

THESIS

RECIPROCITY THROUGH DRAWING

Submitted by

Rachael Lynn Davis

Department of Art

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Summer 2014

Master's Committee:

Advisor: Marius Lehene

Mary-Ann Kokoska

Ajean Lee Ryan

Thomas Lundberg

Matthew Cooperman

Copyright by Rachael Lynn Davis 2014

All Rights Reserved

ABSTRACT

RECIPROCITY THROUGH DRAWING

My drawings are founded in visceral moments of immersion in nature. I see this immersion as a form of reciprocity within the animate earth. I am seeking to record through drawing the quality of these experiences.

My drawings consist of a repetitive white line. I think of this white line as a translation into visual language those exchanges with nature. These lines invent a way to express a parallel between feeling and vision, suggest micro and macro oscillations of my perception of the earth, and imagine what the essence of life might look like.

My motivation lies in a need to reflect on our present ecological crisis.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ESSAY	1
FIGURES	11
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	32

ESSAY

I am reminded of impressions from my childhood in the following excerpt from William Cullen Bryant's poem titled 'The Prairies':

“These are the gardens of the Desert, these
The unshorn fields, boundless and beautiful,
For which the speech of England has no name—
The Prairies. I behold them for the first,
And my heart swells, while the dilated sight
Takes in the encircling vastness. Lo! they stretch,
In airy undulations, far away,
As if the ocean, in his gentlest swell,
Stood still, with all his rounded billows fixed,
And motionless forever. —Motionless?—
No—they are all unchained again. The clouds
Sweep over with their shadows, and, beneath,
The surface rolls and fluctuates to the eye...”¹

¹ William Cullen Bryant, excerpt from “The Prairies”

My earliest memories take place in the Great Plains of North America. I had my siblings, surroundings, and imagination to occupy my time. I felt comfortable being outside. In many ways, the nature that surrounded me was a companion and a steadfast sanctuary. The continuous hum of insects, the low burl of wind in the trees, and the lively chatter of songbirds complimented the visual and tactile feast of my world. My childhood was shaped and molded by the elements and was rooted in a fundamental identification with nature.

In my drawings, I am compelled to capture those visceral moments of reciprocity. The immersion into this responsive, living world activated my every sense, captivated my attention, and seemed to hold me in its timeless embrace. My drawings are abstract reflections of nature as a force that holds, wraps, and meshes. Willa Cather describes this exchange:

“I kept as still as I could. Nothing happened. I did not expect anything to happen. I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more. I was entirely happy. Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become a part of something entire, whether it is sun and air, or goodness and knowledge. At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great. When it comes to one, it comes as naturally as sleep.”²

I am seeking the quality of my experience as a living being within the larger living being of our planet. My drawings consist of a repeated white line symbolizing what this experience might look like. The intent of these lines is to describe the relationship of feeling and vision, to convey micro and macro oscillations of my perception of the earth, to represent an imagined life essence, and to carry a depth of concern about the environment.

As a small child, the world is much bigger than your physical size and lived experience. It is simple, believable, and safe. This spatial understanding seems to slowly shrink in proportion

² Willa Cather, *My Antonia*(New York: Bantam Books, 1994) p. 20-21

to one's successive years as a human being. I reflect on this constriction within the in-between spaces of my line drawings recalling growth and condensation in light of our present ecological troubles. There is a dismantling of the world that takes one further and further from an expansive awareness into places that are hard to describe and painful to bear. It is a kind of journey inward, where my purpose as a human being is in need of a new story of being in the world. As eco-philosopher Joanna Macy articulates, "There is a beauty in the brokenness -a truth that is better communicated and realized in the tearing apart and spreading thin." I experience sadness in relation to the losses of species, resources, and wild places. I am searching for the visual language to describe a kind of psychological processing -what is its character and how would I define it? The drawings I have created are a reflective response to the incredibly complex change and unprecedented pressures being felt by all species that claim this living planet as home.

The compulsive and meditative lines that comprise my drawings have origins in my own personal dream imagery. This drawing (Fig 1) called *Splashing and Splashing*, came to me quite literally as a dream image in my sleep. I then experimented with the repeating lines in the studio. They also appeared as remnants of evaporated water in a stainless steel pan. This synchronicity expanded into associations with tree growth rings, waves in pools of water after throwing a rock, and perhaps also the field of energy emanating from living beings. A non-verbal and precarious feeling around our future survival is given a voice through the optical vibrations of the lines.

My work is also influenced by the dreamings of Aboriginal artist Dorothy Napangardi. (Fig 2) She was a Warlpiri woman from the area around Mina Mina, a significant site located near Lake Mackay in the Tanami Desert in the Northern Territory, Australia. Her paintings embody the vast uninterrupted vistas of her homeland and are grounded in ongoing cultural and ancestral ties to country. (Fig 2, 3) The paintings are about women's dreaming, passed down from her father's

side, which follows the long journeys of Women Ancestors from Mina Mina as they walk, dance, and carry digging sticks. I am inspired by her unique ocular sensibility, spatial aesthetics, and what have been called “a danced landscape of song lines “in relation to her large-scale paintings.³ The dots that Napangardi painted seem to create a continuous line of which I could identify as an expression of complex ecological systems, the sacred, and ideas about the “mesh”⁴ in my own work (Fig 4).

