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Ode to the Whiterock Conservancy

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Ode to the Whiterock Conservancy

by

Nancy Lynn Thompson

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Integrated Visual Arts

Program of Study Committee:
Katherine Gibbs, Major Professor
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Artist Statement

“Color is the keyboard, the eyes are the harmonies, the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand that plays, touching one key or another, to cause vibrations in the soul.”
Wassily Kandinsky

The Whiterock Conservancy is a 5000 acre reserve in the Middle Coon River Valley a few miles south and east of Coon Rapids, Iowa. Surrounded by an area that has been converted almost entirely to cropland, the Garst family has protected and preserved this island of bluffs, woodland, wildlife, native prairies, and wetlands for generations to come. They have also opened it to ecologists, environmentalists, biologists, and the general public for environmental education, low impact public recreation, research and modeling of ecologically and economically sustainable methods of land management. This diverse area is a place of great inspiration to me and it is my hope that the work that I have done in expressing its beauty will help to promote and preserve it for future generations.

During the time of the European Impressionist painters whose paintings evoked a shared interest in the landscape, musical composers were also writing music about the landscape. Just as art can express beauty and idea through a combination of form, color, texture, rhythm, variety, intensity, etc., so too does music seek to express beauty and concept through the same means. The more I have studied music and expressed myself through it, the more it seemed like a natural combination in this exhibition. While the visual arts exist outside of time, the musical art exists in real time and can only be perceived when performed. The viewers or the listeners bring to the interaction of either visual art or musical art the experiences of their own lives at that particular moment in time and that interaction has the potential to change them in subtle ways. This is one of the true values of art, both for artist/composer and the viewer/listener.

The music that played during my exhibition reception were selections that reflected the overall tone and color of the pieces that I had created for this exhibition. The selections chosen were; *Two Arabesques*, *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*, and *Claire De Lune*, by Claude Debussy and Aaron Copland’s orchestral masterpiece, *Appalachian Springs.*
My works come from a place within me that finds happiness and satisfaction in settings that are away from the crowds of people and the monuments to their ingenuity that they create. These places are full of color and light and live as an integral part of the natural world that has been here before humans arrived and will continue after we have vanished. The musical works that I chose reflect this love of color and light, and use tonal sounds that are positive and constant. They were created by composers who share my love of the natural world. As Claude Debussy, one of the composers to whom I refer once wrote:

“There is nothing more musical than a sunset. He who feels what he sees will find no more beautiful example of development in all that book which, alas, musicians read too little - the book of Nature.”

The use of tone as color and form in expressing their musical landscapes is like the way in which I, as a visual artist, use color and texture to bring the visual world to life. I use color to create form, and I see the subtle changes of color over a surface as transitions that are much like a musical passage. It has an intangible effect upon us, and holds an immediate and sensuous appeal.
Introduction

In formulating my thesis exhibition I found myself reflecting on my artistic journey and realized that my area of greatest passion is the landscape. Growing up on a farm in central Iowa gave me a close connection to nature and I am strongly drawn to images of land, sky and woodlands.

In my work as a landscape artist I studied the work of other artists who have also found their passion in painting the landscape and I noted that it is often centered around a particular place. The artists of the Hudson River school found their inspiration in the landscapes of the northeastern United States. The artists of the French Impressionist School found inspiration in the French countryside, while Caspar David Friederich centered his work on the forests of his native Germany. An internationally renowned landscape artist whom I know and admire is April Gornik. While she often travels afar and paints the vistas that inspire her, she is still drawn to the seas and skies which are very close to her home on the tip of Long Island. Another contemporary artist who also paints the landscape is Ellen Wagener. Although Ellen now lives in Scottsdale AZ., much of her work still revolves around the fields of her native eastern Iowa home.

