

THESIS

ORIGIN AND EXPANSION

Submitted by

Sarah R. J. Vaeth

Department of Art

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Fall, 2004

COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

November 2, 2004

WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY SARAH R. J. VAETH ENTITLED "ORIGIN AND EXPANSION" BE ACCEPTED AS FULLFILING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS.

Committee on Graduate work

Esther J. Pressel

David A. Ellerby

Steve Smith

Adviser
James T. Roemer

Co-Adviser
Patrick J. Key

Department Head/Director

ABSTRACT OF THESIS
ORIGIN AND EXPANSION

This work has its source in the internal landscape, constructed out of memory, dream, psychological propulsion and inhibition. It is fundamentally my autobiography, in which I use the language of pictorial space to create a text of the mind. The work encompasses two series, called *Wing* and *Stone and Water*. These are differentiated by physical processes and by formal qualities. Both are conceptualized as an elucidation of my own psychological terrain. Throughout the work runs this vein of thought: that I am pushing forward from a ground prepared in childhood. My work is an examination of this liminal confrontation.

Sarah R. J. Vaeth
Art Department
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, CO 80523
Fall 2004

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Jim Dormer and Steve Simons for recognizing the direction in which my work was strongest, and for encouraging me in that new territory. I would also like to thank David Ellerby, Marius Lehene and Tom Lundberg for their mentorship, which has proved to be so crucial to the work presented here. Finally, I want to thank Julie Keith and Ron Salkin for insisting that I stay the course.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION TO THE WORK.....	1
SELECTED WORK.....	13
INVENTORY OF WORK.....	24

ORIGIN AND EXPANSION: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE WORK

The source for this body of work is the internal world of memory, dream, my origins, my present psychological space. This work is at its most fundamental an intimate autobiography. I come to images urgently and compulsively. Varied individual images come out of an overriding *image-idea*; this visual concept will come to me with a heady feel of significance: it is irresistible. My working process is one of holding the *image-idea* in my mind, while I test the physical image against it. Because the original concept occurs to me with little specificity, the working is a suspenseful hunt. The series of images that comes out of the concept is a series of hypotheses, a positing of variations guided by the first idea. Every image begins with a mapping stage, where I sparingly mark out the big structure of the image. From the outset I approach designated bounded regions of the picture plane as differentiated spaces. Intuitively I know when I am working true to the vision until I have spun out every variation that comes to mind.

My thesis work belongs to two major *image-ideas*, which I have worked on concurrently since 2002. A few works represent a cross-linking occurring between these two.¹ For convenience I have named these two *image-ideas* the *stone and water* series and the *wing* series. The *wing* series includes those works with “wing” in the title;² it also includes all of the drypoint prints³ and the thread drawings.⁴ The *stone and water*

¹ *Hanging Landscape* and *Crevice* belong to the *Stone and Water* series, but have characteristics of the *Wing* series: thread elements and references to suspension.

² *Wing, Two Wing*.

³ *Ascension I, Ascension I, Encroachment, Tethered, Web*.

⁴ *Cradle, Cross Stitch, Darting Line, Garden, Marine, Needles, Script, White Line*.

series⁵ is a set of complexly made intaglios and collagraphs. In formal terms these two series are characterized by a privileging of line in the former, and color and shape in the latter. The visual priorities I set up in each series dictate very different working methods, which can be summarized by a use of direct, unedited processes in the *Wing* series, and the use of exploratory and layered evolutionary processes in the *Stone and Water* series.

THE *WING* SERIES

The *wing* series started with the earliest of my thread drawings.⁶ These thread drawings trained me in a different way of drawing. When I draw with thread the placement of the line on the page is precise. The drawing is constructed by increments; each line is laid down, positioned, adjusted and anchored in place. This is a meditative, rather than impulsive kind of drawing. There is spontaneity in the tensility of the thread, its irregularities, the way the thread is kinked from tangling- and how those qualities make it yield to or resist certain placements on the page. However, the visual effect of these variable factors is negotiated rather than accidental- an articulate dance of intention and resistance. Because I give so much attention to each line, each line has a characteristic presence, like a letter within a text.

After I began making thread drawings, I wanted to use line in an analogous way in my prints. Ultimately I found that the most direct ways of working a plate or stone were the ones most akin to my thread work. Most of the prints in this series are

⁵ *Crevice, Delight, Hanging Landscape, Remnant, Vortex, Water Garden, Water Spaces.*

⁶ including *White Line* and *Darting Line.*

drypoints. In these plates it was important that I work the plate directly with the scribe or *Dremel*. I didn't want to modify the drawn line with etching and layering; it had to retain the mark of the hand and the purity of the first intention. In my prints I do not attempt to imitate the very slow pace natural to the thread drawings. The line drawn with a scribe has its own pace; and so does the line drawn with a *Dremel*. What is common to both the prints and thread drawings is the foremost priority given to thoughtful placement of line. Every line is considered and necessary.

