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PLAYGROUND FOR THE IMAGINATION

By

B. DARLENE MILLER

Under the Direction of Professor Patricia Walker

ABSTRACT

Over the past years, my work has been based on a desire to depict the spiritual and physiological interdependence humans have with the wetland ecosystem. As I examine the shapes of the trees and their roots through rubbings, paintings, and sculpture, I sought to express this interaction between humans and nature. My artwork metamorphosed from the traditionally separated forms of painting and sculpture into an environment.

The transformation of natural materials into manufactured products led me to cultivate a deeper understanding of ecology, where humans are participants in the natural process of the life cycle. Nature becomes the primary subject and humans are mere participants, the secondary subject. In earlier times, people lived among nature, today, most reside in cities that are isolated from nature. Fear of the unfamiliar prevents most humans from developing a close relationship with the wetlands. Universal interconnectedness requires humans to reflect on nature. Through my art, I aim to cultivate conscious and unconscious awareness of human dependence on nature.

It is my ambition to encourage dialogue among all people about nature. I am encouraged by public recognition of the need to protect and sustain the scope of nature necessary for earth's survival. We have the power to save nature

through regulation if we only use that power. The planet does not belong to humans; humans depend on and belong to the planet Earth.

INDEX WORDS: B. Darlene Miller, Playground for the Imagination, Public art, Women environmental artist, American environmental artist, Tensile architecture, Fabric sculpture, Sculptural Painting, Installation art, Interactive art, Wetlands, Ecology, Geneva Florida, Guyton Georgia, Sculpture, Painting, Painting on silk, Painting on fabric, Aluminum sculpture, Cypress roots, Fabric dye-painting.

PLAYGROUND FOR THE IMAGINATION

By

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B.F.A., GEORGIA SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY, 2003

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern
University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

STATESBORO, GEORGIA

2006

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to give formal aesthetic consideration to *Playground for the Imagination*, created by B. Darlene Miller, as both an outdoor environmental installation and gallery exhibition. *Playground for the Imagination* is an interactive sculptural painting that refers to the wetlands of Geneva, Florida and Guyton, Georgia. This wetland installation focuses on encouraging the economically distanced and culturally diverse segments of society to interact with each other through a dual installation and exhibit.

The limitation when using art to refer to a wetland environment is that it fails to reproduce the very real stench that meets one's nostrils, that confronts one in the wetland, with an instant impact on the remaining senses. Driving through and living within an area of wetland removal, the offensive odor of the decaying wetlands immediately after rapid, gigantic tree removal and soil displacement is stupefying. What causes this fetidness? When walking through an area stripped of its trees your foot will sink as if in quicksand. But this ground is different; the fine grained particles create suction as if grasping for life at the very moment when life realizes the battle to survive has been lost. Responding to this descending movement is an endless black, like the soot from a flue. The evaporating water seeping into the barren ground stains like protein laden blood. The dark black mud surface of this lost wetland environment that once hosted the sun flickering through the leaves of the trees, onto the forest floor textured from leaves, now glares like glass as it bakes in the sun. The outer face of the wetland

fractures, opens, and curls while gasping its last breath. This deeply furrowed soil replaces the level basined bay of the wetland. The stripped and exposed black soil fades to gray, silver, and then bone. The plant and animal life, dismembered, dies. While dying, it breaks apart and reduces its size bringing immediate thoughts of unwarned inhabitants killed by the destruction of their habitat. The story *Watership Down* describes the journey of a few surviving rabbits who escaped when their homes were destroyed by huge mechanical equipment. Could this type of nature removal taking place in Guyton, Georgia have inspired the book *Watership Down*? The emotions felt from the repercussions imposed by the industrial extinction of the wetland environment have a resounding impact. In my mind, retreating to the forest of my youth, I regularly experienced wet ground, bugs and more bugs, rain, swamps, alligators, lizards, snakes; all the sights, sounds, smells, and touch of visiting in a wetland environment. It is my sincere desire to share with others the overwhelming love felt as a child and the knowledge learned as an adult about wetlands. As a visual artist, my focus is to search for mediums that will allow me to express my own deeply felt experience with nature.

My thesis work, titled *Playground for the Imagination* is devoted to bringing the experience of a wetland, in abstracted form, into an urban environment. *Playground for the Imagination* is a 45 feet by 23 feet large outdoor installation consisting of a canopy made of silk painted with color and three abstracted forms that sit under it. The colors used on the canopy above are reflected below on the nearly five feet high abstracted forms. These abstracted

forms represent tree forms called dendriforms. The colorful dendriforms are sewn, multilayered fabric shapes that move when the wind blows representing the movement in tree tops. Just as trees are stabilized by branches and roots, my fabric dendriforms are pulled over aluminum poles that have been welded and bent into root forms and branch like shapes. Three silk and linen pillows lie on the ground connecting the earth to the aluminum root shapes. Six cypress root rubbings 45 by 45 inches are on exhibit in a dairy barn near by. Four gouache paintings wait to be exhibited during the summer in the Talladega Alabama Museum.



Figure 1: Playground for the Imagination, Georgia Southern Botanical Garden, Statesboro, Georgia, 2006



Figure 2: Playground for the Imagination, Georgia Southern Botanical Garden, Statesboro, Georgia, 2006

As a child, people told me to become a nurse because of my natural affinity to care for people. Being an artist, for me, is like being a nurse: caring about people and using my occupation to offer medicine to the world. Through creating a visual experience with my thesis art, it is my intent to increase communication and teach understanding about the wetlands. The creation of a large interactive installation offers persons of different economic and cultural backgrounds the chance to engage through art the feelings, temperature, and lightness of spirit, evoked by a wetland environment. My installation, *Playground for the Imagination*, factors intellectual inspection of the intangible, yet familiar, nature of the forms and scale used, while overhead a canopy allows viewers to experience a feeling of safety in this public space.

Statement of the Artistic Problem

In 2000, upon deciding to transfer into the BFA program at Georgia Southern University, I purchased property because my residence in Augusta would require a four hour round trip drive to school. In Effingham County, I located an eleven and a half acre plot of beautiful wetlands. As the legal title of property ownership transferred into my name, my interest in wetland environment was aroused, and I began to research wetlands. Arriving each week at my property I have watched the extermination of the forested areas, at first slowly, then the rapid elimination and infilling of the basins. During this time, I worked on my BFA degree in painting. I graduated with a BFA in Painting, yet my interest in sculpture grew as did interest in creating art to express my growing concern over the loss of the wetlands in Effingham County. I applied and was

accepted as an MFA candidate to work both in painting and sculpture. Once in the MFA program, I began grappling with how to push painting and sculpture closer together; I wanted to do more than make a three dimensional sculpture and paint on its surface. In my first attempts, I built a three-dimensional aluminum frame and sewed canvas by hand onto it, later painting on both the canvas and aluminum. Feeling satisfied, I began building many aluminum frames and began to sew. I quickly realized that the time required for hand sewing would not permit completion within my thesis schedule. A new idea was needed.

