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The latent landscape

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THE LATENT LANDSCAPE

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
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Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

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May Ann Babcock
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ABSTRACT

I set a task to take a new look at local Louisiana landscape and to understand this place where I live. The spaces most powerful were leftover, abandoned and forbidden industrial places, including an old lock, stretches of the levee along the Mississippi River, highway underpasses and chemical, energy and sugar cane processing plants. Working from observational sketches and using local materials such as river mud and plant fibers for papermaking, I make prints on handmade paper, books and video that bring this latent landscape into view. Images and surfaces become primitive, disorienting, psychological, dark and changing landscapes.
THE LATENT LANDSCAPE

Landscape includes everything that we can see outside of ourselves, natural and man-made. Today’s landscape is one of a post-industrial nation, with spaces exhausted and the economical power of land fading. In observing the South Louisiana landscape, I have found countless places that are abandoned and forbidden, places that were used by people and now are discarded and decaying. In our culture, one rarely spends time in such landscapes. A relationship between people and the land is no longer vital. A person who looks around can easily find evidence of this disconnect and a history of land use and abuse. My work is the start of a new conversation with these leftover spaces local to South Louisiana. Through the processes of printmaking and hand papermaking, my work uncovers this disconnect via the transposition of my observations and feelings generated by specific locations. I make prints, handmade papers, books and video that interpret this latent landscape, establishing a cultural connection with the state of our contemporary landscape.

At the start of my thesis work, I set a task for myself to look around and observe the particular qualities of local Louisiana landscape. The sites I found most powerful were abandoned, forbidden and disorienting industrial spaces. In particular I focused on an old lock, stretches of the levee, highway underpasses as well as chemical, energy and sugar cane processing plants. These are outdoor spaces, but outdoor spaces that people are not meant to spend time in, as opposed to neighborhoods, parks, or even nature trails. The environments I am compelled to are foreign and devoid of a human presence. When I walk through these landscapes, I feel like I am not meant to be there. These are quiet spaces, except for the distant sounds from the highway, boats on the Mississippi river and birds in the air. Strange, dark and
rusting industrial structures loom, and I feel the need to sketch quickly in these foreign locations. Where do I stand in relation to these sites? It seems strange at first that if I meet people at all in these places, they are security guards, police officers and Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries officers. These encounters make it clear that this land does not belong to the people living in the town or area. Industrial agriculture and levees, locks, and bridges are left abandoned to rust in silence all across our land. It is not surprising to feel the psychological rawness, bleakness and wrongdoing that these sites have endured.

The underlying reason for these industrial spaces is Louisiana’s unique location at the end of the Mississippi River. This natural force affects everything that people build, create, use and abandon, leaving a haunting and emotionally evocative place. Reusing local materials and incorporating them into my work is an act of reclamation, a conversation with my locale, and a step towards understanding my local landscape. My work harnesses the complexity and power of these places and transforms them into my visual interpretations of place. I mix Mississippi River mud from these sites into the paper made for the prints, books and casts, such as in *Cinclaire Study 1* (Fig.1). A portion of the paper is made from bagasse, the fiber left over from the industrial process of sugar cane production, a major crop in Louisiana. Bagasse paper was first made in Louisiana in the 1800s.¹ I went to Alma, Louisiana to obtain the bagasse fiber from the Alma Plantation, one of the 11 remaining sugar mills in Louisiana. Bagasse is used to fuel the processing plant during harvesting season, but still each year about 60 percent of it is unused and discarded.² The books I have made are a gathering, binding and combining of light and delicate sheets of bagasse paper to form a whole object. *Bagasse Construction* rises, both sides echoing a

2 David Stewart, Alma Plantation Manager, personal tour of Alma Plantation, 18 Nov. 2010.
slope constructed of layers of material (Fig. 2). Peering through the side of the ream, one can see the crevices and caves formed by the cockled paper. The paper is dried and formed according to its own characteristics. Books are now mass-produced, but time and care was put into making this sculptural object. Like a soft version of Anselm Kiefer’s lead books, it is in-between being a sculptural object and conventional book.

My efforts to understand local sites have resulted in an exploration of contemporary culture’s relationship with a created and then discarded landscape. These places are dug into, built upon, trashed, confined, controlled, rotting, scarred, paved and formed into confining hills and then thoughtlessly discarded. My studio practice is an investment in time, thought, exploration and resolution of “my place” in South Louisiana. Lucy Lippard makes the argument that ours is multicentered society where “even if we can locate ourselves, we haven’t necessarily examined our place in, or our actual relationship to, that place.”3 The spatial experience of a landscape can be impressive because it is so totally unfamiliar. I spend time drawing, sketching, observing, looking, listening and thinking in these left over places, trying to understand them visually and intuitively. I interpret what I find in the dark cavernous spaces that are so mysterious and strange. I carve, mark, chip, line, scratch and dent away at the wood, finding the light, forms and structure, and realizing each specific place in pictorial space and in the physicality of the hand made paper. In works such as Bayou Plaquemine Bridge 3, I pulp paint, tear, layer and form sheets that are irregular, deteriorating, fading and ephemeral (Fig. 3).

