

PLACES COMMON:
ENCOUNTERING NATURE IN TIME AND PLACE

A Thesis

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By
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Dedicated with love to
my grandchildren:
Serena, Zacorey, and Ondrea

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Abstract

There are some moments in time that imprint the memory in a lasting but unremarkable way. These memories are not always profound but yet are sometimes the most enduring. They come forward in our thoughts again and again with no particular rhyme or reason and with the randomness of a field of wildflowers. My memories often come back to me disguised as the flowers themselves.

Introduction

Whatever my current reality is or has been at any given time, nature has remained the one constant. I see many parallels between human life and plant life. I don't think it is too far fetched considering we share variations on the same molecular structure. A quote by Jackson Pollock comes to mind that I feel is a complete distillation of what the nineteenth century transcendentalists expounded on in eloquent prose and essays. Pollock said:

“I am Nature.”

I have thought of this often since I began to make paintings devoid of the human figure. I used to explore my thoughts and ideas about relationships in a more literal manner. I separated the human figure from nature in site specific settings to create narratives about memories and the passage of time. These would always seem to miss the mark. They were too specific and the interaction of my figures would appear too awkward and staged. The figures became smaller and smaller and I eventually abandoned them altogether. What was successful in the paintings of which I speak were many references to forms occurring in nature.

The first plant forms appeared as a floral pattern of small roses on wallpaper. Then more references came in the form of small landscapes visible through windows, as vases of flowers, boxes of split wood, and bundles of dried herbs and sometimes images of places on calendars. Soon the figures were very tiny and the land around them, be it a field or garden, became the focal point and narrative. I came to the conclusion that it was these components of nature I was focusing on.

I began to wonder how nature could serve as metaphor for my memories about people and places. I began to make paintings about encounter. Living in the high desert of the southwestern United States the first thing you notice is the panoramic landscape. Once you go out into the landscape, leaving the roadside, you realize that coming up on a cactus as tall as you are can be very much like an encounter with another person. I use the term encounter, as it describes a chance meeting. A chance meeting is in fact the first definition listed for the word “encounter” in the *Oxford Dictionary and Thesaurus*. This is very applicable because when I go for my walks I seldom do so with the intent of seeking out a specific plant form or experience. So encounters with these bizarre desert plants with their many needles and psychedelic blooms inspired my departure from the way I had been painting. The cacti became my new “figures”. I removed them from the landscape and anthropomorphized them. I painted them in hot oranges and reds, with rainbow colored needles and deeply layered impasto to create the sensation that they might indeed just leave the canvas at any moment. Much later as I began my thesis work the second definition listed for the word “encounter” became as relevant as the first. It is: to be faced with.

These paintings did not seem to convey why I was interested in encounter and how it related to memory. When I arrived in Louisiana, I began to make more abstracted

versions of plant forms. I painted layered images of flowers real and imagined that appeared to float and to morph into other forms by manipulating spatial elements and the surface treatment. I became visually engaged with all the invasive forms of vines and ivy that are common to this geographic area and their curvilinear, serpentine nature. These forms made their way into the mix as well as the flowers, both domestic and wild. I intended the many complex layers to convey memory and the way perception changes over time. I also began to feel that I was being too abstract and removed from my original intention, which was to convey memory and encounter using forms in nature.

Once again I began again to isolate the forms from their environment. Twigs and sticks and bits of moss, souvenirs of my morning walks, were carried into the studio. I began to make small studies from these as I contemplated the use of nature as metaphor. I was thinking about how much the abstracting had taught me about the substance of paint. I considered the way in which I was drawn to abstraction of the forms and yet how my images remained grounded in realism. It is always evident in my work which plant or flower I am drawing inspiration from, even if the image is not rendered from observation.

At the end of my second year in the painting program at L.S.U. I was introduced to the writings of John Berger. In his 2001 book, *The Shape Of A Pocket*, I read a chapter that helped me to think about my approach to painting in a different way. Berger writes:

“How does a painting become a place? It’s no good the painter looking for the place in nature—it wasn’t in Delft that Vermeer found it! Nor can he search for it in art—because, despite the belief of certain postmodernists, references don’t make a place. When a place is found it is found somewhere on the frontier between nature and art. It is like a hollow in the sand within which the frontier has been wiped out. The place of the painting begins in this hollow. Begins with a practice, with something being done by the hands and the hands seeking the approval of the eye, until the whole body is involved in the hollow. Then there is a chance of it becoming a place. A slim chance.”