I have always been drawn in similar ways to the areas near my long time home in Coon Rapids, Iowa. Among those areas are the pastoral scenes around what is now known as the Whiterock Conservancy, an area of timber, pastures, and rivers just a few miles from the town where I lived and raised my family. I spent more than two decades in this area and when I moved away in 2004 I experienced a deep sense of loss and sadness and yearned to return to the familiarity of my former surroundings. With the passage of time my sense of sadness has lessened and I am comfortable in my new
community but I will always feel that Coon Rapids is “home”. This sense of “longing for home,” I believe is an intrinsic human need. At its most basic level, home is a place with sufficient food, water, and shelter from the elements. Yet, home is much more than that. Human beings are social animals and we evolved among and depend upon a community of family, friends, and neighbors. For a place to be thought of as home it must be imbued with a sense of meaning, where important life experiences take place and where a sense of self is embodied.

When the decision was made by the Garst family to convert their land into a conservancy trust, it heightened my interest in using it as the subject matter for a new creative project. During my twenty years of living in Coon Rapids, I had spent considerable time exploring the woodlands, prairies, and paths of the Conservancy and felt that it would be a way for me to revisit and reconnect to my former home. I also wanted to help the Garst family show the people of this state the importance of what is being done here. The fact that it was one of the first areas to receive an Iowa Great Places designation fueled my interest even more. Not only is the Whiterock Conservancy a place for people to come and recreate, it is also a place where environmental work is being done and where preservation is of key importance. And so I made the decision to make my thesis a tribute to a special landscape, a landscape which reminds me of my past and has helped me reconnect to my home. Because I am not a writer of poetry or music but a creator of visual art, my tribute is in the form of a ‘visual’ poem, and I call it, Ode to the Whiterock Conservancy.
Artistic Processes and Influences

Early in my graduate studies I was searching for non-traditional supports on which to draw and paint. My first attempts were to draw with pastels and paint with oils on faux suede fabric. My early experiments taught me two things: painting on faux suede fabric did not work well and was not worth pursuing. I discovered immediately that when drawing on this support there was an inconsistency between the different kinds of fabrics that fell under the heading of "faux suede." Some of the fabrics were more suitable for drawing and held onto the pigment well while others were woven together in such a way that did not allow the fabric fibers to hold the pastel adequately. Even with these issues, I found the look of the finished drawings intriguing. They had a hazy, somewhat out-of-focus look that was visually appealing. Due to the inconsistency with the faux suede fabric I started looking at suede mat board. This material is readily available and comes in a variety of colors and is also consistent in texture and makeup. The pastels responded beautifully on the suede mat board, and the underlying color of the suede mat affected the overall tone of the drawing. It also helped to create a unity through the showing of consistent tone throughout the piece. For the most part, I wanted the effect of the colored suede to be subtle and not overwhelming.

Another alternative support which I discovered was fine grit, wet/dry sandpaper. I learned that contemporary artist, Ellen Wagener, whose work I have long admired, was drawing with soft pastel on sand paper. In a conversation I had with her in 2006 she shared that she was drawing with pastels on fine grit sandpaper mounted on a special surface. My quest began to find sandpaper in a large width. My search ended at the 3M Company here in Ames, IA. The company makes a wet-dry sandpaper that is very
durable and nicely toned in gray. They make the sandpaper on a large roll that is 36” wide before it is cut down into smaller pieces for commercial sale. I was able to obtain it before it was cut. Pastels perform in a different way on the sandpaper and I had to adjust the way in which I applied the medium. This adjustment gives the work on sandpaper a considerably different look as opposed to pastel on suede paper. While the pastels on suede paper have a hazy out-of-focus look, the pastels on sandpaper are more photographic in appearance.

I was also searching for different types of mark making in paint during this time, and it led me into a series of paintings where I decided to abandon my paint brushes. I was looking at the work of the world famous German artist Gerhard Richter. In his work I saw a series of contrasts in subject matter and styles ranging from complete abstraction and non-objectivity to photo realism. One of his paintings I found particularly interesting was a piece entitled: *Parkstück*, (Elger, 65). This painting is a very impressionistic landscape that contains a consistent, expressive mark and appears to be done with his fingers instead of paint brushes. After studying this image I decided to try painting without brushes. I donned tightly fitted disposable gloves and started making large scale paintings using my hands and no paintbrushes. Working in this way has made my paintings function more like drawings. There are no barriers between my hands and the medium with the exception of the gloves.

