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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

LOCATION/DISLOCATION: TEMPORAL ENVIRONMENTS

By

Erin Elizabeth Holscher

12-08-03

Approvals

Chief Advisor Keith Howard
(Please type)

(Signature)

Date: DEC. 12 - 03

Associate Advisor Eileen Feeney Bushnell
(Please type)

(Signature)

Date: 12-9-03

Associate Advisor Marnix Everaert
(Please type)

(Signature)

Date: 19-11-2003

Department Chairperson Don Arday
(Please type)

(Signature)

Date: 12/8/03 _____

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for my mom and dad

Table of Contents

Page

1	Introduction
2	Main Thesis Body
12	Conclusion
13	Endnotes
14	Bibliography
15	Plates (Figures)

“She woke and spread out the map on the floor. What was she looking for? Her skin was her own small ghost, a shroud to be dead in, a newspaper for old news to be read in, gift-wrapping, litter, a suicide letter. She left it there, dressed, checked out, got in the car. As she drove, the town in the morning glittered behind her. She ate up the miles. Her skin itched, like a rash, like a slow burn, felt stretched, as though it belonged to somebody else. Deep in the bone old streets tunneled and burrowed, hunting for home.”¹

The intent of this thesis was to create a body of work that explores concepts of location and dislocation, as they relate to my personal experience in transient places. This work is an investigation of the physical, emotional, and spiritual displacement felt when moving from place to place. The work culminates with the physical, emotional, and spiritual connectedness that I have to “place”, even as I move along. Using the human body and anatomy as a vantage point, I will explore human temporal relationships with place and environment. Human ephemeral existence and the transient places and environs humans inhabit are two elements that I want to visually investigate using non-toxic printmaking processes. My concepts are best served through a process partially of my own invention: the Pastel Wash Drawing Construction Intaglio-type, a non-toxic intaglio process that allowed me to merge my drawings with printmaking.

I will be referencing the work of Kiki Smith, particularly her investigations of the human body. The work of contemporary Boston-based painter Anne Harris has had a significant impact on my own conceptual growth, in her approach to the human figure and use of transparent forms. I am influenced and fascinated by the work of two contemporary writers, Sylvie Germain and Jeanette Winterson: Germain, for her poetic approach to writing about human physicality and the power

of place, and Winterson, for her use of the body as metaphor for environment, the body as landscape or sanctuary. Both writers approach the body in a raw and visceral manner. I will discuss influential artists and writers/philosophers and the relevance of my work in contemporary art. Mapping, narrative, displacement, and memory are integral concepts that inform and delineate this body of work.

Location/Dislocation: Temporal Environments is an exploration of the transient places and spaces we inhabit throughout our lives and how these places, no matter how fleetingly they are inhabited, become embedded in who we are. It is an exploration of the displaced sensations I have experienced as I leave one place for another. This thesis exhibition represents my experience with the cycle of settling, uprooting, leaving, and resettling: the experience of mapping my internal self through the places that I have called “home.”

I began my current artistic investigation by looking at the artists Kiki Smith, Anne Harris, and a piece by Jonathon Parsons, an artist who exhibited in the controversial “Sensation” show in New York City. Both Kiki Smith and Anne Harris confront the physicality of the human body, using veins and body parts as a metaphor for the human condition. The piece by Jonathan Parsons is a dissected map of his homeland, Great Britain, displayed in an acrylic box (Fig. 1). The dissected map becomes a displayed network of vein-like roads.²

Influential writers Jeannette Winterson and Sylvie Germain both write poetically of the raw and physical nature of human emotion and of the power of place. Germain’s fiction is comprised of characters whose

connections to place are deeply embedded in their being. In Germain’s **The Book of Tobias**, one character “might well have lived anywhere, in fact, on a raft, in a tree, out in the desert, in the heart of a city . . . She was so much an exile, and had so few needs. It did not so much matter to her where she ended up, she carried within her the land of her birth, of her childhood, of her ancestors.”²

