



MOVING MOUNTAINS

Keith Spencer

# **MOVING MOUNTAINS**

by

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## IMAGE LIST

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*Between the end and where we lie – ink and gouache on paper – dimensions variable – 2018-19*

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not titled – ink on paper – 8x10in - 2018

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*Seasons change* – ink, acrylic, and oil on canvas over panel – 18x14in - 2018

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*Caldera* – ink, acrylic, and pigment on canvas – 5x4ft – 2019

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**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

It is with respect that I acknowledge my MFA studies were undertaken as an uninvited guest on the traditional and ancestral Coast Salish territories of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh Nations. As my artwork is fundamentally concerned with the places we live and to which we are emotionally connected, I am humbled to have spent a portion of my life in this amazing place. I would also like to acknowledge the people I met at Emily Carr University of Art + Design who have challenged, supported, and inspired me daily with their wisdom, insight, and humor. Finally, I would also like to acknowledge the irreplaceable support of my friends and family. I am thankful to be surrounded by so many wonderful people, both here and across the world.

*I've had enough of black and white  
I'll find another way and I will lean into the  
Grey  
– Thrice*

## A SPACE BETWEEN

Seeking a point of stability within the shifting flux of material approaches and influences in my visual practice leads back to New Mexico, the site where cultures, histories, and languages converge in my own subjective space. It is a (0, 0, 0) point on the axis of my life, where the conceptual and thematic investigations in my work, through painting, drawing, and printmaking, begin. New Mexico has a long

In her novel *Flights*, Olga Tokarczuk invokes Zeno's paradox of motion when she says, "Every distance is infinite in itself, each point launching a new space that cannot be surmounted, and of course, any movement an illusion, all of us travelling in place."

history of Pueblo, Apache tribe, and Navajo Nation populations that have continuously inhabited the land, as well as shifting rule by Spanish colonial forces, Mexico, and the US. Growing up in this place fostered an awareness of border spaces as actual physical divides as well as ineffable sites of cultural and temporal interface.

The methodology of my work can be understood through nuclear development and its entanglement with familial history and lived experience, specifically those in New Mexico and Japan. This interest arose from living in coastal Fukushima prior to the March 11, 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and resultant nuclear disaster which contaminated a wide swath of Japan's Northeastern coast. The drastic shifts that occurred in my adopted home since then prompted me to begin thinking about the way spaces undergo invisible changes over time and the often arbitrary borders that define them. Fukushima, nuclear, and self are further entangled through my grandfather's past employment at the national laboratories in Los Alamos, a site established specifically for the purpose of developing the atomic bomb. New Mexico is also home to the Trinity site where the Gadget, the world's first nuclear device, was detonated. Research into these nuclear histories is a way to frame my interest in perception, landscapes, and border spaces.

My artistic practice explores these subjects through a material approach which leans into a lack of clarity, intentionally engaging in a dialogue with both landscape painting and modernist ideas of purity in order to critique these modes of production while offering a more nuanced approach to the same. I contextualize my work among artists working in a spectrum, from representational depictions of space to material abstraction, both as a way of demonstrating blunt, political, or aesthetic ways of engaging with similar ideas to my own, but also to highlight the range of depiction within which my own



work operates. By occupying a shifting space of interface, I seek to describe an emergent reality where interactions of space, time, and matter manifest in all their entangled complexity. Or, in the words of US feminist theorist Karen Barad: "*Spacetime mattering* is a dynamic ongoing reconfiguring of a field of relationalities among "moments," "places," and "things" (in their inseparability), where *scale is iteratively (re)made in intra-action*" (Barad G111). Barad's quote serves as a reminder of the complexity of the present moment, and as a way to understand the multifaceted mix of technical approaches and material agency in my work, approaches which distance myself from the final composition and produce corrupted, incomplete forms. It is into these hazy spaces that I plunge, seeking something near but always just out of grasp.

"When life itself seems lunatic, who knows where madness lies? Perhaps to be too practical is madness. To surrender dreams - this may be madness. Too much sanity may be madness - and maddest of all: to see life as it is, and not as it should be!" (Cervantes, *Don Quixote*)



Image 2: not titled – ink on paper – 8x10in - 2018

## BLURRING THE EDGE

In his book The Order of Time, contemporary physicist Carlo Rovelli describes reality as something which we blur in order to simplify and comprehend. According to Rovelli, this is due to our inability to perceive the infinitesimally small, as well as the delay in light from its source to our eyes. In the context of my artistic practice, I use the term “haziness” to describe my visual aesthetic while also evoking a blurred reality described through physics too complex to be precisely perceived. In relation, I also use the words “unstable” and “instability” to reference both the material processes at play in my work as well as the effect it creates in the visual space of the picture. Finally, the term “uncertain” refers to the response I seek to provoke in the viewer.

### *Between fiction and truth*

My interest in exploring hazy, loosely defined spaces through my artwork is an attempt to understand something at a remove from myself. One association I make through this aesthetic approach is to a linguistic inability to speak or understand. This relates to my upbringing in the multilingual, multicultural environment of New Mexico<sup>1</sup>, but also reflects the larger scope of my practice which

The young narrator of Rudolfo Anaya's *Bendiceme, Última*, set in rural northern New Mexico, receives mentorship and understanding of his cultural heritage from the *curandera*, Última.

navigates disparate influences from landscape painting to literature to nuclear history. My attempts at synthesizing these sources reflects a contemporary condition where an overwhelming amount of information can be immediately accessed, but which often eludes total comprehension.

Although the reader has undoubtedly already noticed the use of literary sources deployed throughout the text, a word about this decision may clarify their relevance to my writing and larger artistic practice. I use fictional literature as a way to tie the real world to a space of imagination and generative thought. These juxtapositions acknowledge the disparate voices and viewpoints which swirl around my artistic practice, much in the way that I push off of and respond to a wide range of material processes, such as photography, watercolor, sketching, printmaking, and painting, within the space of the studio. Additionally, these texts provide an alternative way of thinking about the content of the research or the work itself, and exist in a range of relevance from direct to oblique.

The use of fiction also brings a political connection to my work, as it is a way to propose alternative realities to an established narrative. US painter Norman Lewis provides a powerful reference

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<sup>1</sup> In 2014, the New Mexico Department of Health estimated the state's population to be 46.4% Hispanic and 41.4% White. (“Health Indicator Report”)



point here, as “Lewis’s work points to and operates within a mosaic network of the interwoven dualisms of poetry and politics, allowing an unfolding process of rumination on an uncertain future” (Campbell 221). Campbell notes the connection between the title of Lewis’s 1951 painting *Every Atom Glows*<sup>2</sup> and the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson as a strategy to reference American transcendentalism and nuclear policies of the time. *Venture through the veil* (2018)<sup>3</sup> is an example of a title within my own body of work which aligns with Lewis’s strategies. This painting, loosely based on a space affected by radioactive contamination, takes its title from a song lyric which was itself based on the poem “A Great Wagon” by the 13<sup>th</sup> century Persian poet Rumi (Thrice, *About*). Titling my work in this way allows me to interweave poetics, fiction, and politics with my art and provide new perspectives on contemporary realities.

