2010

Nearly gone

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Nearly gone

By

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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:
Barbara Walton, Major Professor
   Brenda Jones
   April Eisman

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INTRODUCTION

The intent of this written component is to document my thesis exhibition, “Nearly Gone.” It explains the influences, processes and research critical to its development. Twenty-three paintings and digital prints were exhibited at The Gallery in the Round in Ames, Iowa, April 10- May 29, 2010.

Focusing on emotion, my work seeks to elicit a visceral response from the viewer. Though the development of these works over time has helped me to define my own sense of identity and history, my goal is to provide a type of visual catharsis, exploring emotions that are common to all of us, but are often difficult to communicate verbally. Philosopher John Dewey said, “A lifetime would be too short to reproduce in words a single emotion” (Dewey 70). Searching through the unfavorable aspects of modern living I juxtapose feelings of pain and anxiety against stillness, serenity and awe. My work responds to the need for art as a healing and spiritual power within the community. Modernist critic Suzi Gablik writes, “The collective task of ‘re-enchanting’ our whole culture is, as I see it, one of the crucial tasks of our time” (Gablik 67). In an era of impersonal communication and socio-economic upheaval, these works explore the beautiful amidst chaos and struggle.
ARTIST’S STATEMENT

Developing textural and layered surfaces, my work explores alienation, loneliness and the sublime within the contemporary landscape. These works also address the emotional aspects of the human condition, relating isolated highway structures and urban sprawl to the disconnectedness that affects our daily interactions. I contrast agitated man-made objects with traditional elements from nature. Light and atmosphere create drama, presenting a landscape sitting precariously between horror and beauty, tragedy and hope, implying the sense of a breaking point within the individual and the outside world.

Technically, the works rely heavily on the physical processes of layering, scraping, sanding, and gouging. The compression and slow removal of layers of paint with tools such as razor blades mirrors the process of continual growth and destruction within the contemporary landscape, and the kinetic energy involved in molding the physical surface of the paint lends agitation and anxiety to the mark making.
THE WORKS OF ART

Exploring the sublime in both urban and pastoral settings, the work represents landscape in varying degrees of abstraction. Most paintings reference some form of highway or overpass structure. In many of the early images allusions are more ambiguous, favoring traditional associations to nature (fig. 1). Developing over the time period of three months to a year, distinct phases in the process are difficult to pinpoint. However, on the whole trends towards the increasing abstraction of highway imagery, recombined with soft hazy atmosphere can be seen throughout works created in 2008 and 2009 (fig. 2). The color palette during this period also grew progressively darker, favoring earth tones, and deep rich blacks. At the beginning of 2010, works shifted, growing progressively lighter in palette, and areas of stark white where introduced for the first time. During this time period works return to more defined areas of representation, to explore the creation of space (fig. 3). Where previous works focused on patchy areas of atmosphere to obliterate subject matter, these latter works in 2010 place an emphasis on the development of deep space, incorporating muted tones and the use of atmospheric perspective.

Acrylic on Panel, 32” x 40”
(fig. 2) Disintegration, 2009
Acrylic on Panel, 37” x 36”
(fig. 3) Nonsense Map I, 2010
Acrylic on Panel, 32” x 33”
Digital imagery follows a similar trajectory, beginning with a dark palette in 2008 and growing increasingly lighter towards the end of 2009 as pictured below in (fig.4) and (fig.5). In the digital images, references to nature and urban structures are mingled interchangeably throughout the process. Other representational elements such as clothing or shoes occasionally emerge in the landscape, referencing the presence of people, who are otherwise completely absent from both the painted and digital imagery.

(fig. 4) *Untitled*, 2008  
Digital Print, 16” x 16”

(fig. 5) *The Last of Us*, 2009  
Digital Print, 16” x 16”

Paintings and digital processes rely heavily on the manipulation of the physical body of the paint. In the paintings, surfaces range from heavily textured with cracks and crevices, to ultra smooth areas where paint has been scraped and compressed. Working with paint, the media allows me to develop a sense of history in the work, and translate emotion through a spontaneous and visceral process. In digital imagery, marks created during different stages of the painting process have been photographed, and collected with other images of texture and landscape to be recombined using layers in Photoshop. Using digital techniques, I am able to
explore imagery and new ideas with greater freedom, as layers can be hidden, and added without the risk of losing any information.

