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Landing

by Rachel Smith

Graduate Thesis
Master of Fine Arts
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology

May 2000

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Landing

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preface

Before you is a curtain, a doorway above which is a small symbolic map inscribed on the wall with text that reads “You are here.” The ambiguity of this message implores you to open the curtains and cross the threshold to the chamber within. You enter a large, dimly lit room with warm glowing light. Thin lines of string, jutting out of the walls at various heights, cut across the space and converge to create transparent shapes and planes that visually continue beyond the floor. The floor itself is covered with an enlarged map, a life-size blueprint echoing the sign above the doorway which foretold “*you are here.*” The blueprint’s design is curiously familiar; referring both to an organic yet extremely controlled man-made “site”. Its bilaterally symmetrical layout is made up of curving rounded shapes outlined in white over a dark blue background. Paths, perhaps walkways, are implied in the positive/negative area between the shapes. Despite these suggested boundaries, you are allowed to wander all over the floor map as you choose. As you do so, small lights suspended from the ceiling illuminate like faint stars guiding your way.

Your attention is directed to a soft drone slowly crescendoing as a “window” of projected video imagery arises on the far wall in front of you. The sound continues to build into a rhythmic hum and encompasses you as it reverberates off the walls. A female voice emerges from the rhythm in a mantra-like tone saying: “I am the custodian, you are the service. I am an

attendant, you are the sanctuary. I am the cultivator, you are the plot. I transform, you remain constant. I rise and descend, you are the landing.”

The moving imagery shows a female figure dressed in plain uniform emerging from the opening of a dark tunnel or chamber. The view follows the subject walking through a series of exterior environments, generic landscapes, if you will, until she stops in a barren field to dig a hole and plant an apple into the soil. As the hole is then covered up again, she pats the earth in a slowed gesture of tenderness. The soil is then carefully watered, with attention focused on water dripping from the spout of a watering can. Suddenly the drips transform into small white balls dropping out of a hand. As they fall, they bounce and scatter onto a field of seemingly endless white light. Scale, context and time are forfeited as the balls roll, converge and repel off one another in a constant flow of motion. Eventually they reach the edge of the field-most of them hit it and ricochet back into the white space, while a scattered few are simply propelled forward and are sacrificed into the deep blackness which lies beyond.

For a few moments the room is dark once again until several startling flashes of light come from the projection as well as two additional monitors which are on each side wall. The perspective of the image has changed. The vantagepoint is now from the perspective of someone walking, looking down at her feet. The camera becomes the eyes of the “walker”- all that is seen are the feet rhythmically stepping one foot in front of the other as the subject

marches forward. The terrain on which she treads is blurred and abstracted by the motion drastically changing from one step to another.

On each side wall the imagery on the monitors shows passing landscapes—specifically fields of vegetation. On the right side, the vegetation is thick, green and lush; it is obvious that the crops have been carefully sown row after row after row for a particular type of agricultural industry. Across the room on the other side similar imagery passes by, but instead the vegetation here is sparse, emaciated, perhaps diseased, resembling a cemetery or field of swaying bodies. Both sides simulate peripheral vision as from the windows of a moving vehicle, with the walking within the front projection propelling the motion ever more forward. As the imagery passes by, the landscapes become more and more layered and obscured. The saturated colors fade to muted gray and the vegetation turns into abstracted lines moving up and down across the screen at tremendous speed. Here too, through repetition, distortion and layering, the voice takes the form of abstraction. What can be made out are only fragmentary phrases and terminology associated to definitions of landscape.

Eventually the image and sound fade to silence. After a few moments pause, the work begins its cycle again.

* * *

The experience you have come to is what I have entitled *Landing*. *Landing* is a search for balance; it is a point of departure and a destination; a resting-place and a state of mind, along the course of a personal journey.

“Apparently exterior, the true extension of any landscape traverses both the exterior and interior of the individual. In short, landscape is the link between our outer and inner selves.”¹ -Bill Viola

During the production of my thesis, my inquiry shifted from the politics of the female body as it has been contained, controlled and surveyed by patriarchal institutions, to an analysis of the ever-changing relationship of the human body to the built environment and the spaces it creates. This space, otherwise understood as “landscape,” is a notion which assumes a variety of associations. Today the word is used interchangeably as place, nature, view, property, scenery, or the improvement of an area of land. In all of its manifestations, landscape is the projection of culture, of who we are and the principles by which we live.

An assessment of the landscapes around us, however, reveals that the links between ourselves and the environment have become fragmented and disconnected, resulting in a system that alienates nature from consciousness and from being. As Susan Griffin says, “In the Western habit of mind, the earth is no longer enchanted with its own significance. A forest exists for lumber. Trees for oxygen. A field for grazing. Rocks for minerals. Water for irrigation. Inch by inch the earth is weighed and measured for its uses and in the process, the dimensions of the universe are narrowed.”²

My thesis has been a process of self-discovery, confrontation and reconciliation of the fragmented relationship between the body and landscape. My intention with this paper is to elucidate upon the personal

experiences, intellectual investigations, and artistic motivations that contributed to the production of *Landing*, my thesis exhibition.

experiences

A few years ago I had a curious dream where I envisioned myself as a kind of ethereal mass of organic energy permeating a space that was in turn passing through me. In this dream I was in a perpetual state of flux; somewhere between being and becoming, both large and small, at rest and in motion, floating and falling. I was in a place that was both internal and external; the distinction between my being and the environment around me was indecipherable. No physical boundary of skin separated me, nor delineated where my being ended and where “space” began. Rather, my essence was simply an extension of a larger life force; an integral part of an all encompassing living, breathing organism.

