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# REMEMBRANCE: drink while the water is clean

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*REMEMBRANCE: drink while the water is clean*

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A thesis  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of Art and Design  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art

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by  
Marissa Angel  
May 2016

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Ralph Slatton, Chair  
Andrew Scott Ross  
Travis Graves

Keywords: Water, Memory, Environment, Painting, Printmaking, Installation

## ABSTRACT

Remembrance: Drink While the Water is Clean

by

Marissa Angel

This thesis paper supports the Artist's Master of Fine Arts exhibition held at the Tipton Gallery, located in downtown Johnson City TN from November 30, 2015 through January 22, 2016. The works Included in the exhibition consists of a series of mixed media collage paintings, a large scale etching combined with clay and a site specific installation.

The Exhibit features work that delves into the concept of nature as a subject of beauty, as well as a symbol of the resiliency of life. The work in this exhibit exposes the separation that exists between humanity and the natural world. Through an exploration of memory the importance of a connection between human beings and nature is revealed. The following further expands upon on the ideas, influences, techniques, and concepts that led to the formation of this exhibit.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

I consider myself to be an environmentally conscious artist. When creating I factor in the effect of my materials, methods, and actions on the planet. I use recycled materials and non-toxic materials when possible to avoid further abuse. Nature has often been an inspiration for my work. This began as work exploring landscapes, and has evolved into works inspired by events that threaten those landscapes. By responding to events I witness around me, I use my art to provoke thought regarding the protection of nature. While it may be naive to think that I can alter how humanity interacts with the world, I cannot sit quietly by without expressing my emotions. The smallest of actions can spark change and perpetuate new ways of thinking.

The central theme of earlier work leading up to my thesis was the contrast between the ugliness that is inherent in environmental disasters and the resilient beauty of nature. Certain aspects of this initial explorations have informed the current work. One of the ways in which my work continues to delve into this contrast is through the method of pairing photorealism with gestural representation. The relationship between these methods symbolizes the connection between humanity and nature, as well as control and lack of control. The natural environment is a symbol of the resiliency of life. There are life cycles that are revealed by nature and humanity's interaction with nature. As a society we have become removed from nature and often do not consider the impact of our actions. Through destruction, pollution, and the impact of our progress the resiliency of nature becomes threatened. This thoughtless impact on nature has become a motivation in my creative process.

Within the work of my thesis show I explore the connection between human beings and nature. My work is comprised of threes and inspired by my connection to three bodies of water. The Belleisle Bay, The Dan River, and Crooked Creek all have significance to me and my family, and all three bodies of water have been endangered by the behaviors of humanity. These works are created in self-reflection to answer self-imposed questions about why I feel so strongly connected to these bodies of water. The resulting work is a visual narrative created from my memories as well as those my family shared with me. I have grown up with stories of these bodies of water, and the ways in which they have impacted members of my family. My father talks of the Dan River the way a person describes an old friend. My grandfather was born in a farmhouse on the shores of Belleisle Bay, and his relationship with this body of water has remained constant for 90 years. Through the representation of memory and the exploration of my connection with nature, I wish to remind the viewer of their relationship with the natural world.



## CHAPTER 2

### RIVER OF ASH

The body of work that I applied to graduate school with was a series of drawings depicting landscapes decimated by the process of clear cutting. This work was a condemnation of deforestation and a reaction to the destruction I witnessed personally. My first year of graduate school was about developing process and manipulating materials. I abandoned any preexisting ideas or projects in pursuit of new exploration and experimentation. By focusing on process and materials I was able to work in new ways outside the realm of traditional art. This led to a series of studies created using sustainable materials, and recycled materials. Throughout this exploration of materials, I was also continuing to explore concepts related to environmentalism and activism, continuing to respond to observations of my surroundings. This led to a variety of projects, from a series of etchings depicting illegal trash dumps, to *Indulgence* an installation comprised of cardboard coffee sleeves (Fig. 1).

*Indulgence* was an installation created after observing the sheer quantity of coffee cups and sleeves in the trash around campus. I collected the sleeves for months, from everywhere I visited. Each of the sleeves displayed a logo, as well as a time and date stamped on the inside, which gave the viewer a visual representation of the amount of time required to collect the sleeves. I discovered that creating strips from the sleeves and weaving them together forms a two dimensional object that could then be manipulated into becoming a three dimensional form. In this piece I approached the idea of activating multiple senses for the viewer. By including used coffee grounds the viewer smelled coffee and as the viewer walked around the space the sound of crumpling paper could be heard underfoot. This first exploration was all about engaging the space and the viewer's senses as well as the amount of waste generated with disposable cups.



*(Fig.) 1 Indulgence, Marissa Angel*

In February of 2014, a coal ash spill occurred in Eden, North Carolina. The third largest coal ash spill in US history. For six days over 40,000 tons of coal ash poured into the Dan River. This is the river where I grew up. I attended high school in Danbury NC where this river is heavily used for recreation and to support the region through tourism. I received an undergraduate degree from Averett University in Danville Virginia, located about 15 miles downstream of the toxic spill. Danville, where I lived for 4 years, had their water supply compromised by this event.

In reaction to this catastrophic environmental disaster, I refocused my efforts on a new series of work. This consisted of three drawings, constructed from collaged photographs of the

Dan River displayed together, as a triptych. By using ink and ash the river was depicted flowing from image to image. These 4ft by 5ft collages were comprised of photographs I had taken of the Dan River (Fig.2). These photographs were taken over the years, as I enjoyed the river and recreational activities upon it. These drawings were an immediate and direct reaction to the spill.



