

Drawing Mindfulness

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BFA The College for Creative Studies 2006

A Thesis Support Paper Submitted In Partial Fulfillment Of The
Requirements For The Degree Of
Master Of Fine Arts

Emily Carr University of Art + Design 2022

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Territorial Acknowledgement

I would like to acknowledge that for the past two years I have been studying, creating, writing, and residing on the unceded, ancestral lands of the skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), xʷməθkʷəy̍əm (Musqueam), and sə̌ilwətaʔ (Tseil-Waututh) peoples. The works that I have created during my time here have been directly inspired by the landscapes that these peoples have cared for and called home since time immemorial. These works were made from a place of wonder, humility and love for this beautiful place and it is not enough for me to simply acknowledge the land and those who once lived freely here but it is my hope that the care and stewardship of this place and all the lands of North America will soon be given back to its rightful owners.

Introduction

I made the decision to pursue my Masters of Fine Arts Degree at Emily Carr in February of 2020. What a strange moment to look back on in light of the global pandemic and the myriad of ways it has upended lives. Getting an MFA has been something I have wanted to do for so long and the anticipation and excitement I was feeling at that moment, coupled with the thrill of getting to move to a new country were incredible. What a rough two years it ended up being though. It took me a while to get up to Vancouver, due to Visa application delays because of Covid but once I was here, I don't think anything could have prepared me for the amount of alone time I was about to spend with myself. I had to cross the border alone; no one could come with me or visit me, and I couldn't go home because of the fourteen-day

quarantine. My cohort has been absolutely amazing but socializing and physically being together, especially that first year, was difficult because of restrictions.

I have never in my life spent so much time alone nor felt so utterly alone. It sounds depressing and although yes, it was very difficult at times, it turned out to be a strangely generative experience for me. The place that I ended up moving to was two blocks up the street from Locarno and Jericho Beaches. I knew nothing of them when I made the decision to live there but I have become so attached to this place and it has brought me so much solace. My cell phone rarely works here in Vancouver, a complication from moving to a new country, and I never ended up fixing it even though it often causes frustration because I secretly love that it does not work. It adds to the sense of loneliness and further enhances this relationship I've formed with my new home. The minute I leave the Wi-fi bubble I am completely alone and undistracted. These moments, during my walks on the beach, have given me so much time to really think about my relationship to myself, to the world around me, to my art, and what I want to share through it. It sounds cliché but when life throws us into unexpected, strange and difficult situations, we grow so much and that has been an unexpected outcome of this MFA experience. I've begun to see my practice and this solitary meditative state of walking and connecting to place, as integral to my art making, an intentional mindset that is reflected in my studio practice. The loneliness has brought a clarity of contemplation.

I consider myself to be a representational landscape artist, working in both oil and charcoal. It is very easy for others to initially see my practice as simply these beautiful finished pieces. However, there is so much more to it that I am seeking to discover and learn about in the works I create. I have questions that I am intrigued by and hopeful that in an intentional art practice like drawing, I will be able to find answers to them. They are questions about what it

means to be a thoughtful, present person, how to care for myself and others through intentional living and mindfulness. How to slow down in order to fall in love with my physical surroundings and the natural beauty, how to exist in a state of wonder and magic with everything around me, spending time in the landscape, cultivating a deep, rich relationship. Intentionality thinking of these works I am creating, from their very early stages, through their meticulous creation in the studio and the final realized image, as a form of mindful meditation. Searching for a state of being which allows me to step out of and resist the daily busy-ness, of life, of being constantly distracted in an attempt to keep up with the fast-paced world, of being overworked and entangled in the never-ending urge to be available through technology.

It is my hope that I could create a practice that in every step of the process, will offer resistance, a respite, a chance for the antithesis of hurried modern life. The research questions I am hoping to explore through my thesis engage with these thoughts. What does it look like to make time to just stare at the physical world around me and allow myself to exist in wonder, to prioritize a lifestyle of slow, deliberate observation, a gesture in opposition to the attention economy of modern Western society? To then take this slowness into my studio and spend hundreds of hours in thoughtful art making to recreate these moments of quiet solitude and considered gentleness? What does it mean for a meditative drawing practice to be a form of resistance?

Method

Jericho Beach I is a charcoal drawing of the pier at Jericho Beach originally known in Squamish as iy'a'l'mexw, located West of downtown Vancouver, on the South shore of the

Burrard inlet. It was February on a foggy, snowy day. This piece began with a walk in the snow. I had just moved to Canada, and it was my first day out of my fourteen-day quarantine. The landscape was totally new to me and I was excited to take advantage of the amazing weather to get acquainted. My works are always about places and the relationships I form with them and the work always begins with taking photographs. Sometimes they are quick first impressions, moments I find visually interesting. Other times images are gathered slowly over time, as a connection grows and a place begins to have more meaning to me.



Fig. 1 Stephanie Buer, *Jericho Beach I*, 2021

I find it very difficult to put into words exactly what it is about certain places and moments that stop me in my tracks and overwhelm me with this urge to recreate them through drawing. I have witnessed breathtaking sunsets and awe-inspiring mountain vistas but they

never place this fire in me to rush back to the studio to draw or paint them. I'm not certain why this is. Yi-Fu Tuan is an author and landscape theorist whom I look to in expanding the ways in which I relate to landscapes and in his book *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, he describes this exact same feeling I'm referring to in the chapter on "Intimate Experiences of Place." He is writing about how we often find beauty in the most unexpected places, particularly the cities in which we live and spend the majority of our time, for example the glow of a highway lamp or the trodden earth of an oft used path through an abandoned lot.

At the time we do not say, "this is it," as we do when we admire objects of conspicuous or certified beauty. It is only in reflection that we recognize their worth. At the time we are not aware of the drama; we do not know that the seeds of lasting sentiment are being planted. (Tuan 143)

In conjunction with those sentiments, I think that, for myself, it also has to do with a feeling of solitude, quiet, maybe loneliness, or melancholy, as well as the way that certain textures and shapes, weather and light speak to these emotions in a particular moment. It is the juxtaposition of human-made and natural objects, an unusual conversation taking place that speaks to my soul of uncommon and unnatural beauty, a place that doesn't quite fit in.

When I find a moment and a landscape I am struck by, I stop and take photos and sometimes make sketches on site. I go back to the studio with these images and will print them out and mull them over. I know that the use of photography in representational artmaking has been a point of contention ever since it became widely available and I would like to take a moment out of my method description to address my feelings toward the use of photography within representational drawing and painting. I use photography in the way that

almost every representational artist uses it nowadays, as a tool, along with any other tool or piece of technology I use. In order to feel comfortable using photography to inform my work it is important for me to be aware of where it falls short and a very obvious shortcoming is the ways in which it affects my connection to the landscape, and how it can make connections brief. Susan Sontag, an American writer, and theorist writing in the latter half of the 20th century writes on this in her book *On Photography* when discussing the ways in which tourists take pictures while on vacation, using it as: "A way of certifying experience, taking photographs is also a way of refusing it – by limiting experience to a search for the photogenic, by converting experience into an image, a souvenir . . . This gives shape to experience: stop, take a photograph, and move on." (Sontag 9) Photographing landscapes is quick but my time out in the landscape is not defined by the amount of time required to take a photograph, a deep relationship with place cannot be built in that time frame. Photography also only captures very specific moments and my drawings are often built of many photographs or moments of certain locations compiled over days, weeks, months, even years observing in real life and in captured images how the shape of clouds change within the fog, how the horizon line comes forward and recedes in different types of weather. A finished drawing in my studio is very rarely made from one single image. Even when using a single image, I heavily edit what I feel should be included or excluded from a finished drawing based on creating the atmosphere or memory of a place, how I remember it, or how it made me feel, more so than how it "actually" looked.

