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Crystal Queer: Fracturing the Binaries of Matter, Creation, and Landscape

By
Sarah Knight

A thesis presented to the
Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts
Washington University in St. Louis

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

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Abstract

In this thesis, I compile a series of fragments consisting an analysis of my artwork in the gendered contexts of landscape, self-identity, mythology, and philosophy. I develop my concept of a “queer mark” in my art that serves as a form of queering, a disruption of visual and conceptual cohesion. I form a picture of how our contemporary selves are influenced by our gendered understanding of the landscape through the analysis of philosophical, artistic, and mythological concepts of creation. I see my sculptures as an atlas to an alternative means of understanding identity, a queering of these historical and exclusionary means of making identity. My focus on using alchemical processes of ceramics and geological material to represent an ever-becoming identity ties my sculptures to the landscape and subterranean world of our origins.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	1
INTRODUCTION	3
THE QUEER MARK	6
FRAGMENTED BECOMINGS.....	11
CREATION MYTHOLOGY	16
ATLAS, MAP, AND HETEROTOPIA.....	25
SHORT STORY: <i>INHUME</i>	33
FEMININE MATTER AND LANDSCAPE	36
THE FRAGILE QUEER IMAGE	41
RECONSIDERING IDEAS OF EARTH IN CONTEMPORARY CERAMICS	47
EARTH-BOUND LABOR.....	52
RUINS.....	57
POEM: <i>LITHOTOME</i>	62
SUBTERRANEAN INNERSCAPE	63
CONCLUSION.....	68
APPENDIX	69
NOTES	71
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	75

Introduction

My practice speaks from a foundation of queerness towards the larger scope of human experience. In this paper, I use queerness as a term to describe a state of identity in flux or disorientation. Queerness can encompass gender, sexuality, and all identities that fall beyond the canonized binaries for identities in contemporary Western culture. To show how queerness can benefit people both within and outside of the queer community, I have found multiple ways of “queering” in my art practice premised on contemporary queer theory. Queer theory is a long-standing and well-researched means of understanding concepts from this point of view. Jeremy W. Crampton explains the fundamental role of queer theory, stating:

Queer theory is extremely powerful in contesting not just *gay* identity, but all gendered and sexual identities – *all* identities, in fact. It may be that heterosexuality as a *material* practice is underplayed by queer theorists but by revealing that heterosexuality, as the absence of abnormality, depends on homosexuality, and by demonstrating that a logic of exclusion lies at the heart of all questions of identity queer theory has revealed a whole new landscape of power, previously barely glimpsed, let alone understood.¹

The act of queering is more complex than muddying the tension between two perceived binaries. Queering, as an act by queer people for those in and outside of the queer community, is our subversive contribution to a dialogue around contemporary issues of identity that go beyond gender and sexuality and encompass every aspect of the formation of the self.

In the quote above, Crampton is speaking of a power dynamic that applies to all identities, but how does this canon of “normal” and “abnormal” stem from and affect self-identification? And how can it be traced back to the landscape? Queering, the act of applying a queer theory lens, is capable of expressing a recognition of the flaws in language and gendered value systems contemporary culture has projected on the earth, landscape, and ourselves. We live in a world without intrinsic binaries. We also neglect the omnipresence of the primordial subterranean world that ties us to our own myths of creation and self-identities. From a queer perspective, there are parallels between geology, landscape, and human interaction and the development of the self within Western culture. My work seeks to express these connections through material, process, and display.

This thesis will draw connections between queerness and gendered concepts of the earth by examining artists and writers who share my focus on labor, material, and landscape. Using fragmented writing, I will introduce

the idea of queerness, orientation, and the philosophical idea of “becomings” and connecting them to creation mythology, contemporary ceramics, and the earth.

Fragmentation is a form of writing as well as a formal aspect of visual art. Unintentional fragments are pieces of writing that are incomplete or are missing pieces. This fragmentation style allows for a broader reading of the context behind the writing, as well as the implications of the writing itself. A good example of the power of the fragment to form queer narrative can be found in Sappho’s writing. Sappho was an Archaic Greek poet who lived circa 570 – 630 BC. She is thought to have written a huge quantity of poetry, but most of it has been lost. Her remaining poems are labeled by their fragment numbers. Her writing, because of its incomplete context, has been interpreted as being an expression of her lesbianism (the word “lesbian” is derived from the island of Lesbos because Sappho lived and worked there), as many of her poems speak of feminine lovers and romance. The gaps in our understanding of Sappho’s life and the incomplete nature of her writing have allowed her queer myth to emerge and become canon.

In *Primordial Sense of Art* Guillermo Marini states that “artworks have meanings that evade explicit explanations, yet they seem to offer an alternative view of the spectrum of human life that would remain otherwise hidden.”² My work seeks to excavate these fragmentary human experiences and render them tangible and immersive. I consider my works both as individual objects and installation-based accumulation to be a fragmentary queering of space. They explore different ways to disorient and reorient the viewer’s own connection to the earth, landscape, and perceptions of self. The words “fragment” and “form” are both verbs and nouns, the action word usually ascribed to the creation of the form, and the passive existence of fragment usually ascribed to the viewing of it. I argue that the viewer plays a role in the continued fragmentation of the fragmentary art object - in my work, the implications of missing space within the form of the work are where interpretations proliferate and effuse meaning.

Intentional fragmentation in my art is a quality I use to allow for a more expansive investigation and interpretation of my work. The fragmentary form is something I consider a form of queerness, and also something that operates on the entropic scale. P.W. Bridgeman mentions entropy as a scale in *The Nature of Thermodynamics*, saying that “like energy, entropy is the first instance a measure of something that happens when one state is transformed into another.”³ Fragments as concept and as physical things do not adhere to traditional means of understanding narrative, story, or space. They highlight the role of distance, the gaps between fragments

becoming fissures of fluxing, expanding, dissolving primordial raw matter. In a lecture given at University of Cambridge in 2014, Rebecca Varley-Winter said “readings of fragments and fragmentation [are] shaped by *want*, wanting in the sense of both missing and desiring.”⁴ What lies in the space between fragments is the absence of a whole, one that our human need for comprehension yearns to fill but instead further fuels the cycle of creation, possibility, and becomings.

I will be using a fragmented writing style in this thesis to connect it to the physical and conceptual influence of the fragment on my art. This paper consists fragments that introduce the concepts, research, and process of my practice along with fragments of creative writing, poetry, and appendices of my writing that I use as reference. The purpose of the fragmentary form in talking about my concepts is to display my work alongside the research I have done into geology and philosophical ideas of self-identification and myth while leaving room for an expansive interpretation of my art.

Each fragment of this paper is intended to hold connections and references to other fragments, but I have ordered them to introduce fundamental concepts and definitions in chronological order. I begin with the questions closest to the heart of my practice that form the foundation for my explorations into material and dissemination. Each concept fragment will combine my research and process with the things I have learned through making the work.

The creative writing fragments, including poems, are intended to provide insight into the element of my practice that uses writing to document my personal connection to each idea I have researched. The short narrative on my childhood gives a glimpse of my own personal understanding of the landscape which has infused itself in my self-identity and subsequently my art. Self-identity and self-mythology are two points that I find important to understanding the role of both physical and internal orientation. I use my memories of my childhood landscape as a foundation to speak about origins and the creation of a mythology that stems from the earth. Using my own experience as a reference I set out to exhume the impact of contemporary notions of gendered labor and landscape on perceptions of the self.

The Queer Mark

<i>queer</i>	<i>English (eng)</i>	<i>(UK, dialect, dated) To puzzle..</i>
		<i>(slang, dated) To ridicule; to banter; to rally..</i>
		<i>(slang, dated) To spoil the effect or success of, as by ridicule; to throw a wet blanket on; to spoil..</i>
		<i>(social science) To reevaluate or reinterpret (a work) with an eye to sexual orientation and/or to gender, as by applying queer theory..</i>
		<i>(transitive) To render an endeavor or agreement ineffective or null. [...]⁵</i>

What is the queer mark? Is it an act of mark making, an insignia, a signifier, a reference, or a gesture? I think there is a difference between a “queer mark” and what is “marked queer.” Things that are marked queer are, from the outside, projected upon to be related to queerness. The queer mark is one made in an act of queering. The queer mark is a flux - it is what catalyzes everything around it into motion and what hemorrhages the flow of process. It is what disrupts, erupts, corrupts, corrodes, erodes, and disintegrates our assumptions about how things are, why things are, and how we feel about them. The queer mark results from the intentional act of disruption or disorientation in visual, physical, and conceptual cohesion.

In my art, I am searching for the presence of the queer mark. The queer mark begets the small existential crises that make up discovery. When we learn something new, it’s not that this knowledge or experience has not been uncovered before. It’s been exhumed from the turf we plant our personal flags of understanding and orientation on, and that exhumation reminds us that what we stand on is not solid at all. It replaces the solid surface of our present landscape with a transparent one where we can glimpse the histories and myths of our present moment. This discovery also reminds us that we grow and decay psychologically much the same as any biological, geological, or cosmological force outside of ourselves. To learn something *new* is to replace a previous assumption or absence of knowledge with discovery, which is often disorienting and causes an avalanche of small readjustments in our perception of ourselves and the world. The queer mark is any mark that sparks a moment of humility, grounding, and slippage.

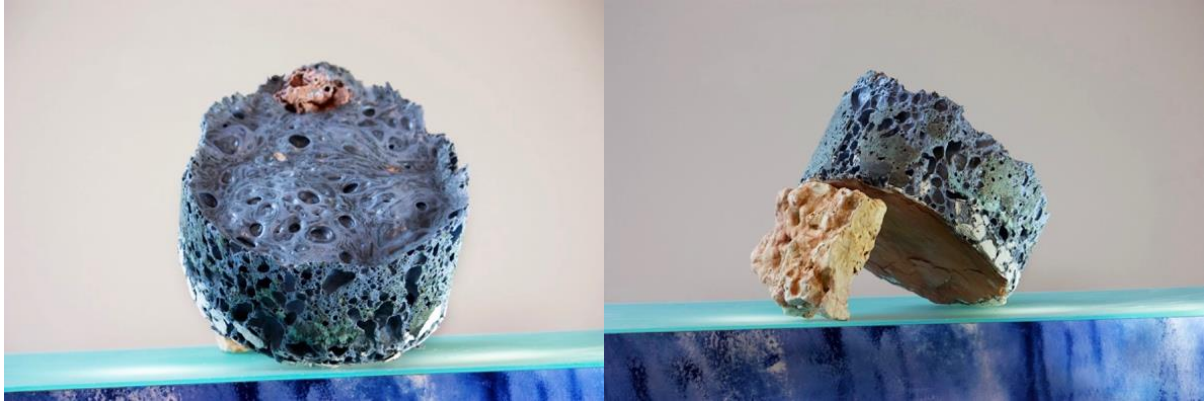
I have multiple ways of incorporating the concept of the queer mark into my work. One method is to present sculptures and found stone alongside each other, forcing the viewer to reinterpret the role of “made” art and object. The pull between the artificial and the organic is not a binary, but a spectrum that mirrors the shifts of personal identity. Where do we draw the line between the made/artificial and the found/natural in ourselves and in objects? Using the geologically referential process of ceramic kiln firing to make the artificial sculptural elements, my materials always begin in one state and transform into another.

Is there a line between artificial and organic worth delineating at all when it comes to these objects? Does that delineation hold a weight, or is it arbitrary based on our society’s understanding of art, artifice, artificiality, and artifact? And how does queerness fall between the natural and the artificial, or the artifice⁶ and the authentic?



Figures 1 & 2: Sarah Knight, “Lavender Lapilli,” Approx. 13” x 7” x 7” Stone and metal shards, Frit, pigment, sand,
2020

In my sculptures, found stone acts as a reference to the natural and to geology. By alluding to the natural, it holds conceptual power as a comparative object next to the artificial parts of the sculpture. The piece “Lavender Lapilli” (Figures 1 & 2) is a conglomerate of steel shards, found gravel and stone, slate, and sand fused together with pigmented frit. Lapilli means “rock fragments ejected from a volcano.”⁷ The materials in this piece are detritus from making previous sculptures. I focused on the idea of accumulation of natural and artificial. The process allows disparate materials to become a single geological form, artificial in its making, where small fragments are amassed to create a sculpture that resembles a fragment of natural geology but remain ambiguous. “Lavender Lapilli” is artifice without the intent to deceive, but with the result of being queerly unidentifiable. This resonates with ideas of self-ascribed identity (not just in the queer community, but in all realms of identity outside of cultural standard), and how methods of self-identification can be read as artifice in relation to the heteronormative “natural” structure that culture embraces. This exploration left me questioning if the concepts of artificiality and ambiguity serve or hinder queers in contemporary society.



