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Valerie Corradetti

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MODERN LANDSCAPES

A THESIS

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
In
Studio Art

by

Valerie Corradetti

B.S. Saint Joseph's University, 1999

August, 2014

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ABSTRACT

I explore nature in order to understand something that is becoming increasingly unfamiliar. I wonder about accelerated human transactions with nature: the control of animals, land, and resources for pleasure, consumption or survival; and how these actions manifest themselves visually in the modern world. Through images, I create new ideas about my surroundings. My questions about nature are documented through my work employing subtlety to narrate stories of contemporary environments.

KEYWORDS: Nature, subtlety, survival, contemporary environments.

INTRODUCTION

With simplified materials I create two-dimensional representations of nature. I think about what is real and recognize the power of imitation. I like being surprised by something unexpected but I mostly enjoy subtlety. Through visual metaphor, I am exploring our increasingly stressed and distant relationship to the natural world. My hope is that through intense observation I will more fully accept reality, whatever that may be. Nature is visually resonant in my mind because it offers an immediate truth.

CONTROL

In 2005 I experienced a catastrophic flood from Hurricane Katrina and levee failures that destroyed my home. When I arrived to survey the damage, I witnessed a new kind of reality. The landscape was dead. There were strange visual markers everywhere I looked. Massive change, on that scale, was something that I could not comprehend and at first glance my environment was unrecognizable. The grass lay matted in chalky-yellow clumps on the ground, with nothing living visible. Dust swirled in the air and white suited men walked the streets. Every possession that I owned was piled up on the sidewalk waiting to be carried off and buried in a landfill. Rotted books became permanently sealed vessels, the pages 'glued,' the bodies arched and curled. Day after day, sledge hammer to wood, brush to brick, bottled water showers in the back yard, overlooking a murky, black-bellied pool, most things took on new meaning. It is difficult to comprehend the physicality, emotion and power of that catastrophe. Unrecognizable images of my surroundings in combination with the concept of this new physical and emotional reality gripped my thinking and perception. This was not the first time in my life that the course of reality changed so dramatically. This was just the first time that the nature of so many things that I considered concrete changed all at once.

The fallout from the flood is what I use to convey the meaning of what I witnessed. Things that I had previously understood superficially

about global climate change were now knocking at my own front door. Katrina's sheer size and might helped me consider what I had always taken for granted and made real my previous understanding of disasters. I understand now what a mass of water, wind, and power can accomplish or destroy. This singular event and its reverberations created an altogether new set of questions to ponder. So I've started pursuing these thoughts to create images that harness those tensions in my work, one that causes me to seek out metaphors referencing ideas related to impermanence and control. The sublime nature of the flood led me to focus on creating images of beauty in the wake of its terribleness as I attempted in my own way to make nature seem more tame and alluring.

Because the things we see and experience shape our behaviors and expectations, the lack of control that I had experienced as a result of the flood was met and matched by my unwavering desire to dominate my work. The control in my artworks became compensatory to the loss of control from the event. At the time I was completely unaware of the natural reaction that I had to such a state of disarray. My hand and eye wanted to flatten, perfect and meticulously control images and marks.

In my drawing practice this process continues. I meticulously sharpen my pencil before each stroke, beginning and ending every line with a specific tension to the surface of the page. Hours upon hours of line work occasionally fall victim to a determined eraser with its sights

set on perfection of shape and surface. My photographic images require preparation, not only in color selection but also lighting, consideration of surfaces, and precise placement of objects. I use torn nature photos of rocks, snow, ice, water and other formations from outdoor catalogues to symbolize the ephemeral natural world.

Through visual metaphor, I am exploring our increasingly stressed and distant relationship to the natural world. Nature has become a shadow of its former self, so much so that we don't really know what it is or looks like anymore. Through controlling my still life environments, my current work questions, the notion that everything is somehow okay. It is a conscious decision to engage my ideas in a subtler and less didactic way.

