Casey Land rambles

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Casey Land rambles

by

Alexis Dwyer

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:
April Katz, Major Professor
Ingrid Lilligren
Barbara Walton
Bambi Yost

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2016

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DEDICATION

For my mother, and the joy she finds in nature’s complexity and beauty.

and

My husband, for his unwavering support.
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Finally and most importantly, to my family, thank you for your support and understanding even if you didn’t get what I was doing in the middle of Iowa. Especially to my husband for his rock steady support in my education and creative endeavors; all of our hard work will bring us to a brighter future.
ABSTRACT

I have found that the best way to connect with nature is to go out and experience a piece of land. This creates an experience that is relevant to the time and space that I exist within and is more rewarding than depending solely on videos and photographs. This allows my senses to come alive and opens opportunities to grow emotionally and spiritually.

This writing details my experiences with the Everett Casey Nature Center and Reserve. Through the course of a year, ideas grounded in sense of place, mindfulness of walking and ethics of land use guided me to a larger appreciation of the land and a deeper sense of belonging within the landscape. The act of walking in the land allowed for spiritual growth and an evolution of my thoughts. Considering the ethics of the land and how other creatures use it I began to have a greater understanding of my personal impact in the world.

Casey Land Rambles was created as a reflection of the spiritual and emotional growth I achieved through continual interaction with the Everett Casey Nature Center and Reserve. By utilizing mediums that created immediate results while working in the landscape to document the interactions between plant, animal and human life I began to gain a deeper understanding of the connections between these life forces. The installation work allows the viewer to enter a state of mind similar to my own when I am at the Casey Land. As the viewer becomes a participant interacting with the installations their mind slows and their senses become heightened. They begin to feel their own emotions keenly through this interaction and heightened awareness allows new opportunities to connect to a deeper sense of belonging with the natural world. This exhibition continues my exploration into how we relate and interact with the outdoors and its effect on our psyche.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

My mother was the first to draw my attention to the enjoyment of nature. She would say, “Alex, come to the kitchen window! Look, look at that sunset, it’s so beautiful. Do you see the lines of pink in the clouds?” smiling and letting out a sigh. She taught me to read the changes in the weather and seasons not by sight alone but by smell. Closing her eyes she would take a deep breath in, smiling and say, “smells like rain,” or “smells like fall.” Opening her eyes to check that I had smelled the air as well she would describe the smell to me. The joy of nature can be found right outside our windows and doors if only we take the time to open our eyes and senses.

Long camping trips every summer in southern Missouri played another role in my introduction to the outdoors as a child. For two weeks at a time I was able to roam the campground, surrounding trails and riverside. My mind would wander over the bright green plants and the rough trunks of the trees as insects buzzed around me. Walking the uneven ground forced my eyes downward. Along the river’s edge was what I could only describe as a gold mine—treasures to be had—rocks, rocks as far as my eyes could see. Rocks smoothed by the river. Rocks ranging from deep rich reds, to muddy yellows and pure white. Rocks with fossils set in them, whispering the secrets of the river’s past. To this day I cannot contain the impulse to hold them; feeling their surfaces in my hands, reading them like stories. How did they come to this place and what were they made from?

My grandparents, who my family fondly called Mimi and Papa were equally important in developing my interest in nature as well as giving me some of my first lessons as an artist. Mimi and Papa would pick up the grandchildren in their RV almost every summer and take us to visit
family in other states and on the way we visited many state and national parks, places like the Grand Canyon, the Petrified Forest, Yellowstone National Park and many more. These trips and inspiring places filled me with the kind of respect and wonder for nature that never dissipated. While on these trips I spent time learning to use watercolors with Papa. He was the first to teach me to draw and paint what I observed, giving me my own book of special watercolor pages saying, “Use them well so that they are not wasted.” His words prompted me to look carefully while painting, my first lessons in observation.

Clearly my childhood, spending hours each day playing outdoors, interacting with nature allowed me to first experience this feeling of wonder in nature. This ability as a child to go and play outdoors was reinforced by my entire family. Dr. Louise Chawla writes of English Romantics such as Wordsworth and Rousseau who captured the relationship of early childhood experiences in nature. “Wordsworth integrated this Romantic sense of childhood with the romantic sense of nature, to create a philosophy of the influence of the natural environment on childhood which still pervades our thinking today.”1 Researchers like Chawla believe that spending time in the outdoors is crucial for a child to develop an appreciation and understanding of nature, and that by doing so one can develop a sense of place and I agree. After spending much of my childhood outdoors, I feel I have a deeper awareness of natural environments and their effect on my emotional and mental state, and I hope to convey this awareness in my work.

Byrd Baylor, a children’s author speaks to the qualities of natural environments in many of her books, including The Other Way to Listen, Everybody Needs a Rock, and The Desert is Theirs. In The Other Way to Listen she speaks of the ability to hear nature in a way that most

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modern people would not. The main characters, a grandfather and granddaughter carry on a conversation as they walk through the desert. She begins, “He was so good at listening—once he heard wildflower seeds burst open, beginning to grow underground.” She responds, “That’s too hard to do.” “He said he was just lucky to have been by himself up there in the canyon after a rain.”

Listening is considered a crucial step in having a relationship with another human being or our pets. We understand the needs of others through listening, creating bonds for life, why not with the rest of nature as well? What would we gain from listening to the insects, the plants, the oceans? Baylor continues to explain how to learn to listen, “Every morning of his life when he was young he climbed a cottonwood and sat there listening. He told me it was worth the time. He said trees are very honest and they don’t care much for fancy people. And he said he doesn’t know of anything he ever did as important as sitting in that tree.” Finding a quiet place to observe the natural environment can have a large impact on a child’s ability to deal with stress.

*How to Raise a Wild Child* by Scott Sampson talks about helping your child find a “sit” spot, a place that they can go to be alone and often. Their “sit” spot will begin to exist as a place of refuge and contemplation not only in the physical world, but in their mind as well, as a resource for stressful situations. My work speaks to creating this physical and mental refuge not only for children, but for adults.

