

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

Reading the Landscape

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When we call a place by name it is transformed from wilderness to homeland. I imagined this beloved place knew my true name as well, even when I myself did not.¹

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Abstract

Surface is a topsoil, an epidermal layer inviting us to wonder what is beneath and what came before. Likewise, painting is what we read on the outermost layer, an exterior where we pause to consider the residue of the brush stroke. For me, nature and landscape are another surface of my reality, past, and perception of home. However, home like much history embedded in the earth, is nuanced, complex, and even dark - no matter how beautiful on the outside. Within my work I question my own and perhaps our shared “romantic” gaze on the landscape. By leaning into the absorbent and porous alchemy of plaster, I physically submerge personal photos and imprint my mark making to conceptually wrestle with this longing for the nature of home - a landscape that I am deeply connected to but also feel a strange amount of resistance towards. Through my misuse of materials and attempts to capture the landscape, I speak to the history of both painting and photography. In the challenge to hold these various truths or feelings toward a single place all at once, I find the poetry in between the lines and language of nature. I embrace the lessons and stories we could learn from the nonhuman and effortless giving of the land I have witnessed in my upbringing and artistic practice.

The word ecology is derived from the Greek word oikos,

¹ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2015), 33.

*the word for home.*²

Mixed Blessings: Home, Southern Landscape & History



Photographs of my parents in Islandton, SC

My first experiences with painting I remember, started around fifth grade when my aunt gave me a subscription to a decorative country themed painting magazine. Each project outlined step by step how to paint birds, flowers, and fields with barns. My parents always encouragingly hung up whatever I made, and never viewed it as tacky or kitsch. They loved imagery of rural landscapes, especially their print of the painting *The Angelus* by Jean-François Millet, depicting a husband and wife praying over a desolate field. I have never talked in great detail with my father about art, but he always had an unspoken adoration for this painting. The give and take of the land are how he understood the world.

² Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*



Fig. 1, Millet, Jean-François, *The Angelus*, oil, 1857-1859, Musée d'Orsay, France, <https://www.musee-orsay.fr/fr/oeuvres/langelus-345>

I grew up in a place called Islandton, a swampland on the edge of Confederate battlefields with barely a population, a post office, and several churches. If the wind blew a little too hard, we would lose power, collecting candles and flashlights moving around the house like lightning bugs. Tractor roars were a soundtrack of my childhood, along with humid mornings picking blueberries, snapping green beans for my grandma, and getting lost in the swamp. Interaction with and appreciation for the soil beneath us was our way of life.

As wonderful as it was and is, home is a mixed blessing. It is a landscape I long for but also a place of pain, both historical and personal. I started my thesis certain I was reading the landscape, but it became clear that the landscape is reading me, returning the gaze, writing my narrative.

I have always had a turmoil between embracing my southern roots and being embarrassed or ashamed of them. At times I buried them for fear of being seen as a hick or bigot. Other times I dreaded returning home to hear certain relatives voice harsh conservative judgements or see the reality of plummeting family issues. Still, home taught me how to be humble, how to love and care for myself and those around me.



Spanish Moss, 76 x 96 cm, plaster and inkjet print on paper, 2022

Growing up in the rural south, the landscape, like most of America, is weighted in a history of racism, colonialism, and trauma. Sometimes I feel this is still embedded in

the ground, a haunting and a healing ingrained. Even in all the pain the landscape can carry, nature also shows us these systems can be healed and rebuilt again.



Ocean Bed, 76 x 96 cm, plaster, pigment, and inkjet printed paper, 2022

Depth of surface – connotations and process of plaster

Surface is defined as “the outermost or uppermost layer of a physical object or space...the portion or region of the object that can first be perceived by an observer using the senses of sight and touch... with which other materials first interact.”³ While many would argue surface is about façade or superficial representation, for me it bears a large amount of

³ “Surface” Wikipedia. April 1, 2022.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Surface#:~:text=A%20surface%2C%20as%20the%20term,which%20other%20materials%20first%20interact.>

depth and connection to what we cannot see. Reading the surface of a landscape provides us with an understanding of the land's story, it tells us when the season is changing, it's how we judge the readiness of bittersweet blueberries by their color on the outside. My navigation of the surface of plaster helps me speak to what is buried within my memories and feelings for the landscape that raised me.