When I look at a natural environment what I see is most likely affected by the human hand. The act of experiencing a 'real' landscape is simultaneously becoming more abstract and elusive. In this 'natural' world the engineering of our wants and needs seems to stop at nothing until the very things we need cease to exist. What intrigues me is the process of searching only to find that my immediately perceived reality is actually an artifice. What distinguishes the two? Like the visual and physical experience of walking across a field toward a horizon, my exploration leads me to a place that I am unsure of and often do not recognize.

SYMBOLIC GESTURES

When I began the graduate program at The University of New Orleans my investigations led me to take a complete break from my former painting practice in order to change my sense perceptions. My earlier paintings were explorations of flat color fields referencing landscape and figures. Searching for new ideas, I began drawing with my left (non-natural) hand on delicate leaves of transparent paper. The images I made were landscapes that, through minimally controlled mark making, broke down into subtly recognizable shapes, forms and lines. The drawn objects changed from shapes with defined edges to portraits of color fields with blurry arrangements of form. Rocks became scratched lines of varying thickness, a hillside turned into a lumpy blob, and water became a suggestion of shape in pencil.

Reflecting on my newly understood inability to know anything absolute, I was reminded of my life in a Capitalist society, where access to the real is limited and confusion is the status quo. So, these drawings became a way for me to reconsider my idea of what is real and the meaning of my former and current surroundings.



Figure 1, Untitled Landscape, colored pencil on vellum, 2011.

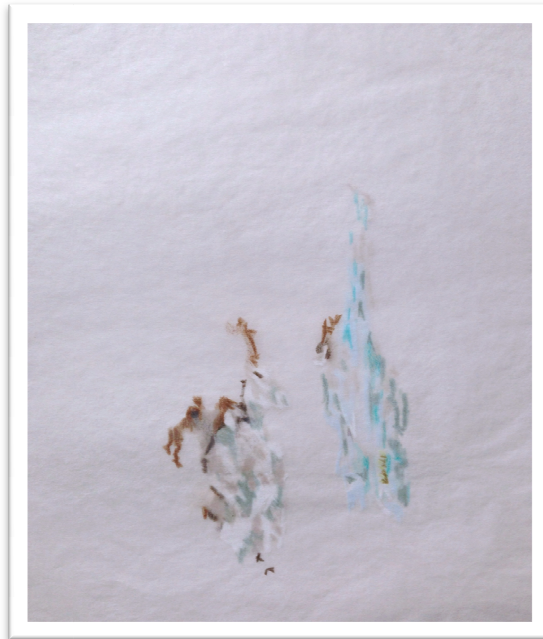


Figure 2, Untitled landscape, colored pencil on vellum, 2011.

Dissecting images of landscapes helped me explore symbolism and abstraction in nature, which are things that nature itself does not exhibit in any obvious way. After experimenting I began to reinstate some sense of order into my images, understanding that replication of nature with modern materials was inherently symbolic. This symbolic gesture was the key to interpreting my confusion over the 'real'. By re-using modern materials (torn magazines) the act of reorienting them as landscape and tearing them into smaller pieces became further symbolic of the distance we have to the physical landscape and commentary about the rate of change we're currently experiencing. Andy Goldsworthy is a contemporary artist who uses natural materials symbolically by creating an abstracted language through the repetition of line. I use replicas of nature to create an image that removes its identity while it still remains familiar. The experience of viewing a copy of the real is fundamentally disorienting.

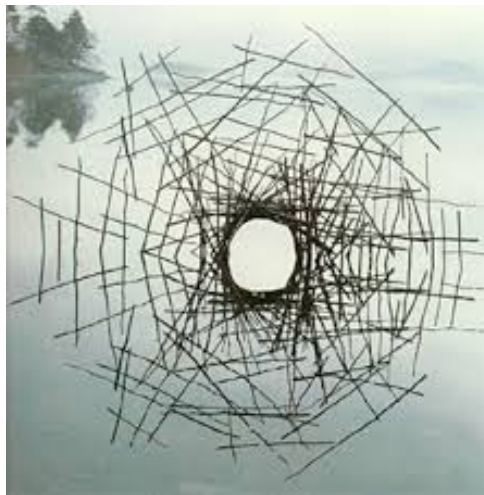


Figure 3. Andy Goldsworthy

PROCESSING MY ENVIRONMENT

When I make images the process is relatively slow. I oftentimes think the slowness is a response to the rate of change in all things. My ability to process information feels like it has become slower as I have more access to the technology created to assist me in working and learning faster. Our general perception of reality is manipulated by this increase in speed. And so, drawing feels different from technology because it is an unplugged and tactile experience.

