

**THESIS**

**POEMS AND PRAYERS TO NATURE'S SUBLIME INSPIRATION**

**Submitted by**

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**In partial fulfillment of the requirements**

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## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

### POEMS AND PRAYERS TO NATURE'S SUBLIME INSPIRATION

In the intimate folds of nature, I have found places which have inspired me to revel in them, to remember them, and to research with paint the visual and emotional power they hold. They are microcosms of life's universal rhythms which sing praise to the sublime wisdom of the macrocosm. My journey through them affirms personal growth, understanding, and renewal; the evidence of these things lies in the sensitively crafted and painted handmade objects which are left behind. I have made myself a conduit through which nature informs art.

With my process of laying down a primal and gestural web of marks and later weaving paint over and through them, expression is crystallized and then built upon through memory re-construction and aesthetic choices. Sanding, scraping, wiping, and veiling of paint make reference to the ethereal forces of nature while creating visceral surfaces on the art objects.

In this body of work, traditions are simultaneously being championed and challenged. The tradition of using flat, rectangular planes to allude to space is embraced, while the angular juxtaposition of the panels against each other calls the rules of two-dimensional painting into question. They are paintings, yet as screens they have utility and function. The screens borrow from the intelligence of the Japanese master screen painters, but stretch the limits of the prescribed formats beyond the legacy.

These are the most recent footsteps of my journey, inspired by real, visual experiences of nature and colored by perspective, time, and the very acts of remembering and painting.

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

	<b>PAGE</b>
<b>LIST OF PLATES.....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>THESIS STATEMENT.....</b>	<b>1-10</b>
<b>PLATES.....</b>	<b>11-20</b>

## LIST OF PLATES

PLATE		PAGE
1.	<i>Sarugajou</i> (Front) Oil on wood panel and canvas screen, 72" X 150" .....	11
2.	<i>Sarugajou</i> (Back) Oil on wood panel and canvas screen, 72" X 150" .....	12
3.	<i>Sarugajou</i> (Front) Oil on wood panel and canvas screen, 84" X 150" .....	13
4.	<i>Sarugajou</i> (Back) Oil on wood panel and canvas screen, 84" X 150" .....	14
5.	<i>Pusan</i> Oil and acrylic on paper, 26" X 20" .....	15
6.	<i>Red Mountain Pass</i> Oil on canvas, 78" X 168" .....	16
7.	<i>Big Thompson</i> Oil on canvas, 78" X 156" .....	17
8.	<i>Tarumizu</i> Oil on canvas, 108" X 60" .....	18
9.	<i>Sketch for Sarugajou</i> Charcoal and pastel on paper, 13" X 27" .....	19
10.	<i>St. Vrain</i> Oil on canvas, 72" X 96" .....	20

## POEMS AND PRAYERS TO NATURE'S SUBLIME INSPIRATION

The culmination of this latest body of work marks another chance to ponder the nature of my search for an understanding of the world around me through visual art. Though only a mere segment of a much larger journey, these paintings hold insight into all of my past experiences and discoveries of painting while shedding light on what may be to come in the next body of work. As an artist, it is my responsibility to continuously give evidence of growth as I use all that has preceded the present piece and the intuition I have cultivated to improve upon my personal expression. I see my task in writing about my own work, however, as one of an historian rather than a soothsayer. As it is in the studio when the paintings are coming to fruition, I often work in a state of skeptical curiosity of the forces which direct my activities and then study them in retrospect to find their significances.

In tracing my footsteps on this journey through stylistic and philosophical changes as they pertain to my paintings, I found that the major influences on my life and art could be summarized by the following: 1.) the liberal arts education and contact with highly motivated and dedicated professionals; 2.) the balance between opposing poles such as the taste for highly representational and abstract elements of style, and rational, intellectual, Apollonian versus subjective, intuitive, Dionysian perspectives; 3.) the influence of travel and foreign culture; 4.) the importance of nature as subject matter; 5.) the relationship between the activities of drawing and painting; and 6.) the drive to explore elements of technique, scale,

and sculpture in painting.