(Fig.) 2 *River of Ash Study*, Marissa Angel

These smaller studies led to the idea to create a large scale collage mural, *River of Ash*. I created a 12ft by 33ft mural comprised of images of the Dan River. After the spill I took several photography trips up and down the Dan River. I visited every public access and boat landing between the coal ash spill in Eden NC and the Kerr Reservoir where the Dan River ends. In addition to this trip, I kayaked the Dan up river from the spill, on the sections of the river with which I am familiar and consider home. I took photographs of the wildlife, the landscapes and

flowing waters of the Dan. These research trips allowed me to find inspiration from the beauty and resiliency of the river, as well as to add to my collection of photographs of the river.



*(Fig.) 3 River of Ash, Marissa Angel*

After collaging the photographs together, I began to paint an overlying landscape of the river using black acrylic paint to create a tree line and river bank. Over the top of this I applied a mixture of ash, decoupage glue, and water. Using loose gestural marks, as well as splattering and bursts of energy I created a contrast between the realism of the photographs and the abstraction of the paint. The splatters and gestural applications of paint and ash contribute to the creation the landscape representing the banks and flowing waters of the Dan River. Visible behind the somber colors of dark paint and gray ash, splashes of color emerge from the underlying photographs. Within the encompassing landscape, the inhabitants of the Dan River become visible. A blue heron spreads its wings as it wades in the river, a small frog rests on a rock and pair of turtles sunbathe on a log. These moments of life emerge from the landscape, symbolizing



the peril of humanity's impact on nature (Fig. 4). The resulting installation at the Reece Museum, Johnson City, TN became a condemnation of an environmental disaster and an aesthetically powerful celebration of nature. The image spans two walls, a gentle curve creating a sweeping landscape within the space that dominates the viewer's field of vision and immersing them within the landscape. The Dan's haunting beauty lingers, amidst the desolation, color and life emerging in the representation of wildlife, resilient and defiant (Fig. 3).



(Fig.) 4 *River of Ash*, Detail, Marissa Angel

After *River of Ash* I entered a period of reflection, and returned to the process of experimentation. Conceptually, I turned to self-examination, searching to answer a question for myself. That question was, simply, why? *River of Ash* was created in reaction to a specific disaster, and was a cathartic expression of emotions. The piece was a condemnation of the actions of men that directly impacted nature in a disastrously harmful way, as well as a celebration of the river itself. Why did I react so strongly, why was the environmental disaster

taken so personally? In search of answers I began to explore my own memories. The work that results from this line of inquiry became my thesis exhibit and is a product of introspection and reflection regarding my personal connection to three bodies of water: the Belleisle Bay, the Dan River, and Crooked Creek.

## CHAPTER 3

### ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

An integral facet of my process is the research into artists whose work informs my own. While I worked on my thesis exhibition I explored the work of four artists in particular, Anselm Kiefer, Richard Long, Pat Steir and R ur . These artists and their work inspire my own creative process, be it conceptually, aesthetically and through materiality.

#### Anselm Kiefer

Through my studio research I have been exploring the relationship between realism and gesture, and the work of Anselm Kiefer appeals to this idea. I am also intrigued by Kiefer’s combination of non-traditional materials. The first Anselm Kiefer painting that I saw in person was an untitled piece, 1980-86, and was comprised of: Oil, acrylic, emulsion, shellac, lead, charcoal and straw on photograph, mounted on canvas; with stones, lead and steel cable in three parts. This was several years ago at the North Carolina Museum of Art, in Raleigh. I was drawn to this piece in an elemental, emotional way. The dark moody image, the thick textures and the three-dimensional aspects combine in a dynamic and impactful way which evokes deep emotion in the viewer.

Kiefer’s work is an example of the influences, and counter-influences, between American and German art after World War II, resulting in a strong political discourse. Michael Werner, a German art dealer once stated that *“German art of this generation has too many layers and deep, painful splinters to be nursed into order by our generation. This will take a long time, but it must be important because these artists make us fight among ourselves.”* Kiefer’s work is predominantly political, and often subject to intense debate. He not only reminds us of German

history that many would rather forget, but he conveys it in an approach that is as thought-provoking as it is somber. As Michael Auping states in his book about Kiefer:

*A first impression of Kiefer's art is often one of daunting symbolic complexity in which multiple references to controversial philosophers, mystics, political figures, and events are juxtaposed to the sacral. Finding a pathway through this labyrinth of references is a matter of viewpoint, ranging from dense scholarly analysis to personal interpretation.*

Anselm Kiefer's works include paintings, sculptures, books, and works on paper that explore recent history and references to ancient stories. The cathartic and dramatic subject matter reveals basic human instincts and touches transcendence. A recurring theme of his work is a symbolic dialogue between heaven and earth (Auping).

The work in my thesis is an exploration of my personal history and connections to the three bodies of water I reference, and in this way my work is connected Kiefer's. I find the skill with which Kiefer merges dark, politically charged subject matter with non-traditional materials to create aesthetically beautiful landscapes. His paintings are simultaneously disconcerting and awe inspiring. Kiefer utilizes toxic, non-traditional materials in an exploration of texture. The materials he use often include straw, or other natural elements, that incorporate texture into the work. In my piece, *Finding Crooked Creek*, I use raw clay to paint back into etchings. The textures created from these materials are similar to Kiefer's utilization of straw in his own work. The clay has a rough texture, gritty in areas and as it is unprocessed it has small pieces of decomposing wood and other plant matter within the clay. Kiefer's pieces are raw and elemental, with sections of canvas becoming ripped and torn. This was an influence on my series of paintings, *Veiled Memories*, where I began with used canvas drop cloths. The drop cloths had



holes from wear, and the image that was created over them incorporates the rips and worn threads in an additional layer of texture.