My photographic and drawn works both generally begin by selecting a color palette. I spend a lot of time looking first for color references that speak to a specific mood. I gather photographs and natural materials here and there, walking, looking and traveling to contemplate other landscapes. I am always seeking an emotive quality in color and image and great care goes into observing details; the way a field of color overlaps into a new pattern or texture is something worth noting. Luis Barragan, the architect, has a strong sense of color in his designs and would use brightly colored walls connecting, meeting and overlapping another in a minimally stacked balancing act. I find his aesthetic to be pleasing and harmonious to the eye and it is one example of what I look for in form and movement in visual space.



Figure 4. Luis Barragan, Casa Luis Barragan, 1948, Tacubaya.

Observation of conventional planting design is another method I use to process landscape. I find the American garden fascinating and full of insight. On the one hand it is fraught with obsessive control and lack of creativity. Any McDonalds or Starbucks in the USA will display a perfectly dull mound of mulch dotted with overused Hawthorne or Boxwood, extremely clinical and submissive in appearance. Plants pruned almost to death, trapped in a maze of asphalt, make me wonder, how has this become an accepted, modern symbol of nature for our culture?

WALKING, LOOKING AT NATURE

So, what am I seeing when I look at 'nature'? This has become my focus. What is actually natural and what is not? And why has the modern American landscape become so artificial? Where have all the

wild animals and plants gone? In the essay "Imperial Landscape,"

W.J.T. Mitchell states,

Landscape is a medium not only for expressing value but also for expressing meaning, for communication between persons - most radically, for communication between the Human and the non-Human. (1)

This radical communication between human and nonhuman has been seen in the art world time and time again. For example, in the contemporary works of painter Walton Ford, the viewer gets a chance to become reacquainted with the beasts of nature. He makes this introduction by telling the written stories of humans from an animal's point of view, visually. As possible compensation for their disappearance in the wild, he makes them oversized, injured, attacking or under attack, in general, a spectacle. My drawings also address this same type of "communication" by suggesting through remnants of fur that the animals in our landscape have practically disappeared. I am stating, subtly, that they have faded as if a tattered, transparent, threadbare cloth. So, what then are our actual landscapes, that we control, saying about us?



Figure 5. Walton Ford, Chingado, 60" x 119", 1998

Because I have purposely heightened experiences with nature I find value in the fact that we are physically and psychologically intertwined. My response to our relationship with other nonhuman animals in the environment is to suggest visually that they are remnants of their former selves. My fur drawings symbolize the ideal animal as seen by modern humans: no face, no eyes, no hooves or claws, just silent, soft and malleable. Symbolically they are unable to invade the entire visual plane (in my drawings) and literally our myopic human lives. We have arrived at a place where our delight in nature has been reduced to scentless, overly manicured gardens full of domesticated kittens and puppies that bear no threat and adore their human companions. Any possible chance to experience the sublime is immediately underwhelming and the wild surprises nature once had to offer are distilled into a nonthreatening dialogue of dullness.

ESCAPE TO LOST NATION

One of the most overwhelmingly simplistic examples of fiction and control in nature I experienced occurred in the winter of 2011 when I took the first of several trips to Lost Nation, Iowa, to spend time with a friend. The farmland in Lost Nation is similar to what I grew up looking at in rural, Southern New Jersey except on a larger scale. The landscape puzzled me as I tried to understand the symbols of the environment. They were something other than what I immediately thought I was seeing: The visible land was controlled by humans but still appeared natural. It became clear that my understanding was

just an imprint of what I had learned formerly about landscape and not the actual truth. The serene pastureland was tilled relentlessly, chemically and mechanically controlled, silent, contemplative, dominated, 'beautiful,' 'natural.' Being moved by the force of this manufactured and exploited landscape confused me enough to want to recreate my experience. This led to the beginning of my collection of modern symbols, the torn sporting catalogue images that represented nature in the promise of a grand, outdoor experience. Henri Rousseau's painted jungle scenes romanticized his desires of tropical experience with nature. My use of still life drawing and torn magazines represent a similar concept.