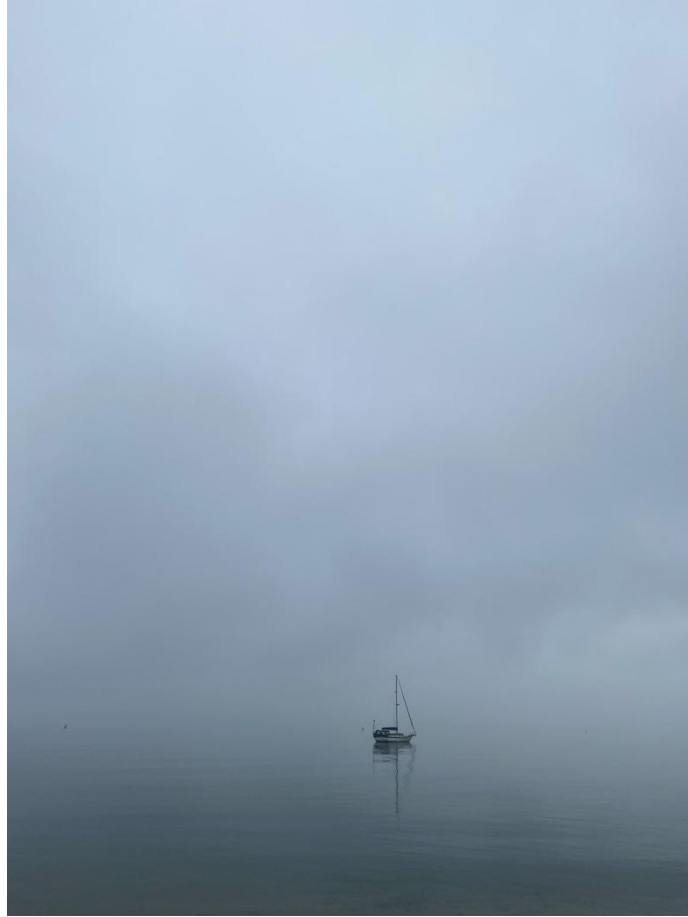


Fig. 2. A photo reference of fog, 2022

It is a piece of technology that I use in my art making process, to create my charcoal drawings. A convenience that allows me to collect images of places I love as I collect memories of places I inhabit, and to use them to inspire my works. My charcoal drawings are not the beach, and they're not the photo; they exist on their own, in an entirely independent and meaningful way.

Once I gather these photos and sketches together, mixed with my memories and mental impressions of place, I begin looking for interesting contrasts, textures and composition, something that keeps that initial spark of attraction burning. I often know right

away, at first glance which images carry that original attraction. I am overcome and cannot get it out of my head. It is again, an intuition that is so hard to put into words. This moment, when I fall in love with a landscape while out wandering and then again with the photograph in the studio, is what fuels my practice. There is so much self-motivation needed in the studio, to make work happen and especially within a process as tedious and time consuming as representation drawing, it would not be sustainable without this fascination.

I was attracted to this particular image, which I gathered on that day as the fog, the ocean and the snow blurred the horizon lines and the shadows. It was very atmospheric and monochromatic and I found it to be calming and lonely. There was so much negative space and emptiness for me to play with in order to further explore the subtleties of mark making. It was also the way that the subtle footprints in the freshly fallen snow, hinted at the presence of someone, a stillness, a contemplation that resembled my own interactions with that place. The dark shapes of the empty pier and how it speaks to the human-made in landscape but also adds direction, a line for the eye to travel from foot prints to horizon line. Though my work is representational, I draw inspiration from abstract painters as they are so skilled at creating movement in composition. This tool takes on greater importance when the relatable imagery is taken away and is why I believe, abstract painters are so masterful at this skill. If I stand back, look at my work and squint my eyes to blur the photo references or finished drawings, and I see an interesting abstract composition, I get excited. It has to be visually interesting as a representation landscape but also as an abstract work of art.

I then take that time spent in mindful solitude out of doors and bring it into my studio. The presence of mind I experience while I am out gathering images, and connecting to place is mimicked through my drawing process, it is personal, deliberate and intimate, built around

mindfulness and a carefully considered use of time and labor. I will elaborate in detail here; I begin with a piece of Rives BFK printmaking paper. It is an unusual choice for representational drawing but I find that the rougher texture accentuates the abstract quality of the marks. When viewed up close the paper helps the recognizable image to melt away and the small marks become more visible and intimate. I then lay in the image, by hand with a graphite pencil. Once that is finished, I begin building up layers with charcoal and cross hatching until the image is complete. The rendering always happens from the upper left corner across to lower right, the reason being that I am right-handed, and that it is so essential in the finished piece for there to be absolute perfection and tidiness. I cannot have any smudging, especially if I am leaving large areas of paper blank as negative space. This habit also mimics the action of reading, and although it is not a reflection of actual reading, as in a book, it is similar to the way I “read” a scene, my eyes travel carefully over each object moving left to right, across my view. This slow, intentional way of moving across the landscape with my pencil brings me into a deeper understanding and curiosity with all the objects within my view and picture plane, meditating for long periods of time on each element.

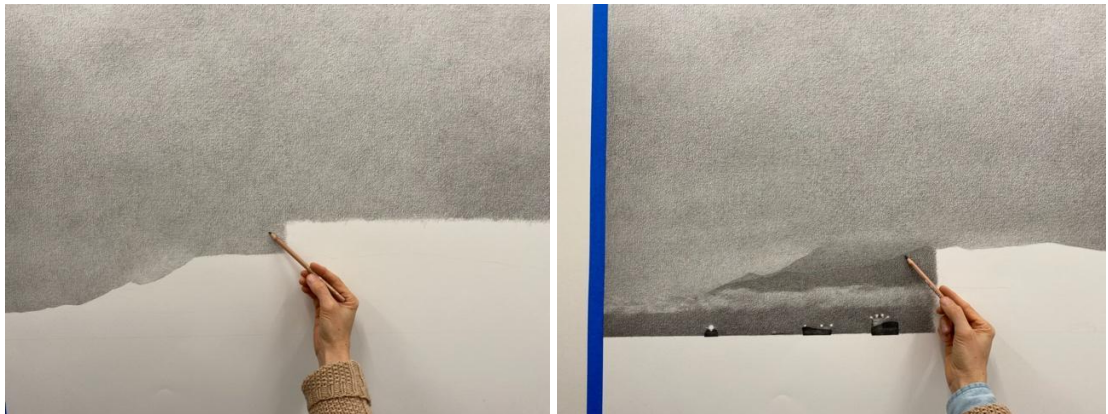


Fig 3. Drawing in Progress, 2021

I prefer to use a certain type of charcoal called carbon. There is a greater ratio of wax to charcoal than in a standard charcoal pencil. As a result of the increase in wax, and combined with the toothier texture of the paper, the blacks become much richer and darker. The blacks don't have the sheen of a graphite, or the chalky quality of a standard charcoal; carbon is a matte black, that is so consuming in its rich darkness. It adds great depth to the work. The depth in the blacks is also built up very slowly, starting with the lighter shades and up through the pencil hardness to the softest, darkest carbon pencil. It is a long and tedious process but it is the duration of time spent in thoughtful, working meditation that makes the pieces more meaningful to me.