This passage and a trip home to Michigan over the summer brought me to this body of work. Previously, I mentioned the second definition as it describes encounter. It was the experience at the farm in Michigan that made it as relevant to my content as the first definition was and I was able to make a connection between encounter and memory. For me, to come upon a familiar plant *is* to be faced with a flood of memories that seeing the form can invoke. I will feel at once connected to that form and aware of the passage of time. Regardless of where I am when I see a familiar plant, looking at it will always transport me back to the place I first encountered it, and subsequently to recall what was going on in my life at that point in time. I am surprised at how complicated I was making it by trying to paint a specific memory, or a specific place, or a specific time all the while consumed with an outcome. In the end I have found that the best way to make these paintings has been to experience, to remember, and then to just paint.

Subject

“It is a wholesome thing and a necessary thing for us to turn again to the earth and in the contemplation of her beauties to know of wonder and humility.”

Rachel Carson

My paintings with their various references to plant forms are all expressions of moments in time. Nostalgia fuels content in this body of work, combined with an awareness of where I am at in the present moment with my own time passage. They reference my own encounters with nature at different times and in different places. It is my hope that they will provoke viewers to recall their own encounters with the natural world.

I approached each of these works with the intention of recalling, with my paint, encounters I have had while out communing with nature. The various images of plant forms have strong associations for me with different times and places that have become imprinted on my memory. I feel a deep spiritual connection to the land as well. This may be in part because I have spent most of my life living in rural places, but also as a result of the strong relationship I feel between the land and myself as an extension of it. Painting has only deepened that relationship.

As children, my sisters and I were taught to respect the earth. Good basic lessons like: don't litter, be kind to animals. Though Mother encouraged us to collect and to observe plants and insects while on walks, the notion of putting a bug or a butterfly in a killing jar purely to have as a possession would have been discouraged. We did however raise farm animals for food. This practice was explained and justified by the laws of nature and the notion of the food chain when the occasion arose where a favorite rooster or hen would end up on the dinner table. I remember early on looking closely at nature, lying on my stomach at eye level in the grass to observe insects, munching alfalfa to find out why the pony and steer coveted it so much, blowing on dandelions gone to seed, and pulling the satiny seeds from inside of milkweed pods. I could not put word to what I was feeling at the time, but later I realized I wanted not just to enjoy nature, but also in fact to be nature, all the while not really understanding that I already was.

As a teenager, I began to supplement this close observing of my environment by reading from the works of others who had done the same. I was reading Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Emerson, Wendell Berry, Annie Dillard, and Rachel Carson. My spiritual tendency developed more from this time in my life than from any religious teachings, either eastern, or western, before or since then.

So time and place are with me when I approach the canvas. As I have described, they are imbedded in my mind in the form of wild and domestic plants and the sensation of cool grass around my feet and legs.

Process

“The artist submits from day to day to the fatal rhythm of the impulses of the universal world which encloses him, continual center of sensations always compliant, hypnotized by the marvels of nature which he loves, he scrutinizes. His eyes, like his soul, are in perpetual communion with the most fortuitous of phenomena.”

Odilon Redon, *The Prince of Dreams*

As I have stated, the practice of painting has deepened my awareness of the natural world. I look at it now with the developing eye of an artist. I note value structures and unusual viewpoints. I see forms with expanses of distance beyond them, horizon lines and absence of horizon lines. A leaf waving in the breeze registers in my mind before I realize just what I am actually seeing. It may become a shape or a form other than what it actually was by the time it appears on my canvas. Sometimes I photograph and sketch to have something to reference when I begin a painting, but it is the memory of experiencing that form that is ultimately what I wish to convey, and what drives my process.

In my quest to find out how other painters have dealt with similar ideals, I found direction and solace in the work of Jim Dine. Dine impresses me as an artist, but I was equally moved by his description of being Midwestern and what he describes as painting Midwestern. One of his comments referred to how in the Midwest your parents may not be knowledgeable about works of art or painting, but they do encourage their children to go to museums and to look at art. This reminds me of my mother taking us from the small town where we lived in Illinois to the Art Institute of Chicago each summer to look at the permanent collection.

The traditional paintings and paintings with objects that Jim Dine created, with tools as subject, both painted and adhered, and sometimes supplementing alongside of a painted canvas, fascinated me the first time I saw them. I wondered what it was about the tools that held his focus. In a book about this series, he talks about his father’s carpentry and how the tools are fixed images in his mind from his childhood. This affected the way I considered painting about or from memory. Those tools are very specific to him, but painted in a way that does not deny viewers their own experience.