The typical size of the paintings ranges from roughly 33” x 36” to 35” x 50”. The scale of the work is large enough to complement a physical, aggressive painting process, while still remaining intimate enough to invite the viewer in for a closer look at the subtleties in each layer of paint. Digital works are smaller, typically 16” x 16” to retain detail in the surface quality of the scanned and photographed painted mark.
SOURCES OF IMAGERY

The content in my work explores the alienation and loneliness of modern life. Influences in subject matter derive from the development and breakdown of society in its physical forms, such as the growth of the urban landscape, and cultural forms such as social interaction and economic hardship. In the images, the landscape is depicted in a process of destruction and rebirth, referencing time and mirroring the emotional journey human beings face as we meet challenges.

The development of highway imagery relates to the evolution of the “Edge City” or urban developments outside of the city center that are connected by freeways or highways. Where societies once existed in tribal structures or sparse rural developments, the gradual modernization of our landscape has changed how we move and live, communicate and form relationships. The vast miles of highway and the urban sprawl which characterizes many American cities provides the inhabitant with freedom and anonymity, while at the same time alienating and isolating individuals from the natural development of tight-knit communities.

Theresa Caldeira, Professor of City and Region Planning says, “[In today’s cities] …Residents from all social groups have a sense of exclusion and restriction. For some, the feeling of exclusion is obvious, as they are denied access to various areas and restricted to others. Affluent people who inhabit exclusive enclaves also feel restricted; their feelings of fear keep them away from regions and people that their mental maps of the city identify as dangerous.” (MacLeod 153). Areas that were once heterogeneous in cultural and socio-economic diversity have developed into regions of sharp disparity.
Journalist and author Joel Garreau says:

“We Americans are going through the most radical change in a century in how we build our world, and most of us don’t even know it. From coast to coast, every metropolis that is growing is doing so by sprouting strange new kinds of places: Edge Cities… Most of us now spend our entire lives in and around these Edge Cities, yet we barely recognize them for what they are. That’s because they look nothing like the old downtowns; they meet none of our preconceptions of what constitutes a city. Our new Edge Cities are tied together not by locomotives and subways, but by freeways, jetways, and jogging paths” (MacLeod 156).

These new Edge cities, which tie together groupings of industrial development, strip malls and suburbs isolate and alienate, creating areas of what philosopher Joseph Kupfer calls “dead space.” (Kupfer 279). Where the atriums of Ancient Rome, or courtyards of contemporary apartment life, create areas for community interaction, modern Edge Cities replace spaces for congregating with expanses of parking lot and distant groupings of businesses connected by freeways rather than traversed sidewalks.

Culturally, if one has not felt the spatial effects of the Edge City, surely viewers can identify with the themes of alienation in modern life. In a time where e-mail and technology replaces face-to-face communication, the phenomenon of the Edge City seems to symbolize the disconnectedness of our daily interactions. The 2010 film Up in the Air mocks the technology-driven lifestyle, following a firm who chooses to lay off employees via video chat. Facing economic crisis and the hardship of unemployment, the characters impersonal dismissal underscores the anonymity of corporate life. In this film, actor George Clooney is the epitome of the lonely and isolated individual living out of airports and hotel rooms. He travels constantly from city to city, facilitating layoffs and avoiding his permanent residence. The airport is his home and the sky is his highway.
However, there is something compelling about the juxtaposition of what we have built on the solidity of the ground and its layers upon layers of compressed history. On the 2009 album *The Crying Light* Antony Hegarty sings in painful falsetto, “I need another world, this one’s nearly gone.” Exploring themes of death and rebirth, Hegarty’s writing points to the cyclical nature of civilization and the upheaval that seems especially poignant to contemporary society. With development comes destruction, both gradual and abrupt; the emotional experience of a breaking point in lifestyle, economy or social structure is not an experience new to our times. Even the great empire of Rome fell, and there is a sense that the intensity of what we struggle against, the persistence of even the worst of conditions must finally come to an apex.