The duration in and of itself is a powerful component of the work, on many levels. Each piece is painstakingly made over anywhere from eighty to two hundred hours, depending on the size. Hours which are spent alone, with just a piece of paper and a charcoal pencil. It is painfully minimal in materials, and tremendously time consuming. What does this time requirement signify in modern, western society? Do we have that much time to sit, to be still and to create in such a minimally focused manner? Still being productive in a sense but in a slightly ridiculous, counterproductive sense. So many things are begging for my attention: work, expectations, social media, emails, texts. Our world is an intensely busy, overstimulating place, and attention spans are both short and worn thin. The stress of surviving, keeping up and staying connected is crushing. What does it mean to stop and stare, to wonder at a beautiful, simple landscape? On top of that, what does it mean to take it further and spend hundreds of hours quietly alone, with a simple paper and pencil and bring that landscape to life, with one tiny scratch at a time? I am sitting, staring, being with these spaces for a completely unreasonable amount of time and I am in love with this gesture and how in a way, it

resists our fast-paced society. Just to be still and wonder, endlessly about the world, this is the embodiment of my practice.

This working meditation that I experience when I am drawing is difficult for me to experience in other media. The simplicity of those materials and the slow build-up of marks remind me of the quiet moments I have while sitting in the landscape, without the distraction of all the things that disrupt my mind in the day to day. These moments bring me much calm, peace and clarity, they are essential to my mental health and happiness and I love how being out of doors and in the flow state of drawing are so connected in this way. I am a creature of solitude, of silence, and stillness and this practice is my home. My hope is that this gentleness will translate to the viewer as they experience the drawings. When first seeing the drawings from a distance, viewers are impressed by the representational quality of the beautiful scene but up close, viewers are often struck by the transition, the rough texture of the paper and the distinctive and deliberate marks change the image and the experience. In choosing not to blend the charcoal but showing each mark, the viewer transitions from the illusion of the scenery to being struck by the obviously time consuming and meditated marks, that stand alone but harmoniously join to build the whole. The viewer in a sense is living both vicariously through the imagery as well as through each discrete mark made on the paper. Giving them the opportunity through this honest and meditative process, to step out of their hectic, fast paced, and noisy world, to slow down, and appreciate the landscape, labor, intimacy, and solitude.



Fig 4. Drawing detail, 2021



Fig 5. Stephanie Buer, *Burrard Inlet*, 2021

Having described in detail the inner workings of my method, as an artist, and how these processes are interrelated in regards to my seeking of a state of mind and a state of existing in the world, I would now like to talk about how I was originally attracted to this type of working as well as this way of connecting to the landscapes and the places with which I draw inspiration. I could be painting and drawing literally anything, but I choose landscapes and why do I choose landscapes? What is in me that feels such a strong pull and connection to the land? Also, how does who I am and where I came from influence my thoughts toward the land? There is also this predilection in my character to seek out balance and calm. It is in my personality to be a more relaxed person. I often wonder if it is a characteristic I have intentionally cultivated or is it something I am born with? Whichever it is, I seem to always be seeking the slow, the silent, the peaceful and continually looking for it in the landscape.

Positionality

The land has always played an important role in my life and in my upbringing. Growing up in rural Michigan, we were very poor. For many folks it may have seemed like a neglected childhood, defined by all the things that were not there. There were no trips to Disneyland, no vacations at all actually. No fancy house, a run-down trailer in fact, that was in constant need of repair. However, when I look back on those early years that shaped me, I don't see the deficiencies; I see a golden childhood, lived almost entirely out of doors. The type of childhood where shoes came off on the last day of school as you ran outside and rarely went back on until the classes started up in the fall. Summers filled with fishing, swimming, building forts, climbing trees, and riding bikes. Though I had few material possessions, what my father had

that he shared with me was a love and respect for land and nature. In hindsight, that to me, is a greater gift than any other I could have received. I've carried this attachment into my adulthood as well. Wherever I go, wherever I have lived I have been outdoors, whether it was wandering the streets of Detroit, rock climbing in the deserts of Oregon, or mountaineering in the alpine in Washington, it's a love and attachment I will never outgrow. It forms the base and the passion that drives my life and my art practice. It is through drawing that I come to better know a place physically and how I inhabit it.

I've always admired my father and looked up to him. I wanted to do everything he did, as a kid, go everywhere he went. I spent countless weekends up north at our family cabin on hunting and fishing trips with him and my siblings. There were no rules up north; you could wander and do whatever you liked. As children that forest was where we became comfortable with being in nature, and it nurtured our imaginations. You could wander for hours and never get lost. My father used to say, "just walk till you hit a fence, follow it to a gate and then follow the road home." I spent a great amount of time alone, in the woods up there, I had favorite trees, swamps, and fields, places I would sit for hours on end, alone, just listening. This is how my father was in nature as well, and I inherited this demeanor from him. We would walk for hours and he would always tell me he enjoyed my company because he never felt the need to speak. We just existed so amicably and peacefully together. He admired things about me that others thought were so odd; they would tell me I was shy and I was so slow but my father would tell me that I wasn't slow, that I was deliberate and he liked that about me.

Also, what an unexpected joy to be a child of the generation before computer and internet technology existed! Those days, weekends, weeks, spent in the woods with my dad

were entirely phone-less, social media-less. I would love to go back in time just to experience that clear and un-distracted mind, my child self that ran to the woods at every opportunity to just sit and be alone in nature. I am constantly chasing those moments nowadays. Those moments where you step out of time, step out of the demands of the day-to-day and just exist for the sake of existing, enjoying the world around you with no objective and no distractions.

My art practice today is a continuous conversation with those early moments in life. I am still that child, so happy in solitude, in nature; I really haven't changed much at all. Sometimes it is harder to slow down and tap into that magic, and my art is a way to keep that connection alive. Always looking for ways in which to recreate the simple moments in place through mark making. Seeking to connect with the land, to be at peace in solitude, I yearn to share it with others, through the work, and to give them an opportunity to experience that childlike wonder of just existing and enjoying nature.

However, there is conflict in this relationship, especially as it pertains to my love of re-creating and connecting to landscape through my art, that I feel I must address. I am descended from European immigrants and settlers. No matter where I live and work in North America, I am always living and working on land that was stolen from Indigenous peoples. Also, as a European descendant making artwork about land, I acknowledge that the history of landscape painting in North America, is fraught with difficulties, with a dishonest, entitled and selfish past. So, although I feel a deep connection to and love of place, these places I have loved and called home have a very dark, conflicted past. They have been stolen from their original inhabitants through greed, genocide, coercion and dishonesty.

