Arable visions

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Arable visions

by

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MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Integrated Visual Arts

Program of Study Committee:
Barbara Walton, Major Professor
Dean Biechler
Barbara Haas

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is the written component to the art exhibit Arable Visions which took place from March 24 to May 3, 2013 at the Gallery in the Round in Ames, Iowa. It explores issues of home, place, and sustainability in the American Midwest. The artwork uses cyanotype and van dyke alternative photo processes in combination with oil painting and watercolor to address the changing character of memory and place. Landscape is a constant theme, and is used to express emotion and imply atmosphere.

This writing documents the intention of the artist in creating the work. It also documents the physical methods of creating the work and the conceptual development. A variety of connections and comparisons to art historical and contemporary influences are made to place the artwork and explain its relevance. A thumbnail documentation of the artwork that was exhibited follows. The artwork in this exhibition is a documentation of the pursuit of understanding place in a contemporary context.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This writing serves to summarize and document the work I have done as a graduate student pursuing a Masters of Fine Arts in Integrated Visual Arts. Within it, I discuss the visual and conceptual conclusions I have developed over my three years of study. These written thoughts supplement the visual component of my thesis, which is the exhibition *Arable Visions* that took place from March 24 to May 4 2013 at the Gallery in the Round at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Ames, Iowa. A documentation of the artworks presented in this show follows in the abstract of this written portion of the thesis.

This show explores the role of humans in the world of the landscape of the Midwest. We have drastically altered the natural ecosystem of the Great Plains, and this artwork provides a space to explore the implications of these actions. Many who live in the cities have never seen a farm and do not know where their food comes from, yet food and water are two of our most vital resources for survival. Even though I grew up in Iowa, I feel distanced from my food – I do not know where it comes from or who grows it. Since the industrialization of food production, less than one percent of people in America provide all of the food we eat. Our values of efficiency and mechanization have streamlined food production gives us time for recreation, but at what cost?

This work aims to transfer a love of the land and the farming community to my audience, as well as a respect for an agrarian way of life. Farming is sometimes seen as work for people who are uncultured and perhaps not intelligent. We rarely think of our reliance on the land as an urban culture, even though we idolize it in our artwork and our media like western films and cheery landscape paintings. Rather than relegating farming to something that is “good for someone else but not me,” we need a constructive way to think about how these two worlds work together. Our urban culture idolizes farms, woods, rivers and lakes in cheery landscape paintings, though we rarely recognize our dependence on the land for survival. Instead, our consumption of goods destroys the land.

People are becoming more aware of these issues. We are beginning to see more farmers markets and efforts to source food locally and sustainably in our communities. People are becoming more aware of the effects of extractive agriculture and the
importance of stewardship. By exploring the relationship of place and sustenance in the context of a farm-based economy in my artwork, I hope to provide a place for viewers to draw their own conclusions and contemplate the implications of our lifestyle.
CHAPTER 2: ARTIST STATEMENT

“So long as we live, we are going to be living with skylarks, nightingales, daffodils, waterfowl, streams, forests, mountains, and all the other creatures that romantic poets and artists have yearned toward. And by the way we live we will determine whether or not those creatures will live.”

Wendell Berry, from The Whole Horse (Berry, 63-79)

Making art is like working with the land. It is a struggle to make something out of marks that cannot be erased or moved. The struggle is for control and also for a loss of it. I hope to address our cultural relationship with the land and our sense of place. We are constantly building, changing, adding and subtracting. In the Midwest, we are continually working the soil, digging, planting, and nurturing – it is what our lives are about. Yet, our farmlands are continually emptying of people, while our crop yields continue to grow. This change in land represents a shift in culture or in mindset. My artwork is about the desire for whole relationships and whole communities, but also recognizes the complexities that arise in a contemporary world. Through the process of creating artwork, I re-frame my memories and ideas (which have been developed by my response to my community) and turn them into physical, tangible objects – pieces of art.

I see the world as a series of symbols. The Jewish scientist Charles Bliss invented a language of pictures rather than symbols. He believed image based languages would create a moral world because images have implied meaning to each person. Therefore, a written word would have an implicit interpretation. My work is made up of many images that can be “read” in a similar way. Their meaning changes depending on their context, but each person will interpret them in a different way. The spaces I create act as a parallel space for contemplation and reflection. By submitting to this parallel world created by my imagery, I can see myself within a new context, and this helps change how I see myself. Since I am to help people see themselves in a new way, the art is intended to be more than an act of simple meditation, but a spur or catalyst.
I created this body of work because I sense in myself a divorce from the land and food growing, even though I live in the heart of the Midwest. This alarms me because to be separated from the physical and essential parts of life seems to be a symptom of a deeper sickness. It allows ideas to be only ideas. They take no form or action, and dreams do not come to fruition. By the work of our hands we live, and without it we die. My urbanized context allows me to live in ignorance. I do not know how the work of my hands brings me nourishment except in a very abstract economic sense, and yet, I live. Something is disconnected.

Am I just another “romantic artist” yearning towards what is imagined to be pure and pristine? Is a self-sustaining community only something that exists in imagination? Is wilderness - a seemingly un-soiled habitat - what I really long for? In a way, we yearn for these things, and dreams of what we do not have are vital to us. They give us motivation to pursue the future. I hope to address a way living through my art in which community and loyalty are valued over industry and production. This way of life values the limits of the land, and preserves what we call “wilderness”. We are responsible for the work we have done, and its sometimes-destructive results. So in that way, my artwork does yearn, and it does look back to consider the past and what has been lost.

However, I do not intend for my art to be a replacement for a relationship with the food we eat or the knowledge of how to grow it. Food growing knowledge has slipped from our cultural vernacular, and we have little idea of how the ecological system supports our lives. My art is a reflection of my own thoughts about my relationship with nature. By a reflection, it is possible to understand or to know more by seeing oneself more clearly from the outside. My hope is to cause the viewer to contemplate his or her relationship to his or her ecological environment. The art serves as a visual recording of my own thoughts, which may then spark a new and different conversation within the viewer – it becomes collaboration between artist and viewer.