Thinking about trees being killed in cities, I began bending aluminum pipe and cutting sheet aluminum using my minds eye remembrance of healthy wetland tree branch shapes. These shapes were then cast into aluminum wash pans containing cement. I dug wetland plants and planted them in the surface of the dried cement. One of my plantings mostly survived while another has barely maintained existence, simulating the aftermath from wetlands destruction.

Continuing to search out a focus for my thesis, finally, I started work on an interactive artwork for public spaces. Using cypress tree roots and the feeling of safety one feels when walking in the canopied forest, I began work on an interactive environmental installation that would comment on humanity's dependence on wetland environments. The Abstract Expressive style used affords the viewer an opportunity to become absorbed in thought about the indefinable environment. A large overhead canopy is used to satisfy the need for a feeling of safety, in order to dream. According to Bachelard in *Poetics of Space*, "We shall see that the imagination functions in this direction whenever the human being has

found the slightest shelter (p. 5).” Overall the abstracted forms used supply a source to activate and inspire the viewer’s imagination.

While the sculptural forms used are nonobjective, the replication of natural forms holds the possibility of psychologically connecting humans and nature. The tree root forms represent the life force of the wetlands and their direct influence on the human ability to exist in the physical universe. In order to breathe, we require wetland environments. The wetlands function in multiple known and infinitely unknown capacities of production that our universe depends on for survival. Both our atmosphere and our potable water receive particular treatment from the wetland environment that cannot be duplicated in any other environment because there are such an infinite number of variables at work in the wetlands. They are the most important ecosystems on our planet according to Paul Keedy of Southeastern Louisiana University, Environmental Studies.

The capture of solar energy by plants is the foundation of virtually all life on Earth. We now know that certain wetland types, particularly marshes and swamps, are highly productive, in part, because they occur where two common constraints on photosynthesis (water and nutrients) are simultaneously reduced (Keedy, Paul A., pp. 58-59). ... Wetlands are therefore the major reducing system in the landscape. ‘Moreover, since the water level changes’ ...wetlands maintain the widest range of oxidation-reduction reactions of any ecosystem on the landscape’ (Fig. 1)(Keedy, Paul A., pp.72). ...Regulating the climate, cleansing air and water and detoxifying pollution. ... Wetlands, swamps and marshes are some of the most productive ecosystems on Earth; they rival both rain forest and cultivated land. But, unlike agricultural fields, this primary production occurs with no fossil fuel inputs in the form of petrol and fertilizer, no tending by humans, no artificial irrigation, and no heavy machinery. Wetlands can therefore be regarded as factories in the landscape that mass produce

both organic matter and oxygen to support surrounding ecosystems. Draining such wetlands may therefore be compared to systematically smashing the factories that support life on Earth (Keedy, Paul A., pp.56 and 60).

Learning more about this, the earth's most important ecosystem, is the new frontier. Human's continually explore, record, and classify their universe in order to improve their understanding of it. Life depends on increasing our knowledge, understanding, and defending of the wetlands.

In our modern times, relief agencies have changed wetland habitats into deserts by drilling wells and establishing permanent housing for nomadic herding cultures in Southern Africa. Before our migrating existence was interrupted people followed water sources for their survival. When the water table lowered, the herding culture moved to the new area of surface water, the grass areas rested and grew deep roots while the herd's people were in a new wet area. Wetland environments maintain a high percentage of moisture that cools its neighboring land; therefore, lowering the air temperature and supporting the growth of plants that depend on cooler temperatures. Settling down and drilling wells allowed people to remain on one plot of land and eliminated their crossing of political geographical boundaries. This settlement prevented their local grasses from growing long roots allowing heat to kill the grass. After a period of time, evolution shortened the grasses roots slowly creating an expanding desert. An entire wetland environment was annihilated (Keedy, Paul A., pp.64-65). Another known wetland contribution comes in the form of preventing the increase of global temperature by releasing carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.

The amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere controls the Earth's temperature through the greenhouse effect. ... Swamps and marshes are ecosystems in which plants rapidly extract carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. In many cases, the secondary consumers and decomposers consume the plants and rapidly release carbon dioxide back into the atmosphere. (For example, Secondary consumers of carbon dioxide are people and animals who consume plants that contain carbon dioxide. This consumption then releases the carbon dioxide back into the atmosphere. Secondary consumers do not store carbon dioxide for an extended amount of time.) (Keedy, Paul A., pp.65-66).

Conservation is getting nowhere because it is incompatible with our Abrahamic concept of land. We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect (Leopold, p.xix).

The laws of nature require respect and practice in balance. The universe tips and rolls according to the needs of survival. The necessity of balancing individual needs and community needs challenges our human race to communicate and unite toward healthy interaction between society and the universe.

This thesis project aims to bring nature out of its native recesses into the urban environment. Humans evolved in nature but presently have fewer opportunities in their civilized communities to experience their forest. People fear the unfamiliar. In 1735 and 1749, the essay "The Economy of Nature" by the Swedish botanist Carolus Linnaeus relates his theory about the role every creature plays in the world's natural balance. These ideas laid the foundation for the study of ecology

Including the cyclical relationship of decay and nourishment, the specificity of geographical zones of plant life, and the balance between reproduction and destruction ...The word ecology was coined in 1866 by Ernst Haeckel, a German naturalist, as a name for a new science devoted

to the study of the relations between organisms and environments.
It became a science only in the 1890's, when botanists and geographers
began examining plant habitats (Greg, p. 5).

These reproduction cycles exist within the universe, and our imagination is the
primordial function that connects and invents possibilities throughout the
universe. Ecology came into existence to describe the science of the relationships
between an environment and its organisms. Jackie Brookner, an environmental
artist who collaborates with communities and scientists in order to create artworks
that filter and clean water while educating the public, states:

The vitality of any community and the continuity
of its cultural heritage depend upon the health
of the natural world that embraces and sustains it.
HUMBLE (^ L. humilis low, small, slight,
akin to humus, soil, 'earth
(see HUMUS))
HUMUS (^L. earth, ground, soil ^ IE.
* ghom-: see HOMAGE)
HOMAGE (^ L. homo, a man IE. *ghom-,
^base * gtheim-, earth, ground, whence L. humus,
Gr. Chthon, earth, OE. guma man)
Hidden in the roots of our words,
we find what we seem to want to forget-
that we are literally the same stuff as earth
(<http://www.weadartist.org/brookner/>).