See Jorge Luis Borges’s short story “Pierre Menard: Author of the Quixote” for an example of how meaning shifts over time.

### *Navigated through paint*

Within my artistic practice, I navigate a space between representation and abstraction as a visual metonym for imperfect transmission, translation, and memory. It is within this flux that I create work which can function as both an illusionistic image as well as material abstraction which serves to provoke a sense of uncertainty in the viewer. In relation to contemporary painting, artists Guillermo Kuitca and Hiroshi Senju are important reference points. Kuitca often uses maps and cartography as a way of understanding space. In an essay about Kuitca’s work, professor and author Andreas Huyssen describes how Kuitca’s maps “open up imaginary spaces...Rather than simply offering orientation, his maps tend to put the spectator into spatial and temporal limbo (Huyssen 24). Kuitca’s work subverts the stability of visual signifiers and pushes the viewer into a space of uncertainty, as in *Untitled* (2008)<sup>4</sup>, an oil on linen painting which presents what appears to be an attempt to reassemble bits and pieces of a road map. The result is frustratingly incomplete and only hints at the original information of the map while simultaneously producing new relationships through their juxtaposition.

“The more I delve into Emilia’s life, the more I realize that from beginning to end it is an unbroken chain of losses, disappearances and senseless searches. She spent years chasing after nothing, after people who no longer existed, remembering things that had never happened. But aren’t we all like that?”  
(Martínez, *Purgatory*).

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<sup>2</sup> [Norman Lewis \*Every Atom Glows\* 1951 oil on canvas 54x35 in](#)

<sup>3</sup> This painting is discussed in further detail in *INSTABILITY & IMPURITY*.

<sup>4</sup> [Guillermo Kuitca \*Untitled\*, 2008 oil on linen 77 1/2 x 148 3/4 in](#)

As I explore the various aesthetic manifestations of this uncertainty and “spatial limbo,” I find Hiroshi Senju’s *Cliff*<sup>5</sup> series to be an informative body of work for its hazy aesthetic and material instability, as well as the way in which the artist responds to uncontrollable elements in the process of making. Senju creates these paintings through the act of discovery, allowing contours in the paper to emerge through a spontaneous application of mineral pigments after which he draws out the image from the surface. These paintings have tight areas of complexity which dissolve into mist and illegibility, giving the landscape a monumental and ethereal presence.

Both Kuitca and Senju utilize perceptual interference in different ways materially, but I find a common thread in the way they destabilize the didactic space of the image and provide the viewer with room to invent and extrapolate. Such a gesture acknowledges limits of perception and is a technique I strive to utilize in my own practice. *Seasons change* (2018) is an example of my own artistic investigation of these spaces of haze and uncertainty. For this piece, I began by loosely painting a gestural mountain form on the surface of my studio floor using block printing ink and acrylic, and then transferring that image to a piece of unstretched, unprimed canvas using a simple monotype process<sup>6</sup>. The resulting image was incomplete, blurred and corrupted through the transfer process. From this point I began painting back into the surface, creating a contrast between the distanced mark making of the monotype and the direct control from the brush to the canvas. In this way, I am piecing together a new image with only fragments, working with only a part from which I must invent and extrapolate to reach a final composition. This process necessitates a responsiveness to the “starting point” (in this case, the monotyped image) from which the rest of the composition emerges. This response can be as logical as continuing an implied line, or, when there is not enough information, creating a stain of contrasting color to invent a new space and interpretation. The result is a hazy, unstable composition with both direct and indirect marks across a range of legibility. My interest in this distancing from the source

One need only turn to Yasunari Kawabata’s *The Sound of the Mountain* for an example of how even a mountain can embody instability. Throughout the course of the novel, the narrator believes he hears roars from the small mountain behind his house. These sounds merge with memories of his past relationships and failures, and point towards his understanding of his own mortality.

and the corruption that occurs through that distance is further emphasized by manipulating where the marks physically sit on the surface. In the case of *Seasons change*, these marks exist across a range, from the panel substrate to the stained fabric of the canvas, to scumbled color and small globs of paint protruding from the surface. I connect this process-oriented approach to my artwork with scientific

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<sup>5</sup> [Hiroshi Senju \*Cliff\*, 2012 natural and acrylic pigment on Japanese mulberry paper 89.5 x 71.6 in](#)

<sup>6</sup> This process will be discussed in further detail in NUCLEAR GHOSTS.

understandings of sight and the chemical reactions that occur between molecules and chemical filters. In an essay discussing the human eye's connection to plants and the sense of touch, artist and curator Wietske Maas states, "Any image, including the optical appearances we continuously fathom through the lenses of our eyes, is the corruption of a substance" (Maas 6). The visual corruption of *Seasons change* is materially reflected in both painting and printmaking elements, simultaneously evoking chemical reactions in the physical act of seeing while referencing the aesthetic and thematic focus of my work in landscape and spaces of uncertainty.