Napangardi’s work exhibits a clear intuitive mark similar to the work of Agnes Martin. Martin also focuses on her own type of line work in her paintings that has come to be known as her signature of the grid. Her motivations were based on the idea of perfection and its impossibility of attainment. There is a suggestion of song in her work in the way her lines undulate softly. Barbara Haskell mentions this aspect of Martin’s work as “a visual tremolo.”⁵ I also adapt this reference to the sense of sound in my own line work. The way in which the white lines vibrate and shiver evokes strings of a musical instrument. Drawing then becomes a metaphor as the lines are bowed like strings, agitated by my fingertips and suggesting an aesthetic wandering into a landscape of sound. As Martin wanted her art to convey “revelatory, transcendental expression,”⁶ my choice of white lines seemed a logical choice in representing the ephemerality of the spirit. There was also an illusion of dimension created from the white line on top of colored paper. The white line made the unseen tangible, the vague and subtle character of life distinct, and gave a face to feeling.

Just as Napangardi’s paintings lack a resting place for the eye, I am compelled to eliminate the horizon line in my drawings (Fig 5). From a viewpoint of an imagined and palpable

³Dorothy Napangardi, *Dancing Up Country*(Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2002) p.69

⁴Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought*(Cambridge: Harvard University, 2010) p. 28

⁵ Barbara Haskell, *Agnes Martin*(New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992)p.105

⁶ Barbara Haskell, *Agnes Martin*(New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992)p.100

ecosystem, a sense of closeness and fascination are best communicated by suggesting just a small part of the whole. (Fig 6) These drawings are not simply myself, as a voyeur, looking out. They are a compilation of childhood impressions, sourced media imagery of the earth and psychological perceptions of looking into a rich inner world. As the eye wanders, there appear moments of connection: that feeling of recognition after seeing a flash of blue from a bird, witnessing the weight of the wind rolling in fields of grass, discovering a shoal of tiny fish and their flashes of silver among green algae nests. Agnes Martin ponders how art can capture “memories of experiences which are wordless and quiet.” In a similar way, an expression of the reciprocity of nature is something that interests me in relation to the size of my drawings. The environment that surrounds us is spacious, entangled, and tactile. In the drawing *Turf* (Fig 11), I am considering these facets of form within an invented environment. The feeling of being blanketed by nature can then perhaps be realized. Monet had similar aspirations of removing the horizon line. He also wanted his paintings of water lilies to envelop and immerse the viewer into its watery panorama (Fig 7). His wish was that his painting installation be a kind of sanctuary⁷ as painting was itself a sanctuary for Monet.

An important part of my process is drawing with organic materials. There are both literal and symbolic meanings to this method. The impressions of grasses are a common motif (Fig 8). These grasses are a fundamental part of the whole. They are the first contact my hands make in tandem with my footfalls on the dirt. They are literally and figuratively a “deeply-rooted” component of nature. They are the physical manifestation of an ecotone, where the terrestrial and aquatic biome community meets myself as a representative of the human community. The obsessive line-making in my drawings becomes an attempt to integrate my existence with that of

⁷ Simon Kelly, *Monet's Water lilies: The Agapanthus Triptych* (Saint Louis: Saint Louis Art Museum, 2011) p.29

the “other” and a way to contemplate the blurred boundaries suggested inside the bigness of interconnectedness (Fig 9).

The organic materials of sand, turf, and salt also serve an aesthetic purpose inspired by the work of Anselm Keifer (Fig 10). He puts real objects on the canvas because, in his own words, ” It’s a reflection about illusion...if you place an object on the canvas you are playing on the material aspect.”⁸ In the process of incorporating debris from nature, my drawings are not merely representations of nature in the mind, but are inhabited by select primary sources from nature. (Fig 11) My proclivity to imbed actual plant bodies into my art and to utilize materiality as a type of decal onto paper is a kind of practice that reveals my own particular sensibility in my studio practice. It is a method I have carried with me from when I worked with ceramic sculpture while in my undergraduate studies at the Kansas City Art Institute. (Fig 12) Plant bodies were pressed into the soft clay of my earlier figurative sculpture leaving ghost cavities of the once living tissue of the plant. The sager fire process also involved flashes of burn-off from organic materials creating embedded patterns of color onto the surface. In a similar manner, my drawings carry the potential artifacts of the fern age of the earth embodied as evidence of green plants and soil and the salt of the earth as a kind of low relief land art. I am reminded about our current energy crisis. It is difficult to imagine how within our short existence on this planet, humans are using up oil in only 250 years that took 200 million years to form. Bill McKibbon explains, “That cloud of carbon (pollution) is nothing more than a ghostly reflection of the pools of oil and veins of coal where it once dwelled...each gallon of gasoline represents a hundred tons of ancient plants.”⁹