### Richard Long

Richard Long is, perhaps, best known for his walking series, in which the works are traces of staying and passing. In this series of work Long would walk, and the evidence of his chosen path became the body of work. Long explains “There is no special reason, aesthetic or political, to make such works of art. The work is there because of the artist’s desire to make it. The artist makes art because he is an artist” (Fuchs).

The Line was a crucial work by Long, because it revealed that “the traditional, common means of walking could be used to make art” (Fuchs). The marks that he makes through walking indicate movement, a straight line, or a spiral, showing where he went, while the circle and the cross indicate staying. The process of creating these paths is a meditative experience, creating steady rhythms requiring concentration and providing relaxation (Fuchs). Richard Long’s walking series appeals to me on a personal level, because the action of walking was both an action of meditation and creation. While my method of creating is very different, using a mechanical tool to etch versus the simple action of walking, our experience from process is similar. The action of etching, while using a Dremel cutting tool, creates a meditative experience. The hum and vibration of the machine, the almost monotonous repetition of movement, and the concentration required provides a creative experience that is both strenuous and contemplative.

Since the beginning Long worked in both the open space of landscape and indoors. On one occasion he brought an outside work indoors, transporting a circle of sticks from a field and

into a room in St. Martin's. In the center of the circle a line points towards the sun's location at the time of the circles creation. By bringing an outdoor installation into a gallery space, Long had to participate in a modern system of art presentation. This led to a series of works that focus on the relationship between walking and presenting work within a gallery. Long went on to walk a spiral with muddy boots on the floor of the gallery. The length of the spiral line was brought with him from England. Therefore the sculpture's form consisted of a line given length though the measurement of walking. The choice of a spiral was dictated by the space of the gallery (Fuchs).

As his practice progressed, Richard long found the combination of water and rock in the form of mud. First harvested from the Avon Gorge, where the river bed is lined with mud and "the opposition between water and land seems to be suspended. Mud is created by the water's movement, whipping up the soil, and is then left behind, heavier than water. It feels like an old material, recalling the beginning of time and the birth of the earth itself" (Fuchs). Long began to make with his hands, to pick up the clay, and create mud circles, made of handprints from a material of the earth. As R.H. Fuchs explains:

*The matrix for Richard Long's work is the surface of the earth. Everything he makes relates back to the earth: even if, in many works made in galleries, the relation with a walk or walking in general is there only in the background, as a point of reference; still the stones of the wood or the clay or mud and water used are from the earth; and the form of each piece reflects and recalls similar forms encountered, discovered and employed while walking the surface for the earth. Sometimes the walks are performed in a random way; if so, they are identified as such, and that then is their loose but still definitive form.*

The mud circles have a great emotional depth, combining within their simple form and simple creation so many of the elements that are integral to Richard Long's work (Fuchs).

Richard Long's mud circles have informed my work in several ways. Richard Long collects mud from nearby bodies of water to create his works. In *Finding Crooked Creek*, I combine etchings with drawings made from clay that I harvested from Crooked Creek, which is the subject of the work. Long's technique of using of his hands to apply clay to the walls of galleries was a direct influence on this piece. By using only my hands to apply the raw clay I paid homage to his techniques, and left part of myself in the work. By deliberately allowing fingerprints to be a part of the piece, my identity is integrated within the art.

#### Pat Steir

Steir's work has influenced both my technique and subject matter. Steir has two bodies of work exploring the motion and movements of water, her wave paintings and her waterfall paintings. Gravity becomes an important element, always incorporated into her work. She creates drips that are falling vertically, suspended and unmoving on the verge of disintegration. While Steir focuses on the inherent qualities of paint, she also investigates water. This subject matter sprang from a desire to represent perpetual change. Pat Steir creates work that explores the relationship between physical gesture and the liquidity of paint (Yau).

Steir uses the liquidity of paint to "inextricably unify gesture, composition, and image", and strives to put herself inside the image. As described by John Yau:

*Steir came as close as she could to being inside her paintings while making the waves. In the waterfall paintings that have preoccupied her for the past decade, she stands outside the painting, often on a ladder, before applying the paint.*

*Initially, she did this by pressing a loaded brush against the surface. Later, she did this by pouring and flinging the paint. Each action is predetermined. Even the number of times the paint is applied is taken into consideration. Everything is consciously calculated. Unlike Pollock, there is no attempt by Steir to lose herself in the painting. Yet Steir's ability to trust in what happens that is beyond her control, can be understood as an expression of the artist's faith in herself and her materials. For, despite all the calculation Steir uses in making a painting, she also willingly embraces chance, accident and randomness.*

Through the investigation of the connection between gesture and mark, control and a lack of control, Steir reveals the fluid relationship between self and reality. Steir's waterfall paintings trace the artist's movements and gestures. The combination of deliberation and gestural marks result in aesthetically beautiful paintings, which compel the viewer to "*contemplate both the irrevocability and splendor of time's passing.*" The work becomes a documentation of the actions taken by the artist, and the nature of the paint and depict images of large crashing waves and serene dripping waterfalls. As Yau explains further:

*In her wave paintings, the viewer realizes that the artist has focused all of her energies on the moment in which a vast potentiality is about to unleash its power, while in the waterfalls, one recognizes the artist's attention is engaged by forces of entropy and dissolution. Beyond their shared subject matter of water, the underlying connection between these two bodies of work is the artist's attempt to make time, both its passing and its effect, palpable to the viewer and to herself.*

In both the waterfall paintings and the wave paintings Steir explores the relationship between water and light, which are both forces in perpetual motion. These elements are associated with

the cyclical aspects of time and thought, representations of the infinite and vastness of time. Steir is not exploring the light of a specific day, or even a representation of light, but instead the emotions that a particular light is capable of producing in the viewer (Yau).