Figure 6. Henri Rousseau, Virgin Forest, 1907

A desire to wander, to escape, is fully manifest in the allure of nature. I am drawn to the visual appeal of things that disappear into the horizon - as if into thin air, or the beauty of the hidden and discovered as it pertains to the wilderness. The art historian Kenneth Clark also explains about early explorer and thinker Petrarch,

He was probably the first man to express the emotion on which the existence of landscape painting largely depends: the desire to escape from the turmoil of cities into the peace of the countryside. (2)

Since Petrarch, has the modern human evolved and, in doing so eliminated the ability to escape into nature? Unlike the experiences of Petrarch, the world seems to follow us even to the most peaceful places. Always waiting to connect us at a moment's notice, our devices feed a growing desire for more images and information. Unlike the aimless experience of virtual wandering online, the physical experiences of temperature, terrain, light, sound and visual stimulation are some important features of traversing land that are slowly becoming unfamiliar. The real experiences of time, place and the horizon offer infinite direction in ways that cannot be mimicked through technology. My ideas about escaping into the wild, open pasture lands changed after recognizing that my perceptions were confused. What I thought I was looking at in Lost Nation, IA was not what I was actually seeing.

EXPERIMENTATION

I began experimenting with landscape and took my ideas and experiences into the photo studio. I was reading the work of David Foster Wallace and became intrigued by his thoughts on the profound ambivalence of popular culture. His arguments took place in an age that was dominated by TV and is now, since his passing, dominated by the Internet.

If nothing else to slap people kind of unpleasantly across the face and say, there may not be something wrong with 6-8 hours of television in a day but it would be very nice for you to remember that you are essentially being offered a sales pitch and a seduction 6-8 hours a day... There's something weird and thrice removed from the real world about it. And a lot of us don't realize it. What's at stake is in many ways is human agency about how we experience the world. Would I rather go muck around in the hot sun by the seashore or watch a marvelously put together documentary about the death of Egrets? But, by the time I go to the goddamn seashore and have seen the Egrets, I have already experienced the smooth documentary so many times that it becomes quickly incoherent to talk about an extra mediated or an extra-televisual reality. Now, that fact, in and of itself is frightening and it's that kind of almost just sort of shooting a flare into the sky inviting people to say how weird that is. I can go to the ocean that I've never seen before but I've spent a thousand hours. I mean, who would want to live when you can watch? (3)

Foster's statement about encounters with the real vs. the idea of reality relates to postmodern life in which the actual experience (visiting the beach) is replaced by the artifice (television). A conveyed experience is something that I experiment with in my work. I appropriate the real experience of fur by drawing copies from still life and in my photos I repeat reality through replication of a printed image. Second hand experience can be used as a stand in for something real if the objects are treated in a way that elevates their status. This work exhibits my idealized version of an authentic fantasy experience. My art making harnesses this idea of second-hand experience to further dissect reality. In my original fur landscape series I use a length of fur inserted in the frame to mimic a hill or shoreline.

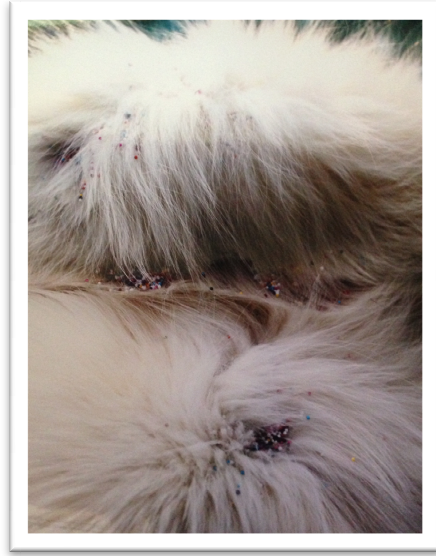


Figure 7. Untitled, Fur Landscape, 2012

I also added ropes, crushed glass, reflective surfaces and studio lighting to create another type of environment that is alluring and self-reflective.

