

THE INTERCONNECTED LANDSCAPE

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ABSTRACT

My work is an exploration of abstract landscapes of the Oklahoma and West Texas Panhandle regions, the land I call home. It serves as a metaphorical mapping for both nature and humanity as fluid realms, while utilizing concepts of home, comfort, and wellbeing drawn from my own personal experiences. My artworks contemplate meanings of entropy and transformation, informed by the evolution of geological landscapes and by changes in the human body and psyche over time. I use the material of bedsheets as both a medium and a tool to conceptualize these ideas. My work aims to inspire my audience to contemplate the interconnectedness between these fluid realms and to appreciate the shared patterns that my artworks display.

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This thesis is dedicated to my late father, Frederick Michael Tuttle, for always supporting and encouraging my dreams of becoming an artist and an educator. Furthermore, his childlike spirit and his passion for science and art, as well as his love for nature and outside experiences, contributed heavily to shaping who I am. I would not be where I am today without who he was.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

My commute from my home in Goodwell, Oklahoma to West Texas A&M University is 129 miles—approximately two hours of driving through land that shifts from flat to rolling, to mesas and deepened canyons of the Canadian River breaks, then back out again, and offers a wide variety of beautiful visuals. Often, I find myself in “auto-drive” on these long road trips, lost in the landscape, recollecting memories of times past, flowing with the fluid rhythms of the land beneath me. In these moments, I am taken to a place in my subconscious mind where I seem to be traveling through a place in my psyche where memories are relived. During these moments of daydreaming, I feel conscious and unconscious at the same time. I am fully aware of my surroundings and the activity of driving a car down the highway, and yet at the same time, I am reliving specific moments from my past which cause a great number of emotions to resurface. My thesis work is about this journey that connects both the physical and mental worlds in which I exist.

This body of work uses paintings and drawings to explore the connection between the physical landscape and domestic objects, which are symbols for my mental state. Though my works draw in part from the regional geography of the Oklahoma Panhandle and West Texas, where I reside, they also construct a mapping of my own emotions over time. My thesis work uses bedsheets, a common household item, to form my invented landscapes in a variety of ways. Bedsheets become a metaphor for the emotions and memories I process on my many commutes. The experience of being in nature and viewing the landscape of my homeland gives me feelings of comfort like the comfort of being at home in my bed, surrounded by the soft, clean fabric of sheets. Bedsheets are

objects of real meaning and human significance: they wrap us up in our most vulnerable moments when we are unconscious and asleep. They represent protection, cleanliness, and domesticity. They can also represent fear-based memories and trauma, such as when one is confined to a bed with debilitating depression, or bedridden in a hospital struggling with illness. Bedsheets, with their malleable fabric that can be formed into peaks and valleys, folds and creases, mimic both landscapes and human bodies in interesting ways. For British artist Tracey Emin, her installation *My Bed* from 1999 (fig. 2.1) was a literal place of refuge during a time of mental instability, but it also represented vulnerability during her darkest state of emotional crisis.¹ Robert Rauschenberg's, *Bed* from 1955 (fig. 2.2) was one of his first "combines," taking domestic objects and placing them in the context of fine art.² For him, this work defined the edge between sculpture and painting, and played upon the intersection between art and everyday life. It sparked a conversation about the familiarity of the bed and the intimate attachments associated with ways a bed serves its function in space. For me, the material of bedsheets serves as a powerful tool for communicating my own feelings of comfort, home, security, and belonging, while simultaneously providing a reference to the geographic landforms that also designate my home.

I compare the automatic experience of driving through the landscape to the automatism of my practice. My approach integrates the bedsheets in various ways, including manipulating and sculpting actual bedsheets into high-relief compositions directly onto a surface, and then using them as a reference for drawings and paintings.

¹ For more on Tracey Emin's *My Bed*, see the artist's interview, Yale British Art, "At Home: Artists in Conversation | Tracey Emin," June 23, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n3T5IXFW3MU>.

² On Rauschenberg's *Bed*, and its use of materials, see The Museum of Modern Art, "Robert Rauschenberg | HOW TO SEE the Artist with Sarah Sze," August 2, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e_nAKiSutiA.

My thesis work began by sculpting bedsheets soaked in acrylic medium directly onto a primed surface. The action of this process led to deep thought about my own personal connections to the landscape where I grew up. I then used those sculpted works as visual references for drawings made in graphite and charcoal. The drawings served as a starting point for my work, *Entropy* (fig. 4.1). I started this piece simply as a replication of the drawings, but soon into the process of painting it, I found myself unintentionally altering the image through moments of transcendence that took me back into the landscape. It was through these moments of escape that I realized the power of automatism and began a deeper connection to my work, as only the word “interconnected” could describe it. I started adding color. The first color was blue, chosen to represent specific feelings of emotion and touch, or the cool winter wind, the blue haze of the horizon line at dawn, the coldness of the water in the lake or river when first stepping in, or even the coolness of bedsheets when first crawling into bed. Color, at this point, became an important addition to my work to communicate the interconnectedness I wanted to convey. Upon completing *Entropy*, I began exploring these ideas more through a series of small mixed media works using watercolor and graphite. I integrated the bedsheets as a literal part of the process to further enhance the layered feelings I experienced through the process of creation. They became a tool to soak up the paint from the surface of the watercolor paper to leave light imprints of the folds and creases, creating a guideline of shapes and textures for my abstractions. At this stage, the marks from the bedsheets became a departure point. Once the imprints were made, I went back in and lightly defined them with graphite. This method added my own personal gestures and stylistic expressions into each piece. The series of watercolor and graphite works that are in my thesis exhibition demonstrate this

process, each pulled from a specific memory of a place experienced in my homeland. These smaller works led to the creation of my three other larger acrylic paintings, *Warm Embrace* (fig. 4.2), *Coming Home* (fig. 4.3), and *Becoming* (fig. 4.4), all completed using the same technique of imprinting the sheets onto thin washes of paint as a starting point for the abstractions. The colors I chose for each work came from memories of places and events, and the feelings associated with those memories. The process starts off more controlled while pressing the sheets onto the surface, as mental images of the landscape guide my actions. However, once I begin painting, I let my memories and feelings of being in the landscape guide the process. Each of these paintings uses simplified shapes in bold color transitions pulled from specific emotions. The bedsheets serve as a conceptual tool in the beginning, while the process of painting leads me through a journey of the mind. Making my work is both a creative and emotional journey for me—a journey like the ones I take while driving through the Northern Panhandle.