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3 Baylor and Parnall, *The Other Way to Listen.*
CHAPTER 2

WALKING IN NATURE

My Experience Walking

Walking outdoors will always be an activity I look forward to; it frees me of stress, clears my mind and allows me to see more clearly. It creates a private space where I can be alone with my thoughts and allows my mind to engage with the wildlife and vegetation around me. I come back with a heightened sense of observation and a calm feeling that gives me a deeper sense of purpose.

Not knowing where you are going can be beautiful. During the summer of 2014, my husband and I decided to hike starting at the Shooting Star Trail Head in Rockbridge State Park. We had been to the trail head many times before, but had never gone past the creek located about 20 minutes into the park. Just like a child my mind raced with the possibilities of what landscapes we would find on our hike; it was to be an adventure. My creative juices were flowing! So, when my husband said, “Do you know where we are going?” of course I said, “Yes, this way.” As we wandered on the trail my eyes were filled with the texture of tree trunks, leaf strewn forest floors and bright green plant life. My mind opened to the possibilities of the forest. We argued off and on about our position on the map and how far we had to go, but it did not matter to me. I was in the woods and so was my mind. I feel I have a certain “flow” in the forest that I cannot feel indoors or in an urban landscape, surrounded by concrete and the hard edges of buildings. We walked on for 4 hours eventually finding our way out at the other end of the park. My husband was upset about being lost in the woods, but I left with a smile on my face as we walked 30 minutes on the side of the road back to our car. I had not been lost in the woods;
I had found a part of myself. Every time I return to a natural place I feel closer to myself and all life on earth. A sense of confidence and humbleness floods over me.

As many artists before me I find that walking stimulates my creative process. I become aware of myself through observation of the land in front of me and the willful movement of my legs and feet. “William Wordsworth used walking in order to think or write, with phrases spoken adopting the cadence of feet on the ground. Jean-Jacques Rousseau could meditate only when walking: “When I stop I cease to think; my mind only works with my legs.”4 I am continually inspired by the connections I observe in nature while walking. I see the lines, shapes and patterns in my work as the connections I see within the land. Each tree, or stream or flower affects every other around it. My ideas and thoughts flow at the pace of my activity; if I am biking, my ideas tend to come more quickly and in spurts. The pace of walking allows time for my mind to wonder and meditate on an idea and affords me the time to stop and look, or listen to my surroundings.

As I walk I begin to take note of my surroundings first I notice the atmosphere of the place, how it smells, the temperature, the feeling of a breeze against my skin, how the light reflects onto the plant life, rocks and water. Light becomes a crucial element in its ability to draw attention to the landscape; moving my eyes to a particular tree or slab of rock. On a recent hike, I found myself staring at trees amassed and leaves littering the ground; no singular object caught my eye. It was a cloudy day and it kept my focus on the forest as a whole rather than a particular object. Thoughts of the changing seasons and life cycles flooded my mind. One of my greatest joys in the outdoors is being able to see meaning in the beauty that fills my senses. What stands

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out the most, what screams at me on every walk, is that this life, this experience is continuous. There will be a million more moments like it and yet no one will ever be the same. I see life being birthed out of death; each cycle of the seasons, each animal’s life and death feeds into the continual loop. I can imagine Mother Earth kneading her body like dough, effortlessly and continuously folding death into life. Could there be anything more spiritual than observing that transfer of energy, to be surrounded by it and to be part of it?

Experiences in Nature are not just viewed by our eyes or felt in the footsteps that take us through natural spaces; they involve all of our senses. Each season brings to mind a different sense for me; in summer it is sight, in fall it is smell, in winter it is sound, and in spring it is touch. Summer in Missouri brings forth every shade of green imaginable and in the wind the leaves of the cottonwood and American sycamore shimmer like diamonds reflecting the energy of the sun. In fall the passing of this foliage brings forth the scent of change on the breeze, it is a musty odor that relaxes my mind. Winter is the perfect season to tune my ears to the delicate sounds of ice and snow. If I’m not careful the soft static sound of falling snowflakes and crunch of the snow and ice covering the ground will pass me by like a missed opportunity. The crunch of my boots in freshly fallen snow speaks of adventures in terrain reborn in white. Spending time in Iowa has heightened these senses, through close observation I have discovered subtle differences in the landscape. These are the pleasures of being outdoors, of being aware of your surroundings and how they affect you.

Artists Who Walk in Nature

Two artists, Fulton and Long, who walk in nature have inspired me throughout my studies at the Casey Land. Hamish Fulton is a British artist who identifies himself as a “walking
artist.” For Fulton the walk is the constant in his work and the medium of the art is the variable.

“Walking structures experience. We perceive ourselves and our environment in interaction as we move along a path. We shape space as we go.”

Hamish Fulton wrote, “My work is about the experience of walking. The framed artwork is about a state of mind—it cannot convey the experience of the walk. A walk has a life of its own.”

Hamish Fulton uses his work to create a discussion about nature and having a personal experience within. Fulton uses words to represent his trip as in a detail from a 21 day coast to coast walking journey in Japan...

He used words and repetition to help the viewer understand the walk, “AND PATHS TREE TREE TREE SKY SKY SKY” made into art.

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5 O’Rourke, Walking and Mapping, 43.
Fulton emphasizes the important characteristics of his walk through careful consideration of the words, font and value. His choice in words as well as their relationship to each other, as they are presented allows me to begin to form my own image. The sky is dark with scant clouds floating close to the earth as a raven swoops down from the sky. The trees and river hold your attention as you walk towards your goal, the sea. Repetition of the word “sea” on the bottom row of the work makes me think that the sea must have called Fulton throughout the journey. I envision the word echoed in the lapping waves, sea, sea, sea. The journey is compressed for the viewer in these few words because the real journey can only be experienced through being present on the walk itself.