Plaster carries a connotation of construction and building, tracing back as an early technology of paste taken from the earth and adhered to shelter for sturdy living quarters. It's function and history coat it in a context of home while its malleable qualities connect it to nature. I am drawn to the material's shift from liquid to solid because the transformation parallels cycles of nature as well as changes in my own personal growth. Imagery and motifs merge organically from personal photos of South Carolina's landscape. The alchemy I witness in the materials gives me space to self-reflect on these images and relinquish a level of control.

My studio practice is a paradoxical recipe of planning and spontaneity. Contrary to stretching a canvas to paint on, the paintings are constructed from casting poured layers of plaster in box frames. My background in printmaking has heavily influenced the structure of my methods. I build box frames around the surface I flood with plaster, which serves like a plate or template in printmaking. On this template various textures are organized such as cut canvas, painted landscapes on transparency, paint, pigment, or inkjet photos. The plaster functions as a liquid photograph or scanner, replicating and capturing. Because of this, I am always thinking and planning in reverse, knowing the textures, casts or photographs I embed will mirror the original layout. Some parts may be submerged and lost entirely, pigments bleed and colors shift in translation between the wet to dry finish.

The permeability of plaster limits the saturation of color that can be produced. As the plaster dries the pigment becomes lighter and more pastel. I enjoy this lack of control and how the fading absorption of color gives each piece a stamp of ephemerality. The inks in the photo prints usually bleed or shift in tones sometimes leaving frozen waves of magenta or cyan. The colorful edges of each piece reveal the many layers of the pouring process, resembling stratified rocks.

The pouring is broken down into a ritual of mixing different ratios and portions of plaster with raw pigments. The amount mixed is dependent on how much the template should be covered or how many colors of plaster will go into the top layer. As I spill plaster from mixing cups, I think about the process of abstract expressionists and how I also rely on a level of spontaneity and risk to emerge. The physicality of my body and labor of the process is a significant part of the material, though it does not overpower the visual outcome. The mixing and pouring process asks me to move in and out of control, allowing the gesture of the pour to take over. This play of control and uncontrol places my process between abstract expressionism and contemporary artists like Wade Guyton. Guyton's choice to force canvas and linen through digital printers manifests manual glitches that are reverberated in the deterioration of images. These textures build as he walks a line of control and uncontrol with the printer. While my process is not as digital as Guyton's or as gestural as Abstract expressionists, I too must leave room for collaboration when I approach the medium. Reciprocity transpires between the accidents and mistakes the plaster offers.

I approach each piece with a flexible idea of how it will dry, understanding that unknown results will occur. There is a magic to this I crave and a satisfaction I find in unbinding the mold. It matches that moment when I watch my mom pull the blueberry

cobbler out the oven sighing at her recipe's success or my dad checking the field for watermelons after weeks of nurturing the soil. A trust and patience are needed for my material process, that links back to my upbringing.



Detail of *Haystacks*, 76 x 96 cm, plaster, pigment, and inkjet printed paper, 2022

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TAPE PIECE IV Moving Piece

Take a tape of the sound of the stars
moving.
Do no listen to the tape.
Cut it and give it out to the people on the street.
Or you may sell it for a moderate price.

Yoko Ono
1963 autumn⁴

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⁴ Yoko Ono, *Grapefruit: a book of instructions & drawings*. (New York : Simon & Schuster, 2000.)



Haystacks, 76 x 96 cm, plaster, pigment, and inkjet printed paper, 2022

***Prescribed burns:
Techniques for Deteriorating the Image***

Not long after I moved back to South Carolina, I helped my brother and dad burn one of our fields to prepare for the next planting season. I remember watching at a

distance in awe as the destruction ensued. Vibrant orange flames blazed across the landscape and as the smoke settled and ashes rested on the ground, something inside me also turned. The emptying field echoed the limbos in my career and life which I began to regard as space for new beginnings, instead of loss.