What this transcendent dream illustrated to me was the fact that I am just as much *a part* of my surroundings, my environment as it is *a part of me*. And that the world in which I live is based upon a dynamic and active interaction between nature and all living things. The health and stability of this interaction is determined by a crucial balance between its forces; when the system falls out of balance its viability becomes severely threatened.

With the message of this dream imprinted in my consciousness, I have begun to reconnect. I’ve begun to take notice of things that often go overlooked-

such as how the spirit of a place can be experienced in different ways and how our use and conception of land has changed over time. These narratives are written in the landscape, and it is just a matter of attuning oneself to them in order for a transformation in thought to occur. Two recent trips, one to Ireland and the other to Costa Rica offered further enlightenment, and greatly affected my thesis process. I would like to share with you excerpts from these experiences to preface the rest of the discussion.

ireland

Scattered throughout the fields of Ireland are hundreds of forgotten sacred sites and megalithic monuments left by its pagan ancestors. On this particular trip, most of my time was spent in the Boyne River Valley; a region inhabited between 4,000 and 2,000 BC by a pre-Celtic culture whose system of beliefs centered around the forces of nature. They were skilled in farming and magic, and their ideology was most eloquently projected in the architecture of their “passage tombs.”

Numbering in the hundreds and ranging in scale, these sites served a variety of functions; they were the center of activity for the community and a place to converse with the spiritual realm. Built entirely of raw, organic materials, and covered by layers of earth and grass, the passage tomb deceptively appears like an ordinary hill in the landscape. But this structure is far from ordinary. The layout usually consists of a long, narrow passage lined with large standing stones leading from a small entrance to one or more circular



Fig. 1 Paul Caponigro, *Ruined Cairn*, Loughcrew, County Meath, Ireland. 1967.



Fig. 2 Paul Caponigro, *Corbelled Ceiling*, Newgrange Tumulus, Ireland, 1967.

chambers within. The entire space is enclosed by a corbelled roof, as seen in Fig. 2.

What is most impressive about the structures, beyond the tremendous effort it must have taken to transport the megaliths to the sites, is the fact that many of them are oriented to align with solar and lunar phenomena. Even thousands of years later, on a designated day, the sun shines a narrow shaft of light into the dark passageway once every year on either a solstice or equinox. It enters the interior-most chamber, magically illuminating geometrical symbols inscribed into its back wall (see Fig. 3). This symbolic union once a year between the earth and the sun represents the essence of the philosophy that was upheld by the people who built these sites, namely, that there is a balance of elements essential to creating and sustaining life. Although these sites are currently inactive as spaces for ritual, the fact that they still work precisely as they were meant to, testifies that these people had a profound connection to and understanding of the forces around them.

The symbolic significance of the engravings remains a mystery, however. Clues to their meaning could be derived from the art of other ancient civilizations, where, as historian Thomas Cahill describes, “zigzags are the symbols of flowing water, and the spiral, ever-turning, ever beginning again, is the image of the cyclical nature of reality- of the phases of the moon, the changing seasons, the cycle of a woman’s body, the ever-turning wheel of birth, copulation and death...”³