Figures 3 & 4: Sarah Knight, “Zenith/Nadir I” Glaze and Stone, 11” x 11” x 10” 2020



Figures 5 & 6: Sarah Knight, “Zenith/Nadir II” Glaze and Stone, 10” x 10” x 9” 2020

Another way I use found stone as a queer mark is through the way I display my sculptures. An example can be seen in the “Zenith/Nadir” series of works, which consist of an artificial element and a found rock propping it up. “Zenith/Nadir I” (Figures 3 & 4) and “Zenith/Nadir II” (Figures 5 & 6) were both made by pouring liquid glaze into a steel tube inside the kiln. When the steel was peeled away, the cylindrical form was held by the fluxed glaze, like the setting of a mold. I display each one of these pieces by propping up one end of the glaze form with a found stone to change the physical orientation of the sculpture. Zenith is “the point in the sky or celestial sphere directly above an observer”⁸ and nadir⁹ is its opposite, directly below the viewer. These points of orientation are ones I find

fascinating because unlike our global orientations such as meridian and poles, they are points of reference from the location of the observer. This implies the presence of a single person observing the sky and being constantly oriented by their own position in relation to something as expansive as the heavens, a position that cannot be replicated exactly by anyone else.

Self-identification and orientation work much in the same way, to the point that the word “orientation” is used to describe not sexual or gender identities, but any means of placing one’s self in culture. Classical understandings of identity have people placing themselves along an established binary standard that can’t possibly encompass the entirety of human experience. I believe the concepts of a personal zenith and nadir are more contemporary means of understanding one’s self in the world, making the self the point of reference around which things are positioned. With this in mind, these sculptures are illustrative of my exploration into this alternative way of self-identification.

Fragmented Becomings

The path you are leaving will speak to the world of your laboring body in an ocean of rock, learning to scramble where you were only taught to walk. Your hands become your tools here, to brace you and guide you where your feet and your vision lose their way. – S. Knight¹⁰



Figure 7: Sarah Knight, “Grey Matter II,” detail, Plaster, pigment, steel, cloth, concrete, 2020

The concept of “becoming” is a system of constant extrapolation and expansion, one that mirrors personal transformations of gender identity, cultural connection, and personal narrative. In their book *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari see the self as “only a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities.”¹¹ I am tying the idea of “becomings” directly to the formation of a queer identity defined by a person’s placement outside of, around, between, or completely departed from traditional ascriptions of gender, sexuality, and personhood.

Fragmentation in my work is one way I express my exploration of these “becomings.” When I create a sculpture or installation, I use fragmentation in sculpture to create multiplicity, to speak of interior and exterior, or making and unmaking. The accumulation of sculptures and found objects in my installations is also a form of fragmentation. I aim to create a reflective critique of our ways of interpretation and understanding “wholeness” in visual narrative, or the need to move towards definition and categorization. The concept of a wholeness does not always benefit the expansive nature of personal identity. Instead, I have chosen to create moments of becomings to highlight this issue.



Figures 8 & 9: “Grey Matter II,” Plaster, pigment, steel, cloth, concrete, 2020



Figure 10: “Grey Matter II” detail.

When I choose my materials, I consider their sources, associations, and potential for transformation through my process. These materials are fluxes, things that change states in the process. This definition mirrors P.W. Bridgeman’s definition of entropy described earlier, or “one state transforming into another.”¹² Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy of “becomings” begins with something serving as a flux, stating that “a flux is something intensive, instantaneous and mutant —

be-tween a creation and a destruction.”¹³ Both ceramics and plaster have these qualities. There is a material used in ceramics recipes called a “flux,” and it is the ingredient that allows a glaze to become fluid and reform on a surface. With plaster, a chemical reaction sets a powdered material into a solid that generates heat. I use both of these fluxing materials to suspend shards of stone, ceramic, steel, and aggregate, pausing the process of transmuting matter to create a form. Without a flux, transformation is impossible. Dust remains dust.

In “Grey Matter II,” (Figures 8 & 9), I manipulated chipped pigmented plaster to better articulate the idea of entropy of orientation, and the philosophy of “becomings.” This sculpture has an interior and exterior space, and the visible strips of gauze and flakes of plaster (Figure 7) flow between both. My intent was to explore the role of disorientation in creating spaces that confront us with the hidden realities of identity. To find this space the viewer must walk around the piece and follow the direction of the plaster-coated cloth inside the sculpture. (Figure 10 & 11) Once inside, the blue plaster turns to pink and blends in with the grey exterior layer of the sculpture once again. This is a reference to the cyclical nature of “becomings,” one without a beginning or an end.



Figure 11: “Grey Matter II,” detail.

Robert Smithson says fragmentation has “no traces of an end or a beginning.”¹⁴ The fragment suspends itself in the act of becoming, whether that is becoming a further fragmentary form, fusing to form a new whole. I believe that what Deleuze and Guattari were saying is that writing (or art) functions not to *balance* the creation and destruction of things, but to *generate* more creative and entropic energy within the realm of ideas, making rhizomatic and fluid the connections and disconnections between points. “Grey Matter II” is a material exploration into this flow between points.

Creation Mythology

*The mountains paint their calligraphy in landslides
 Obliterating vertical horizons with each stroke
 Defined not by their own mass but what little space they leave to the sky
 Imagine being large enough to obscure humanity's view of the cosmos*

*Do we make them itch as ants do
 When we scale their hides?*

*Do we haunt their secret places?
 Why glorify discovery when existing in a time of presence
 Has let us all - in some way-
 Meet mountains
 Take to all fours
 don a golem's skin
 And ascend*

*The mountain forces me to kneel to ascend
 To pay homage on hands and knees to the othering enormity of a world we all borrow
 I repent gratefully for the sand in my teeth and the dirt under my nails
 For the ache of effort
 Of straining to hear the pulse of the mountain beneath my torn palms and crackling breath*

*My atoms chose flesh, yours stone
 No more than I are you timeless
 In this weft of foreword moving time let's reconvene
 When my atoms and your atoms
 Dissolve*

I've made many sculptures and installations influenced by my research on the intersection of creation and human mythology, specifically focusing on creation myths. My goal is to make work that expresses the need for a queer mythology but also denies the mythologization of real queer identities. Like the example of Sappho I used in my introduction, myth highlights gaps between and buoys the queered nature of an incomplete history. Reflecting on the origins of my installation practice, I began to analyze how creation mythology, geology, and personal identity overlap.

Every culture in the world has a creation myth, and an overwhelming number of them begin with earth as material and place of origin. In Latin, *humus* means “from the earth/of the earth.”¹⁵ *Man* emerges from a cave, a golem is sculpted from clay, dust is turned into *man* with the breath of God, or man came down from the mountains. But while deities like Gaia reign over the earthly birth and feminine aspects of creation, the virtues of *man* are attributed to his refinement and superiority of the landscape. When the chaos of the disordered, primordial, natural world meets his hand, the sublime is made.



Figures 12 & 13: Sarah Knight, “Cave,” Found Concrete and Steel, Approx. 42” x 56” x 60” Installed, 2018 - 2019.

Before any other installation and before I dove headfirst into ceramics, I constructed a found-object installation in the far corner of a hallway in Lewis Center. This installation, “Cave,” (Figures 12 & 13) explores a

queered mythology in which the act of creation for this piece involved using only pieces of discarded, useless building material. For me, the exercise of making this installation was an act of recovering material and considering the infused history and its role as a place of origin as the foundation of the building. The steel and concrete remnants, laid down as the foundations of Lewis Center, were ripped up violently to make way for new development.

I drove into Lewis Center one afternoon and saw a mountain of shattered concrete slabs and mangled rebar in the lot to the side of the building. I immediately asked one of the construction workers if they were moving it and if I could take a few pieces. When I got permission, I took the Official Lewis Center Shopping Cart to the pile, climbed on top of it, and began pulling out pieces of steel that I could reasonably carry up to the third floor. When it began to rain and the sun went down, I was still extracting chunks of concrete. I had a lot of time on my man-made mountain of Lewis Center rubble to think about the role of labor, extraction, and landscape. I wondered if I was salvaging or perpetuating the fascination with discard and ruin. I just knew that the, quite honestly, brutal labor of throwing forty-pound chunks of rebar and cement into a shopping cart on a rainy night would help me understand the history of the material I was working with.

In reaction to having discovered steel and concrete “scrap” to work with, I wanted to let the life, and afterlife, of these materials create a cave-like presence, maybe a nest, maybe a womb. I felt a sympathy for this discarded residue, useless to the men who were refurbishing the building. The steel was rusted and corroded by years under the wet soil, and when I pinned it to the wall, it shivered at anybody passing by. The concrete would crumble with the vibrations, and the forms would cast veiny shadows when I manipulated the light inside of the installation. I found a new way of displaying the role of time and history through material. Making this work, I



Figure 14: “Cave,” detail.

realized that steel and stone could possess fragility, unmonumental elegance, and an ambiguous but gender-referential presence.

Working on “Cave,” I began to imagine that we are always ever emerging from the cave we were birthed from. Maybe a fully independent masculine existence has never happened, despite our best efforts as a species to penetrate and drain the landscape. We are forever in the process of becoming, between the feminine beginning and masculine enlightenment, somewhere queered, both and neither.



Figure 15: Michael Heizer, “City, Complex One,” earth (soil); concrete; steel (alloy); stone (rock), 1972 – present.

The found concrete and steel I used may have been manufactured using industrial processes, but my work looked nothing like the well-known land works of Michael Heizer. When I picture his monumental works, I think of the quote by Rebecca Solnit where she discusses creativity, geological material, and the denomination of masculinity:

...inheritance is entirely patrilinear; in other words, that meaning is determined by form not by matter. Such theories of paternity reinforced the identification of women with the material, men with the transcendent, and creativity with the masculine action rather than feminine engagement.¹⁶

Michael Heizer’s “City” (Figure 15) is exemplary of this “masculine action” and his drive to create work via excavation on an unheard-of scale. In an article on “City,” LACMA Director Michael Govan says “Mike started the idea that you can go out in this landscape and make work that is sublime [...] There is nothing more powerful, romantic, and American than these gestures that in Mike’s case have taken his whole life.”¹⁷ Heizer has spent decades creating this yet-unfinished work, an extension of the monumentalism he is already known for. His practice is one of unfathomably large-scale works, and part of that includes massive excavations. He speaks about his

process in an interview, saying “To begin with, I have a tremendous real estate file on every available piece of property in six western states. I look for climate and material in the ground. When I find the right spot, I buy it.”¹⁸ This land mining and ownership is nothing if not a masculine, penetrative endeavor of labor and craftsmanship. Heizer’s material manipulation directly contrasts with contemporary female large-scale artists like Christine Corday.



(Figure 16) Christine Corday, “Relative Points,” Installation, 2019.

Christine Corday’s “Relative Points” (Figure 16) installation at the Contemporary Art Museum in St. Louis included a series of large-scale industrial material sculptures. Where these twelve cylindrical tons of “elemental metal and metaloid grit”¹⁹ differ from works like Heizer’s industrial works is one of gendered perspective, in my opinion. Corday’s fascination lies in the “what if’s” of material manipulation; many of her works are created by heating, bending, folding, and patinating steel in an exploration of the limits of such an industrial material. “Relative Points” is made of the residue of the steel fabrication process and specific elements she considers intrinsic to the beginnings of life. She compressed these flakes of steel into massive cylindrical shapes and displayed them in this installation. Her fascination with material, or the “feminine” aspect of creation is paramount over the mastery over it, or the “masculine” endeavor. While she creates her work using industrial processes, the works that result are meant to be discovered and touched by viewers for their material nature. She revels in the changes that result in her

sculptures from interaction with people over time and, although massive in scale and in process, they speak to their making and their primordial, elemental matter.