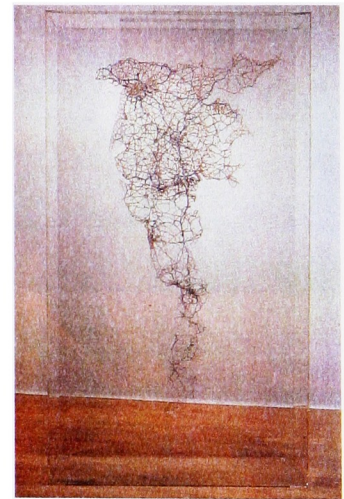


Fig. 1 Jonathan Parsons
Carcass, 1995
dissected map in acrylic case,
200x110x40 cm



Fig. 2, Kathy Prendergast
from *Body Map Series*, 1983
ink and watercolor

Throughout the exploration, I came across contemporary artists with whom I empathized. The relevance of mapping and narrative in contemporary art is something I related to on a personal level. Artists such as Kathy Prendergast (Fig. 2) and Lordy Rodriguez include mapping in their work as a device for exploring memory and displacement. For Prendergast, “it is the map that dominates her oeuvre, from her literal maps of cities, to her figurative maps of the female body, to her poetic mapping of the passing of time and beliefs.”³ Lordy Rodriguez’s “maps are often about places he’s been

and longs to return to.”⁵ Maine-based painter Dozier Bell sees “remote sensing technologies as exquisite corollaries of mental processes: map-making, reconnaissance, detection, destruction, and deliverance, are as applicable to psychological and spiritual life as they are to the global theaters of war.”⁶ Bell questions faith, divinity, creation, and destruction in her work (Fig. 3). The atmosphere and execution of Bell’s paintings influenced my own approach to environment. The philosopher Gaston Bachelard explores the power of places and intimate spaces. His book **The Poetics of Space** had some bearing on formulating my ideas about “home” into more concrete thoughts.

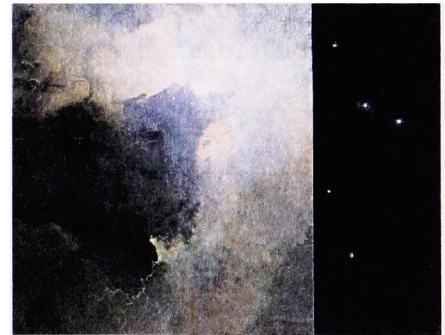


Fig. 3, Dozier Bell,
Map Study No. 2, 2000
acrylic on paper, 14x18"

My exploration was not just one of a development of concept and form, but also one of process. My body of work is comprised of construction intaglio-types, created from a body of pastel wash drawings on drafting mylar. The images are constructed of layers, giving the images transparency, texture, and layers of meaning. Some of the images are composed of two or more plates, breaking the image up into two or more panels. This division suggests dislocation through the physical separation of parts of a whole.



Fig. 4, *Epoch*, 24x27"

Epoch, the first in the body of work, marks the passing of time (Fig. 4). The three figures, which repeat throughout the body of work, represent lineage. The piece not only symbolizes an era in time, but a breakthrough as well. Epoch is the turning point in my use of process. The image draws on memory, lineage, and the transitory state of being. The first of the figures represents my grandmother, someone who has already passed on. Her physicality and spirit are referenced through two layers within the print. The middle figure represents my mother. The mother is divided, referring to my own divided feelings toward home. The last figure, seen in full but whose face is not yet fully formed, is a self-portrait: the figure recognizes the passing of time and embraces her lineage, but is still coming to terms with who she is.