If I am to continue to make work about land, it must be with the utmost gentleness, gratitude, humility and openness to listen, to be very mindful of what my work conveys and adds to the conversation, and not to perpetuate past wrongs. These thoughts will be touched on again later in this writing and further, this work is ongoing and most likely unending, being mindful in this way has already taught me so much in my short time here in British Columbia on unceded territory and at Emily Carr University where there is a strong emphasis on reading and learning Indigenous history and ways of knowing.

Research Methodology

Walking // Noticing

It is so important within my practice to always be looking intently at the world around me, noticing objects, their relationships with each other, their relationship with myself, the weather, the light, the way that I am feeling. Over the years of learning to be more aware of my surroundings, I have cultivated a habit of making time for wonder. Since a young age I have made time to cultivate a deliberate rhythm of moving through the world that allows me the time to stop at any moment, to be present to converse with the landscape and notice, it is what my dad always referred to as my “being deliberate.” This is where the research methodology begins. If I want to make works that embody a sense of calm in order to counteract the disconnected-ness of our society, cultivating a practice that prioritizes “seeing” is an important first step. Cultural Theorist, Byung-Chul Han, in his book *The Burnout Society* addresses ways in which technology and modern life are causing mental degradation in our society and ways in

which we can work towards more aware, mental states and one of those methods is through a "Pedagogy of Seeing" he elaborates:

Learning to see means "getting your eyes used to calm, to patience, to letting things come to you"- that is, making yourself capable of deep and contemplative attention, casting a long and slow gaze. Such learning-to-see represents the "*first* preliminary school for spirituality [*Geistigkeit*]." (Han 21)

My image gathering is a form of seeing, and it takes place while walking or biking. Walking is an effective way to slow down, to organize my thoughts and also to turn my attention towards the tangible world around me. The moment I stop using my truck to navigate the world and use my own two feet or even my bicycle, I'm moving at a pace that is more human, it allows for a freedom of thought and observation that is more appropriate. Driving is fast and stressful; my mind is not at ease; I'm not noticing and connecting. In my place here in Vancouver, I bike and/or walk every day and I've begun to build a relationship with this place I now inhabit. Jenny Odell, is an American artist, writer and educator and in her book, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*, talks at great length about how we can and should reshape our lives to reflect this philosophy of slowing down, to exist in the physical realm, to become more aware of ourselves, and to notice the world around us and how others and ourselves live in that world: "I propose that rerouting and deepening one's participation in history and in a more-than-human community, from either a social or ecological perspective, the ultimate goal of 'doing nothing' is to wrest our focus from the attention economy and replant it in the public, physical realm." (Odell xii)

What an important practice “noticing” is, and walking really strengthens this practice. An absolutely imperative skill, taking time to notice forces a situatedness in the real, and it cultivates curiosity. This semester I was given the opportunity to teach a foundation drawing class at Emily Carr. Learning to teach drawing has had this strange way of clarifying what it is I do, and how I do it, highlighting things that are important to the process. While developing a curriculum I realized early on that just as important as teaching my students to draw, I needed to cultivate in them a practice of noticing. Working on being fully present to notice is a difficult skill but it is essential to my practice and to knowing the landscape. Odell writes on noticing, and wonderfully sums up my very thoughts on what it means to move intentionally throughout the places that we live and to allow ourselves to be surprised by them: “Snaking through the midst of the banal everyday is a deep weirdness, a world of flowerings, decompositions, and seepages, of a million crawling things, of spores and lacy fungal filaments, of minerals reacting and things being eaten away – all just on the other side of the chain-link fence.” (Odell 126)



Fig. 6. Stephanie Buer, *Smoke I*, 2020

Almost every day, on my bike ride home from the studio, when it is dark, I stop by this same log at Jericho Beach and see the same Great Blue Heron. She’s always in the same spot,

just near the shore, hunting. It has become a daily ritual for me, to sit in those peaceful moments and acknowledge this beautiful being. My nightly visits with the heron are a daily reminder that I am just a small part of a larger, more complex and amazing world, a non “human” centered world. Taking time out to connect and notice the ways that life moves through this spot at the end of the street I live on, and has moved through it for thousands of years, has been a deeply moving experience and I hope that love and respect for place will seep into the drawings I create.



Fig. 7. The Great Blue Heron at Jericho Beach, 2022

Another way to interpret this important concept of noticing is through the physical artworks themselves. I need this noticing and connecting to be represented in the pieces. I choose drawing as a method to recreate these mindful moments, and I use drawing in a representational style as I feel the wonder and magic of the illusion mimics the wonder and magic I experience in real life. Also, my meticulous nature of working allows time to meditate

on the mark making and the spaces which I am spending time with. The method is very slow, solitary and thoughtful, mirroring the mind set I have while out of doors immersed in nature.

The final product can often be dismissed as just being beautiful or exceptional in its detail but just as I am working to cultivate a way of seeing on my walks, I believe this practice should be mirrored in how we look at the finished pieces. In Susan Sontag's writings about art theory, she often advocates for the aesthetic, for the less "complicated" in art. In Sontag's text, *"Against Interpretation"* she discusses the main difference in viewing and critiquing work that is more formal and aesthetic in nature versus those that lean more heavily on theory. She begins with a short history lesson on where she sees the shift happen from when work was allowed to exist purely for its pleasure and aesthetics, to when art needed to justify itself through a concrete, conceptual interpretation in order to be taken seriously. I enjoy how she argues to return art to its pre-conceptual based existence, referring to its magical properties, its powers to transcend knowing and explanation. In the essay she writes; "In most modern instances, interpretation amounts to the philistine refusal to leave the work of art alone. Real art has the capacity to make us nervous. By reducing the work of art to its content and then interpreting *that*, one tames the work of art. Interpretation makes art manageable, conformable."(Sontag 8). This argument really resonates with me and my practice. I believe that the work should be allowed to simply exist and be enjoyed for the images that are present, without the need for over explanation. Sometimes images are simply full of wonder, and beauty and in my opinion these things should be able to stand on their own. They often stem from a fascination with trees, or water or fog, just a general obsession with nature and its inherent beauty. When I am out of doors, standing in awe of the snow for example, I don't feel the need to discover the concept behind this moment, I am just struck with it, simply as it is. My hesitation with focusing too much on the theory, is that content often has a way of taking

the viewer outside of the physical work, asking them to go somewhere else, where the specific content's definition and substance lies more clearly. The beauty I am striving for in my work is in being present, and it is difficult to ask the viewer simply to be present when the theory or content is begging for them to go elsewhere in order to be fully understood. Sontag argues further: "What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more. Our task is not to find the maximum amount of content in a work of art, much less to squeeze more content out of the work than is already there. Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all." (Sontag)