In my work, I use highway imagery as a symbol of the alienation and loneliness of modern life. The physical destruction of this imagery as the landscape is subsumed with atmosphere implies anxiety and tension as forces of nature collide and destroy the landscape. Works span through the range of emotional stages experienced through the process of destruction and rebirth. *The Return of Don Johnson Part II*, (fig. 6) for example, is a swirling and foreboding composition that, represents the chaos before obliteration. Other work, such as *The Animals Were Gone/ Dreaming Day*, (fig. 7) represent stillness and serenity associated with regeneration.
(fig. 6) The Return of Don Johnson Part II, 2010
Acrylic on Panel, 33” x 36”

(fig. 7) The Animals Were Gone/Dreaming Day, 2008
Acrylic on Panel, 32” x 40”
STYLISTIC INFLUENCES

The Sublime and William Turner

Throughout my work, the sublime and Romanticism have played a major role in the development and abstraction of my imagery. I use light and atmosphere to create emotion in my work, and the representation of nature as a destructive force that challenges survival is a central Romantic concept.

The philosopher Immanuel Kant speaks of the sublime as a force that must elicit both enjoyment and horror, while the beautiful conjures what is pleasant and harmonious. Kant also divides the Sublime into several different types: the terrifying, the noble and the splendid (Kant 48). The terrifying is described as “dread or melancholy,” the noble as “quiet wonder,” and the splendid as an overall feeling of harmony or a “sublime plan” calling to mind a sense of spiritual or religious association (Kant 48). Kant says, “Temperaments that possess a feeling for the sublime are drawn gradually, by the quiet stillness of a summer evening as the shimmering light of the stars breaks through the brown shadows of night and the lonely moon rises into view, into high feelings of friendship, of disdain for the world, of eternity” (Kant 47). Kant’s description of the sublime describes what one might expect to find in a Romantic painting: the feelings and grandeur of an experience in nature.

Originating in the early 1800s, Romanticism grew into a wide and loosely defined movement interacting across the fine arts and literature (Brown 8). Focusing on the sublime, and developing a new fervor for landscape and natural phenomenon as subject matter, Romanticist painting translated the way an experience felt, as much as capturing what it looked like (Brown 14). JMW Turner was quoted as commenting on his work, Snow Storm-Steam-Boat off a Harbor’s Mouth, (1842) as follows, “I wished to show what a scene was
like. I got the sailors to lash me to the mast to observe it… and I did not expect to escape: but I felt bound to record it if I did. But no one had any business to like the picture” (Brown 20).

During the late eighteenth century, the sublime in landscape painting focused often on what Kant described as the *terrifying* translating feelings of horror, fear, and melancholy (Novak 36). Into the 19th century paintings increasingly adopted aspects of the *splendid*, responding to the influence of Christianity (Novak 38). Art historian Barbara Novak says, “Nature is both sublime and sanctified. The task of the artist and spectator is to unveil, to reveal the hidden glory” (Novak 39). Working around the time of the industrial revolution, Turner incorporated aspects of each of these elements in his work. As I first began to explore imagery, light was a primary preoccupation, and Turner captivated my attention with his use of bold expressive color, coupled with layers of atmospheric, luminescent paint.

For Turner, the study of light was a primary concern. Though not as faithful to the accurate translation of value and hue seen in the light studies of the Impressionists, Turner nonetheless carefully studied and depicted natural phenomenon such as fire, fog, and violent forces of weather (Gage 162). How light descended through the elements was important and in his many turbulent swirling compositions, atmosphere becomes the subject matter, subsuming representational landscape. In *Shade and Darkness: The Evening of the Deluge*, (1843), the viscous swirl of foreboding weather sweeps over the entire composition, forming a vortex of rain, clouds, and light. Monochromatic tones of yellow and brown tint the entire surface of the canvas. Here, light and atmosphere are elevated to a nearly tactile substance. What happens in the space between the objects depicted is as important, if not more important, than the objects themselves. Allowing color to become expressive, Turner’s work transitions from a realist attention to form and depth, to abstracted areas of bold color. In *The
Houses of Parliament Burning, (1835), the depiction of fire is dramatized with patches of arbitrary color exploding into the sky. A critic writes of Turner’s work, “full of fine passages of chromatic arrangement, it has so little foundation in fact that the sense is merely bewildered at the unsparing hand with which the painter has spread forth the glories of his palette” (Gage 164).