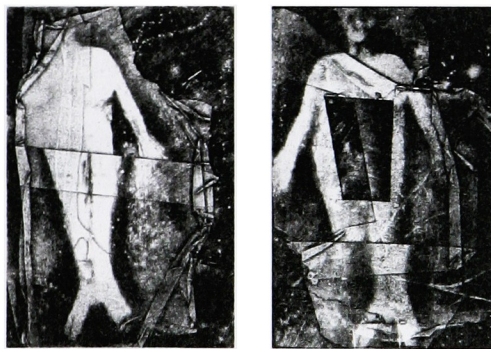


Fig. 5, *Beacon*, 6x4" each

The diptych *Beacon* and the image *Cold Comfort*, like *Epoch*, also allude to lineage and the passing of time. *Beacon* (Fig. 5) represents my grandmother-someone who has passed on and whose deep spirituality and goodness serve as a guide for my own actions and spirituality. The diptych serves as a literal passage, or transition, from one panel to another: the transition from physical to spiritual. The light that shines through the window is the beacon that guides. The unformed face

appears in *Beacon*, this time representing a loss of being. The celestial background suggests the heavens and transcendence, a theme that is seen within other images in this body of work. *Cold Comfort* depicts, more directly, the passing of time through mortality. This image (Fig. 6) portrays three female figures all contained within their own house shapes. The houses seem coffin-like in their verticality and in their containment of the figures. Although the house represents comfort and security, the coffin-like quality of the houses gives the image an unsettling psychological torque. The title also has personal different meanings: the first is the literal definition of cold comfort, meaning lack of comfort. The second refers to my upbringing in a physically cold region. The nature of my “home” and source of comfort and security is a cold place.

“Winter is by far the oldest of the seasons. Not only does it confer age upon our memories, taking us back to a remote past but, on snowy days, the house too is old. It is as though it were living in the past of centuries gone by.”⁷



Fig. 6, *Cold Comfort*, 12x18"

The ambiguous figures represent the multitude of human experience. The figures may represent three different individuals or one individual's progression. If the image is read from right to left or from left to right, it could be interpreted to be one individual's gradual connectedness or disconnectedness to place. The roads evoke veins, as they connect to one figure's hands and run along the leg and through the torso of another figure. The roads, which repeat throughout the body of work, allude to roads in North Dakota, South Dakota, and Minnesota, particularly the place of my birth and where my family resides.

The next set of images explores concepts of identity, impermanence, dislocation, and transcendence. *Dollhouse Nostalgia I* and *Dollhouse Nostalgia II* (Fig. 7 and 8), express a deeply personal sense of dislocation. The title draws from my childhood memories of my dollhouse. The child's dollhouse sets the stage for the child's interpretations of home, security, and comfort. I drew from one particular memory of my dollhouse being thrown out as I prepared to move to a new city and home with my family. The casting aside of the dollhouse represented a personal sense of dislocation: a transition from childhood into young adulthood, and of uprooting, leaving, and establishing a new foundation. This is my memory of my first sense of displacement. The figures question their identity and search for a sense of place: place within environment and feeling at "home" with themselves. The nostalgia is for that of protection and security, not for childhood.

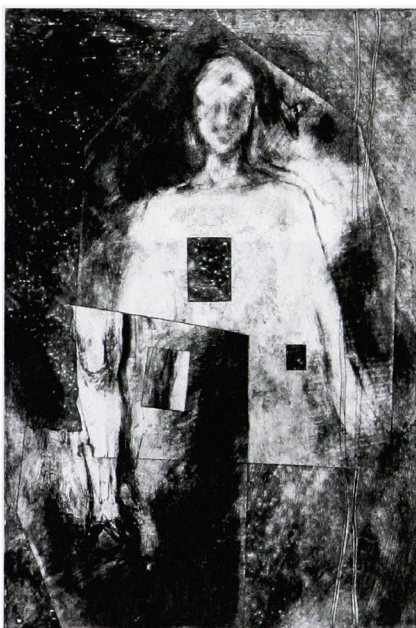


Fig. 7, *Dollhouse Nostalgia I*. 18x12"

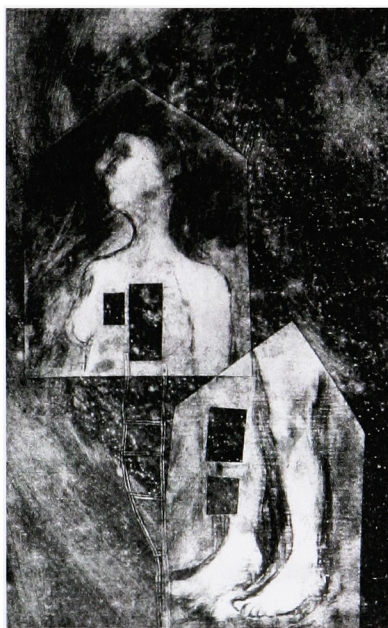


Fig. 8, *Dollhouse Nostalgia*, 18x10.25"