In reading about Dine, I noted his approach to his palette. He described unconscious decisions in his color choice. He talked about instinctively knowing what was next. I came to my formal study of painting after I had long enjoyed the bliss of color theory ignorance. My own approach is similar to his, and I believe that it may have been a gift to not be bombarded too early on with color theory.

When I lay out my palette, I am looking for the blue sky of childhood summers and for the green of cool, deep shadows in tall grass. I now begin from a basic foundation of color theory that has matured my color vocabulary; but as the images emerge and develop my mixing and pigment choices become instinctual and come from a more emotional place. Sometimes the application of the paint does as well. My collection of brushes might be passed over in favor of a stick that came into the studio tucked behind my ear, or the corner of a worn out t-shirt wrapped about a finger. I put on paint, and smear and scratch and brush.

I work all over the place at once on a large canvas. I employ a less physical interaction with a small canvas. A large-scale painting invites physicality in the way I paint. A small-scale painting impedes great sweeping emotional movements of the arm, but invites a slower, more contemplative approach. The process of making the painting becomes more experiential for me when nature becomes larger than life. The smaller, scale painting becomes more meditative and reflective. I strive to not be too illustrative on my larger paintings. With a small canvas, there is a different sort of interaction that develops, and I begin to draw more with my brush and experience less the surprises that can come from holding a somewhat awkward object that does not afford that sort of precision.

I feel that there is much to gain from retaining a willingness to work on both a large and small scale. There are times when I need the frenetic activity and act of abstracting to release an idea, and yet there are other times when a slow, meticulous exploration is in order. Both methods yield their own strength and sense of purpose visually. When I see my big paintings beside my smaller one, it almost seems to me that I am doing two things. In the smaller format I am generalizing in a specific way, and in the larger I am specifying in a general way. I will illustrate this notion by comparing two of the paintings.

On a large canvas (72'' x 50'') entitled *Prickly Thistles and Queen Anne's Lace*, I have painted an abstracted image of wildflowers. In a blue- green tangle of stems, swirls, blossoms, and brush-marks, are the suggested forms of Queen Anne's lace and Russian thistles. There is no horizon line and no specified point of view. In a small rectangular panel, entitled *Field One* (10'' x 28''), The Russian thistles appear again but are in a field. The vantage point is low and the horizon line is broken up with trees a readable distance from the point of visual entry into the scene.

The smaller panel is referencing the thistles, but the approach is more gestalt. They are thistles in a field with other wild plants in some green place with trees and sky. They are part of a collection of components that suggest a place. On the other hand, the forms on the large canvas do not delineate a specific place as much as they specify the encounter with specific plant forms. They are more about a specific experience with just those plant

forms at a point in time. But, where they are located is deliberately vague. In this painting the encounter at a specific point in time is as specific and important to me as are the forms.

The canvas entitled *Volunteers*, (50"x 50") is related visually and conceptually to the thistle paintings but uses a different plant form. In this painting with its square format a row of hollyhocks grows from thick deep grass. A horizon line is only glimpsed between the plant forms that are life size. They interact as they dominate the picture plane. A domestic plant, but situated in a wild setting with weeds and grass, takes this from being a nice study in paint of hollyhocks to another implication of place and of encounter. The format of the canvas itself and the scale of the hollyhocks make it difficult to discern exactly where they are, and yet the absence of a fence or other domestic flowers in an orderly arrangement may imply that the flowers are not in a predictable setting. The forms in the grass at the base of the hollyhocks are related to similar forms in the other paintings in this body of work. They describe overgrowth in the fields of the countryside where I grew up. The flowers and their stalks are handled with a looser painterliness and heavy build—up of paint and layering of pigment. In the grass and in the sky, I have used a great deal of glazing to achieve layers and to imply depth and temperature.

The trip that I made home to Michigan was a powerful catalyst for this body of work. Prior to beginning my thesis, my paintings would often be filled with many different types of flowers. The time I spent out of doors with the land that was so familiar to me, helped me to isolate a lesser number of plant forms and to explore them in different ways with my paint, and to come to an understanding of why they are so connected to my sense of recollection.