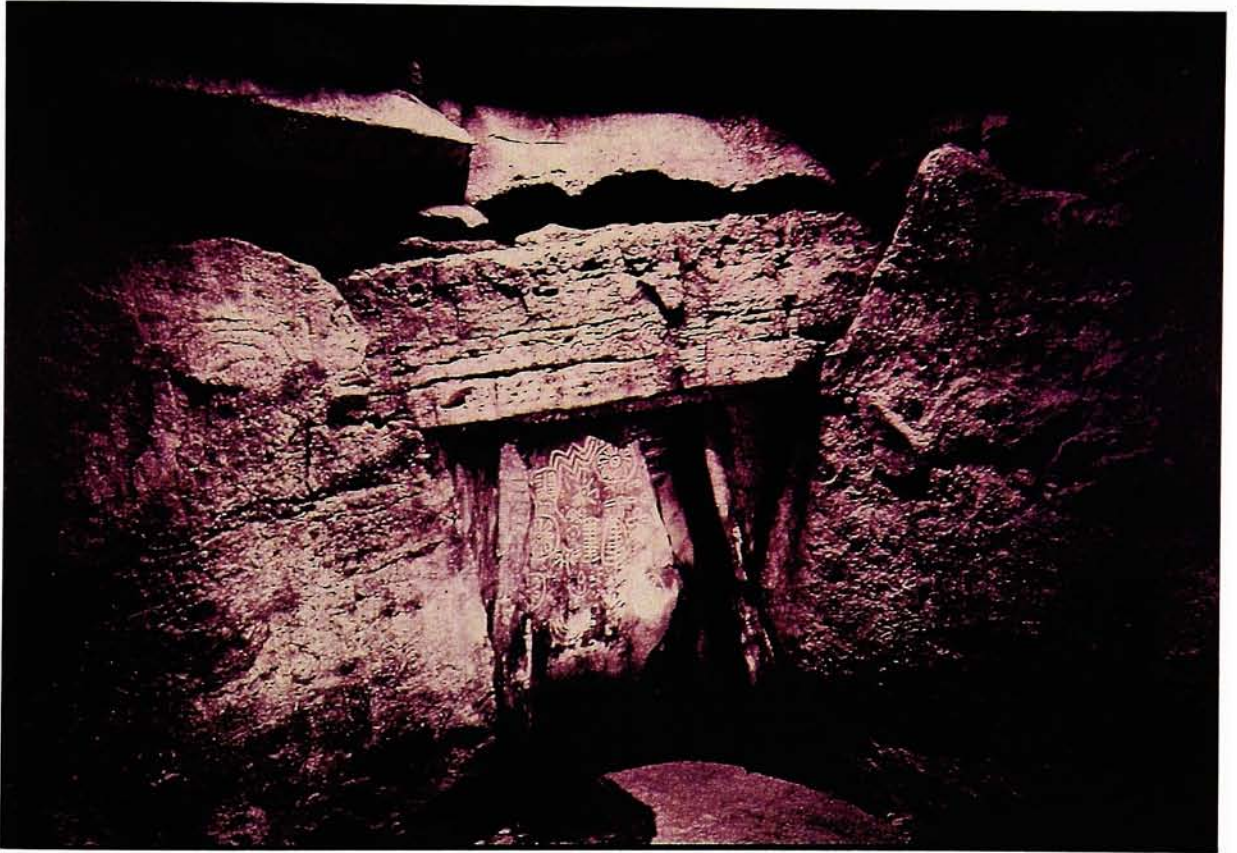


Fig. 3 Paul Caponigro, *Central Chamber*, Loughcrew Cairn, Ireland, 1967.



Fig. 4 *Entrance Stone, Newgrange, Ireland, 1998.*



Fig. 5 *Kerb Stone, Newgrange, Ireland, 1998.*

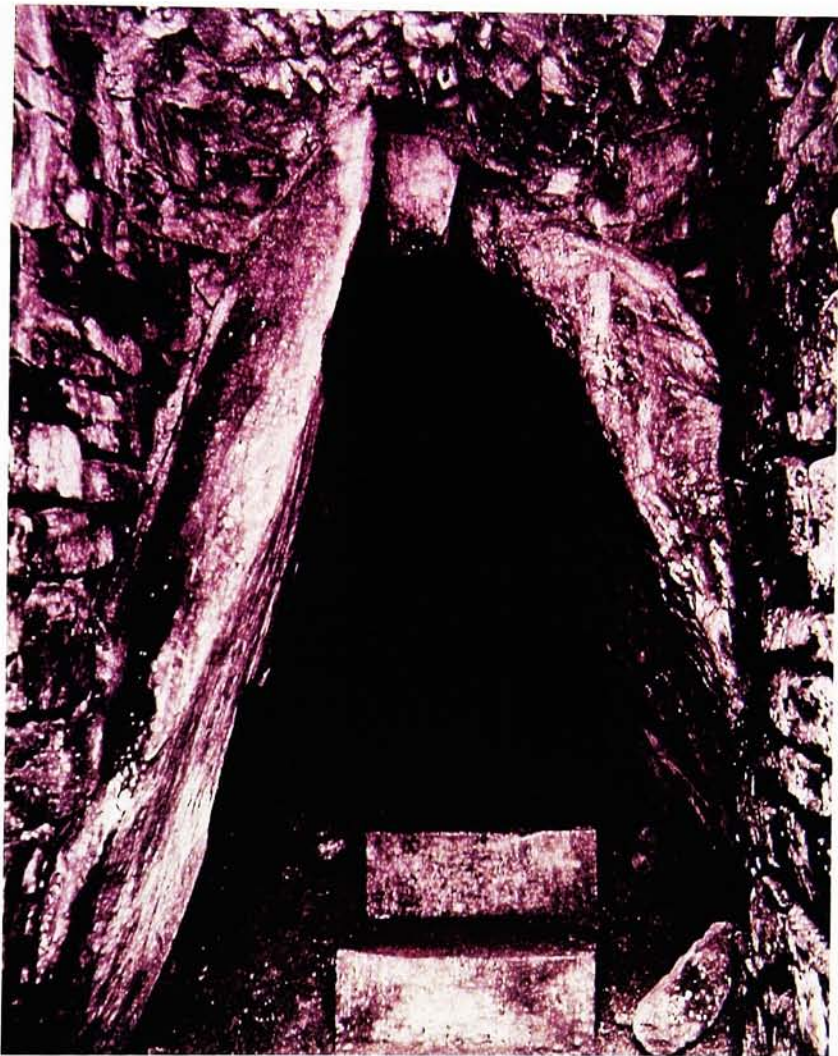


Fig. 6 Paul Caponigro, *Entrance, Dowth Tumulus, Ireland, 1967.*

The aura and humble simplicity of the sites was incredibly inspiring. They spoke to me in a way that called my attention to the earth's pulse and hidden spiritual presence. Standing within it, the relationship of my body to the site recalled a connection to a greater, nourishing force. With a design so undeniably echoing the female form, I felt I was symbolically and metaphorically venturing towards the source of creation; enveloped by the comfort and protection of the womb (see Fig. 6).

Clearly it appears to have been a sensitivity to the interdependence of all things which inspired this people to designate a "place" in which to honor, reflect and worship. How drastically this frame of mind contrasts to the traditional Western paradigm, which so deliberately suppresses nature rather than serves as an extension of it and whose agenda regarding landscape is one based on efficiency and domination.

costa rica

My trip down to Costa Rica also called my attention to our relationship with landscape. As I entered the jungle I was overcome by feelings of humility and awe- in its vastness in scale I felt very small and insignificant, and the diversity in plants, animals, and insects was enough to confound the imagination.