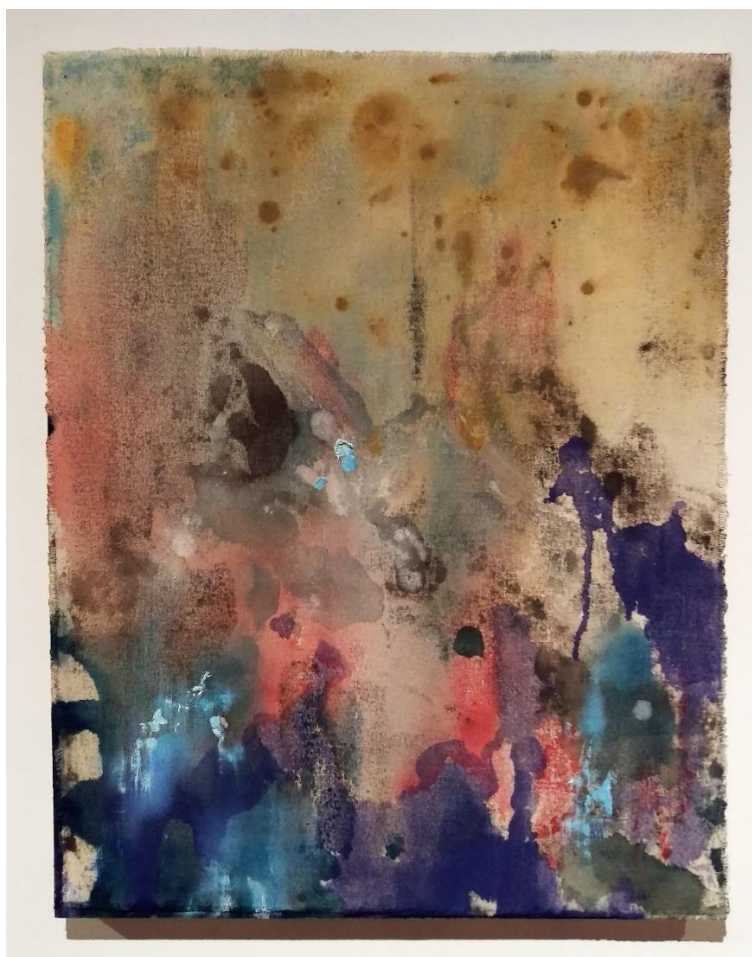


Image 3: *Seasons change* – ink, acrylic, and oil on canvas over panel – 18x14in - 2018

## VISION

*It was too cold to stay outside for long without a jacket, but clear enough that the mountains of the Santa Fe National Forest were in sharp silhouette.*

*There was no one else. You stood on the patio facing west, watching the pale blue of the sky conflagrate in yellows and oranges.*

*Chamisa sprouted wildly and struggled with juniper bushes for morsels of nourishment in the arid dirt.*

*It was then, when all that lingered were the last purple gasps from the invisible sun, that a movement from your left caught your eye.*

*The hazy forms of two coyotes emerged from the dusk. Their fur shimmered and their steps were brisk, synchronized and silent. As they passed in front of the patio one of them turned and looked you directly in the eye.*

*You weren't scared, but its gaze pierced the veil between space and self. Then they passed, and disappeared into the dark.*

The main character in Denis Johnson's Train Dreams is disturbed by tales of "coyote-people" haunting the valley where he lives, remarking, "'Dear God. I don't know where I'll get the strength to take this road at night anymore'" (Johnson 71).

## THE LAND OF ENCHANTMENT

The New Mexico landscape is a site of relative stability from which my explorations in visual art can begin, the first tangible clue of a speculative investigation through paint and process. In particular, the Sandia Mountains and the surrounding high desert (a daily sight for the first 24 years of my life) form a lens through which I experience and depict all other spaces in my work. More specifically, the loosely

"But what is memory if not the language of feeling, a dictionary of faces and days and smells which repeat themselves like the verbs and adjectives in a speech, sneaking in behind the thing itself, into the pure present, making us sad or teaching us vicariously?" (Cortázar, *Hopscotch*)

defined borders of this space, which have shifted time and again throughout history, manifest in my visual aesthetic and the core research interests of my practice.

The New Mexico landscape must be understood through a larger tradition of landscape painting in the United States. This tradition emerged in the 1820s as visual artists began responding to the natural landscapes of North America. Work by artists such as Thomas Cole "glorified both untouched wilderness as God's creation and nature made arable in accordance with the biblical mandate" (Büttner 280). These paintings served as patriotic pride and manifest destiny propaganda, reinforcing belief in a divine right to an unspoiled land that encouraged commodification, and erasure of indigenous groups. The history of art in New Mexico is particularly rich given the nineteen Pueblos, three Apache tribes, and Navajo Nation which have inhabited the land for centuries prior ("Pueblos, Tribes & Nations"). While engagement with these myriad peoples and their artistic traditions is beyond the scope of this document, the reader should remember that these traditions were in place long before painters such as Cole were depicting the land.

In an essay entitled "Between Subject and Object," art historian Alan Wallach lays out an overview of the panoramic in US landscape painting by drawing parallels to Foucault's panopticon. In the US, landscape tourism, landscape literature, and landscape painting and photography augmented and reinforced a view of the world in which the state's imperial agenda—seizing by force of arms nearly half of Mexico, conquering the American West by displacing and annihilating Native American populations, 'opening' Japan—took on the appearance of naturalness and inevitability. (Wallach 318-319)

Wallach's description of US landscape painting provides an important background to the problematic issues that are fundamentally connected to this genre of art production. Focusing in more specifically on the history of New Mexico landscape painting, artists such as Taos Society of Artists founding member Joseph Henry Sharp, Georgia O'Keefe, and others were drawn to New Mexico by an "idealistic yearning for harmony of life and art drawn from nature" (Schimmel 56). The work produced by these artists

sought to capture something of this spiritual harmony and mystique, and often resulted in depictions of idealized landscapes that perpetuated fetishization, commodification, and/or erasure.

Contemporary artmaking in New Mexico, in contrast, confronts these problematic histories and highlights previously overlooked subjects. In an essay entitled “Inverted Landscapes” written for SITE Santa Fe’s *Unsettled Landscapes* Biennial, curators Candice Hopkins and Lucía Sanromán describe the land as “a place with qualities that are mysterious and difficult to measure – born of the memory of events and emotions that have been hidden but can be made visible – with a future that is more enduring and meaningful than any commodity” (Hopkins and Sanromán 48). This quote points to the potential for mysterious, hidden sentiment and histories to be explored and visualized through artistic practice, as well as the potential to overcome ingrained, problematic ways of seeing the land as a site for commerce, trade, and exploitation. Artists such as Patrick Nagatani exemplify this approach by examining “the impact of the development of nuclear energy and attendant industries on the cultural and physical landscape of New Mexico” (Dees 166). Nagatani accomplishes this in his *Nuclear Enchantment*<sup>7</sup> series through photography and post-processing which highlights the damage the nuclear industry has done to the New Mexico landscape. While this research avenue has a necessary ecological component as well, I am focused more on exploring

“The first commandment for every good explorer is that an expedition has two points: the point of departure and the point of arrival. If your intention is to make the second theoretical point coincide with the actual point of arrival, don’t think about the means – because the journey is a virtual space that finishes when it finishes, and there are as many means as there are different ways of ‘finishing.’ That is to say, the means are endless”  
(Guevara, *The Motorcycle Diaries*).

a hazy space of perception and the ineffable qualities within a given landscape even as I acknowledge the importance of advocating a sustainable relationship with the land.