In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Kimmerer Wall points out how “the forces of creation and destruction are so tightly linked that sometimes we can’t tell where one begins and the other leaves off”⁵. These moments amid destruction and transformation are something I meditate in the choice to cut images and submerge them in the plaster molds. By cutting or tearing photographic prints of my home into pieces and embossing mark making into the plaster, I contemplate and reframe my perspective of the southern landscape. The visual undoing and deteriorating of the image are also an act of remembering or piecing together. While I try to debunk my own idealized gaze on the landscape the beauty is still difficult to dismantle and the longing hard to untangle. While at first I anticipate the image will remain intact it is often lost or abstracted, liberated when submerged in plaster. A flickering occurs among the strips of paper, like the flame shifting across the field, moments of the image enter and disappear. A distance is created as it ruminates between representation and abstraction. But the distance gives room for interpretations to emerge, and the cut pieces relate to threads in a tapestry, blinds in a window, or the glitches in a screen.

The embossing that is created on the surface of the plaster is another technique that is sometimes controlled and other times out of my control. Both results also create a visualization of deterioration or absence.

⁵ Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, XV



Untitled & Real Tree Camouflage, 76 x 96 cm, plaster, pigment, and inkjet printed paper, 2022

By painting stencils on transparent film with gloss medium, I can create a template that will emboss the plaster, leaving an imprint of my mark making. Like camouflage, this technique creates a subtle haptic effect where the image feels carved or embedded. The elevation of the patterns or castings I incorporate play with the space and depth of the two-dimensional surface, bordering on sculptural. The uncontrolled emboss comes from the warps or wrinkles that occur in the paper prints when they are exposed to the moisture from the plaster. The direction of the warp is determined by the grain direction of the paper and provides another visual flickering or rhythm.

The weight of the plaster and object hood of the outcome tugs at the baggage of representation, photography, and landscape. As I break apart the image, I am also challenging my inherited ways of viewing and perceiving. My choices to manipulate the photographic image or collage the landscape is a response to work by Letha Wilson.

Wilson pushes the landscape photo as an object, folding her shiny printed images and obstructing them with industrial materials. Wilson sees her work as a “longing for a place far away, and a back-and-forth between your physical location and your memories and thoughts. The works seek to merge these two states: being present in your current location, and a recollection from time spent elsewhere.”⁶

In choosing to implement printed photographs of the ocean, cornfields, rural haystacks, and cypress swamps; my final pieces have ties to memory and this idea of time spent elsewhere. The use of photography follows the lineage of painting and photography, and both mediums urge to frame the landscape. In these failures to grasp nature or landscape, mediums teach us something about our self and our relationship to these spaces, our longing and memory, our stubbornness to hold on to, document or recreate something. The same challenge emerges when trying to pinpoint a definition of home. How do we truly capture or hold the landscape or place in a single image? Does the need to encapsulate landscape relate to the ways we view it as a part of home we long for? Or a part of ourselves?

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Abstraction & Rural living

At a distant view from google earth’s satellite capture, the rural landscape of my home address looks like repeated brushstrokes. The camera’s physical space from the earth abstracts the fields into lines, shapes, and visual patterns of grids and textures. From far away I can better understand the agriculture, I can feel the slow plows of the field and

⁶ “5 Minutes with Letha Wilson”. Cynthia C. Wainwright Gallery at Children’s Museum of the Arts. January 29, 2020. <https://cmany.org/blog/view/artist-letha-wilson-interview-childrens-museum-of-the-arts/>

the repeated cycles we co-op with nature. The bareness of rural living gives room to better understand our dependance on the land. I also see this comforting vastness between landscape and abstraction when I look at work by Annie Albers and Agnes Martin. The choice to convert prints into grids and repeating rectangles is not just about deterioration but about abstraction. A way to slow down the reading.