Our guides, who had grown up around these forests, displayed an intimacy with their environment or eco-system very atypical to that of the average



Fig. 7 *La Selva Verde*, Costa Rica, 1997.



Fig. 8 *Maneater*, Costa Rica, 1997.

westerner. They could reproduce a variety of birdcalls and predict the behavior of many of the animals camouflaged among the flora. They could identify most of the plants for their medicinal properties and name most of the indigenous plants. This wisdom, so foreign to the “modern” world, was one that had been passed down through the generations and was the essence of their culture. Placed in this context I began to comprehend and consider the notion that all parts of nature are dependent upon one another and mutually affect each other and the whole. When one part of the system is thrown out of balance the entire infrastructure is threatened.

On one of our treks to the rainforest, the “main road” we were following disintegrated into a pitted and bumpy dirt path. We suddenly found ourselves smack in the middle of a plantation of palm and banana trees and could smell the exhaust fumes being emitted from the processing plants nearby. The lines of trees on both sides of us seemed infinite. We drove past these perfectly aligned rows of thick vegetation for what seemed like miles. But then on one side the green lushness abruptly stopped. We had come upon a strangely sparse section where the trees had become disease ridden, and all that remained was their tall, lanky trunks. It was quite a jarring sight—a sort of melancholy beauty. From the corner of my eyes they resembled a crowd of swaying human skeletons. There was the feeling of death all around and that something had gone terribly wrong. It occurred to me that this graveyard of trees abandoned to its own decay might have been foreshadowing the fate of the entire plantation.

This image became for me an important metaphor for the economic, political and social circumstances that many tropical countries face, under a familiar history of colonial enterprise. Beginning in the 16th century, European “explorers” invaded this region, as they sought to add to their empire’s inventory of territorial possessions. They brought with them diseases against which the local indigenous population had no immunity, i.e. influenza, measles, smallpox, typhoid, and the bubonic plague. In Costa Rica’s case, its population was nearly wiped out, and the few who survived were either enslaved or fled to the mountains. The westerners were very interested in the exotic produce that came from these regions and began importing them back to Europe, where demand quickly grew within the trade market system. Although Costa Rica has been praised for its land conservation policies, it is still very dependent on foreign investors and corporations (such as Chiquita, formerly known as United Fruit Co.). In order to sustain the country’s economic security, the government is forced to compromise its integrity and in turn exploit its natural resources and local labor force. What has developed is a complex web of interconnecting factors, and as a consumer within the capitalistic system, I couldn’t help but feel somewhat liable for and connected to the conditions I had observed there.

I returned home from both of these trips with a new perspective and heightened sense of longing for that pre-industrialized past that I would never know. I was compelled to investigate the causal shift in consciousness that obviously occurred in history and changed how we would come to experience place.

intellectual sources

I found intellectual grounding and answers to some of my questions in the feminist writings of Carolyn Merchant, Richard Sennett and Susan Griffin. Among other things, their theories highlighted for me how the ideology of culture determines the nature of place and the place of nature. Briefly I will attempt to synthesize their points that informed my work.

In her *Death of Nature*, Carolyn Merchant implicates the Scientific Revolution for the gradual shift in human attitudes and relationship with landscape. She recounts how much of pre-Modern Europe was structured with "close-knit, cooperative and organic communities that relied upon the land for their existence."⁴ In these societies the communal whole was greater than the sum of its parts- they considered themselves very much integrated into the ecosystem, they treated their environment with respect, and farmed only according to their needs. All members of the community had equal rights to the land and its resources. Thus an ecological balance between the earth and its inhabitants was maintained for some time.

As demonstrated in ancient Ireland, throughout the language, imagery, art and architecture of these societies, nature was represented and expressed with female characteristics- as nurturing, bountiful and the giver and sustainer of life. According to Merchant, this image of the earth as a living organism and nurturing mother served as a cultural constraint restricting the actions of human beings. "One does not readily slay a mother, dig into her

entrails for gold or mutilate her body... As long as the earth was considered to be alive and sensitive, it could be considered a breach of human ethical behavior to carry out destructive acts against it."⁵

But this reverential conception of nature would not endure. In many regions throughout Europe, an alternative political and social climate threatened the stability of the cooperative system. Through force and the need for military security, a hierarchical structure of landlord domination imposed itself on the communal structure of agrarian society. The land was chopped up into sections, and became something to own, a commodity to possess. Subsistent living was replaced by one of contractual labor, and availability of resources was restricted to that which yielded the highest profit. Under the yoke of the feudal lords, peasants no longer had the means to properly cultivate the soil, resulting in a decline in the eco-system, as well as the health and welfare of the community. As a result of landlord oppression, rising taxes, famine and plague, people were forced to flee to urban centers in search of more hopeful opportunities.

This shift from farm to city also changed how the body would interact with and receive nature. As the urban centers expanded, so too did the needs and demands of the population. A trade market developed based on capitalist modes of consumption and production of natural resources. As nature became more and more relied upon as the prime means toward economic advancement, more and more people began to experience nature as altered and manipulated by machine technology. There was great initiative towards

reversing the perception of nature- from that of a nurturing, feminine force, to one that was violent and unpredictable; hiding secrets below its surface, which needed to be revealed for the benefit and enlightenment of humankind. This new conceptualization sanctioned all kinds of scientific experimentation, delivering the field of science to new levels of authority.