As my work and thoughts about walking and being out in nature have matured over the past year, I find myself relating to the work of Richard Long. Unlike Fulton, who only leaves his footprints as evidence, Long uses the natural materials around him to create physical works of art during his walks as well as in galleries afterword. Long’s ephemeral sculptures leave you with a sense of mystery.

Figure. Richard Long, *Five Paths*, Galeria Mario Sequeira Braga Portugal, 2004
Looking at Long’s work, I see a connection between the earth and the hand of the artist. The rocks have been shaped by the earth’s processes, they have also been selected by the artist’s hand. Long’s hands work to translate the image from his head to the gallery floor. The curving, jagged edges of the paths between the rocks give me a sense of the shape of the individual stones. I begin to feel them in my own hands through the lines created in between the rows of rock. I sense an organic, rough and chalky surface. The thickness of the paths give me a sense of the weight the rocks carry. While controlled by the human hand, the work speaks to the organic nature of the material, and long winding paths become a place of meditation. I imagine focusing on my feet as I walk through the stones in the same way I watch my feet as I walk a dirt trail. Thoughts begin to surface about the rocks and their history. The similarities of the rocks create pattern and texture which allows me to see them as a whole and not just individual rocks. Thoughts of water flowing in streams as well as the sensation of holding one of the rocks in my hands gives me a feeling of peace and meditation. I consider the paths as a journey yet to come or representation of choices Long has made in the past. How many paths were walked to create the path before us? Long believes that, “A walk is just one more layer, a mark, laid upon the thousands of other layers of human geographic history on the surface of the land.”8 Some of his work can be found in galleries, but it is said to pale in comparison to his work in the outdoors.

**We All Should Walk**

In the last year, two studies have been published citing the importance of walking in nature. A study at Stanford University showed that walking improves creativity. They found that a person is more creative while walking and shortly after, than while sitting. “A person’s creative

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output increased by an average of 60 percent when walking.”9 Complementing the first study, Stanford University has also found a link between time outdoors and its effect on our mood. It was found that those who walked for ninety minutes in a natural area had decreased activity in the region of the brain associated with depression. While more research will need to be done to better understand how to spend our time outdoors for the best results in mood enhancement, it is safe to say going outdoors and into nature is beneficial for everyone. Our physical and mental states are deeply connected.

It is imperative that we understand our relationship to nature and all of its effects as more people move into cities and away from nature. “More than half of the world’s population lives in urban settings, and that is forecast to rise to 70 percent within a few decades.”10 It is believed that mood disorders are increasing as more humans live in urban areas. What will it take for us to understand nature’s effect on our emotional wellbeing?

A sense of place is about gaining an appreciation for a particular place and acknowledging the effect that it has on you emotionally and spiritually. Sense of place is inevitably dual in nature, involving both an interpretive perspective on the environment and an emotional reaction to the environment…. Sense of place involves a personal orientation toward place, in which one’s understanding of place one’s feelings about place become fused in the context of environmental meaning.11

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In a modern world what benefits can we gain by creating a sense of place? Taking no training or special skill; it is about being conscious of your interactions with a place and understanding that place through those interactions and your personal reflections. Everyone’s sense of place will vary based on their personal ideals, but the benefit is that it can help you understand the natural environment and how you effect that environment. A sense of place can also create a greater sense of community with the people who live around you. Communities with people who care about place care for the life of that place and desire to sustain plants, creatures and humans within it.
CHAPTER 3
ETHICS

My personal ethics are centered on my concerns for the environment and how we connect to it. Recognizing how my choices affect the planet and trying to balance convenience with respect for nature has become a daily practice. As an artist I feel a responsibility to use my skills to connect others with the outdoors whenever possible, keeping in mind that everyone’s definition of nature will vary. The basic definition of nature is any part of our world that is not made by humans and with this definition a rock on the edge of the road or a tree planted next to a side walk fits that definition. I do not disagree, but personally I need to feel that I am being immersed into a natural environment. The farther I can get away from the sights, sounds and smells of the man-made environment the better. When discussing nature in the subsequent chapters I am focusing on an experience that takes you away from the man-made. I want others to care as deeply as I do because we are part of nature and forming a positive connection through art can help those feelings develop.

I am concerned that the average American allows little to no time to experience nature and therefore gives it little to no value. In the words of Hamish Fulton, “Our rejection of nature is the cause of global warming- Walking (and especially including wild camping) allows us the opportunity to be influenced by nature and gain an attitude of respect for all life-forms not just human life.”12 Changes in temperature around the globe are affecting food production and the availability of water causing survival in previously hospitable areas to be near impossible. The environmental cost of meat production is higher than most of the American population could

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imagine, taking hundreds of gallons of water to produce one pound of beef and poisoning water systems reaching as far as coral reefs in coastal waters. By going out in nature and experiencing how it functions, we can gain the appreciation needed to change to a way of life that brings awareness of the world around us. I see walking as a sustainable way for any individual, no matter their age, to be able to gain the experiences needed to create a powerful and meaningful connection with nature.

Like many artists before me, my hope is to influence others’ view of nature to bring awareness and reflection on how they choose to interact with their natural environment. Awareness of the natural environment is crucial to our success as a species on this planet. It has become apparent in the last decade that we cannot continue to live the way we do at present because our choices are damaging the environment. This damage cannot be fixed or covered up; it is affecting all life on this planet, including humans. Othello Anderson has turned to making art that highlights his concerns for the natural environment stating: “I can no longer consider making art that is void of moral consciousness, art that carries no responsibility, art without spiritual content, art that places form above content, or art that ignores the state of the world in which it exists.”