The house and figure reappear, but in fragmented forms. The atmosphere within the two pieces is symbolic of snow, referencing my home. This snowy atmosphere is seen throughout this body of images. The snow sweeps throughout the picture planes of both prints, promoting an unsettling, blizzard-like movement. "And so, faced with the bestial hostility of the storm and the hurricane, the housed virtues of protection and resistance are transposed into human virtues. The house acquires the physical and moral energy of a human body."⁸ In *Dollhouse Nostalgia I*, the figure

faces the viewer directly, but lacks facial definition. The ambiguous nature of this figure represents someone still trying to understand and feel at home with herself, or is a representation of the passing of time and the fleeting nature of home and relationships. This piece suggests an impermanence of structure: of relationships, of home, of security, and of being. The figure passively confronts the viewer with her lack of facial formation.

Dollhouse Nostalgia II depicts a female figure whose face is more fully formed. The figure is fragmented and partially contained within fragments of a house form. Linear elements that reference roads pertaining to my childhood home construct a ladder-like foundation that supports the house containing the woman's face and bust. This woman's more fully formed face and cast outward gaze suggest that she perceives change. Her feet, although firmly planted on the ground, are disconnected from her head and shoulders. Although she is disconnected, she faces the storm outside the house. This figure seemingly has a stronger sense of self and place.

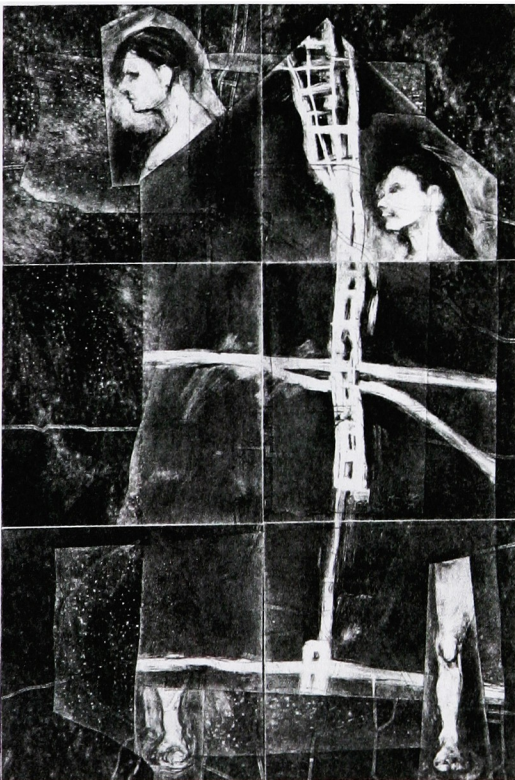


Fig. 9, *The Architect's Sorrow*, 24x16"

The Architect's Sorrow (Fig. 9) is based on the impermanence of structure. Structure becomes a metaphor for two basic ideas: relationships and home. The "architect" may be interpreted in a few ways; the architect is the father, the maker, the originator, the planner, etc. A pair of feet, at either end of the bottom of the house, serves as the foundation of this structure. Lines referring to specific places are also apparent within the layers, referencing places that I have called home. These lines, as they run beneath the house and the figures, retain a vein-like quality, which emphasizes the physical connection we have with our environment. The evocation of veins and the transparent nature of the material is something I have strived to utilize within

my own work, having seen the work of Boston-based artist Anne Harris. *First Portrait with Max*, by Harris, is a strong example of Harris' treatment of the figure and what lies beneath (Fig. 10). The network of blue veins that shows beneath stretched, pregnant skin embellishes the raw physicality of the image. In *The Architect's Sorrow*, the central road line that creates a division within the house has a spine-like quality, symbolizing the dichotomy of strength and vulnerability. The home and the relationship are at this point seemingly stable, yet the image suggests that the male figure may be searching for something outside of his immediate environment.