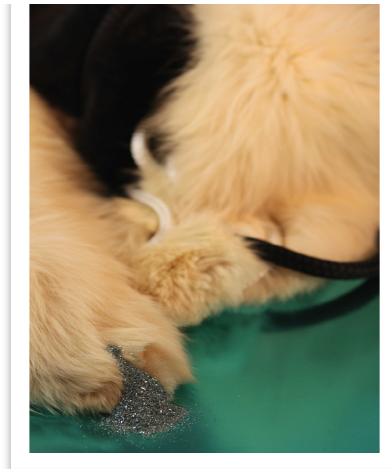


Figure 8. Untitled, Tied Fur Landscape with crushed glass, 2012

Using fur as a stand in for animal or hillside blurs the line between the actual object and the representation of landscape. The viewer is shown the image of something familiar, used as a prop, set up in still

life format, printed in a photograph and presented as the idea of landscape.

PAPER MOUNTAINS

Experimentation with the idea of the mundane and the ordinary in naturalism led me to photography. In general landscape is relatively boring. It also lends itself to an immediate pictorial realism specifically when viewed through the lens of a camera because the camera captures a reflection. Since I'm seeking truth through nature the camera has a tendency to represent the seeable world in all of its ordinariness. Many have had the experience of snapping multiple pictures of a completely useless landscape.

My interest in nature has also made me a victim of marketing; I have been receiving outdoorsy magazines in the mail for the last few years. They come every other month. They arrive in my mailbox, slip into a slot through the door, and fall on the floor. Sometimes the dog jumps up and down on them and scratches the hell out of the pages. I usually thumb through them and toss the magazines onto a pile in my studio. I knew that eventually I would use the images in these catalogues but was not exactly sure how. So, I began experimenting with images comprised of and collected from nature. In these photographs I stack torn magazine images of mountains, clouds, rock, sea and sky, laying out each slice of paper in a precariously perched narrative. I am using mass-produced replicas of real natural objects. When we see

even just a fragment of a rock or the sky we still can recognize the form. These familiar objects are the building blocks for my experimentation with fragility, illusionism, consciousness, self-reflection and time. Because photos convey the assumption of truth there are things about the images that seem real. On one hand, the images are just disposable catalogue pages created in mass to be discarded. On the other, these catalogues are very expensive to make. Marketing companies hire professional photographers and outdoor athletes to capture 'awe inspiring' images of humans conquering nature. Through set design and the process of photography I have reinterpreted these forms into something that mimics the notion of reality. It is important to use existing, highly marketed impressions of nature because the recycled images become part of a recycled sentiment. Like the way I process the color wheel, this is another way to examine, dissect and recreate both my physical (magazines from the mail) and natural (things I see outside) environment. I am engaged in a mode of processing this environment that makes it my own and gives me control.

My initial collection of images was based on a nostalgic inclination toward coldness, reminiscent of my walking experience in Iowa. I appreciate the contrast between the feeling of real physical heat of summer and the romanticism involved with looking at images of snow. A sweltering New Orleans summer can be overwhelmingly monotonous and exhausting. Inserting the fantasy of snow into a humid studio is a satisfying notion. In response, last summer, being influenced by my

trip to Lost Nation in the winter, I began collecting images of the idea of cold in nature.

Through my examination I questioned if, as a result of global warming, the only cold remaining will be represented in a printed image? We live on a planet that is changing rapidly and monitored glaciers are melting away. The unfrozen water fills up land, increasing sea levels while uprooting and displacing many things in the landscape. As a result of this change there are many questions that come to mind and filter into my work. Will there be a last snowfall? When will it cease to be cold? What will landscape look like in the future and how have we changed that process?

When I make images, nature is an endless supply of source material. Nature is also a reservoir of random ideas and patterning. Trying to know it is an enormous task, similar to understanding the size of a mountain from a comfortable viewing distance. I use the image of a mountain in the photograph *Paper Mountains, 2013*.