We are not outside nature. We are part of it, and we should strive to be fully part of it. My art is the method I use to question this: how do we participate in a constructive way with our environment without taking advantage of its bounty? It also points out where we consider ourselves separate from nature, contrasting the “natural” with the “manmade”. My art hopes to explore our assumptions about our things and our place in our environment.
“There is what my reason tells me. There is what my church tells me. There is what my dreams tell me. There is what this land tells me. I’m coming to accept that I’ll never bring all those things together before I die. But on my strongest days, I can tell myself without guilt or fear, it is not paganism or idolatry or sacrilege or sin. It is just what I know. And what they tell me, these things I finally let myself trust, is what we’re doing to this land is not only murder. It is suicide.”

Ann Pancake, from Strange As This Weather Has Been (168-80)
CHAPTER 3: THE ARTWORK

Visual development

There are three main groups of work in the exhibition *Arable Visions*. Predominantly, these pieces fall into the category of landscapes. They include imagery that is familiar to the Midwest experience, specifically my life experience. Space, color, and symbols play a major role. These three bodies of work are three attempts to address multiple facets of the same issue, which is the contemplation of a wholesome relationship with the land and with one’s community.

The first part of the development of my thesis exhibition are pieces from the *Meanderings* series. Visually, they are something of a hodge-podge at first: the frames are all different sizes and different types. They are all small colorful watercolor illustrations, rarely larger than 8x10”, and are framed with old and antique frames found at garage sales and thrift stores. Each of them are held carefully and individually. This refers to their place in my mind, since they are meant to be shared personal reflections, like a conversation with friends at home. The frames give them a preciousness and separateness. As Robert Adams, the environmental photographer, says “Beauty is the confirmation of meaning in life;” (Robert Adams, Art 21). These pieces are meant to be a reassurance: a place of play and a wholeness of spirit.

*Meanderings* share a similar method of painting. There is some mixing of media in these pieces, and quite a bit of mixing of imagery. They are made of bright and sometimes pastel colors that bleed and drip. The abstracted areas delineate spaces, which have horizons and other landscape imagery, buildings, flowers, grasses, trees, animals, or
people. They are not photographs, but are done with a degree of fidelity to the appearance of the original reference image. Some of the works contain patterns representing farm landscapes as seen from the air. This may refer to an overall look at the land, and it also connects to the care and love put into traditional quilt handcraft.

In a few of these small pieces, there is a young girl facing away from the viewer. She can be a stand-in for me, or for those in the future or past generations. She is intended as a way for the viewer to enter to the work. These pieces are very small, and so I feel there should be a “reward” for viewing them closely. For example, drawing a building, animal, or person is a recognizable representation of a space and idea. The girl serves to draw us in and helps us to relate to the rest of the imagery.

The second group of artworks is blue cyanotypes on oak panel: the *All That Was* series. It consists of thirty-six pieces hung on the wall in a grid formation. The imagery is collected from my family history, and the grid provides a structure for relationship between each of the pieces. As the display moves outward from the center, there begin to be holes in the grid formation, causing them to visually “dissolve”. This refers to the changing and sometimes diminishing state of memory.

Visually suspended within a landscape are photos of objects and machinery from my grandmother’s farm, and also my own life. They are a mechanism for memory and contemplation. The objects photographed represent the memory and love a person bestows upon a place or a thing, or the intention for it. They provide an artistic signpost or memorial to the dreams and hopes attached to something that no longer serves its original purpose. They are brooding and sorrowful.

The cyanotype chemical adheres better in some places than others, and the wood grain shows through. This gives the appearance of clouds or water. The texture obscures the image printed upon the wood. The dark blue field behind the image becomes part of
the larger landscape around it such as simply painted clouds, horizons, water, or other agrarian subjects. These landscape elements are literal and metaphorical. These elements exist around us, but they take a place of higher meaning within the art and within my mind. Landscape has always been powerful to me as I was growing up. Especially when I was younger, traveling across the prairie put me in a sort of trance or reverie. I could respond to the landscape and elements of nature in a deep emotional way. The space and weather transform me to a state of emotion or being that allows me to assign a new or more abstract meaning to a space or event. Feelings and meanings are abstract, and their interpretation is different to every person -- just as light, weather and space are.

The All That Was series responds to ideas presented in the artwork of David Sebberson. He is also concerned with a discussion between past and future as evidenced in the growth and change of the land he is from. Sebberson expresses memories of the past farmscape which he remembers growing up, recording the progress of modern farming. He speaks of a progressive “emptying out” of the things he knew, and discusses what it means to have a place to oneself. Stylistically his approach is different from mine, but ideologically we are similar. His art uses rigid structures combined with landscape to reference an accumulation of new memories gained from periodically visiting his birthplace over many years. The land did not remain static while he was gone, and his paintings acknowledge time and the change of landscape. Now places he love may exist only in his memory, and in his paintings (Sebberson, interview).

This idea is continued in my third group of images All That May Be (pictured on page 37), the larger cyanotype and van dye combination prints and drawings. They pursue similar goals of the All That Was series, but include contemporary images. They address more current questions about our way of life. Visually, they are the most complex of all the pieces, made up of multiple photographic images, exposures, and watercolor drawings. The images flow together even though they are printed in
different color chemicals. The exposure fades away around the edges, which are uneven due to the flowing and bleeding of the photosensitive chemicals. These images, though predominantly brown, yellow, and blue, have splashes of other colors specific to each work, such as green or red.

I find strong visual inspiration for my work in Gregory Euclide’s drawings, paintings, and assemblages. He examines the land around where he grew up in Northern Minnesota by creating work with many horizons and a mixture of two- and three-dimensional material. In the many works on his personal website, he records the changing of his landscape, from a rural to an urban one, and sees the complexities that arise because of the mechanization of our lives. His focus is primarily land-centric, rarely using animals or humans in his work. It is about construction and creation, and a balance with what already exists. His work begins to look like typographical maps in places, referring to construction and planning. He begins to call into question the role and meaning of these structures (Euclide).