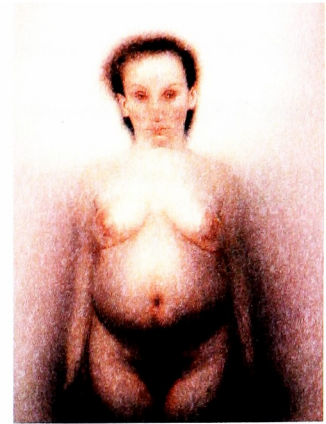


Fig. 10, Anne Harris
First Portrait with Max, 1996-97
oil on canvas, 44x30"

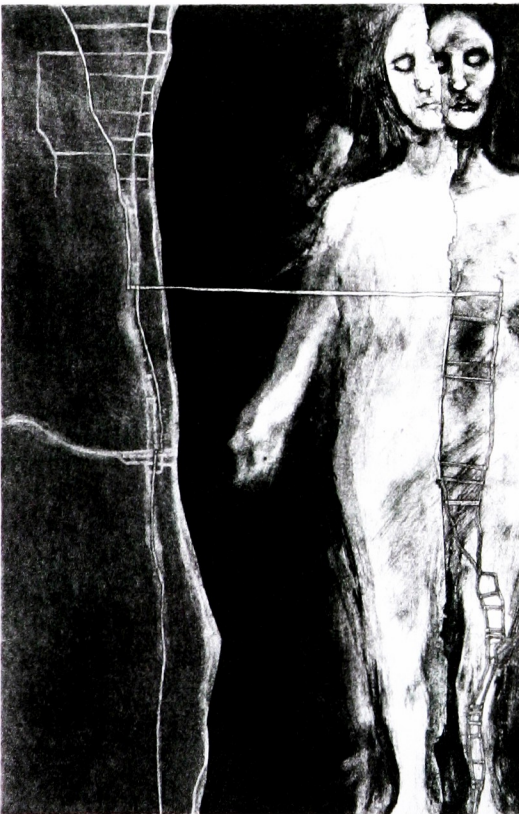


Fig. 11, *Train*, 28x17.75"

Train is an image that portrays my emotional connection to my homeland. The idea of the Midwest as the "heartland" is referenced through linear elements that connect a female figure to a map. The figure is divided and dislocated suggesting dichotomies that we find within ourselves. In *Train*, this division implies a physical disconnection and emotional connection to a place of origin and upbringing (Fig. 11). The figure's stance is one of acceptance, a stance that also can be seen in connection with religion, thus suggesting my Catholic upbringing. Linear elements connect the bottom panel to the figure in the top plate. The lines are reminiscent of the roads in that particular geographic location, at the same time that they could be veins,

ladders, or train tracks, icons of the Midwestern landscape. The suggestion of veins reminds the viewer of how our environment affect us not only emotionally, but physically as well.



Motherland gives homage to my Midwestern home (Fig. 12). Housed within the small plate is the head and neck of a female figure, whose downcast gaze rests upon the large panel below. The atmosphere is suggestive of the sweeping winds and tumultuous snowstorms commonplace in the Midwest. The housed female, although tiny in contrast to the aerial view of the plains, calms the sweeping tumult of the larger panel. The darker lines referencing my childhood home imply a disconnection between figure and location. The housed figure is also the mother and the mapmaker, looking down upon something that is a part of her even as she moves beyond it. The house symbolizes the

same virtues as a mother: comfort, security, and protection.

The last set of images investigates ideas of location and dislocation, and of “home” and its associations. *Memory Maps* was created from the same response to process as *Epoch*. The series embodies my intuitive response to personal location and dislocation. The series (Fig. 13-15) contains twelve separate images, each constructed of fragments of maps. The maps are drawn from my memory of places that have been home to me. Each map contains a window to the map beneath it, alluding to house or home. Each map is an intimate memory, printed and housed alone, but subtly embossed to create a connective network between each map.