Fig. 8. Stephanie Buer, *Jericho Beach II*, 2021

Silence // Emptiness

I also think that an intentional use of silence and emptiness in my work is a form of research and resistance. I think that both silence and emptiness work in parallel in my drawings. The empty space which I intentionally leave creates an atmosphere of silence and both are very important forms of research in my drawing practice. In studying the importance of empty space, or negative space in my work it is apparent and thus in need of address, the lines that are easily drawn between my work and the work of earlier European, Romantic landscape painters, a Western art movement taking place around the mid 18th to mid 19th century, and as its name suggests, it was moving away from the ideas and rationale coming out of the Enlightenment and leaning into the more "Romantic". Lines that are made even more apparent in that I am a descendant of European settlers. I will start with acknowledging this tie and move forward with a desire to distance myself from this movement. In my research I have found the movement to be wholly masculine and imperialist in nature, it separates the human from nature, taking the stance of "Man" viewing or being confronted with nature and it sees the natural world as being filled with horror, terror and confrontation. While also seeing the world as a place to make money, made up of natural resources to extract at any and all costs, and artists of this era would often make works that glorified this. These are a few of the troublesome lineages from which landscape art is often tied to. I would like to step into a different way of conversing about art making within the landscape, a place where we view and interact with the natural world more gently and respectfully. Art critic Jerry Saltz recently shared a quote by American abstract painter Elizabeth Murray in which she is responding to a question about how she fits into art history; "That way of seeing historically, belongs to the guys. The greatest part about being a woman in the world of painting is that I'm not really part

of it. I can do whatever I want.” (Saltz) I would like to transition into a conversation with a more feminine viewpoint, one that listens and learns about how we as humans should respectfully exist within the natural world, especially learning from Indigenous ways of knowing, working towards respect, reconciliation, and reciprocity. How can I make artworks about the landscape that are different from the Romantics, not just different but subversive?

One of the ways in which I see my drawings working differently as landscapes is in the way that they are presented and viewed. There is of course the obvious, representational reading of the landscape, the easily consumed imagery. However, I like the reading to go a bit deeper, to go beyond the easily consumed, to make the drawing vague and unsettling. This happens in the double viewing of the work which I have mentioned earlier. From a distance it is a landscape but move closer, move in very close to the drawing and the recognizable image melts away, it becomes visible only as a fuzzy, somewhat messy collection of marks on a piece of paper, undecipherable. The illusion is broken and the viewer is confronted with my own personal relationship to the drawing, to the marks made by my hand, to my inner conversations over long periods of time embedded in every tiny little mark. It is these tiny hatching lines, made tediously and meditatively over long periods of time, time spent contemplating my place in the world, the particular places I am connecting to, my labor and my commitment, that make up these drawings. Not only do the marks become more visible but, in the melting away of the imagery, the emptiness opens up on another level, a negative space of ambiguity and ungrounded emptiness. It is as if my inherited relationship to the land is being untethered, and undone, this disconnected seemingly empty space is a space of questioning. As the viewer stands back the recognizable, consumable image returns but it is buzzing now, buzzing with a double read that the viewer is now aware of, this ungrounded space as well as this gentle,

feminine way of seeing and creating, they are my attempts to interpret and better understand the world around me, though meticulous care and attention.

Henry F. Skerit in "Marking the Infinite", his catalogue essay from the exhibition entitled, *Marking the Infinite: Contemporary Women Artists from Aboriginal Australia* at University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology; writes about the ways in which a group of women Aboriginal artists from Australia have been expanding and changing this conversation around landscape art and it really resonates with how I feel about this need to shift from movements born of Western-centric absolutes that emerged from Romanticism and high Modernism:

Coupled with the question mark that global warming places over the sustainability of human life, there has never been a more urgent need for artists to develop new world-pictures, ones that imagine our shared predicament as the diverse occupants of the same planet. To meet the needs of our present, such world-pictures must necessarily be both local and global; they must be planetary in scope but human in scale; they must balance the big with the small. (Skerit 9)

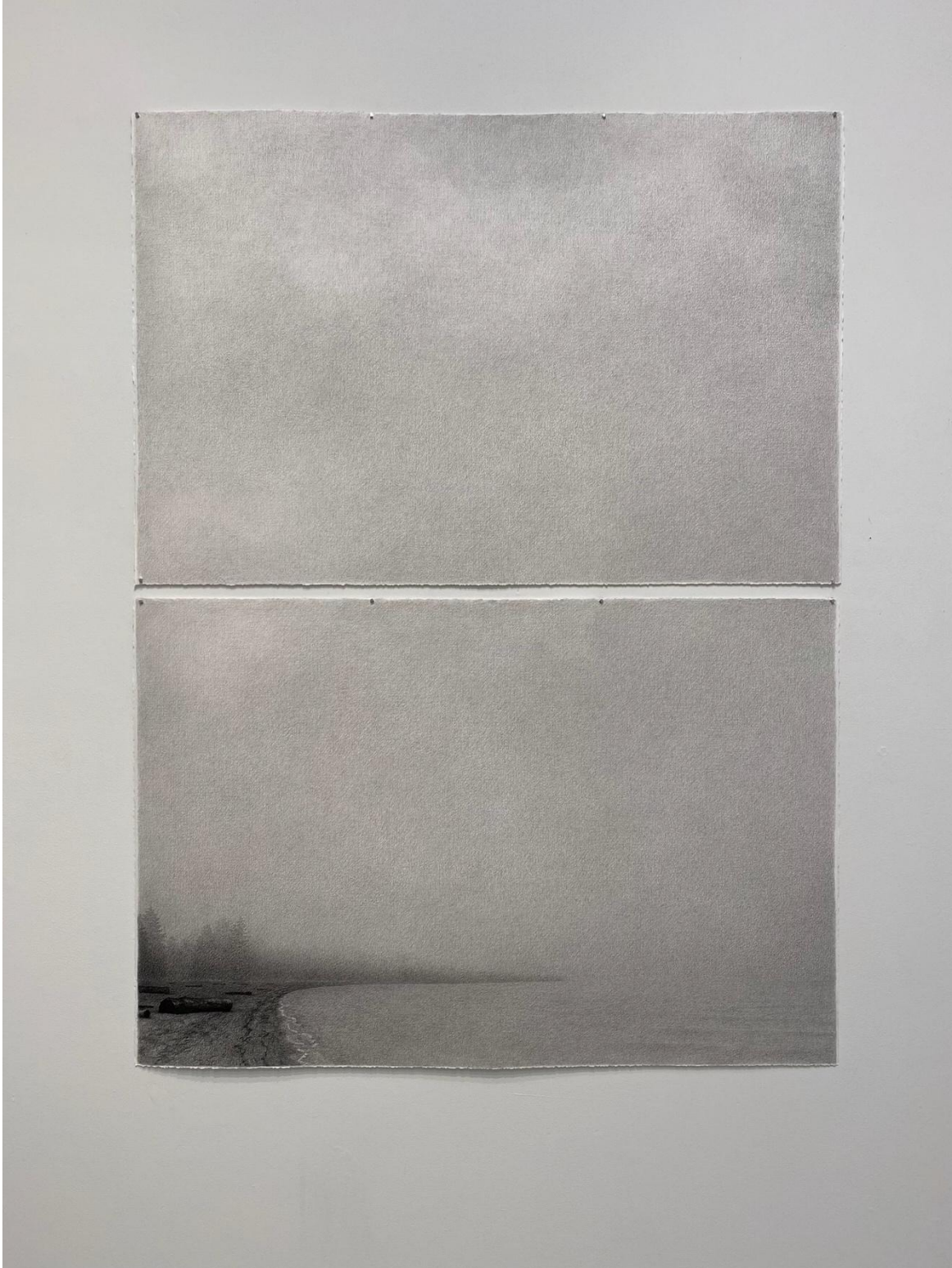


Fig. 9. Stephanie Buer, *Untitled (fog)*, 2022.