My images and symbols are recognizable and accurately rendered, though their format is unconventional. In each piece, the photographs and drawings imply at least two horizon lines. The photos have a fisheye warp to them. The warped perspective is also applied to the drawn imagery in these exposures. Drawn elements sometimes continue implied lines already in the piece, and sometimes they cover or add to it. The drawn imagery is diverse — sometimes farming or agrarian subjects and sometimes urban or humanitarian subjects. The effect is of a collage existing within a visual space creating an unreal or impossible space, somewhat like a vision or memory.

**Process and material**

My work is comprised of basically three media processes: digital photography and editing, alternative and historical photo printing, and painting. These methods have developed over the last three years, morphing from separate areas of interest into one
combined approach. Experimenting in new media gave me improved ways of expressing myself, which in turn, sparked new ideas.

Sebberson’s perspective towards his Midwestern artwork has been helpful for me in understanding my own process and perspective towards my own work. He quotes the critic Lucy Lippard who says that the idea of a place is made up of complex memories that cannot be represented in something as simple as one photograph. Through the act of painting, Sebberson records the value of the landscape from his childhood. His aim is to create a physical object, perhaps a relic, to make his memories and thoughts tangible (Sebberson, interview). I am pursuing a similar goal. The act of making my work acts a sort of documentation of a thought while I make it, but when it is finished; it has a life of its own and gains a new meaning. This multifaceted understanding can be better explained by examining each of the different parts of my creative process.

Digital photography functions as a method of documenting the world I see and the things I experience. The images in this library are representations of experiences or objects I find important at the time. Sometimes, years later, these things are obscure and I have forgotten why I took the picture in the first place. But other times, the images are still important to me, and have in some ways gained meaning. I like to use a combination of these two kinds of images because the importance of symbols in our lives has an ebb and flow – things are forgotten and remembered over time. Though many images are catalogued on the Internet, it is up to the individual to make sense of them. My work brings meaning and place to images that are easily misplaced or forgotten in digital storage. It allows them to be part of a collective memory and experience. The joining and mixing of images also gives them their own meaning in their new context, providing structure and support.

The medium of photography has meaning implied in the way it is shot, printed, and stored. Traditional film photographs are taken mechanically, recorded by light and stored in silver, and are safe as long as they are chemically processed and carefully stored. They are something physical and tangible – an object you can touch, see, stain, or burn, even though they represent a past event. Digital photographs, on the other hand, are predominantly the product of electricity, stored in metal but requiring a complex devise (the computer) to see and retrieve. If the technology goes out of date, the photo may be lost passively, just like forgetting a memory. In this way, digital photography is much
more elusive. However, it is also convenient and prolific – available on the Internet or through Facebook. The usefulness of photos depends on our ability to retrieve them. My own digital library is currently very accessible to me, but will it be in 30 years? Working with these images allows me to make them physical, and this process changes their meaning and enforces memory.

The photos I use for my artwork come from the images I have taken and stored. Some of them are taken specifically for the purpose of the art. These are often taken with a fish-eye lens because the distortion implied seeks to represent the space I sensed around me as I took the photo. I may use an image that was originally intended to be a record of an event and not as a reference for future art – they are often taken with a traditional lens and perspective. These digital images are sometimes lost on my computer for years, and when I rediscover them, they may have gained new meaning and strength. When images become important, I seek to use them in my artwork.

In the first step of processing an image or series of images, I use Photoshop to digitally alter and manipulate the work. Sometimes an image is left nearly un-altered except for the steps required to make it into a negative. Other times, I add or subtract elements to improve the impact of the piece. To me, this process is similar to the narrative we tell ourselves as we fix our understanding of new information, events, and people in our memory. Very few have the ability to remember every detail of a memory perfectly (interestingly, we call the ability to recall perfectly a photographic memory). And so it is natural for the photograph to undergo a change before it becomes printed (or imprinted). As I work, I seek to cause the image to more closely resemble a memory or feeling. The real memory I have may not be photographically accurate or perfect, but other elements fill in the details I imagine, like words, emotions, colors, and impressions. I attempt to translate these to the image as I develop the digital negative. The next step is the chemical processing.

The medium of alternative (or historical) photo processing becomes more useful to me as I develop my work, and it is still a technique I am learning and exploring. Through this work, the digital image, stored by electricity, becomes physical and tangible: first by printing a digital negative, and then using the Cyanotype and Van Dyke chemical processes. Rather than inkjet printing the images for the final piece, using historical chemical processes implies content. Our associations with the color palette may
remind us of something that has stood the test of time, preciousness, or longevity. Using an older method is also somewhat like reliving an old memory. It is informed by the newer technology but seeks to include the character of the historical as well.

The application of the chemicals to paper brings an element of chance to my work. I apply them loosely, with a lot of water, allowing them to run together and mix. The actions of water and surface tension, as well as color changes during drying, can only be controlled in the most general way. When the digital negative is exposed as a contact print, only fragments of the image are presented in the final piece. This mimics the state of memory, which is elusive, even though we often assume our recollection of it to be fixed and under our control. The two chemical processes also react on the paper where they overlap and their appearance changes over time. This adds another uncontrollable aspect to the work. During the chemical developing process, I tone or bleach the image on paper with certain chemicals – washing soda, tea, and photo developer. This allows me to increase and decrease contrast in certain areas, but it does not allow me to ever erase the chemicals completely or with a high level of precision. The past is also something we cannot change, though we may try to erase parts of it from our memory – with varying degrees of success. The chemical stability is as certain here as the stability of our memories.

The element of chance is vitally important here, and I think of Andy Goldsworthy’s work. His pieces are about his construction being changed by effect of time and nature, which is out of our control but also something we can learn to predict. It is, in a way, collaboration with nature. An unexpected wind can destroy hours of his work in seconds. Yet, he works with the action of the tides and the quality of light at different times of day, planning for his works to be best photographed during a certain window (Goldsworthy). My work also includes this element of chance. The running of the chemicals provides a framework for my later drawing process.

