transformed into two images; twin representations, mimicking each other.

⁹ In order to keep consistency throughout the text, “I” is used in this paragraph while in reality, it should be a “we”. The charcoal Monotype technique was devised by Mark Johnsen, a printmaker in the MFA program at Emily Carr and myself. This process is the result of an ongoing collaboration that relies on the sharing of our knowledge. It is dependant on both the plate as a fundamental aspect of printmaking technologies and the specific qualities of drawing with charcoal. Our intention is to further accentuate the possibilities of our images and expand their potential to capture detail rivalling photographic processes. We believe that the charcoal monotypes re-think where the art-making happens (in the initial drawing or through its printed reproduction), and they question the inherent divide between discrete media and material methods (the space between a drawing, a photograph, and a print).

My practice involves a cyclical process; a feedback loop occurs between every activity. One work is the starting point of another since an incentive for creation is always present in the residues, facilitating the formulation of future works. This cyclical process takes form through an iterative process that results in the formation of many images. Steve Garner, designer, author and director of the international Drawing Research Network¹⁰, notes in *Writing on Drawing – Essay on Drawing Practice and Research*: “Drawing research represents a powerful opportunity to demonstrate the ability to generate new knowledge about the visual and to communicate this through visual imagery.” (Garner 17) Garner, in his attempt to define “drawing research” suggests that we shouldn’t shy away from image-making in relation to research since it is the primary language of drawing. Too often, research is done through the manipulation of words, setting aside other methods of representation in terms of academic research. I raise this point because I realised that my research-based practice took form through the serial production of images that happened in my studio over the past year and a half. The cyclical process that describes the activities in the studio forms the research that supports every decision. I am responding to materials, the surfaces and the experiential knowledge I develop while drawing in the studio and visiting sites, to create representations that further define drawing as a reactive method for research.

¹⁰ “The **Drawing Research Network (DRN)** was established in 2001 as part of the The Big Draw. The DRN is an international network of individuals and institutions who are involved in some way with improving our understanding of drawing, for example through professional practice, education or general interest. It aims to use this knowledge to raise the profile of drawing and drawing research.” (Drawing Research Network)

The most recent iteration of my research based-practice is what I call the matrix transference. The process of making the charcoal impressions generates almost twin images: the obvious and the overlooked. The former is the charcoal monotype itself while the latter is the matrix, now flattened and stripped from a thin layer of charcoal dust. I have been collecting these seemingly trivial matrixes with the intention of re-purposing them. Lately, I have started making collages that juxtapose these matrixes, or fragments of them. sometimes with pictures I have been using to create former depictions. These collages are scanned and printed so they now exist as physical documents from which the process of depicting begins.



(Fig. 15) *Chiffonnage* / 2018 / charcoal on paper / 100"X60"

Chiffonnage (Fig. 15) is a window into a new representation of space, referential to rock formations, to a charcoal impression precise records of details and to a topographical map. I use my drawing abilities to depict the now ambiguous form of what was formerly paper. The matrix transference is the peak of the feedback loop, where all the parts constituting my practice are reunited.

Conclusion.....

Recently, I have been thinking about the concept of pressure as a generative force. Pressure, whether conceptual or physical, is the force that consolidates all the parts. Resources and materials are pressurized by capitalist regulations of production. The environment suffers from that constant pressure, a burden that goes against the regular geological pressure (stratigraphy) dependent on accumulation of deposit through an interminable period of time. Rock and organic matter are transformed through intense pressure, which is the same force at play in the creation of charcoal. The intense heat that sublimates wood into simpler molecular structures is not unlike the action of a printing press. Compressing multidimensional surfaces into a thin layer of dust—a charcoal impression lingers. The most significant form of pressure is applied by my own body, my hand when I draw, pushing materiality around. This thread is ever present in my practice, and serves as a unifier for the many frameworks constituting my research-based practice.

As I stated at the beginning of my thesis document, it is initially my love for drawing that has brought me here. I developed research based on the continual materialization of images in the studio, from which questions emerged: How does a deeper understanding of a

material, charcoal for instance, from its fabrication to its use, affect the production of representations in image making? And, how is drawing a gateway to research, conceding that an iterative process in image-making is its prime method? Indeed, a deeper knowledge of charcoal has shaped my experience of drawing. It has affected the directness and confidence with which I draw. Making my medium has connected me to a web of relationships that speaks to larger concepts and grounds my practice here and now. Drawing, whatever form it may take, has been the incentive for research. I wish to pursue cultivating my practice while mindfully navigating new sites that sustain my creative energies.

Reflection on the Thesis Exhibition.....



(Fig. 16) View of the thesis exhibition installation *Rock Paper Charcoal*

My thesis exhibition also titled *Rock Paper Charcoal* has brought together various narratives, such as processes of making (burning, drawing, pressing...), the journeys from outside to inside, from the studio to the gallery, and the phenomenology of (geological) time and space. The latter speaks to layered experiences of places, where immobility is imposed: the rock wall and the studio wall, merged and transmitted into one, a viewer's experience of the gallery space.

Drawing (with charcoal) was the binder, unifying all the parts (artworks and ideas). Displayed in a plethora of forms, drawing was found in large depictions of rock that undeniably pointed back to the maker and her traces, and through the subtle placement of charcoal sticks on a table, a design leading to drawing. My selection of artworks functioned

as a sequence, each part having the potential to explain the next one: everything was intrinsic. Perhaps this installation was a site to explore process, or more specifically, to better understand how to reveal process.

The charcoal dust is inevitable, flowing on every surface, its micro particles floating in the air until it settles. Charcoal is infectious, disguised in the gallery space through many appearances. The medium is present in its raw state as a display of charcoal sticks, the main ingredient to every one of my artworks and the starting point of every process. It is also trapped within the paper, resembling a fossilized being, an indexical record of movement through time.



(Fig. 17) View of the thesis exhibition installation *Rock Paper Charcoal* (right) and of Robin Gleason's thesis exhibition (left)

The space inhabited by my artworks was shared with Robin Gleason, a fellow MFA student I have been working closely with, outside collecting and making, as well as inside, building and planning. We treated the gallery space as an environment where our work could co-exist: the result being an installation where the line differentiating our work is blurred. It created a tension that calls in question authorship: Who made what wasn't specified on a label, a closer inspection of the work was required to access each artist's narrative. This

close proximity enhanced each others process and time as main themes of both our installations.

In closing, my installation embodied the storyline of my evolution in the past year in the MFA program and my explorations of various sites that inspired my production. One of which is the studio, where I started extracting the remnants of creation, mirroring my material making practice in nature, when I make my charcoal. This was key to the development and success of my research and consequently, to the series of works that I exhibited in *Rock Paper Charcoal*.

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