My thesis work takes a multidisciplinary approach that involves the overlaps of phenomenological study and human psychology, geomorphology, and visual art and art history. My work draws heavily on process, exploring how abstraction and forms can come out of literal folds of bedsheets. I use color, value, form, texture, pattern, and rhythm as integral components to evoke meaning; these components that might have a sense of familiarity for viewers but are also highly personal for me. My work conceptually engages with feelings of wellbeing and the process of transformation by exploring the relationships between so-called “nature” and humanity, recognizing that humans themselves are part of nature, but we also respond to natural forms in ways that

are experiential and psychological as well as bodily.³ A certain phenomenological experience takes place through my automatist practice, as lived human experiences and memories become part of the work. The embodied experience of being in the world but also part of the world is deeply contemplated through moments of transcendence into a wider temporal field of past and present. Surrealists, like writer Andre Breton and artist Max Ernst, believed in a “superior reality” of the subconscious mind where art came from an “uninhibited mode of expression derived from the mind’s involuntary mechanisms.”⁴ My practice is similar to that of the surrealists, utilizing art as a way to process suppressed memories of past happenings inspired by the places I grew up. My art is a window between the outer world I observe and my inner self, reflecting on how humans and the land are connected in ways that are layered and complex, not unlike the layers and folds that appear in my art. My work encourages contemplation of the interconnections between these fluid realms and an appreciation of the shared patterns that my artworks display.

Influenced by Earth Artist Robert Smithson, I use concepts of fluvial entropy in the evolution of geological landscapes as artistic inspiration.⁵ When examining the landscapes, I especially focus on the aesthetic of the drainage network of the land surface caused by fluvial entropy and the pattern of channels created. I note these geomorphic

³ On the connection between humans and nature, and on nature as a human construction, see William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995). On the study of phenomenology and the link between consciousness, body, and world, see Yochai Ataria, *Consciousness in Flesh: An Unapologetic Phenomenological Study* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

⁴ On the history of Surrealism, see ‘Superior Reality’ of the Subconscious Mind,” Museum of Modern Art, 2022, accessed October 17, 2023, <https://www.moma.org/collection/terms/surrealism/superior-reality-of-the-subconscious>.

⁵ On fluvial entropy and energy distributions, and their relation to changes in landforms in space and time, see Luna Bergere Leopold and W. B. Langbein, “The Concept of Entropy in Landscape Evolution,” U.S. Geological Survey Professional Paper, January 1, 1962, A1–20, <https://doi.org/10.3133/pp500a>.

visuals as features in my own work and process. As these paths in the landscape are being sculpted by erosion and deposition, the look of the landscape is formed. I use this knowledge as a visual process, sculpting the fabric into folds and creases that are similar to a topographical map in many ways, with the familiarity of the aerial view from an airplane. I am also inspired by Smithson's artist-spouse Nancy Holt, and her use of film to document Smithson's work and processes. So, I chose to utilize video as part of my thesis work to demonstrate to the viewer the "mind mapping" that takes place as I survey the land and lose myself within it on my long drives.

My works are also highly influenced by modernist abstractions, especially the works of Georgia O'Keeffe, who deeply investigated the connections between landscape and meaning, place and emotion. O'Keeffe's methods of abstraction involved transforming the environments where she lived and visited into painted, abstracted landscapes focused on capturing the essence of the time and place, rather than their outward appearance.⁶ My methods of abstraction come from studying O'Keeffe and her nature-based abstractions. Along with O'Keeffe, transcendental painter Agnes Pelton is another artist whom I draw inspiration from. Like O'Keeffe, Pelton created abstracted landscapes of her home, using the materiality of paint to represent spiritual intuition while still referencing the natural world, but through bold color usage and mysterious forms.⁷ My work draws on Pelton's conceptual approach of using "mental images" to paint impressions of the landscape, often using unnatural color to explore the ethereal

⁶ On Georgia O'Keeffe and her methods of abstraction, see Richard Marshall and Yvonne A. Scott, *Georgia O'Keeffe: Nature and Abstraction* (Milan: Skira, 2007); Paul H. Carlson and John T. Becker, *Georgia O'Keeffe in Texas: A Guide* (Austin: State House, 2012); and Amy Von Lintel, *Georgia O'Keeffe's Wartime Texas Letters* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2020).

⁷ On Agnes Pelton and the Transcendental Painters, see Sarah Victoria Turner, *Enchanted Modernities: Theosophy, the Arts, and the American West* (South Petherton, UK: Fulgur Press, 2019).

realm of painting the essence of a place. Finally, Paul Cezanne was yet another artist who explored abstract aspects of nature in his compositions, with the intention to transform objects he saw into a formal geometric description, rather than simply copying nature as he saw it.⁸ He also emphasized bold saturated colors in a reductive palette of mainly primary colors and used “lost and found” contours resulting in a shared pictorial space between planes. I draw from both Pelton and Cezanne in these ways.

Highly influenced by modernist abstractions, through a multidisciplinary approach, my thesis works challenge traditional painting techniques by utilizing the domestic objects of bedsheets in combination with traditional media to arrive at a cohesive body of work that is unique to me yet is ambiguous for the viewer’s perception. Though my final works are influenced by the methods of modernist abstract artists, the process and the meanings they represent are all my own. The regional landscape abstractions I create explore the connection between the physical landscape and domestic objects as symbols for my mental state through drawings and paintings that reveal the personal interconnections of mind, body, emotion, and place.

⁸ On Cezanne and his methods of abstraction, Erle Loran, *Cézanne’s Composition: Analysis of His Form, with Diagrams and Photographs of His Motifs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963).

CHAPTER TWO: INFLUENCES

As mentioned above, my thesis work draws upon several artists who share a common thread of nature as inspiration balanced with a commitment to abstraction. These artists include Robert Smithson, Georgia O’Keeffe, Agnes Pelton, and Paul Cezanne. Additionally, I pull from Robert Rauschenberg and Tracy Emin’s radical use of domestic objects as a display of the intersection of art and everyday life in ways that are both intimate and vulnerable. Furthermore, my process involves automatist practices, inspired by Surrealism. Together, these influences have helped to inform my conceptual and technical approaches to result in an original body of work.

Both Rauschenberg and Emin had a strong impact on the conceptual framework of my thesis development. Rauschenberg’s combine *Bed* from 1955 (fig. 2.1) sparked my interest in exploring how domestic objects could be used to enhance meaning, fusing the everyday materials one might take for granted with high art.⁹ For this piece, Rauschenberg used a literal bed as his canvas, equipped with a pillow, sheets, and a quilt, all tucked into the edges. He then adhered paint to the items, making a mixed-media collage, but one that uses an object of domestic comfort, like a bed. Then he affixed the bed to the wall in the gallery. My work similarly involves elements of a bed—bedsheets—and though I do not paint them like Rauschenberg, I use them as the basis of my designs, like he did, but less literally. Emin also used an actual bed in her wildly intimate installation *My Bed* from 1999 (fig. 2.2). Her work opened my mind to the possibility of autobiographical art without the need of traditional representation. Unlike Rauschenberg, who still uses paint and mark-making in his bed piece, Emin transplants

⁹ On Rauschenberg’s *Bed*, see The Museum of Modern Art, “Robert Rauschenberg” as in note 2 above.

her entire apartment bedroom into the gallery, including her messy bed with stained sheets, but also with her trash, including empty liquor bottles, used condoms, soiled underwear, cigarette butts, and contraception. Emin was unafraid to attempt new processes with the vulnerability of sharing her intimate, private life directly with her audience. Emin's artworks such as *My Bed* deal with personal experience while using universal themes about grief, loss, love, and desire, as well as female identity.¹⁰ It wasn't about a shameful dirty place, but rather a heavenly place that saved her life during her darkest moments of depression and suicidal contemplation. My autobiographical elements are more removed, more abstracted and symbolic; but following in Emin's footsteps, I found the courage to bring more of my own biography and history into the work. Both Rauschenberg's and Emin's works relate to my use of bedsheets, while they also inspired me to explore the meanings of materials—their form and function as well as their symbolic and psychological resonance. In my mind, the sheets I use are the core of my art. They serve as a tool for my conceptual and technical processes, as they emphasize the content and visual quality of my works. They give me a form to express the mental and physical manifestations of my themes that contextualize both place and emotions.