Resistance

I also would like my practice to exist in a space that resists this mindset which is held so staunchly in western society of always being busy, that a person's worth is based on their labor, on how well they do in their jobs, on how available and connected they are. This lifestyle of overstimulation and hyper connectedness, that at every moment of the day I am available to others; I want to be able to turn away from this lifestyle from time to time, to create space that brings a counter-existence, one of waiting, of stillness, of wonder, moving slowly with intent, allowing for moments in a day which go entirely against the status of what it means to be a contributing member in a consumer-based capitalist society.

Rebecca Solnit is a contemporary American author who writes often about many of the themes which inspire my work. We share a passion for this idea of connection to place, the importance of walking in knowing and meditating and also this resistance to these time saving technologies, and the ways in which they often rob us of our time and our attention, even though they are billed as objects which should be time savers. It is such an odd dichotomy that these things are invented and put into the world to build in more free time but in reality, do the opposite. She addresses these ideas in her book on walking, *Wanderlust*.

The Multiplication of technologies in the name of efficiency is actually eradicating free time by making it possible to maximize the time and place for production and minimize the unstructured travel time in between. New timesaving technologies make most workers more productive, not freer, in a world that seems to be accelerating around them. Too, the rhetoric of efficiency around these technologies suggests that what

cannot be quantified cannot be valued – that that vast array of pleasures which fall into the category of doing nothing in particular, of woolgathering, cloud-gazing, wandering, window-shopping are nothing but voids to be filled by something more definitive, more productive, or faster paced. (Solnit 10)

These “voids” are exactly the spaces I am interested in leaving unfilled; they are the spaces I am seeking to elevate and maintain. Odell echoes Solnit when she writes about her relationship to technology: “I look down at my phone and wonder if it isn’t its own kind of sensory-deprivation chamber. That tiny, glowing world of metrics cannot compare to this one, which speaks to me instead in breezes, light and shadow, and the unruly, indescribable detail of the real.” (Odell 29)

I am noticing a common theme among a lot of writers nowadays, for example, many of those who I am reading and referencing in this text, who speak on these ideas of what it means to be alive in the world today. Whether speaking on ecology, feminism, indigenous ways of knowing, science, art theory, they all seem to be calling for an urgent need to turn away from our phones, our computers, our workaholic tendencies and notice the world around us. This noticing is crucial. This slowing down and connecting to the world could cultivate better mental health, a better understanding of our fragile place in the world, and help us to become better stewards and members of this planet. My nightly visits with the Great Blue Heron would lead me to believe that this is true. These visits have changed me. I hope that my work and the way that I live can contribute to this urgency through a kind of resistance. By “resistance” I am referring to how I spend my time, putting away my phone for a while to fully enjoy those slow meandering walks, noticing all the beautiful life around me, listening to the birds. Resistance through silence, making space in my works for thoughtful reflection, an embrace of the

emptiness. Resistance through how I spend my work hours, sitting for an absolutely absurd amount of time, lovingly crafting these natural landscapes one tiny mark at a time.

I find negative space to be an effective visual tool which I can use in my drawings to speak to the importance of slowing down and making space for what Solnit refers to as “woolgathering, cloud-gazing, and wandering”. Erling Kagge, Norwegian arctic explorer and author, in his book, *Silence in the Age of Noise* writes, in regards to the music of Beethoven, that it is in the pauses, in the silence that his work becomes so poignant, “He understood that when we are exposed to silence, our minds and thoughts expand outward.” (Kagge 3)

Through the use of simple compositions, negative space, fine attention to detail and mark making, I am trying to incorporate these mindful ways of moving through the world, allowing for empty space and thoughtfulness. The depiction of a snowy evening or a foggy morning, embodies this idea. Calm, meditative silence can be conveyed through the use of empty space, allowing others to share in this presence, to suspend time and just exist in thoughtful reflection and silence. This space can convey a cold breeze, the crunch of the snow underfoot or the damp mist of the fog on one’s cheek: a universally shared language of being in the elements and a part of the world. In my drawing *Untitled (snow)* I wanted to create space for pause by leaving the majority of the picture as blank white paper, untouched by the pencil. By expanding the negative space, it forces a greater emphasis on the elements that are highly detailed and fully rendered, the logs, the power lines, and trees, but it does not overstimulate the viewer as they can let their eyes move back into the emptiness and rest. I feel it embodies silence and empty space.



Fig 10. Stephanie Buer *Untitled*, 2021.

Artistic Influences

Alongside my reading and research, it is also important for me to delve into my art ancestry, and to be in dialogue with those artists that came before me, who learned and spoke in a material language which I would like to learn from and align my own material language with, those artists whose shoulders I stand upon. Nothing that I myself do in my studio would be possible without the works of those that came before me both in regards to making the material process possible, but also in the inspiration and formal aspects that I build upon. Recognizing and valuing my artistic influences provides me with the opportunity to see the

world as artists from past generations saw it and how they chose to interpret it through their material practice. Who am I studying and pulling inspiration from, in order to hone in on my own visual language and how am I using that visual language to interpret the world around me in a way that aligns with my methodology? How are these artists not only influencing the ways in which I work but radically changing the way in which I view and interpret my own world? Spending time with other artists' works can drastically change and alter my point of view, in a powerful way, cause me to question things and change how I interact with people, land, and the objects around me; altering the ways in which I see. A powerful work of art can allow me to see things in an entirely new way, which in turn will affect the ways in which I am bringing the world around me into my own work.

Andrew Wyeth

One of the artists who is most influential for my artistic practice, and whose work I find incredibly beautiful and inspiring, is Andrew Wyeth. A 20th Century American painter, Wyeth is known for his melancholic and often poignant depictions of Eastern American rural landscapes, and their inhabitants. The work focuses on the farmlands, and homes of the rural folks who lived there, with a predilection for capturing the banal within everyday life. I draw influence from Wyeth's paintings, and his method of working in a myriad of ways, most notably within his landscapes, and his representational style of painting. The majority of his work was made in the middle of the twentieth century, particularly in the 1960's, which was a time when working realistically in the art world was out of fashion. In Wyeth's paintings I find an acute expression of the emotional breadth in viewing the world through another's hand and mind. What their

eye sees and how they choose to focus on it, in an attempt to better know and convey themselves and the world, creates such a deep and personal level of knowing the world. Taken from a writing about Wyeth's painting techniques by E.P. Richardson in an article from the *Atlantic Monthly*, printed in a Catalogue from an exhibition in 1973 at The Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco . . . Wyeth works with, " . . . a conviction that the wonder of the objects which make up this world can be grasped only by the most painstaking and loving study."