Richard Sennett describes in his book *Flesh and Stone* how one of the more influential developments in science that altered the physical and psychological relationship between humans and nature was the discovery of the human circulatory system by William Harvey in the early 17th century. This development affected not only the ideas of what constitutes a “healthy” body, but consequently what constitutes a healthy urban environment and how the body should most effectively travel through it. With the population influx in many European cities, there was growing concern regarding the movement and assembly of the masses. The governing bodies feared any congestion or blockages that might provoke conflicts and threaten the infrastructure. Therefore, urban planners borrowed from the model of the circulatory system, “seeking to make the city a place in which people could move and breathe freely, a city of flowing arteries and veins through which people streamed like healthy blood corpuscles.”⁶

The application of the concept of the circulatory system to the design of urban spaces became adopted into the standard practice of city planning. As European cities were modernized and as American cities were constructed, this was in effect an implementation of social determinism. By creating paths

of least resistance this new physical layout of space very much governed how people would come to interact with each other and with their surroundings. It changed the ideology of the culture and deprived people of a more natural interaction that is crucial to a healthy community. "Resistance is a fundamental and necessary experience for the human body; through feeling resistance, the body is roused to take notice of the world in which it lives. The lack of physical touch creates an ethics of indifference."⁷

In her book *The Eros of Everyday Life*, Susan Griffin goes beyond the historical accounts of Merchant and Sennett and delves into the psychological consequences affected by what she calls "the western habit of mind." As she says, "the alienation of human society has led to many different kinds of destruction, not the least of which has been the fragmentation of consciousness."⁸

Griffin discusses how, in the modern world, the notion of the interdependency of human beings with nature was replaced by "a hierarchical thinking that placed human consciousness above nature."⁹ This notion of supremacy and autonomy has thus led to social injustice, a break down of knowledge, the spoiling of nature and the crisis of identity that we experience today. She also attributes the source of this destructive logic to the fear of the male's psyche to admit a dependency on earthly and feminine sustenance. To recognize this need would portray vulnerability and weakness to a greater power. And so this denial manifested itself in the subordination of nature and women's role in society. Instead, the wisdom of

nature became replaced by scientific truth- the new pretense of power and agency for unmitigated “progress.”

In the end Griffin does offer hope for a return to an ideology that is more at one with nature: “Surfacing from the unconscious recesses of a psyche which imagines itself impervious to earthly frailty, is the memory of a union with a greater, enclosing, nourishing body.”¹⁰

landing

Thus far I have attempted to provide a background of the primary issues that contributed to my intellectual process. At this point I would like to discuss the artistic motivations that lead to the manifestation of my installation.

My very first piece at RIT, entitled, “Harmonic Sequence,” was my initial departure away from the wall, where I first started playing with the illusion of and movement through space. Coming out of a predominantly modernist undergraduate art background, my convictions towards the straight photographic image were being challenged by the range of new work I was being exposed to, including that of Robert Irwin and James Turrell- whose sensual light installations sparked my interest in perceptual illusions and the contemplative, meditative space. Other influences were Nancy Holt, Richard Long and Andy Goldsworthy, whose work highlight, manipulate and exploit patterns and cycles in nature; Magdalena Abakanowicz, Ann Hamilton and Christian Boltanski, whose juxtapositions of mundane objects and sculptural

forms unlock the subconscious and quietly undermine the most troubling social phenomena. I had become intrigued by the possibility of going beyond the viewer's visual sense and accessing deeper levels of perception and thought. Releasing myself from the limitations of the flat, immobile plane of the photograph, I ventured into the realm of installation art.

My initial attempts at installations were naive at best, and it took several failures before I began to fully comprehend the process involved in making an idea successfully encompass a space. I learned the importance of "living" with the work, and letting it grow and evolve over time. During this period I began creating imagery in film and video, and found the flexibility of digital editing to ideally suit my non-linear, experimental style.

Investigating video installations, I quickly discovered an affinity with the work of Bill Viola, whose primary subject is the "physical and mental landscape and the connections and interplay between the outer world and the inner realm."¹¹ I particularly appreciate the way his work does not subscribe to the trendy self-consciousness of much of post-modern art, but instead touches upon the spiritual essence of being and becoming. In the simplest of actions (a breath, a gesture, an expression) he captures the complexity, beauty and mystery of life. Perhaps it is for this reason that he has been so well received around the world.

And finally we come to my thesis exhibition. My goal for this piece was to fabricate a space using a variety of forms, symbols and mediums. This

juxtapositioning served to raise an awareness of our physical and psychological relationships to our surroundings. Rather than use the academic gallery space at RIT, I chose to work and exhibit out of a large studio at Village Gate in downtown Rochester (see Fig. 9).

The primary components of Landing consisted of video and sound. There were 3 channels of video- one projected on the far wall with the other two on monitors on each side. In the first section of the video, only the front projection runs. Here I will describe it as it could be read in a narrative fashion: from darkness comes a light at the end of the a tunnel- closer and closer in spurts of motion and then, bam!- the shock upon entering this world, the violence of birth- a figure emerges out from the depths- and crosses the threshold- from one metaphoric landscape to another; physical to psychological. She is me; she is the generic representation of humankind, male-female, mother, warrior. She is a custodian to nature, perhaps nature itself, traversing the landscape with purpose and direction. As a sign of the return to the garden, she plants an apple in the ground and sprinkles water over the fresh earth. The drops of liquid soon transform into small white balls, a world within every drop, a metaphor for the wisdom that exists in all of nature, not just the human mind; and the conditions from which we emerge into life and to which we return. The seeds, set free from that which has contained them, cascade and bounce on a dense white field; they roll and repel, ricochet and crash like thoughts in our subconscious landscape; some bounce back in from the edge while others are sent forward into a void of darkness.