Steir applies a brush to canvas, and places a permanently suspended mark within a simultaneously empty and infinite space. The drips become both a gesture, and an illusion of falling water. In contrast with Pollock's abstractions, Steir creates recognizable images, which are still recognizable as simply paint (Yau).

When I began working on the paintings that would become my series, *Veiled Memories*, I wanted to create the illusion of a veil of dripping water, which would obscure the underlying landscape. I began allowing gravity to control the dripping paint, and layered photo transfers over sections of the drips. Like Steir, I considered the idea of light, and how light affects water. The first drips are dark, almost black, and the layers of drips become lighter and lighter the closer they are to the top, creating the illusion of light hitting the top of a waterfall. The drips I created reveal the artist's hand, but unlike many of Steir's works they became precisely placed, revealing my need to exert control on the material.

### Rúrí

*"No matter how original we imagine ourselves to be, our works are always based on the same fundamental premises which are the earth in the universe and the existence of man on earth, man and culture in relation to nature, the earth and the universe." – Rúrí*

From the beginning of her artistic career, Rúrí explored many forms of conceptual art, addressing subjects from time, space and a quest for order. Rúrí's investigation into the cosmos reveals the significance she places on the act of questioning in order to see life in a broader

framework. As she has stated, “every detail has hidden within it a meaning of its own, while together they give a fuller picture of the whole.” This idea becomes evident in many of her works (Schoen).

Rúri’s home land of Iceland is known for its hundreds of waterfalls, each a unique representation of natural beauty. A growing demand for energy and power has endangered the survival of the waterfalls. Large projects, hydro plants and dam construction has destroyed many waterfalls, covering them with vast reservoirs. In reaction to this, Rúri made multiple expedition to document the waterfalls in photographs, and recording the sound of the falling water (Brown). The resulting work of art, *Archive-Endangered Waters*, was an installation exhibited in the Icelandic Pavilion of the 2003 Venice Biennale. As Andrew Brown describes:

*It consists of fifty-two large photographs mounted between fragile glass in steel frames, which are installed in a large archiving unit and can be pulled out for inspection. When a frame is pulled out, the recorded sound from the waterfall on the photograph starts playing. Each one has its own voice, from gentle gurgling to deafening roar. When the frame is pushed back into its slot, the sound stops. Up to five photographs can be pulled out at the same time, the images blending into one another to create a visual composite, while the sounds merge to form a water symphony that changes as different frames are pulled out and reinserted. The work thus reacts to the actions of the viewer, who ‘plays’ the hauntingly beautiful ‘music’. But when the sound stops, silence sets in – a pointed reminder of the empty void that is left when the waterfalls have gone.*

*Archive—Endangered Waters* becomes both a lasting record of Iceland’s natural environment and a warning regarding the possible future if humanities progress remains unchecked. Since the

creation of this piece, half of the waterfalls featured have been damaged or destroyed completely. This piece may become a monument to the lost waterfalls of Iceland (Brown).

The ideas expressed in *Archive—Endangered Waters*, of remembering and conserving, become recurring features in Rúrí's art. The utilization of the archive serves to preserve and document, but also acts as an indictment of man and his actions. Many of Rúrí's works deal with the beauty of nature, and revel in its fragile existence. As Schoen states, "Balance, proportion and harmony are for Rúrí part and parcel of classical philosophy, the ideal which has to be preserved or recaptured." This theme of balance refers not only to the world, but the individual. Nature is a symbol of balance, self-regulating and remaining in balance until a natural catastrophe or the human race interfere (Schoen).

By bringing up issues that affect everyone, Rúrí addresses the viewer directly and involves them. By creating immersive installations in public spaces Rúrí is able to directly confront her viewers, affecting them intellectually as well as emotionally (Schoen). Rúrí's motivations in creating work resonate with my own. The influence of Rúrí's work on my own is most evident in my installation, *Reflections*. In *Reflections* I create a space of meditation for my viewer, in which they can become immersed in images of water. I am drawn to the way in which Rúrí creates all-encompassing installations, which place the viewer in an environment designed to impact the viewer's opinions and emotions.

## CHAPTER 4

### WATER CONSERVATION

*“The trouble with water—and there is trouble with water—is that they’re not making any more of it. They’re not making any less, mind, but no more either... People however, they’re making more of—many more, far more than is ecologically sensible—and all those people are utterly dependent on water for their lives... humans can live for a month without food but will die in less than a week without water. Humans consume water, discard it, poison it, waste it, and restlessly change the hydrological cycles, indifferent to the consequences: too many people, too little water, water in the wrong places, and in the wrong amounts.”*

*MARC DE VILLIERS, water expert.*

As I began to explore the reasons I was so affected in an emotional way by the events that led to *River of Ash* I also researched other ways in which our water systems are threatened. This affects more than just the bodies of water themselves since the damage to water systems affects the surrounding landscapes and the inhabitants of those landscapes as well. I was exploring the personal importance of water and I sought to explore the ways water is important to humanity as a whole. I began with the scientific fact that water is necessary to all life.