If the primordial is feminine and creation masculine, is matter intrinsically queer when it is in a state of transformation? This question is the foundation of my making process, and my decision to work with ceramics. Ceramic processes take a “raw” material and vitrify it using heat. I take that process and apply it to traditional clay and glazes, but also to found stone, steel, and sand. My sculptures work to reframe visible, historical, and contemporary queerness with ideas of residue and process. In my art I ask: how are queer space and objects made? How are queer relics, queer fragments, memories, futures, forms, experiences, and mythologies - how are these formed for us? What is queer matter? Rebecca Solnit makes the point that dirt is “primordial chaos” because “nothing has been divided yet; no opposites have emerged: the nastiest tale dirt tells is that the charnel house is the womb of life.”²⁰ I work with dirt and clay because of its association with the pre-gendered creation of humanity, making it the material of non-binary queerness.

Much of my work has led me back to theories of the creation of the “self” through mythology. Mythology, according to Stuart L. Charmé’s study of Sartrean ideas of consciousness, writes:

Paul Ricoeur suggests that fiction ‘remakes reality’ by looking at the world in new ways, art provides a means simultaneously discover and invent reality. The story or myth that interprets a person’s life is also more than a copy of his or her past. It both enlarges and condenses the sense of reality created by that life. It is a mixture of poetic and historical elements.²¹

Considering this concept of self-creation (“story or myth that interprets a person’s life”), I understand how myth combines factual and interpretive narrative to form an identity. This quote connects fluxing perceptions of the self to a remaking of a person’s reality through history and fiction (mythologization). Sartre’s idea of the self as flux sparked me to think of queerness as flux. I began researching how I could represent this internal flux in space.

Jeremy W. Crampton, author of *Space, Knowledge, and Power: Foucault and Geography*, states:

It would be better to say that all space carries traces of heteronormative spatiality, and/or that all space is actually *queer*, in the sense that the norms of heterosexual society are unstable and incoherent. This means, for one thing, that the identification of spaces as either *gay* or *straight* is fundamentally mistaken.²²

This quote supports the idea that any identity binary is “fundamentally mistaken.” With Sartre’s internal analysis of a queered self and Crampton’s interpretation of a queered external space, I began formulating the idea of exploring a queer mythological landscape in my sculpture practice.

The history of land art, art using geological materials, traditional and modern ceramics, and industrial sculpture has been a historically masculine endeavor, at least on the level of the most recognizable artists. Material mastery, manipulation, mining, and monumentalism play a huge role in solidifying geologically-bound art practices in the realm of the masculine, despite (or because of) the primordial landscape and subterranean world being relegated to the feminine. A ceramicist who exemplifies this is Peter Voukos, but the work that expresses this gendered dynamic is being created by a contemporary trans-woman artist, Nicki Green.

Nicki Green's ceramic practice is a materially diverse one, and often incorporates reappropriated objects. Green, a self-identified transwoman, takes bricks from Peter Voukos' decommissioned reduction kiln, as well as his kiln shelves. She is using them to negotiate terminology ("brick" being a derogatory term for a non-passing transwoman that she uses as a play on words) and the narrative of male-dominated art and creation in her own practice. Peter Voukos was at surface level the epitome of the successful male clay sculptor of his era. Bold and gestural in the creation of his pieces, he helped establish and embodied Californian ceramics of the 50s-60s. But his personal life was troubled; Voukos was an addict and struggled with his mental health.



Figure 17: Nicki Green, "Landscape #2 (Diptych)," 2017. Glaze on found kiln floor. 15" x 7.5" x 1" each panel

Nicki Green's work titled "Landscape" (Figure 17) consists simply of two of Voukos' kiln shelves standing as ruined, fragile slivers of a magnanimous practice. These kiln shelves bore witness to Voukos' acts of creation stoically and still bear the marks of his work fused into their surfaces. Green stands them upright to display their jagged upper edges. They stand silently together, like doors to a world of the history of the artist. They are patina'd with iron oxides, copper and chromes, rust or bloody reds, and charred blacks. This borderline iconographic piece is serving as a record. This record's current state and implied history questions the role of masculinity in the act of artistic

creation. Charmé called mythology a combination of "poetic and historical," and this work is exactly that. They hold the history of their own making but stand silently like pages of a tome recording the lifetime of the creator they outlived. Using only found objects, Green is able to articulate the history and presence of gendered notions of

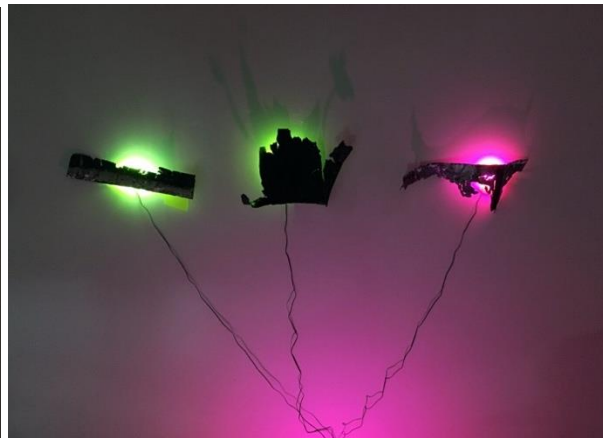
creation in the ceramics world. She critiques this history using its own relics and residue, and her work asks how gender needs to be reinterpreted for the future of ceramics and all of sculpture.



Figure 18: Sarah Knight, "Sublimation Column I," 16" x 11," Stone, Steel, 2019.



Figure 19: Sarah Knight "Sublimation Column II," 11" x 10," Glaze, Steel, 2019



Figures 20 & 21: Sarah Knight, "Skins," Installation, Dimensions variable, kiln-fired steel, LED lights, 2019.

“Landscape” by Nicki Green “Relative Points” by Christine Corday were two works by contemporary women artists that sparked my interest in mythological or queered concepts of landscape using residue. “Sublimation Column I” (Figure 18) is illustrative of this queer mythology where primordial matter meets a creative attempt at forming it. The heat of the kiln turned solid stone into liquid lava that expanded to fill its container. When I peeled the steel away, what I found was a porous, cylindrical form of melted stone, fully capable of standing without its protective steel casing. The meeting of the flux and the boundary created a new and unexpected reaction. “Sublimation Column II” (Figure 19) is a colorless glaze that, by reaction with the zinc from the recipe and copper from the steel sheet, created a smooth green skin. The meeting of my mimicry of a masculinized attempt at material mastery and the primordial feminized matter is the queer mythological strata I seek to reveal in my sculptures. The preservation of this state between matter is a queer mark.



Figure 22: “Skins,” detail.

I created an installation in Weil hall that displayed the steel shells of “Sublimation Columns I & II.” This installation (Figures 20 & 21) was an experiment in mythologizing my art using the residue of my creative process. These steel pieces, or the “Skins” series, were the cylinders of my “Sublimation Column” series that contained the glaze and stone inside the kiln as they melted. When they were peeled back, they were brittle and textured. (Figures 20 through 23) I see them as queer records of the process of their making. When I displayed them, my intention was to highlight the residue of my process but give them their own presence. I wanted to remove them from the association of ruin as lifeless by using colored lights that played with the reflective qualities of their surfaces. The placement of the lights were meant to draw the viewer’s attention to their display as mythological relics or artifacts.

Atlas, Map, and Heterotopia

“To imagine what you know, to populate the unknown with projections, is very different than knowing that you don’t, and the old maps depict both states of mind, the Shangri-Las and terra incognitos. Perhaps fantasy is what you will fill up maps with rather than saying that they too contain the unknown.” - Rebecca Solnit²³



Figures 23 & 24: Sarah Knight, “Disinterred Non-binaries of Matter, Time, and Spirit,” Installation, 2019

During my research into myth and fragment, I created an installation that functioned as a type of queer subversive atlas of art objects and geological fragments. In line with artists like Aby Warburg's “Mnemosyne Atlas,” (Figure 28) my installation was an expansive accumulation of fragments between which meaning and comprehension were meant to be created by the viewer. “Disinterred Non-binaries of Matter, Time, and Spirit”²⁴ (Figures 23 through

27, 29 through 32) was an immersive installation in the black box room at Des Lee Gallery. The title is, like the installation itself, a collection of references to my own non-binary identity, my research, and the act of subterranean discovery – disinterment. I invited viewers to put on headlamps and enter the installation, which was unlit. Lining the black walls were thirty one matte black shelf boxes topped with colored plexiglass. I lit each box from the inside, (Figure 19) illuminating the plexiglass and the objects on top. The objects I put on the boxes were a diverse collection of my sculptures and found rocks. The sculptures were each made of a combination of kiln-fired stoneware clay, melted stone, glaze, and porcelain. Most boxes held a combination of both artificial and found objects, which I arranged to highlight their varied surface textures, shapes, and contours. At the back of the room were steel brackets holding larger flat sculptures (Figures 31 & 32) made of a combination of melted slate and found stone.

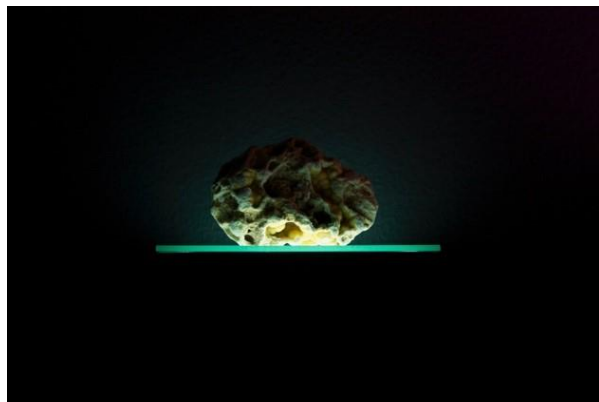
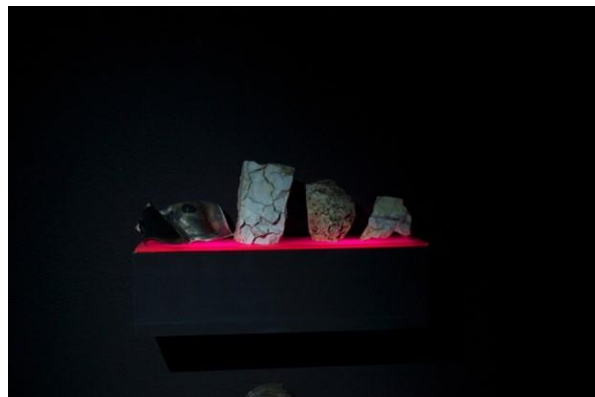


Figure 25: Installation detail

Walking through the installation, people wearing headlamps were greeted with matte black walls punctuated with the staggered shelves. Each shelf was eight to twelve inches from the wall, allowing the viewer to be physically close to the objects displayed on them. A closer inspection would make the surfaces of both the stones and the sculptures shine in the light of the head lamp. The lamp cast odd shadows around each piece that were pigmented by the

underlighting diffused through the plexiglass. The viewer was required to move their head to move their light source, making each work a moment of intentional discovery and disorienting interactive viewership.



Figures 26 & 27: Installation details

I made the “Disinterred Non-binaries” installation to address a series of questions I confronted while making sculptures that focused on queering geological processes and material. What role do cultures of display and organization play in the presentation of fractured narratives? How do institutions like museums and archives display or shelve artifacts, relics, and fine art in ways that give them historical and contemporary power? And how might that organization be used to reinterpret objects in a queer narrative? History, from its innumerable mundane meanderings to its explosive catastrophes, is presented and valued to the degree it can insulate the institutions that perpetuate colonialist normative ideology. This was something that I felt very strongly about addressing in my installations but had yet to find a form that was able to express how my accumulation of sculptures could confront the issue.