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Artists like Othello Anderson inspire the viewer to consider the ethical treatment of land through a 2-D format pulling on the viewer’s thoughts and emotions. Anderson’s painting *Acid Rain* speaks to the devastation caused by pollution (sulfur dioxide) when it turns into acid rain, killing off plants and wildlife. *Acid Rain* is a desolate landscape of barren trees and flat lifeless earth. The tree limbs are short and stubby, as if ripped off by a cruel act. The painting as a whole gives a feeling of pain, something lost. I appreciate what artists like Anderson are saying with their work, and I believe it is a worthy cause, but it is my belief that people become defensive when confronted with information that says they are doing something wrong. I want to forestall this feeling of defensiveness through my work. I want to inspire the viewer by sparking their curiosity and heightening their awareness.

Positive experiences in a place can lead to positive place attachment. Jenny Kendler is a multimedia artist who focuses her work on environmental activism. Kendler’s work fits into the emerging current of artists engaging in social practice. She creates experiences in gallery settings

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as well as outdoors. Kendler’s work *Milkweed Dispersal Balloons* allows the viewer to participate in environmental activism.

Figure. Jenny Kendler, *Milkweed Dispersal Balloons*, Biodegradable latex balloons, Common Milkweed (Asclepias syriaca) seeds, hemp string, custom-printed buttons featuring macro photos of monarch wings, handmade aprons, eco-friendly handouts, umbrella, food car, 2014

Latex balloons were filled with milkweed seeds and given out from a food cart on the street and in elementary school classrooms. Each participant was also given a small button decorated with the image of a monarch butterfly wing. The purpose was to disperse milkweed because it is the only food of the monarch butterfly and is being killed off by the popular weed killer Round Up. When the participant was ready, they took the sharp end of their button and popped the balloon dispersing the seeds within. This allowed the viewer to become part of the work of art as well as connect to nature within their area of residence.
Unlike participatory art and social practice, land artists like Michael Heizer create works of art that express interest in how we relate to our environment, though not all land art is meant to help the environment. His work at Buffalo Rock State Park in Illinois shows a need to heal the damage done by surface coal mining during the 1930s and creates a new place for outdoor recreation.

*Figure. Michael Heizer. Water Strider of the Effigy Tumuli Sculptures, 1983-85 Buffalo Rock State Park Illinois*

*Water Strider* is just one of the five mounds created by the artist to reclaim the damaged land. The water strider, catfish, snake, turtle and frog all water dependent creatures serve as points of interest within the park. These creatures are also powerful reminders of man’s impact on natural systems. The site invokes thoughts of the ancient mounds created by Native Americans and they
rest on the flood plain like guardians of the land. They are inspired by a Native American burial ground and creatures native to the Illinois River.15

There are a multitude of factors that impact climate change around the globe including water usage, air pollution, and overuse of soil in crop production, mass production of meats, fracking, drilling for oil / oil production and deforestation. What one country chooses to do to the environment can affect those in countries on the other side of the globe. As a whole humans need to change how they recognize the value of nature including its impact on emotional health and physical well-being versus exclusive focus on profits from the use of natural resources. The effects of using these natural resources must be fully recognized and choices based on future impacts instead of convenience need to be made. I believe that as our actions continue to change our planet we will have to evolve our understanding of community and connection. Our community is every human on the planet and we are connected to every living thing from microbes to the largest mammal, the blue whale.

CHAPTER 4

THE CASEY LAND

Introduction to the Casey Land

In February of 2014 I was invited by my painting professor, Barbara Walton to go hiking with a few ISU faculty members and a fellow graduate student at the Casey Land. Located in Boone County Iowa next to Ogden, off Hwy E26. The Casey Land is a hidden gem fitted between the hard lines of industrial farmland. The land’s official name is the Everett Casey Nature Center and Reserve. Everett Casey graduated from Iowa State University in 1946 with a degree in Engineering and gifted the land to the English Department upon his death. The 76 acres stayed fairly undeveloped in the last 100 years because it’s in a valley surrounded by forest and prairie. Everett Casey intended the land to be used for students working towards their Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing and Environment. Since its donation the land has also been opened to students in programs including Forestry and Integrated Visual Arts (IVA).

That February, in 2014, as we embarked on our 1st hike together, a thick layer of snow covered the ground hiding a solid layer of ice. We found ourselves sliding down the steep sides of the valley at the beginning of the trail, expectantly. All was quiet except me and my fellow hikers. Barbara Haas, the director of the reserve took us down into the valley where we followed Bluff Creek as we explored the land. The cold silence had a subtle energy, as if something was waiting to spring forth from the cold. That feeling left a lingering mark on my senses. I wanted to know more about the land and what lay waiting under the layers of ice and snow.

One year later I returned to the Everett Casey Nature Center and Reserve. I joined the Casey Land Committee meetings under the premise of a collaborative project with a fellow IVA student. I felt that the land represented the pages in a book and contained an endless narrative that explored the transformations of the land over time and of the life forms inhabiting the land in the present. I wanted to start a dialogue with the land to understand how the animals, plants and I related to the land. I wanted to tell the story of the land.

I started by exploring the plant life at the Casey Land. The Casey Land Committee members had recently cleared pine trees for prairie restoration on the side of a hill near the entrance of the hiking trail. Skirting the newly cleared area were the remnants of prairie grass fallen and flat from winter. In an act of meditation and bonding with the land, I braided the prairie grasses. As I braided the dried golden grasses, they seemed to spring back to life. They swayed in the wind as if reaching up for the sun. This interaction with the land sparked thoughts of the cycles of a plant’s life. I began creating artifacts, “fossils” out of Sculpey (clay that becomes hard when baked) impressing the plants into flattened pieces of clay. These “fossils” documented the seeds that would become new plant life in the coming months. Exploring other methods of creating imprints and documentation of creatures interacting with the land, I began creating plaster casts of any footprints I could find, recording the different animals on the land. Later, an encounter with the bones of animals who had lived and died on the land and the discovery of the death of the local bee colony started my investigation of how to better read the narrative of the land. I had not read it by observing the presence of the animals, but from the absence they created, the imprints they left on the land and from the bones they left behind. I see these as ghosts of their interactions, a story of passing, harmony and remembrance.
I believe that seeing beauty in change, including death, is crucial to our ability to conserve land. No piece of land, no space becomes what it is by always staying the same, growing the same plants and trees, maintaining the same creatures and bugs. Each piece of land has a cycle of change no matter how long or short, fast or slow, and understanding how death weaves into the cycle is crucial to a healthy environment. Learning to see and appreciate comes from spending time on that land, observing each change and how it affects the next. Without this ability you cannot see the relevance of each life.