I also found that underpainting the work had a significant effect on the resulting image. Like the use of colored suede mat board, I found that using different colors in the underpainting produced very different visual effects. I became familiar with this technique in my years as an undergraduate in painting classes. Through studying color
theory I learned that color complements intensify one another when placed side by side. In the summer landscape in Iowa, the color green often predominates, so underpainting the canvas with red tends to give the painting more intensity.

The type of work that has received the most interesting response in this exhibition has been the achromatic work, or "grisaille." The decision to work in grisaille came about in an interesting way: It started with a history of photography class I took in the fall of 2006. In this class we looked at early photographic processes such as the daguerreotype and the calotype, both different processes with different results. The calotype was a somewhat out-of-focus photograph on paper and the daguerreotype was a very focused almost mirror-like image printed on metal plates. In the drawing class that I was taking at the same time, I started working achromatically as opposed to working in color in response to the photography class. The results were two parallels; one in which I was working impressionistically on the suede paper in response to the calotype and the other was a more controlled realistic representation on sandpaper in response to the daguerreotype.

Another important influence in my decision to work in an achromatic style came from a visit to April Gornik, in her studio in Sag Harbor, Long Island. Although a major part of her work is comprised of large scale landscapes in oil, she also has a landscape series devoted to charcoal on watercolor paper. During my visit with her she produced one of these works and I was amazed at the subtlety of light and shadow that she was able to create using such limited media. When I returned from this visit I decided to try my hand at this approach and created a series of drawings which might be fairly called "grisaille". However, I found that drawing on watercolor paper did not suit my way of
working and I started experimenting with the grisaille on navy blue suede mat board. The series of drawings which resulted looked like night scenes. It then occurred to me to try the grisaille drawing on the sandpaper. The super fine grit of the sandpaper holds the pastel securely and allows the pastel to be smoothly blended to an almost mirror-like quality in the sky areas. In contrast to the blended areas, this surface also allows for very detailed mark making. Using the two forementioned techniques and an achromatic palette of pastels gave the pieces the look of black and white photographs which I found intriguing and worthy of further investigation.
Conceptual Elements

It is important to me that certain conceptual elements in my work be defined and understood. Many commercial landscape artists create work that has limited conceptual value and is primarily created to grace the walls of offices and waiting rooms. I take my work more seriously than that however, and while creating a beautiful image with fine technique is important to me, I have included elements which point to concepts that continue to be influential in my life.

One concept which has been developing in my work, especially since the unexpected death of my husband in 2002, is that of the path as a metaphor for our lives. In the past few years, my life has taken a remarkable turn primarily because of my late husband’s accident and other uncontrollable events. This has heightened my awareness that our lives are not really destinations that are achieved, but paths that are to be explored and journeys to be experienced. I am attracted to subjects that have paths around them because of the significance that I see in this metaphor. Some are paths that are overgrown through lack of use, some are well worn paths that are traveled daily. Some of the paths are threatened by possible storms, which could signify that trouble or danger may lie ahead and that caution and careful consideration are needed. I am always reminded of the poem by Robert Frost entitled The Road Not Taken:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth.

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same.

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference. (WSP, 223)

Frost has stated, in a way that I can only begin to share, the metaphoric meaning that a road or path can have when it becomes one of the elements in a landscape painting.

In her book, *The Poetic Landscape*, Elizabeth Mowry, aptly relates her sentiments about the path or road;

A road or pathway can be a metaphor for one’s journey through life experiences and through space and time. Its existence defines itself, showing us that others have traveled before us. The path represents a way to move more easily on to another place, thus it’s an invitation from nature simply because of what it is. In a painted landscape, roads or pathways are vehicles that suggest to some viewers a course taken or a line of movement in their lives. A road also facilitates the viewer’s direct involvement in the painting by leading him into the scene more quickly than if it did not exist. (Mowry, 92)