As I investigated Turner further, I noted that part of the work’s captivating appeal, was the tension created between such intensely beautiful and emotional depictions of light, and natural phenomenon, against subject matter describing modernity, horror, awe, and the tragic destiny of man. Throughout William Turner’s work, nature acts as an epic force, depicted as overwhelming and sublime. While beautiful, Turner’s images contain a pervading sense of melancholy, impending doom and destruction. In Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and the Dying—Typhon Coming On (The Slave Ship), (1840), a cascading blood red sunset covers a raging sea. A 1939 tale records the account of the slave trader Zong, who chose to discard sick and dying slaves overboard rather than trying to help them. If the slaves were lost at sea, the trader could collect insurance (Walker 132).

Referencing the horror of this event, Turner renders monster-like fish seething in the violent waters around the abandoned passengers. Maintaining a glorious sunset, capturing the light flickering across the sky and water, Turner represents both the horrific and beautiful within the same image.

Other imagery often focused on the cityscape, intermingling with sky and water, however, the most overt reference to the modern in Turner’s works is present in the painting, Rain, Steam and Speed—The Great Western Railway, (1844). Here, we see a dark steam engine approaching out of the smoky atmospheric background of city, water and sky. A
reviewer wrote of the painting exhibited in an 1844 Academy Exhibition, “up to the time of the Impressionists it is the solitary painting of significance glorifying the new age of railways” (Walker 140). Here, traveling down the center of a bridged track, the train emerges forward as a rabbit runs out in front. The composition is simple and even a bit melancholy. Some postulate that the rabbit represents nature being over-taken by the city; others consider it commentary on the slow speed of railway service (Walker 140). I also put forward that the rabbit can be seen as a symbol of struggle and survival.

In my work, exploration of the sublime and references to Turner can be seen both formally and conceptually. Formally, references to the sublime are built through light and atmosphere, composition, and color. Using light and atmosphere to create beauty, some images such as The Animals Were Gone/Dreaming Day, (fig. 7) are quiet and still, exploring melancholy emotion with hovering layers of glazed color over areas of muted mark making. Here, the composition is stable and serene. Other images explore aspects of the terrifying, creating atmosphere through agitated mark making and activated compositions.

The recurrence of a circular swirling composition can be seen throughout the works of William Turner such as Shade and Darkness: The Evening of the Deluge, (1843). In my paintings I use the circular composition as a way of implying foreboding and upheaval. Color also plays a role. I use deep rich browns and blacks to create a sense of darkness and high drama where areas of light illuminate. In Two Birds Before the End of The World, (fig. 8) fire rages next to the side of the road, while glowing green light cascades across the sky. The swirling composition helps to add agitation and movement. In this work complimentary colors are used to create drama, and a sense of spatial vibration as varying shades of light red hover against the dark green background.
Working to gradually build and eliminate painted imagery, the implication of nature as a destructive force, is also a sublime concept. In *Disintegration*, (fig. 9) representational imagery has been almost completely obliterated. Elements from the highway such as the guardrail stand out, but atmosphere envelops and overwhelms the composition.

(fig. 8) Two Birds Before the End of The World, 2008
Acrylic on Panel, 32” x 33”

(fig. 9) Disintegration, 2009
Acrylic on Panel, 37” x 36”
Anselm Kiefer and Social Healing

Though Anselm Kiefer prefers not to be categorized as a landscape painter, his transformation of landscape as subject matter to reveal content infused in process has also been influential to my development of imagery and surface. Curator Mark Rosenthal says, “Kiefer separates himself from traditional approaches toward the depiction of nature. He wants to penetrate the appearance of a specific landscape, so as to understand and allude to its underlying, meaningful history” (Rosenthal, 27). Born in 1945, the year WWII ended and Carl Jung wrote *After the Catastrophe*, Anselm Kiefer’s work addresses the Holocaust and the “collective guilt” inherited by post war Germans (Lopez-Pedraza, 9). Through the process of painting, Kiefer’s work facilitates discussion and healing, dealing with events which have left a deep chasm in society. In my work, I explore topics of hope and despair to encourage viewers to make connections to their own life experience, and facilitate a similar healing process.