The final step in the production of my work is the application of imagery to the surface with paint, pencil, and watercolor (collectively, I refer to this as drawing). This is the most personal part of the process and may imply a narrative. This layer of meaning attempts to bring the full value of an experience, emotion, and decision to a physical reality. The drawn elements of the work are usually part of a decision or exploration process. I gather significant images mentally while I am working. I often use photo
references, and by doing so, continue the process of making a digital image tangible. I am drawing instead of photographing which brings an implication of imagery that is imagined or artificial. Sometimes I may include an idea I have only just run across and combine it, visually, with an idea I have been pondering for a long time. The photo memory made physical decides what can fit or what the composition needs to finally come together. As I am working, I allow the photographic elements to come through, and I avoid covering the parts necessary to the meaning. Sometimes an implied line is continued, and in this way, the photographic elements become part of the drawn or new elements.

Working with photographic imagery alters and re-frames all the elements of the idea I start with. Sometimes this serves to “complete a thought,” and so I put an idea to rest. Other times, struggling with the composition reveals an idea is in conflict with another idea or element. This motivates me to attempt a new piece. I do not finish a work until I feel it is resolved, but there is always more to try. I am already planning a future series using fabric as a way to loosen the edges of my work so it is not so confined. I expect this will bring new technical challenges and discoveries, as well as new ways of composing. The focus of the work – a pursuit of agrarian ideals – will continue, though the mode of transmitting them will evolve. I hope to show an agrarian ideal in a way that is not didactic, but leaves visual handles (recognizable images) for people to explore a similar train of thought. It is important for me that people can see the work in its own context, and not force it to be only in the context I give it. I want the unexpected development of community and chance to play a stronger role in my future work.
CHAPTER 4: CONCEPTS AND INFLUENCES

Learning from historical and contemporary artwork

The historical and contemporary artwork and writing done on the subject of conservation and agrarian subjects influence my current work. I see the relationship with the land through two lenses: one is the view of the sustainable farmer, and one is the view of the urban environmentalist. Both have the goals of an efficient and harmonious lifestyle with nature, but they understand the problems in fundamentally different ways. These two approaches are what make up my own view of how my art speaks and what its significance is.

The urban environmental understanding emphasizes an anthropomorphic or spiritual connection with the land. People who live in cities may not have a practical way of understanding limits of the land and animals because an urban environment seems to have limitless supplies of everything essential: food and shelter. They regard the land with awe, making it unattainable. Contemporary environmental artwork reflects this. While it draws inspiration from the natural, it seems to be concerned about the land in a sense of metaphor or myth. We tend to anthropomorphize animals and nature. This either moves us towards a greater understanding of the world because it entices us to learn, or it can cause us to become removed from environmental concerns. For example, anthropomorphizing an animal might cause misunderstanding when it comes to hunting wild populations in order to control their numbers. The urban and humanistic understanding of the world primarily uses landscape as metaphor.

In Building and Re-Building, I utilize the method of anthropomorphizing to draw the viewer into the scene and to help him or her to relate to it. The two Boer goats in the foreground look at their surroundings, seeming to examine their environment. We can begin to understand their tactile relationship to their place based on how the space is used. They encounter a seemingly un-friendly goat habitat, but perhaps the viewer understands the tenacity of goats. One might think of the food a goat might eat in a city, or lack of food. The goats inhabit one space, but consider another. Someone who is familiar with goats will think of them according to the behaviors they know they exhibit,
or as a source of milk or meat. They might think about zoning ordinances preventing people from keeping goats in the city. Someone who is not familiar with the habits of goats will tend to anthropomorphize them, or think of them as a companion animal. I hope to leave the relationships with the animals open enough that they could be understood in both of these contexts.

Anthropomorphism in art is a popular subject, especially in children’s books and movies. Most are familiar with the characters of Beatrix Potter: a frog in a rain jacket, Peter Rabbit in his blue cardigan, and a smartly dressed fox (Potter). The animals in these stories embody human characteristics: the fox is cunning and shrewd, always looking to make an extra buck off someone. Peter Rabbit is opportunistic, but quickly learns the error of his ways in the farmer’s garden. The frog embodies a hermit-like character, not so great in hygiene, and somewhat plodding in personality. These perspectives are useful
because they help us to see ourselves in a new light. We tell stories to learn about ourselves.

However, too much of this approach can lead to incorrectly understand animals, the land, and our relationship to them. In the context of Beatrix Potter’s stories, rabbits will eat whatever tastes good – they don’t have a sense of belonging. Frogs will be slimy. Assuming human standards on animal instinct, at some point, becomes unhealthy. The popular cat memes on the Internet are a contemporary look at our viewpoints towards animals. We love our pets, and we are entertained by them, and a little of that is fine. But this approach loses relevance when we consider modern farming practices. We must learn to understand animals and the land on their own terms, learn their limits, and see our relationship with them realistically. Anthropomorphism can prevent us from having a deeper and more responsible understanding with our place and how we live.

The artist Matthew Jacobson uses a farmer’s perspective towards animals in his work. He lives near an Amish community. In a perfect world, Amish standards preserve community and land-based ideals. Teamwork between man and nature are still a way of life, and the ideal Amish farmer respects the limits of his animals. Jacobson’s work seeks to emphasize this through a primarily representational approach. In this piece, *Young Man*, it is understood that animal and man are co-dependent. The animal plays an active role in earning its keep – it is not an imaginary figure or metaphorical invention. Without the horses, the boy would have no work, and without the boy, the horses would live a diminished life. His work exemplifies a second approach to our relationship with the land, one of active responsibility, not mere imagining and fancy (Moseman).

In *Building and Re-building*, the land can be approached in two ways – one from the perspective of land as a partnership, and one as the land as an alternate space for meditation and contemplation. The joining of these perspectives creates a particularly strong effect. I hope to express the value of relationship and context by emphasizing that
our constructions are a product of our work. These environments affect our ecological and human communities.