The paper casts of the levee created with bagasse and linen paper pulp also reclaim leftover landscapes, just as the images I carve and print recall my original experience of place. The Bagasse Pour is a video of this site-specific sheet forming. Displayed on a small screen,


Figure 3

there is no set beginning or end to the video. Someone is pouring murky, wet and lumpy pulp on a concrete slope. Later, a desiccated version of the pour is peeled back from the concrete slope. The resulting cast, *Bagasse Pour*, is printed on and presented so as to echo the slope on the levee sides along the Mississippi River (Fig. 4). The paper exists separately from the actual place, but re-affirms the site’s complexity. When light travels through this sheet, all of the ripples, holes and tears of its varied density become alive, glowing with life. The previously visible printed image of the lock disappears into the paper, barely a ghost of itself. The bottom edges of paper drape on the floor, and hold the piece at a slight angle, a slope that gives one the sense of a space below and above. Near the bottom, ripped from the levee, are grasses, dirt, stones and tar that the paper cast removed from the levee near the Plaquemine lock.

I find new visual combinations in these unintentional landscapes and combine them with the process of making. When looking at the finished work, one gains a sense of how I felt when I was in the “real place,” and also a sense that image and physical material become one. Frank Stella describes a type of ‘working space’ where the work is a physical fact, but the presence of a pictorial space is also “felt, real, and touchable there.”

4 Ink, tones of paper, gestural edges, changes in transparency, opacity, thickness, thinness and texture all work together to create such a situation. *Cinclaire Study 8* is irregularly shaped and made to feel like a remnant of a larger whole, or a spill that captured a woodcut (Fig. 5). There are two values and hues in the paper, and the texture of chiseled and carved wood comes forward. When light comes through the paper, thinner areas glow and thick areas retain image. An architectural type of structure looms forward, projecting into our space, and the pocked surface of the paper transforms into the side of this structure. Underneath, shadows, dense ink and charcoal hide a depth. This is an

Figure 4

Figure 5

May Ann Babcock *Cinclaire Study 8*, Cast Paper, Monotype and Woodcut, 36 x 42 in., 2010.
ambiguous space, a dark place with rusting and decaying structures hidden in shadows of ink and layers of paper. Other prints have a slick, oily surface, reminiscent of a landscape that has been burnt and used; where something happened that wasn’t of nature.

Change and decay in each piece implies a timeline in the subject matter as well as in the life of the print worked through my studio processes. The architectural structures are fading fast compared to the timeline of natural processes; slower, vast, immense and eternal. Paper and ink have been manipulated to the point where each piece takes on a life of its own in the gallery space. Image and surface become primitive, cave-like, decaying, disorienting, psychological, dark and changing landscapes. It is not an ordered, neat and easily readable place. Large simple shapes dominate, and the surface is scratched, textured, creased and hidden in shadow. String intercedes in several of the prints and books in this body of work. It binds and weaves through the pages, connects panels of paper, holds up runaway edges and freely moves across paper surfaces, merging with and disappearing into the image.

Color in this body of work originates from a combination of the late time of day when I draw, the natural colors of the papermaking fibers and the color of Mississippi River mud. In my opinion, bright and saturated colors sit on the surface of a picture place, while a range of warm and cool blacks, browns and gray give a sense of looking into the vastness, of something rusting and decaying, dark and changing. Alexander Cozens, an 18th century British landscape painter, was influenced by Edmund Burke’s thought on color and emotion. Burke theorized that high contrast and little saturated color places emphasis on light, shadow, marks and volume. This achieves the sublime, or passions of “astonishment, horror, awe, admiration, reverence and
respect, danger, gloominess, melancholy, tranquility tinged with terror.” My use of color varies from shiny to matt surfaces created from oily or stiff inks, absorbent or non-absorbent paper. 

_Plaquemine Lock 1_ has the same overall feeling and uses somber colors, from a light yellow-gray to a darker warm black (Fig. 6). This piece is made up of three sections of 4ft by 8ft, very thin, tearing and deteriorating paper, and through the gaps and holes in front we see a natural colored paper. Walking behind it, one sees oily black ink seeping through the sheets.

There is something wonderful about being able to work with every physical part of a piece of art. Hand papermaking allows me to deal with my substrate, which is not neutral or silent, but has a voice in conversation with the printed image. Papermaking gives artists the ability to build their work from the substrate up. You can get underneath the surface, and have access to it, and viewers can sense a person behind the handmade object. Tom Bannister further describes how handmade paper carries meaning from the maker and the audience, and “between the two, paper offers the chance of profound communication, not merely small-talk.” The handmade paper sheets I make are organically wild: they have irregular edges, gestural “watermarks,” holes and embedded materials.

Though my work uses real experience and knowledge of place, it transcends simple interpretation. What I know about a site is never complete, never perfectly clear, even with memory, materials, drawing and factual records. In order to complete a work of art, I have had to create and imagine more than I have known. I can never be conscious of all of my influences,

Figure 6

and some of the work takes me by surprise. My work lives within the contexts of contemporary art, local culture and place, and is interpreted via my personal practice of reading, listening and looking. It is a part of a growing consciousness and responsibility towards the land, through a focus on my local landscape’s abandoned sites. We created these places of industrial production and allowed them to fall into ruin. These decaying structures are “evidence of human life, poorly founded, played out and gone” as Wendell Berry, a writer on agrarian awareness articulates.\(^8\) The prints exist as a conversation with and about these abandoned landscapes, these forbidden places that are our culture’s darkest legacy. My work starts a conversation about the condition of the land with the hope of change.

\(^8\) Wendell Berry, *Imagination in Place* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2010), 15.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


VITA

May Ann Babcock was born in Massachusetts and raised in Thompson, Connecticut. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Connecticut in Storrs, Connecticut. Directly after graduating, she moved to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, to enroll in the graduate printmaking program at Louisiana State University.