⁸ Anselm Keifer, Anselm Kiefer(Milan:Skira, 2007) p. 295

⁹ Bill McKibbon, Eearth(New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2011) p.28

In order to examine McKibbon's insights of carbon ghosts alongside ideas of bruising, my process required some kind of direct expression of the physical interaction of method and material. I began with an urgency to record tactile data from nature. (Fig 13-14) The most direct way to do this was by the process of frottage, or rubbing drawings. Through frottage, I created a platform for exploring the relationship of tactile experience and felt experience. Like a Plein-Air painter, it was important to draw in the out-of-doors. However, my palette is sparse and my intention very direct; to reconnect to the reservoir of my subconscious, to ground myself, and to remember my connection with nature.

I am interested in chance as a part of my drawing process. A number of artists associated with Dada incorporated chance apparitions in their work. Duchamp did the pioneer work in a mechanically chance process by holding a thread over a canvas, letting it drop and varnishing in the place where it fell.¹⁰ Jean Arp experimented with falling papers in his collage work. It was Max Ernst who really carried the "irrelevant" process of frottage. Brecht defines this technique," as a semi-automatic process for obtaining patterns of designs by rubbing canvas or paper which has been placed over a rough surface." It was within these pattern drawings that the earth became encapsulated as a microcosm and created a platform for the relationship of feeling and form.

A path appeared within the accumulated rubbings to explore the ideas of microcosm and macrocosm and the marriage between accident and intention. I began to ponder these rubbings as maps of feeling. When I say feeling, I don't mean human sentiment, or those swings that affect a mood, or what kind of day you are having. My intention is to make visible the world of touch. I am exploring synesthesia of seeing with my hands. It's more than just a motor response; it has become a way to find, to discover, to recognize in a really beautiful way, the relatedness and connections of our world. The rubbings became impressions of my senses. (Fig 15) In many

¹⁰ George Brecht, *Chance* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2010) p. 34-43

ways, I rely more on my tactile experiences than on my eye sight. It seems to be a purer expression of the world around me. Feeling is certain and more palpable reality than what I perceive with my eyes. Perhaps it is a more subconscious understanding of the earth. Agnes Martin believes that art embodies the artist's "most emotional responses to life."¹¹ (Fig 16) To me, feeling is much more integrated and full. There is an immediacy and aliveness to sensation. This is not limited to feeling in ones fingertips, but is available in our whole body. In this sense, the active participation to my drawing process is crucial. It has become a ritual to prepare the ground for an interrelated activity of drawing. The stage is set for a communion with nature. David Abram explains,

“Only when we slip beneath the exclusively human logic continually imposed upon the earth do we catch sight of this other, older logic at work in the world. Only as we come close to our senses, and begin to trust, once again, the nuanced intelligence of our sensing bodies, do we begin to notice and respond to the subtle logos of the land...”¹²

Philosopher Susanne Langer articulates with ease a “new key” regarding feeling. Feelings seem to carry negative connotations due to Descartes and his Cartesian dualism of the seventeenth century. He claimed a separation between mind and body where “feelings of hunger, thirst, pain and so on are nothing else but confused modes of thinking” and “imagination...is a bodily intrusion on thought.”¹³ However, how can the intelligence of the body be denied? I see the mind and body participating in unison. Langer asserts that the essence of mind is feeling. She claims that this is a non-discursive dialog. Feelings are abstract and intangible and do not

¹¹Barbara Haskell, Agnes Martin(New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992)p.107

¹² David Abram, The Spell of the Sensuous(New York: Pantheon Books, 1996) p. 268

¹³ Susanne Langer, Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling(Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1988) p.V

occupy space. Words can describe their physical effects, but not the actual presence of feeling. The making of art objects, then, becomes a form of the knowledge of feeling.

The color blue doesn't give off light like other colors, rather, blue absorbs light. The depth of blue suggests a place you can go to. I agree with the painter Yves Klein where blue is at once ephemeral, ethereal, wordless, and soulful. As my process resembles that of the Action painters, these drawings are also influenced by such Color Field Painters as Mark Rothko and Helen Frankenthaler (Fig 17-18). The acrylic washes that treat the surface of the paper create a foreground and background field of vision. Rebecca Solnit says, "Blue the color that represents the spirit, the sky, and water, the immaterial and the remote, so that however tactile and close-up it is, it is always about distance and disembodiment."¹⁴ The color blue, then, has the same properties of reciprocation and compound meaning that appear in my work. (Fig 19-20)

There is a nearness and farness in these line drawings. There is an invitation to, at once, travel near to far, to be close enough to see the grass embedded in the paper and to be far enough to feel the drawing's enveloping nature. There is a kind of DNA imprint found within all things, including human beings. With access to images from an aerial perspective of the earth's crust, it is painfully obvious to see, at minimum, the visual similarities between our bodies, our earth, and even the cosmos. The artist Maya Lin explains that our relationship to landscape has been altered by our ability to view the earth from new vantage points. She states, "The landscape is now thought of as ubiquitous - a landscape that includes the microcosmic as well as the macrocosmic..."¹⁵ Perhaps a relationship of oneness can be entertained as these images are puzzled together.