This metaphor is often an unsettling one for me, especially since many of my more recent paths in life have come about because of unplanned events which have left me with decisions that I did not expect to be required to make. Sometimes the journey has been difficult, often unexpected, usually without a clear vision of the destinations. But like the traveler in the Frost poem, one cannot really avoid taking that first step which requires some sense of assurance that the journey will not be so painful as to cause one to stop and turn back.
Music and the Landscape

Since the presentation of the original prospectus for this thesis exhibition, many changes and evolutions took place in my thinking regarding the role of music in the exhibit. A decision was made to prepare the artistic images and then to search for selections that suggested the kind of approach that I took in conceptualizing the work. As I considered various compositions and composers I was ultimately drawn to works that suggested color and tone rather than form, and not surprisingly I was impressed with Claude Debussy and Aaron Copland. The works that were composed by Debussy included, *The Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun, Claire de Lune* (from the Suite Bergamasque), and *Two Arabesques*. I was attracted to these pieces because of Debussy's use of tonal color in his compositions. Debussy was also very interested in art and when he was a young child it was said that “he wanted to become a painter.” (Vallas, 3) He also is known to have close ties with the impressionist painters Manet, Monet, and Renoir, whom I also admire and hold in high esteem. These painters opened a new way of seeing the world, not as the traditional realist painters did. Leon Botstein, in his article "Beyond the Illusions of Realism: Painting and Debussy's Break with Tradition" which appears in the book "Debussy and His World" (edited by Jane Fulcher) states the following:

The version of what one sees in a classical realist painting is ... only superficially real...The claim to truth is artificial. A unitary single color is actually an assemblage of gradations and tones…What Monet and Pissaro are able to do is to abandon mere "melody" and create a true "symphony" of life....The impressionist painter transcends the limitations of the flat canvas by recording the complexity of visible reality.” (Botstein, p. 148)
He continues and makes this important statement about the impressionist art:

Time in painting ceases to be arbitrarily conflated, but is enlarged. The canvas records the act of seeing over time. And it permits the viewer to sense the passage of time as recorded by infinite variations in color and light...This notion comes quite close to the view, held by Debussy and his defenders, that Debussy emancipated pitch and rhythm as well as harmonies from relationships defined by tradition and rules.... In each piece of music the sequence of sounds is suggested by their gradual unfolding...permitting new and unexpected sounds and colors to emerge.. (Botstein, 149-150)

In using this compositional technique, Debussy was able to step into the passage of time and use a palette of new harmonic material which cares more about color and texture than pure form.  Upon further research, I learned that Debussy was using old church modes (musical scales) such as the Lydian, the Dorian, and the Phrygian to arrive at this new, colorful combination of harmonies and melodies.  Spaulding, in the book *Music: An Art and a Language*, notes that, “Debussy was extremely fond of a scale of whole tones.  In this scale the normal perfect 4th and 5th and the major 6th become augmented, thus producing a very unstable but alluring harmonic basis.” (Spaulding, 228)

Spaulding then relates this passage concerning Debussy’s musical compositions and the connection to nature;

They are mood-pictures in which the composer has tried to imprison certain elusive states of mind—or the impressions made on his susceptible imagination by the phenomena of Nature: the subtly blended hues of a sunset, the changing rhythm of drifting clouds, the indefinite murmur of the sea, the dripping of rain.  For Debussy... is a passionate lover of Nature.  To quote his own words, he finds his great object lessons of artistic liberty in “the unfolding of leaves in spring, in the wavering winds and changing clouds.  It benefits me more to watch a sunrise than to listen to a symphony.  Go not to others for advice, but take counsel from the passing breezes, which relate the history of the world to those who listen.” (Spaulding, 229)
When I listened to his music, I was able to visualize the rustling of wind through the trees and the passage of clouds through his unique use of harmonies. In my work in nature, it has been my goal to approach the landscapes that I choose as an impressionist painter would approach them, and so it is not a surprise that I would be drawn to Debussy's work.