Men are around 60 percent water, and women 55 percent. A 150 pound man is approximately 90 pounds of water, or 11 gallons. Because all the cells in our bodies are pumped full of water, everything that human beings do becomes a function of water. Blood is 83 percent water, every beat of our heart is facilitated by chemicals in water. Even thinking about water is only possible due to neurons filled with water (Fishman).

Water is the most familiar, and important substance in our lives, however most do not think of themselves as having a relationship to water. We do not think of it, and we take it for granted that it will always be there with the turn of a faucet. Water has become invisible, when previously it was part of the cadence and motivation of daily life. There are still places, like



farms and in the developing world, where water is still a driving force on everyday life  
(Fishman)

Few are truly aware of how much water is consumed by the average person per day. We drink no more than a gallon and a half, including water for washing and for flushing the toilet we use around 40 gallons each. Use of sprinklers, swimming pools and other outdoor uses can bring that up to 80 gallons. In the United States the typical per capita water use per day is about 100 gallons (Pearce).

Most are aware of the need to conserve water within the home, even if the motivation is monetary to keep their water bill low. However this can only go so far, when the larger consumer of water is related to the water used to grow what we eat and drink. Fred Pearce breaks down some of the figures:

*Get your head around a few of these numbers, if you can. They are mind-boggling. It takes between 250 and 650 gallons of water to grow a pound of rice. That is more water than many households use in a week. For just a bag of rice. Keep going. It takes 130 gallons to grow a pound of wheat and 65 gallons for a pound of potatoes. And when you start feeding grain to livestock for animal products such as meat and milk, the numbers become yet more startling. It takes 3000 gallons to grow the feed for enough cow to make a quarter-pound hamburger, and between 500 and 1000 gallons for that cow to fill its udders with a quart of milk. Cheese? That takes about 650 gallons for a pound of cheddar or brie or camembert.*

This is information that is not provided on the label with the nutritional content, and the conservation of water has been promoted to the personal consumer without raising awareness of the larger picture. The average person only drinks around 265 gallons of water a year, and uses 50-100 tons around the home. To produce crops to feed and clothe an average person takes somewhere between 1500 to 2000 tons of water (Pearce).

As Charles Fishman States, “We have a complicated, conflicted, and mostly unacknowledged relationship to water” (Fishman). This unacknowledged relationship became a motivation in the creation of my thesis exhibition, and provoked further research into humanities relationship to water. This research into our unacknowledged relationship to water influenced my decision to create an installation within my exhibition that featured water.

CHAPTER 5  
THEOLOGICAL RELATIONSHIPS TO WATER

*“Water flows from high in the mountains.*

*Water runs deep in the earth.*

*Miraculously, water comes to us*

*And sustains all life.”*

*-Buddhist water Gatha*

In a continuation of my research into humanity’s connection to water, I thought about my own spiritual connection to water. This has motivated further research into theological relationships to water across cultures and religions. Since the time of our human ancestors, water has always been a necessity for survival. This extends not only to water for drinking, but as a means of transporting and sustaining crops. By necessity, civilizations developed around water sources, and the need to control water has long been a characterization of human society (Chamberlain). David Suzuki has written in a way that places water in the sacred:

*We are water—the oceans flow through our veins, and our cells are inflated by water, our metabolic reactions mediated in aqueous solutions.... As air is a sacred gas, so is water a sacred liquid that links us to all the oceans of the world and ties us back in time to the very birthplace of all life... it is the tide of life itself, the sacred source (Chamberlain).*

As of 2001, there were approximately five billion followers of the world’s religions, which filled 82 percent of the world’s population. The most prominent religions, Christianity had over two billion members, Islam 1.2 billion and Hinduism with 752 million. Followed by Chinese religions, Buddhism

and indigenous traditions with 390 million, 360 million and 230 million. Within each of these traditions water has a place and importance. As Chamberlain States:

*Religions have the capacity to provide new understandings, meaning systems, worldviews, and ethos to create communities across ethnic, political, social, and economic boundaries, as well as the power to inspire and bring moral authority to issues of great significance. In addition, religious traditions possess tremendous resources in organization, finances and person power. In the antiwar and civil rights movements in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere, religions were shown to have the moral and spiritual bases to call forth responsive actions for greater justice. Similarly religious traditions need to resort to their prophetic powers to call for needed changes in water use and management.*

In all of these traditions, water has meaning, either as divine in itself or as an indicator of the divine. Abuse of water in any form could then be construed as an abuse of the divine, and a sinful, even criminal act (Chamberlain). It is not just water, but rivers that are sacred in most religions. The Buddhists believe that in the center of the universe, in the home of the gods, are the great rivers of their world. Hindus go on pilgrimage to drink the holy water of the Ganges. Christianity's Garden of Eden is where fountains fed rivers that then watered the world. In recognition of this Christians baptize the faithful in water. Australian aborigines consider water holes and billabongs of the outback to be sacred places, and to represent the process of creation. The Japanese place Shinto Temples at the start of rivers. Africans pray at springs in the depths of sacred groves. Ancient holy wells are scattered across Europe (Pearce).