I realized the atlas may be the key to displaying this problem while reading Georges Didi-Huberman's *Atlas: The Anxious Gay Science*. He believes that the atlas in its historical and artistic forms serves as a “rereading of the world.” He writes that:

...to reread the world is to link the disparate pieces differently, to redistribute the dissemination, which is a way of orienting and interpreting it, but also of respecting it, of going over it again or reediting it and piecing it together again without thinking we are summarizing or exhausting it.²⁵

This quote articulates the montage practice that I used in “Disinterred Non-binaries.” I intended the installation to expand on the sculptures I made from material and metaphorical sedimentation of history by analyzing the role of fragmentation and reversal of archaic forms of knowledge that devalue certain identities. By definition, the atlas not only disrupts canonical knowledge but a fundamental fluctuation in understanding. Didi-Huberman describes the atlas as

...a visual form of knowledge or a knowledgeable form of seeing, and the atlas disrupt all frames of intelligibility. It introduces a fundamental impurity — but also an exuberance, a remarkable fecundity — that [traditional] models had been designed to avert. Against all epistemic impurity, the atlas introduces a sensible dimension into knowledge, the diverse, and the incomplete character of each image. [...] it introduces the multiple, the diverse, the hybridity of any montage.²⁶

With this definition, Didi-Huberman introduces Aby Warburg’s “Mnemosyne Atlas” series. The word atlas itself comes from the myth²⁷ of the Greek Titan Atlas, who is often depicted carrying the globe on his shoulder. Aby Warburg manipulated myth in his own atlas creations. Warburg used the concept of the atlas to more adequately map culturally powerful images and how they are buried and reappear throughout time. While Warburg took a heuristic approach in making his atlases, he was creating highly researched accumulations of images from different cultures and eras that linked their disparate geographical origins with similarities in cultural gestures in mythology.



Figure 28: Aby Warburg, “Mnemosyne Atlas, Panel C,” 1924 – 1929, Mixed Media

Warburg’s atlas that explores Mars, the mythology and mathematical prominence of the planet, and the discovery of orbit, is simply titled “Panel C” (Figure 28) However, this “panel” is illustrative of Warburg’s approach to reconfiguring concepts with the Atlas. Didi-Huberman goes on to state that the atlas

...invents interstitial zones of exploration, [...] deconstructs the ideals of uniqueness, of specificity, of purity, of logical exhaustion. It is the inexhaustible opening to possibilities that are not yet given. Its principle, its motor, is none other than the imagination.²⁸

By using the atlas form described by Didi-Huberman, Warburg was inventing these places as well, allowing imagination to populate gaps between images to reimagine the importance of symbols across time and cultures. Placing orbital diagrams, Greek mythological symbolism, and contemporary mathematical representations of the planet, Warburg was combining history and poetics to highlight the cultural significance of Mars and its associations with the evolving cosmology and technology of his time.

My work for “Disinterred Non-binaries of Matter, Time, and Spirit” aimed to align my practice with the concept of a heuristic²⁹ atlas of queered geological disorienting space. I was empowered by Aby Warburg’s intuitive approach to reordering, so I took this approach when laying out my installation. An atlas like “Disinterred Non-binaries” is a form of visual knowledge that reorders imagery and association to better highlight not only different

ways of seeing, but to engage directly with the fragmentary qualities of understanding and the gaps between shards of history.



Figure 29: Installation detail

To make this installation, I looked at the object of the map not as the encyclopedic venture it has become, specifically at its physical edges. Map edges are squared and often with a legend designated as a key for deciphering it. The viewer understands that outside of those borders is something that *may* be known to them but is not shown. Therefore, the edges of a map engage with the unknown known, the fragmentation of knowledge. The map becomes an atlas of delineation, bordering, naming, and value systems. In its object state, it allows us to engage with the absence of logically understood space beyond the edge of the map, almost more so than it does the information presented within the map. It also engages us with the systems and society that created it, and how they value, name, and fragment the space it depicts. A hundred maps on a wall is not a cohesive map of a larger area, but a study of the values placed in borders and naming, and how we learn to navigate them. In “Disinterred Non-binaries,” my organization of both made and found objects presented in conjunction with each other was my exploration of moments of recognition and ambiguity for the viewer.

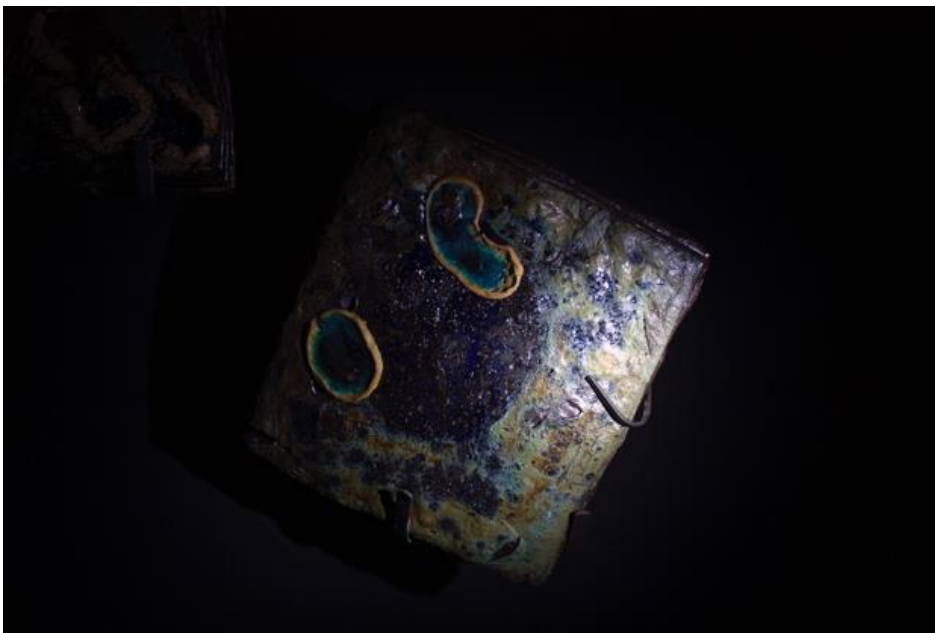
The dispersal of both artificial and found geological objects in my installation insinuates the breakdown of knowledge systems to provide enough room for both meaning and becomings to arise. Knowledge exists



Figure 30: Installation detail

between the cultural creation of it and the entropic passage of time, caught in the cycle of contemporary values that sort the fragments by legibility and cohesion.

The atlas as well as my installation serves as a visual guide to a heterotopia. Foucault defined heterotopias as spaces that hold “the disorder in which fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately in the dimension, without law or geometry.”³⁰ Heterotopias are intrinsically queer spaces, ones that operate outside of binaries and definition. Heterotopia, as opposed to utopia³¹ disturbs and amplifies dissonances that arise when conventional forms of knowledge are inadequate to furthering an understanding of something. Heterotopias force us to reconsider our way of being in the world that relies on historical precedent, the way that caves disorient us when our way of navigating space lies in the omnipresence of the horizon. Different environments, concepts, and ways of being need different forms of knowledge than what history has chosen to write into our contemporary curriculum, but which the atlas unearths and uses to reorient us. “Disinterred Non-binaries” was a space for queered and disoriented perspectives on the geological environment, histories, and encounter with art objects.



Figures 31 & 32: Installation details

Inhume

So much of my need to make and the scope of my practice is defined by my walks through the world and my relationship to the landscape. My affinity for stone, clay, and labor came well before my affinity for art in the formal sense. In my childhood, I used my senses and imagination to find ways to become a creator, carer, and witness of the land. My small explorations and grand adventures, my childhood, my family, are equally saturated in my art and my vision.

I was raised above the level of the horizon, in the forest of the coastal mountain range of Northern California. I understood that the world lay below me — not above, not at eye-level. The view from the corner kitchen window was a glimpse through the dripping darkened bark of the redwoods of a roiling opaque fog obscuring the ocean, the coast, and the valley where the rest of the world lived. Sometimes at night, under the inland fog, I could see the diffuse flickering yellow, red, and blue lights of the city. Looking out towards the ocean from my mountain perch, only darkness at night. I can't say if my mountain-dwelling childhood was the reason I always looked down when I walked despite the protests of the chiropractor I went to for back pain, but as a child my eyes were on my feet, the ground, and the instant before my next step. Rarely did I search my eye-level for my road, and I never really looked up to find my way.

My parent's house sat on around an acre of land, well over half of it owned by the sloping of semi-graded mountainous terrain. The shaded inclines under the trees gave their ground to massive blackberry bushes, the lowest stems of which were thicker than my arm and were better described as trunks. The chickens we owned loved dust-bathing underneath them. I'd follow the hens in through openings only a ten-year-old could manage, chest to the gnarled roots and packed dirt, my shirt and leggings catching on thorns. Inside the blackberry bushes were little sun-dappled dells, green-tinted light smattering the branches and the smell of heated berries staining the air. Their juices turned my fingers a bruised pink. I would lay under the bushes and listen to the hens brokenly croon at their chicks.

Scrambling on hands and knees up and down the slopes bordering the flat section of yard, I named each boulder and pretended to commune with the mountain. I reveled in the lawlessness of things living where they could, the way rocks and roots alike fought for surface area, each stubbornly digging into the fertile soil of decaying things, sheltering snails, spiders, and worms. Living in a forest whose trees were so tall that the tops moved with a wind so high above my head that I couldn't hear it pass, it wasn't hard to imagine that the silent world was sentient and so much more aware of me than I of it. The imported stones in our driveway had names I gave them, the three-

leaved trillium were offshoots of an alien ecosystem implanted under the earth millennia ago that I was responsible for mapping and naming. The childhood myths I sowed into the landscape were my connection to its reality, the gaps in my knowledge were where I was allowed to imagine my own place. The golden-grey grass covering the sunblasted hillside on the Eastern side of our yard always smelled of disturbed dust and warm straw in summer. When the light hit it in the early afternoon, I could only squint at it. As a child it was my job to strip the (what I now know is invasive smutgrass) seeds of the grasses as they matured and scatter them over the hillside. My mom was not pleased with this one of my many self-appointed tasks in “proliferating” the landscape on our property.

Even gardening in the vastly untamed mountain forest of California was only ever the gesture and rarely the mastery of the art of gardening. My mom and I half-heartedly attempted to maintain a garden alongside the sheltered nook where our deck curved. Owning chickens and fending off rabbits, deer, and slugs in the mountains made this more of a learning experience than a successful investment. Growing up surrounded by so much life amongst decay, watching to wood planks of my swing set gradually rotting by fog drip, and witnessing the aftermath of a storm ripping forty foot redwoods through houses, I absorbed the notion that what *is* in the landscape is always becoming and unbecoming. What happened when I wasn't watching happened either too quickly or too slowly for me to see, and it happened at the earth's whim. The biological and the geological, the grass and the dirt, the animals and the cliffs, all of them contain a sentience that required nothing more from me as a child than an observer's respect for their comings and goings. From the very beginning, my identity was tied to the earth's intrinsic muddling of making and unmaking, animacy and inanimacy, myths, and humanity. I reckoned with other aspects of my identity through this foundational lens of queered multiplicity I learned from the earth. The social aspects of gender and sexuality are things I've seen as pulling and pushing, giving and taking, being and not-being, as much as the matter of the earth and the things that make their living on it.

My art practice emerges from a place of earth-bound queerness towards a larger scope of human experience. Queering is more complex than muddying the tension between two perceived binaries; queering, as an act by queer people for those in and outside of the queer community, is our subversive contribution to a dialogue around contemporary issues of identity that go beyond gender and sexuality and encompass the entirety of human experience.

What we are capable of seeing and giving language to from the outer margins of a binary-centric, self-bisecting society is a recognition of the flaws in language and gendered value systems culture has projected on the

earth, landscape, creation, and ourselves. We not only live in a world without intrinsic binaries, but we neglect the primordial universality of the disorienting, entropic existence of the world beneath us that ties us to our own myths of creation and self-identities. From a queer perspective, the parallels between geology, landscape, and human interaction are synonymous with the development of the self within culture. I place my practice in using soil, dirt, stone, and clay for the reason that it not only holds the primordial, intrinsically not-yet-gendered existence of becomings, but because as long as we have had a myth of our own creation we have used gendered value systems to give geological materials worth. Even as a child I knew that the value of the land was in its own creation, and as an artist and queer person I understand that to be true of the *self* as well.

Following that road back into my personal origins and the origins of the geologic world, I've explored the ideas of gender in relation to landscape, creation myths, hidden and fragmented narratives, geological processes, and entropy. I've found that queering art — the deconstruction and dissolution of feminized and masculinized characteristics historically ascribed to the land and experiences of humans in it — holds so much potential for reframing our future with the earth and our identities. It holds even more power in understanding creation myths, and recontextualizing them to give power to the voices of marginalized identities that systems of historical recording so often devalue and dismiss. Art is my bridge between an understanding of creation, whether that be the self, a place, or an object, and the value assigned to it.