I was also impressed with the music of Aaron Copland for many of the same reasons that attracted me to Debussy's music. When I listened to Copland's *Appalachian Spring*, I was able to see the imagery of nature: running water, birds singing, the light growing in the sky, and the wind blowing through the trees. In his book *Copland on Music*, Copland describes his view of music and color in the following way:

> Color in music, as in painting, is meaningful only when it serves the expressive idea; it is the expressive idea that dictates to the composer the choice of his orchestral scheme. Part of the pleasure in being sensitive to the use of color in music is to note in what way a composer’s personality traits are revealed through his tonal schemes…Debussy, at his most characteristic, sought for a spray-like iridescence, a delicate and sensuous sonority such as had never before been heard. (Copland, 32)

I found this statement to embrace my sentiments concerning color in painting and drawing. It seems to me that every artist has a special vision which grows out of their personal life experiences. Two artists viewing the same landscape will, because of their individual uniqueness, paint the subject differently. In the mid 1990's I was involved with a group of artists who painted on location together every week. Even though we painted the same scene, our paintings did not look alike. They varied in many ways such as the translation of hue, scale, and what the artist saw as important compositionally to the scene.

I find it exciting to realize that the visual arts and the musical arts can have so much in common. Debussy and Copland both attempted to express the world around
them with music, but in their own ways. Each understood the role of color, harmony, texture, and form but used them within their own individual styles. As a visual artist, I am also attempting to express the landscape in new and special ways, experimenting with color, texture, value, and form. In doing so I join a long list of artists who, in their own ways and their own styles, are attempting to do the same.
About the Images

In this section, I wish to discuss the images that were created and touch on some of the following questions: why I chose a particular landscape, what is the conceptual nature of the image as I discern it, and what artistic problems arose and how they were addressed and solved.

The paintings and drawings will be divided into three different categories: pastels on suede paper, pastels on sandpaper, and oil paintings on canvas.

The first piece that I drew is aptly named *The Beginning*, (Fig. 1) and is a pastel on suede paper. Whenever I began my physical explorations in the Conservancy, this is the place that I almost always started. This drawing is one of many that contains a path and conceptually the path can be said to lead the viewer into the exhibit as well as into the piece. As I was creating this image I remember wondering where this “exhibition journey” would lead and felt strongly that the composition should have the entry path in the center of the image, drawing the viewer’s eye toward the light.

*Canopied Trail*, (Fig. 3) follows the path further into the Conservancy and I chose to draw this piece on dark blue suede. In this particular area, the trees stand closely together and cast lush rich shadows on the ground below them. The dark blue suede helped to convey the mood of that particular place and moment in time which was quiet solitude.

*South of Spring*, (Fig. 4) as the name implies is close to an artesian spring and slightly further north of *Canopied Trail*. (Fig. 3) In this spot the trees are not as close together which allows more sunlight to filter to the ground. I made the decision to use a
light blue/gray suede paper which lightened up the overall image. It also helped convey the color of early spring which is greenish yellow.

*Spring Meadow,* (Fig. 2) is also drawn on the gray/blue suede and was chosen to contrast the wooded scenes, for the Conservancy is also full of meadows and creek washes. This view shows the vastness of western Iowa, but also the interesting rolling topography of an area that did not receive the flat scraping of the glacier, which halted just a few miles to the north leaving this natural vista.

An important part of this exhibition includes drawings done on location at 805 River, a primitive campsite located deep in the conservancy on the west side of the Middle Coon River. This site includes a house/cabin that has three rooms with no electricity, a pond, outhouse, solar shower, picnic table, fire pit, and fenced corral for horses. Camping overnight at 805 River was an adventure, and the cacophony of sound coming from the bullfrogs in the nearby pond was so intense that it was nearly impossible to sleep. One can feel far removed from civilization here, no human sound pollution, only the birds, frogs, insects, coyotes, and the wind. I drew four small pieces at 805 River; *The Gate, The Pond, Looking East, and Looking South.* (Figs. 8-11) I challenged myself to a time limit of no more than one hour per piece. What was important was capturing the light/time of day and a sense of place.