(Richardson)

Another way in which I find my method closely aligned with Wyeth's is how he chose what imagery to paint, or where and how he found inspiration for his paintings. Similar to my practice, it comes from a deeply rooted relationship with walking, and spending time outside, in order to feel more connected to and better know a place. Through wandering without distraction, with an openness to listen and experience the world around oneself. In an interview with Time Magazine printed in 1965, he articulates exactly how I feel about finding inspiration:

You see, I don't say, 'Well, now I'm going to go out and find something to paint,' To hell with that. You might just as well stay home and have a good glass of whiskey. Really, I just walk a great deal over the countryside. I try to leave myself very blank – a kind of sounding board, all the time very open to catch a vibration, a tone from something or somebody . . . every so often I'll catch, out of the corner of my eye, off balance, a flash impression of something, a spark of excitement. (Meryman 6)

Wyeth goes on to say in the article that these moments will sit with him for days, weeks, months or even years before he begins to recreate it in his art and I feel so akin to this way of

collecting images and information. Nowadays, with the inventions of personal cameras on our phones and printers, I feel quite lucky that I can be literal with this way of sitting with an image. I will print out the moments that catch my eye and post them up all over my studio and just set them there and wait for the moment to come up when I just can't wait any longer, and the desire to bring that moment to life in the work becomes overwhelming!

Fig. 11. Andrew Wyeth *Plowed Road*, 1985

Wyeth also seems to have been drawn to very sparse, monochromatic landscapes, much like myself. Winter is my favorite season to draw and paint, especially when there is snow. It adds another layer of gentleness, thoughtfulness and solitude; it speaks volumes. In that same interview Wyeth also touches on this tendency which we share.

I prefer winter and fall, when you feel the bone structure in the landscape - the loneliness of it - the dead feeling of winter. Something waits beneath it - the whole story doesn't show. I think anything like that which is contemplative, silent, shows a person alone people always feel is sad. Is it because we've lost the art of being alone?
(Meryman 6)

I am also attracted to Wyeth's compositional choices, his color palette and his use of negative space, or emptiness. In Wyeth's landscape painting entitled, *Heavy Snow* (1967), all of these aspects that I noted are wonderfully visible. The composition, in its simplicity is stunning, and the use of negative space creates such an environment of calm and serenity. The limited and monochromatic palette and the way that the color of the sky and the hillside covered in snow are barely discernible to each other. Wyeth's sparing yet emotional treatments demonstrate how so much can be said with so little, which is pertinent to the world in which we live in today. It is a world where there is an ever-increasing amount of noise and activity, so much to distract ourselves with that as Wyeth states, we've lost the art of being alone and also being alone in silence.

Fig 12. Andrew Wyeth *Heavy Snow*, 1967

Vija Celmins

Another artist whom I feel my work is connected to is Vija Celmins, her work is absolutely stunning in its beauty and attention to detail, there is an acknowledgment, an indebtedness and a similarity between our works which I must recognize. Artists who are

creating work today are able to do so because of the growth and effort put in by those artists that came before them, and the drawings that I am making today are definitely in deep gratitude for the drawings that Vija Celmins has made. In a lot of respects, she paved the way for an art form like charcoal drawing to be a stand-alone, to be taken seriously in the art world.

Vija Celmins was born in Riga, Latvia in 1938, she and her family escaped amidst World War II and moved to America where she still lives and works today. Her early career and formative years were spent on the west coast, in LA and later she moved to the east coast to be closer to the art scene in New York City. Her works that I will be referencing are the intimate and meticulous graphite and charcoal drawings which she made of the ocean. She drew many subjects in intimate detail including space, the desert, and spider webs but for obvious reasons, it is these drawings of the ocean that I am particularly attracted to. These were all up close studies of the surface of things she was fascinated by in the natural world, often lacking a horizon or a determinate object to place them. She seems to have a fascination with drawn surfaces which I can wholeheartedly relate to. She had this obsession with staying true to the tools of her craft, not hiding the fact that it was a drawing by leaving the evidence of the mark visible but also leaning into the power of representation to create this magical illusion in her works. Writer Sarah Manguso writes about Celmins' work in an article for Frieze Magazine: "What makes her images so alive is the consummate craftsmanship that goes into them . . . every mark fits with every other mark in a seamless image that refers only to itself." (Manguso)

Fig 13. Vija Celmins *Untitled (Ocean)*, 1977

Celmins is also unapologetic with her use of photographic references in her work, much the way that I have attempted to be in this writing. She would even use photographs that she cut out of science magazines to recreate images of the stars in space. She explained that the finished works were not the photograph; they were a thing wholly unto themselves. In Celmins own words, during an interview with Calvin Tomkins for *The New Yorker Magazine*: “Some people think I just sit down and copy the photograph . . . it is precisely that I *reinvent* it in other terms.” (Tomkins)

Celmins is also an avid walker and observer. She was, as many artists are, astute at noticing. Her studio, for much of her early career, was in Venice Beach and her walks, like my own, were along the ocean. I believe that in this time spent wandering on the beach she too saw the beauty in the simple, in leaving space for emptiness in the works. This sense of gentleness and calm that I am trying to recreate in my own works is clearly evident in hers. Again, from her interview and article from *The New Yorker*: “There is a furious fullness about it, despite the general emptiness. That fullness is the promise that one can look into the abyss and live.” (Tomkins)

Fig. 14. Vija Celmins *Long Ocean*, 1973

Along with my gratitude for her solidifying a place in the art world for charcoal works to be taken seriously, I am also grateful for her dedication to representational art. Working in an era when Modern abstraction still dominated painting and as a woman doing so back in the 1970's, is very admirable. It is a difficult genre of art to be working in as is, but to be taken seriously at that time as well as to be so successful, is amazing. I feel such a strong affinity with Celmins, not only do I find my process aligning with hers in so many ways, but she spends her days now, living outside of the city, with her cat Raymond whom she lovingly refers to as her husband and she drives around with him in her 12-year-old Toyota. I think to myself, "me too Vija, me too", except my cat is named Matilda and my Toyota is 32 years old, all the same. Let's draw oceans together sometime.

Etel Adnan

Etel Adnan is my third and final artist that I would like to share as a part of this writing. Her work is quite different from Wyeth and Celmin's, but it still has much in common as far as mood and aesthetic language goes. Though Adnan is in fact a landscape painter, it is her poetry that has inspired and influenced my drawings of late. Perhaps it is because she also speaks in the language of landscape painting that I find her poetry to be so relatable. Etel Adnan is a Lebanese-American painter, poet and essayist, born in Beirut, Lebanon in 1925. Throughout her life she spent time living primarily in America and France and has had an incredibly prolific and active life. I am focusing on her poetry but I do believe it stands mentioning and showing an example of her beautiful landscape paintings. They are so stark and simplistic, wavering between representational and abstract and her use of color is stunning.

Fig. 15. Etel Adnan *Untitled*, 2010

Adnan's poetry consists of meditative observations of the places she lives, mingled with the thoughts which are at that time flitting through her mind. It reads as a stream of consciousness, or a collection of streams of consciousness as she wanders about the land, experiencing and observing the natural world. I find it to be very mindful and meditative, similar to the ways in which I wander outside looking for inspiration. In fact, reading these poems has helped me to be more present and focused while out walking, observing what I am seeing in tandem with what I am thinking and I find it to be a very generative, and therapeutic exercise, so thoughtful, present and relatable. Almost as if it explains the ways in which I work, in a way that had not occurred to me before.