¹⁴ Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (New York: Penguin, 2006) p.159

¹⁵ Maya Lin, *Maya Lin: Systematic Landscapes* (Seattle: University of Washington, 2006), p.63

In conclusion, my practice of drawing is at once familiar, slow, expansive, and the activity of drawing itself illuminating. (Fig 21). There is a lingering residue felt in the meditative and reflective mark-making that suggests multiple furrows contained within a singular repetitive motion. Is there any consolation in the seeking as the drawing develops and becomes? While in the midst of the activity of drawing, I can't help but pause, and notice the dome of the sky and the way the grasses feather and frame. Nature is as fragile as it is resilient. It is a wonder to belong to such a thing that has no bounds. I am humbled by the mutuality of this implication suggesting an interconnectedness with nature and the complex system of exchanges it is.

FIGURES



Fig.1: Rachael Davis
Splashing and Splashing, 2012
acrylic wash, white conté on paper, 50 x 86"

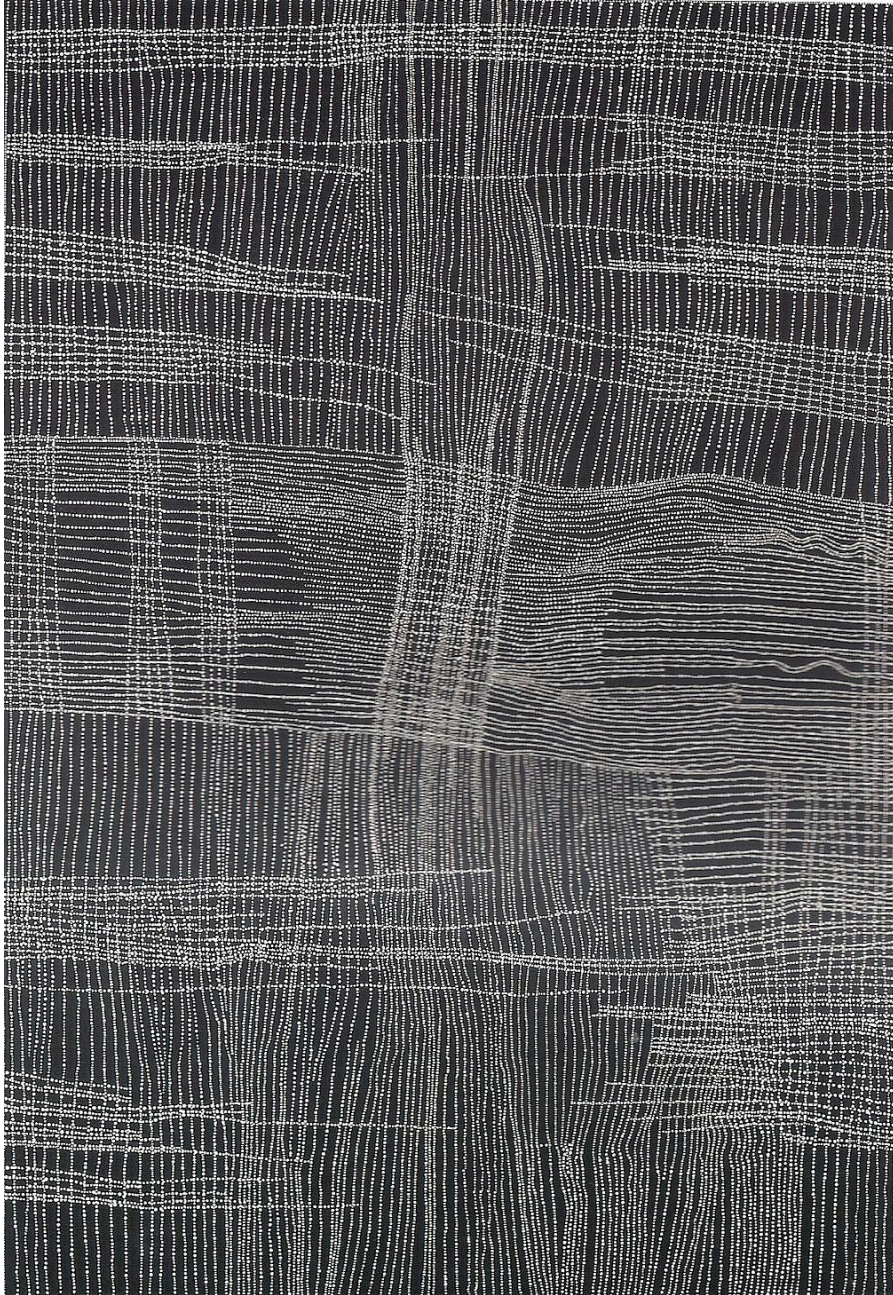


Fig 2: Dorothy Napangardi
Salt on Mina Mina 2000
Synthetic polymer paint on linen, 122 x 198 cm
Private collection, Sydney