The way I work with my forms, as I mentioned above, is less literalized than Rauschenberg and Emin. However, I employ the Surrealist technique of automatism, or automatic drawing and painting techniques to manifest unconscious thought in their productions, generating suggestive forms that promote multiple associations. Surrealist automatic practice requires both the conscious and unconscious minds to work in concert, a conscious receptivity, and a willed passivity. This approach was heavily inspired by

¹⁰ On Emin's *Bed*, see the interview cited in note 1.

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theories, which legitimized the importance of the unconscious as valid revelations of human emotion and desires.¹¹ Surrealists often relied on the power of abstract shapes to generate associations consciously and unconsciously. My work is primarily created by automatist practices like that of the Surrealists. The experience of driving through the Northern Panhandle and "losing myself" in the views while processing things in my subconscious mind, then using that to demonstrate those moments through drawing and painting falls right in line with Surrealist techniques. Those moments of transcendence reveal themselves in my final abstractions that have the familiarity of environments, yet when closely observed, create smaller parts that also resemble human qualities.

Part of this process of automatism also involves deep contemplation of my own evolution as a human and a woman, and how the subtle but profound changes in the land are not unlike changes in the human psyche over time. My works focus heavily on the notions of change; they begin with a more controlled method and then morph into moments of automatism and improvisation. Around this theme of change, I draw especially upon the art and writings of Robert Smithson, whose largescale designs in landscapes contemplate entropy as a creative force. Smithson was interested in how geomorphic processes such as erosion and decay would transform his work as time passed. In his essay "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," he contemplates a metaphoric and poetic connection between geomorphology and one's mental faculties in

¹¹ On the history of Surrealism and automatism in art, see Anne Martin, "Automatism and Art Practice," PhD Diss., University of Plymouth, 2006.

what he calls “abstract geology.”¹² He writes: “One’s mind and the earth are in a constant state of erosion, mental rivers wear away abstract banks, brain waves undermine cliffs of thought, ideas decompose into stones of unknowing, and conceptual crystallizations break apart into deposits of gritty reason.”¹³ My work similarly evokes erosion in its forms, and thus draws on Smithson’s concept of entropy. In particular, I explore fluvial entropy as a part of landscape evolution, both as a visual reference and a mental process. Just as landscapes undergo transformation due to processes such as erosion and deposition, humans also undergo transformation as they adapt in response to changing environments and life’s circumstances. My works—in their forms that mimic landscapes but also the folds of sheets with hints of body parts beneath them—closely relate to these processes. As I drive through the same landscapes, day after day, month after month, I closely observe the physical characteristics caused by geomorphic processes and try to store those visuals in my mind. They later become part of my aesthetic process. I pull from those stored visuals as I begin the automatic process of painting and drawing, but I also compare the characteristics of the land to human characteristics through contemplation of the connections we have to the land we thrive within. Part of that also comes from the specific traumas and memories I have from my past. That balance of human development and geographical landforms show up throughout my works. And, in order to make this even more clear for my viewers, I utilized video in my exhibition for documentation of my concepts and as a mode of creating a visual “mapping” of my thought processes. I also drew this idea specifically from Smithson and his artist-spouse

¹² On the writings and theories of Robert Smithson on entropy, mind, and land, see especially Jack Flam and Robert Smithson, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 100 - 104, 256.

¹³ Flam and Smithson, *Collected Writings*, 100.

Nancy Holt, who often filmed the formation and development of his work at the sites, such as *Spiral Jetty*.¹⁴ These motion-based and time-based films seem to reflect the entropic processes that would occur over time, and they allow a capturing of the changes in forms over time.

Regarding abstractions based in the observation of nature, my work responds heavily to Georgia O’Keeffe’s techniques. Inspired by the natural beauty of the American West, I admire how O’Keeffe mastered the essence of the landscape through simplifying her compositions to focus on the most basic design elements of color, value, shape, and form. Though her works are comprised of simple elements, the way she used the principles of design to organize her abstract compositions resulted in overall complex and beautifully rendered works of art. O’Keeffe took a drawing course in the summer of 1912, where she learned Arthur Wesley Dow’s principles of harmonious design. Dow taught that art’s purpose was not to copy nature but to create harmonious designs that expressed the individual’s understanding of the world.¹⁵ He believed that “abstract design is, as it were, the primer of painting, in which principles of composition appear in a clear and definite form.” Dow’s unorthodox teaching methods inspired O’Keeffe to change her way of creating, pulling imagery from shapes she had stored in her head, depicting intangible feelings that were beyond her conscious grasp.¹⁶ She described this as “the unknown.” I work in this way as well, and researching Dow’s methods on the principles of subordination, repetition, and Notan (balance of tonal values) provided me

¹⁴ On these films, see Alena J. Williams, *Nancy Holt: Sightlines* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

¹⁵ On Dow’s teachings of harmonious design, see Arthur Wesley Dow, *Composition, Understanding Line, Notan, and Color* (New York: Dover, 2012).

¹⁶ On O’Keeffe, see Georgia O’Keeffe, Barbara Haskell, and Sasha Nicholas, *Georgia O’Keeffe: Abstraction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), as well as the sources cited in note 6.

with a framework to “find something of my own” just as it did for O’Keeffe.¹⁷ Dow emphasized the subtleties of tonal variations and rhythmic repetition of imagery, especially within landscapes because of their irregular spacings that contrast well with the symmetries of pattern. Like me, O’Keeffe found inspiration on the plains of Northwest Texas and described it as the only place she ever really felt like she belonged; a profound place and time when she began to fully express herself as an abstract artist. As this is my homeland, I share the same sentiments, and like O’Keeffe, I use it as subject matter for my own abstractions.