The goal of my thesis work is to have people interact in an intellectually
safe environment and perhaps interact with and see the immediate environment
around the installation in a new way. Through various means of communication,
the people visiting the environment may discover similarities between each other.
It is not my intent to create a truthful representation of nature. Abstraction offers
far greater opportunities to explore the relationship between people and nature
than would an exact replica of any part of nature. An abstract safe environment

allows people to approach, enter, touch, and discuss the artwork. Realistically recreated objects and imagery would not challenge intellectual inquiry in the same manner.

CHAPTER II

INFLUENCES

The questions we raise have the possibility of changing the manner in which we choose to live. Paul Gauguin searched to understand social conventions through his painting *Who are We, Where did We Come From, and Where are We Going*. This painting provides us the opportunity to explore the past, present and future through his use of visual images on canvas. Paul Gauguin as an artist questioned the beginning of our existence in a modern way. I too am searching for a method of presentation in my art that will engage the public in a new way, so I can contribute toward establishing balance and harmony. We need to move forward into the twenty-first century using the advanced capabilities we possess to reside in harmony with all living matter and the environment at large. The painter Mark Tobey claimed,

Humanity is likened to a tree of which each individual is a part, and the product of a single seed. Baha’I humanism, inseparable from the premise of unity, opposes all social divisions and barriers which can engender hostility, injustice, or strife, whether personal, national, or religious; and it advocates an auxiliary international language, international mediation, world peace, and the ultimate unification of peoples in a single world state. The priority of this social doctrine is plain in the assertion of “Abdu’l Baha’ ... that if a religion ‘rouses hatred or strife ... absence of religion is preferable’ and ‘an irreligious man better than one who professes it’ (Seitz, William C. p. 10).

According to Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space*, humans need a roof over their head in order to dream. *Playground for the Imagination* seeks to be a place where people can feel safe and use their imaginations to contemplate

conservation and the similarity between nature and humans – a place to relate to nature rather than exploit and destroy it. This artwork offers persons of different economic and cultural backgrounds the opportunity to both interact with a work of art and learn more about our environment. Through a subliminal experience with the dendriforms, the viewer will interact with tree root shapes from the wetlands. Learning about the wetland environment does not take place directly in *Playground for the Imagination* but through the viewer's unconscious relationship with nature.

The antithesis of permanent hard architecture is Frei Otto's four point modern tensile architectural designs. Otto, the father of modern tensile architecture dedicated his life to the renewal of fabric stretched and mounted high into the air. We have discovered structures, lived in by humans that were assembled from bone and animal skins dating back 44,000. Some cultures have never chosen to build hard architecture for their societies. Wet weather dictates the need to build hard architecture, dry or cold weather does not motivate humans to move out of tents.

Using this ancient soft canopy provides a psychological safety zone for the viewer. To make it in silk allows light to penetrate through adding additional interaction with nature. The encompassing landscape acquires immediacy from the translucent fabric and the open design quite different from the isolation occupied by hard buildings where people feel isolated from nature. Through the Chinese, we have evidence where they have brought small pieces of wood and/or rocks into their homes in an effort to be closer to nature. The flexibility of fabric

breathes like the evolution in life (Drew, Prepace). The reflection in the canopy shadows becomes a substance of the fabric when lit by sunlight.

Playground for the Imagination developed from thinking about tree roots and other natural forms located in the wetlands. In roots and tree trunks, I found forms that were similar to life forms and industrialized objects used by humans. Finding these forms I began to make rubbings, on fabric using dye, of the roots and trunks. Shapes found in the rubbings I reworked into gouache paintings. A basket, bird, horses, and dog developed from one root rubbing. Three dimensional roots and trunks of trees were transformed into large silk rubbings, which were in turn re-imaged as gouache paintings. At this point, the shapes used in the gouache paintings were changed back into three dimensional shapes made of fabric. The dendriforms that populate the space beneath my canopy reproduce the shapes used in my gouache paintings.

Indirect Influences

The importance for a thoughtful, healthy, interactive relationship between earth and humanity necessitates my drive to create art about the importance of trees and water in the universe. Like nature, artists do not aimlessly wander. Because the largest numbers of the population will not step foot in the wetland environment, I search for methods to bring the snake, mosquito, and poisonous plant wetland environment to the mass population.

In the article “ ‘A Declaration of Social, Political and Aesthetic Principles’”, David A. Siqueiros (1896-1974) explains the Mexican artist movement where the aristocratic hierarchy in their easel painting was rejected by

creating murals. Here artists favored monumental public art over small aesthetic pieces for individuals. This movement glorified the noble farmer, industrial workers, and soldiers. The majority of the population spent their lives working long hours to be “scourged by the rich” (Harrison, Charles, and Wood, Paul, p.406). As an artist, I feel the analogy that would best describe my intent would be a cloud that fills with water over the ocean, then travels to release its’ water over the land. I soak up my environment then develop art from my knowledge and experiences to share what I have learned with others.

The task of fitting into either a strict two-dimensional or three-dimensional program felt limiting for me because I see, feel, smell, hear, and taste an energy field that moves in many directions. Learning about David Smith’s description of art helped me to validate my personal needs for making art.

“The ethical basis...is to be found in his commitment to improvisation, and to what is revealed of the artist in the process. ... Sculpture can be painting and painting can be sculpture and no authority can overrule the artist in his declaration. Not even the philosopher, the aesthetician or the connoisseur” (Harrison, Charles, and Wood, Paul, p. 766).

Artwork stays alive when at the beginning I do not know what it will look like in the end; when my expression and the formal aesthetics of the concept initiate many changes during creation. These changes are necessary for the art work to gain its own life so that when it leaves me, the creator, the art work can stand alone and defend itself. I do not need for the artwork to look like anything familiar; the elements and principle of design mandate the form and the concept drives its development.

Residing within a wetland environment, while dreaming about how to

push painting and sculpture closer together, tree roots began to take on the appearance of birds, baskets, and other familiar objects. The supply of shapes for these forms was taken directly from cypress tree roots. I would travel deep into the wetlands to capture rubbings of the three-dimensional Cypress tree roots, onto malleable silk fabric. These rubbings allow the volumetric forms to become flat shapes that allow me to explore my hypothesis: do the tree roots grow and age into forms that humans are familiar with in their everyday lives? By developing two-dimensional images from the original three-dimensional forms, I create newly defined two-dimensional shapes in an effort to discover the answer. Again, working with the original tree root forms allows me to increase my exploration of both the visual and physical possibilities for where natural, organic, three-dimensional forms repeat nature's essential character. Viewers are able to bring their own history to an image when they don't know what thing the abstracted shape depicts. Therefore, the observer has the opportunity to bring a unique, personal experience to their understanding of the artwork.