By developing a new water ethos, and a new water ethic, we can revive water's place in the world's religions and in our conscious spiritualities. This would provide significance and

inspiration to work for changes that protect and preserve our waters. We have lost the respect and intimacy with water that our ancestors developed through necessity, modifying our appreciation, value and respect for the natural world that would not survive without water. It is not fair to say that agriculture, industry, and human consumption are evil. We cannot stop technological progress when it benefits many people in many ways. However we need to consider the consequences of the ways in which we are changing the water world, and give meaning back to the water that sustains us (Chamberlain). The importance of water in our lives can be deeply personal beyond literal necessity to sustain life.

My own connection to water is a deeply personal one, which has been a driving motivation for my thesis work. I feel spiritually connected to water, as if water is a conduit to unity with the natural world and an inner peace. This feeling led to the creation of *Reflections*, the installation in my thesis. I brought water into the gallery in order to create a space for my viewers where they could experience the peace that water brings me. My intention was to create an installation that represents my own spiritual connection with water, and provide my viewers with the opportunity to reconnect with an element that is important to so many people.

## CHAPTER 6

### METAPHOR AND MEMORY

The work in my thesis exhibition explores my personal memories, and a facet of that exploration of the idea of water as a metaphor for memory. When discussing consciousness, and of the mind, people usually utilize a metaphor of a physical space. Memories and ideas become objects in a physical space. We speak as if our minds can hold things, describe ideas as being in the front or back of our minds. People are described as having minds that are shallow, narrow or closed while others have minds that are broad, deep or open (Roediger). As Roediger explores in his article, *Memory metaphors in cognitive psychology*:

*Mental processes are often described in terms that apply to actual behavior in a physical space. We speak of storing memories, of searching for and locating them. We organize our thoughts; we look for memories that have been lost, and if we are fortunate we find them. The term recollection implies that memories are objects left at some earlier time that are now collected again. The adjectives we use to describe mental behavior are similarly borrowed from those used to describe physical behavior, such as active, nimble, or quick minds on the one hand, and slow or sluggish minds on the other.*

The purpose of using these metaphors is to explain the unknown qualities of the mind and consciousness with the comparison to something that is familiar. Roediger continues with an explanation of the importance of the analogy between the mind and a physical space: “*First, memories or memory traces are considered to be discrete objects stored in particular locations*

*in the mind space. Second, in order to recall information, it is necessary to search for and find these memories” (Roediger).*

In the essay, *Rivers of memory, lakes of survival: indigenous water traditions and the Anishinaabeg nation*, Melissa K. Nelson discusses the metaphor of water in indigenous traditions. Nelson further explores the connection between rivers and memory, focusing on how “*rivers hold a special metaphorical advantage for exploring and understanding memory*”. As I created the work for my thesis exhibition, the idea of water being a metaphor for memory was an important part of my research (Nelson). Nelson provides a description of the ways that a river can be a metaphor for memory:

*“Memory is not a static phenomenon but is constantly changing depending on perspective, context, and other factors. Memories, like rivers, have sources in time and have a history. Memories have beginnings that start after an experience happens, they have middles that change over time, and whenever we recall the memory years later, and they seem to have endings, when our human organisms, containing our minds/hears, die. Owing to trauma, memories too can be diverted or dammed, and with healing they can be released and drained.”*

In indigenous traditions, the land and water hold important memories, acting as reminders of history (Nelson). In my thesis exhibition I explore my own memories of specific bodies of water, and their importance to my family’s history. The idea of a landscape holding memory is one that resonates with me and I have applied this to my creative process.

## CHAPTER 7

### REMEMBRANCE: DRINK WHILE THE WATER IS CLEAN

People become attached to landscapes, we are of nature and so create relationships with locations, with or without realizing that we do. We feel connected to these places through our memories, and through the shared memories of our families and those we connect with. My relationship with water is intertwined with memory. When I think of the specific bodies of water in the works created for my thesis exhibition, I think of experiences, family and memory.

I grew up hearing of my father's personal mythology, in which the Dan River was an integral subject. Through the oral tradition of storytelling, and the sharing of his memories, my own memory contains interpretations of his experiences. The Dan River became an important part of my personal history, as my father shared his connection to the river with his children. One of my earliest memories is of riding down the river in a big green canoe, allowing my fingers to skim the surface of the water as the rhythmic sound of paddles slapping the river's surface filled the quiet.

In a similar way, my mother shared her memories of the Belleisle Bay. My grandfather was born in a farm house on the shores of the bay and as a child he moved to the United States. In his adulthood he went back to visit the Belleisle every summer. He made this pilgrimage to the bay to visit what he calls "the healing waters of the Belleisle". I have heard his stories of the people and the waters for the length of my life. As a toddler I swam in the waters and in the summer of 2015, I was able to renew my own relationship with the bay. Making our own version of the trip our grandfather made for over 60 years, my siblings and I traveled to the Belleisle



Bay. It was a powerful feeling to visit a place I had heard so much about, and that features prominently in my family's history.

Crooked Creek is an always flowing, fresh water creek that filled my childhood. I spent hours running wild and playing in and around the creek as a child, and as an adult continue to visit and explore. The creek is ever changing, and yet constant. My memories of Crooked Creek are forever intertwined with memories of my siblings, and growing up.

The work created for my thesis exhibition was an exploration of those memories related to the landscapes surrounding those three bodies of water. When deciding what to title my exhibition I searched for the right words to represent my ideas, and came to *REMEMBRANCE: drink while the water is clean*. The term remembrance has connections to mourning, as well as the act of remembering. The added statement, "drink while the water is clean" becomes a cautionary sentiment, implying that the water will not remain clean.