Some of O’Keeffe’s letters to Alfred Stieglitz written while she lived and taught in Canyon, Texas, feel like memories pulled right out of my own head. She describes things such as the blazing sunset, the moonlight seeming like something alive and breathing, the air making her feel free, and big dark clouds that make shadows on the flatness.¹⁸ My work heavily draws from O’Keeffe’s combination of reality and abstraction, and the physical manifestations of experiences that she explains in her writings. She took the time to truly “see” her surroundings as an artist and used her materials as a language to develop a remarkably unique style of art with feeling. My work is reminiscent of many O’Keeffe landscapes, colorful with emanating light, subtle transitions of folding forms, and rhythmic movement throughout the composition, yet they are my own translations. The correlation can be made when comparing my works to several of O’Keeffe’s Western landscapes, sky, and flora, from both Texas and New Mexico, especially with my largest works. For example, *Warm Embrace* (fig. 4.2) is similar to *Red Canna* (fig. 2.3), an O’Keeffe abstract floral, but also favors *Red and Pink*

¹⁷ On Dow’s influence on Georgia O’Keeffe’s work, see Judith Zilczer, “‘Light Coming onto the Plains:’ Georgia O’Keeffe’s Sunrise Series,” *Artibus et Historiae* 20, no. 40 (1999): 191–208.

¹⁸ On O’Keeffe’s letters to Stieglitz, see especially Von Lintel, *O’Keeffe’s Wartime Texas Letters*.

(fig. 2.4). In each of these, the color palette evokes mysterious forms and the simplified shapes and directional movement suggest the ambiguity of landforms that mimic fabric folds and vice versa. But perhaps the most striking comparison could be my *Becoming* (fig. 4.4) to O’Keeffe’s *Rust Red Hills* (fig. 2.5), as both have a definite sense of place and location, but also a playful abstraction of space and color. Yet, another visual concept that I share with O’Keeffe is the change in perspective from aerial and topographical to an unfolding into deep space across foreground to background, as in many of my smaller watercolor studies that can be compared to her *It Was Yellow and Pink II* (fig. 2.6). The rhythmic patterns of movement in works like my *Glory* (fig. 4.10) also respond to O’Keeffe’s musical rhythms and colors.

But O’Keeffe was not the only artist inspired by the American West that has inspired my designs. I also respond deeply to the images of Transcendental painter Agnes Pelton. In her work, Pelton sought to spark a visceral response in the viewer rather than represent a visual concept, an inner realm rather than an outer landscape.¹⁹ I aspire for my work to evoke feelings from my audience, allowing the viewer to interpret the work based on a combination of visual and conceptual perception, just as Agnes Pelton did in her desert landscapes. My work draws on Pelton’s conceptual approach of using “mental images” to paint impressions of the landscape, often employing unnatural color to explore the ethereal essence of a place. I have drawn inspiration from her ability to represent aspects of changing color and light rather than recreating a realistic representation of the land. I especially pull from Pelton’s intellectual use of color psychology to transmit a sense of energy within her paintings. I also play with the effects

¹⁹ On Pelton and her methods of abstraction and color psychology, see Turner, *Enchanted Modernities*.

of color psychology by using brighter, purer hues to evoke a feeling of the sublime within my abstractions. An example of this can be seen through a comparison of colors in Pelton's *Awakening* (fig. 2.7) to my watercolor, *Back Road Sunset* (fig. 4.7) Both paintings use bright yellow as a focal point to illuminate the importance of specific subject matter, but slightly off-centered as an integral balancing part of the composition. Such asymmetrical but rhythmic balance is a motif that is present throughout my body of work.

Finally, in my land-based abstractions, I was also responding to the style and approach of post-impressionist painter Paul Cezanne. Like me, Cezanne used the landscape of his upbringing—the South of France with its arid climate and its craggy limestone mountain of Sainte Victoire—as his inspiration, painting it over and over. He observed the landforms but then sought to transform them into geometric compositions, rather than simply copying nature as he saw it.²⁰ Similar to Cezanne, I have tried to create an interplay in my works between positive and negative space, and between lights and darks, which is as much about formal design as it is about anything observed directly. This can be seen in his *Clairière (The Glade)* 1895 (fig. 2.8), where all parts within the whole have equilibrium. Additionally, Cezanne often used “passages” from light to dark with contrasts of “lost and found” contours, allowing volume to fuse into the background, enhancing the balance and rhythm. This can especially be observed in my acrylic painting, *Coming Home* (fig. 4.3).

In sum, my thesis combines a conceptual approach that intersects domestic everyday objects, like the works of Robert Rauschenberg and Tracey Emin, with Surrealist methods of automatic painting and drawing, with an exploration of nature-

²⁰ On Cezanne, see Loran, *Cézanne's Composition*.

based abstractions along the lines of those by O’Keeffe, Pelton, and Cezanne. My works aim to express changes made by both geomorphic processes and psychological development, changes across time and space that dialogue with the concepts of Smithson. Together, these ideas, subjects, and techniques have helped me create an original practice resulting in a unique body of nature abstractions that is both highly personal and relatable to a wider audience beyond myself, extending to the larger concept of humans and nature as an undifferentiated whole.



Fig. 2.1. Tracey Emin, *My Bed*, 1999, mixed media installation, Tate Museum, London.