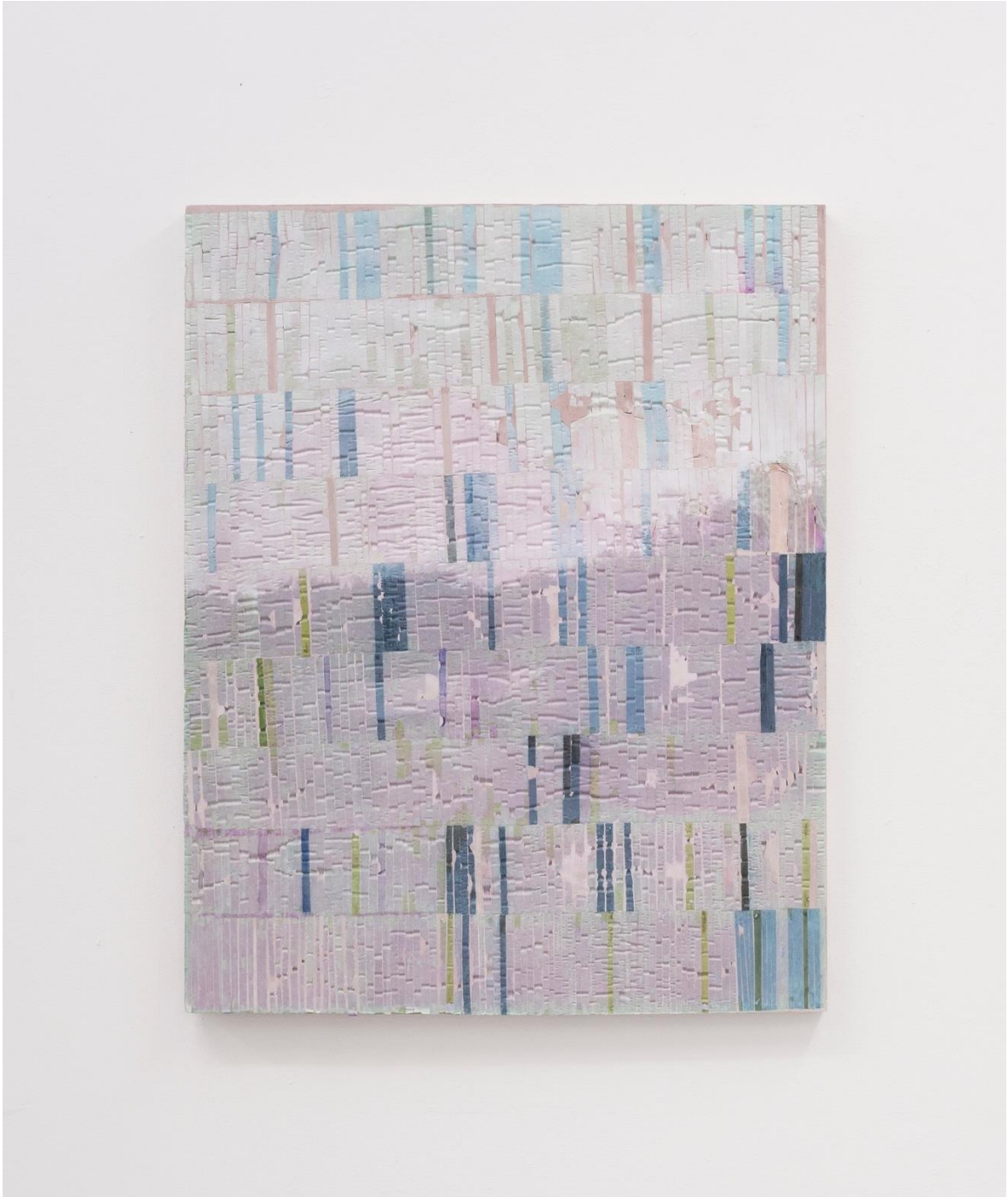
By slicing my photos into rectangle pieces, I reference Agnes Martin's use of line to create tranquility and invoke a level of visual labor that ties to farming, sowing seeds, and plowed lines. Regardless of how straight I cut the paper or attempt to assemble it, the plaster heightens and disrupts any cleanliness or delicate gridding—wrinkling the paper, contradicting, and softening the rigid forms. Even when using a ruler human error occurs, pieces are mixed up when reassembling and the image begins to glitch. These mishaps align with our inaccuracies in perception as well as the illusions of the photograph. The grids and repeating lines become containers for how I fit home into painting, myself into home. When the exacto knife and ruler fray my prints into lines they stack in piles around my studio. It reminds me of hay bales or how my mother collected trays of dead zinnia flowers to dry out and reuse for planting the following spring. Martin reflects on this tie between grid and nature stating, “when I first made a grid I happened to be thinking of the innocence of trees”.⁷