The Playground for the Imagination challenges the viewer through the use of shapes removed from the wetlands then brought into the urban environment. Martha Swartz used fabric and metal to direct her viewers through a historical landscape in Charleston, South Carolina in 1997 at the Spoleto Festival that hosted the theme *Human/Nature*. Likewise, I have chosen to focus on establishing a place with purpose by using the formal elements and principles of design in an urban location. Swartz chose to bridge two places and activities that inspired interest thereby questioning viewers about a place and its purpose. She

primarily used both line and plane to:

Incorporate commonplace, mass-produced materials ...she ... referenced Christo, both in his draped fabric and his interest in exploring the social history of a place (Beardsley, John, p.144).



Figure 3: Art and Landscape in Charleston and the Low Country, Martha Swartz, 1997

Interjecting artistic change into a public space can nibble at the inhabitant's intellectual understanding. Martha Swartz received both positive and negative feedback from her installation (see Figure 3) although the majority was positive. She focused on presenting a different perspective onto a subject historically difficult to discuss: plantations and slavery.

A public space invites the highest collection of people from different cultures and economic classes. I aspire to increase discussion between differing

economic and/or cultural clusters. In an effort to reduce the distance between them I want to increase discussion about ecology. First, the sculptural forms abstracted appearance presented in a familiar space creates an opportunity for inquiry. Then, the psychological safety felt underneath the canopy opens opportunities to reduce barriers. The observer's psychological state of safety sanctions an interval where a person from one cultural or economic group may interact with someone from another group. It is my hope that, after leaving the installation, the abstracted wetland shapes remain in the observer's memory as a link to one day wanting to experience firsthand the environment these shapes were based on.

Direct Influences

The continuance of life relies on the interrelationship of all living matter; Theodore Rousseau read some of the early writings on botany and responded by focusing his imagery on the interaction of humans and nature. Several major treaties on ecology were written in 1840, 1845, and 1859 that directly influenced Rousseau. Scientific expeditions took place proving the connection between particular environments and specific organisms. The painting *The Footbridge* (Greg, p. 42) relates directly to the knowledge about this scientific model. *The Footbridge* as explained by Greg M. Thomas was composed following the same ecological order set down by Liebig.

The same kind of subsistence system, in which animals eat plants, people eat plants and animals, and all the minerals taken from the soil are returned to it through feces, urine, plant debris, and animal carcasses (Greg, p. 6).

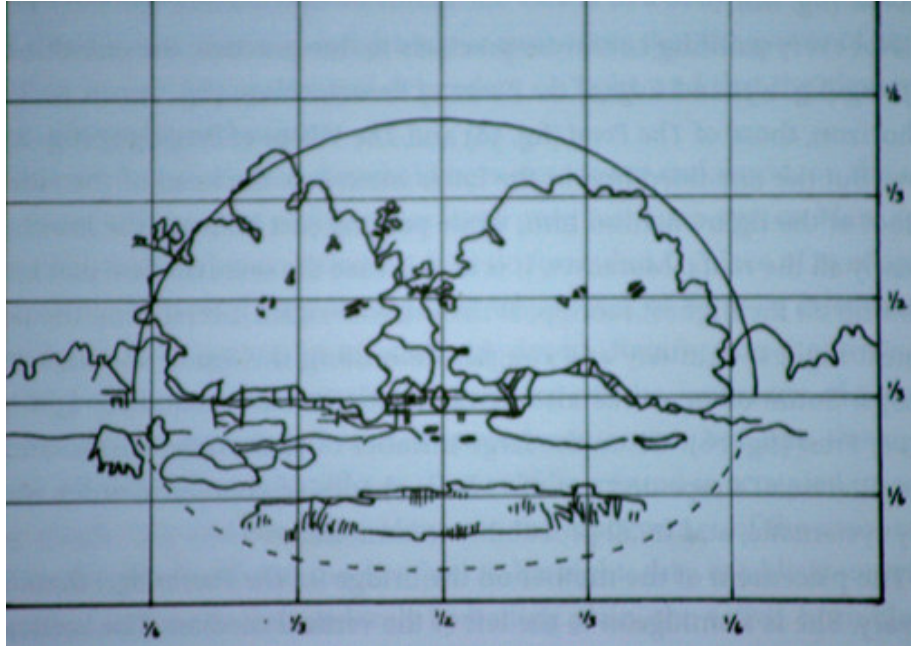


Figure 4: The Footbridge (dissected), Theodore Rousseau, 1855-60



Figure 5: The Footbridge, Theodore Rousseau, 1855-60

During his lifetime, Theodore Rousseau wrote letters to the government attempting to prevent them from cutting down the trees in the Fontainebleau Forest.

While Rousseau struggled to present nature as he saw it, his art developed from his philosophy of how nature grows. I get the feeling from his paintings and drawings that he climbed inside the tree, the shadows, the animals, the people, and the forest in which he painted. Because Rousseau loved and studied his subjects so deeply, then combined his academic training with his intuition, he presented the viewer with new inventive imagery. Rousseau developed his paintings by blending his intellectual investigations with masterly technical manipulation of paint, color, value, and composition. Rousseau followed his own feelings when he created his paintings. He became a controversial artist because of this approach.

Painting at a time when romantic landscapes presented a passive world for human consumption, Rousseau ventured into the scientific understanding of the interconnections between humans and nature. Rousseau poses humans as participants in the natural process of the life cycle, with nature as the primary subject and humans the secondary subject. In *Edge of the Forest Fontainebleau, Sunset*, we see this new philosophy at work (Greg, p. 24). It seems to represent the first time art collaborates with nature's process to create an image. Rousseau and I share the practice of making art from our experience of nature and our interpretation of them. We strive to imbue the natural environment with significant meaning instead of making a transparent copy.



Figure 6: Edge of the Forest Fontainebleau, Sunset,
Theodore Rousseau, 1848-49

Feelings, emotions, form, and images emerge from where? The soul dictates the significance of one's subject matter. This mystical manifestation arises from deep within the very nature that connects me to the physical world in which I reside. German artist, Nikolaus Lang said,

I believe that its quintessence has to manifest itself for it to be what we call art... Craftsmanship does not necessarily have anything to do with art.
... The making, the craftsmanship, is meaningless if there is no soul or secret in the work itself (Gooding, p. 114).

The soul, for me, is the inherent memory of nature. The soul resides in a private place within all of humanity, a doorway exiting outward toward the physical world. Intellectual evolution provides expanding opportunities for humanity to understand more about their universe, the rational acceptance of knowledge about the interrelationships of seen and unseen elements.

Art has served humanity throughout our history. The fertility goddess *Venus of Willendorf* represents an important expression about humanity's survival within the universe with stone as the medium and female as the subject, this sculpture symbolizes the importance of understanding preservation and reproduction.