*Controlled Resource* approaches the subject of consumption under human willpower. Our renewable and non-renewable resources need to be treated with respect and care. Oil provides us with surplus energy, and we must learn to harness its use carefully. I considered the abuse of natural resources while working on this piece, both energy sources like hydrocarbons and less recognized ones like good pasture. Pasture is not seen as an energy source except people like biofuels scientists. Plants convert sunlight into an energy form we can directly consume: food. The regionalists celebrated our control of the land and our efficient ways of extracting its energy, sometimes with little thought to the consequences.
“Sodbuster” by Harvey Dunn celebrates the hard work of the farmer to till the native prairie to provide farmland. The wildness of the prairie is highlighted in the clouds moving along, the grass swaying, and the physical struggle of breaking the sod. The painting is about the relationship between man and beast working together to make a living in the harsh but beautiful landscape (Mosman).

Though it is an exciting piece meant to honor the work and determination of the farmer, it reminds me of the commentary of farmer and writer Wendell Berry. He says in *The Gift of Good Land*:

“As we felled and burned the forests, so we burned, plowed, and overgrazed the prairies. We came with visions, but not with sight. We did not see or understand where we were or what was there, but destroyed what was there for the sake of what we desired. And the desire was always native to the place we had left behind.’

“The forest could not survive because we did not see it; we saw cleared fields. The prairies could not survive because in their place we saw cornfields and pastures sowed to the cool-season grasses of the Old World. And this habit of assigning a higher value to what might be than to what is has stayed with us, so that we have continued to sacrifice the health of our land and our own communities to the abstract values of money making and industrialism.” (Berry, 82-83)

Grant Wood’s mural *Breaking the Prairie Sod* in the library at Iowa State University demonstrates our American vision of creating our imaginings over and in spite of what exists, rather than working with the land that is already established. We see the wooden plow in the background, with a steel plow in the foreground. The evolution of progress in the Midwest is demonstrated as technology improves life. The work and sweat that Dunn so clearly emphasizes is idealized into a streamlined, bright, cheery painting. A young man attempts to chop trees as one enters the library, and Abraham
Lincoln swiftly chops on the way out, showing us what we can learn to do if we follow the right path (University Museums).

Wood communicates the idea that the Midwesterners have a valid and modern way of life in an age that glorified industry and mechanization. Their religious heritage produced the idea of Manifest Destiny, in which many settlers believed it was their commission from God to develop the land and make it be productive. Wood’s relationship with nature relies on the land intimately. He recognizes the intrinsic beauty of the native flowers of the region. However, he fails to see the negative impact that this lifestyle has on the land. The close foreground includes beautiful native woodland flowers. Though I am sure he intended them to be a celebration of the land’s bounty, I cannot help but imagine that their demise is imminent as their protective canopy is so heroically chopped down for consumption and increased productivity.

Our actions have consequences that stretch beyond our vision. In Controlled Resource, I consider the possible outcomes of this scenario: the image of a pipeline provides energy for a town to grow. The town provides a market for the grass fed animals. But perhaps the use of oil is also polluting our water and land, both of which are necessary for our life, and the life of the animals. Our control of these resources is imagined. The composition of the image reflects this instability, a fluid and moving context.

In our pursuit of progress, the meaning and value of community and relationship is easily lost. Our visions overrun our sight, and we forget our responsibility to the ecological community around us. Artist Lynne Hull emphasizes a new definition of community that includes the

Grant Wood. Breaking the Prairie Sod. Oil on Canvas. center panel: 23’x11’ side panels: 11’x9’ each 1935-1937. Parks Library at Iowa State University, Ames, IA

land and creatures around us. She says in Suzi Gablik’s book *The Re-enchantment of Art*:

> “Except in very few instances, all man’s activities are aimed at benefitting himself, as a species if not as an individual…. Hasn’t civilization brought mankind to a point where he could take actions which would benefit primarily other species?” (Gablik,78).

The need to relate and provide for species other than humans is a wholesome idea. Her piece “Lighting” *Raptor Roost*, completed in 1990, exemplifies a renewed agrarian attitude, which seeks to create a place for other creatures by recognizing community and mutual dependence. She erected poles with branches, a sculpture to humans, but a roosting place for birds that can be electrocuted on power lines. Her other artworks include rock engravings whose deep cuts hold water for animals to drink, and branch sculptures which provide roosting places for waterfowl (Hull). In these examples, the dependence upon animal species strives to create an avenue for spiritual wholeness. Humans may begin to recognize that we are communal and that our actions affect animals as well.

As we consider our living and our working, addressing communal concerns brings fulfillment in life. Hull is onto something. As people living on what used to be the tall grass prairies, our actions to renew relationships with native creatures are limited because of our extensive land use. Real sacrifice will need to happen to consider those whose needs are different than ours. My piece *Henslow’s Sparrow, Won’t You Be My Neighbor?* considers the fragile environment of the Henslow’s Sparrow in this context. Its environmental needs are great, as it requires large spaces of un-touched grassland. Grazing and mowing disturb its habitat and it will not stay. They are an endangered species in Iowa, since the land here is more than ninety nine percent disturbed. We are willing to let animals like this go extinct because we do not know about them. We wish to have our pets with us and are willing to pay vet bills to keep them healthy, but small creatures like the Henslow’s sparrow are overlooked and unappreciated. Why are we so discriminating? We ask for ecological conservation but are unwilling to sacrifice in order to make that possible.
Our relationship with the land is ongoing, and it is what we will pass along to our children. Our attitudes to life will affect them in the future. Wendell Berry says in his essay *The Whole Horse*:

“This is an economy, and in fact a culture, of the one night stand. “I had a good time,” says the industrial lover, “but don’t ask me my last name.” Just so, the industrial eater says to the svelte industrial hog, “We’ll be together at breakfast. I don’t want to see you before then, and I don’t care to remember you afterwards.” (Berry, 63-79).

The one night stand economy – buy it now, pay for it later – has repercussions that we have not yet fully understood. Predications are that my generation and the next will live in a world that is very different from the world we live in now. Energy will be more
expensive, and so food prices will go up. As the world gets warmer, growing will be harder.

*Grace* contemplates the relationship of the next generation to what has been left. An eroded field with water flowing out of it sets the scene for a child’s play. The sense of wandering and imagination is upheld in the framed image, but the scene around it sets the tone, only seen by the outside viewer. The little girl does not know the context she is in.