At this point it seems appropriate to say something about the concept of “Alla Prima” or the act of starting and finishing a painting or drawing in one sitting. Richard Schmid, an artist whom I admire, says in his book entitled “Alla Prima”:

> I believe it (alla prima painting) to be the ultimate in representational art because it is about real experience and demands the highest level of skill. (Schmid, 10)
When an artist combines the idea of painting or drawing a subject in one sitting with working on location and outdoors, a special challenge is accepted. Summer at the Conservancy can be a very difficult time to attempt an on location work of art. The heat can be intense, the bugs can be difficult, and the shifting light can cause the subject to change completely.

The first piece created at 805 River was *The Gate*. (Fig. 8) A gate, like a path or road, has a specific conceptual value that makes it an important subject in landscape work. Elizabeth Mowry eloquently describes my sentiments on the subject of gates in her book *Poetic Landscape*, in the following way;

> An open gate extends yet a second invitation to the passerby in a natural landscape as well as to the observer of a landscape painting.  
> (Mowry, 94)

I started this piece early in the morning shortly after sunrise when the shadows were long and the atmosphere was moist with dew. I chose to draw with pastels instead of using paints so that I would not have to transport wet canvases. I wanted to use the suede paper because I have learned to work quickly in a loose and gestural fashion on this surface.

The second drawing of the day was *The Pond*. (Fig. 9) Morning was turning into high noon, the shadows were shorter, and the sun was intense. This is a spot that I had rendered many years ago and decided to revisit. The trees have grown and time had changed them to a great degree. It is much like painting the portrait of a person at various stages of their life.

The third piece I completed that day was *Looking East*. (Fig. 10) I completed this drawing in about twenty minutes and at first was not happy with the outcome. I decided
to put it aside and possibly work on it later. After some time had passed I viewed it again and realized that it was better than I had initially thought and never touched it again.

My final piece of the day was *Looking South*, (Fig 11) and was done on a whim. I happened to notice a dead tree towering above its neighbors and felt it had a certain personality that should be shared. Interestingly, I moved my easel only a few feet and simply turned to look different directions for each of the drawings. This reminds me of a statement that Ellen Wagener made in a lecture at the Brunnier Gallery where she related the fact that by moving only a few feet one way or the other when taking photo references, she could find an entirely different composition that was worthy of creative endeavor.

*River Crossing and Ridge Trail*, (Figs. 17-18) are companion pieces and share similarities. Both are done in a panoramic format and to create this effect I carefully photographed the area and pieced the images together. I chose to draw them with pastels on gray/blue suede paper of the same dimension. Each piece shares a metaphorical path image, one is an actual path and the other is a river. The river, like the path, connotes similar feelings of journeying. The particular spot in *River Crossing* (Fig. 17) was chosen because I was drawn to the wide spot in the river and the worn trails created by the cattle and deer where they cross and drink. The resulting animal footprints create a unique and identifiable topography to the river and surrounding river bank. In *Ridge Trail*, (Fig. 18) autumn had come to Whiterock and I wanted to share the beauty of this time of year with the viewers. The Conservancy still retains many Burr Oaks which are native to this river valley. These trees, as well as the maples, display beautiful fall colors.
The autumn day on which I visited was truly a glorious moment in time and I believe I have captured this event in *Ridge Trail*. (Fig. 18)

Five of the nineteen pieces done for the thesis exhibition are grisaille pastel on fine grit, wet/dry sandpaper. Even though they are without hue, they still contain a full tonal range of values. In some ways, I connect these drawings to the Debussy piano pieces. To use an analogy to music, I find an interesting dichotomy between music that is written for a wide variety of instruments and music that is written for one instrument. It is my understanding that the act of orchestrating a piece of music for a band or orchestra is the process of assigning melodies or harmonies to various instruments in order to allow the particular tonal color of those instruments to affect the melodies or harmonies. This gives the composition a wide tonal palette. Music written for a single instrument such as the piano is limited in its tonal color when compared to an orchestral piece. Though limited by tonal color there are other ways in which to express tone and this can be achieved with dynamic intensity and expressive articulation that a pianist can provide. In the same way, when I convert a colorful scene into grisaille, it may limit the expression of the scene by removing the original hues, but increases the dynamic intensity and the articulation of the scene and can, in fact, make the scene more dramatic than it had originally been.