The history of the Meso American peoples clearly establishes the evolution of civilizations with the loss of their relationship to nature. The modern day archaeological zone of La Venta is located about 4.5 km (3 mi) from the modern town of Villa La Venta in the NW corner of the state of Veracruz where the Olmec's (1500-200 BC) built *LaVenta* as a spiritual site supposedly located on an island in the river Tonala for ritual performance. The north-south axis of the platforms placement provided a designated location for reflection on nature reflecting their belief in Earth Magic from the sun and moon. Earth, life, water, and vegetation directly influenced their choices about location and building styles. The Olmec's view of the cosmos centered around a spiritual axis that connects the upper (atmosphere), middle (earth), and the lower (under the earth) worlds through this central north-south axis. *LaVenta's* pyramid style appears to be a replica of a volcano. During these ancient times volcanoes were used as sites for shrines because they were places of transition to the underworld. It was believed humans came from inside the earth, so all openings into the earth were sacred. The Olmec artifacts are preserved in a museum in Villahermosa, the Museo de Parque la Venta.



Figure 7: Altar 4, La Venta, Olmec Ruler, Middle Formative

In addition, animals occupied a special relationship with these people. It was believed that animals cared for humans. A shaman could shift their shape by entering a trance and travel between worlds via the axis. As time moved forward, their civilization became more warlike and their worship moved toward the human ruler of the period. This change away from looking to nature for understanding transposed the importance of honoring nature into admiration for individuals and their personal need for power.

By the nineteenth century, artists began to follow their intuition to create work that expressed personal responses and passions, relying on private patronage for necessary financial support. Listening to their souls they assisted in an effort to gain greater understanding about the cosmos. Two of these selfless, admirable

souls are Vincent Van Gogh, in the nineteenth century, and Oscar Kokoschka, in the twentieth, who both expressed their emotions in their paintings.

In Jean Dubuffet's *L'Hourloupe* series, the origin of his work has served to guide my own.

Imprecise, fugitive and ambiguous figures take shape. Their movement sets off in the observer's mind a hyper activation of visionary faculty. In these interlacings all kinds of objects form and dissolve as the eyes scan the surface, linking intimately the transitory and the permanent, the real and the fallacious. The result (at least, this is the way it works for me) is an awareness of the illusory character of the world which we think of as real, and to which we give the name of the real world. These graphisms, with their constantly shifting references, have the virtue (to me, I should add again) of challenging the legitimacy of what we habitually accept as reality. This reality is, in truth, only one option collectively adopted, to interpret the world around us---one option among infinity of equally legitimate possibilities. Had any one of these other options been adopted at the dawn of human thought, it would today offer the same impression of reality that we now confer upon the established one (Messer, p. 35-36).

In my thesis exhibition, the shapes taken from nature are presented in an ambiguous form for the viewer. The abstracted appearance of the individual sculptures places the viewer in a position of contemplating the classification and naming the forms. This process engages their imagination as the canopy creates a place of safety and protection. The viewer is engaged to wonder: What are these forms? Where did the shapes come from? Why did you choose these shapes and materials? Why did you choose to incorporate them in this environment?

Natural fabrics call out to be caressed. In my installation, silk crepe de chine, smooth satin charmeuse, transparent chiffon, textured striped Indian Dupioni, heavy weight earthen linen, and heavy weight cotton canvas duck

mingle and sway in the breeze. Beyond the visual attraction, the senses of touch, smell, and hearing ignite memories into flames of activity for the imagination to explore. Ideas formed in a millisecond enhance the process of creating within an outdoor environment while the outcome remains a mystery until the end. Though the fabric used in my installation will disintegrate over time, the aluminum frames will remain as a more lasting suggestion, the skeletal remains. This appreciation for the process of creation was utilized at La Venta, by the Olmecs, who designed, built, and buried artworks that were not meant to be seen see Figure 6. “Made of large serpentine blocks ... mosaic mask was systematically buried under cubic tons of colored clays and slabs of plain, imported rock” (Miller, Mary Ellen, p. 25). The earth artists of the 1960’s and 1970’s have created artworks intended to break down over time and return to nature. Robert Smithson built *The Spiral Jetty* by dumping loads of dirt in a spiral shape in a Utah lake. The water table rose and covered the dirt spiral. Today the water table has lowered, and the dirt spiral once again shows its face.



Figure 8: Abstract Mosaic Mask La Venta,
Olmec Civilization, Middle Formative

The anti-form movement parallels my own thinking about the separation of painting and sculpture. While the separation of sculpture and painting, for the purpose of teaching the characteristics of each discipline, works well in some circumstances merging the two allows for greater exploration through the interdisciplinary aspects of contemporary art. A narrow focus on a two-dimensional or three-dimensional art has been shown to limit the creative possibilities of post modern art.

In this vein, Eva Hesse labored along with other artists, like Robert Morris. The Modernist artist Eva Hesse quoted:

The focus on matter and gravity as means results in forms which were not projected in advance. Considerations of ordering are necessarily casual and imprecise and unemphasized ... chance is accepted and indeterminacy is implied since replacing will result in another configuration. Disengagement with preconceived enduring forms and orders for things is a positive assertion. It is part of the work's refusal to continue aestheticizing form by dealing with it as a prescribed end. ... The ideological mission of anti-form, problematic though it may have been, proposed the dismantling of the institutional hierarchies that defined the art object, mandated its form and appearance, and brokered its sale and distribution. While the resolute abstraction of anti-form removed it from any immediate engagement with the class, race, gender, and antiwar politics of the 1960's, these works embraced an indirect cultural politics concerned with spectatorship and capitalist institutions. While (Eva) Hesse's sculpture was less ideological, less chance-oriented, and more ordered than Morris' understanding of anti-form suggests, it nevertheless shared anti-form's call for freedom from the repressiveness of traditional formalist painting and sculpture. 'I am interested in finding out through the working of the piece some of the potential and unknown and not preconceived,' Hesse told Cindy Nemser in 1970 (Cooper, Helen A. p. 125).

I want to be surprised, to find something new:
I don't want to know the answer before but want
An answer that can surprise.
Eva Hesse, 10 December 1964 (Cooper, Helen A., p. 0).

Walking through the Botanical Garden in Atlanta, Georgia in October 2005, I saw an exhibition by Dale Chihuly. He selected his color and forms to celebrate the plants in their habitat. In the tropical plants, he matched the intensity of the foliage with vibrant colors. In the desert plants, he repeated the luminosity of the sun, bleached, green cactus. In the water, he included transparent areas that reflected the water and sky. All areas of the many different installations repeated the forms of their chosen locations. Each installation dictated the scale of the form. In the center of an open area, a composite of forms created one large mass easily seen from a distance yet intriguing up close. Throughout the gardens, the quantity and scale of the carefully chosen individual forms complimented each individual habitat.