While painting, I see myself as a conduit between nature and art. I have constantly explored ways in which I can express my gratitude for the inspiration and wisdom of nature, and arrived at painting as the proper language to use. My debt to the forms I pass on mountain trails is evident in my work, but for this I have only the act of remembering and the handmade objects built in the process to offer in restitution. Through the activity, I gain a feeling of oneness with the subject, and little by little, an understanding of the forces that shape it. A painting, for me, is an investigation of the mystery of seeing as much as the reality of the seen. It becomes a prayer, a poem in microcosm, dedicated to the sublime inspiration of the macrocosm.

But the entire process of creating a painting is part of another realm which I find even more mysterious. With the basic premise of paying homage through a studio ritual to that which directed my meditation in the first place, non analytical connections shaping my exploration are constantly made. Often, explanations for stylistic changes or threads which run through the work can only be made in retrospect of the acts. Through this ritual, therefore, I am constantly discovering myself: my own connections to the earth, my changing perspectives, and the language I use to communicate and interpret.

Fundamentally, my paintings strive to be beautiful handmade objects. Labored over, loved, and brought into being over time in the act of memory reconstruction and aesthetic choices, they are not for immediate gratification or simple connections. They are made ostensibly to be appreciated as objects which are well crafted, aesthetically pleasing, visually stimulating, and intellectually challenging.

My imagery often stems from the architectural building blocks of nature, the rocks and formations that make the vast openness intimate, sheltering, and visceral. Needless to say, these are beautiful, colorful, infinitely varied sculptural forms--a vocabulary which can be used to a variety of expressive ends. The psychological connections many of us have to the formations, however, are far more enigmatic. Sometimes the application of paint refers to this mystery with thin translucent layers, speaking of the irony of ethereal spiritual forces inhabiting the cold and lifeless objects. At other times, through scraping and sanding, older stratum of paint are exposed, and newer ones eroded, alluding to dynamic and temporal qualities. I have chosen to listen, whether the landscape speaks of the eternal and massive, or the forces of weathering and decay.

The paintings are certainly not portraits of rock formations within a landscape, nor are they representations of landscapes in photographic perspective, although there are some visually representational elements in every painting. The ratio of representational to non-objective elements varies greatly from one painting to another, but there are necessarily components of both poles in every work. I have never completely abandoned the highly representational style which I first admired and practiced as a painter, though I have used the skills in a much different way with these paintings. While I believe that the learned "realistic" visual language our society most often uses to communicate is not always adequate for conveying emotional, spiritual, or intellectual experiences, it is important vocabulary nonetheless. It would be surprising for a viewer not to initially experience the paintings as landscape inspired images, but the vocabulary of paint, texture, and color encourage exploration of the surface beyond mere representation of the location. They are inspired by



real, visual experiences of nature and colored by perspective, time, and the very acts of remembering and painting. I must never forget that the objects are made of canvas and paint, not rocks, wind, and waves.

The recent paintings share some common characteristics of architectural form, the two most important of which are their monumental scale and the three-dimensional juxtapositions of two or more flat panels. Two of the pieces are in the form of two-sided, free-standing, six-paneled screens (see plates 1 through 4), which further propel these elements into the realms of sculpture and utility. By allowing these to function in concert with daily life, while physically breaking up space in an interior, I have acknowledged that the material object is more than simply a window to another world.

In these paintings, I have tried to risk some of my own conventions as I listened to urges to discover new ways for communicating the sublime inspiration of the landscape. All are landscape inspired images which make use of dramatic compositions, textural elements, drawn and gestural marks, and a blend of transparent, luminous areas with more opaque ones. The grand scale of the most recent pieces makes them environments which physically envelop the viewer. They have arisen from a process of painting which resembles dance in the physicality of the gestures and mark-making, where the landscape occurs through the act of painting.