*Caldera* (2019) is an example of how I navigate this space between problematics and potentials within my own work. This painting was made first by applying a large amount of thinned acrylic, pigment and water to an unstretched, unprimed canvas on the floor. This allows the material to react and soak into the surface, staining and creating a hazy field upon which the rest of my decisions sit. As an echo of New Mexico’s stability in my own life and its function as a jumping off point, this initial artistic gesture creates a foundation (albeit a materially shifting one) defined by my own movements and gestures.

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<sup>7</sup> [Patrick Nagatani \*Contaminated Radioactive Sediment, Mortandad Canyon, Los Alamos National Laboratory, New Mexico\*, 1990 & 1993 Chromogenic print \(Ilfocolor Deluxe\) 17 x 22 & 27 ¾ x 35½ in](#)

Before stretching the canvas, I trim the edges and reintegrate them into the composition itself. This creates new relationships within the painted field, disrupting its previous stability and providing another point of reference for me to respond to directly with my brush. The final result, from a distance, reads as a comprehensible, mountainous space which recalls traditional Southwestern landscape painting through its depth of field and hazy light. However, upon closer examination those conventions are undermined through the use of material abstraction and collage. The canvas offcuts create disruptions which are further highlighted by moments where I break the continuation of a mark from one piece of canvas to another. The overall mountain form is composed of washes of paint which stain and react against the ground and create an abstracted field. Through this method of working, I create paintings which function initially as landscape, but which reveal formal disruptions and areas where the space dissolves or is obscured.

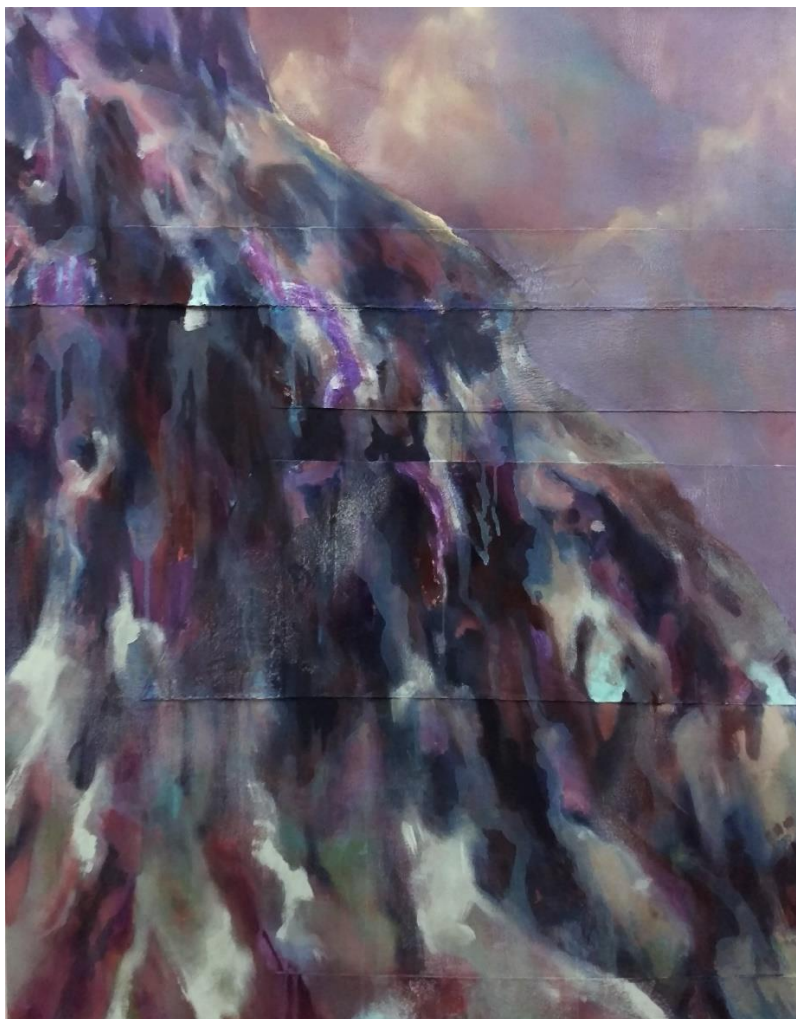


Image 4: *Caldera* – ink, acrylic, and pigment on canvas – 5x4ft – 2019



## BORDERS & INTERFACE

### *Physical positionality and political reality*

Borders are the way I think through locating and conceptualizing the sites of shifts and disruptions in my work. This consideration manifests in material and compositional choices, as well as in theoretical and cultural research. Given my practice's focus on in-between spaces, thresholds, and the haziness of perception, the reader may wonder why I have not used the term "liminal." Despite its usefulness, particularly in an art context, I have chosen to use the term "borders" as a way of retaining the geographical and political connotations of that word. The reprehensibly xenophobic and outright illegal actions of the current US Presidential administration (ICE entrapment, refusal of asylum seekers,

"The truth may be stretched thin, but it never breaks, and it always surfaces above lies, as oil floats on water" (Cervantes, *Don Quixote*).

family separation, to name but three) have been an unavoidable backdrop against which I have been making work throughout the duration of this program. Writing this document in 2019 as a person from a state on the US-Mexican border, *the* border at the center of so much political turmoil, maintaining these geopolitical connotations is vitally important. This choice references the physical space of New Mexico and anchors more abstract conceptualizations in both subjective experience and contemporary political reality.

### *As artistic subject matter*

These daily conflicts are a point of departure for critical thinking that operates on a conceptual level rather than direct political action. Given the scale of both the US-Mexico border space and issues which surround it, a size which exists beyond the scope of a single individual's actions, I have turned to the edges and borders of my paintings as spaces which allow for my direct intercession and manipulation. My visual practice is a way for me to think through the nuanced complexity of borders, to maintain a link to the pressing concerns of the real world while also expanding into theoretical investigations of the same as a site of interface between the known and the unknown.

Given this engagement, I have found curator Russel Ferguson's assessment of the subject of paintings and edges to be relevant. He states, "Paintings have edges, but the relationship of the painting and its subject to those edges is far less arbitrary than most photographs" (Ferguson 25). This assertion not only indicates active decision making in terms of composing images, but also points to potential for those edges to play a more prominent role in imparting meaning to the overall piece. One example of how I began intervening in the borders and edges of my own work can be seen in *Bottle up the sea*

(2018). See Shusaku Endo's Silence where, in a crisis of despair, the narrator describes the silence of the sea to the silence of God.