Dale Chihuly directly influences the place chosen for my environment. In contrast to glass, I have chosen hard metal and soft fabric. All my life, I have dug into the soil whether it is sand or clay. Never needing to be asked to provide help to assist with maintenance of the yard, I receive personal joy from every garden I have visited and/or toiled in. The earth has always called me to enrich my life through active participation. Like Dale Chihuly, who reaches into the hearts and awareness of the public through his glass artworks being presented in gardens, my thesis work will be presented in Georgia Southern University's Botanical Gardens. Precious are the wetlands, and precious is this bit of nature existing in an otherwise developed landscape.



Figure 9: Garfield Park Conservatory Exhibition,
Dale Chihuly, 1995

Summary

Nature is the playground for the imagination. In the present lies the key to the future through willingness to study, accept, and act upon knowledge learned from nature. My belief in humanity and that the natural world contains the formula for the survival of humanity provides the impetus for my work. That coupled with the destruction of the wetland environment around my property in Guyton, brings the purpose of my work to creating the sensation of the wetlands in an urban environment. By placing abstracted forms from the wetlands in the urban environment my hope is to create awareness, knowledge, and understanding. It is my desire to look at natural tree root forms and try to see in them shapes that connect humans to nature. Though I do not know how this process can help humanity to understand our dependence on wetland

environments for survival, I am reaching for a means to convey the sensations present in nature through the discipline of art by using abstracted forms and color.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The broken detached, dislodged pieces of wood on the forest floor of the wetlands, in Guyton, Georgia, resembled people and animals. Using the wood pieces I made molds, then cast and assembled them into an environment titled “The Hunter and the Hunted”. Through continued observation in nature searching to find forms for use in my art, I found the subject for my graduate research deep within the Cypress forest in Geneva, Florida.

Painting on fabric requires the surface to be suspended, so frames need to be made of equal size to the fabric plus six inches to prevent the dye from traveling into unwanted areas. Using one-by-four pine boards, I built three frames forty-eight inches by forty-eight inches. Moving deep into the wetland environment about a quarter of a mile, the frames and equipment I used were carried on human backs – my children and mine. A six inch piece of elastic was cut and stapled every six inches around the frames edge. Silk tee pins were bent and attached to each elastic piece to hold the fabric in place. Silk crepe de chine fabric was torn into thirteen forty-five by forty-five inch squares then, in the forest, was attached to the frames. Protein dye was mixed into squirt bottles. Foam paint brushes were packed for the distribution of dye onto the fabric.

All this equipment, we carried past littered debris of soda cans, beer bottles, and empty bags to find the still beautiful intact Cypress trees and their root systems rising from sandy soil deep in the woods. Cypress trees that grow in and out of the water loom over head creating a canopy of safety where light

flickers through the tree tops upon the interior woodlands. Cypress knees and roots extend vertically and horizontally in every direction. The largest mosquitoes I have ever seen swarmed around us filling our car when we parked and opened the doors. Dressed to protect ourselves from the sun and mosquitoes, we traveled past fisherman along the shoreline as we entered the darkened forest.

Once inside the forest, I began to capture the root forms onto the silk fabric becoming totally involved in the process of root rubbing. The intense heat caused me to shed first the hat then the over shirt. Decisions had to be made which roots would be chosen for my research. One group of knees reminded me of a congregation. Another of a beast because of disfigurement to the form and the pain deeply engraved in the root's shape. As each new root came into my field of vision the choices became difficult. Draping individual silk fabric squares over tree root systems, I would rub the surface with permanent dye to capture their forms. First foam brushes were used but they applied too much liquid dye onto the root form and the delicate root texture became a blob of color. Then, I began squirting dye directly onto my gloved hands and gently rubbed the root surface with dye.

I made thirteen forty-five-inch by forty-five-inch two-dimensional silk dyed fabric images which over time led me to develop the forms currently used in my large interactive outdoor sculptural environment. My children assisted me as I attached the wet silk rubbings on the frames to dry, and by photographing the process. The temperature was so high that day that when we returned to our vehicle all of the trapped mosquitoes in the vehicle were dead.

Back in my studio, I suspended my silk fabric rubbings vertically in order to copy my root rubbings in gouache onto cotton rag paper. Looking at the silk fabric rubbings I worked to visually separate distinct shapes from each other, re-evaluating the shapes that I captured from the cypress root or knee. Each of the shapes I found in the rubbings and then painted in gouache for me resembles some element familiar in civilization. These newly discovered shapes contained all the information I needed to begin developing my thesis installation.



Figure 10: Bassinet Basket, 2005



Figure 11: Bird in Flight, 2005

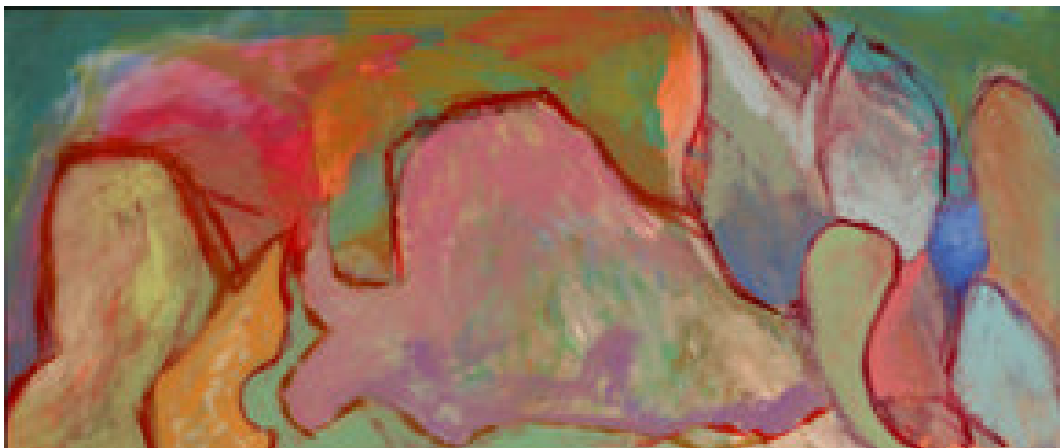


Figure 12: Wild Horses, 2005



Figure 13: Tibetan Dog, 2005

I challenged myself to create an artwork from my wetland rubbings that places the viewer in an environment where he or she can contemplate forms taken from nature without damaging its fragility. Tracing my painted shapes onto transparent plastic, I then transferred them onto a variety of natural fabrics: cotton grown from a cotton plant, linen grown from a flax plant, and silk spun from worms. The difference in the fiber content established different colors, tints, and tones and textures in the fabrics. The spun yarn techniques and different weaves of fabric provided further texture variations. The impermanent quality of natural fabric relates to our individual life cycle; we live and then

we die. The same elements that form our planet earth are contained in all life on earth, including humans. The natural fabrics I chose were not combined with unnatural fibers because industrialized fibers are manufactured fibers, not the elements grown from the earth or spun material from an animal. In order for my work to reflect nature, it was important for all the materials used to be natural. Reflecting on how the ancient Olmec Culture of Meso America revered and mimicked the natural shapes of the mountains by repeating the mountain shapes to create the sacred ritual site at Monte Alban, I thought about the purpose of my research and understood the importance of using natural fabrics to refer to a natural environment.