Some of the drypoint images are very densely built up.⁷ However, they retain the character of individual lines, with a very specific hair-like tensility. I placed the fine lines of the central image parallel to each other, never allowing them to cross; so they never become generalized into tone or texture. The *Dremel* lines in my drypoint prints are quick and aggressive. When I use the tool to make a loose curving line it is barely under my control. The tendency of the tool is to whip across the plate, escaping the guidance of my hand. I exploit this condition to make lines that are like snapped wires.⁸ I choose a placement and destination, but sometimes the line breaks and curves midway. This is the inherent resistance of the tool, and it introduces spontaneity.

The works in the *wing* series share a horizontal format and elements connoting flight, upward movement, and conflict against upward movement (tethering or suspension). These elements are, variously, a centrally oriented form based on the wing, and the presence of thread or thread-like lines. Where the wing metaphor appears in conjunction with obstructing elements- lines that tether and pull- the image connotes

⁷ For example, *Ascension I, Ascension II, and Tethered*.

⁸ For example, *Ascension I, Tethered, Belt*.

hampered destiny, a fear of moving forward. When the wing is unobstructed it expresses an emotional expansion, a stretching into psychological space. Gaston Bachelard examined the correspondences between spatial imagery and psychology in The Poetics of Space. The book was recommended to me when I began to articulate the themes of vast space and visual poetry in my work. In particular, the chapter *Intimate Immensity* has been instrumental in focusing the terms of my work. Bachelard equates poetic or artistic ideation with “daydreaming,” in which the mind “flees the object nearby and right away... is far off, elsewhere, in the space of *elsewhere*.”⁹ One favorite destination of the daydreaming mind, Bachelard tells us, is the *elsewhere* of immensity. Bachelard explains that the imagination is compelled to the subject of immensity or grandeur. When we contemplate immensity, we grasp the possibility of infinity, vastness beyond anything we can behold in the world. To the poetic mind an image of grandeur is expanded “indefinitely.”¹⁰ Bachelard argues that an artist’s depiction of an object of grandeur has as its true subject the artist’s contemplation of infinity.

In analyzing images of immensity, we should realize within ourselves the pure being of pure imagination. It then becomes clear that works of art are the by-products of this existentialism of the imagining being. In this direction of daydreams of immensity, the real product is consciousness of enlargement.

Placing my work in dialog with Bachelard, I am provoked to examine my own impulse of expansion. Compelling visual ideas, for me, are related to dream images. They carry a similar weight of significance and awe. Both, I think, derive from an alignment where

⁹ Bachelard, p. 184.

¹⁰ p. 184.

the particulars of my autobiography touch upon universals of human experience. I make my images out of the motifs of my particular experience- but these images are compelling because they represent the points where my experience intersects with a larger human experience.

The *wing* images locate me as an inheritor of and participant in lineage, locate me in a shared space bigger than my own life. I have conceived them as human appendages: they are rendered with locks and thickets of hair-like lines or constructed of thread and membranous tissue. The materials of their construction resonate with textures of the human body- and particularly the female body. In the thread drawings, the reference to a decorative feminine craft further identifies these images with a female source. In this way the wing images evince a matrilineage. In my childhood the association between women and thread work was natural and pervasive. My grandmother quilted and crocheted. My mother embroidered, wove and quilted- and I was especially taken with her decorative embroidery when I was very young. When I use the medium of thread I carry this matrilineal connection with me. Of course, I am not only the product of matrilineage. For my attraction to the wing motif itself, I owe a debt to my father, who was a pilot. My father surrounded my childhood with images of airplanes; and I was entranced at an early age with flight and with the power of these machines. My father is very present in the wing motif- not only in the literal borrowing from his avocation. There is also the way I associate his character with that motif. The wing evokes his willfulness, optimism, and single-minded propulsion into that avocation. So for me, the wing is at times a declaration of uncompromising purpose, by which I parallel my chosen

path with his. Thus the wing images have their source dually in matrilineage and patrilineage.

THE *STONE AND WATER* SERIES

I worked with the *stone and water* series concurrently with the *wing* series; and while they take a different visual form, the themes of origin and expansion predominate here too. In the *stone and water* images I start with flat shapes that define regions of the picture plane. In the intaglios I create that foundational image with softground textures, using shapes cut from cloth, arranged and impressed on the plate. In this way I map out the big structure of the image. The textured shapes have the rough geometry of stones or patches of land, or pools. The way I work the plate in successive stages has analogies in geology. I begin to designate some of the shapes as solid and some as fluid. At this point I understand these shapes as being different kinds of spaces, and I approach them differently. The marks I make in the solid spaces are dense and organic, yielding variously surfaces which are pebbly or vegetal. I scrape down or open-bite the fluid spaces to excavate them. These spaces become the sites for brushed and swirling liquid marks.