What also attracted me to Kiefer is his use of a wide variety of materials and techniques to create surface and mirror content through process. Artist Joseph Beuys advised Kiefer “no material or approach seemed so banal or degraded that it could not through the artist’s alchemical touch be reconstituted into art, thereby initiating a healing process for the modern world’s sickened spirit” (Hunter, 394). In *Untitled*, (1987-88) Kiefer develops a landscape in monumental scale, combining oil, acrylic, emulsion, lead, ash, and lead objects on canvas. Somber and dusty in palette, areas of the land appear ashen and burnt, reflecting the traumas of war, and the Nazi’s scorched earth policy, destroying whatever territory they were not able to take. Kiefer sometimes uses a blowtorch in his work to replicate the process of burning, and layers of the painting also appear to be pealing away under the duress of
degradation and time. Using thick impasto paint, the surface takes on a granular quality, alluding to earth and plant matter at the point of destruction, waiting to be reborn. In the image, we see a set of railroad tracks leading off into the distance, a lead ladder twisting up towards the heavens, and a pair of ballet shoes attached. There is a dichotomy between the richness of the textured surface and the attached objects. The same tension is created between the affirmed flatness of the picture plane, and the representational device of perspective. Kiefer says “I use perspective to draw the viewer in like a bee to a flower. But then I want the viewer to get by that, to go down to the sediment so to speak, and get to the essence” (Hunter, 394). Here, the train tracks can be seen as reference to the Holocaust, and the transportation of Jews to and from concentration camps, but the ladder can be seen as a symbol of hope and resurrection as it ascends towards the sky. The lead can also be seen as a symbol of hope, referencing alchemy, or the process of trying to turn lead into gold, again an underlying reference to the transformative properties of art (Des Moines Art Center).

Looking at the work of Anselm Kiefer, I draw upon the concepts of marrying surface and texture with more developed and refined areas of representation. Almost all of the compositions have some distinguishable representational element, while allowing other areas to become abstract and emotional. In *The Return of Don Johnson Part I*, (fig. 11), *Cinders*, (fig. 10) and *The Return of Don Johnson Part II*, (fig. 6) areas of thick texture have been developed along with smoother compressed areas of scraping.
(fig. 10) *Cinders*, 2009  
Acrylic on Panel, 32” x 42”

(fig. 11) *The Return of Don Johnson Part I*, 2009  
Acrylic on Panel, 40” x 72”
In *The Return of Don Johnson Part I* (fig.11), I spread paint on thickly and covered it with a layer of gloss medium before completely dry. I then placed the work in front of a fan to cause the surface to crackle. Successive layers developed through additive and subtractive processes of painting and scraping. Where Kiefer’s work is more three-dimensional, using thick impasto paint and rough, ashen surfaces, *The Return of Don Johnson Part I* combines texture with smooth slick areas and an all-over glossy sheen. *Cinders* (fig. 10) and *The Return of Don Johnson Part II* (fig. 6) are also heavily textured, building additive layers of texture on top of smoothly scraped areas using gloss medium.
Michael Mann, Television and Cinema

While contemporary artists like Anselm Kiefer have helped to shape my aesthetic, I also recognize the importance of film and popular culture, such as the works of Michael Mann. Director of films such as *Heat*, 1995 and *Collateral*, 2004 and the 1980s television series *Miami Vice*, Mann is known for his stylized approach to filmmaking, combining big budget projects with art film aesthetics. Michael Mann treats the highway and urban landscape with exalted beauty. His sleek aesthetics, pastel colors and vibrant motion transform the topics of Turner into modern media. My paintings react to this aesthetic, incorporating the deep rich tones and speed of the modern landscape, while commenting on the 1980s culture Mann’s aesthetic helped to define.

Though the initial mention of *Miami Vice* as a television series might elicit a laugh, the influence and pioneering of its aesthetics changed television. Michael Mann micromanaged every aspect of the shows aesthetic, from the colors of the cars driven, to the actors clothing, and the backdrop of the city (Feeney, 73). Screenwriter and critic F.X. Feeney says, “Mann’s adherence to ‘feature film’ value had a strong positive impact throughout the television industry. For too many years, TV dramas had been under-realized. Under Mann’s guidance, there were now skillful plays of light and shadow, with dynamic compositions and even the jittery authenticity of hand-held camerawork. The whole palette of TV became a great deal bolder, in imitation of him” (Feeney, 74).