After creating a field of paint and pigment on an unstretched canvas, I realized that the edges of the composition were the most visually interesting elements which would be lost if I were to stretch it simply as it was. For this reason, I chose to trim the edges and then stretch the remaining canvas. My challenge was to take these marginalized elements and give them a central, prominent place in the overall composition. By taking two opposing edges and bringing them together, I created a rupture in the relatively unified field of color and shifted the space of the image within the stretched frame. For this particular work, I wanted to minimize my actions with paint and brushes in order to keep the focus on the edges themselves. Although this piece does not contain any direct visual links with the New Mexico's high-desert landscape, it demonstrates the way a formal, intuitive response to the materials and surface are loaded with meaning through my subjectivity and the present political moment.

I conceptualize my artistic approach to border spaces through the words of artist and author Meredith Tromble. In an essay written in response to a National Science Foundation conference on art as a way of knowing, she describes how

contemporary art operates at the interface between the known and the unknown... And thus, for those willing to tolerate the anxiety of standing on moving ground, it expands seeing, resists dangerous certainties, and urges exploration of the inexhaustibly vast borderland between the known and the unknown. (Tromble 7)

In an increasingly polarized world, this ability to exist in a more nuanced grey space offers the potential to move beyond an art which simply confirms what is already known. Specifically through landscape painting, I am able to explore these border sites and push myself and the viewer into a space that exists at a remove from panoramic, stable definitions of space. *Mutual Understanding* (2019) is an example of how I attempt to do this through paint. Similarly to *Caldera* and *Bottle up the sea*, this painting began with an application of paint and pigment on an unstretched canvas which was then cropped and stretched before collaging elements from the edges. From this point, I began responding to more sharply defined brushstrokes to create hazy mountainous forms. At the same time, I also highlighted areas of the composition which referenced the sky. As I worked, I sought to maintain a balance between legibility and material abstraction<sup>8</sup> as a way to straddle this border between the known and unknown. This allows me to propose a multiplicity of spaces and perceptions created through painting and collage. I shift the viewer's gaze upwards as a way of creating distance from the stabilizing horizon (itself a

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<sup>8</sup> This dynamic will be discussed further in INSTABILITY & IMPURITY

border between land and sky). Despite the numerous approaches to depicting landscape in contemporary art, I have chosen paint for its ability to function as illusionistic representation and material abstraction simultaneously, a quality which allows me to link conceptual concerns like borders and haziness to concrete material processes. Additionally, landscape painting's long (and often problematic) history offers an opportunity in a contemporary context to draw the viewer out of a space of stable certainty created by panoramic vistas and into a space of nuance, uncertainty, and contradiction.

As I attempt to address this larger concept of borders and the interface between known and unknown, I draw parallels with the work of Chicago-based artist Michiko Itatani. Itatani's paintings condense multiple experienced and imagined events in an allegorical space which references literature and scientific discovery. *Close Binary* (2018)<sup>9</sup> depicts an ecstatic view of the cosmos, a space which points to a

"The universe  
was a place of wonders,  
and only habituation, the anaesthesia  
of the everyday, dulled  
our sight"  
(Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*)

constant upward striving and transcendental level of existence. This effect is achieved through the luminous quality of her colors and the variety of material applications which create patterns, lines and abstract fields of color and texture. Itatani's work often operates at the border between scientific and spiritual, and her use of both oil paint and *sumi* ink reflects an interface of cultures manifested through disparate material intersections. The composition of her paintings often feature a tangible space of a laboratory or library which draws the viewers gaze upwards and into a cosmological space highlighted by vibrant color and material interaction. In a similar way, *Mutual Understanding* explores the border between known and unknown by starting from a point of tangibility in the form of its mountains, a point which maintains a link to the romanticized landscapes depicted by Taos Society of Art painters, but which then dissolve into a different view of space and sky and material interactions, a space which resists rigid definition and apprehension.

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<sup>9</sup> [Michiko Itatani \*Close Binary\*, painting from \*Celestial Connection 18-B-1\*, 2018 oil on canvas 72 x 122 in](#)