**Change Found at the Casey Land**

My experiences and interactions with the Casey Land created a divide in my work and how I understood my relationship to the earth. The Casey Land gave me a sense of belonging, which led to a deep sense of connection with the land. Both my present and past work center on my experiences in natural surroundings, but I had never felt connected to one place. I did not realize that I had been floating through beautiful, inspiring landscapes, but took no further action to seek out nature in everyday life. I cannot say that it is wrong to travel to see the beauty and power of nature, but without a personal/regional connection created by repeat experiences you only have one piece of a very large puzzle.

The change that occurred to my psyche and my emotional state is evident in the work I’m now making. My work had depicted what I considered to be beauty in those encounters, heightened color, graphic imagery and abstracted views. While we do value beauty we have to look past the surface and that takes time and reflection. Repeated trips to the Casey Land heightened my awareness of the changes that occurred in the land weekly. I found myself wanting to capture the beauty of the constant evolution of the land not its superficial beauty. As I made my first contact with the Casey Land, braiding the grasses, I knew I had something more
than a quick fix for my need to be outdoors. What I found was a place to connect with the land and its ecosystems observing how it functioned throughout the seasons and the plants and creatures that cohabitated. The ability to return to the same piece of land repeatedly allowed me to truly make connections through observation that led to an understanding of a place.

I began noticing the deer’s hoof prints in the trail after a rain storm, and as I found the scat of other creatures, I hunted for their prints making plaster casts of them. It did not matter if the plaster casts had significance to anyone else; they were for me. I knew their story; I visited the same trails and followed them weaving through the land finding hidden patches of sand and rock. My interactions and documentation of the land became more important than a beautiful representation of my experience. These activities became a practice of flow, being fully present in the moment.

Finding the bones of animals who had lived off the land was common once I knew how to train my eye to look for them. I found deer, coyote, mouse, raccoon and many unidentified bones at the land. The bones left me with a sense of the cycles of life and death; the land feeds you, you die, you feed other creatures and the land itself. I found this to be comforting, because it solidified my belief that we are all connected. Small threads intricately weave through our interactions with the rest of life on earth. Recently after finding various animal tracks, bones, pellets, trails and resting spots I encountered a live deer. As I quietly traced the lines of a newly found creek above me on the bank, a buck came into sight. It was rutting season, and the buck cocked his head at me and stamped his feet three times. I had not felt danger at the Casey Land before this day. If I made the wrong move, the deer might come after me; the right action would scare him off. As I realized the danger I was in fear crept over me and I felt physical and emotional emptiness because I had nothing to protect myself against attack. In desperation I
climbed up a fallen tree trunk and yelled at the buck, “no, no, no,” until he ran away and I ran the other direction slipping in the creek and over embankments. Would the buck have attacked me? I can’t say and was not willing to risk my life to find out. The experience helped to bring my emotional connection to the land full circle. The Casey Land is not always a safe place for creatures; for some it is where they are hunted, and for others where they fight for a mate. A month later a young buck lost its life on the land, feeding others’ lives in the process. The buck’s body lay by the Bluff creek and as the months went by it was fully utilized as a source of energy by the animals who roamed the land. Could it be the same buck I encountered? Had his life completed that circle? If I had visited the Casey Land just once or twice I would not have found these connections, and my understanding of the land would be shallow.

**Relationships between Work on the Land and Work in the Studio**

When I compare my work at the Casey Land with my work in the printmaking studio I find that my activities reflect each other. In both I must be in “flow,” fully aware of my actions as well as reacting to my work and the environment surrounding me. At the Casey Land, the smell of earth and fresh air fill my lungs. I hear the sounds of life around me, as I focus on the terrain underneath my feet. In the printmaking, studio I focus on my plate. The sweet smell of ink lingers in the air, as I listen to the ink rolling up on my brayer--a sticky sound. I must devote my full attention to applying an even layer of ink and registering the paper to the plate. In the same way when I am hiking I must devote my full attention to my surrounding. These activities bring me to a state of heightened awareness and deep thought. In the studio, my mind plays with color combinations as I work, imagining new possibilities for my plate. At the Casey Land my eyes are filled with color as I scan over prairie grass, sticks and leaf litter and I think of the possibilities of these materials. This kind of thinking mixes the words “play” and “creativity”
until they are suddenly one. My reactions are based on the immediate, allowing new ideas to flow. The plate and the natural materials are a matrix that I am responding to and building imagery from. My body is not left behind in the hustle of my hands and thoughts; my legs lead me through the Casey Land--memorizing the terrain. In the printmaking studio, I am constantly on the move: from inking my plate, to running it through the press. My rituals haunt both places, whether it is casting plaster in deer tracks or creating prints. They become my church,—the places where I find meaning behind my work and life, coming to new revelations.
ART WORK

The action of going out and experiencing nature is one with my need to create work based on that experience.

Art Work Made at the Casey Land

Braided Grass (Appendix page 49): The braided prairie grass was my first work connected to the Casey Land. I had just begun making weekly visits to the land in March of 2015 and I reflected on what materials I found on the land with the purpose of creating land art. What the land had plenty of was sticks and grass. The recently cleared hillside near the beginning of the trail was skirted by yellow and withered prairie grass from the year before. I sat down on the hillside to think, touching the ground around me I felt the dry pine needles and my fingers ran through the grass. I thought about the action of braiding hair and the intimacy involved and awareness needed while you braid. I began braiding the dried yellow grass and it flexed under the pressure of my fingers. The braids stood straight up in the air as if I had brought the prairie back to life, a symbol of the care that the Casey Land Committee worked to give the land. The braids swayed in the wind as the sun lit them up golden yellow and though they only lasted a day and then fell back to the soil below the effects of the experience were lasting.