Feminine Matter and Landscape

Listen to the grind of stone on stone as your presence presses pebbles into each other, compacts them and scatters them in a joyfully chiming dance. Know that you have left a mark and that the earth has recorded it. – S. Knight³²

While I do not consider my materials innately gendered, their sources and means of production have long been tied to the exploiting forces of humankind on the landscape. The slate I use in the kiln was mined in a slate quarry, a giant stepped pit in the ground where workers blast and chip away at the walls to excavate the rock. Steel is the refined product of iron ore, which also needed to be extracted from the earth. The exploitative, violent processes enacted on the earth that produced some of my materials speak directly to the gendered understanding of landscape as the raw material by which civilizations are made.

“...the landscape is identified with origins, with the maternal and feminine, with the raw material out of which culture is made. Running through these associations was an assumption of passivity: nature, matter, women function as the neutral ground on which meaning will be inscribed.”³³

In this quote from her book “As Eve Said to the Serpent: On Landscape, Gender, and Art,” Rebecca Solnit ties gendered associations to the landscape. She goes on to say that the act of creation, of imparting will upon raw, inanimate matter from the earth, is innately masculine. However, she argues that in art, “in concentrating on substance rather than form as the bearer of meaning, artists assert decisive significance of substance, rather than regarding it as a neutral matter that takes on meaning as it is given form.”³⁴ Like other artists, I use substance as meaning to de-gender the binaries that cage creation and raw material, landscape and intention, and labor and product.



Figure 33: Alexandra Engelfriet, "Tranchée," 30" x 7.5" Wood fired Earthenware clay, 2013.



Figure 34: Sarah Knight, "Artificial Meteor," Approx. 28" x 33" x 18," Melted slate, rocks, glaze, steel, 2020.



Figure 35: "Artificial Meteor," detail.

Alexandra Engelfriet is an artist who uses clay and her own body to create work that speaks to the feminine and malleable role of the earth. For her 2013 work “Tranchée,” (Figure 33) Engelfriet dug a trench and dumped a massive amount of raw clay into it. She proceeded to climb around in it, manipulating it with her whole body. This was an act of creation on a huge and personal level, and upon finishing it she had a crevasse pockmarked with her feet, hands, knees, and elbows. Finally, she built a giant kiln around it and fired over a period of days. The result is an artificial chasm that references the feminine cave, a womb, or a vagina. Engelfriet’s “Tranchée” uses clay, the gendered material of the earth, with the labor of her own gendered body to create an anti-monumental, anti-monolithic sculpture. This sculpture pushes against ideas of excavation as a means to an end. Instead this work is cemented firmly in process and material over power and mastery. This idea also challenges the masculine monolith. It instead brings the viewer underground, into the earth, and back to our own feminized origins.

There are many gendered binaries that frame our relationship to landscape. By this, I mean topographical, sociopolitical, subterranean, historical, cultural, personal-internal, and contemporary landscapes. We perform gender within each one. The binaries of our understanding of the world include space/place, hard/soft, subject/object, known/unknown, observer/observed, male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, colonizer/colonized, discoverer/wilderness. Rebecca Solnit points out a fundamental flaw that these binaries have produced in our understanding of the world. She says that there is a “gap” between each binary, where “the essential immateriality of mind and mindlessness of matter”³⁵ is in direct conflict with Western culture’s attempt to delineate feminine and masculine traits.



Figure 36: “Artificial Meteor,” detail

“Artificial Meteor” (Figures 34 through 36) was the first sculpture that was meant to be displayed on its side, revealing its “bottom” and “top” simultaneously. I wanted to create a work that literally pushed the boundaries of my

material, to see what would happen if the steel used to contain my melted stone were to be overwhelmed. I wanted to give the stone an autonomy and allow it to form the shape of the piece rather than adhering to my steel forms. To make this piece, I constructed a steel ring out of metal that was much thinner than the twenty gauge steel I typically use to make my containers. I put much more slate into the ring, and filled the rest with found river stones, glaze, and steel bar. The amount of slate melting in the thin steel ring forced the container to warp and expand, forming an undulating shape. While the temperature I fired this piece at should have fully melted the slate (Figure 34), the bottom of the piece remained partially melted (Figure 35). This delamination of the slate on the underside shows how I placed it in the kiln. Picking away the steel around the outer edge of the piece (Figure 36) reveals the conglomerate of materials I amassed inside. Visible are pieces of white limestone, orange glaze, and melted, flowing rock. In its conceptualization, “Artificial Meteor” is similar to “Tranchée” because the material holds the record of the forces exerted on it and reveals its primordial nature.

By working with stone, I’ve found that geology and all its substances remain stubbornly outside of our attempts at gendering. Solnit’s declaration that the pastoral is associated with the passive gave me the urge to animate the landscape in my art as an aggressive, existence-defining force in Western perception. This may look like upturning the idea of surveying, mining, land ownership, of colonization and of assimilation, as acts relegated to history. These exploitations of the landscape affect our perceptions of self as much as they do the land. Perhaps connecting the self with geology will inspire people to be aware of the ways our own identities are systematically parceled off, profited from, labeled, commodified, and owned through current but archaic means of gendering. Maybe a queered return to the primordial chaos of the earth will make us uninhabitable to anything wishing to (dis)own us.

The Fragile Queer Image

*To the self-ascribed organizer of worlds, identities, countries, peacekeeper:
Where would you choose to bisect me?*



Figure 37: Sarah Knight, “Purple Drip,” 10” x 10” x 8”, Clay, glaze, stone, porcelain, 2019

I’ve chosen to address the idea of queer cultural camouflage by intentionally including or excluding visual characteristics of contemporary queerness in my practice. By manipulating color, texture, form, and display, I am able to create work that speaks to queerness without erasing dialogue around self-identification outside of queer identity. I think about the assumptions people have of queer art, of the queer landscape made visible and aesthetic, and about the queer aesthetic itself. What flags queer? Why? And what does the queer landscape owe to anyone else to follow these signifiers? I am trying to push a visual narrative of my identity that is not the one given to me by a patchwork historical model that feels very inauthentic to my community. Our community’s historical narratives, the ones that we’ve spent so much effort dredging up and dusting off, seem to be co-opted by heteronormative culture.

Our understanding of queerness in visual culture is often oriented by the stereotypes and caricatures that queer/trans folk embody in popular culture. I think of the flamboyant gay sidekick, I think of the non-“passing” transwomen used to represent attraction/repulsion, to represent an artifice, a mistake avoided. “Passing” is a term used to describe a person in the transgender community who achieves the unquestioned look of the gender or sex to which they are transitioning and shows no social indication of having not always been that gender or sex.³⁶ I think

of the tragedy that befalls the representations of my community in books, movies, theater, and music. And I think of the narrative we're given, the one we're expected to enact to signify our place as "other," but "appropriately queer." I also think about the densely packed studies of queer geographies by queer theorists - from Foucault (who presumably had no idea that he and his work "The History of Sexuality" would become a cornerstone of queer geographical study) to contemporary queer academics who conflate queerness with gayness, and find in the Castro District in San Francisco a problematically wafer-thin slice of gay culture to apply to the entirety of non-heteronormative identities.

I see the predominant concept of "queerness," even where the word is rightfully applied³⁷ as having a set of delineators perpetuated by theorists, academics, artists, and members of the queer community itself. From within the community, it is easy for me to say that we police ourselves and our image, and this is a historical and understandable safety measure. Where we can appear docile or spectacularly deviant, iconographic or pornographic, we have a method for being consumed by culture that makes us less vulnerable to attack. We offer over our authenticity and our multiplicity for a stereotype, which serves neither those of us who cannot fulfill this ideal queer image, nor completely protect those of us who embody it most.

I think a lot about how I represent myself and the importance of queer symbolism in my work without falling into cliché or 'commonsense.' My stance lies firmly in the belief that queerness is an ever-fluxing state, one that takes on an infinite number of visual forms, and one that can be defined within the realms of aesthetic and art by its means of creation using the transfiguration of matter. My use of color is intuitive, but I do draw connections to the use of color connotations within queer community. Purple or lavender, the combination of blue, a "boys" color and pink, a "girls" color, is often used by the trans and queer community to express their non-binary or non-heteronormative identities. The pink triangle, used originally to label gay male Holocaust internees, is now a symbol of pride for gay men and lesbians. I use both in my work and installations but they are always subverted or partially hidden.

An example that uses this color and symbolism is "Purple Drip." (Figure 37) For this sculpture, I made a custom purple and teal glaze. I also created a pedestal using the same color of lavender resulting from the fired glaze recipe. The sculpture itself is stoneware with a porcelain topographical skin laid on top of it. The topography is completely fictional, but the lines are pink and blue, seemingly signifying the elevation of this made-up disorienting

landscape. My intent was to create a piece based on a fictional landscape that subverted gendered notions of color and landscape, but the unruly purple glaze added another layer of interpretation that I worked to highlight in display. The purple glaze I applied frothed over the side of the sculpture and fused to a piece of stone. I wanted to show the dimensionality this flux, so I constructed a pedestal of the exact size of the base of the piece, allowing the incidental stone fusion to become a dynamic form as it hangs off of the side.

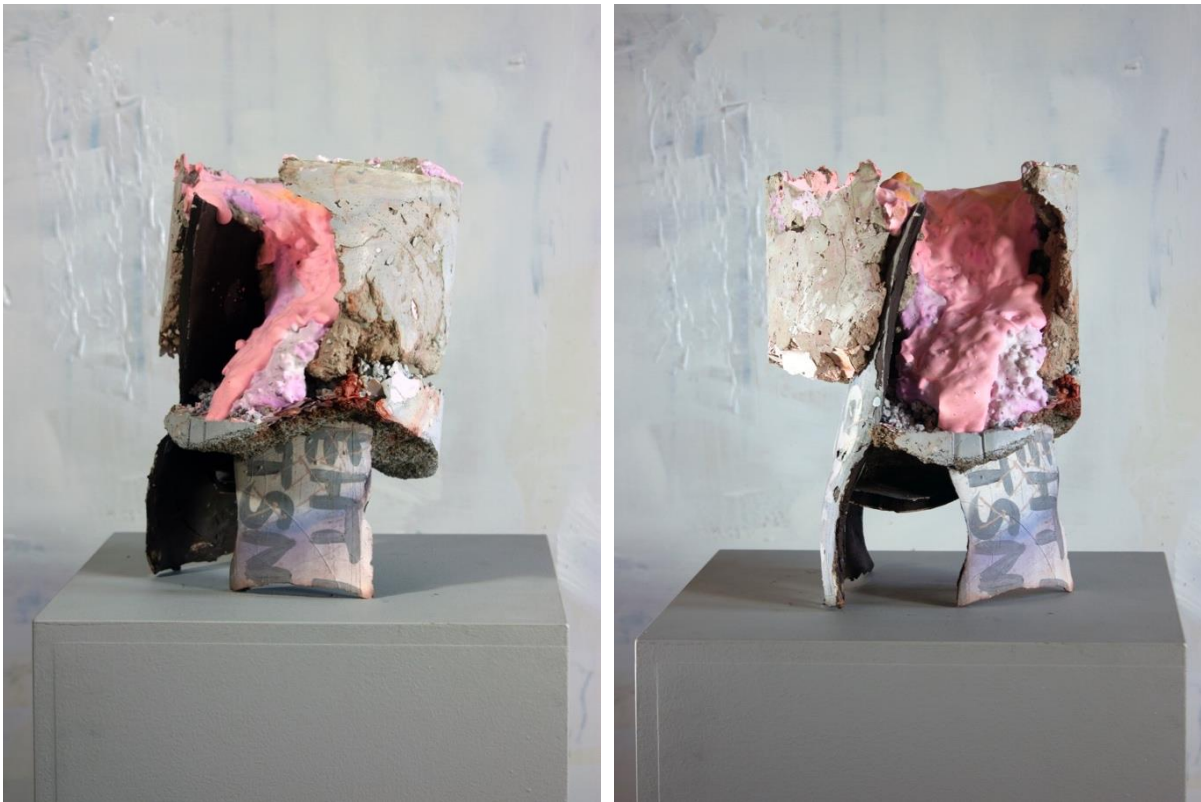
Are my sculptures self-identified objects? Queerness, in all its iterations and infinite variations distinct in every individual in the community, looks as varied as an existence can possibly be. As for the queer landscape - that is where I release my practice to roam, and the works that result from it are an amalgamation of fluxes, paused in a state of “becomings,” between creation and destruction, transformed in matter but not permanently preserved. Not entirely nameable, not entirely recognizable, but as expressive of their meaning as they are their making.