In the leap from the smaller easel-sized paintings (as in plate 5), I found that the scope of my vision changed to allow a wider perspective on how the intimate sections of nature (which have compelled my attention since my first serious paintings) fit into the landscape. These are not incorporated into the painting from a single perspective, however. Instead, the

images have been arranged and fused together from a series of different views and distances, which better describe the place of inspiration as I actually experienced it and continue to experience it in memory (see plates 6 and 7). Here, macroscopic and microscopic perspectives melt together and cross-reference each other to affirm the universal rhythms of nature.

With the screens and other multi-paneled paintings, I have embraced an entirely new set of perceptual experiences and discoveries. The visual irony which comes about due to the relationships between the illusionistic space of the painting and the actual, three-dimensional space of the panels as they stand freely in space is truly compelling. The paintings continue to pay homage to the wisdom of nature, but for these features, they affect the space which they inhabit all the more powerfully.

While the historical references to the Japanese screen, or *byōbu* (literally, wind protection), are fascinating and the screens themselves are beautifully engineered objects of utility irrespective of the imagery, the initial drive to create a painting on a folded surface came first from an interest in the perceptual and illusionary distortions afforded by the actual three-dimensional qualities of the surface. I was surprised to learn that the Japanese masters never considered that the screens might be oriented in any other formation than flat on the wall or in an accordion fashion. Certainly there are incredible design problems resulting from the imagery changing with respect to the viewer's point of reference which require a certain amount of simplification, but it seemed to me that there were possibilities for the format which were yet to be discovered.

Since the artist of a screen has to consider a series of constant distortions in viewing

the piece, Japanese predecessors preferred to use the zigzag formation to limit the main angles of vision in general to three: from the left side, from the right, and from straight in front. While the screen must be comprehensible as a whole, only one panel can be seen at its best at any time. Each panel must at once maintain its relationship to the others, and work on its own, irrespective of the others.

The master screen painter, Sotatsu, of sixteenth century Japan, dealt with this challenge by considering first and foremost the grand vision or the overall form which lures the spectator to come closer. It calls out from afar where the viewer can see it in its entirety and then, as the viewer moves into the space, he felt that the painting had to function to retain interest in the more subtle relationships between the panels themselves. I drew on the master's experience and, like him, thought of the images working across the entire surface at first, doing small thumbnail sketches to work out compositional forces and then blowing them up and dividing the drawings in order to evaluate the panels individually. One of the strongest elements in the "grand vision" of my paintings, however, would never have been considered by the Japanese masters. I felt free to organize the screens in whichever format best suited the image (not restricted to the zigzag pattern) and conceived the image on the first screen, *Sarugajou* (plates 1 and 2), as roughly concave on one side and convex on the other. On one side, the image, in concert with the actual three-dimensional space of the screen, works to envelop the viewer with the deepest point of the illusionistic space also being the farthest point from the viewer at any viewpoint.

I was unable to predict what the distortions might do to the imagery, but was very pleased by the discoveries I made along the way. For example, depending on the arrangement

of the screen there are areas where the actual shape of the screen mimics the illusion of space in the imagery, but there are also places where those two elements completely contradict each other. I found both visual experiences delightful. Therefore, the image and the viewer's reaction to it change not only with the viewpoint, but also with changes to the orientation of the screen. Panels one and two can be in a convex "V" configuration, or a concave one without dramatically changing the overall image or space suggested by the screen, but there is a palpable perceptual shift which occurs in the process of changing the format.

There is a dialogue between the two images as the viewer walks from one side to the other, noticing that the images are related, but different perspectives of what is apparently the same place. Viewers will sense a relationship between the two sides and feel encouraged to walk from one side to the other. As it is impossible to experience both sides at once, the screen necessitates remembering one side to understand its relationship to the other. In so doing, the viewer is forced to participate in the very process I used to create the object, which is both unique and justified with the memory of the place. The tension between the two sides of the first screen (plates 1 and 2) arises from the initially apparent differences between the two sides, while in the second (plates 3 and 4) it is the similarities which compel the walk back to the opposite side.