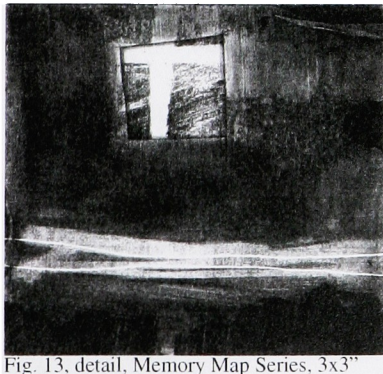


Fig. 13, detail, Memory Map Series, 3x3"

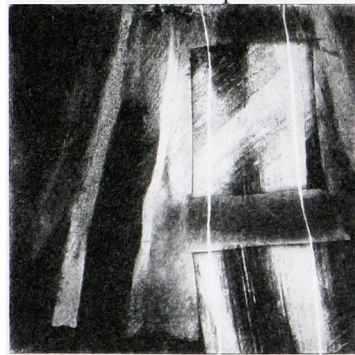


Fig. 14, 3x3"



Fig. 15, view of installed *Memory Map Series*
Bevier Gallery, Rochester Institute of Technology

42.358°N, 71.060°W (Location/Dislocation) is a triptych (Fig. 16-18) referencing a specific place in relation to feelings of location and dislocation. In the first panel (Fig. 16), a female figure is contained in the house. Throughout this series, the house serves as a metaphor for a variety of ideas. In this panel, the house is a metaphor for the body as home. In **Disappearance II**, a short story by Jeanette Winterson, one androgynous character has isolated herself/himself from the outside world, practically becoming a physical part of her/his own home.

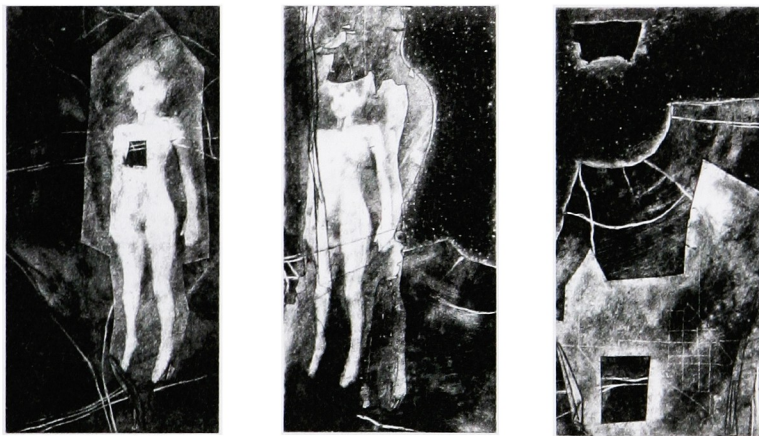


Fig. 16, 17, and 18
42.358°N, 71.060°W (Location/Dislocation), 12x6"

“Nevertheless, it is my house in winter that I love, my house clipped and silent, and me its master. You will understand that I do not trouble myself with covering up the furniture or shutting up the fireplaces. Others do that. Room by room the house is quieted for the winter, until only I am its beating heart. Only I, the rise and fall of its lungs, the house and I breathing together in the night.”⁹

42.358°N, 71.060°W (*Location/Dislocation*) references not only a physical sense of location/dislocation, but also an emotional attachment to and detachment from a specific city. In the first panel, the house is more complete and whole. The house is absent from the figure in the second panel (Fig. 17), suggesting a lack of “home”, then reappears in a strange, fragmented form in the third panel (Fig. 18) absent of the female figure that appeared in the first two panels. This suggests a loss within myself, or a lack of feeling at home with myself, after leaving this city. Sylvie Germain, in a passage from “The Weeping Woman on the Streets of Prague”, writes “Cities, like bodies, have their smell, their skin.”¹⁰ This passage profoundly expresses not only the emotional, but also the physical power of place.