Martin also said:

Nature is like parting a curtain, you go into it. I want to draw a certain response like this... the quality of response from people when they leave themselves behind, often experienced in nature, an experience of simple joy... My paintings are about merging, about formlessness... a world without objects, without interruption.⁸

⁷ “Agnes Martin: the artist mystic who disappeared into the desert” The Guardian. May 22, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/may/22/agnes-martin-the-artist-mystic-who-disappeared-into-the-desert>

⁸ The Guardian. “Agnes Martin: the artist mystic who disappeared into the desert”



Barn Yard, 76 x 96 cm, plaster, pigment, and inkjet printed paper, 2022

This bareness of rural living intertwines with the quietness abstraction can bring.

Martin herself craved this lifestyle and moved to the middle of nowhere cutting off ties to the city, isolating herself on a deserted property. When I was younger, I was eager to leave country roads and retreat to a busier lifestyle, certain I would better find myself in the promise of the city. But as I have grown, I am attracted to being consumed in the emptiness

of rural spaces, sanctuaries to read myself in the landscape. I relate more and more to Martin's longing for a better consciousness with nature. When I view Martin's paintings, I find a slowness in her grids and lines, an inhale and exhale. In my work this slowness is created not necessarily through the repeated lines but the shift between abstraction and readable image.



Detail of *Barn yard*, 76 x 96 cm, plaster, pigment, and inkjet printed paper, 2022

As I look to Annie Albers, the rectangle itself becomes an important icon, a warp in my weft between motifs. As stated earlier, the alignment of shapes begins to resemble quilts, tapestries, or fabrics – garments of home. They too become “pictorial weavings” but within the fragile and irreversible instillment of the plaster. I appreciate how Albers takes on a “detailed planning” of threads that I also try to conjure in my compositions but ultimately must surrender before the plaster pouring.⁹ Albers's choice to bring her

⁹ “Annie Albers: Touching Vision.” Guggenheim Bilbao. <https://www.guggenheim-bilbao.eus/en/learn/schools/teachers-guides/with-verticals-1946>

weavings into an objecthood that contrasts the “utilitarian purpose” of fabric parallels my misuse of plaster.¹⁰ Leaning into these nuances of the material and the possibilities of abstraction bring poetry to the work and my reading of the landscape.

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I Said to Poetry

I said to Poetry: “I’m finished
with you.”
Having to almost die
before some weird light
comes creeping through
is no fun.
“No thank you, Creation,
no muse need apply.
I’m out for good times--
at the very least,
some painless convention.”

Poetry laid back
and played dead
until this morning.
I wasn't sad or anything,
only restless.

Poetry said: “You remember
the desert, and how glad you were
that you have an eye
to see it with? You remember
that, if ever so slightly?”
I said: “I didn't hear that.
Besides, it's five o'clock in the a.m.
I'm not getting up
in the dark
to talk to you.”

Poetry said: “But think about the time
you saw the moon
over that small canyon
that you liked so much better
than the grand one--and how surprised you were
that the moonlight was green
and you still had

¹⁰ Guggenheim Bilbao. “Annie Albers: Touching Vision.”

one good eye
to see it with

Think of that!"

"I'll join the church!" I said,
huffily, turning my face to the wall.
"I'll learn how to pray again!"

"Let me ask you," said Poetry.
"When you pray, what do you think
you'll see?"

Poetry had me.

"There's no paper
in this room," I said.
"And that new pen I bought
makes a funny noise."