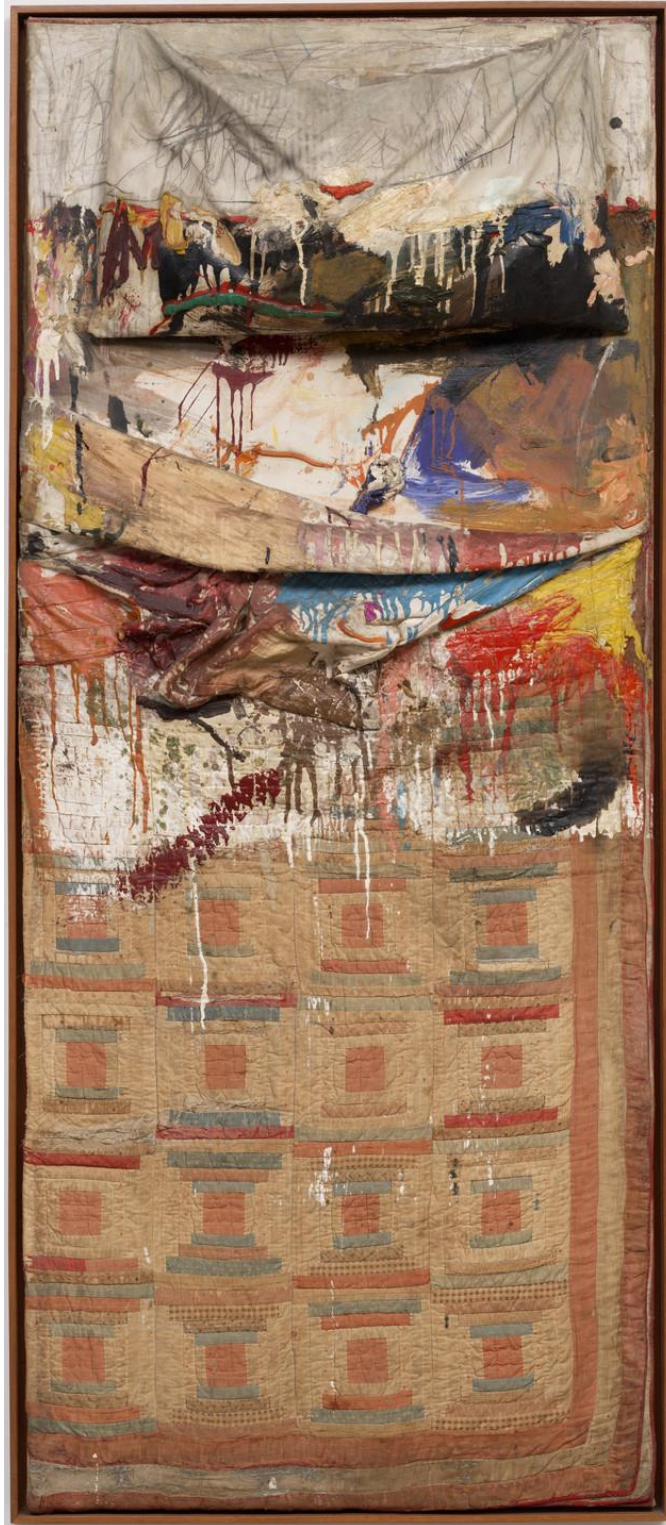


Fig. 2.2. Robert Rauschenberg, *Bed*, 1955, combine painting,
Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Fig. 2.3. Georgia O'Keeffe, *Red Canna*, 1924, oil on canvas,
University of Arizona Museum of Art, Tucson.

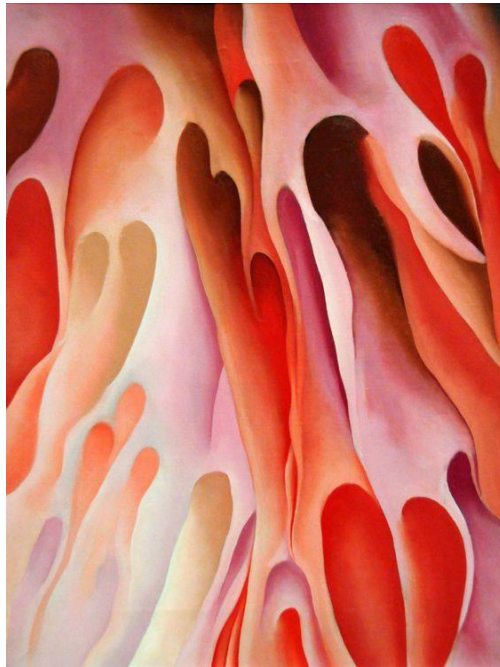


Fig. 2.4. Georgia O'Keeffe, *Red and Pink*, 1925, oil on canvas, Harvard University Art
Museums, Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, MA.



Fig. 2.5. Georgia O'Keeffe, *Red Rust Hills*, 1930, oil on canvas, Brauer Museum of Art, Valparaiso University, Valparaiso, IN.



Fig. 2.6. Georgia O'Keeffe, *It Was Yellow and Pink*, 1960, oil on canvas, Art Institute of Chicago.



Fig. 2.7. Agnes Pelton, *Awakening*, 1943, oil on canvas,
New Mexico Museum of Art, Santa Fe.



Fig. 2.8. Paul Cezanne, *Clairière (The Glade)*, 1895, oil on canvas,
Toledo Museum of Art.

CHAPTER THREE: PROCESSES

My thesis work utilizes a combination of nontraditional and traditional approaches to painting and drawing. The bedsheet, a common household object, is the conceptual content of my work. Bedsheets serve as a medium, a reference, and a tool to symbolize meanings and create visuals of the interconnected landscape. I also use traditional media like watercolor and acrylic paints, graphite, and a variety of grounds for my works, including wood panel, Arches cold pressed watercolor paper, and gallery-wrapped canvas. Additionally, I make use of video and installation to further enhance and conceptualize my ideas in a way that interconnects the work in my thesis exhibition.

In the beginning stages of my work, I explore abstraction. My previous training in art and design was highly focused on technical skills in naturalistic representation. My goal with this thesis was to challenge the traditional processes of mimetic representation and expand into something that felt more authentic. The repetitive commute back and forth to Canyon, Texas, from my home in Goodwell, Oklahoma, provided the experience and visuals that built the framework for my landscape abstractions, which led to the research that put my concepts into tangible form. My process involves a journey, changing over time to show the transformation and development of my concepts as they unfold. I begin with a controlled, highly detailed process. Then I lead into a looser, automatist mode of free association fueled by the processing of memories. Finally, I arrive at a state of balance and cohesion.

The first part of my process involved taking white bedsheets, soaking them in acrylic medium, and sculpting them directly onto wood panels making high-relief designs that mimicked the formation of geographic landmasses, as well as human bodies. I

associated these results with images I had been collecting on the long drives through my homeland. Upon completing these pieces, I further explored this concept in a different medium. The sculpted works became references for several hyper-realistic drawings using graphite and charcoal (figs. 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3). Though I found some catharsis in this process, I did not feel the same connection to the work that I did when freely sculpting the bedsheets in my reference pieces. So, I reworked these images with acrylic paint on canvas. At first, I was hyper-focused on every detail, using only white and black to create grisaille, or an achromatic value painting. But soon, I found myself getting lost in thought and memories related to the landscape but also specific emotions. Part of that experience involved emotions of depression and drowning, while simultaneously thinking of wanting to escape to a specific place from my childhood where I felt safe. But I also kept returning to the urge to curl up in my bed and escape the reality that was my life during that time. In these moments of transcendence, I escaped to my subconscious mind and entered a mode of automatism, where the act of painting with my physical body and consciousness worked in concert with my subconscious thoughts which became part of the painting itself.

When I finally stepped back to examine my work, I realized that I had departed from the original contour lines drawn with charcoal and painted something similar to what I was experiencing in those moments. I decided to abandon my photographic references, and to experiment with color that was not a direct reflection of the natural world. I found that my palette enhanced the emotional content that was part of the work. I started with blue because it was the only color to describe how I was feeling in this

specific painting, which was the start of a new journey for me. It inspired me to explore further conceptual art, automatism, and abstraction.

I decided to experiment with bedsheets in other ways and began testing them as a mark-making tool. First, I tried soaking the sheets in water, dipping them in paint, and pressing them onto a wet canvas. Though this did create an interesting texture, it did not work the way I had hoped. I pressed the paint-soaked sheets on the ground, like a sponge instead, and enjoyed the imprints left behind because they facilitated the automatism that came with the deeply connected feelings I had experienced with my previous painting. I explored this technique with different types of fabric to test the hydrophilicity of a few types of sheets: cotton, linen, microfiber, and polyester. I found that cotton, linen, and microfiber were more absorbent than polyester, and that linen was the most absorbent, but the cotton's absorption was just the right amount for my purposes without soaking up too much of the paint and leaving behind slight patterns of the folds and creases. Polyester sheets only created a muddy mess.