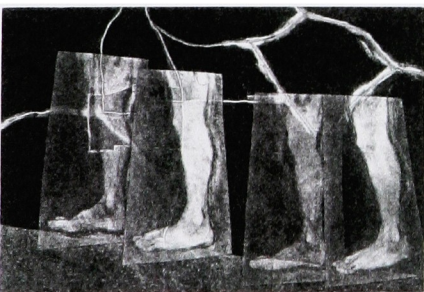
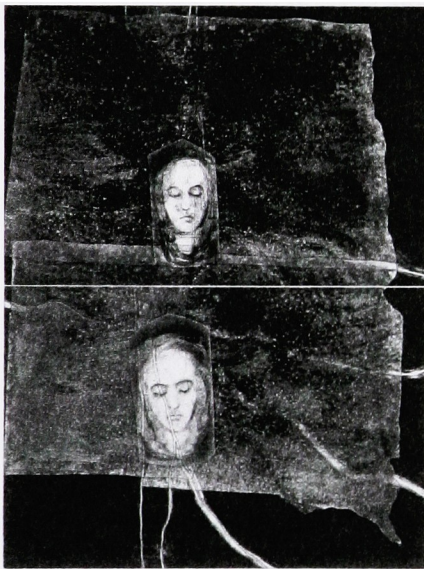


Fig. 19, *Passage*, 37.75x18"

Passage (Fig. 19) is a culmination of all the ideas previously discussed. The bottom of the three plates is distanced from the first two, but visually connected by linear elements that run through all three plates. Aside from the bottom layer of road lines, the two top plates in *Passage* contain shapes that reference North Dakota and South Dakota. A strand of film following a central road line connects two heads that are contained within shapes reminiscent of grain silos, which are associated with the Midwestern landscape. The faces have an ominous, sorrowful quality. The bottom plate contains two pairs of feet, which are disconnected from the body, but are walking across the landscape which spans the bottom third of the plate. These pairs of feet are also connected to the top plates by the road lines and the connecting strands of film. The piece uses the concept of passage to explore many ideas: the passing from one place to another, the path by which a person travels,

and the passing of time. Location is suggested by the abstract references to state boundaries and roads, while dislocation is apparent through the disconnectedness of the heads and

feet to any other body parts. The influence of New York-based artist Kiki Smith can be seen in *Passage*. Smith's use of physically detached limbs in pieces such as *Nuit* (Fig. 20) shaped my own use of disconnected body parts to imply an inner dislocation.



Fig. 20. Kiki Smith, *Nuit*, 1993
anodized aluminum, bronze, and mohair

“Even if one’s history there is short, a place can still be felt as an extension of the body, especially the walking body, passing through and becoming part of the landscape. Michael Martone is eloquent about his sensuous identification with the Midwest: ‘The Midwest is too big to be seen (as the Heartland) . . . I think of it more as a web of tissue, a membrane, a skin. And the way I feel about the Midwest is the way my skin feels and the way I feel about my own skin . . . the Midwest is hide, an organ of sense and not power, delicate and coarse at the same time.’”¹¹

My intent was to create a body of work that is as conceptually riveting as it is visually captivating and technically excellent. The discovery of a new process, in addition to a strong oeuvre, highlights the success of this thesis exploration. The pastel wash drawings teamed with the construction intaglio-type allowed for a natural transition from drawing to print. This technique also permitted me to work more intuitively with the materials. The layers, textures, and translucency achieved with this process best served my original concept. Conceptually, the images work individually and as a body. The images independently express either a sense of place or displacement: each of the pieces included in this body of work evoke a distinct sensation of location or dislocation, of being at home or not at home. Each of the images is as important as the next and each contributes wholly to the dynamics of a strong and cohesive oeuvre.