Fig. 9 *Landing*, Installation View, 1999.

In the second part of the video there is perspectival shift- all three monitors in the room illuminate to play imagery moving in a forward direction. Calling attention to the body of the viewer as the subject, the vantagepoint of the front projection is that of someone looking down and walking over terrain that changes every few steps. On each monitor the imagery is of passing landscapes; on one side the vegetation is thick, green and lush, on the other side the vegetation is sparse and emaciated. Facing the front projection, the side monitors occupy the viewer's peripheral vision, a metaphor to that which we see but do not see, that which we tend to overlook.

Crossing through landscapes on foot or by car we become mesmerized by the passing scenery unraveling around us. The car window becomes the proverbial "screen" which divides and protects- from which we assume the position of the tourist-voyeur-subject; where, in a passive state, we are allowed to gaze and view at our own discretion, comfort and distance. Eventually the motion of the trees becomes more and more chaotic, blurring into a field of abstraction and returning itself to the darkness of the tunnel. What is emphasized here is the displacement that occurs between the body and nature when we are allowed to pass through spaces free of resistance.

The sound element served to conceptually activate the space and compliment the video imagery. In the first section the voice chants the mantra of an I-thou relationship, but the specific subjects of the relationship are kept obscure. In the second section phrases associated with the term landscape are



Fig. 10 *Landing*, Installation View, 1999.

deconstructed to emphasize the many layers of language and cultural references. The space was even more brought to life as the rhythm of the sound reverberated and continued to echo within the walls even after the video had stopped.

Prior experiments with installations taught me that the architectural context is as integral to the work as any object placed within it, so I considered the pre-existing structural elements in the room- the four walls, windows, doors, ceiling rafters, the natural light and ambient noise as part of the conversation.

Thin lines of string crossing the space created illusionary geometric forms to articulate relationships between architecture, empty space and the viewer, and to echo the converging lines of the rafters in the room (see Fig. 11). The horizon line on the walls was meant to recall the visual arrangements used by the masters of Renaissance perspective: the systematic visual ordering of the picture plane for an image to be compositionally balanced and legible. These lines also crossed into the light boxes, which covered the windows, further alluding to a pictorial and cultural enframing of blank space.

Continuing in my effort to make use of all parts of the exhibition space, I felt the floor plane deserved some significant consideration. In a previous installation entitled *Antechambre* I had placed official looking yellow and black striped tape on the floor of the space to indicate at what point the viewer's shadow might enter the projected video imagery (see Fig. 12). It was then left up to the viewers to choose how they might navigate through these