Once I figured out what material worked best for the results I wanted, I created an acrylic painting by using the wet-in-wet technique of soaking the canvas with water first and then adding in the acrylics to the already wet surface (fig. 3.4). I chose colors pulled from memory and an emotional connection to a specific landscape that I experienced. Once the canvas was covered in color, I took the sheets, crumpled them in my hands, and carefully pressed them onto the surface to soak up the paint where the sheets touched the surface. I then let the painting dry. The printed patterns became a departure, and once dried, I came back in with a 6B graphite pencil and embellished the imprints. The graphite deepened the contrast and enhanced the rhythm and balance, creating unity.

The successes with the sheet imprints led me to create a series of small mixed-media works in watercolor and graphite on Arches cold pressed watercolor paper that used a similar technique (fig. 3.5). These mixed-media explorations led to the creation of my larger acrylic paintings, also displayed in my exhibition (figs. 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4). These paintings utilized a combination of bedsheets as a mark-making tool with the wet-in-wet method and the automatism that came from painting with a brush.

My two final pieces use technology to exemplify my entire process of creation. The first piece is an installation, featuring a white sculpted bedsheet on gallery-wrapped canvas with a color-changing LED light positioned above the work to shine down upon it (fig. 4.22). The changing lights and value transitions that occur on the folds and creases of the bedsheets is meant to represent the visual effects of light on the landscape, as well as the passing of time, changing of scenery, and a flux of emotions. The very final work of my exhibition is a combination of videos taken on my commute from Goodwell, Oklahoma to Amarillo and Canyon, Texas. I edited the videos in an application called Videoshop and combined them together using an application called Kinemaster. Then I used Adobe Premiere Pro, to size the video down and add visual effects such as a vintage camcorder filter to enhance nostalgia and a mirrored symmetry filter to symbolize the infinite nature of human life. The video, entitled *Mind Mapping* embodies the manifestation of my concept and provides a visual element that describes the feelings of interconnectedness that I experience while driving through the landscape. I then projected the video onto three sculpted bedsheet pieces to connect the entire process in a visual and tangible representation (fig. 4.23).

From the nontraditional use of domestic objects such as bedsheets, to the traditional methods of painting and drawing, but using a surrealist automatist approach alongside new media such as video projection, my thesis work contains a variety of visuals and experiences to conceptualize my interconnected landscapes. The processes are a journey, showing the exploration and transformation of ideas as they developed over time, cohesively representing how landscapes can be highly resonant of place and mind, of land and body.



Fig. 3.1. Katy George, *Untitled*, charcoal on paper, 18 x 24 in.



Fig. 3.2. Katy George, *Untitled*, graphite on paper, 18 x 24 in.



Fig. 3.3. Katy George, *Untitled*, charcoal on paper, 18 x 24 in.

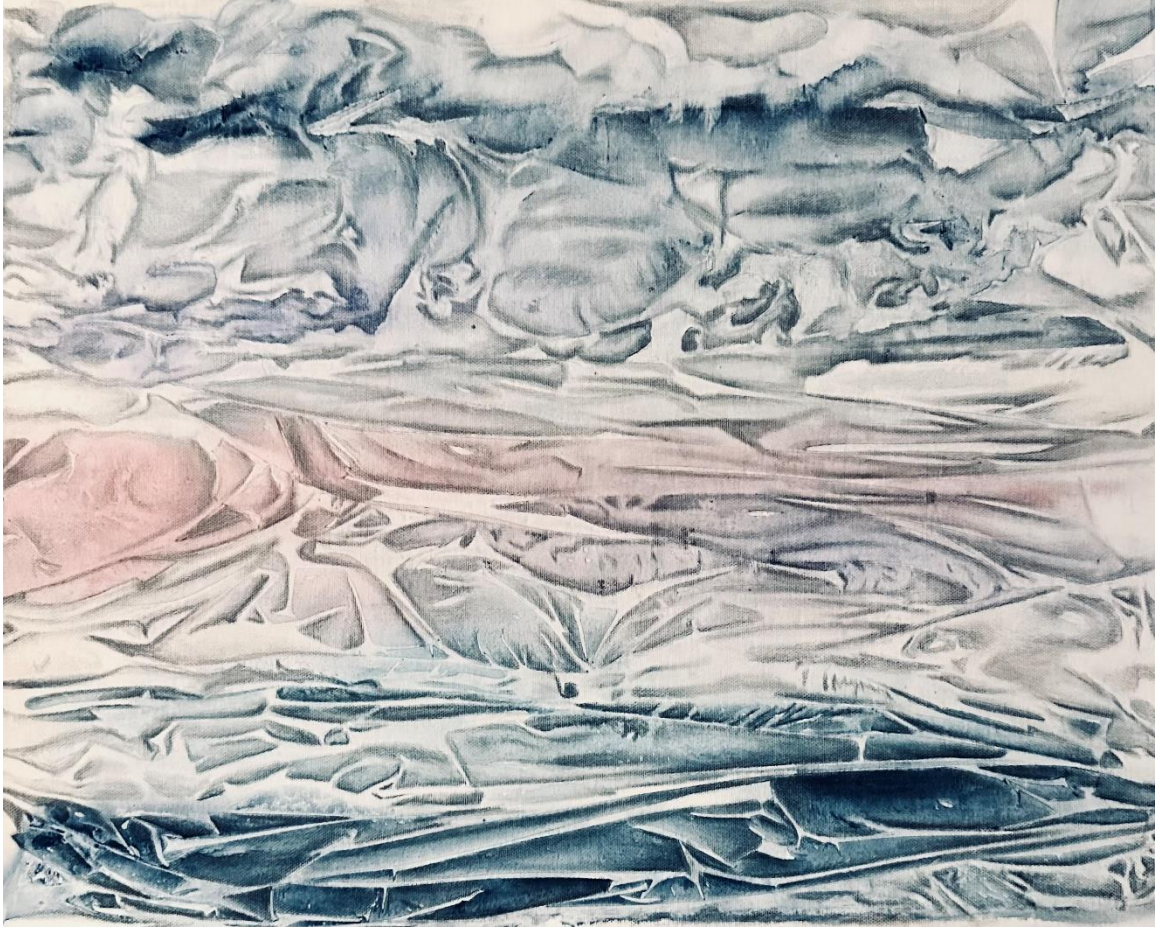


Fig. 3.4. Katy George, *What is it?*, acrylic on canvas, 18 x 24 in.



Fig. 3.5. Katy George, gallery view of mixed media works, watercolor and graphite,
various sizes

CHAPTER FOUR: WORKS



Fig. 4.1. Katy George, *Entropy*, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60 in.



Fig. 4.2. Katy George, *Warm Embrace*, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60 in.



Fig. 4.3. Katy George, *Becoming*, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60 in.



Fig. 4.4. Katy George, *Coming Home*, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60 in.



Fig. 4.5. Katy George, *Riverbed*, watercolor and graphite, 6 x 8 in.



Fig. 4.6. Katy George, *Hail Coming*, watercolor and graphite, 6 x 8 in.



Fig. 4.7. Katy George, *Back Road Sunset*, watercolor and graphite, 6 x 8 in.