In the *stone and water* images the experience of psychological expansion is produced in the relationship between solid forms (evoking stone or patches of land) and the liquid forms (pools and rivulets) between them. When I make these images I conceptualize these solid and liquid forms pushing against each other, vying for space.

The solid structure contains the liquid forms, but barely. In these images there is the implication of future erosion and an overtaking of the solid structure by water. *Water Spaces* and *Water Garden* together posit this kind of inundation. The strict geometry of *Water Spaces*- with the blue pools contained by mossy patches- gives way to the swampy verdure of *Water Garden*, in which the geometry of the plane is broken and organic. These two images were made from the same intaglio plate. Here is an instance where my physical working of the plate paralleled the evolving “geology” of the image. The plate itself became increasingly eaten away with successive etches, and the image became increasingly broken and complex.

In several images of the *Stone and Water* series¹¹ the tension of solid and liquid pushing against each other is repeated in the relationship between the whole image and the edges of the picture plane. These are images in which I chose to let the edge terminate irregularly, following the outlines of individual shapes. The irregular edges of these images are an expression of barely contained cohesion. I do not regard the edges of the plane as a “window” in any of my thesis images: the picture is a complete object, a world unto itself. The images where I have avoided an abrupt edge cannot be read otherwise. The irregularity of the edge declares the image to be both complete and filled with the potential energy of expansion.

Like the *wing* images the *stone and water* pictures speak to my origins. The patches of stone-like forms have a textile reference in the way they are pieced together. My choice of the title *Afghan* for one image is an acknowledgment of that connotation.

¹¹ *Crevice, Delight, Hanging Landscape Remnant, Water Garden.*

The patchwork of colored shapes recalls the afghan blankets my grandmother made when I was young; the orange and brown in that piece are colors she used in a blanket. They are also the colors of the rich earth around her East Texas home. Curiously I have had dreams about my grandmother's house in which the house and land are in peril of inundation by encroaching water. I speculate that the presence of so much water, both in my dreams and in my work, is a metaphor for imperiled memory- for the loss of the past.

When I construct these images I build them from bottom to top. I treat the orientation of the picture as vertical, like the face of a rock wall. Irrationally, the fluid pools stack up between the stones. Inevitably however, these images are perceived by the viewer as from an aerial perspective. Because this interpretation is so inescapable I must approach it as a critical aspect of the work. I did not undertake these images with the idea of aerial perspective, but inevitably the presence of flight- the view from an airplane- became woven into the series.

INFLUENCES AND RESOLUTION

It is important to me to locate my work in terms of art history; and to understand where my innovations intersect with the visual culture I have inherited. When I undertake a new direction in my work, I look for new kinships both to contemporary and earlier artists. Recently I have been looking at work in which I respond to a kind of spatial poetry. In this respect Helen Frankenthaler's drawings and prints and Gerhard Richter's drawings are particularly significant to me right now.

When Helen Frankenthaler's works on paper were brought to my attention, I was in the early stages of my *Stone and Water* series. My reaction to those poured color-spaces was one of recognition. I saw in her work a shared aesthetic terrain. It is a category of abstraction redolent of personal content. Writing about Frankenthaler's drawings from the 1960's through the 1980's, Wilkin uses words like "continents," "islands," and "broad floods of color" to describe recurring motifs. Frankenthaler's work lends itself to landscape analogies, but is resolutely ambiguous.

Frankenthaler has said of her work, "It has to be flat, flat, flat, and also move miles into space."¹² Frankenthaler says of her approach "I start out as a spacemaker on a flat thing with four corners."¹³ This declaration of priority is intriguing to me because it parallels the way I approach an image. The first thing I do with the blank surface, is feel out a map of the big structures; this sets up a compositional hierarchy. The space Frankenthaler makes is not an illustrative description, but a metaphorical one. The fundamental flatness of the picture plane is never denied, yet she makes the plane into a vast and emotive space. I love this about her pictures: that I can see in her most expressive compositions a respect for the integrity of the flat plane. Spreading washes of color allude to expansive masses. Negative space is made oceanic by the shapes floating in it. Broad swaths of varied color delineate a functional division that could be ground- to- horizon, but more often has the feel of two liquid regions bumping up against each other.¹⁴ Always these forms are made analogously out of gesture and mark; they are never rendered.

¹² Wilkin, p. 30.

¹³ Wilkin, p. 8.

¹⁴ For example, in Wilkin: *Fiesta* (Plate 41), *Untitled* (Plate 61).