They are as much disorienting as they are reorienting, functioning as landmarks in the way cairns do. Historically, stacked rock cairns were placed by the sides of trails to help guide travelers through an unknown place. Cairn placement is also a means of memorialization. Modern cairns are often made by hikers on a whim; they find and stack rocks to indicate where they’ve been, not to help guide the next person to follow them. These cairns no longer help us find our way (in fact, these cairns are notorious for getting present-day hikers lost, but they are still markers of a presence.



Figure 38: Sarah Knight, “Sedimentary Record,” Approx. 8” x 6” x 6”, Melted stone, porcelain, pigment, 2019

I have many examples of sculptures influenced by the history of cairns. One example is “Sedimentary Record” (Figure 38). I made this sculpture by painting watered-down symbols of the queer community (inverted triangles and gender markers) onto a porcelain slip sheet using mason stains and slip and peeling it up. Once dry, this sheet broke, and I stacked the pieces between shards of slate like a cairn. I then fired it in the kiln to a temperature that allowed the slate to slump slightly, fusing each layer together. In this sculpture, each layer of porcelain is slightly obscured and unrecognizable, the queer signifiers are infused more into the process of making than the final result. The sculpture itself acts as a cairn of symbolism for a landscape that defies an orientation. Like the cairn, it also serves as an un-monumental means of memorial or recording.



Figures 39 & 40: Sarah Knight, “Cairn II/They Isn’t Plural” 12” x 8” x 8”, Bisqueware, stone chips, plaster, aggregate, concrete, pigment, 2019-2020

“Cairn II/They Isn’t Plural” (Figures 39 & 40) is a mixed media sculpture that uses a similar technique as “Sedimentary Record.” I made the ceramic component to this sculpture many months before the final sculpture was

completed. I poured porcelain sheet and, in tinted slip, painted the words “they isn’t plural,” repeatedly, and laid a layer of black clay on the back. When I peeled it up, the writing was inverted, making it difficult to read. I fired this flat piece of greenware and it bent and shattered in the kiln, further obscuring the writing. I had been holding onto these fragments for a long time and when quarantine forced us to leave studios, I took them with me. I decided to incorporate them into a poured cement and tinted plaster piece to mark the moment of uncovering these records or relics of my practice. The text-printed ceramic shards hold the bulk of the piece aloft, revealing the layering of material and the text itself. I consider this piece a “cairn” marking the overlap of two very different points in time. The first moment is now history, a time when introducing my pronouns meant fielding comments about the plurality of the word “they.” The second moment is the present moment in quarantine, a moment when there are no new introductions, and my socially performed gender feels irrelevant. The gap between these two moments feels very abstracted and warped with the current sociopolitical situation and Covid-19. However, the present moment is still evolving, so this sculpture has a bubbling, oozing center revealed by a chasm in the side. It’s an unrecognizable pink sludge that speaks to primordial, feminized becomings, something I have thought about extensively as I consider how performativity of gender and queerness fit into our current time.

Reconsidering Ideas of Earth in Contemporary

Ceramics



Figure 41: Liz Larner, “Subduction,” ceramic and epoxy, 2015

I began my journey into ceramics with a material fascination, and soon realized that the other ceramic artists working in a similar vein to myself are making work that pushes the medium of clay sculpture to embody a contemporary language around landscape.

Liz Larner, a fellow Californian ceramicist, makes clay sculptures that depict fault-lines and crevasses from a bird’s-eye-view. premise of many of Larner’s works is the reconsideration of space through the formal language of Minimalism. She uses porcelain for what she says is its ability to remove us from the synthetic feel of many cast or large-scale sculptures in space. Her work may not be more “personal,” nor is it more “craft,” or “handmade” for being made of ceramic, but it is more innately human, more immediate in its existence as a work of exploration and play. “Subduction” (Figure 41) by Larner resonates with me, as a fellow Californian and someone who takes the earth’s geological processes into account in my own work. This is the first work by Larner that I ever read about, and its simplicity in form is what made it the most striking to me.

The West coast is the place of mountain ranges formed from the tectonic plates underneath them. It’s the place of unstable foundations and, for some reason, a stubbornness of people to continue living there despite literally

standing with one foot on either side of a massive subterranean chasm that occasionally spasms and shakes the whole region. This work does for me what Larner's exploration of form and space does for her - it reorients me to the geological underside of my home, always to the left, always the epicenter of beginnings for Californians. This piece is monumental in its concept even though it's relatively small, and shifted my perspective on ceramics, space, catastrophe, and geographical identity. Larner says in an interview with Phaidon that what's next for ceramics is:

...vulnerability and arguing with the thesaurus. Synonyms for vulnerability: susceptibility, accountability, amenability, amenableness, blame, burden, compulsion, culpability, debt, duty, indebtedness, liability, obligation, onus, openness, subjection, susceptibleness, accountableness, arrearage, owing, vulnerableness. Among many of the synonyms for vulnerability that I feel should not be listed as such, I find onus to be the most offensive.³⁸



Figure 42: Liz Larner, "Caesura," ceramic, epoxy, and pigment, 2013

This work's title is defined as "any interruption or break,"³⁹ but Larner's definition is most likely closer to its other definition of "a break in a line," from the Latin root "*caedere*"⁴⁰ to cut, hew. Through its simple form and because it is highlighting its material as clay in the breaking the slab, this is another of Larner's work that is a

reference to the geography of West coast mountains. The white flowing pigment, specifically, is placed in a way that looks nearly identical to fog patterns over the ocean and the mountain range acting as a ridge of clarity, funneling cool air to warm before the fog can reach inland. The blue break across the lower half of the sculpture does not follow the line of the ocean, but almost turns it on its side, an atlasing or bisection of a landscape. Its orientation on the wall confronts the viewer, but its size makes it a personal encounter. This isn't a moment of overwhelm, but still a moment of sublimation all the same. Are we gazing out over the ocean's horizon or seeing a satellite image of the Sierras? Are we watching a weather pattern on a radar or are we witnessing the underside of tectonic plates as they rupture and fuse together again?

This piece makes me realize the importance of ceramics being ceramic at all — made of any other material, all reference to the ocean, the coast, mountains, to fault lines, to geography, wouldn't come through. The material as orientation, as the point of departure for an idea or a spark of recognition, is so essential to clay sculpture.



Figure 43: Sarah Knight, “Fission,” Approx, 16” x 11” x 3” Porcelain, stone, glaze, pigment, 2019

Discovering Liz Larner's sculptures shed a new light on the pieces I make out of porcelain. In “Fission,” (Figure 43) I joined two undulating forms of porcelain by fusing them with stone chips and glaze. To make this

piece, I poured porcelain slip, blue and unpigmented white, onto a plaster surface and peeled it up when it was dry enough to for me to manipulate. Then, I draped each of the two pieces like fabric onto a paper-coated surface to dry. Once dry, I butted the ends of the two pieces of porcelain up against each other and placed stone chips and glaze into the space between them. The firing process melted the stone and glaze and caused a fusion between the two sides.

The smooth quality of the porcelain is interrupted by a crevasse of bubbling stone which to me references tectonic plates and subterranean creation of mountains. Fission is the act of splitting something apart, but the movement of this sculpture's form brings into question if it is separating or joining. This is the push-pull tension I was hoping to illustrate between creation and entropy that the geological process embodies. Like Larner's work, "Fission" evokes a sense of tectonic movement, something that both she and I share experiences with as artists living on the Californian coast.

Earth-bound Labor

Daily I court it, offer over my neck to its teeth. This is the sacrifice that the act of creation requires, a blood sacrifice. For only through the body, through the pulling of flesh, can the human soul be transformed. And for images, words, stories to have this transformative power, they must arise from the human body-flesh and bone-and from the Earth's body-stone, sky, liquid, soil. – Gloria Anzaldua, “Borderlands: The New Mestiza, La Frontera”

My sculptures require physical exertion on my part that I find important for the conceptual foundation of the work. I have a personal connection in the making of these individual sculptures, the finding of each stone⁴¹, and the mixing of each glaze or flux. But I also have the experience of exhuming, excavating, and revealing each work as it comes out of the kiln. This is oftentimes a battle of gravity and willpower; many of the pieces I've made in the final semester of my MFA are heavy conglomerates of real stone, steel, glaze, and clay wrapped in a steel crucible of sorts that I then have to dig out of the kiln and slice into with power tools. I don't wait until they're completely cool, they have to be uncomfortably hot for the steel to crack in the colder air to and fall off. I have burns and scars from handling my work. The calluses on my hands are as functionally specific in my practice as a writer's callus. There is not a graceful way to build the sculpture's form or remove it from the kiln, and I've fallen inside of the kiln more than once trying to balance myself on the lip.

I record acts of my labor through studio notes while I take pieces out of the kiln. I write about the first encounters I have with my sculptures once they are fired, what they look like and feel like, and what reactions I have to them. In many ways, I'm recording a meeting of the creator and the created, but also the human and the geologic in the process of creation. This is my exploration of de-gendering my creative labor with stone and steel.

...the moment of being close, the scent of warm sand, crackling static of cooling shrinking metal, tinging of crazing glass. The music of the subterranean world in miniature, forty pounds of nebulous matter in my arms. Watching hairline spiderweb cracks appear on the surface as the sculpture cools in its first moments of life outside the womb, picking them away like I'm trying to help a baby bird hatch from its shell.⁴²



Figure 44: Video still of the removal of a work from the kiln.



Figure 38: Cassils, “Becoming an Image,” performance still, ND

Transgender performance artist Cassils’ titled “Becoming an Image” (Figure 38) is a documentation of the body’s meeting with earth and evokes gendered notions of the labor that goes into creation and destruction. “Becoming an Image” is a performance work enacted in front of an audience in a dark room. Cassils faces off against a block of clay weighing nearly two thousand pounds. They are mostly

naked, with only boxing wraps around their fists as they attack the clay, punching, kicking, and climbing the block. The only way to see this performance is by the flash of the camera lights of a photographer placed in the audience. The documentation of the work is often the photographs and the fired remnants of the clay, presented with an audio recording of the performance. This final iteration is an artifact of queer bodily labor brought back to its moment of creation using the immersiveness of sound and the documentation of the process. Cassils says that the act of the work “performs trans not as something about crossing from one sex to another, but rather as a continual becoming, a process oriented way of being that works in a space of indeterminacy, spasm and slipperiness.”⁴³ This statement by the artist recalls the idea of queer becomings and perpetual flux that I connected with Deleuze in my earlier fragment. Cassils is using clay as the malleable queer material that embodies this space of “slipperiness” and in-betweenness of form and identity.

I see my practice using stone and glaze to represent this slipperiness as well. While “Untitled I” (Figures 45 through 48) remains unfinished due to the quarantine measures for Covid-19, it’s an important sculpture because it represents the labor of my practice well. It was meant to embody the central role that my physical labor played in making all of my sculptures. This piece is made of steel wire and stones fused together with melted slate and a single type of ceramic frit. It was a chemical risk to make, as well as a physical one. The size of this sculpture meant that when I was arranging it to be fired in the kiln, I had to climb inside to move it. I was confronted with the reality of making such a large conglomerate, and every time I touched it, it seemed to disintegrate more. The interaction

between me and the material in the act of creation asked me to consider my body's queer presence as an influence on my work



Figures 45, 46, 47, 48: Sarah Knight, "Untitled I," Dimensions Variable, Steel, melted stone, frit, rocks, wire, 2020.

The labor involved in my process is a response to both the malleability of the material I work with and to the rigidity of it. I think that this duality represents the nature of geology well; we can make nearly anything from the earth, but it still contains an unruly, heavy characteristic that demands physical labor. It feels natural to work my body when working with clay and stone, being made of fluxing genders and shifting identity terrain as well. “Untitled I” helped me make my queer presence known in the final form of the work, even though it hasn’t been exhibited yet.

Ruins

Latin: Ruo

(Verb) I cast down; I hurl to the ground..

I collapse, fall down.. I fail, fall..

I hurry, rush, hasten, move quickly.

I cast down; I hurl to the ground..

I collapse, fall down..

I fail, fall..

I hurry, rush, hasten, move quickly.