The use of wood panels and oil paint make the screen considerably heavier than the Japanese paper *byobu* and the feeling of the piece is also very different. The oil painting is solid and weighty in comparison to the light and airy Japanese models with their ink washes. This provides another visual irony as the screen is only about one inch thick, and like the metal sculptures of Richard Serra (i.e. *Tilted Arc*, 1981), seems to defy gravity when it stands

freely in the center of a room. So heavy and so thin, it appears that it should fall, though it is very stable.

Unlike even other large-scale wall paintings I have done, I feel that there is an added sphere of importance of the screens due to the utility of the objects and the way in which they occupy space. More than with the other paintings, I have considered the effects of the piece on the interior environment which holds them. My paintings have always been a way of bringing things important to me into my own interior environment, but these become environments in and of themselves. Not simply bringing a piece of the exterior inside, these attempt to make the interior space nearly as intriguing and beautiful as the place in nature which inspired it. They explore how beautiful objects can fit into and enhance everyday life.

The technique used to create many of the textural qualities in my paintings was, coincidentally, similar to the Japanese tradition of applying a raised layer of *gofun* (gesso) to form the underpainting and raised textural waves of some *byobu*. Some of the underpainting of the pieces was done with a thick acrylic gesso, white-on-white, with broad strokes and large brushes. In this way, the immediate gesture of my own movements and the textures of the brushes were solidified, awaiting to be rediscovered as the paint was built up over it. The image itself arises from the application and removal of many layers of oil paint over the initial gesso underpainting.

While I feel that my drawings are subordinate in many ways to the paintings I do from them, drawing has always been an important activity for me as a means for honing my skills of seeing and as a constant exploration of mark-making. I have been continuously intrigued, however, by the differences between my paintings and drawings and the process of translation

from the visual experience to the drawing, and from the drawing to the painting. Perhaps because of the relative ease of drawing, and the lesser investment required by the medium in comparison to the commitment demanded of a painting, the drawings have sometimes held marks which were freer, or more immediate reactions to the subject matter. The variety of marks, the speed and direction of lines, and the immediacy of response in drawing are elements I have long felt would enhance the overall effectiveness of my paintings. This body of work holds evidence of exploration of those suspicions (see plate 8).

Most paintings have a series of sketches done before and/or during the process of painting which are used to work out problems and compositions, and help to focus on the important aspects of the painting (as the sketch in plate 9 was done in preparation for plate 4). In several of these recent pieces, as with the raised gesso strokes, I have attempted to utilize the power of the drawn mark; to crystalize the freely drawn marks in the early stages of the painting and utilize them with the more painterly movements creates a foundation for the painting which is built on energy, gesture, immediacy, and expressiveness. With this energy as a base, the paint is woven over and into the gestures—sanded and scraped until the marks are unified, but the energy remains preserved intact (see plate 10).

For my own part, the paintings are successful in that they are the products of a ritual which has as its main goals a union with the inspiration of nature and another step in my journey as a painter. It is possible for me to re-experience the memory of the sacred place as well as the joy of the making, simply by standing in front of the paintings and letting myself be pulled once again into them. I can only hope that other viewers can experience such communion with the natural world when surrounded by the paintings in an environment of

canvas, paint, light, and organic form. They may enter into the paintings with recognition of place and form, but then let the controlled chaotic textures, swirling liquid colors, and rhythmic marks take them to a place which is neither here, nor there.