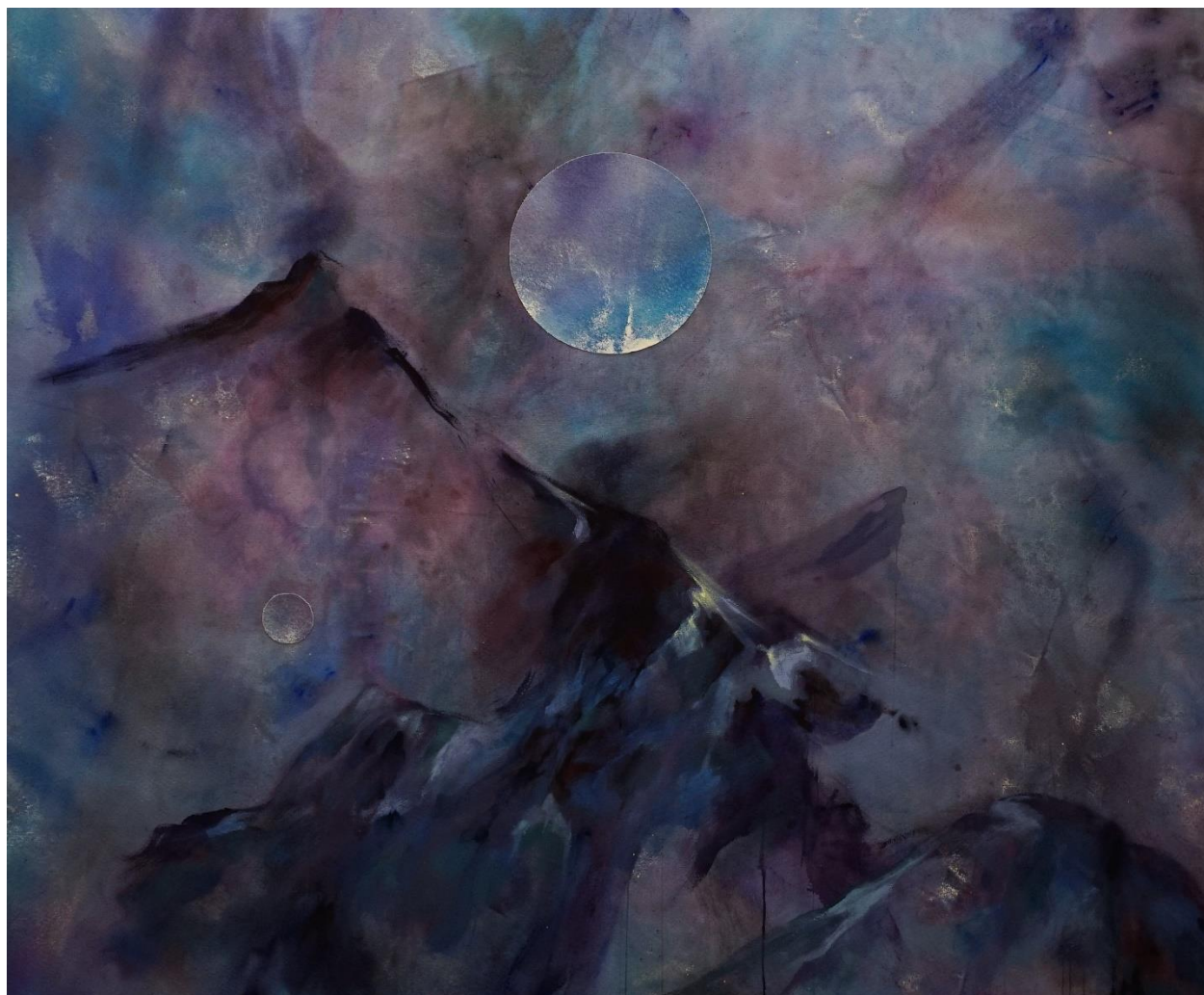


Image 5: *Mutual Understanding* – acrylic and pigment on canvas – 5x6ft - 2019

## QUESTIONS<sup>10</sup>

Q:

*A: I lived in coastal Fukushima for 2 years, pre-disaster. I've visited plenty of times since, twice last year. Some of my closest friends live there and have families there. But many have moved away, too.*

Q:

*A: I can't explain it. The best I can manage is a feeling, like it was perpetually dusk, like right before a storm. Only in this case the "storm" had already passed. Or I guess had come but never really left. That was over 6 years ago though.*

Q:

*A: That's not a problem since there aren't many other vehicles on the road. Occasionally you'll see a dump truck with a pile of dirt in the back. Or flashes of black trash bags piled up behind walls. It's like everything is under construction.*

Q:

*A: I'd be lying if I said I wasn't.*

Q:

*A: But I could have been inventing things too, and anyway it was hard to tell because so much of the towns are now empty lots.*

Q:

*A: I'd rather not answer that.*

Q:

*A: I remember visiting the elementary school where I used to teach, an old concrete building surrounded by a gym and a few tool sheds. It's located towards the northwest edge of the town in the middle of farm houses and rice fields. Anyway, so when we went back it was night, and the school was just a pale shadow, the colors washed out. I don't want to say ghostly, because that's melodramatic, and inaccurate. I mean, that's the problem with all of this, that things are there, you know? But so anyway then I saw, near the entrance tucked back in the garden, a machine that looked like a space age trash can, with a solar panel and glowing red LED lights displaying numbers, like a clock. Only it wasn't a clock.*

Q:

*A: The numbers meant nothing to me.*

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<sup>10</sup> The format for this section has taken its influence from David Foster Wallace's Brief Interviews with Hideous Men.

"Había perdido un país  
pero había ganado un sueño...  
Y el sueño vivía en el espacio de mi espíritu  
Bolaño, *Romantic Dogs*

## NUCLEAR GHOSTS

### *Radiation as haunting*

Radiation is a generative way for me to approach ideas of tangible, yet imperceptible shifts in space in my artistic practice. It is a way to conceptualize hazy perception, landscapes and their history, and borders as sites of interface. Radiation was something I was keenly aware of when I returned to Fukushima after 3.11 and encountered closed-off roads and warning signage. These encounters caused me to view my surroundings with suspicion, even as their physical features were visibly unchanged.

Hiroshi Suzuki, a Fukushima-born poet declares in his poem "Decontamination" that  
"We only need to get back the security of make-believe" (Stenson, Aroldi 75).

In discussing absence and the void as a "well-worn tool used in the service of colonialism, racism, capitalism, militarism, imperialism, nationalism, and scientism," Karen Barad asserts

The void is not the background against which something appears, but an active, constitutive part of every "thing." As such, *even the smallest bits of matter – for example, electrons, infinitesimal point particles with no dimensions, no structure – are haunted by, indeed, constituted by, the indeterminate wanderings of an infinity of possible configurings of spacetime mattering in their specificity.* (Barad G113)

This quote serves as a reminder that even apparently "empty" spaces are actually folded into the activity of everything else. It also points to the opportunity depicting this haunting activity offers in subverting traditional modes of landscape depiction.

My own limited experiences with these strange spaces occurred even outside the government-mandated 30km evacuation area (which has now, thanks to cleanup and recovery efforts, shrunk to 2.7% of the total prefectural area). The 30km boundary and the often arbitrary lines it drew across spaces and towns proved to be a jumping off point for critical thinking regarding forces which do not conform to neat edges and boundaries. Art critic Noi Sawaragi discusses this manifestation when he asserts, "Radiation...isn't an abstract concept but rather a concrete force with substantial effects," and that "these invisible traces, through engaging actual world processes, were made visible" (Sawaragi 79). Sawaragi's assessment of the invisible made visible can be seen in the bags of contaminated topsoil and debris collected in Fukushima as part of an ongoing government effort to "clean" areas around the Fukushima Dai-ichi reactor. These efforts have reduced background radiation levels, but have also resulted in massive and complex storage issues as the inexorable accumulation of radioactive dirt and

water gradually renders the space it occupies inaccessible. I explored these observations in work such as *untitled (plots)* (2018) and *untitled (bags)* (2018), where empty plots of land and bags of contaminated material created different spaces within the landscape. Both of these pieces were created as a way to process my own experience of witnessing the extreme shifts in my former home, expand my visual language, and explore the effects of haunting on physical space.

To be clear, I do not presume to speak for those who still live in such areas, nor do I seek to aestheticize their experiences. Having witnessed firsthand the struggles of friends who continue to live in affected areas, I cannot presume to create art which speaks to their daily experience. What is within my ability, through this metonymic link between radiation and haunting, is an expression of my own conflicted relationship between these spaces and the larger characteristic of a contemporary moment where every person on the planet now lives among the effects of nuclear events from Trinity to Fukushima.