Fig 3: Dorothy Napangardi
Sandhills 2000
Synthetic polymer paint on linen, 122 x 198 cm
Private collection, Sydney



Fig 4: Rachael Davis
Tepid Stepping (detail) 2012
Acrylic Wash, white conté on paper.
38.25 x 50.5"



Fig 5: Rachael Davis
Action Field 2013
acrylic wash, white conté,
watercolor crayon on paper.
50 x 56"



Fig 6: Rachael Davis
Water and Ash (detail) 2012
china marker and charcoal on paper.
50 x 74"



Fig 7: Claude Monet

Water Lilies, 1914-26

oil on canvas, three panels, each 6' 6 3/4" x 13' 11 1/4"

(200 x 424.8 cm); overall 6' 6 3/4" x 41' 10 3/8" (200 x 1,276cm)

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund



Fig 8: Rachael Davis
Blue Rubbing II 2012
8 x 11"
acrylic wash on paper



Fig 9: Rachael Davis

To Imagine That Which We Know 2014

72" x 108"

acrylic wash, white conté, watercolor crayon, salt, pulp, organic debris on paper



Fig 10: Anselm Kiefer, *Nurnberg (Nuremberg)*, 1982-
acrylic, emulsion, and straw on canvas 280 x 380 cm
Eli and Edythe L. Broad Collection, Los Angeles



Fig 11: Rachael Davis
Turf 2013
acrylic wash, salt, grass, white conté,
watercolor crayon on paper. 49 x 50"



Fig 12: Rachael Davis
Self-portrait, 1992
clay, mason stain,
organic material sager fired

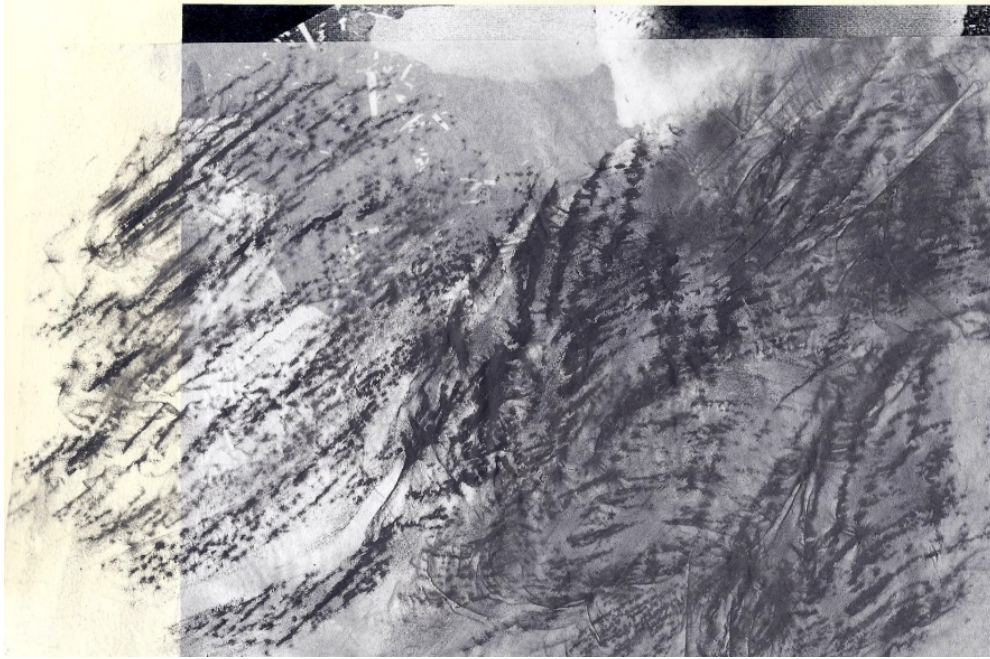


Fig 13: Rachael Davis
Rubbing studies, 2012
5.5 x 10" each
graphite, mineral oil on
tissue paper



Fig 14: Rachael Davis
Rubbing studies, 2012
5.5 x 10" each
graphite, mineral oil on
tissue paper