Sitting and braiding the grass forced me to be fully present in that moment and heightened all of my senses. The dry but sturdy touch of the grass blades on my fingers and the sound they made as I braided them became integral to my experience. I also began to notice the atmospheric sounds of the land around me, the doves hooting in the nearby trees and the beautiful and subtle sound of wind against grass and trees. This first work set in motion the ideal
for all of my work at the land, building a relationship over time and gaining awareness through my interactions.

Audio: Based on my experience braiding grass and new awareness of atmospheric sounds at the Casey Land I began creating audio recordings at the land. Most recordings lasted around an hour and were in a specific spot at the land. My goal with the audio recordings was to paint a sound portrait of the land throughout the 8 months before my thesis exhibition. I started recording in the prairie areas near the entrance of the trail to record the sounds of the wind in the grass and the insects and birds singing. Moving into the woods I captured the sound of the wind blowing the fall leaves out of the trees and the sounds of rain on the forest floor placing my recording device underneath a log to keep it dry. Experimentation with the sound of hiking feet crunching on dry leaves down the trail played a role in the Forest of Prints.

Video (Appendix page 48): The videos that I took at the Casey Land were of the moments and settings that caught my eye as I walked. I recorded moments where I had to stop and soak in the view in front of me, acknowledging the beauty and serene qualities that it carried and those small movements of a bug or bird that I saw out of the corner of my eye. On a sunny January day I found myself staring up at what looked to be a bald eagle soaring above the trees. I turned on my camera and captured its movements as it glided across the sky weaving back and forth above the tree line until it disappeared from the focus of my lens. That one small moment taking less than a minute of my time can become the meaning of hours spent at the land. Finding the bald eagle flying above me gave me a sense of discovery and joy, lifting my spirit. Most videos were recorded for 30sec-1minute depending on how interesting I found them to be as I recorded or if the subject matter flew, crawled or leapt away.
When recording movements in plants I depended heavily on the wind to create movement in the video. While recording the leaves falling from the trees in fall I waited with my hand as steady as possible for a gust of wind. I slowed my breathing and stood quiet and still as I listened for the sound of air moving quickly through far off prairie grasses and leaves. Hearing a quiet rushing sound I held my breath to check again and pressed the red record button on my camera.

These videos serve as documentation of moments when I was fully present, paying close attention to my breathing, body movements and composition of the video. These moments were powerful and my memory of them crystal clear, I do not need to reference the video to remember but had to take the action of recording to create the memory.

**Plaster Casts (Appendix page 48):** The plaster casts of animal and human footprints found throughout the land document my exploration. I followed trails made by animals who traversed the landscape. It was not often that I saw these creatures so their footprints and trails were evidence of their activities. From the main trail (now maintained, but originally a deer path) I saw deer hoof prints turning into tunnels of forest undergrowth and I bent over to fit within the tunnel following it to a previously unseen clearing in the woods. Once, behind a bush on one of these paths I found two coyote footprints sunk in the mud and for a moment I was the predator crouched behind the bush watching and waiting, imaging how the creature must have felt; feelings of hunger and hope.

It is part of the process of being at the land, I was always hunting/searching for something no matter if I knew its name or not. On a December visit to the land I followed a deer path to a section of forest I had not walked in the past. I followed the path down a small valley where numerous fallen tree trunks lay. The trunks were moist and chunks of fibrous wood fell away at the touch of my fingertips. It was the perfect environment for mushrooms and I found
mushrooms like I hadn’t seen before. The round stump puffball mushrooms were growing in clusters on rotting tree trunks with an opening near the top of each. The first set I found puffed out orange clouds of spores at the touch of my fingers and the second had spores in drab olive green. I stayed for a while gently tapping the sides of the mushrooms thinking that I was helping them to reproduce and feeling like I had been taken to an alien landscape.

Photogram Cyanotypes (Appendix page 44): As I began working on my series of cyanotypes, it became very important that I work directly from the Casey Land and only while at the Casey Land. My goal was to capture the essence of what had been on the land. To remove the actual objects from where they had been found seemed detrimental to the process. In the studio I prepared my papers with the cyanotype solution and tucked them away in black plastic bags. Once at the land I would find a spot with the amount and angle of sun that I was looking for and lay the natural objects from the land onto the photosensitive paper. I wanted to capture the mystery of a life unseen by the human eye. I didn’t know how the animals’ lives ended or how long they spent on the land, but I did know that it had an effect on the animal and that its life ended there, that is what I wanted to capture.

In the bee cyanotype my goal was to show the suddenness of the bee’s death. As I opened the bee box I found the dead bees as if frozen in motion, all still working away at their daily lives. Some had their heads stuck in the comb some were about to emerge from the box to find more pollen. It was as if an atomic bomb had gone off, but the bomb was winter. I carefully collected the dead bees from the hive and scattered their bodies across the light sensitive paper. To capture the scene I caught the sun at a lower angle during the day to get a more drawn out shadow.
In my cyanotypes what I hoped to capture was the lack of an object by creating photograms of that object. Photograms have lent themselves to this concept in my work; capturing the silhouette of an object and not the fine details. I found success by working directly from the Casey Land and enjoyed the immediacy of the process. Capturing not only what was left of the animals, plants and insects that had come to the land, but the sun that shone down on them as well. This allowed me to capture their essence in the photogram process using cyanotype chemicals on Stonehenge, Rives BFK, Asian papers, cotton and silk fabrics.