Frankenthaler's images are spaces of her own making, particular to her, with their own rules of gravity and weight, cohesion and repulsion. The abstract drawings of Gerhard Richter strike me similarly. I see in both artists a use of metaphorical space as personal utterance. The space of Richter's drawings is sparingly described by line and texture. Lines of different weight play different roles in his drawings. Fine hairlines tentatively divide regions of the image, and quick parallel lines describe juxtaposed planes- these two systems of line set up the architecture of the drawing. Smudged and rubbed textures create an atmospheric distance. This distance makes the space of these abstractions vast: a space analogous to landscape. Weighty, chewy lines activate the space. While the initial premise of these drawings is a non-confined space, the vigorous lines playing across it have a feel more man-made than organic. At times they set up an architectural structure or loose grid, skeletal and incomplete.¹⁵ The result is an idiosyncratic space that resists identification with any objective situation. Schwarz interprets Richter's drawings as analogies for diary writing.¹⁶ Richter's most energetic lines are very much a kind of handwriting. Schwarz additionally points out that most of the abstract drawings were done on standard typing paper (21cm x 29.7cm). I can see in these drawings a tentativeness and careful framing of the statement, breaking into frantic compulsion. This is very redolent of the note written to oneself, the testing of an utterance not ready for public expression.¹⁷ Schwarz insists that the drawings are not

¹⁵ For example, in Schwarz: 90/8, 98/3, 99/15, 99/27.

¹⁶ Schwarz, p. 25.

¹⁷ According to Schwarz, Richter was unwilling to exhibit his drawings until relatively recently in his career, believing they were too personal, and not in keeping with his more socially-oriented paintings.

freeform “autonomous” expression. They are “studies” of a world “inaccessible to perception.”¹⁸ In other words, these drawings belong to the world of the mind.

My examination of Frankenthaler’s and Richter’s work has helped me to more closely define the kind of work I do. I see their work as belonging to a certain category of abstraction characterized by analogy and self-reference, but employing no overtly identifiable forms. This is the territory where I have established my own relationship with abstraction. My work has elicited from viewers the observation that it falls somewhere in between representation and non-objective work. This description suggests a kind of ambivalence- but I feel no ambivalence about my images: to me, they are necessary. They take forms suggestive of biological or geological objects; but they are new constructions. They have an identity and an assertive completeness apart from any single source of influence.

The creation of my thesis work was fundamentally the task of opening up a source in myself. I do not think this work represents a culmination; rather it is the breaking of a path. Through this work I have come into a vital terrain: the visual exploration of my own interior response to the objective world. What I can claim as finalized, are the terms that clarify my endeavor. Through this work, I have defined my relationship with abstraction as turning upon the condition of visual poetry. I use pictorial space poetically, as a metaphor for psychological space. For me, the emotional connection to form is crucial; the psychological source is the impetus for me to choose the forms I do.

¹⁸ Schwarz, p. 11.

WORKS CITED

Bachelard, Gaston. The Poetics of Space. Translation by Maria Jolas. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994.

Schwartz, Dieter. Gerhard Richter. Drawings. 1964 – 1999. Catalog Raisoné. Düsseldorf: Kunstmuseum Winterthur/ Richter Verlag Düsseldorf, 1999.

Wilkin, Karen. Frankenthaler. Works on Paper. 1949 – 1984. New York, NY: George Braziller, Inc., 1984.