Figure 9. Paper Mountains, Dye Sublimation print, 2013

The jagged mountain image leans against another torn photo of an ice sheet. Together these segments of landscape photographs support one

another - in much the same way a real mountain elevates a vista. My images access the picturesque nature of landscape as I control the mountain by reinstating a reference of something massive and unmovable into a staged set up. The eye thinks what it is seeing is a mountain but in fact it is not. Hence, artifice extended - it is not just about the artificial experience of looking at something real - it is also about controlling and constructing that artifice.

'Sublime images show nature at its most fearsome. Humanity is small and impotent in front of raging rivers, dizzying cliffs and canyons, ferocious animals, and violent storms. These works can also be uplifting, but in a deeply spiritual way. The Sublime emphasizes God's dominion over humanity and considers the possible folly in mankind's overriding confidence.' (4)

Nature and humanity are intertwined and what happens when we engage with nature in its most pure form - we can become terrified. The terms "beautiful," and "sublime" have their beginnings in 18th - 19th century theory, particularly in the writing of Edmund Burke.

According to Burke's theory beauty and sublime were categorized into two distinct ways. Beauty is casual and enjoyable and the sublime can be deadly. In my work, fear of the unknown exists and is inspired by the sublime but it is also beauty that attracts the eye. Nature can be dense and unfriendly and wicked and beautiful and we often seem to be powerless against it, but is our most imminent goal an obligation for survival? Perhaps the idealized version of nature in the sporting magazines is the closest modern humans want to become with the great outdoors?

DRAWINGS

The decision to try and mimic fur began as an experiment with shape and texture. Initially the furs were drawn as small patches with various color patterns that eventually morphed into structures built with an armature, overlapping shapes or architectural elements. My interests in structures and the manufacturing of nature are combined in these drawings.



Figure 10. Untitled Fur Drawing, 2012

They became shapes that spoke of volume and space instead of flesh and blood. In the first fully realized fur drawing *Ball*, I used the idea of order by building an image that had a repetitive texture and line.

Making something natural into a shape thereby changing the meaning of the material.



Figure 11. Ball, 2012

In my drawing practice there are events that happen because of chance and those that occur as planned. My mind wanders and the hand follows. Drawing in this way leads the image to self-generate and form an animal / object. Unlike the circular shape in *Ball, 2013*, the other drawn forms seem to unveil themselves, taking on an even more organic and living existence but one with an unpredictable framework. Some lack of control and freedom within the surface of each drawing promotes experimentation in shape. Image resolution is therefore a gut reaction to the drawing and the remaining, unfilled space on the page.

Biology informs specific areas of my drawings. Each biologic shape becomes its own organic entity - inviting associations with other living things. These drawn forms become tangled in the fur and poke out here and there suggesting playfulness and disease simultaneously. Appearing in the same way one might discover the growth of a new mole, an illness or the unexpected presence of mold. These growths have a will to live that mimics my desire to control them.



Figure 12. Hooked, 2013

Experiencing fur can conjure different emotional responses. Its softness, warmth and comfort almost create an inherent desire for more. The alluring qualities that fur has can transcend and encompass the idea of skin or body that are familiar to me. This being one example of a quality in nature that humans seek out. Fur addresses the sensory experience of touch by creating, an inherently, physical desire and so fur covered mammals are killed for their skin. Combined

with the intimacy of drawing and the requirement of time, the viewer can indulge in the labor of my hand through tangles of fur.

My drawings reference a similar color language used by Luis Barrigan, by depicting what seems like a minimal palette. For example, what might look like an overall blue or pink image is intentional.

However, in the drawings, I ultimately use several other colors to emphasize the blueness or pinkness of the image. To create a single blue drawing, I might use twenty different colored pencils and not all of them blue. Creating space for color is also helpful in moving the eye across a visual plane, so I intentionally isolate the drawing in one area of the paper.