It is so affirming to have a kindred spirit in this way of engaging with one's self and the landscape through art. Adnan had a rigorous habit of walking, as I myself have and the other artists I have mentioned in this paper do. I connect to the land this way, and in the act of walking my mind is free of distraction and better able to be present and engaged. Our practices overlap in this way and then alongside this state of being, we are both creating artworks inspired by these wanderings. Her in the form of poetry and myself in the form of drawing, both practices inspired by walking and interacting with the natural world in a very present, peaceful sort of way

Her collection of poems that I am most excited about is titled, "Sea" and "Fog." This book is broken up into two longer sections titled, *Sea* and *Fog*. Within those sections are short writings that all flow together, like the stream of consciousness I mentioned earlier. The Beach near my home is foggy a lot of the time, as is evidenced in my recent works and reading her poems while collecting images or looking at images of fog, is almost like my ideas for drawings have magically turned themselves into words. Here is an example of a poem from her book which I have been referencing: "In all innocence the fog is touching the tip of the trees. The forest is silent. It doesn't mind its invasion by such a light substance. Lighter than a dance, than a hand." (Adnan)

I decided to use an image from the book for this next poem of Adnan's instead of transcribing it as I feel it is a good representation of another aspect of her poetry that I'm drawn to. The visual component of the compositions is very important, the way that Adnan is so conscious of the layout of both words, lines, and the spacing on the page is beautiful. It is that same concept of negative space that is present in Miyazaki's films, or Wyeth's snowy landscapes. The emptiness speaks just as much as the words themselves, in fact, the emptiness enhances the poem, the space around it dictates the cadence in which it is read, and brings it to life.

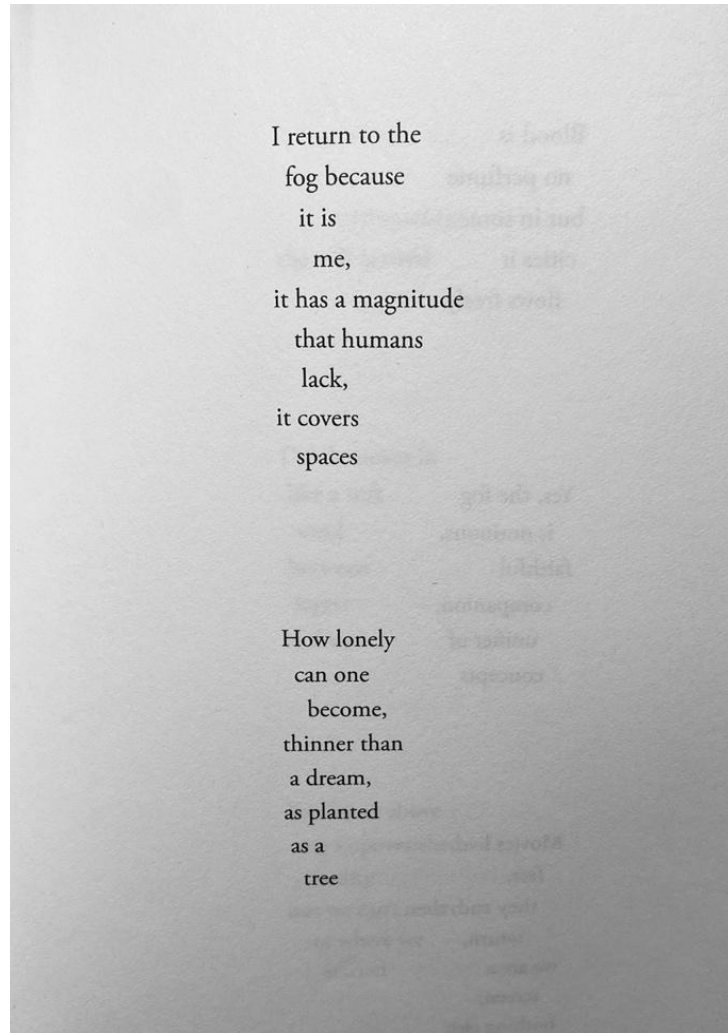


Fig. 16. *Page 107 from Sea and Fog, 2012*

Though I have an eclectic collection of artistic inspirations, in my own strange mind they make sense. They are speaking on the same topics, working with the same inspirations but in very different and exciting ways. We as artists are all trying to make sense of the world around us, in our own works and occasionally those meandering paths cross or converge and the sharing of ideas and images in those magical moments is a generous and generative gift and I am so grateful for all those who are brave enough to create.

Conclusion

This endeavor of searching and learning to be more mindful and present through a slow and intentional art practice has been an incredibly enlightening experience. It has also been an experience both born of and in response to my sudden change in living situation, dealing with the difficulties of starting an MFA program, in a new country, and in the depths of a global pandemic, suddenly finding myself so utterly alone, in a strange new place, making the most out of a very challenging time in history and in my own life. It has indeed changed the ways in which I move through the world. It has changed my outlook on life and how I spend my time. I am very grateful to be embracing a wholesome practice that will be an enriching, lifelong pursuit, a continuously fulfilling process. Kagge mentions in his book that he often hears from his older friends that when looking back on their lives, "All those days that came and went. I didn't realize those were life." (Kagge 3). I want to be sure that my work and my art are lifelong pursuits situated in and embracing the ordinary in the everyday, taking time to "do nothing", to move slowly and intentionally and to enjoy the world around me and the time I am given to exist here. I aim to continue to make time for the practice of walking to really get to know the places that inspire my landscape drawings, sitting with the seasons, the textures, the fog and the light, just existing in a state of wonder in these beautiful landscapes that I am so fortunate to experience. Carrying these precious moments into the studio and with my patient and skilled hands, bringing these special moments of awareness to life. Through long hours of slowly building up marks, in a tedious but gentle moving meditation, totally aware of every tiny mark and how it adds up with every other tiny mark into a magical illusion of these beautiful landscapes of my wanderings.

Images

1. Stephanie Buer, *Jericho Beach I*, 31 x 45", 2021
2. Stephanie Buer, Photo reference, 2022
3. Stephanie Buer, Drawing in Progress, 2021
4. Stephanie Buer, Drawing Detail, 2021
5. Stephanie Buer, *Burrard Inlet*, 30 x 36", 2021
6. Stephanie Buer, *Smoke I*, 17 x 29", 2020
7. Stephanie Buer, Photograph, The Great Blue Heron, 2022
8. Stephanie Buer, *Jericho Beach II*, 40 x 31", 2021
9. Stephanie Buer, *Untitled (Fog)*, 64 x 48", 2022
10. Stephanie Buer, *Untitled*, 42 x 56", 2021
11. Andrew Wyeth, *Plowed Road*, 1985
12. Andrew Wyeth, *Heavy Snow*, 1967
13. Vija Celmins, *Untitled (Ocean)*, 1977
14. Vija Celmins, *Long Ocean*, 1973
15. Etel Adnan, *Untitled*, 2010
16. Etel Adnan, Photograph of Page 107 from *Sea and Fog*, 2012

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