Naomi Friend, *Grace*
Cyanotype and Oil on Panel, 11x11” 2012

The ideas in this piece are loosely based off of the ideas of Alexander Hogue. He was primarily concerned with the destruction of the land as the great depression and dust bowl hit. After much speculation on wheat prices, the bottom fell out of the market. More and more farmers plowed virgin soil to raise more crops in order to make a living, not unlike today. Erosion was a problem even before the drought really hit.

In his painting *The Crucified Land* we clearly see Hogue’s condemnation of farming practices which plow under the native grasses, weaken the land, and make it susceptible to erosion. He is specifically speaking against the practices of land and crop speculation and deep, endless tillage to plant more wheat crops. These practices culminated in the dust bowl. Hogue appeals to the community around him to care for their farmland responsibly (De Long). He believes farming is a worthy profession, as Wood did, but also sees the responsibility required for all those who have power over others to make management good decisions for the wellbeing of the community.
In *Grace*, I created based on a similar desire to help us remember why proper care of the land is important. *The Crucified Land* points out that our actions are our legacy for those who come after. My cousin Grace is the figure in the print, and her family lives directly adjacent to a prairie preserve in Minnesota (where I photographed her). Her childhood is shaped by the land set aside and preserved from modern farming practices. It is a precious place. We can either maintain or exploit the land that later generations will rely on. Our decisions are short-sighted, though family values call for long-sighted decisions.

The sense of space and mood in the *All That Was* series is somewhat reminiscent of Robyn O’Neil’s work, and also the landscape paintings of the Dutch landscape masters. Both of these use landscape as a way to create an atmosphere for the characters. O’Neil does very large graphite drawings of spaces. In the detail of *These final hours embrace at last; this is our ending, this is our past*, by Robyn O’Neil in 2007, she uses scale to imply the vastness of the world and comparative weakness of the humans. In this man vs. nature scenario, the humans are beaten and overwhelmed (White). This reminds me of what could happen if we do not recognize our place and work to support the land, instead of using it for our advantage. The Dutch masters also create an overwhelming space, but their implication is not so much hopelessness as transcendent awe. The figures in these paintings are often farmers. Instead of feeling sorry for them, we feel they are lucky to live in such a
large world. I hope for the *All That Was* series to have a mixture of these two meanings. Nature is not something we can tame, no matter how many safety buffers we think we might have against its effects. But when we properly care for the land, it is vast and beautiful, as in the example of Jan van Gruyen's *Landscape with Two Oaks*.

Our need for shelter from this awesome power becomes central to us as frail human creatures. In my piece *Dwelling Sustenance*, I consider what our homes are and what they mean to us in terms of security. Lucy Lippard also explores the idea of the land as a mother or shelter. She sees standing stones set up by ancient peoples in the Moors of England and connects them with the desires of the Earth Art. She believes living closer to the land is way back to a spiritual understanding of one’s roots. Earth artworks seek a sublime experience, as the standing stones invoke. (Lippard, 1-39)

*Dwelling Sustenance* is not an earth artwork, but it does evoke a sense of shelter and home. The imagery of a traditional homestead or Midwestern farmhouse, specifically my family’s farmhouse, is combined with the workings of a coal power plant. Below is the image of an earth-sheltered dwelling as developed by the architect Mike Reynolds. The farmhouse served as a shelter warmed by trees or cow chips before the widespread use of coal and electricity for heat. Reynolds tries to simplify dwellings by using passive
solar energy for heat. Though the approach is quite different from earth artwork, I address our need for shelter and security, and hope for a better way of achieving this. The intimacy of the home is expressed Wendell Berry in his essay *A Native Hill*. He says:

"I came to see myself growing out of the earth like the other animals and plants. I saw my body and my daily motions as brief coherences and articulations of the energy of place, which would fall back into it like leaves in the autumn."

(Berry, 7)

We are a part of our land. The food we eat and the place we sleep deserves our respect. Our care of the land and intentionality towards our dwellings are essential.

In all of my work, space and weather implies emotion or state of being. *Submerged* from the *All That Was* series is an example. To me, a realistic rendering can be abstract at the same time since nature is made up of many smaller abstractions. The pattern of frost on a winter window looks like frost, but it is also lines radiating from a point, sometimes changing but always in a rhythm. Clouds change as you look. Grasses weighed down and cracked by snow have an entirely different line quality and energy than mature grasses in the summer. Everything around us is made up of abstract forms, so the shapes within the landscape take on an attitude carrying association and meaning, just as the strokes of an abstract expressionist artwork might.

Naomi Friend, *Submerged*, Cyanotype and oil on panel, 11x11,” 2012

In this piece, the clouds are sweeping and brooding, and they appear heavy. Yet, they are simply paint on a panel. Just as in abstract art, our mind translates this and
generates a meaning or impression. However, since this implies landscape, the forms have even more power since they have a context. I imagine a damp or chilly wind with this piece, and the color also implies an atmosphere and mood.

Andrew Wyeth uses landscape and weather atmospheres in a similar way. In the watercolor study "Knapsack", the figure in the foreground is indistinct, but the foreboding clouds indicate a wet and heavy fall day, implying contemplation, waiting, time, and memory. His work and life story is described by writer Gene Logsdon. The context for his paintings is the Kuerner family farm lived in and cared for by generations. His pieces use light, cloud movement, and the season to communicate a mood. Often the colors are of autumn, a time of death or rest. His skies are often overcast with brooding rain clouds or hazy fog. The impression brings a mood strongly through the depiction of landscape and atmosphere. In this context, the elements of landscape function in the same way as an abstract painting might. The figures in his work become a part of their land. (Logsdon, 53-71). My pieces show the context of the works made by my family members who have lived on the family farm for generations. The weather and mood becomes a part of the piece in a similar fashion.