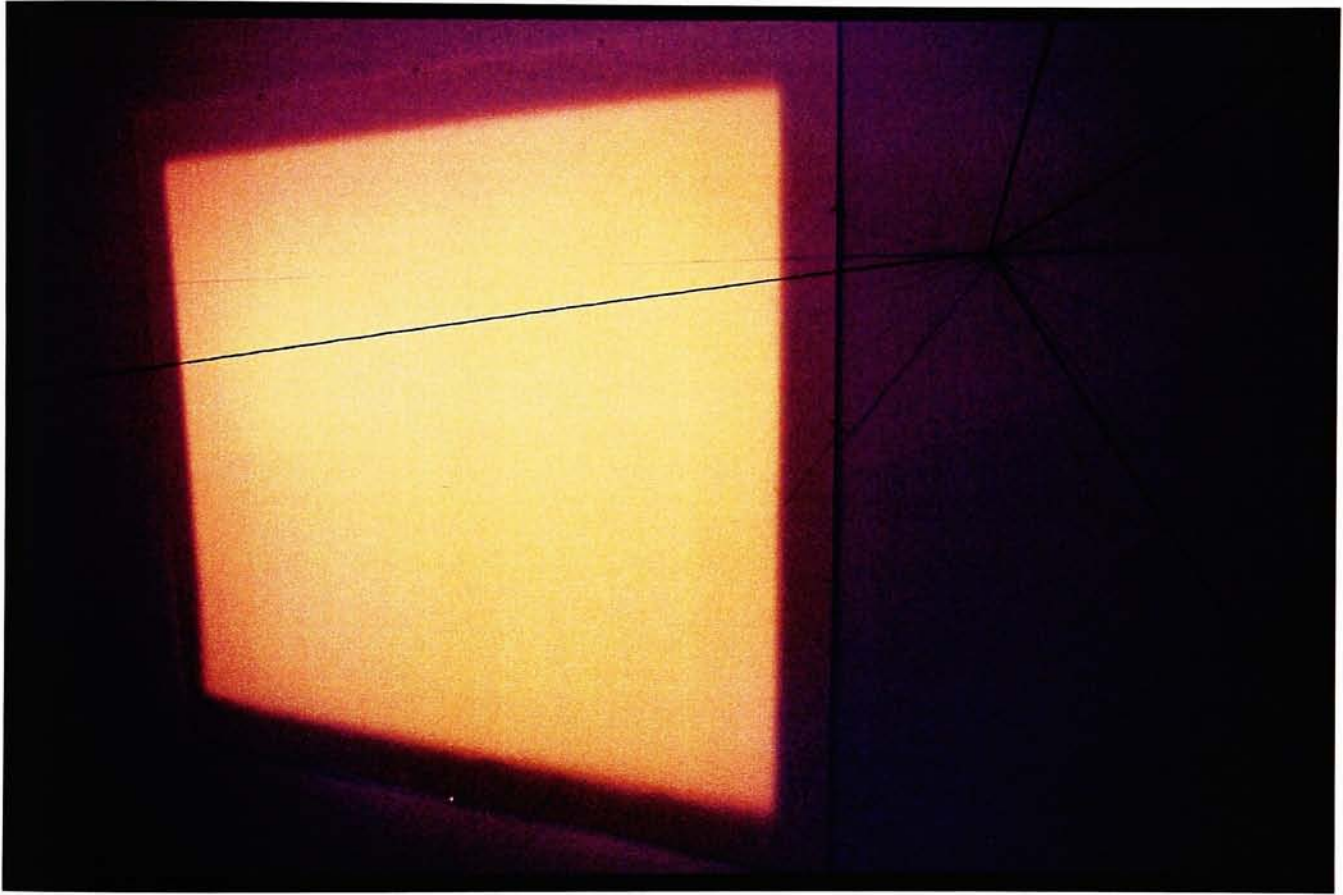


Fig. 11 *Landing*, Installation Detail, 1999.



Fig. 12 *Antechambre*, Installation View, 1997.

suggested boundaries. This element became a casual study in bodily movement through space and viewer participation. As they entered the room, most people heeded the authority implied by the arbitrary lines on the floor and cautiously restricted their movements within its boundaries. Others took notice of the lines but chose to move about the space at their own free will, and seemed to enjoy the infusion of their presence (their shadow) within the work.

In *Landing*, I wanted to call attention to the viewer's presence and scale as well. In my research into the politics and history of the public space I had turned to the urban park- a fabricated place where nature is *re*-introduced as non-threatening, orderly and homogenized. I became intrigued by how the park acts as a stage where public and private lives intersect, and where those who enter are both actor and spectator in an unfolding narrative. And so I chose to bring the public space into the gallery and into discussion. This is how I arrived at the idea of the blueprint floor. Though this context was not articulated in the show, I wanted to make reference to the work of Frederick Law Olmsted. Essentially the father of American landscape architecture, Olmsted designed hundreds of urban parks, campuses, estates and residential communities over the course of his extensive career. He is responsible for much of the look and layout of our cities. Thus it seemed fitting for me to use the blueprint of a park that once existed here in Rochester particularly one that was designed by Olmsted, but which is now cut off by the inner-loop beltway (see Fig. 13).

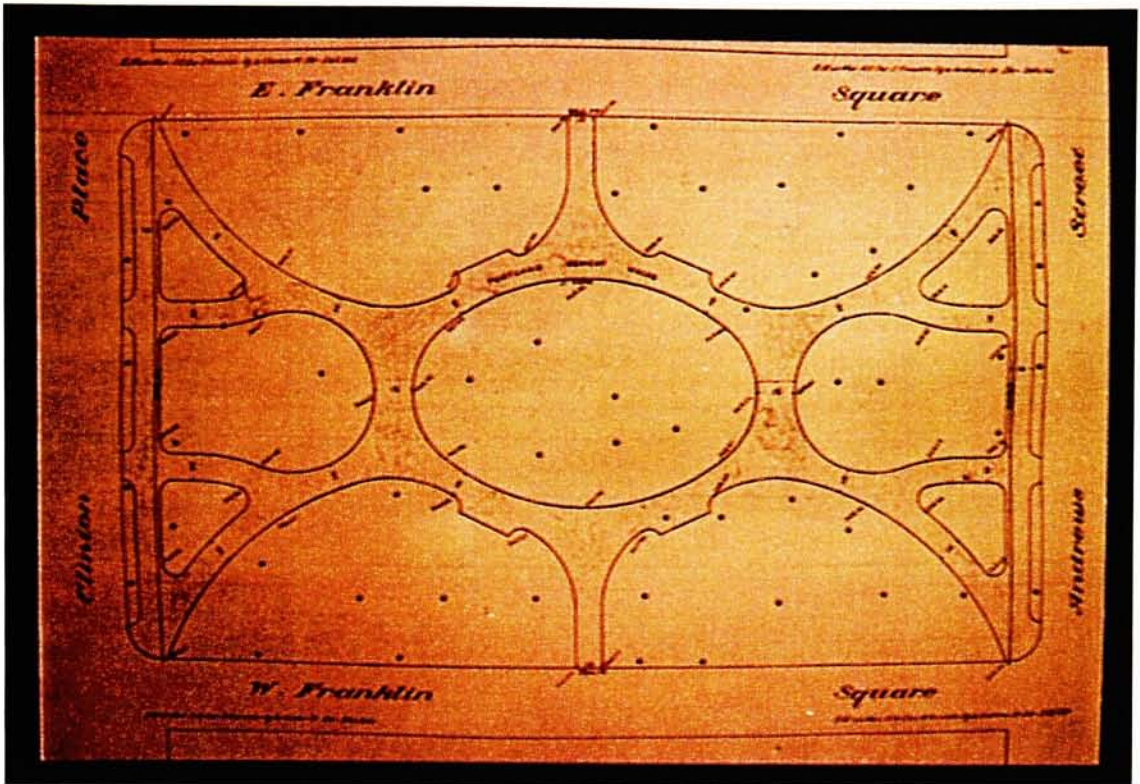


Fig. 13 Frederick Law Olmsted, *Franklin Park*, Rundell Memorial Library, Rochester, NY.