(Verb) I dig out. I dig out.⁴⁴



Figures 49 & 50: Sarah Knight “Disinterred,” Glaze, Steel, Stone, Approx. 11” x 12” x 15,” 2020

My sculptures’ qualities of ruin are a reference to their own making, entropy, and geology. My art has an element of collapse and wreckage to it. Many of my sculptures look charred or broken, because they have been melted and shattered in the making process. Their forms look like geological ruins more than architectural ruins. In “Disinterred” (Figures 49 through 51), I poured a layer of bubbling glaze onto a mound of sand to act as a “surface” into which I embedded steel rods, sheet, and stone. The kiln firing process melted them together and created a sculpture that displays the underside of the surface landscape. The underside of this miniature landscape is visible, propped up on the steel rods that charred in the kiln. In this sculpture, I wanted to reveal both the



Figure 51: “Disinterred,” detail.

subterranean and its surface and use linear forms to connect them. In the detail photograph (Figure 52) the emergence of the stone and the steel from the glaze is more apparent. This moment of emergence is the place of connection between the landscape and subterranean world, which I see as a moment of “becoming” revealed through ruin.

Anselm Kiefer is an artist that plays with the pull between myth, and the ruinous landscape. His works have the same qualities of wreckage that my sculptures do. Kiefer’s sculpture in his show titled “20 Years of Solitude” is titled “Ages of the World (Die Erdzeitalter)” (Figure 53). This work is a behemoth stack of wood, the artists’ own canvas paintings, stone, steel, and creative detritus. At first glance, it looks like a crumbling mountain or a monument to the Kiefer’s dystopian topics. It is a pile of aftermath, as much of my own sculptures are conglomerates of scrap and residue.



Figure 53: Anselm Kiefer, “Ages of the World (Die Erdzeitalter)” 1971-1991.

However, Kiefer and I use the idea of ruin in a similar way. He takes the stand that ruins are not necessarily a bad thing. Anselm Keifer addresses the ruinous quality of his work, saying:

what interests me is the transformation, not the monument. I don’t construct ruins, but I feel ruins are moments when things show themselves. A ruin is not a catastrophe. It is the moment when things can start again.⁴⁵

Both he and I see ruins as a visible form of becomings, or cyclical transformation. When making works like “Disinterred” I see the ruinous aspects of the form as a frozen state of both growth and decay that symbolize the power of the earth to enact transformation.

Geology is the god of the ill-connoted: of hell, of death, of destruction, of cavernous unknowns deep beneath the earth where supposedly, only exist the souls of the rightfully damned, those whose punishment is to live without light and without ascension, among their fellow impure souls covered in dirt. Geological processes and time are also makers of ruins. Ruins are the detritus, the stone and steel residue of human-made things that were formerly functional, inhabited, meaningful to culture. Things that seem dead and empty but stay with us physically. But like Anselm Kiefer and myself, philosophers have approached geological catastrophe as an opportunity to reorient the human world to the vastness of the earth. Michel Serres is one writer who has described his experience with earthquakes, something I resonate with as a lifelong resident of the Californian coast.

In his essay “The Underside of the Landscape,” Serres describes in detail what an earthquake does to physically and psychologically shake up our senses and perception of the world. He writes that when an earthquake strikes

...what [the landscape] conceals and how it comports itself without humans can be seen! A veil is torn, a barrier crashes down, a boundary opens before a never seen reality, while the habitual condition of being blind and deaf ceases! A truth appears, which the planet, fundamentally naked, intentionally seeks to have be glimpsed. What to call the terrain discovered beneath these ruins and about which no one knows how to say, on that day of wrath and joy, whether it bears the end or the beginning of the world.⁴⁶

Serres, like Kiefer, is linking ruins to becomings, questioning whether the ruins of an earthquake are “the end or the beginning of the world.” Like my sculptures, he relates ruins to emergence, where senses must be reoriented when “the condition of being blind and deaf ceases.” He gives an animacy to the earth that I have talked about in previous sections, speaking frequently of “discovery” at the point of ruin, when he is shaken by an earthquake and realizes that his senses must be recalibrated to understand the emerging power of the earth.

I use a process to make my art that is very dependent on chance and decay. I consider using the kiln with non-ceramic material an act of making ruins. I know that there is always a chance that the walls I build to house liquid glaze or melting stone will fail to contain them, and that they could flow like lava into the inside of the kiln. I understand that the stones I place faith in to remain the foundations of a sculpture and fuse together via a flux may shatter or crumble, that leaks happen, and I cannot predict the results. To a certain extent, I rely on ruin happening in my process because when the pieces are fired, I need to be able to remove and combine broken parts to reveal the structure of the sculpture. The risk in ceramics, but more so the risk in my very experimental practice, lies in balancing the possibility of ruin with the potential for creation. Both exist, as do entropic and creative forces, within

the ceramic process. Sculptures like “Disinterred” illustrate this point well, and further lend themselves to removing geology and geological processes from the realm of the inanimate and the passive. This animacy and transformative power of the geological process is revealed through destruction, and in the final forms of my sculptures.

Lithotome

Monuments, monoliths, skeletons, and shrapnel breccia

*The self that takes the breath you take now is a compressed stone of silt
Formed of all of your other breaths*

they expand

then contract

*the distance between them fills more space than they themselves make up
a sum of all parts and a plasmic fragile fusion*

the light shines through your skin

You feel aphanite

*The self feels whole and promises growth
The whole feeds a future and a promise of expanding moments*

But the time between the breath you took then and the one you take now

Take now

Take now

Grows

*Each breath, the rhythmic lapilli of your lungs
Coats the space between itself and the breath before
Dissipates*

Your self, a lithotome

*"stone formed by natural processes in such a way that it appears to have been
artificially fashioned"*

Made of the same place from which all other things are made

Orogeny - the process by which mountains are created

Dictates an orientation of your atoms towards cohesion

And runs from the entropy and dark that bore witness to your first breaths

And bears witness to the one you take now

Take now

Subterranean Innerscape

lapis:

Latin (lat)

*(poetic) jewel, precious stone. Lapis Manalis in Latin "stone of manes" covers the gate of Hades or underworld.
A boundary stone.*

A milestone.

A statue.

A stone.

A stone platform at a slave auction.

Gravestone, tombstone.⁴⁷

Cave:

Cage, den, enclosure, stall, coop, beehive, birdcage.

Hollow, cavity.

The roof of the mouth.

The seats in a theatre.

The sockets of the eyes.⁴⁸

In the age of the coronavirus, I have begun taking a closer look at the role of the earth as a preserver or recorder of global conditions in history. While my ceramics practice has been largely suspended and my thesis show postponed due to the quarantine measures taken by the country during Covid-19, I'm taking this strange immeasurable timeframe to articulate the pull of inner and outer landscape through mixed media sculptures and prints. I'm using materials that erode or crumble, like unfired clay and porcelain, plaster, cement, stone, and dry media. I am also incorporating shards of unrealized ceramic sculptures that I have from my studio purge. The sculptures I am making now contain the residue of my own practice. During this period in human history, my work seems to be returning to the underground landscape I studied at the beginning of graduate school.



Figure 54: Sarah Knight, "Quarantine Cairn Installation," dimensions variable, stone, steel, glaze, plaster, concrete, pigment, 2020

The research I did on the role of time, recording, and the geological underground is reemerging under a different visual narrative. From Plato's cave, birth from the womb, or hell— the subterranean world is related to human origins and trauma. But it is also relegated to feminine, the keeper, and the guardian. We bury what we want to preserve in geologic time – people, memories, weapons, histories, secrets. What is buried unintentionally is considered lost, and sometimes what is exhumed is “discovered” as if for the first time. The subterranean is the timeless unknown despite our deepest mining of its resources. It is also the place of some of our greatest moments of global intentional amnesia. We bury nuclear waste in remote places and civilizations under rubble.

In the introduction to his book *Why Hell Stinks of Sulfur: Mythology and Geology of the Underworld*, Salomon Kroonenberg says that he understands why people study the cosmos so much more extensively than our subterranean universe. “Heaven is transparent and the Earth is not. Evolution has not given us eyes that allow us to see through rock. And in the darkness, people get scared.”⁴⁹ Maybe we are capitalizing on this fear of the primordial unknown to keep our most important things safe from ourselves. In the darkness or in the age of disorientation we are currently living through, people dizzy themselves searching for a landmark or a precedent by which to locate themselves. There are none. Historical parallels should be taken with a grain of salt because whether time is cyclical or linear, it is not a matter of what time we are given, but what to do with the time that is given to us.⁵⁰ Coronavirus and the subterranean both run on a timescale we can't comprehend but are negotiating with all the same, and my art is becoming reflective of that.

I am informally calling my current work in plaster and concrete mixed media “quarantine cairns,” (Figure 54) but they also resemble core samples of an otherworldly excavation. I see a strong pull between the inner and outer layers of my sculptures; the layers sink into each other or fall away to reveal hidden spaces. The sculptures require a close physical presence to be fully explored, but something inside of them is always hidden from view or partially submerged even close. The added distance of quarantine further obscures these moments from anyone looking for them, which speaks to the digital observation we are forced to see the world through. These sculptures record my way of moving through a quarantined life filled with ambiguity around visibility and space, exploring what gets recorded and shown or hidden and buried.

I pigment the plaster with a combination of powdered paints, dyes, and inks that slowly change color as the piece sets. Embedded in many of the pieces are found and eroded limestone pieces that have crystals, bubbled surfaces, and crumbling pits. I found these pieces of stone along the Huzzah River, and they once belonged to the

inside walls of the numerous limestone caves in the area. They are brightly colored cylindrical sculptures in which the underside and surface seem to flow between each other. “Cairn I/Geophagia” (Figures 55 & 56) was a light pink color when I first removed it from its mold. Once completely dry, it turned a near neon red. These otherworldly colors may provoke fascination, but their bright hue seems to signal a warning.



Figures 55 & 56: Sarah Knight, “Cairn I/Geophagia,” 11” x 9” Plaster, rocks, pigment, sand, aggregate, 2020.

These new cairn pieces are serving as landmarks and a record of my time in quarantine. Their bright colors urgently signal the anxiety and unfamiliarity that I’m not alone in feeling. In each, I am exploring a different conceptual and material idea related to recording and excavation. In “Cairn II/Fuscia Fossil” (Figures 57 & 58), I embedded folded unfired porcelain sheets into wet plaster. Once the plaster dried, I picked the porcelain away to reveal the imprint of the folds inside the plaster. The papery folding of the porcelain was semi-preserved, (Figure 58) and I was able to see the erosion caused by combining an ephemeral material (porcelain) with a more durable one. Now that my ceramics process has been suspended I have become more driven to manipulate residue and the temporal nature of my art in quarantine.

So much of history is inscribed on the surface of the earth; the landforms past and present that dictated the movement of our ancestors and our evolution. A map of the eruptions, chasms, islands, mountains, climate impacts. However, what lies underground connotes something very different from the epic nature of the highest peaks and the wilderness exploring, colonization, or migration that colors human history books. What lies fully underneath the earth has been both mythologized and made into metaphor in ugly terms. Hell lives underground, symbolized with

caves of lava, brimstone, darkness and punishment. Our contemporary selves reflect on our anthropocene impact with words like “geotraumatism,”⁵¹ When we add the layer of gendered understandings of the earth, the feminine orifice a cave has long symbolized, the place of origins and birth, it’s easier to understand why thinking of the subterranean world as a dark, oppressive, punishing, terrifying place affects our understandings of gender dynamics. My new graduate work, while it did not culminate in a thesis exhibition, is a display of a gentle excavatory practice that I’m developing to respond to current dialogue around burial, memorial, record, and the underground. I’m taking this strange immeasurable timeframe to articulate the pull of inner and outer landscape, or the visible and the invisible.



Figures 57 & 58: Sarah Knight, “Cairn II/Fuscia Fossil,” 13” x 16” Plaster, concrete, aggregate, pigment, porcelain, ink, 2020.

How can I connect our inner worlds with the subterranean world? I need to subvert the ideas of a frightening subterranean world and queer concepts of burial and a return to geology. I think this is especially crucial in the moment we are living through; our impact on the earth is becoming clear and defining the way we think about ourselves as a species. I believe there is so much to be learned from a return to the earth, but there is a need to reconsider our associations with it before we are ready to descend.