Boyne City, Michigan August 18, 2004

It is 10:00 a.m. The fields and flower gardens are still wet with dew. My granddaughters are playing in the yard with wet hair that I have braided and pinned up to unwrap later for their parents' wedding. The bride and groom are arguing loudly about the placement of tents and chairs. I leave them and go to my parents' home two miles up the road to pick my daughter's wedding bouquet. My mother and father have a yard full of flowers, both annual and perennial. They used to grow vegetable gardens and put up food for winter, but this practice has been replaced with filling the yard with as much color as possible for the few short weeks that the Michigan growing season will allow. Dad mostly plants the flower gardens. Some are in orderly rows like Marines in formation, others meander in and around trees and wrap the back porch. Mother has lots of hollyhocks. She has always had them and favors the heirloom variety with the single petal formation. They have begun to appear beyond the fence that encloses the yard. There used to be sheep that kept the fields trimmed to stubble, but now wildflowers and volunteers from the flower gardens are waist high among the tall grasses. I gather Jessi Rose's bouquet from the

many rows and beds. Coneflowers, zinnias, daisies, and flowers from every corner of the yard. It was her wish that her bouquet be gathered this way. I look out beyond the fence and decide to gather some wild plants as well. The wet grass tangles around my legs as I pluck wild mustard and Queen Anne's lace. I pass the volunteer hollyhocks that tower over my head and come upon a wall of Russian thistles and Queen Anne's lace. The stand of plants shimmers and is backlit by the sun, nearly in silhouette and difficult to look at. I am feeling melancholy on this day knowing some of what life holds in store for those who marry young. I look at the thistles mixed up with the delicate lacey wild carrots and think these would make a perfect bouquet, symbolic of the joys and difficulties of the journey of two young people walking as a couple through life.

There are two works on paper in my show that were studies for the large painting the wedding bouquet inspired. One is rendered in charcoal and the other in oil on gessoed paper. Both studies helped me to strike the balance between abstraction and representation that I sought to execute on the large canvas.

The subject of another small rectangular panel and a larger canvas depict the puffy forms of dandelions gone to seed. The smaller panel is similar to the one with the thistles. It too describes a field from a low vantage point with an expansive view and a horizon line dotted with trees. It is as much about the view and the implied season as about the dandelions specifically. They become more like characters on a stage.

On a larger canvas, the field disappears and it is only the plants that are apparent. The vantage point is even lower, ground level but looking up. The dandelion still serves as a sort of character but the composition is not radically abstracted. The dandelion gone to seed dominates the right hand side of the picture plane. Stalks of oat straw bisect the canvas at diagonals. The sensation is of being below the forms. To the left, dandelions in the puffball stage float with stems attached up into a blue sky. Clouds echo the puffy forms. The canvas is stylistically more akin to the process I employ to create my small painting and somewhat less like the larger ones. It is my approach to the application of the paint. My painting process with this painting entitled *Puff* becomes more tentative and more thoughtfully deliberate.

From Boyne City, Michigan, August 20, 2004, back to Kankakee, Illinois, June 1964

I'm lying on my back in the field in front of what used to be my farmhouse. I am hiding from my busy grandchildren. I raised my daughter in the house and watched her and her friends play in this field as children. They picked mulberries in the summer and rode sleds and saucers down snowy hills in winter. As teenagers they graduated to parties and bonfires. Now I have given the farmhouse over to her, her husband, and my three grandchildren. I gaze up through the weeds and dandelions gone to seed at a blue summer sky. I can hear the little girls calling for me. I remember the first time I saw dandelions. They appeared in a small yard in Kankakee, Illinois. My mother and I walked in the early spring. It was chilly. I remember her blue housedress in the breeze and looking down at my buster browns to see a little yellow flower. She explained that it was a dandelion; a

weed and not really a flower. Later in the summer I asked her about the ball of puff on the stem where a dandelion once was and she described how it had gone to seed. She told me if I blew on it would float on the breeze to another place and make a new dandelion. I recall clearly the mental picture I had of the puff and its stem floating off like a hot air balloon and was surprised when the puff dispersed itself in tiny parts. My mind returns to the pasture I lay in and the swishing sound of little pant legs in tall grass.

Conclusion

Though nostalgia was the main fuel that drove this body of work, it became about the exploration of images; in my case, plant forms that trigger recollection. Most of my images are of humble, common weeds, and yet for me they bring the mind back to childhood and the clear recollection of common themes. That a dandelion can bring about these responses in my forty two year old mind is what I find remarkable and worthy of expressing in paint. I remember the first moonwalk, which was very remarkable at the time. However, the details that surround it are vague to me now. And yet I remember with crystal clarity the damp breeze, my mother's smell, and the dandelion next to my tiny foot.