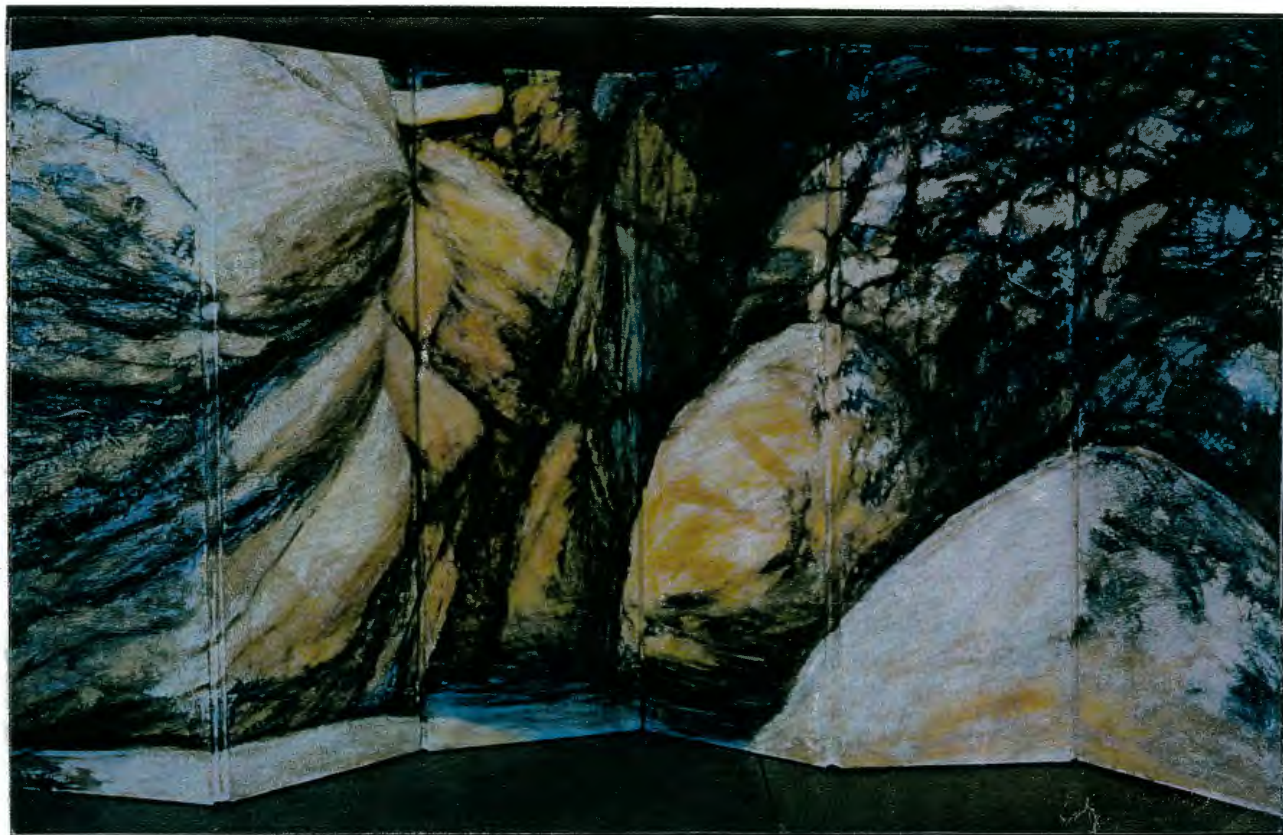


Plate 1. *Sarugajou* (Front), Oil on wood panel and canvas screen, 72" X 150"