In regards to imagery, Mann says, “I’m a romantic about industrial landscapes” (Feeney, 102). Throughout Miami Vice and the films *Heat* and *Collateral*, we see long lingering shots of city and highway. We get shots focusing on the car traversing the highway at night, the signature shot of the camera riding low down by the wheel well, capturing
reflections off the car, the vibration and hum of the pavement speeding by. Like Turner, Mann uses aspects of light, atmosphere and long, drawn-out reflections to abstract landscape and create sublime contrast to the violence and action that takes place in the city streets. In Mann’s work distance and depth of field produce dancing abstract shapes of color. The atmosphere surrounding figures is monumentalized engulfing the characters in its grandeur. Film critic Steven Rybin says of Heat, “Characters are often found in spaces that do not evoke any sort of realistic sense of geography; the viewer may get a broad sense of the mood or manner of a setting, which in turn expresses character and comments on the action, but these shots do not comprise a realistic depiction of the city of Los Angeles or the locales within it” (Rybin, 116). Rybin relates this sense of abstraction to the struggle and isolation of the films characters; the confusion of the space they traverse represents “the inherent fragmentation of postmodern society” (Rybin116).

Examining my paintings, The Return of Don Johnson Part I (fig. 11) and Part II (fig. 6), are both tributes to Michael Mann and Miami Vice. The title plays upon the episode The Return of Calderone Part I, but also a return of 1980s fashion in contemporary culture. Last year I began notice my students trickling into class wearing leggings and flats with poofy clipped back bangs. I thought about the fast cars, high fashion and money-driven lifestyle paired with Michael Mann’s sleek aesthetic that combined to make Miami Vice so popular in the 1980s. I also thought about this aesthetic in comparison to what is going on in our current economy, where greed and over-extension have caused financial collapse and a rethinking of over-indulgent lifestyles. Thus, in The Return of Don Johnson Part I (fig.11), I stayed true to Michael Mann’s early 1980’s palette, using deep blacks, light turquoise and peach tones, and added a thick layer of glossy shine over the top with gloss medium. The
highway scene and overpass mirrored the Miami streets that Crockett and Tubbs might have sped down late at night, with one major difference; everything was falling apart.

Incorporating a crackling surface texture and carving down into the layers of paint, the seductive smooth perfection of speed and motion is marred, implying a breaking down of 1980’s indulgencies (fig. 12). The Return of Don Johnson Part II (fig. 6), takes this concept even further, transforming the highway landscape into a type of battleground, bathed in a queasy lime green light and covered in an all-over rough texture.

(fig. 12) Detail, The Return of Don Johnson Part I, 2009
Acrylic on Panel, 40” x 72”
ACTUALIZATION OF CONCEPTS IN PROCESS

Paintings

Over the course of time, the subject matter and imagery of the paintings developed from a focus on nature to an integration of natural and urban structures. When I first started working, the paintings had a pastoral feel, focusing on layers of atmosphere blanketing the earth with a type of stillness and calm found in what Kant would describe as the *noble*. I began by building up layers of acrylic paint, at first thickly to develop a surface, with gradated transitions between colors. From here I allowed thinner acrylic paint to drip, splash and run over the surface as I began to glaze over colors to create a hovering sense of depth. After an adequate ground was established, I began glazing with a series of oil glazes and graphite washes to create luminescence.

At this point in the process, my goal technically was to learn how to reproduce the presence of light so skillfully captured by Turner. However, even in these beginning stages the usage of acrylic and playful washes start to veer into a new direction. *La Cygne Burning*, (fig. 14) completed early on in the process depicts a quiet scene of clouds and yellow light cascading across the landscape, with splashes of warm reds in a hazy foreground of land and water. Abstracted from photos of the regional landscape, objects were made less distinct to place an emphasis on atmosphere and the emotional quality of the scene. The sharp contrast of light blue sky in the evening, with a dark mass of land in shadow found in the original reference photo (fig. 13) were transformed into areas of monochromatic gradation, focusing on warm tones to envelop the viewer in light. Though still appearing as a traditional landscape, the lower third of the composition has been altered to depict an ambiguous structure jutting across the landscape. Paint drips and pools reference deteriorating metal, and
the rectilinear form intentionally unrecognizable could describe any number of man-made materials set into the ground. In this composition, the addition to the landscape is less overt than later depictions of highway scenes, but begins to imply a mysterious relationship between the man-made and the natural.