Conclusion

In the duration of my MFA, my art has reflected my drive to align the of a queered notion of existence with geological forces and the landscape. My research has led me into the gendered histories of the earth, creation mythology, and labor. I have developed ceramic mixed-media sculptures that reflect my understanding of material and process as the philosophical and physical presence of queer becomings. Whether we are aware of it or not, our personal narratives and relationship to the earth is colored by these histories. My investigation of it through material and poetic means is a further mythologization of the queer presence that lies hidden between fragments. I believe that queering the notion of creating a self-identity in Western society helps better interrogate the means by which we ascribe value to ourselves and the world around us. A reorientation towards the omnipresence of the geological world could be the key to reordering the hierarchies of gender and identity.

Appendix

“Horizon”

All the mantras we fall back on are slipping now

“Life is long”

“It could be worse”

“Change is good”

“This will make us stronger”

None of these are true anymore, nor are they certain. They’re bitter where they were once lightening, and more acidic the closer the pandemic hits to home.

The air is warm and damp. It feels too much like another body we are supposed to avoid, but it’s in our lungs and on our skin, particulate. The wind shifts and brings with it a new layer of vulnerability. The rain doesn’t cleanse things like it always seemed to before

Things have slipped, and our words have tumbled down with them.

This isn’t the time for naming and claiming pain and trauma. This is a gash that every single person on the planet will share, it’s not one we will be able to hide, and not one we will be able to force to heal. This is one that will keloid, will mark like a tally or a compass the way it changed us all together. This is one that we will run our fingers over, like braille, to try and read the things we couldn’t speak about it.

I’m not an empath but the weight of the losses of the world are thick around me when I sit with them too long. Poetics like silver linings and acts of kindness are too delicate to survive the weight of the numbers and projections. We don’t live in the same world we lived in when this year started, and whatever it would have been is lost to us. Whatever wishes we cast for what we might have had, planned to have, hoped to have, all are poured back into our fingers like sand and it slips through. The mountains we were building have been shaken into dust. We stand in a stark, bare landscape where the horizon, where the future, looks exactly the same in every direction. There are no landmarks to follow, and no trace of the lives we built. There are no ruins to flush out with memory, because nothing has been destroyed. It just isn’t, anymore.

We can’t walk forward with eyes level to the horizon. The horizon line circles us indefinitely, a predatory marker of the future. It contracts around us and becomes the razor wire of our confinement. There is no point on this line that tells us where to go. The sky above is a searing blue, but there is no sun.

Look down, at the dust at your feet. The piles of sand where everything we built disintegrated becomes our new ground. There are paths worn into the earth, stones polished slippery smooth. They wind their way between the columns of sand, they stretch out like the fingers of lightning from behind you all the way to the horizon before you. These muted, packed-earth trails are the paths of the rest of us, of all of us. Of every life that has been, is now, and will be, as we walked in our empty, post-cataclysmic landscapes. The paths you will follow were made by someone else, have been polished by the feet of the lost but alive, and will be patinaed by your own steps when you finally move forward.

The path you take you will follow has been taken before, no matter which one you choose. Keep going. The horizon will never get closer, and it will never curve. There will never be an interruption in the line, and you will never arrive. But the path you are on will give you more and more the farther you go.

First, the sand becomes gravel, and your steps will turn from hissing to crunching. Still, you will see nothing new. The line, the eternal line, will be burned into your closed eyes if you look at it, so look down. Watch the path, look at how each pebble dances with its neighbor when the weight of your foot makes a ripple in the surface. Watch each grain of gravel tumble eagerly into the indent of your footprint as you pass. Listen to the grind of stone on stone as your presence presses pebbles into each other, compacts them and scatters them in a joyfully chiming dance. Know that you have left a mark and that the earth has recorded it.

Next, the gravel becomes stones, round or bumpy but all smaller than your fist. The sand and the gravel fill the pits of their hollows, cradle their weight on the surface of your path. Your foot presses them into the fine-grained silt, and you hear the squeak of compressed sand on stone. The earth feels firmer now, and you feel heavier with each step. Gravity bears down on you all the same, but the earth gives less under your weight.

Now you smell something in the damp of the air. It's a smell from before the time of sickness, when the heaviness of warm air was the prelude to a storm and you welcomed it. Before the time of masks and fear of a cloying, invisible threat. The smell of wet earth rises up from your path, races up your neck and into your hair. This is the smell of puddles in the street after a night storm in summer, before the tangy exhaust of cars on their morning commute. This is the smell of patchwork concrete and grit at the edge of the river, where the rocks from the earth and the rocks that humans made come together to greet each other, to tell their stories, and to be eroded gratefully by the rushing water. This is the first thing you can smell that you do not cover your nose to. This is the earth welcoming you on your path.

Then, the sand, gravel, and stones lead you through a field of rocks, not much larger than the stones but so much more jagged. They sing in sudden *cracks* and *tings*, brittle sharp edges smacking each other as you displace them from the silt. Here, you must watch your step to balance yourself. The meeting of the slick edges of these rocks causes you to slip, the ground to give way in miniature, and your feet to slide back suddenly. You feel as though each step were falling slightly behind you with the sliding you're fighting against. But the idea of being late for a place you can never arrive is absurd, so you dutifully move forward, letting the rocks play with you, drag you back, sideways. From between the edges of these sharp rocks the sand, gravel, and smooth stones laugh at your progress. They crunch and crackle, jostled by your clumsy movement. The path you are leaving will speak to the world of your laboring body in an ocean of rock, learning to scramble where you were only taught to walk. Your hands become your tools here, to brace you and guide you where your feet and your vision lose their way.

Here, suddenly you can touch.

Notes

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- ¹ Crampton, Jeremy W., and Stuart Elden. *Space, Knowledge and Power: Foucault and Geography*. London: Routledge, 2016. Page 310.
- ² Marini, Guillermo, “A Primordial Sense of Art,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 50, no. 1 (2016): 46–61.
- ³ Percy Williams Bridgman, *The Nature of Thermodynamics*, 2013. Page 69.
- ⁴ Rebecca Varley-Winter, “Reading Fragments and Fragmentation: What Do Fragments Want?” (Lecture, University of Cambridge, 2014).
- ⁵ “Queer Word Origin,” Etymologeek, accessed April 25, 2020, <https://etymologeek.com/eng/queer>.
- ⁶ Here, I am using the definition of artifice as “deceptive,” because it connotes a form of trickery that many queer-identified (gender or otherwise) individuals are seen as proliferating.
- ⁷ “Definition of LAPILLUS.” Accessed April 19, 2020. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/lapillus>.
- ⁸ “Definition of ZENITH.” Accessed April 19, 2020. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/zenith>.
- ⁹ “Definition of NADIR.” Accessed April 19, 2020. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nadir>.
- ¹⁰ See Appendix
- ¹¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).
- ¹² Percy Williams Bridgman, *The Nature of Thermodynamics*, 2013. Page 69.
- ¹³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013). Page 50.
- ¹⁴ Robert Smithson and Jack D. Flam, *Robert Smithson, the Collected Writings*, The Documents of Twentieth-Century Art (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). Page 111.
- ¹⁵ “Humus | Origin and Meaning of Humus by Online Etymology Dictionary,” accessed April 8, 2020, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/humus>.
- ¹⁶ Solnit, Rebecca. 2003. *As Eve said to the serpent: on landscape, gender, and art*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press. Page 155.
- ¹⁷ Dana Goodyear, “A Monument to Outlast Humanity,” *The New Yorker*, accessed April 26, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/08/29/michael-heizers-city>.
- ¹⁸ ARTnews, The Editors of, and The Editors of ARTnews. “‘There’s No Understanding of My Work’: Michael Heizer on His Monumental Art, in 1977.” *ARTnews.Com* (blog), June 26, 2015. <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/retrospective/theres-no-understanding-of-my-work-michael-heizer-on-his-monumental-art-in-1977-4398/>.

¹⁹ “Camstl_corday.” Accessed April 17, 2020. https://christinecorday.com/camstl_corday.html.

²⁰ Solnit, Rebecca. *As Eve Said to the Serpent: on Landscape, Gender, and Art*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2003. Page 152.

²¹ Stuart L. Charmé, *Meaning and Myth in the Study of Lives: A Sartrean Perspective* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984). Pages 149-150.

²² Crampton, Jeremy W., and Stuart Elden. *Space, Knowledge and Power: Foucault and Geography*. London: Routledge, 2016. Page 310.

²³ Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (London: Penguin, 2006).

²⁴ The title references this quote by Gilles Deleuze: “[an] infinite fold separates or moves between matter and soul, the façade and the closed room, the outside and the inside. Because it is a virtuality that never stops dividing itself, the line of inflection is actualized in the soul but realized in matter, each on its own side.” Deleuze, Gilles. *The Fold*. London: Continuum, 2006. Page 35.

²⁵ Didi-Huberman, Georges. 2011. *Atlas, or The Anxious Gay Science*. Chicago and London. University of Chicago Press. Page 9.

²⁶ *Ibid.* Page 4.

²⁷ “Atlas.” Accessed April 11, 2020. <https://www.greekmythology.com/Titans/Atlas/atlas.html>.

²⁸ Didi-Huberman, Georges. 2011. *Atlas, or The Anxious Gay Science*. Chicago and London. University of Chicago Press. Page 4.

²⁹ Heuristics is defined as the methods of enabling someone to learn about and find something for themselves and is a different and more engaging form of interpreting knowledge that leaves room for the imagination, unlike an encyclopedic or reiterative method.

³⁰ Foucault, Michael. 1966. *The Order of Things*. London, England. Pantheon Books, Page 755.

³¹ Foucault, Michael. “Of Other Spaces.” Translated by Jay Miskowiec. *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1984): 22. <https://doi.org/10.2307/464648>.

³² See Appendix

³³ Solnit, Rebecca. *As Eve Said to the Serpent: on Landscape, Gender, and Art*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2003. Page 51.

³⁴ *ibid.* Page 52.

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ Gender and sex are two different means of identifying that should not be confused. My paper focuses primarily on gender, which is the “gendered” identity people choose to play within society (man, woman, Genderqueer, Transfeminine, Agender, etc.) as it pertains to the spectrum of gender identities. Sex refers to the biological determination of the body’s genitalia upon birth (of which there are more than two, but outside the “male” and “female” are unfortunately lumped into one large category of “intersex.”), which is not determinate of the gender of a person. Gender and sex of an individual are often unrelated and can change independently of each other.

³⁷ “Rightfully applied” referring not to “gay/lesbian” but encompassing sexuality, gender, and all non-normative identity functioning as abnormal within a binarist-driven culture.

³⁸ Phaidon. “Liz Larner - Why I Create | Art | Agenda.” Accessed April 16, 2020. <https://www.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2018/january/15/liz-larner-why-i-create/>.

³⁹ www.dictionary.com. “Definition of Caesura | Dictionary.Com.” Accessed April 17, 2020. <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/caesura>.

⁴⁰ “Latin Definition for: Caedo, Caedere, Caecidi, Caesus (ID: 7280) - Latin Dictionary and Grammar Resources - Latdict.” Accessed April 17, 2020. <https://latin-dictionary.net/definition/7280/caedo-caedere-caecidi-caesus>.

⁴² Excerpt from studio notes

⁴³ CFile - Contemporary Ceramic Art + Design. “Clay | Heather Cassils’ Becoming An Image,” November 8, 2013. <https://cfileonline.org/clay-heather-cassils-becoming-image/>.

⁴⁴ Etymologeek. “Ruin Word Origin.” Accessed April 17, 2020. <https://etymologeek.com/eng/ruin>.

⁴⁵ “In the Beginning There Was Not: A Tisha B’Av Reflection | HuffPost,” accessed April 19, 2020, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/in-the-beginning-there-was-not_b_1703387.

⁴⁶ Michel Serres, *Nouvelles du monde*. Paris: Flammarion, 2014. Pages 57-62.

⁴⁷ “Lapillus Word Origin,” Etymologeek, accessed April 23, 2020, <https://etymologeek.com/lat/lapillus>.

⁴⁸ “Cavea Word Origin,” Etymologeek, accessed April 8, 2020, <https://etymologeek.com/lat/cavea>.

⁴⁹ Salomon Kroonenberg, *Why Hell Stinks of Sulfur: Mythology and Geology of the Underworld* (Reaktion Books, 2013). Page 7.

⁵⁰ Tolkien, John Ronald Reuel. *The Hobbit and the Lord of the Rings*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1994.

⁵¹ Robert Macfarlane, *UNDERLAND: A Deep Time Journey*. (S.l.: W W NORTON, 2020). Page 113.

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