**Gallery Installation** (Appendix page 37)

In the gallery my work takes on a different purpose, it is no longer for me but for the viewer. My intent is to show my relationship with the Casey Land based on time and memory through the items collected and work created. You enter the exhibition with feelings of uneasiness; 8 feet from the entrance and spanning the width of the gallery you encounter a forest of hanging prints. You are unsure of what you will find passing through the forest of prints, but with no other option you use your hands to help you move the hanging prints aside so you can enter the forest. Sounds of feet crunching leaves underfoot draw you through the prints. As you wander out of the forest you come upon intaglio prints made of imprints of the plants from the land. As you turn to move forward you encounter a dome shaped hut surrounded by soil. Above the hut memories of the landscape are suspended in midair on strips of silk captured with the photogram process and cyanotype chemicals. Looking to your left you find many small shelves on a gallery wall with delicate items. This curated selection of artifacts natural and manmade are meant for your fingers to embrace and to fill your eyes. On the back wall cyanotypes hang. You notice light to the left from the corner of your eye. In the middle of the floor 2/3rds of the way back in the gallery projected on a patch of soil are videos of the Casey Land, a stream churning
over rocks, leaves swaying in the wind, a fuzzy caterpillar skillfully working its way across 
blades of grass. You are drawn to the soil and you notice resin casts of animal foot prints with 
handles made from tree branches. Picking one up you press it into the soil and as you lift it up 
you see the foot print of a coyote, grabbing another you discover the hoof print of a large deer. 
You are creating your own experience. Hearing audio coming from the hut, you look again for 
the entrance; it is now in sight. As you walk the path through the soil you feel secluded from the 
rest of the gallery, inside the hut the branches frame your view of the forest of prints, natural 
items and videos. As you sit in the hut your mind wanders over what you have seen as you listen 
to the atmospheric sounds of the Casey Land. When you are ready to leave you weave your way 
back through the forest of prints thinking of going out in nature, your senses suddenly more 
aware.

**Fossils (Appendix page 41):** The fossils made of Sculpey were a translation of my 
experiences finding fossils in rocks over the years walking many creek and riverbanks. When I 
find fossils my mind drifts back in time imaging what the creature or plant must have looked like 
alive, when the middle of our country was submerged in water. Filled with a new awareness and 
deep sense of wonder I treasure the rocks, they are truly one of a kind. When creating my own 
fossils out of items found at the Casey Land I was careful to select items that spoke to the story 
of the land, like the story I found in the fossils I had collected. The flowers both native and 
invasive, the prairie grasses that we are working to recover, like the rocks left behind by the 
glaciers that once spread their massive bodies over the landscape are all part of the narrative.

I created the Sculpey fossils by first selecting the natural item I wished to use and second 
by rolling the Sculpey out into an appropriate size and shape for the item. Carefully I pressed the 
item into the Sculpey just deep enough to create a shallow impression. The last step was to bake
the Sculpey for 15 minutes at 275 degrees. When the plate was finished I printed it the same way that you print an intaglio plate. I soaked the paper in water and applied ink to the plate, wiping it off the surface. This left ink only in the indentions left by the natural item. I chose ink colors for the prints based on my memories of the items as I found them at the Casey Land.

It is my intent that the viewer see these prints as discovery and documentation of the Casey Land, as my relationship and awareness of the land grew so did my collection of Sculpey fossils. The prints are embossed with the rounded edges of the plates resembling the organic lines of a rock smoothed as it was washed down a creek or river bed. The plant life leaves dimples of ink on the paper where seeds pressed into the plates and fine lines where the veins of leaves once were. It is one way for the viewer to explore the land without being there, to see what I saw.

**Monotypes, Forest of Prints (Appendix page 39):** The forest of prints is a direct representation of my experience hiking through the Casey Land over the past 12 months. Hiking through the land multiple times each month I developed an understanding of how time passes on the land and how the seasons affect the landscape. As viewers walk through the forest of 5’x11” prints they push aside the prints to move through them and closely discover imagery that has become part of my relationship with the land. As the viewer walks through they also feel as though they are walking through the seasons. The forest begins in spring as the greenery comes back to life and small flowers like blood root and violets show their petals catching the sun’s rays. Continuing in viewers hear the recording of me hiking, feet crunching through leaves as they travel through the canopy of green that defines summer at the land. Moving into fall the Bur Oaks’ twisting, gnarly branches will loom overhead and just as viewers begin to see past the forest of prints they find themselves in winter. It is in these transitions through memory and time
that I have gained awareness of the land and in doing so I have created a kinship with it. This kind of relationship is precious, the kind where you are taught to listen and do little of the talking yourself. By listening I gained awareness, my work is about that awareness and my hope of getting the viewer to listen.

The forest of prints was created by printing on two types of Japanese papers, kozo and unryu. The papers’ width was 11” and I cut them in 5’ strips. I used two methods to create the imagery on these papers. The first step was printing monotypes of the trees and grasses and other imagery that represents the structure of the land. These images were created on plexiglass with the use of printmaking oil based inks, brushed and rolled on with brayers. I used a barren and the pressure of my hands to imprint the ink onto the paper from the plexiglass. For the second step I painted by hand onto the papers. Third, I printed using natural materials including: moss, tree bark and leaves to enhance the textures and visual interest. Finally I hand colored the prints as needed to sharpen areas of focus. The colors in the imagery corresponded with how the natural objects looked as I experienced them. The work was hung with 25lb fishing line attached to a system of 50lb fishing line with a metal washer that was strung from one wall across to the other and inserted into the slots of a picture hanging rail system.