(fig. 13) Photo reference from regional landscape for *La Cygne Burning, 2008*
As imagery developed, I began to explore aspects of the natural plasticity of acrylic paint further. *Tar Fields* (fig. 15) from 2008 would become one of the first paintings completed almost entirely using razor blades to move paint across the surface and create agitated, sharp marks. Using a dark green as a ground, I added a thick layer of orange acrylic paint mixed with heavy body acrylic gel. I kept a large brush loaded with orange ground color to wipe out mistakes. When the surface was 90% dry, but plastic enough to retain indentation, I began working over the surface to describe the landscape with a layer of lemon yellow wash. Allowing the wash to pool on the surface, I used razor blades to drag the wash across the ground and create dents and divots in the orange layer for the more liquid based paint to gather. As the landscape began to take form, I started to carve out layers of paint in areas to create emphasis, revealing the deepest layer of green paint hidden underneath. After the first three layers were dry, I continued to use razor blades as painting tools to describe the
structure of the overpass and sky, creating sharp and agitated marks. Here colors are bold and jarring, and the black used across the surface references asphalt.

(fig. 15) *Tar Fields*, 2008  
Acrylic on Panel, 40” x 72”

From this stage forward, paintings created merge varied combinations of the two above described processes. My goal was to combine glazing and atmosphere with agitated visceral mark-making. In *Tar Fields* (fig. 15) the subtractive and additive process developed in three distinct stages. As the paintings matured, the process of subtracting and scraping away paint grew more complicated. Starting each new painting by building up two thick ground layers to provide a basis for scraping, imagery would develop over a period of months. Adding layer by layer of paint, I worked selectively at scraping and removing paint to wear down the surface and reveal layers hidden beneath. Working down on the floor and painting aggressively, I painted subject matter in and out completely obliterating the image multiple times throughout the process. Sometimes a new composition would develop, and the
color palette changed often as a result of an on-going dialogue with the piece. Using razor blades to remove paint, thick areas slowly worn down became compressed and smooth demonstrating the passage of time, like a piece of glass slowly being worn smooth by the ocean’s waves. *Turner Diagonal*, (fig. 16) and *Anasazi*, (fig. 17) depicts this effect.

(fig. 16) *Turner Diagonal*, 2008  
Acrylic on Panel, 33” x 36”
The process of gradual addition and removal, and the destruction of imagery are important references to the idea of cycle and time. Landscape over the course of time is gradually worn down through exposure to the force of natural elements such as wind and water. Nature is depicted as a destructive force and the presence of fire or plant matter burning is implied in a number of the compositions, again a reference to regeneration. Similarly cityscapes mirror the same process of growth and destruction as new buildings, highways, and developments are constructed, wiping out what was in its place. The images below depict *The Return of Don Johnson Part II*, (fig. 18) in three stages of development during the process.
Continuing to combine agitated mark making and urban imagery with layers of soft atmosphere, many paintings in 2010 addressed aerial and atmospheric perspective. Introducing light white and yellow tones, these works focused on creating deep space. To create this effect in Nonsense Map II, (fig. 19) a heavy thick layer of gesso was added over a dark under-layer and wiped out with a rag to softly reveal shadows.
Digital Paintings

Working in tandem with the paintings, digital work evolved much in the same process. Combining imagery of scanned painted marks and photographs, I pieced imagery together gradually building and erasing through layers in Photoshop. A typical digital piece might contain thirty to forty layers combined and blended together. The process of adding layers allowed me to create the pieces similar to painting, adding and subtracting, exposing the material contained under each successive layer. Working digitally, I was able to experiment with object symbolism within the landscape. *Untitled*, (fig. 4) uses representational images of a balloon, playground and toy superman figurines to pair imagery of chaos and destruction with hope and innocence.
CONCLUSION

Allowing the work to develop over the of course time, continually reviving and destroying imagery, I believe the process in which the work is made is integral to the development of surface, and the overall content. Philosopher John Dewey says:

“Erroneous views of the nature of the act of expression almost all have their source in the notion that an emotion is complete in itself within, only when uttered having impact upon external material. But in fact, emotion is to or from or about something objective, whether in fact or in idea” (Dewey 69).

Spontaneity and expression is an act that comes from being truly seeped in a material “a complete absorption in subject matter that is fresh, the freshness of which holds and sustains emotion” (Dewey 73). All of the artists that have influenced me have a history of aestheticising the painful and horrid. Through surrounding myself with these materials, personal memories, and reference photos of highways and landscape, I am able to develop imagery intuitively and expressively. The process of constant dialogue with these images has helped to define the quality of emotions perceived through aesthetic experience. It is my hope that through engaging with the artwork, viewers are able to explore concepts that relate to their own life experiences.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


<http://www.desmoinesartcenter.org/>.


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