The pieces in my thesis exhibition can be divided into three parts of a whole. These categories, or separations can be qualified by the methods and materials used. Within this chapter I will further explore the works in my thesis exhibition.

### Veiled Memories

In *Veiled Memories* I created three mixed media paintings. Each of these six foot by nine foot paintings depicts one of three bodies of water that impacted my life, and have been endangered by the actions of humanity.

In these images I utilize gravity in the creative process, allowing gravity to create many of the marks. This is yet another example of pairing an uncontrollable method, in a very precise

and controlled way. By taking a method that could become chaotic, and with the appearance of spontaneity, I use gravity to create a controlled application of paint, each drip a precisely placed line. However this is where the control is given over to gravity. I may choose where the line begins, but the texture and folds of the canvas alter the path of the droplets, removing an element of precision. By allowing an unpredictable path for my dripping paint, I continue to explore the idea of control and accuracy. The method of dripping employs the action of the body, and movement of the artist in the creation of the piece. The veil created by dripping causes the viewer to have to look past the paint to see the landscape depicted behind it. The underlying landscape is in varying states of deconstruction or abstraction, resulting in a fragmented image the viewer must piece together.

These images consist of a variety of mediums, used drop cloths that reference sustainability, acrylic paint dripping to simulate a liquid substance, and photo transfers to depict an interpretation of remembered reality. Throughout the process of making these images, I deliberately allow the photo transfers to reverse the images so that the depictions are literally mirror images of reality. This mirroring is not evident to viewers who are unfamiliar with the locations, and for those who are, it serves to further distort their own memories of the landscapes. The mirror image is also of significance in that it references the way memory can distort an individual's perception of reality. The color choices made are mostly monochromatic, to depict the fading of memory. Subtle bursts of color, and a subtle shift in value add to the layers.

The process of creating these images is through the layering of methods and techniques. The first image began with the embracing of a pre "prepped" canvas. The under layer consists of the marks left through the utilization of the canvas drop cloth in a functional way. The discovery

of rips, paint splatters and unidentified stains associated with construction led to these marks becoming incorporated into the images. The process I choose to pair with the found canvas was photo transfer, pairing realism with abstraction. Incorporating the transparency of the photographs allows the viewer to see behind the image to the canvas surface and any substance on the canvas. In some areas the canvas is left entirely untouched, revealing the material beneath and becoming part of the final piece. Even though there is a combination of a variety of techniques and images, the whole becomes a unified landscape, in which the viewer is not focused on technique or wondering how this is accomplished. By creating multiple layers I give depth to the paintings in a way that forces the viewer to look past sections to what is underneath, as if the surface of the painting is a symbolic pool of water, reflecting and refracting the landscape surrounding it.

Through this series of paintings I explore memories associated with the three bodies of water, and their surrounding landscapes that have impacted my life on a personal and spiritual level. Some of my memories of these places, and the reasons that I am so closely connected with them are due to the shared memories, the narratives relayed to me of them by my family. The disruption of the images through collage creates a symbolic representation of memory, and the impermanence of those memories.

### Finding Crooked Creek

*Finding Crooked Creek* depicts the stream that encircles my childhood memories. Winding its way around my parent's property, this creek has been a constant in my life. Memories of childhood and youth are intertwined with the trees growing on its banks and the rocks glistening in its waters. *Finding Crooked Creek* is a large etching, thirty two feet long and

six feet tall. Interspersed within the overall image are large etchings and large clay drawings. These drawings are made with raw, unprocessed clay that I harvested from the banks of Crooked Creek. It was important for me that the clay be a literal connection to the creek, and that the color of the pigment would be unique to the source. The process of collecting the clay was significant, in that I was helped by my brother, who shares many of my memories of the creek. The etchings are comprised of five separate plates that are then pieced together to create a larger composition. This creates a subtle grid throughout the image, mirroring the lines created by the connection of the panels. This break from reality created by the geometric grid adds to the unreal quality, and fragmentation created by the shifts of perspective.

Fragments of a specific location, from different perspectives and locations, are merged together to create an overall composition, an imagined landscape based on reality. The image is created by depicting a selection of a larger landscape, and using photography as a reference. The scene is based on reality and informed by memory. The connecting panels comprised of clay drawings fill in the gaps between the panels comprised of etchings. This forces a continual landscape to occur, in which the perspective may or not be accurate. It is not necessary that the resulting landscape becomes an accurate representation of that which exists today, or even that which exists in the past. The landscape is a combination of my personal memories of a location created with and photographs documenting a moment of reality.

The use of clay creates an ebb and flow from realism to gestural representation and back again. This continual shifting from end to end of the landscape, mirrors the flow of the stream depicted. The calm of a meandering stream and the use of a material that creates a sepia tone, provokes reminiscence, much like an old photograph of a place from your childhood. Connected to this is the idea of loss and the idea that time moves in a linear direction, preventing a return to

the past. Selected areas are left with minimal mark making, white space is utilized to create depth, and there are areas with a deliberate lack of information. These “blank spaces” represent the areas that memory cannot fill.

The etchings themselves are tightly constructed through a very controlled and precise method. The clay drawings become spontaneous, and embrace a lack of control. The medium itself forces unpredictability and loose representation. By embracing both sides of a whole, the need to control and the acceptance that there is no control, I express my own relationship with making, as well as humanity’s relationship to nature and the natural world.