*Dump Road* (Fig. 7) was the first of the grisaille pastels and in this piece I intended to convey a sense of the dramatic by increasing the value in the upper part of the sky. The concept of the path in this piece takes a significant turn as the journey becomes more complicated. Here the trail is overgrown and intersects the path of a potential storm and a decision must be made to wait out the danger to come or challenge it.
Looking North at Oak Ridge, (Fig. 15) also incorporates the element of a potential storm. Incidentally, it is the same cloud formation as the one in Dump Road, (Fig. 7) but the photo reference used was taken later when the cloud formation had reached maturity. The landscape beneath the cloud was taken from another reference photo and the two images were merged during the drawing process. This is one of the few pieces that does not incorporate a path. The viewer is allowed to view this sky from a safe distance without a road leading them into the storm’s potentially dangerous path.

Another piece that does not have a path is Prairie and Timber. (Fig. 5) The gently sloping hillside leads into the valley and effectively guides you to the small pond tucked behind the trees. While I am generally drawn to stormy skies, the cumulus clouds in this scene were serene and bucolic and created a balance to the native prairie that I found compelling.

Gray Dusk of Eve (Fig. 16) was a night scene that I observed on the oak savannah prairie the evening I stayed at 805 River. I remember thinking that the area reminded me of an African savannah when viewed at night and I attempted to” burn” this scene into my memory. I used an actual photo taken during daylight and converted it to gray scale using Adobe Photoshop ®. This drawing is monochromatic as opposed to achromatic because I incorporated the color Prussian blue to simulate the night sky. Using the blue gives the drawing the feeling and impression of night.

Four of the pieces in the exhibition are oil paintings on canvas and two of the paintings were composed completely on location. These are the pieces that I feel most relate to Aaron Copland’s Appalachian Springs. This orchestral masterpiece is full of beautiful texture and expressive, colorful harmonics. Just as Copland used a wide tonal
palette in composing *Appalachian Springs*, I laid out a wide range of hues on my paint palette to compose my paintings.

The paintings composed on site, were underpainted in red for two reasons. First, it conveyed the summer heat that I experienced as I painted these pieces, and second, the juxtaposition of red and green intensify one another. I intentionally chose to allow the red to show through in small areas throughout each painting with the greatest amount in *Gatling Gun Ridge*. (Fig. 12) This spot was referred to me by Liz Garst, one of the managers of the area and a member of the family who donated the land to the trust. It was quite difficult to access with no direct route save crossing fences and a trek through the bull pasture. I had to set my easel on a slanted hill and it created great fatigue in my legs and feet, an aspect of painting on location that most lay people do not realize. Creating this piece was both emotionally exhilarating and physically exhausting. I was feverishly trying to capture the late morning light before it became afternoon light, all the while savoring the quiet and solitude of the moment. I was startled to hear the rustling of brush and turned to notice a large doe twenty feet away. My movement made her aware of my presence and her tail went up in alarm as she ran off. I was completely surprised that she had not detected my presence until she was almost upon me. Deer are very wary animals and it would not have ventured so close had she known I was there. I felt honored to experience this wild creature so closely in its natural environment.

The other painting which I completed on site was *South of Mary’s*. (Fig. 13) I was attracted to this spot because there was a path meandering back through the trees and the meadows on either side of it were filled with wild purple asters. Two large cotton woods
stood on either side of the trail and they provided me with shade for the entire afternoon while I painted.