Fig. 4.8. Katy George, *Creases*, watercolor and graphite, 6 x 8 in.



Fig. 4.9. Katy George, *Before the Rain*, watercolor and graphite, 6 x 8 in.



Fig. 4.10. Katy George, *Glory*, watercolor and graphite, 6 x 8 in.

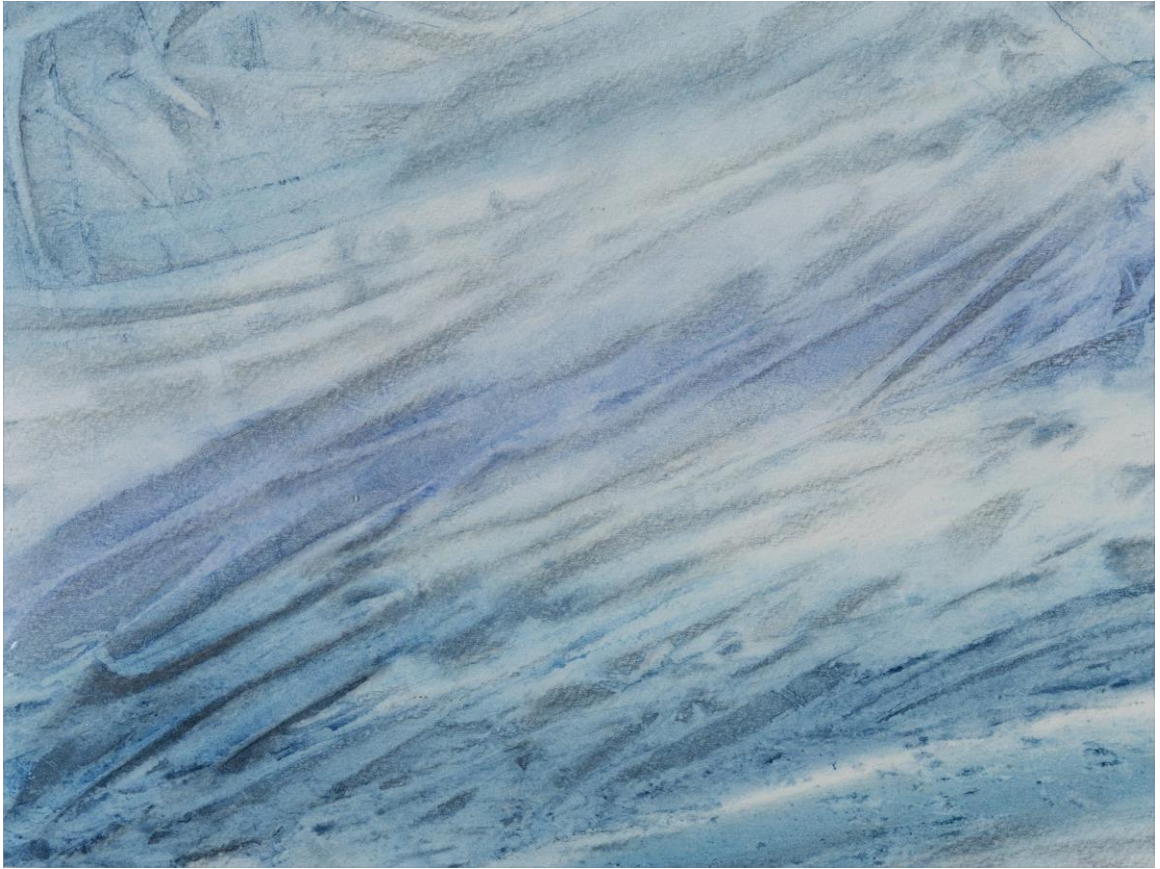


Fig. 4.11. Katy George, *During the Rain*, watercolor and graphite, 6 x 8 in.



Fig. 4.12. Katy George, *Pink Majesty*, watercolor and graphite, 6 x 8 in.



Fig. 4.13. Katy George, *After the Rain*, watercolor and graphite, 6 x 8 in.



Fig. 4.14. Katy George, *Drought Conditions*, watercolor and graphite, 6 x 8 in.



Fig. 4.15. Katy George, *The Fishing Hole*, watercolor and graphite, 6 x 8 in.



Fig. 4.16. Katy George, *On My Way*, watercolor and graphite, 9 x 12 in.

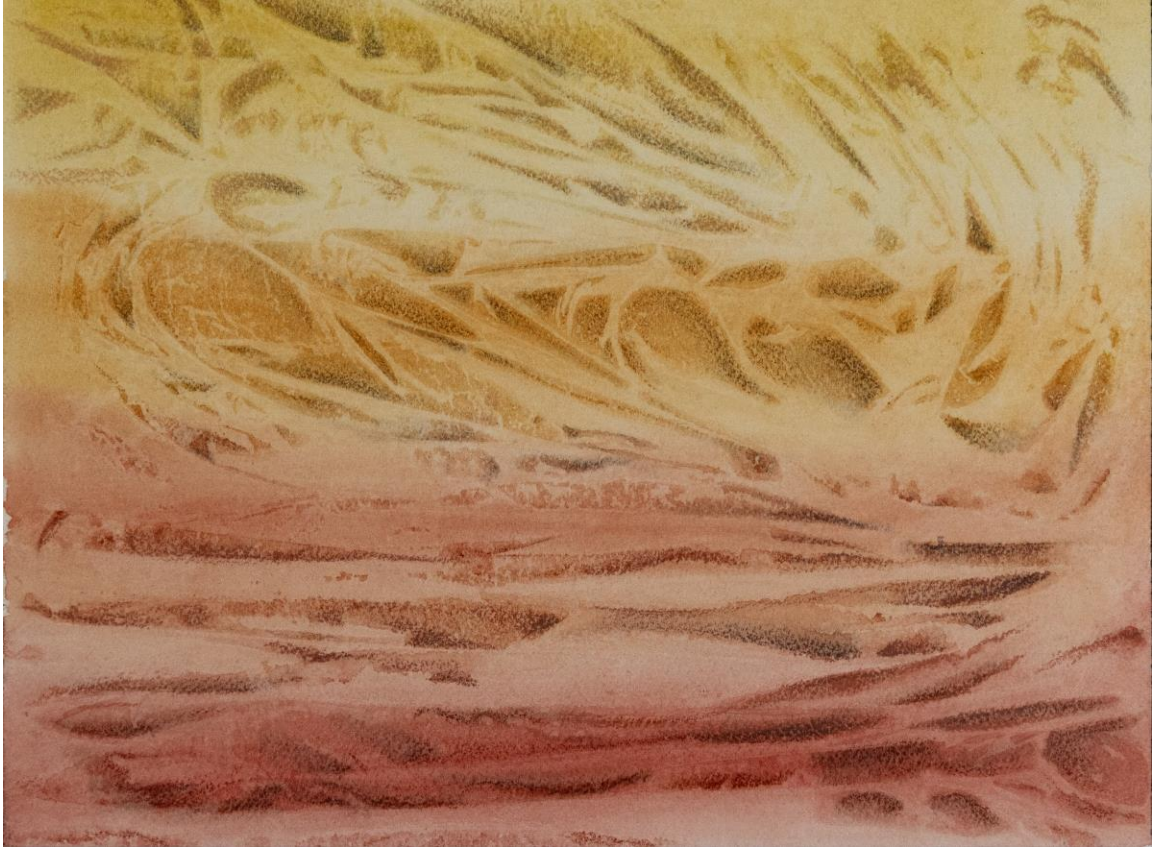


Fig. 4.17. Katy George, *Warm Earth*, watercolor and graphite, 9 x 12 in.