I am combining two processes, painting and printmaking, which are in opposition with each other. The etchings are drypoint on acrylic sheeting, a manmade material not found in nature. They require precision and attention to detail to create. The clay drawings are loose, gestural creations utilizing natural pigment. By forcing these contrasting methods to work with each other a visual tension is created, which evokes tension in the viewer. The splattering of clay creates an unpredictable abandon of control, and also serves to connect the panels visually, softening the shift from an image created from memory to one of a twist on reality. The resulting landscape becomes both serene and discomfoting. A subtle application of clay over the etching creates a softening of the sharp contrast of values in the etching itself. The extreme darks in areas of the clay, and the absence of color create an unnatural feeling for the viewer. By working large I bring a selection of a landscape into the gallery space. This brings the viewer into the landscape by filling much of the line of sight, and the viewer’s peripheral vision. |

My creative process is inexplicably intertwined with the idea of control. I have never been comfortable with the idea of losing control, personally, artistically or physically. My work is a contradiction, in which I force myself to let go of control and embrace chaos. By creating

detailed, highly rendered, and hyper realistic etchings I create a very precise controlled image. The process of painting back into these images with a medium and technique that gives me little control is an exercise in trusting my own intuition, and reveling in the unexpected and unpredictable. By restricting myself to only my own hands as a method of applying clay pigment, I exert control, setting parameters that I must follow, while simultaneously removing control from myself by utilizing a method that prevents precision.

### Reflections

With *Veiled Memories*, and *Finding Crooked Creek* I explored my own connection to water. Reflections was my way of connecting my viewer to water. I knew that the physical presence of water was a necessity, and the sculptural installation was a result of this idea. This project was created specifically for the space I would be exhibiting in. I decided that upon entering the Tipton Gallery, the viewer would first see *Finding Crooked Creek*, and the paintings of *Veiled Memories*, and they would hear the sound of water. The viewer would discover the source of the sound of water behind a floating wall, where the installation, *Reflections*, was hidden from sight. The installation consisted of a central sculpture with a triangular base and three 6ft by 4ft plexi-glass panels. These three panels have abstracted versions of water, representing algae blooms, oil slick and frothy bubbles, painted and etched on their surface. Hanging, suspended in space from galvanized plumbing pipes chosen to match the aesthetic of the Tipton Gallery's exposed pipes running the length of the ceiling. The three images hover over the triangular base, and water runs down each panel onto the base. A video of a babbling brook was projected through each of the three panels to the wall beyond the panels. The marks made on the plexi-glass block parts of the projection, and cast shadow images onto the walls.

The shadows of the running water are visible on the gallery walls, creating the illusion that water is dripping down the walls. To further engage the space, mirrored plexi-glass, was cut in the shape of water droplets, and arranged on the walls. The splash of mirrored pieces across the walls catch the reflection of the projections, the sculpture and the viewer.

The choice to bring a water feature into the space was driven by my research into theological and spiritual connections to water. *Reflections* is intended to be a space of aesthetic beauty, providing the viewer with a space to meditate, and connect to water. The installation surrounds the viewer with water, engulfing the space. The sound of water running, calming, and meditative, combined with cool colors brings the viewer into the work itself.

## CHAPTER 8

### CONCLUSION

My creative process is about my exploration of that which I am passionate about. Through the cathartic experience of creation I explore the issues that are most important to me as a person, an activist, and an artist. By making something beautiful in reaction to something heinous I utilize my work to promote change. In the words of Pablo Picasso:

*What do you think an artist is? An imbecile who only has eyes, if he is a painter, or ears if he is a musician, or a lyre in every chamber of his heart if he is a poet, or even, if he is a boxer, just his muscles? Far from it: at the same time he is also a political being, constantly aware of the heartbreaking, passionate, or delightful things that happen in the world, shaping himself completely in their image. How could it be possible to feel no interest in other people, and with a cool indifference to detach yourself from the very life which they bring to you so abundantly? No, painting is not done to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of war.*

The work involved in my thesis show is inspired by my concern for our environment. Through this work I explore the connections that exist between humanity and the natural world, and the disconnect that occurs with the continued dependency on technology and humanity's manufactured existence. The work is an introspective exploration of my own relationship to the natural world, and my memories of specific bodies of water that I have been influenced by. As Chief Seattle said, *"Humankind has not woven the web of life. We are but one thread within it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. All things are bound together ... all things connect."*



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## CATALOGUE OF EXHIBITION



Installation of *REMEMBRANCE: drink while the water is clean*

At Tipton Gallery, 126 Spring Street, Johnson City, Tennessee

November 30, 2015- January 22, 2016.



Installation of *REMEMBRANCE: drink while the water is clean*

At Tipton Gallery, 126 Spring Street, Johnson City, Tennessee

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*Crooked Creek*, Photo Transfers and Acrylic on Canvas, 6' x 9', 2015





*Dan River*, Photo Transfers and Acrylic on Canvas, 6' x 9', 2015



*Belleisle Bay*, Photo Transfers and Acrylic on Canvas, 6' x 9', 2015





*Finding Crooked Creek*, Drypoint Etching and Unprocessed Clay, 32' x 6', 2015



Detail: *Finding Crooked Creek*, Drypoint Etching and Unprocessed Clay, 32' x 6', 2015





*Reflections*, Multimedia, Site Specific Installation: plexi-glass, acrylic, mirrored plexi-glass, galvanized pipe, water, wood, screen, rock and video projection. 2015.

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