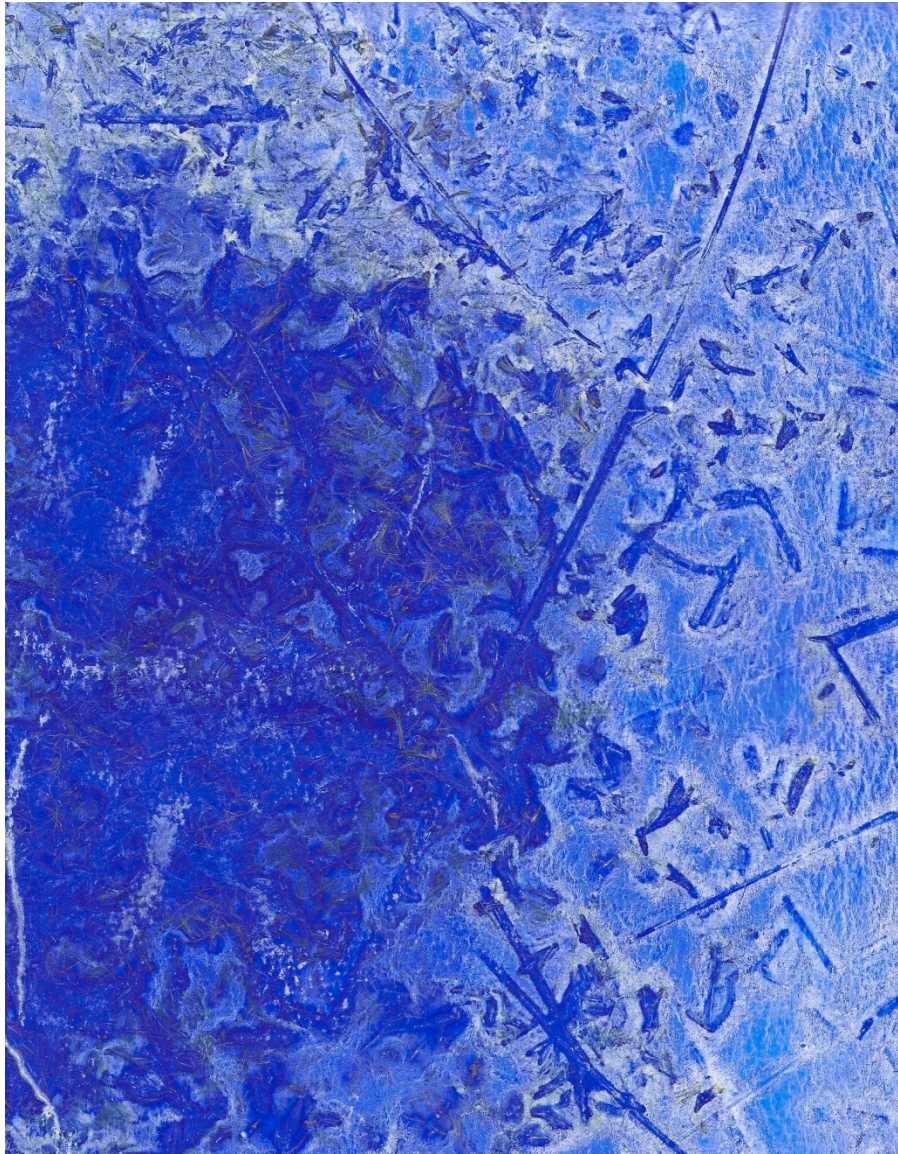


Fig 15: Rachael Davis
Blue Rubbing, 2012
8 x 11"
acrylic wash, grass on paper

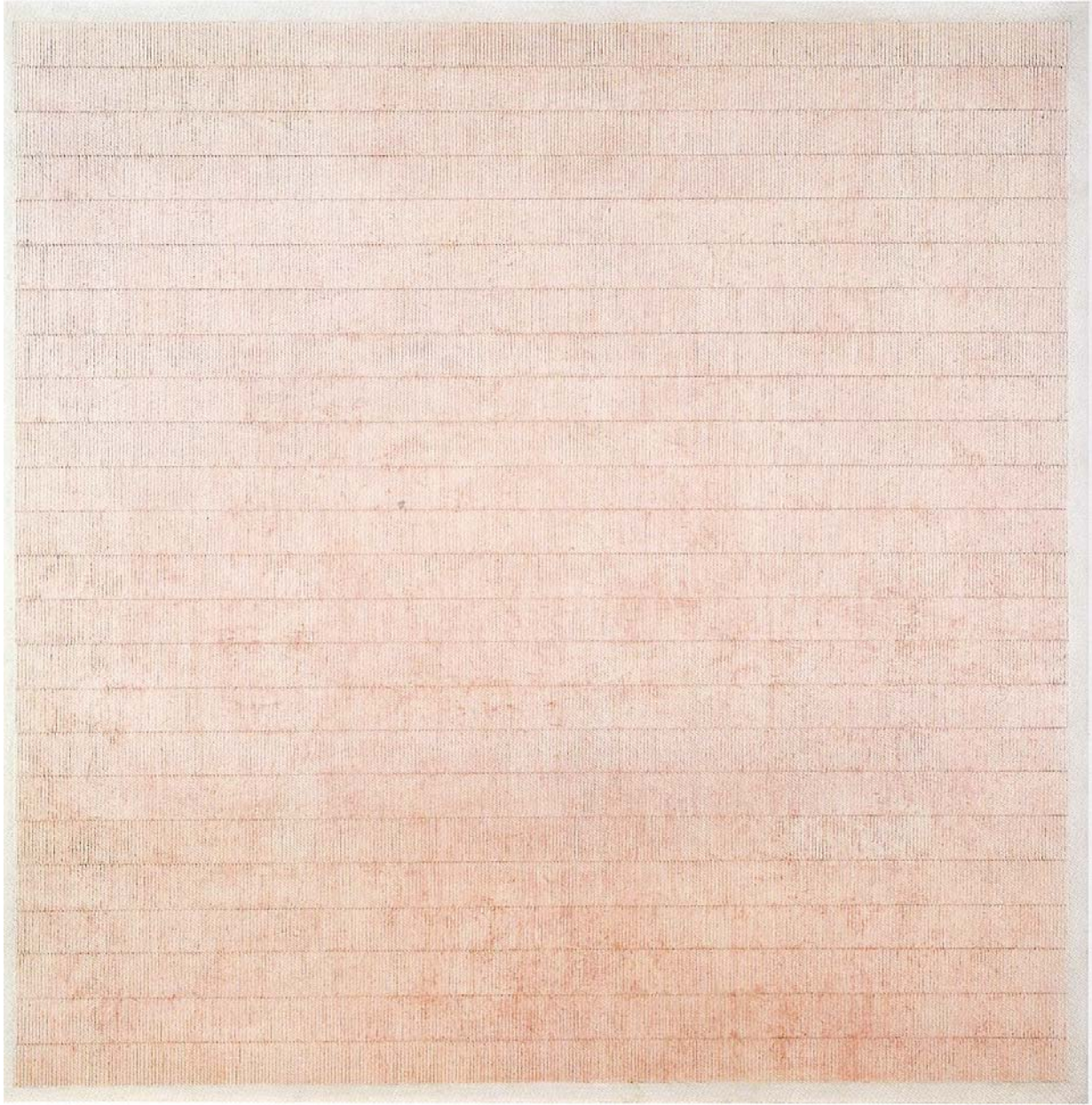


Fig 16: Agnes Martin
Flowers in the Wind, 1963
oil on canvas, 75 x 75 (190.5 x 190.5)
Thomas Ammann Fine Arts, Zurich



Fig 17: Mark Rothko
Detail, *No. 14 (White and Greens in Blue)*, 1957
oil on canvas
National Gallery of Art



Fig 18: Helen Frankenthaler