**Writings on food and food growing:**

The work of writers and naturalists such as Wendell Berry, William Cronon, Aldo Leopold, James Thoreau, John Burroughs, Wes Jackson, Rachel Carson, and Barbara Kingsolver have largely influence the imagery and themes in my work. The past few years have been years of exploration in learning about agriculture, land management, and sustainable food. I have sought to understand why one might choose to be vegetarian, a locovore, or loves to be a carnivore. My own values and beliefs in these areas have been developing. Sometimes food choices are passive, but often they are a reflection of deeper beliefs and concerns, and uncovering these concerns has influenced my work. Understanding our relationship to food is a way of understanding our relationship to the land. Barbara Kingsolver points out how hard it is to know where our food comes from,. In her book *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, she says,

“We’d surely do better, if only we knew any better. In two generations we’ve transformed ourselves from a rural to an urban nation. North American children
begin their school year around Labor Day and finish at the beginning of June with no idea that this arrangement was devised to free up children’s labor when it was needed on the farm. Most people of my grandparent’s generation had an intuitive sense of agricultural basics…. This knowledge has vanished from our culture.” (Kingsolver, 12).

Being able to understand oneself in terms of our physical strengths and limitations is an important but uncommon idea in our contemporary culture.

Kingsolver seeks food culture rooted in a sense of belonging. She gives the example of an Atkins diet or “loose weight fast” plans as a product of our over-commercialized way of life – even our food culture is sold to us. She says “A food culture is not something that gets sold to people. It arises out of a place, a soil, a climate, a history, a temperament, a collective sense of belonging.” (Kingsolver, 17) The larger picture here, to me, is that a food culture comes out of a real community culture, and a real community is not built on commercialism, it is built on relationships. Kingsolver’s original goal was to consume as few fossil fuels as possible to survive, and to supply her food locally. As a result of this, she built community getting her meat from a local farmer instead of the grocery store, eggs from a neighbor, and learned to grow her own vegetables with help from her family. We don’t know where our goods come from, and so we don’t know how we survive – or where we come from.

These ideas changed my understanding of the context of my own work. Just as a food culture should rise out of a place and not be brought into it from the outside, so my art should be. My creating responds to the community I know and understand. I have learned of many artists in art history textbooks who have made important contributions to the way we understand art and ourselves. Yet, these artists often work in general ways, and are in some ways the product of their schools or a culture of artists in the cities. The concept of art being an expression of a whole community – of its farmers, bankers, grocers, and many other professions, is an intriguing one. I want to respond to this community.
Ingredient List is a work about the science of our food. Because of our technological prowess, we are able to genetically modify food to speed up a process that used to be done by selective breeding. We do not know what might happen in the future to these animals. This control over the outcome of another life is powerful but uncontrolled. As Americans, we consume genetically modified and hybrid food on a regular basis, but we do not think about the consequences this has towards local farming communities. We simply think of the price.

Reading Wendell Berry has made me realize how our estrangement from our food production is a symptom of a larger estrangement from our work. We desire recreation because we have lost our connection to creation. Our satisfactions are sought in forms of diversion, which seek to reflect the satisfaction of the creation. He writes in his essay The Whole Horse:

“Somewhere near the heart of the conservation effort as we have known it is the romantic assumption that, if we have become alienated from nature, we can become unalienated by making nature the subject of contemplation or art,
ignoring the fact that we live necessarily in and from nature – ignoring, in other words, all the economic [physical] issues that we are involved.” (Berry, 63-79)

The emotional toll of being separated from our place becomes something we romanticize and idealize, and while this is cathartic and important, he points out that addressing the “economic issues” require work and action in order for a solution to our environmental situation to be found. We cannot escape into the world of art or literature. Finding a solution requires education and work, and while I choose to express this in my art, I also learn about these issues through action – by keeping a garden, by meeting farmers, and by pursuing a lifestyle accountable for its luxuries.

Relational aesthetics and the effect of art

During my studies for this thesis, I read a number of articles and writings by art theorists questioning the purpose of art. I found Nicholas Bourriaud particularly interesting. Many have written compelling things about what art is for, explaining art as either completely formal in nature: about line, texture, color, and shape; or art is about meaning and moral implications. Bourriaud takes a new approach, explaining art as a way for artists to build relationships with others in a community.

In his book *Relational Aesthetics*, he writes that the art of the 90s is more about the relationship built between artist and viewer than the artifact itself. While this idea does not present itself obviously in my work at the moment, though I hope to grow in this area in the future. Bourriaud hopes for the structure of art to change: the museum should not keep “bankers hours,” but instead, should be open from noon to midnight – when the public has the most freedom to pursue things like entertainment and relationships. The art becomes about people, not about an institution or an abstract idea of art. The artwork acts as evidence of a relationship made (Bourriaud). The artists Catherine Bouzide, Lynne Hull, and Jason deCaires Taylor are examples of artists concerned with environmental destruction who pursue Bourraud’s idea of relational aesthetics.

Catherine Bouzide creates art emphasizing communal relationships and connecting to the importance of land and community. She participated in the Illinois Fields Project in farming community members invite artists to live with farm families and produce a work of art with them. Her project *Potable* celebrates the last clean community
wells in the Bayview community of Milwaukee. She created one hundred ceramic cups and then gave them to participants, who were invited to drink from the community well as a celebration of water from the earth and the significance of place (Schwalbe-Bouzide). In this case, the art serves as a way to physically memorialize something intangible and spiritual, which is exactly Bourriard’s idea of relational aesthetics.

Jason deCaires Taylor also strives to develop an understanding of our relationship to place with his large underwater sculptures off the coast of Cancun. Forty percent of coral reefs have been destroyed by human activity, and tourism is one of the destructive factors. Jason’s sculptures of humans are made from a special cement mixture that creates a place for coral reefs to re-grow, and a place for fish to find shelter. The sculptures themselves are caricatures of people, sometimes criticizing their western lifestyle. The project has attracted many visitors and also decreases traffic through native reefs (deCaires Taylor). Taylor displays an understanding of a world in which the land and the people who live in it are not so distant as we might have once assumed: what benefits one helps the other. The figures change their environment by expanding the coral reefs, and the environment changes them as the coral grows on the sculptures.