"Bullshit," said Poetry.
"Bullshit," said I.¹¹

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¹¹ Alice Walker. *Horses make the Landscape Look more Beautiful*. (Boston: Mariner Books 1986)



Corn Fields, 76 x 96 cm, plaster, pigment, and inkjet printed paper, 2022

Swamps & Bald Cypress:

The Bald Cypress is the dominant tree in riverine swamps because of its unique adaptations. It is one of only two tree species that thrives in river floodplains, which often remain flooded for weeks or months at a time. While mature cypress can grow in standing water, young cypress cannot become established in these areas. Cypress seeds germinate in normally flooded areas during droughts when the soil is exposed. Thus, cypress found growing in a permanent body of water, such as a pond or deep Carolina Bay, initially became established during a period with a severe drought.¹²

¹² *Lowcountry Nature Notes*, Clemson University

The ability for bald cypress to begin growth in drought mirrors the consistent adaptations and adversities we face as humans. Observing these hurdles of survival that appear so effortless in nature was a story I needed to hear while living in a pandemic society with constant political unrest. Viewing the world through this metaphoric lens gave solace in the unknowns before me during such an uncertain time. In poetics I learn my own ways to name these complicated meanings and accept them.

Swamps where bald cypress thrive are a short drive down the dirt road from my childhood home. My siblings and I would camp on their riverbanks, our fishing line caught tangle in the tree roots, and we'd get lost along the stream until the sky matched the dark brackish colored swamp water, stained by the dying leaves at the bottom of the waterbed.

These mysterious bald cypress swamps are iconic in the south for their preserved beauty. But swamps are a strange place to romanticize, bearing the weight of stories from fleeing slaves, and home to poisonous snakes and alligators. Beyond the beauty of their appearance, these southern landscapes are complex like us. Through poetry, I see the depth places like swamps or home can maintain, the paradoxes that are embedded.

Poetry is the bigger box that carries all my feelings towards landscape, home, and painting. In *My Meteorite* Harry Dodge argues the necessity of poetry:

“poetics – language based or otherwise – feverishly practiced, is a way we can attempt the impossible work of addressing that which is unknowable. And by the word *poetics* I’m not indicating vagueness or general infinity – in fact, just the opposite, I’m talking about the proliferative filigree of specificity, difference *par excellence*: the fuel for what Edouard Glissant calls *Relation*, or *totality*. Poetics practiced in this way doesn’t take up ideas that are otherwise clear then obscure them, but rather produces (or introduces) something irreducibly singular, something important.”¹³

¹³ Harry Dodge. *My Meteorite*

By reading the poetry in the land I grew up in, in abstraction, the material and myself, I find ways to cope with the unknowns that I will likely face ahead of me. In Alice Walker's poem *I said to Poetry*, she realizes poetry is something she can't abandon. It is how she has a "good eye to see with"¹⁴, a skill that connected her to the landscape and herself. Similar to Walker, I know I can't escape my need for painting, or the poetry painting offers me. It always finds its way back to me, dancing in the flames at the end of the field or hiding under the dark waters of swamplands.



Swamplands, 228 x 192 cm, watercolor, plaster, pigment, and inkjet printed paper, 2022

¹⁴ Alice Walker. *Horses make the Landscape Look more Beautiful*. (Boston: Mariner Books 1986)



Installation, *Swamplands*, 228 x 192 cm, watercolor, plaster, pigment, and inkjet printed paper, 2022

Concluding

..what else can you offer the earth, which has everything? What else can you give but something of yourself? a homemade ceremony, a ceremony that makes home¹⁵

Bridging the poetry between image, abstraction, landscape, photography, and the materiality of plaster is how I can sit with these webs between nature and home. Even when my personal photographs become less recognizable in my process, I feel I am still constructing a sense of home. Painting has always showed me where I came from and where I want to go. In my work I do not wish to find a solution to these pasts or even an anecdote for my complex feelings of home, but a loving acknowledgement. An attempt to view the depth of a place or landscape and accept all that is embedded within it, the good and bad. Because when we allow these meanings, feelings, pasts to come to the surface there is opportunity to cultivate something, recycle and move forward.

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