Fig. 4.18. Katy George, *Swept Away*, watercolor and graphite, 9 x 12 in.



Fig. 4.19. Katy George, *Wind on the Plains*, watercolor and graphite, 12 x 9 in.



Fig. 4.20. Katy George, *Night Storm*, watercolor and charcoal, 9 x 12 in.



Fig. 4.21. Katy George, *This Too Shall Pass*, watercolor and charcoal, 9 x 12 in.



Fig. 4.22. Katy George, *Light Effects*, installation, bedsheet on canvas, color-changing LED light, 24 x 48 in.



Fig. 4.23. Katy George, *Mind Mapping*, installation, mp4 projection on sculpted
bedsheets on wood panel, 16:9, 13 min. 38 sec.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

My MFA investigation has been an intimate journey of self-reflection and artistic growth. The long two-hour drives on my commute to and from West Texas A&M University in Canyon, Texas from my home in Goodwell, Oklahoma, provided ample time and inspiration to build the framework for the conceptual basis and aesthetic elements of my thesis work. This journey connects both the physical and mental worlds in which I exist, using paintings, drawings, and installation to explore this connection between the physical landscapes I pass through and domestic objects, which are symbols for my mental state. My works construct a mental mapping of personal emotions processed combined with visuals drawn from the regional geography of the land, and with the feelings I experience from viewing and being “in” the landscape, many of which cannot be described with words.

Entropy (fig. 4.1) is the first painting completed for my thesis exhibition. This acrylic painting was originally meant to be a *trompe l’oeil* representation of one of the first sculpted bedsheet pieces I created. Soon into the painting process, however, I departed from mimetic representation and entered a mode of automatism, where the conscious activity of painting was guided by an unconscious exploration of memories sparked by the landscape and drawing upon specific emotions. This painting taught me to trust my inner voice, to be free, and to become one with the process. I incorporated monochromatic values of blue to express the emotions I was feeling in the moment while painting, as well as feelings of being in the landscape. Though the work was fueled by personal and emotional content, it is also open to interpretation for the viewer. I titled this work *Entropy* to describe the new process of creation that developed through this

painting, noting the unpredictability and degree of disorder that unfolded over time for me. The title also connects to the process of examination of fluvial entropy in landscape evolution used as source material for my artworks.

The painting *Entropy* led to further explorations with different media. My resulting series of works included seventeen mixed media pieces in watercolor and graphite, each of which has its own emotional content related to specific geographic locations pulled from memories of both mental images of the landscape and of experiencing the landscape. The titles of these works provide hints about their personal content and context; however, they provide an open experience for the viewers to associate their own meanings (figs. 4.5 – 4.22).

The series of smaller mixed media works then led to the three large acrylic paintings: *Warm Embrace* (fig. 4.2), *Becoming* (fig. 4.3), and *Coming Home* (fig. 4.4). Like the smaller works, each of these paintings contain an emotional attachment of personal expression related to time, space, and circumstances, all of which represent the notion of the interconnected landscape. These works differ from *Entropy*, as they are more loosely painted, less saturated and purposely underworked, using a brighter exaggerated palette to provide an ethereal experience for the viewer. *Warm Embrace* (fig. 4.2), for instance, symbolizes the warmth of the sun in the vast open skies of my region casting its light across the land and surrounding our bodies, like a hug from beyond. These are feelings I associate from that experience, but they also relate to the feeling of being warm and wrapped up in the sheets of one's bed.

My acrylic painting, *Becoming* (fig. 4.3), has more of a definite sense of space and a meaningful color palette in relation to the landscape, yet it still contains personal

content responding to inner thoughts, memories, and emotions. Specific places experienced throughout my life and on my drives through the Oklahoma and Texas Plains region were in my mind when laying down my colors and making imprints with the bedsheet. The resulting imagery has a sense of familiarity meant to evoke nostalgia related to each viewer's subjective experiences. I titled the work *Becoming* because of the process of passing into a state of unity of mind, body, and space, through the process of creation.

Coming Home (fig. 4.4), relates to my drive home from Canyon, Texas at sunset and the feelings of awe and wonder that I feel when experiencing the sublime, almost unnatural color transitions and atmospheric effects that occur at this time of day across the Texas Panhandle. This painting exemplifies the breathtaking visuals that provide an almost unearthly experience that transcends simply seeing the landscape and reach the level of *feeling* the landscape.

Light Effects (fig. 4.22) is meant to symbolize a continuation of the atmospheric and light effects expressed in the paintings previously discussed. This work includes a sculpted white bedsheet on a gallery-wrapped canvas with a color-changing LED light shining upon the work to show a real-time representation of the effects of light at dawn and dusk. The changing colors and cast shadows on the folds and creases mimic how the sun changes the appearance of the landscape at various times throughout the day and the changing seasons. Day after day, month after month, I experienced these changes on my commute. This work resembles that phenomenon and is meant to strike the viewer with the same feelings of wonder and appreciation of the beauty that I witnessed, which is created by the light coming onto the landscape at different moments in time. It forces the

audience to slow down and observe the changes in front of them in an attempt to experience the work in real-time.

The final culmination of concepts is displayed in my installation *Mind Mapping* (fig. 4.23). This installation includes three sculpted bedsheet pieces that I had created early in my process that serve as the ground for a video projection. The video is a combination of clips taken on my commute from Goodwell, Oklahoma to Amarillo and Canyon, Texas during the early morning dawn, edited to embody the manifestation of my concept while providing a visual to describe the feelings of interconnectedness—those that I experience on my drives through the landscape. Moreover, the video is meant to symbolize the infinite nature of human life and our existence in the environments where we thrive. This installation is the finale of my thesis exhibition, tying all parts together.

My work is a conceptual approach that intersects domestic everyday objects such as bedsheets, inspired by the works of Robert Rauschenberg and Tracey Emin, paired with automatic painting and drawing techniques pulled from Surrealist methods, with an exploration of nature-based abstractions along the lines of those by O’Keeffe, Pelton, and Cezanne. I aim for my work to express changes made by geomorphic processes and psychological development, and changes across time and space informed by the concepts of Smithson. Together, these ideas, subjects, and techniques have helped me arrive at a place of unity in my work. My unique body of nature abstractions, both highly personal and relatable to a wider audience beyond myself, extend to the larger concept of humans and nature as an interconnected whole.

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