Endnotes

- ¹ Duffy, Carol Ann. "The Map-Woman." Feminine Gospels (New York: Faber and Faber, Inc., 2002). p.7
- ² Rosenthal, Norman. Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1997) p. 203
- ³ Germain, Sylvie. The Book of Tobias (United Kingdom: Dedalus, Ltd., 1998). p.144-145
- ⁴ Mahon, Alyce. "Charting the Familiar: Kathy Prendergast: The End and the Beginning." Make, 28 March/May 2000, no. 87.
- ⁵ Roland, Craig. "Six Contemporary Artists Who Use Maps in Their Work." www.artjunction.org. Jan. 2002.
- ⁶ Bell, Dozier. "Divinity and Devastation: Images of Heimsuchung." www.dozierbell.com. July, 2001
- ⁷ Bachelard, Gaston. Poetics of Space (New York: The Orion Press, 1964. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994). p. 41
- ⁸ Bachelard p. 46
- ⁹ Winterson, Jeannette. "Disappearance II." The World and Other Places (New York: Vintage Books, 1998). P. 119.
- ¹⁰ Germain, Sylvie. The Weeping Woman on the Streets of Prague (United Kingdom: Dedalus, Ltd., 1993). P. 35
- ¹¹ Lippard, Lucy. The Lure of the Local (New York: New Press, 1997). P. 34

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- Winterson, Jeannette. "Disappearance II." The World and Other Places. New York: Vintage Books, 1998. p. 119.

Plates (Figures)

- Fig. 1: Jonathan Parsons, *Carcass*, 1995, dissected map in acrylic case, 200x110x40 cm
Rosenthal, Norman. Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection. London:
Royal Academy of Arts, 1997. p. 135
- Fig. 2: Kathy Prendergast, from *Body Map* Series, 1983, ink and watercolor
www.academic.hsu.edu, Laughter Ten Years After, Electronic Exhibition Catalog
- Fig. 3: Dozier Bell, *Map Study No. 2*, 2000, acrylic on paper, 14x18", www.dozierbell.com
- Fig. 4: Erin Holscher, *Epoch*, 2002, Pastel Wash Drawing Construction Intaglio-type, 24x27"
- Fig. 5: Holscher, *Beacon*, 2003, Pastel Wash Drawing Construction Intaglio-type, 6x4" each
- Fig. 6: Holscher, *Cold Comfort*, 2003, Pastel Wash Drawing Construction Intaglio-type, 12x18"
- Fig. 7: Holscher, *Dollhouse Nostalgia I*, 2003, Pastel Wash Drawing Construction Intaglio-type, 18x12"
- Fig. 8: Holscher, *Dollhouse Nostalgia II*, 2003, Pastel Wash Drawing Construction Intaglio-type,
18x10.25"
- Fig. 9: Holscher, *The Architect's Sorrow*, 2003, Pastel Wash Drawing Construction Intaglio-type,
24x16"
- Fig.10: Anne Harris, *First Portrait with Max*, 1996-97, oil on canvas, 44x30"
York, Jay. Anne Harris. Boston: Nielsen Gallery, Amherst: Oxbow Press, 1997.
- Fig.11: Holscher, *Train*, 2003, Pastel Wash Drawing Construction Intaglio-type, 28x17.75"
- Fig.12: Holscher, *Motherland*, 2003, Intaglio-type, liquid aquatint, 37.75x23.75"
- Fig.13: Holscher, from *Memory Map* Series, 2002, Pastel Wash Drawing Construction
Intaglio-type, 3x3"
- Fig.14: Holscher, from *Memory Map* Series, 2002, Pastel Wash Drawing Construction
Intaglio-type, 3x3"
- Fig.15: Holscher, view of installed *Memory Map* Series, Bevier Gallery, Rochester Institute of
Technology
- Fig. 16-18: Holscher, *42.358°N, 71.060°W (Location/Dislocation)*, 2003, Pastel Wash Drawing
Construction Intaglio-type, 12x6" each
- Fig. 19: Holscher, *Passage*, 2003, Pastel Wash Drawing Construction Intaglio-type, 37.75x18"
- Fig. 20: Kiki Smith, *Nuit*, 1993, anodized aluminum, bronze, and mohair
Posner, Helaine. Kiki Smith. Boston, New York: Bulfinch Press, Little, Brown and
Company, 1998. p. 116