Humans have an insatiable appetite to control, experiment with and possess the bodies of other animals. This I find utterly fascinating and an ultimate form of manipulation if not used only for sustenance, companionship or work. I have collected many real fur remnants from thrift stores and garage sales. By dissecting and separating the pelts from several fur coats I realized that there are many, many mammals that went into building each garment. The nature of structure in architecture was referenced in my earlier fur drawing experiments and the dismantling of the coats piqued my interest. Each individual pelt that went into creating a finished product had its own color story and hair texture. In the drawing 'Ball', which preceded the disassembling project, the image has an overall sense of unity but is made from many very different individual 'pelts.' Broken down even

further, each line in the drawing is also very specific. Therefore the approach to each image is built around a series of processes. From the overall structure of each found coat, to the separation of every pelt, the reorganization of the pelts to create a still life, the interpretation of reality through drawing and the build up of pencil lines as hair, the consideration of color, my system of making images in this way fully references the idea of control that I am investigating.



Figure 13. Backwards 2014

Originally I intended to use fake fur but then immediately realized that observing real fur was a more effective means of representation. I also was very drawn to the idea of a collection of bodies (fur pelts) in my studio. This led to a search for bodies in the landscape, the body as landscape and eventually I stumbled upon the work of Richard Misrach.

MISRACH, ANIMALS, LANDSCAPE

Using a View Camera, Richard Misrach collects detailed images of various landscapes. The image *Dead Animals #1, 1987*, depicts piles of dead animals scattered, tumbled and rotting upon an open plane.



Figure 14. Richard Misrach, *Dead Animals #1*, 1987

The bodies are mainly collected toward the right side of the frame, gathering into a dark pond full of scrap material. Like the Misrach photographs, my work attempts to articulate the real becoming something unnatural. Author Rebecca Solnit explains the dynamic of a Misrach image in her book, *Savage Dreams*.

The animal pictures had taken landscape - or perhaps nature - photography beyond where it had ever been: eliminating the horizon and the distance, describing the bloated, twisted corpses of mustang foals and Herefords and longhorns in the poetic language usually reserved for the reassuringly beautiful. These bodies which had literally been thrown away took on the sensual immediacy of the warm-hued bodies of saints and concubines in Baroque painting: (5)

In these Misrach images I recognize a familiar scene, reminiscent of my home after the flood receded. Death can be interpreted as a physical phase of morphing from one form to another like a hill rolling into a valley and death in the landscape is sublime. Some animals in Misrach's landscape are partially buried under sand some in a trance-like state with decayed, runny eyes that appear to be tear stained. The knowledge of softness remains clear in an otherwise dismal portrait. Fur is a texture that is unparalleled. Even in death it suggests warmth, protection, comfort, desire, or maybe even companionship. In his images there are obvious folds and shadows, shapes and spaces that dictate land from animal from water and so on. However the forms become one overarching shape that recites a singular movement. The power of landscape is in its ability to represent a full range of ideas; the reality of beauty, the mundane, a promise of the future, the unknown and the fiction or reality of what land, and the objects within it must endure. Whether we know for certain that the visual narrative that can be seen or learned is fiction or non-fiction is part of what my work questions.

CLOSING

My art is made from my desires and struggles to see the natural world differently. My work is derived from experiences that are comprised of half-truth and half-fiction. By searching for escape and fantasy I respond to all the rules, confinements and unethical decisions of modern society. I create work that addresses my confusion through subtle, visual dialogue. One where questioning occurs but all hope is

not lost. I take into account the fact that I use complex, modern tools, the mechanics of which I do not fully comprehend, to capture images about the dismantling of the natural world. The manufacture of these tools, their need to be powered and the chemicals used in photo processing all add tension to the problems that I address and question. Observation of things in landscape, daydreams, the marketed American life, beauty, idealized nature and the collective self all filter into my images. My hope is that through intense observation I will more fully accept the presentation of reality, whatever that may be. Nature is visually resonant in my mind because it offers an immediate truth.

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VITA

Valerie Corradetti was born in rural, southern New Jersey at a time when wild black bears still roamed the land. She followed her heart and moved to New Orleans and ended up being surprisingly grateful for the birds the lake and the old oak trees.