My final painting for the exhibition is entitled, *Whiterock*. (Fig. 19) As I made my decision regarding the last piece, it seemed to me that it should be large, a centerpiece of the entire exhibition. I have always been drawn to this particular bluff and knew that it needed to be included in this body of work. I chose to do this painting in a diptych format as opposed to one long canvas for logistical reasons. Transporting a seven foot canvas is complicated while moving two 40” canvasses is much easier. I incorporated an underpainting in this piece as well, but used burnt sienna instead of red because the season had shifted to autumn and I felt that burnt sienna was a better hue for the turning foliage and for the orange rock of the bluff. Even though *Whiterock* (Fig. 19) was composed in my studio, I still wanted it to share the impressionistic qualities of the pieces painted on location. I worked quickly, as I would have done on site, and strived for decisive and purposeful marks with the paint. The end result was a painting that had the look and feel of the alla prima work. When I finished this piece, I felt that my journey through the Whiterock Conservancy had come full circle and the body of work had a sense of completeness.
Conclusion

As I conclude this thesis I realize that I am also concluding a very significant part of my life. Like the metaphor of the path that I have developed in my art work during the years that I have been working on this degree, so this thesis is a significant step on the path that I am taking as an artist and, hopefully, as an educator. This journey was not accidental. Through interaction with colleagues and teachers, through interaction with artists of the past and present, and through my own teaching, I have gleaned elements that have found their way into my own creativity. This interaction has opened my mind to the many varied approaches that can be incorporated into landscape art, the area to which I am still very much committed. I have also begun to grasp the extent to which landscape art can express ideas and feelings that touch the depths of my life experiences, the painful times and the pleasurable times. This has expanded the importance of my work as an expression of my inner self and has increased the satisfaction that I find in the creative process.

It was both a pleasure and an honor to create the paintings and drawings for this thesis exhibition. As an outgrowth of this project, I hope that I have helped to further the cause and goals of the Whiterock Conservancy. It is very meaningful and enjoyable to explore the idea that art can serve the common good in this way, and I know that this thesis project is only the beginning of my connection to Whiterock. There are many more landscapes to be drawn or painted of the Conservancy and I plan to continue my creative endeavors in this area.

Even more important and on a personal level, it gave me a chance to reconnect with a place that is “home” to me. The path that I traveled as I wove my way around the
Conservancy was one that reminded me of who I was when this place helped to define my existence for many years. Now that my road has led me into different avenues and into an unknown future, those primitive paths help me to see that the journey our lives take can sometimes be bright, sometimes peaceful, and at other times dangerous and challenging. In a special way, I learned that I can go home again and in doing so recharge my spirit for the road that lies before me.
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Bibliography


Appendix
Figure 1
*The Beginning © 2007*
Pastel on Suede Paper  12” x 16”
Figure 2
*Spring Meadow* © 2007
Pastel on Suede Paper 16”x 12”
Figure 3
*Canopied Trail © 2007*
Pastel on Suede Paper 18” x 24
Figure 4
*South of Spring* © 2007
Pastel on Suede Paper 16” x 12
Figure 5

Prairie and Timber © 2007
Pastel on Sand Paper 31” x 19”
Figure 6
Trail in Monochrome © 2007
Pastel on Sand Paper 11” x 14
Figure 7

*Dump Road* © 2007
Pastel on Sand Paper 35” x 25”
Figure 8
*The Gate* © 2007
Pastel on Suede Paper 10” x 8”
Figure 9

*The Pond* © 2007
Pastel on Suede Paper 8” x 10’
Figure 10

Looking East © 2007
Pastel on Suede Paper  11” x 8”
Figure 11

*Looking South*© 2007
Pastel on Suede Paper 8” x 10”
Figure 12
*Gatling Gun Ridge* © 2007
Oil on Canvas 18” x 24”
Figure 13

*South of Mary’s* © 2007

Oil on Canvas 16” x 20”
Figure 14
*Summer Heat* © 2007
Oil on Canvas 18” x 24”
Figure 15

Looking North From Oak Ridge © 2007
Pastel on Sand Paper 31” x 19”
Figure 16
Grey Dusk of Evening © 2007
Pastel on Sand Paper 11” x 14”
Figure 17

*River Crossing © 2007*

Pastel on Suede Paper 40” x 15”
Figure 18

*Ridge Trail* © 2007
Pastel on Suede Paper 40” x 15”
Figure 19
Whiterock © 2007
Oil Diptych on Canvas 80” x 30”
Figure 20
Whiterock Conservancy Topography Map