The Bay, 1963
acrylic on canvas
Detroit Institute of the Arts

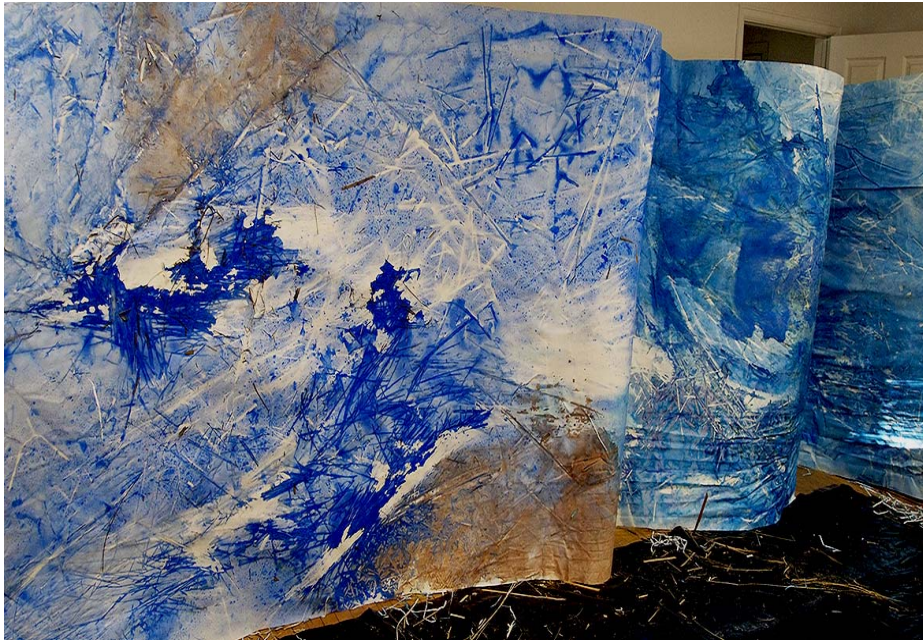


Fig 19: Rachael Davis

That Immense Point Where We Inhabit the Entire Universe

2014

6' x 19' or 72" x 228"

acrylic wash, white conté, watercolor crayon,
salt, organic debris on paper



Fig 20: Rachael Davis

That Immense Point Where We Inhabit the Entire Universe
2014

6' x 19' or 72" x 228"