These artists’ artwork functions as more than just an object in a museum. The art does something, its very physicality pushes against a consumerist mindset of artwork reproducing artwork for sale. I hope for my work to begin to move in this direction. Currently, my artwork acts as evidence of a thought, something intangible made physical, and the act of learning the physical reality of a belief. The artwork is evidence of a relationship made between new ideas and previously held beliefs. I would like to continue to develop this idea to make these elements stronger and more solidified, and to respond to Bourriaud’s instinct. The purpose of art is ultimately an action, not to remain on the wall of a gallery or museum and only there. The relational aspect of the work needs development. I would like to pursue avenues of bringing the viewer into the work in a way that alters its creation, just as we effect each others lives as we live in community. I do not yet have an idea of how this might take shape, but the media I am exploring are easy to work with and could provide room for viewer response.
Wilderness and romanticism

The spirit of artwork typified by the Hudson River School, Judy Phaff, Andy Goldsworthy, and many others is an interesting point of comparison to my work. They utilize a spiritual and almost romantic sensibility. While I enjoy this artwork, it does not always address the depth of the issues involved in land conservation. Instead, it may use nature or natural forms as an escape from the real. This is not, in itself, a bad thing. The work of Judy Phaff explores a depth of emotions using natural forms in an expressionist way. The pieces are beautiful and interesting, but they might be mistaken as a replacement for the natural, or as an expression of what nature is really like. It serves as an example of how our culture uses the land. Artists following ideas of the romantic sublime turns wilderness into a transcendent experience.

The American west was a symbol of freedom and plenty. Settlers could go to claim land for nearly no money, as long as they had the ambition to pursue it. People knew how to live in the land. The Hudson River School depicts the hope people felt about a pristine wilderness not yet been plundered of its large trees and clear flowing water, as the old world had been. Their paintings were technically detailed and sensational. Viewing was meant to me a sublime experience, and the dream of an untouched landscape is still powerful for many.

Walden by Thoreau continues this conversation by arguing for a proper relationship with the land. Thoreau tries to convince his audience to live away from “the system,” or city, which will only cheat you out of the honest wages of your work (Thoreau). If you lived by the food grown by your own hand, he argued, you would find satisfaction and peace. Thoreau’s book is problematic for a number of reasons – he lived on borrowed land, he was not “cut off” from society as friends brought him gifts, and though he lived outside of town, he still consumed the products of civilization. His arguments are primarily something we might call “first world problems.” Despite these faults, Thoreau’s picture of a benevolent nature that provides for his needs and also gives peace and rest is often repeated and developed in our contemporary culture.

William Cronon argues against this in his essay The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature. At the time of European settlement of the new world, the “wilderness” was seen as something dangerous, something needing to be tamed.
the industrial revolution, Thoreau’s depiction of wilderness is becomes a way to truly understand God, or to find satisfaction in life. The pursuit of the sublime illustrates a mindset we still have in our urbanized culture. The national parks are a place to “escape to,” what we call “wilderness.” All other land has been tainted and polluted by human activity, and is therefore not worth the effort of preservation or restoration. This drives a wistfulness and nostalgia for “wild” places, with little understanding of the human activity required to make these places possible (ie, the act of withholding tillage preserves sections of native prairie – a sacrifice for a farmer) (Cronon).

My work aims to tread the line between what is “wild” and what is “domestic,” and in doing so, to leave room for exploration and discovery. The issue of landscape as an escape is an easy thing for us to fall into. It turns landscape into a mythology, which distances us from actual issues of conservation. I include imagery from both of these categories. In this way, I hope the audience will find a point of entry. I want to venerate a human construction which supports and sustains the life surrounding it, like a beaver creates a habitat suitable for its own purposes. In doing this, many other lives become possible. Lynne Hull and Jason deCares Taylor both do this, and I also want to point out issues of land management still present, and help the viewer explore how he or she might relate to them, just as I am exploring them.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

My studies for the thesis show *Arable Visions* have revealed much about my own process and how it relates with the work of others. My explorations began as I began to question food choices in the context of a Midwestern farming community. The more I learned about sustainable living, the stronger I felt about contributing my voice to those who support this lifestyle.

My artistic explorations began in watercolor, drawing, and painting, but I grew to include photography and historical printing processes as well. This media gained importance for me as I became more familiar with it. The process of taking and finding photographs mimics my recording of memory and life experience. The work of making the photo into a piece of artwork is somewhat like trying to understand my own life experiences. Through processing the conceptual ideas, I make them into a physical piece of artwork: a physical record of learning or belief.

Many artists and writers have informed my understanding of the place of my work. Art through history has often focused on the landscape and farmers. In recent years, the land has gained a metaphorical or spiritual personality in artwork. Since the industrial revolution, people have become secure as food and shelter are easily provided for. However, they have also become wistful for the sublime qualities of the land, because it is something we can never truly tame. Artists like Alexander Hogue point out how our misuse of the land hurts our ecological community and us. Andy Goldsworthy points out our relative fragility. My work seeks to combine the questions of land management and the fragility of the changing landscape and give viewers space to understand their distance from these vital aspects of life.

Writing continues to influence my work. Wendell Berry addresses living in community with responsibility in his writings. He seeks to provide a solution to the problems our individualistic culture has wrought. Barbara Kingsolver also explores and seeks to solve these issues. Their thoughts and ideas have sparked me to learn more about the ecology of the Midwest, and by hearing their struggles I have come to better understand my own difficulties and discomforts towards our contemporary culture.
Through my artwork, I attempt to address vital aspects of the human experience in the context of the farming Midwest. This attempts to characterize the land in a way that is about more than just production, but wholeness of mind and spirit. Yet, I also hope to acknowledge the rightful limits of the land – we ask too much of it, yet we need it for our sustenance. I hope for my work to be a fusing of these two worlds. I want it to reveal the tensions between our built environment and the land established before us.
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APPENDIX

Image Documentation

All That Was
Cyanotype and Oil on Oak Panel
2012-2013
All pieces 11x11 inches
Efficency
Hereafter
Rigidity
Hindrance
Encircled
Birth
Displaced
Burned
Grace
Established
Depleted
Disgorged
All That May Be
Cyanotype, Van Dyke, and Watercolor
2012-2013
All pieces 24x19 inches
Meanderings
Watercolor and Plant Pigment
2012-2013
Sizes vary (between 2x3” and 5x10”)

![Image of watercolor and plant pigment artworks](image-url)