**Play Area (Appendix page 48):** This space is for the viewer to interact with the exhibition creating their own experience. It is carpeted with a layer of Iowa soil and the viewer kneels or sits around the edges of the space interacting in the soil with the resin casts of animal foot prints that have wooden handles made of fallen tree branches. From above, a projector displays 5 video streams recorded at the Casey Land. Viewer can choose to become active participant as they see the projected videos lighting up slabs of tree trunks.
**Found Object Shelves (Appendix page 45):** The objects found on these shelves are both natural and manmade items that have caught my eye at the Casey Land helping to shape my experience. As I walked through the prairie grasses in late summer I would run my hands through the blades of grass feeling the tingle of the seeds at the top of the blades. While hiking within the larger valley in one of the dry stream beds a pop of red caught my eye, I reached down to find portions of a “No Trespassing” sign and I smiled thinking about how open the land seems to me. My hope is that I can share some of these feelings with the viewer during the exhibition by presenting these objects to them on shelves ready to be explored with their own hands.

To help the viewer understand that these objects are meant to be picked up they are paired with sounds from the areas they were found in. As you hold the granite stone in your hand feeling its rough surface you will hear the sound of the rushing creek that washed it onto the sandy bank. Each shelf has a light sensor embedded into it with a wire running down to an Arduino and computer with speakers. The Arduino board feeds the computer program the information from the light sensitive cells. When an object is picked up the corresponding sound plays on a loop. By picking up multiple objects at the same time participants can compose their own soundscape as they explore the found objects.

**Hut of Contemplation (Appendix page 50):** The hut is a representation of the inner peace and safety I feel at the Casey Land. As you walk throughout the exhibition the hut stands as a visual centerpiece and a metaphoric center as in, “I feel centered when I am at the land.” The branches stand straight up and curve around the circular form of the hut and the top is left open. The sticks were tied together using jute twine, as I tied each knot I felt that I was solidifying my memories of the land. Around the hut is a layer of Iowa soil stretching out 4 feet in every direction. This keeps the hut contained and creates a secluded experience for anyone inside the
hut. Because my experiences are based on the land, the soil acts as a representation of the land itself. As you walk throughout the gallery you will see the sides of the hut but you will not come to the entrance until you walk around a majority of the exhibition. A path cut through the soil leads you to the entrance and inside you find a cushion with a cyanotype cover to sit on. As you reflect on the imagery covering the cushion your eyes move up through the latticework of the structure. Through the framing of the branches you see the exhibition and can reflect on its meaning and the feelings that arise from the experience. Looking up through the top of the hut you see the tops of the branches which create a scene similar to looking up in a forest after the leaves have fallen. As you follow the branches stretching towards the ceiling of the gallery you see cyanotypes on silk hanging as if they are floating down to you. These floating cyanotypes represent the way my memories of the land float in and out of my mind as I go about my day. They still serve as an inner moment of peace and a place I can go no matter where my physical body stands. After leaving the hut you should feel centered and at peace with the experience you had within the exhibition.

When you do leave the exhibition you will have to walk back through the forest of prints, signifying the end of your experience as the hiking audio fades in the distance. Video and audio recordings from Casey Land Rambles can be found on AlexisDwyerStudio.com under Casey Land Rambles.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

There is no replacement for the experience of being in a natural place and the impacts it has had on me are numerous. I can conclude that only through observing and interacting with the natural world around me can I come to understand who I am and what part I have to play on Earth. Setting time at the Casey Land as a priority on my schedule gave me certainty in my belief that being outdoors was important to maintain my emotional, spiritual and physical health. I was rewarded through my explorations at the land braiding the prairie grasses, creating plaster casts, observing the changes of the land through photographs, video and audio recordings. I felt a sense of mystery and excitement every time I visited the land as it was constantly changing through the seasons. After each visit I left feeling physically exhausted but emotionally recharged. I now feel that I have a bond with the land similar to an old friend. No matter how long I am away, when I visit I will feel that I am picking up right where I left off. I am not only limited to visiting the physical landscape because the curves of the land and twists of the creek are imprinted in my mind and I can travel them whenever I please. In the gallery I recreated the feelings I felt through the works of art allowing the viewer/participant to create their own experience of curiosity, exploration and wonder.

Looking forward I find myself torn between work in the outdoors and work in the studio/gallery. I believe that I will continue to create works of art in the outdoors recording audio, video and photographing. These documentations and outdoor activities will inform my studio practice and work displayed in gallery settings. Reacting to contemporary art currents and especially the possibilities of social practice (SOPRA) I look to create outdoor events inviting others to directly experience with myself as a guide. In my work as a printmaker, I hope to find
new ways to incorporate my time outdoors with my practice as a printmaker, including printing
directly from objects collected from a designated site. Regardless of how it is expressed through
my work, my need to understand how I fit into the world around me, the development of my
psyche, and my effect on that environment will drive me forward.
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APPENDIX

CASEY LAND RAMBLES

INSTALLATION VIEWS

*Forest of Prints*: foreground, *Hut of Contemplation*: background

*Play Area*: foreground
Play Area: foreground, Found Objects: background

Play Area: foreground, Braided Grass: background
FOREST OF PRINTS
Monotype, Collagraph, Stamped and Hand Coloring
Eighty nine 5’ x 11” Kozo and Unryu Papers Hung with Fishing Line
Casey Land Audio
2016
FOSSIL PRINTS
Intaglio (Sculpey Plates)
Varied Sizes
2016

AlexisDwyerStudio.com
CYANOTYPES
Stonehenge, Reeves BFK, Asian papers, Cotton and Silk Fabrics
2015
FOUND OBJECTS
12 found Casey Land objects
12 oak shelves, light sensors, computer, speakers, Casey Land audio
2015-16
**PLAY AREA**

Casey Land Video Recordings, Soil, Tree Trunks, Animal Track Stamps (cast animal tracks and branch handles)

2015-16
BRAIDED GRASS
Photo Documentation of installation at Everett Casey Nature Center and Reserve
5’ x 8’ (original installation size)
Photo sizes variable
2015
HUT OF CONTEMPLATION
Cotton and Silk Cyanotypes, Casey Land Audio
Sticks, Branches and Jute Twine
Hut 5’ x 8’ plus Soil and Cyanotypes 12’ x 12’
2015-16