For me, the art making process required that I use both the two and three dimensional disciplines. First, I saw my project in three-dimensions in my head; then, I used many two-dimensional methods to develop my concept. Imagination is limited only by the margins placed upon it. Through unlimited and cross-related use of disciplines it is my hope that my work creates an imaginative space that increases the opportunity for those living in urban communities to interact with a diverse natural feeling environment.

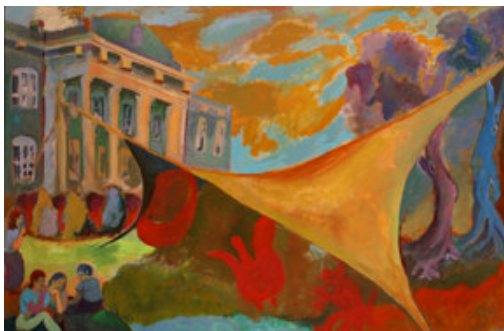


Figure 14: Imagined Installation, 2005



Figure 15: Location Proposal, 2005



Figure 16: Installation In-progress, 2006



Figure 17: Installation In-progress, 2006

The fabrics used in my Thesis Exhibition stand as a reminder of the sensitive eco-system. In my installation three life size dendriform shapes formed in fabric sit underneath a silk canopy that is approximately eighteen feet by eighteen feet. The trapezoid shaped canopy echoes the applied geometry in urban communities. By combining and sewing fabrics into abstract three dimensional dendriform (tree like) forms taken directly from nature that were reconceived in gouache paintings, my installation reprises nature. The flexibility inherent in the fabric gives the installation an ever-changing form. Each time the wind blows or gusts the shapes move and change. As the piece is shown, sitting outside, weather will overtime, affect the stiffness and mobility of the fabric.

I chose lightweight aluminum to support the cloth dendriforms. The fabric and metal combines and transforms into a place for the human imagination to

explore wetland conservation. I have intentionally chosen the abstract expressive style to give shape to the forms within the installation because the lack of objectification allows the privilege of tempting the viewer's imagination to explore unknown possibilities. The undulating root like linear metal forms rise up from the earthen floor tempting the viewer to jump over, around, and among their roots shapes. The pipe used for the armature symbolizes trees with their roots and the water carried through its interior space. As an industrialized material that took earth millions of year to create, aluminum is also a material we are consciously aware of the need to recycle.

The fluidity and multiplicity of the fabric resembles the tops of trees with leaves that move and flutter in the wind. The abstract quality of the forms repeat growth patterns found in the close, mingling, wetland plant branches that coexist in harmony in Guyton, Georgia. Five, seven, or more shrub and tree root systems share the same earthen area. Their trunks and branches twist around each other while ever stretching for the sun above. These plants that thrive in this environment do not reflect a rowed, planned order. Their entangled branches require the visitor to push through the mass as he or she hikes into the forest. The forest flourishes without agricultural practice and tangled natural beauty awaits the visitor. Additional organic shapes grow in the fungi on the branches and fallen leaves. Brilliant colors juxtaposed against the intense neutrals call out to the visitor in this sanctuary. It is this organic mass of beauty that I have tried to present in my sculptural forms. Beginning with the fabric's natural colors juxtaposed against each other then painting color with dye onto the dendriforms

and canopy to lead the viewer through the installation.

Some painters use color to express emotion. They also use the texture of paint as a medium of expression. The color blue has often been used to represent positions of honor for humanity. Children and adults often prefer blue to symbolize healthy water and sky. Turquoise, a mixture of blue and green reiterates the natural wetland environment and harmonizes with the light, bright surrounding spring green of the Georgia Southern University Botanical Gardens that will host this installation. The color turquoise is a transitional color between the surrounding green and the blue sky. The dominant blue color stands for the dominant blue seen from the atmosphere when viewing earth.

From outer space, our planet appears as a mosaic of blue and green – blue for water, green for plants. ... The ecological communities that occur where green meets blue: wetlands...where early civilizations first arose along the edges of rivers (p.3). ... The fact that wetlands intergrade with both terrestrial and aquatic environments illustrates the difficulties in delineating precise scientific and legal boundaries (p.9). ...Human societies are entirely dependent, both for their survival and wellbeing, upon the biosphere, the 20 km thick layer that provides all the necessities of life. One useful way of thinking about the linkages between humans and the biosphere is the concept of ecological function. Ecological function can be defined as ‘the capacity of natural processes and components to provide goods and services that satisfy human needs’ (de Groot 1992 p. 7). This concept challenges humans to recognize, inquire into, and quantify the benefits received from ecosystems. ... Sather *et al.* (1990) and Larson (1990) examine some of these functions performed by wetlands. (They) address five important functions of wetlands: production (including wildlife production), regulation of atmospheric carbon dioxide and methane levels, maintenance of the global nitrogen cycle, storage of ecological records, and flood reduction. ... When humans manipulate wetlands, whether by draining for agriculture, or flooding to increase certain species, many properties, processes and functions are simultaneously changed, Often with unknown consequences (56-58).

The painter, Philip Otto Runge from Hambur, experimented with developing theories about “colour-space” in 1810. Runge developed a three-dimensional color system. In my canopy, I use blue to unify my environment because I agree with several historical views about the importance of blue for humanity. For instance, Runge,

In the *Farben-Kugel*, Schiffermuller, following Louis-Bertrand Castel, placed blue at the apex of his schema as the most important colour, by virtue of its keeping its identity as blue throughout the whole range of values from light to dark (Gage, John, p. 174).

Symbolizing the strength of human intellectual ability this strong quality of blue reflects my faith in humanities power to accomplish goals.

Impregnating dye into the fabric for color requires the optical mixing of the tones due to the restricted offering of dye colorants. This technique of laying on one color and or tone/tint next to another includes,

The way in which fifth-century setters (e.g. at S. Vitale in Ravenna) used several small cubes for each detail to be represented, ‘very much in the way of nineteenth-century pointillism. Like illusionistic painting in general, this technique of mosaic was meant for the instant view. Looked at from a distance, the colour-dots appear as modeled forms...’ (Gage, John, p. 77).