Fig. 1

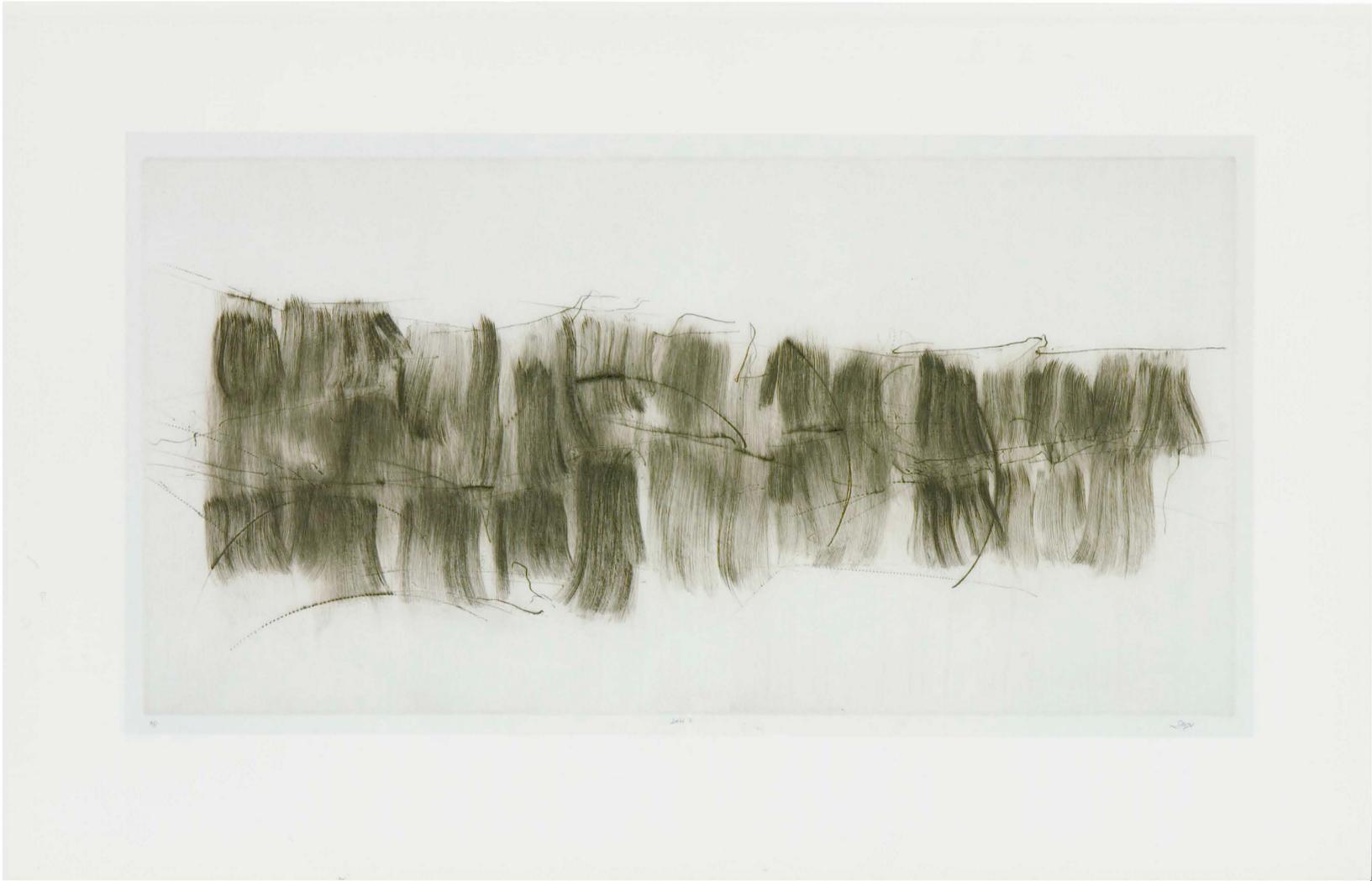


Fig. 2



Fig. 3

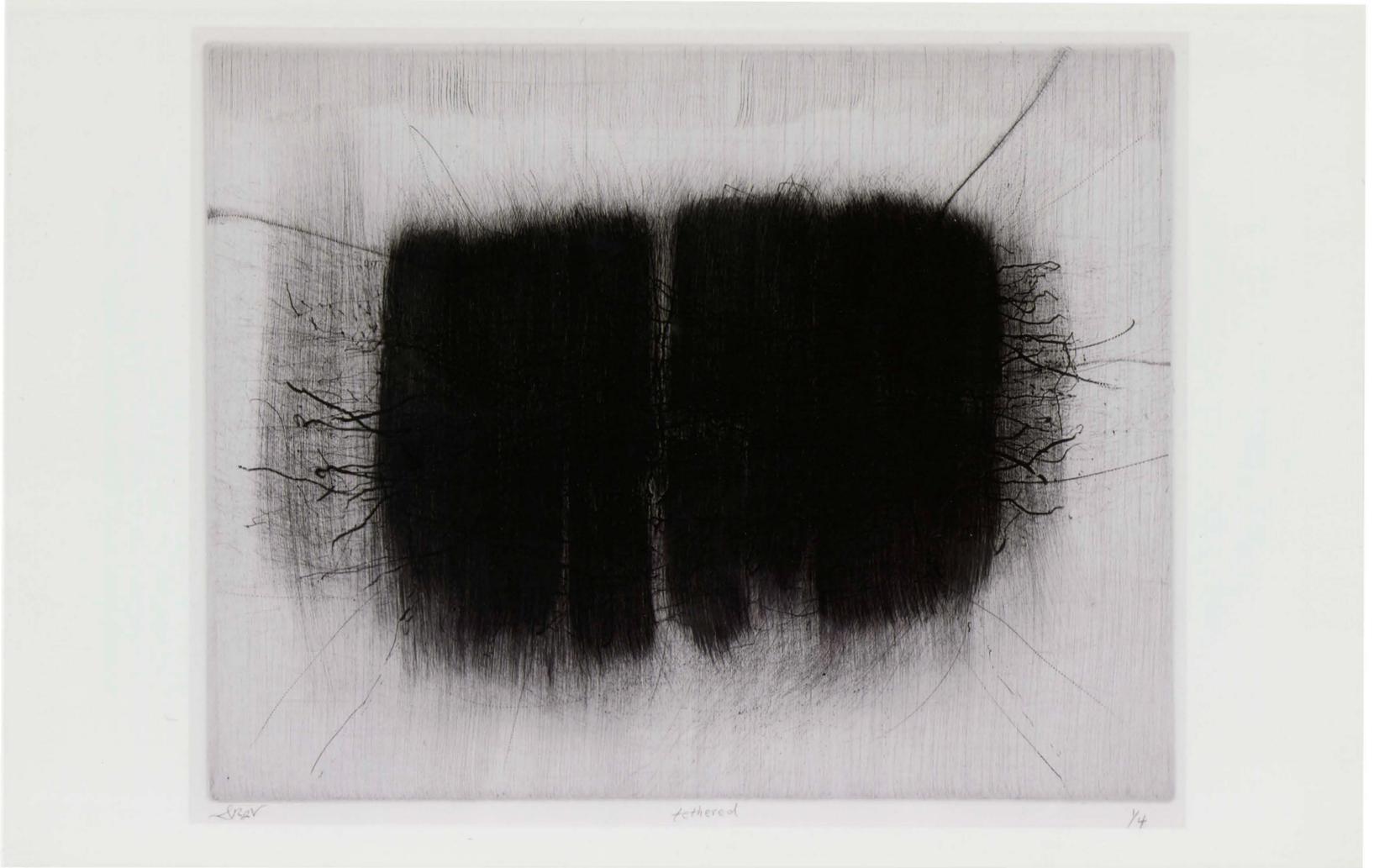


Fig. 4

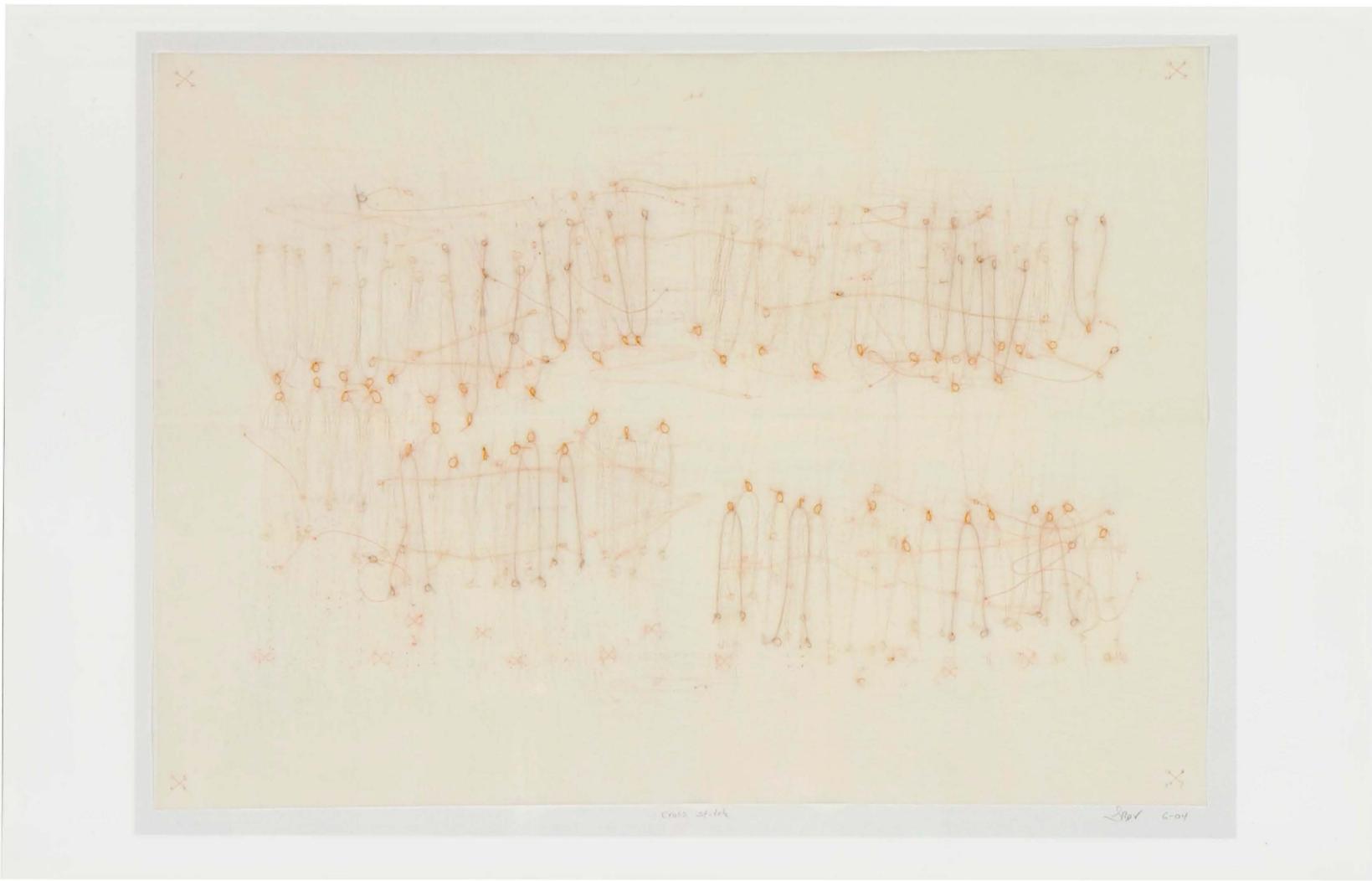


Fig. 5

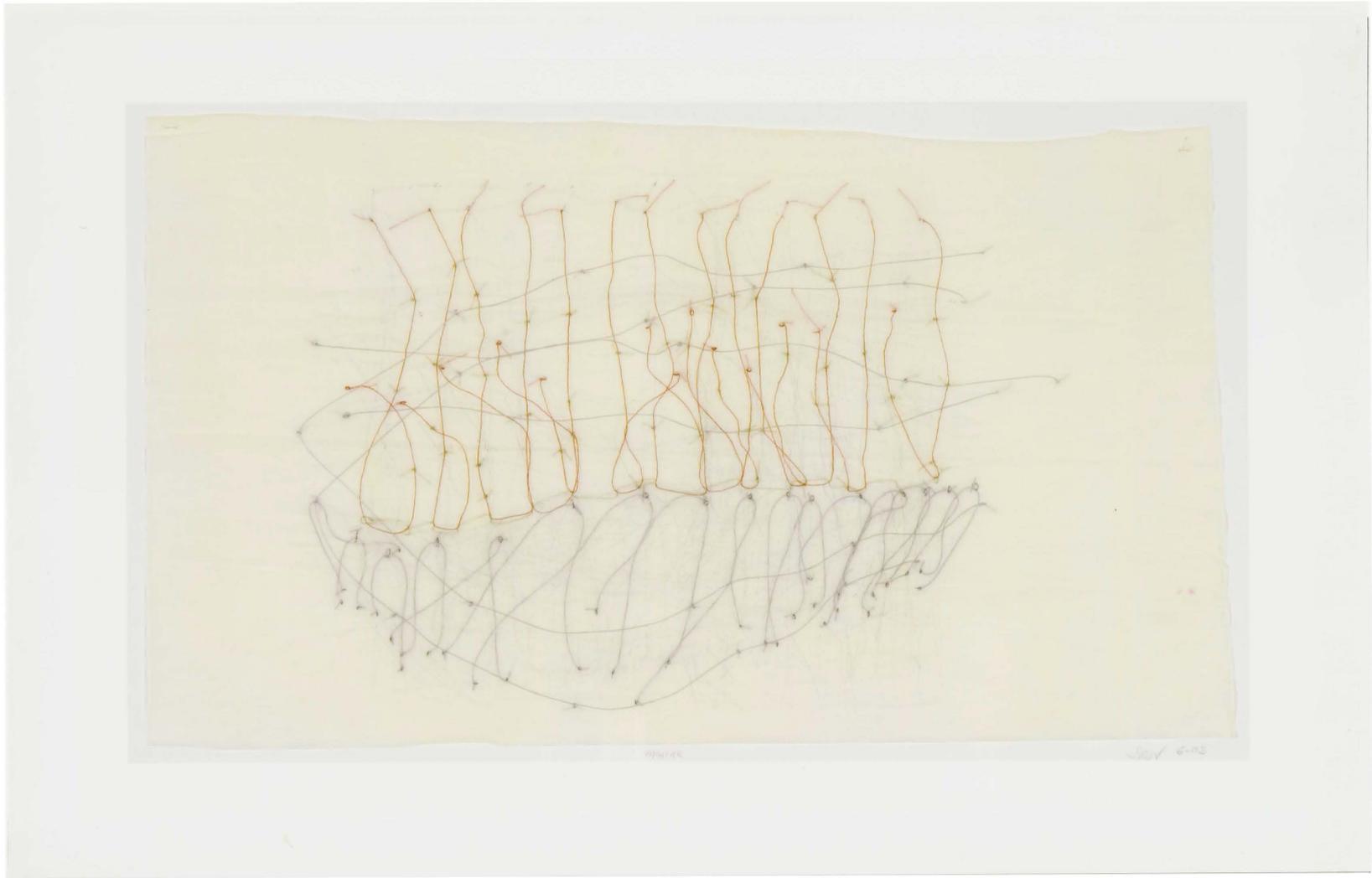


Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10