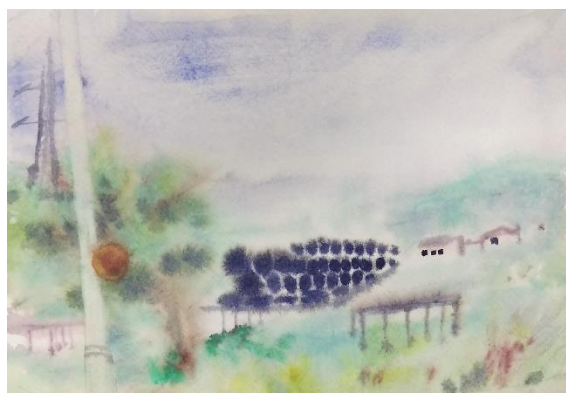


Image 6 (L): *untitled (bags)* – watercolor on paper – 7x9in - 2018

Image 7 (R): *untitled (plots)* – ink and pastel on paper – 9x10in - 2018

### *Visual interference and transformative process*

I link these ideas and observations to my art by exploring the spatial interference produced by

The narrator in Yuko Tsushima's *Territory of Light* finds solace in a room bathed in glow of light, a place she begins to withdraw into more and more as the story progresses. "No one else must know about this place that made me yearn to dissolve until I became a particle of light myself."

haunting. To do this, I focus on strategies of disrupting the viewer's perception of the image by engaging in processes which facilitate material agency and expand beyond my direct control. This allows for the creation of images and marks which could not have been predicted, in the same way that hauntings expand beyond their boundaries and manifest in unpredictable ways. As I work, I draw connections to contemporary artists like Sam Falls, whose practice gives natural forces in specific sites agency in producing the final composition. I also pay particular attention to artists who seek ways of visualizing



the invisible. Swiss-Russian photographer Anastasia Mityukova's *Project Iceworm* (2018)<sup>11</sup> engages with nuclear power and visibility through an examination of a former US military installation and its surroundings, a site which was rendered inaccessible due to radioactive contamination from nuclear warheads. Mityukova's work juxtaposes anonymous, archival images with private photos from local Inuit populations to explore colonialism, global warming, and invisible realities.

My own attempts to visualize invisible forces links to Mityukova's through an interest in radioactive forces. In my work, however, I am proposing a view of these inaccessible sites which simultaneously depict the haunting force which rendered them inaccessible in the first place. My attempt at this can be seen in my monotype series *Between the end and where we lie* (2018). This collection of work on paper depicts sparse spaces punctuated by fencing and mountainous rock forms to reference sites in a state of transition or (de)construction. Working in series, I began to view each composition as a different perspective on the same space rather than a discreet landscape. For this reason, I used various sizes of hand-torn printmaking paper as a way to explore a range of scales within this imagined space. These compositions were painted directly on the floor of my studio using gouache and block printing ink. The painted image was then transferred to paper using a hand-held burnisher as I moved on my hands and knees, sometimes pushing the entire weight of my body onto the paper. The pressure from the burnisher and moisture in the paper activated the fluidity of the paint and caused it to stain, shift, and bloom in unpredictable ways on and into the paper. I chose to create a frame with tape on the floor which created borders in each composition. Despite this border, the material often leaked over its edge, an occurrence which I welcomed as it referenced the way in which haunting forces refuse to neatly occupy a delineated space.

"Art is not the same thing as cerebation" (Orwell, *All Art is Propaganda*)

At its core, this process is low-tech and unpredictable printmaking which results in compositions which have been transformed or corrupted from the original painting. Working in this way facilitates material agency and distances me from the creation of the final image. Both of these qualities are vitally important to the overall meaning of the work, as I conceived the spaces depicted as ones in a state of flux due to the visual ruptures and interference produced by a haunting force. Additionally,

Mark Z. Danielewski's House of Leaves is a novel with multiple layers of narrative and a textual structure that reflects the action of the story. In one particular chapter, the characters become lost in a maze, while the section itself is constructed from a set of circular footnotes which perniciously prevent the reader from reaching the end of the chapter.

distancing myself from the final image reflects the inherent remove at which these spaces exist from immediate experience. Due to the unpredictability of the process, the paint can sometimes overwhelm

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<sup>11</sup> [Anastasia Mityukova Project Iceworm, 2018](#)

the picture plane and produce only blobs or smears. Because I am not interested in simply capturing a material interaction, but rather an interference in illusionistic space, I select pieces which still contain moments of clarity and tangibility of space.



Image 8: *Between the end and where we lie* (installation view) – ink and gouache on paper – dimensions variable – 2018



Image 9: *Between the end and where we lie* (detail view) – ink and gouache on paper – approx. 5x7in ea. – 2018

## INSTABILITY & IMPURITY

By engaging with problematic modernist ideals of purity in art, such as a willing acceptance of the limitations of the medium of a specific art and the abandonment of illusionistic space, I align myself with art historian David Craven who, in a discussion of abstract expressionism, asserts that “post-1945 U.S. art has emerged from an expansive and highly ‘impure’ process of cultural convergences” and further argues that these convergences represent a “polycentric legacy replete with various possibilities” (Craven 46). It is here that I recognize an opportunity in my own artistic practice to bring the polycentric influence of New Mexico and my subjective experiences to bear on a visual space of impurity. Pushing and hybridizing (rather than accepting) the limitations of my media, and still retaining a reference to illusionistic space allows me to position my work at the interface where absolutes collide and decenter traditional loci of power that exist in US landscape and abstract artwork genres.

### *Spectrum*

I formally address a lack of clarity by positioning my visual language in a shifting flux between representation and abstraction. In a series of lectures on abstract art delivered in 2003 to the public at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, former New York MOMA curator and art history professor Kirk Varnedoe described how, through abstraction, artists are able to “produce from the form of things defamiliarized, from our refocus on the things we thought we knew, from the banal, from the points between A and B, from all those momentary interstices where we have no category and no form of understanding” (Varnedoe 272). Varnedoe suggests an ability for abstraction to exist in a space of uncertainty and instability, a site which recognizes limits of understanding while also retaining the ability to invent and extrapolate.

In my own work as well, I “produce from the form of things defamiliarized” by facilitating material agency in the process of making. Work by an artist like Alexis Harding, who builds up large amounts of paint on surfaces until they begin to slip and move, is an example of a contemporary interplay between the intentions of the artist and the material processes that act outside of that. One example of how I approach this space of instability can be seen in *Venture through the veil* (2018). I build up layers of paint using both intentional marks and by placing the painting flat on the ground to facilitate interaction between oil and mineral spirits. Working quickly with diluted paint over a shifting ground allows me to sketch out a physical space which becomes abstracted as gravity and the fluidity of the material distort the original mark. Here it is important to stress the interaction between surface and

「僕らはあのころ何かを強く信じていたし、何かを強く信じることで自分を持っていた。そんな思いがそのままどこかに虚しく消えてしまうことはない」  
(Murakami, *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki*)。



depth, and the material quality of painting which grounds the viewer in a physical space through its objecthood while simultaneously situating the viewer in the image-space of the picture itself.