The perspective of space gained from laying one color next to another color has a unique quality of motion when viewed from a distance. Using Mark Tobey’s painting practice of dissolving through calligraphic line, I attempted to repeat the feeling from flickering forest light remembered from the day the rubbings were made onto the canopy surface.

The patterns used for the shapes painted on the canopy were created by transferring the shapes earlier developed in gouache on paper. On the three-

dimensional fabric dendriforms the colors used in the canopy are changed and repeated. Warm next to cool colors create depth in space on the dendriforms and canopy. The neutral color created by the physical mixing of the liquid dye builds a transition between the compliments.

The imagination is the environment where unknown objectives are seen, formed, and initiated. Unraveling the threads of possibility through discipline, the artist winds their way toward potential solutions. This thesis installation will not be shown inside a gallery or museum; it will be presented in a public outdoor space where the people can access art freely. The Georgia Southern University Botanical Garden represents a place in the urban environment whose very existence depends on the wetlands for its survival. The developed environment focuses on attracting people from different economic and cultural backgrounds who will have the opportunity to interact with my installation. It is my hope they will be motivated to engage in communication with one another. Through experiencing the magic of the canopy and dendriforms up close, in the intimacy of their urban environment, my installation will invite visitors to focus on their relationship with nature. It is the aim of my installation, *Playground for the Imagination* to bring to the viewer the understanding, that we are interdependent with nature for life, before we use and destroy nature till it is gone.

Conclusion

The dual exhibit of my thesis *Playground for the Imagination* presented in the Georgia Southern University Botanical Garden March 25 through April 1, 2006 includes images that show the process of it's creation, the two-dimensional

silk fabric rubbings, drawings, and gouache paintings. With this large environmental installation my aim is to enlighten the public about the importance of preserving our wetlands. I have created an environment where people have an opportunity to advance their understanding of nature through the use of their imagination. The created environment will be a painting, yet it will also be a sculpture. The ephemeral quality of the fabric with its characteristic changes from the weather, time of day, and seasons juxtaposed against the stability and longevity of the aluminum armatures acts as a symbol for the superficial alteration being imposed on the wetlands in support of development.

Painting is a process of using color and sculpture is creating a three dimensional object, the two disciplines are combined to develop this installation for my thesis research. While using two-dimensional disciplines to develop what imagery I wanted to focus on, I have built a three-dimensional space filled with objects and then reincorporated painting into the fabric using dye. I have not just painted on the built object; the color is embedded into the object through the use of dyes. The final object is not only developed through sculpture, it is also developed through painting.

The final resting place for my thesis installation will be inside a wetland environment in Effingham, Georgia. I will photograph the changes in its appearance for later publication. The ephemeral qualities of the fabric are similar to the wetlands in that the fabric shows dirt and creases. When a person walks on the floor of the wetland forest, the surface feels like a sponge and the roots compress. How will the morning, noon, and evening light effect the color used in

the installation? According to the Henrik Steffen a Danish nature-philosopher in his introductory essay for *Die Farben-Kugel* (Colour-Sphere) by Philipp Otto

Runge a Hamburg painter,

Is not the dawn to be seen as the red side of the great colour-structure (*Farben-bild*) which is every day in motion, which projects itself into the brightness of day? And noon as the dominant yellow, and evening the violet, which loses itself in the darkness of night? (Gage, John, p.175)

Monet painted the same subject at different times of the day because of the different colors shown on objects by different lengths of light waves. It is my intent to document the different colors produced by the light and the colors that develop as the plant life grows on and within the natural fabrics of my installation. How will the wetland atmosphere affect the decay of the fabric and the oxidation of the aluminum? Will animals move in and live within the installation? Do the animals also need a roof over their heads for a feeling of security? I think so; they dig holes in the earth, peck holes in tree trunks, build nests with roofs, move into old barns and bird houses. They move more cautiously and more thoroughly survey their surroundings than the average human. Often when startled, a snake slithers away and does not attack. I want to place this environment into the wetlands after it is shown because this documentation will provide an observable connection between my installation and the wetlands. I am hoping that showing this artistic documentation in public places can assist in the preservation of the wetlands, since purely scientific documentation of ecosystem production for the planet has failed. Artworks often are delegated to an attic, storage unit, basement, or some obscure location once

the initial thrill of the object becomes plissé. This make and forget fate, I do not want for my installation. I want to watch and document the changes of the installation in the environment that called out to me for attention. I want to witness the interaction of nature with the artwork I have created. By continuing to show all the drawings and paintings leading up to the creation of this installation, along with documentation of its' destruction, I hope to form connections between people and nature and to help make people aware that nature is being destroyed.

The concept of entropy does not allow us to put back what we have taken apart in our ecosystems, but we can chose who, what, where, when and how we change our ecosystems today and in the future. Immediately after purchasing the Guyton, Georgia property, I went to the local Effingham County Soil Conservation Office. Then, I visited the Columbia County Forestry Office to learn about different types of wetlands; soil, hydrology, and plant life are the factors used in the determination of wetlands.

All continents host wetland environments. The variety of wetlands only begins with the familiar six classifications: swamp, marsh, bog, fen, wet meadow, or shallow water communities because individual situations exist that defy these normal characteristics. The wetlands produce many healthy properties for our planet. The peat bog collects and holds carbon therefore preventing it from entering the atmosphere and then increasing its temperature. The roots in some plants simultaneously filter and detoxify water while making and releasing much needed nitrogen into the atmosphere.

‘Art is one of the most powerful languages humans have ever invented, explains Huey Johnson, former head of California’s Resources Agency, it is a potent tool for environmental restoration and we need a lot more of it. And, as curator Mary Jane Jacobs is quick to remind us, Artists are not miracle workers - they’re just another alternative.’ Art can convey complex information visually, inspire others and solve practical problems in unorthodox ways. Applied to environmental issues, art has the power to provoke debate, call attention to local and global problems, and unite a wide range of people and organizations to address a common goal.
(http://greenmuseum.org/generic_content.php?ct_id=219)

There remains an enormous amount of knowledge to be discovered about the wetland ecosystem. It is my desire to continue sharing my passion for our wetlands imbued with my love for humanity.



Figure 18: Playground for the Imagination, B. Darlene Miller, Georgia Southern Botanical Gardens, Statesboro, Georgia, 2006



Figure 19: Playground for the Imagination, B. Darlene Miller, Georgia Southern Botanical Gardens, Statesboro, Georgia, 2006



Figure 20: Playground for the Imagination, B. Darlene Miller, Georgia Southern Botanical Gardens, Statesboro, Georgia, 2006

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