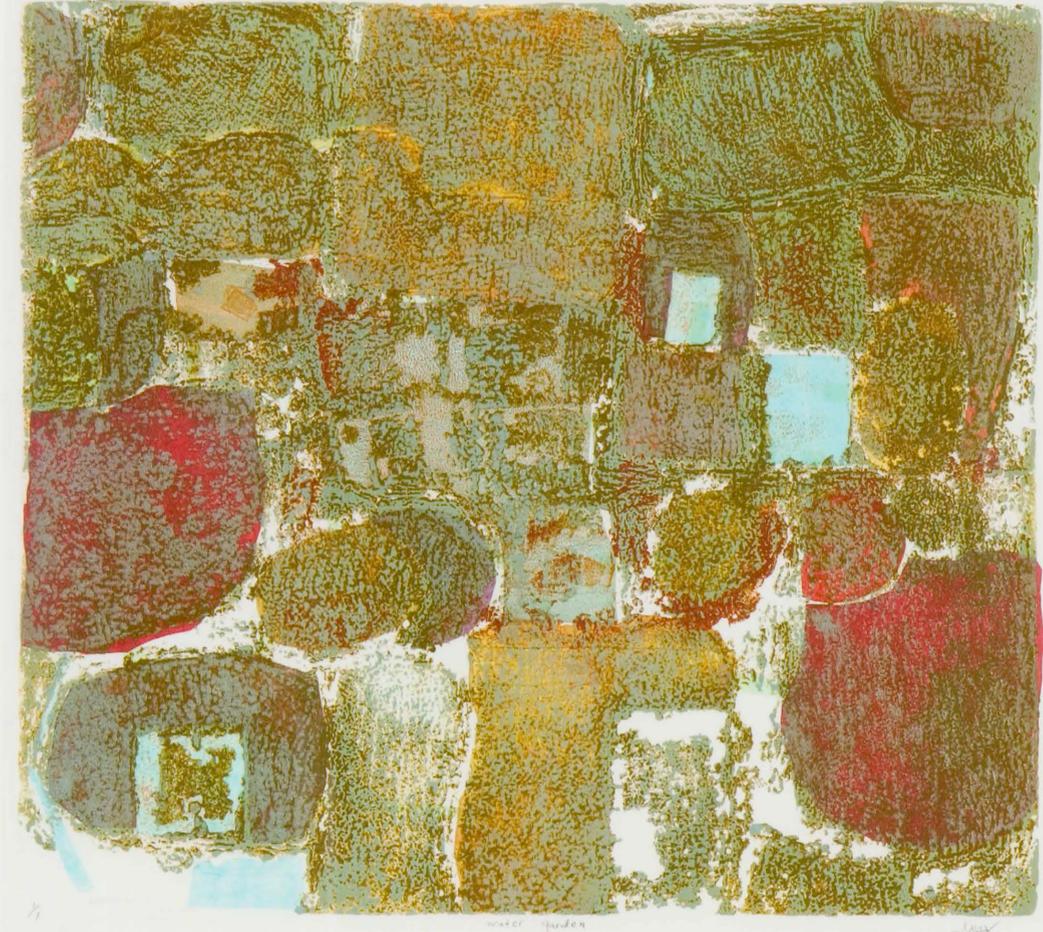


Fig. 11

INVENTORY OF SELECTED WORK

- Figure 1. "Wing." Lithograph. 9 ½" x 12 ½".
- Figure 2. "Belt" (State I). Drypoint. 18 ¼" x 36".
- Figure 3. "Ascension II." Drypoint. 10" x 12 ½".
- Figure 4. "Tethered." Drypoint. 11" x 14".
- Figure 5. "Cross Stitch." Thread, colored pencil on tissue. 12 ½" x 17 ¼".
- Figure 6. "Marine." Thread, graphite pencil on tissue. 9 ½" x 16 ¾".
- Figure 7. "Script." Thread, colored pencil on tissue. 11 ¾" x 19 ½".
- Figure 8. "Vortex." Intaglio. 10 ¼" x 11 ¾".
- Figure 9. "Crevice." Collagraph. 21"x 21".
- Figure 10. "Water Spaces." Intaglio. 15 ¼" x 17".
- Figure 11. "Water Garden." Intaglio. 15" x 17".

A complete set of images can be viewed at the Colorado State University Art Department, Wold Resource Center.