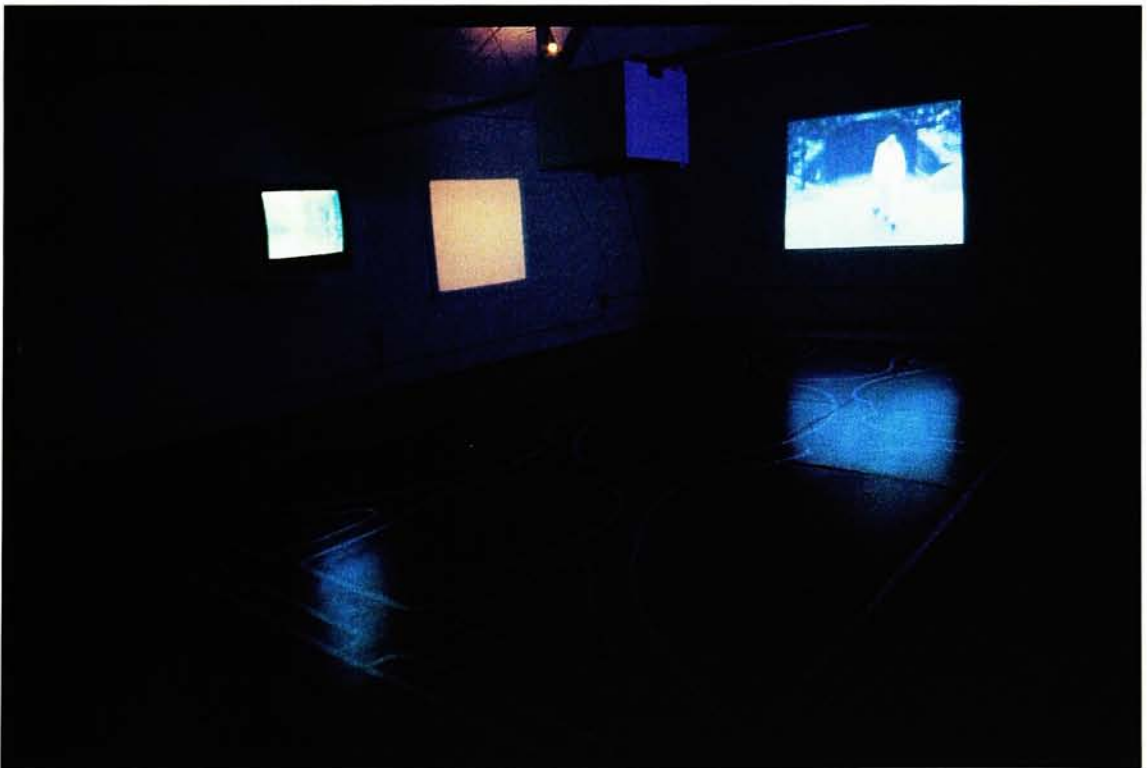


Fig. 14 *Landing*, Installation View, 1999.

In *Landing*, the participation of the viewers was similar to that in *Antechambre*; again, some people were completely comfortable to move about the space freely, while others remained in a fixed position somewhere between the lines. By throwing it out of scale and decontextualizing it, the process of translating a 3"x5" blueprint into 15 4'x4' panels, stripped the blueprint of its neutrality and triggered a variety of new associations: it went from being a reference of an actual site, to a flattened 3-dimensional space, to an icon representing the father of the American landscape, to a non-representational mandala-like design and back again. The blueprint floor further emphasized how landscape is an artificially constructed notion whose function is informed by cultural ideologies and subjectivities.

In conclusion, it is interesting to me how much of the graduate work I have seen here at RIT in the past few years is in some respect about the relationship between the body and nature. While each artist approaches the issues from a unique perspective, this trend indicates to me that there is a legitimate concern about how we interact with and are influenced by the spaces around us.

My purpose was not to resolve the issues, but merely to present them in a way to initiate dialogue. Obviously there are no clear answers, however, as inheritors of the ways of ordering the world set up by the generations past, it is our responsibility to re-examine certain assumptions in thought, to question pre-determined relationships, and to re-establish connections. We are not merely tourists, innocent bystanders of the systems—"we are accomplices in everything that happens around us; our culture and our places are images of each other and inseparable from each other, and so neither can be better than the other."¹² This investigation is merely the beginning of a life-long inquiry that I continue to work through in the artistic process.

notes

¹ Bill Viola and Robert Violette, ed. Bill Viola: Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995) 169.

² Susan Griffin. The Eros of Everyday Life: Essays on Ecology, Gender and Society. (New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1995) 56.

³ Thomas Cahill. How the Irish Saved Civilization. (New York: Doubleday, 1995) 41.

⁴ Carolyn Merchant. The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980) 3.

⁵ Merchant 43.

⁶ Richard Sennett. Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1994) 310.

⁷ Sennett 323.

⁸ Griffin 9.

⁹ Griffin 36.

¹⁰ Griffin 77.

¹¹ Viola 14.

¹² Wendell Barry, quoted in Lucy Lippard. The Lure of the Local. (New York: The New Press, 1997) 12.

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