I had a sense of déjà vu when I dug up a clump of the earth in my backyard with the intention of creating a watercolor based on a famous work by Dürer called *The Great Piece of Turf*. The day I carried my shovel into the backyard at 2204 Ovid Street was damp and the ground was moist. The air was chilly and I was thinking about how there were no dandelions in the backyard and I had hoped there would be. I had to settle for wild clover and pin oak leaves, accepting what the earth offered. Moments that have come before inform the present moment and I think this is an apt metaphor for the painting process as well.

Baton Rouge, Louisiana Spring of 2005

I am walking out the door heading to my studio at eight a.m. and it's already ninety degrees outside. Though I have just showered, my dress is already damp with perspiration. Louisiana is the hottest, wettest place I have ever been. Its plant forms are exotic and unfamiliar to me. Growth here is voracious and prolific. The wildlife is dangerous. It seems very dark to me, like being under a canopy of greens and grays in every variation possible. I can nearly taste the green when I breathe. This eerie landscape with its gnarled oaks dripping with Spanish moss and its endless stretches of rainy days overwhelms me at a most primal level.

Graduate school is nearing its end for me. I have felt at times that the rain and humidity itself might truly drown me. The impact of learning so much from so many in such a short time has in its self been like being caught up in a great deluge. I have found my self gasping for breath in the deep parts of night. The landscape fascinates me. As has always been my tendency, the plant forms here that draw my attention on a daily basis are not the most exotic or the most redolent of the south. Though the magnolias are gorgeous and the gardenias heady, these have not made their way into my work. The giant tropical leaves

that surround bodies of water and make their presence known in yards tended,-even those not have succeeded in steadily engaging me.

I have delighted in all the serpentine vines that are virtually everywhere from the ground to the power lines and anything else in their path. Though people find them a nuisance and fight to beat them back into submission, I have delighted in their power to overtake and to strangle, overcoming any object of humankind left unattended. From a forgotten tool left on the ground to the great plantation houses hidden in the gloom of oak groves, the moss, and mold, and vines prevail. The sheer power of nature and her relentless process of growth and decay!

I am painting myself a swamp bouquet. A commemoration of my life as I have known it thus far swept away from me in this damp green place on a swift current, carrying me toward graduation day. The leaves that are in my painted bouquet are those that nod to me each morning as I leave my house for school. In winter when they are dead and dry, they scratch at the windows. They are the banana leaves and elephant ears that have taken over flowerbeds I've neglected to plant. They appear as one color in the early morning and different colors when I come home at night. I now hack them off at ground level and carry them into my studio in plastic buckets. Their colors become even more exaggerated as they accumulate on my canvas. I do not arrange them as a still life to paint from, but leave them sitting at my feet to glance at from time to time to reference the shapes and forms. I add some imaginary flowers that are the color of the camellias in my yard, but are much more strange and compatible with my bouquet. I paint my leaves and flowers with vines on a large scale against a deep blue background that reminds me of long, hot nights when I could not sleep, and of air that is like water.

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Little Earth, 2004, watercolor, 31 x 32 in.



Study for *Prickly Thistles and Queen Anne's Lace*, 2004, oil on paper, 31 x 40 in.



Study for *Prickly Thistles and Queen Anne's Lace*, 2004, mixed media, 31 x 40 in.



Puff, 2005, oil on canvas, 40 x 51 in.



Prickly Thistles and Queen Anne's Lace, 2005, oil on canvas, 50 x 70 in.



Field One, 2004, oil on panel, 12 x 39 in.



Field Two, 2005, oil on panel, 12 x 39 in.



Volunteers, 2005, oil on canvas, 50 x 50 in.



Graduation Bouquet, 2005, oil on canvas, 52 x 52 in.

Vita

Stacey Jo Harms was born Stacey Jo Doyal in Burlingame, California, on the fifteenth of June, in the year nineteen sixty-two. She was raised in the farmland of rural Illinois and in the northern lower peninsula of Michigan. In her middle thirties she headed west to New Mexico. She received the Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree from New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, New Mexico, in 2002. In addition to being a painter, she is a wife, mother, and grandmother who loves baking bread, riding motorcycles, and cuddling with her two dogs, Spike and Brownie.