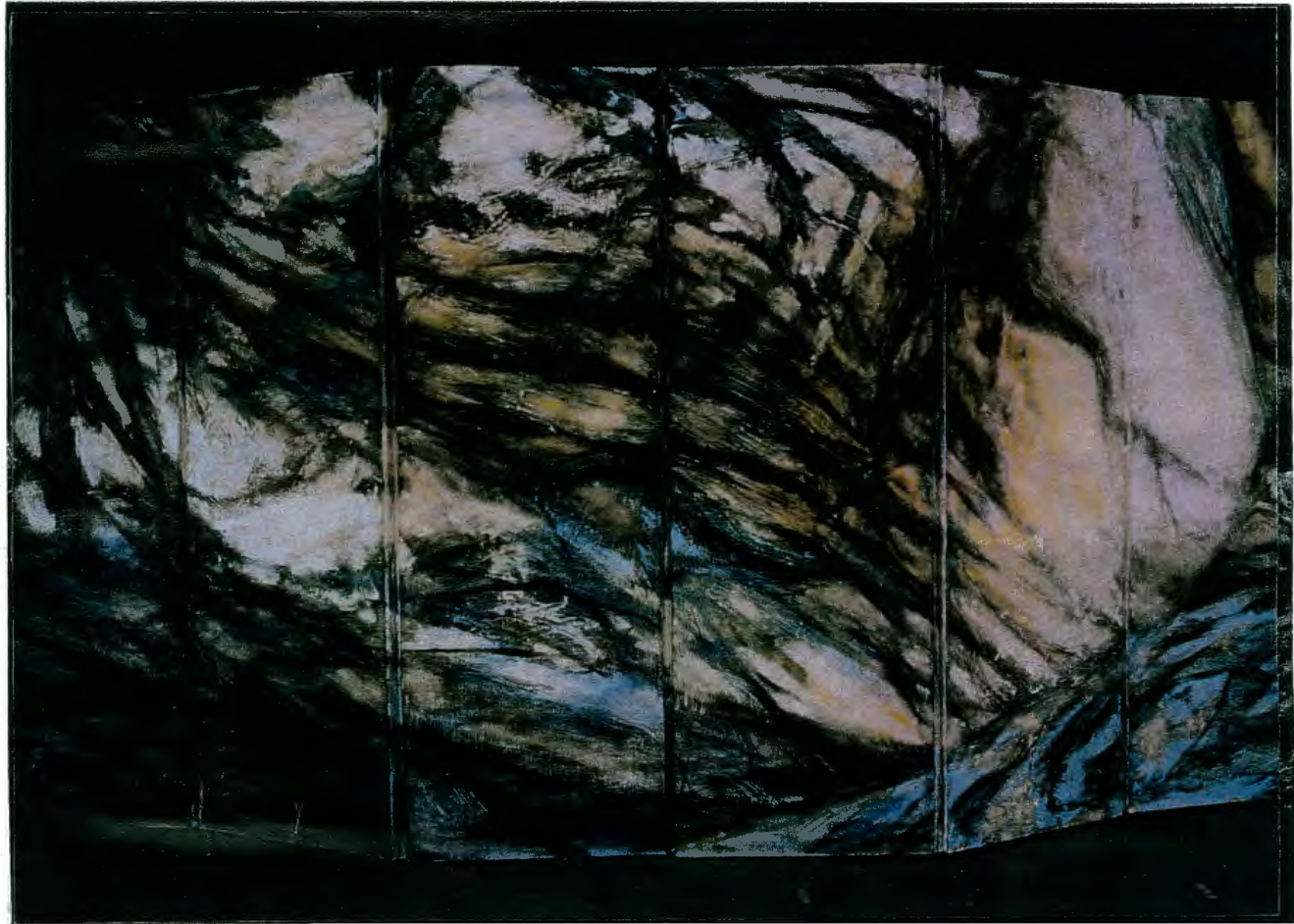


Plate 2. *Sarugajou* (Back), Oil on wood panel and canvas screen, 72" X 150"



Plate 3. *Sarugajou* (Front), Oil on panel and canvas screens (two, three-paneled screens), 84" X 150"



Plate 4. *Sarugajou* (Back), Oil on panel and canvas screens, (two, three-paneled screens) 84" X 150"



Plate 9. *Pusan*, Oil on paper, 26" X 20"



Plate 6. *Red Mountain Pass*, Oil on canvas, 78" X 168"



Plate 7. *Big Thompson*, Oil on canvas, 78" X 156"



Plate 8. *Tarumizu*, Oil on canvas (two panels hinged at wall and protruding slightly from top and bottom), 108" X 60"



Plate 9. *Sketch for Sarugajou*, Charcoal and pastel on paper, 13" X 27"





Plate 10. *St. Vrain*, Oil on canvas (corner piece), 72" X 96"