The intense color in this piece sits in contrast to the monochrome tints of *Between the end and where we lie*. In the case of the latter, a limited color palette suggests a temporal distance from the space depicted, while the saturated, toxic colors of *Venture through the veil* are utilized to create a sense of uncertainty and unease regarding the forces at work in the picture space. Beyond these specific uses, more generally my palette draws on the colors of New Mexico, the bruised purples and blues of the Sandia Mountains, muted greens and earth tones of the desert, and the brilliant oranges and yellows of its sunsets.



Image 10: *Venture through the veil* – latex and oil on canvas – 20x16in - 2018

From Roberto Bolaño's inimitable *The Savage Detectives*: "Of all the islands he'd visited, two stood out. The island of the past, he said, where the only time was past time and the inhabitants were bored and more or less happy, but where the weight of illusion was so great that the island sank a little deeper into the river every day. And the island of the future, where the only time was the future, and the inhabitants were planners and strivers, such strivers, said Ulysses, that they were likely to end up devouring one another."

### *Modernism and Material locality*

As I think through ways to insert the viewer into a relationship between landscape and self, the materiality of paint provides a path to approaching larger concepts. In an essay by artist and writer Stuart Elliot discussing the assertive materiality of Alexis Harding's work<sup>12</sup>, Elliot writes, "If the suggestion is perhaps that we cannot understand larger structures unless we understand something about our insertion into them, then the material locality of painting might present its value exactly at the point where it seems to slip away from us" (Elliot 1). This sense of being present, entering into something just as it slips away relates to ideas of perception and accessibility, where the hidden characteristics of spaces may offer clues to their existence, but elude comprehensive understanding. Such work, Elliot asserts, is a place where "notions of norm and dysfunction are bound up with our often conflicting interest, worlds constructed as much as given, and this is why there is value in the varying registers of coming together and falling apart in Harding's work" (Elliot 6). This quality of coming together and falling apart materially points toward a process of artmaking which leverages material autonomy to translate these varying registers and their resultant interactions. By re-inserting a socio-political context to material consciousness through the hybridity of my subject matter and interdisciplinary studio approach, I defy the purity of a Greenbergian assessment of modern abstract painting concerned entirely with materials and process. The hybridity of my visual language in both materials and approach instead reflects a contemporary reality that I observe most readily in the multifaceted nature of New Mexico, a border space of multiple languages, cultures, and histories. The interface of these various elements is where the production of contemporary painting occurs, and is an artistic philosophy which I link to feminist author and poet Gloria Anzaldúa's description of how "living in the borderlands produces knowledge by being within a system while also retaining the knowledge of an outsider who comes from outside the system" (Anzaldúa 7). Anzaldúa's philosophical and anthropological approach presents the physical and cultural border between the US and Mexico as something out of which a new identity and culture emerges. My own embodied experience of multiplicity in New Mexico is carried with me and combines with my perception and experience of

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<sup>12</sup> [Alexis Harding Crack Tip \(Unraveller\), 2011 oil and gloss on MDF 96 1/8 x 48 in](#)

spaces in Japan, creating a further overlap and opportunity for creation. *All our maps have failed* (2018) is an example of this overlap, where I explored a briefly glimpsed Fukushima landscape through watercolor paintings, monotypes, and photos before using fluid paint and quick brushstrokes to create an unstable space from oil on canvas. Though visually there is little to connect this work to Japan or New Mexico, the shifting, energetic marks suggest a collision of hidden forces out of which the space of the

Also from *Flights*: "They weren't real travelers: they left in order to return." picture emerges. I do not consider the other material explorations that led to this painting to be studies. Rather, they are a way of addressing the same subject through a different visual lens, and the chronology of their creation has little relevance to the importance I place on each individual piece. Through painting I can reflect a confluence of material approaches that manifests across a spectrum of representation in a diverse range of subject matter and influences. As in so much of my work, it is a single part of a multifaceted attempt to speak around the subject, an attempt which always leaves space for silence.

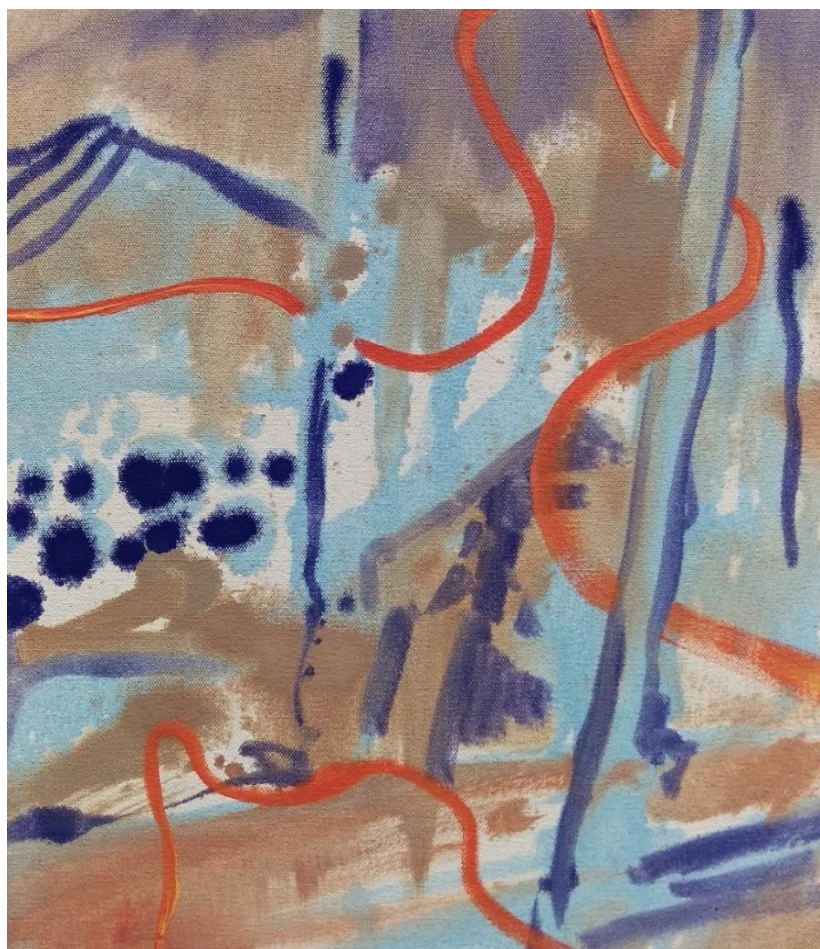


Image 11: *All our maps have failed* – oil on canvas – 14x12in – 2018



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**SOLACE**

How does one move forward  
when all the maps have failed?  
Perhaps our only choice is to  
lean  
into the hazy space of uncertainty  
somewhere between fiction and truth.  
They are the spaces  
around us,  
within us.  
Yet always

just out of reach.