acrylic wash, white conté, watercolor crayon,
salt, organic debris on paper

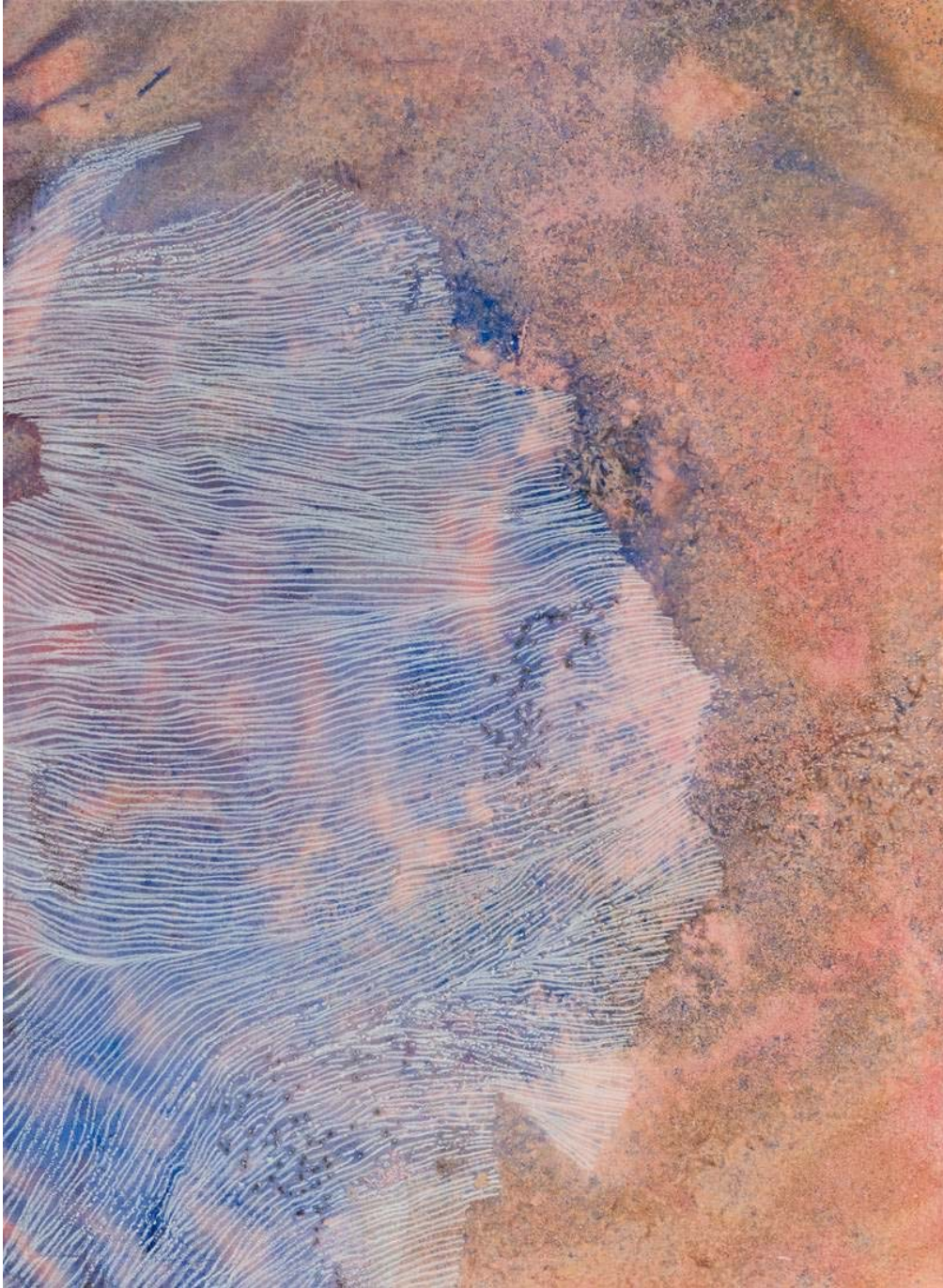


Fig 21: Rachael Davis
Rock Breath 2013
19 x 26"
acrylic wash, sand, white conté,
paper on wood panel.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1996.
- Brecht, George. "?" In *Chance*, by Margaret Iversen, 34-43. London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2010.
- Cather, Willa. *My Antonia*. New York: Bantam Books, 1994.
- Haskell, Barbara, Agnes Martin, Anna Chave, and Rosalind E. Krauss. *Agnes Martin*. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992.
- Kelly, Simon, Claude Monet, Mary Schafer, Johanna Bernstein, and Jean Paul Torno. *Monet's Water Lilies: the Agapanthus Triptych*. Saint Louis: Saint Louis Art Museum, 2011.
- Kiefer, Germano Celant and Anselm. *Anselm Kiefer*. Milan: Skira, 2007.
- Langer, Susanne K., and Gary Van Den Heuvel. *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988.
- Lin, Maya Ying, Richard Andrews, and John Beardsley. *Maya Lin: Systematic Landscapes*. Seattle: Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, 2006.
- McKibben, Bill. *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2011.
- Morton, Timothy. *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge: Harvard University, 2010.
- Napangardi, Dorothy. *Dancing Up Country: The Art of Dorothy Napangardi*. Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2002.
- Solnit, Rebecca. *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. New York: Penguin, 2006.
- Temkin, Ann, Claude Monet, and Nora Lawrence. *Claude Monet: Waterlilies*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2009.