Rock Paper Scissors

Master of Fine Arts

Thesis

By

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My observations are conversations with the material world which excite my inner life, outline my memories and help to form my future self. I am interested in “… a materiality that is as much force as entity, as much energy as matter, as much intensity as extension”. [1] My practice engages in the various spaces among such forces and their manifestations, either as animate beings or inanimate objects, with their ever-present traces of history, and the natural and industrial processes by which they are shaped.

Ceremonial Board (Malu), 19th Century Metropolitan Museum of Art [2]
Such forces are often expressed in ritual art. The Oceania section of the Met exemplifies the significance of art-making as ritual used to mark significant life events that bring communities together by observing cultural mores. The photo above is a Malu board carved out of wood by the Sawos people of New Guinea. These boards are traded to the neighboring Latmul people who use them for initiation ceremonies that mark the transition of boys to manhood. If a boy dies during the initiation process, the Malu are displayed to the village women indicating that a death has occurred. The imagery contained within these objects are important animal and insect forms that have been abstracted from nature. Many of these forms such as hornbill birds incorporated into the openwork carving are important symbolic signs for the peoples throughout New Guinea. The pig which appears at the base, is held in high regard and is a customary feature at ritual ceremonies. Rituals and ceremonies are conducted for the purpose of engaging the spiritual world to affect changes in the natural world. Today, the Latmul call on spirits of the dead called “souls”, or “spirits of the bush and water” referred to as nature; (created by God) the most powerful ancestral spirit, for agricultural purposes, pregnancy, war, death and rites of passage etc. [3] Many of the Oceanic traditions are connected to the belief that spirits inhabit objects such as rocks, sticks, tools, and buildings for the purpose of affecting peoples’ lives (for better or worse). The objects typically created for rituals use only materials from their local environment such as wood, shells, hair, plants, feathers and paint extracted from earth, sap and tree resin, to name a few. Masks, one of the ritual objects, are often used to establish relationships with the spirit world. They are symbolic of many important subjects, including identity, kinship, gender and death.
There is a belief in magic among the communities of Oceania that is expressed through relationships between spirits, humans and the material world, all occupying the same existential space in the cycle of life’s events.

For me, making art is a ritualistic process bound up in observations of the material world. It speaks to my desire to interpret the world around me. How can spaces we consider “ordinary” allow an opportunity for transcendence? Can imagining a space or object from the point of view of a tree or forest animal, ruin/run, or rock allow for a hidden world to filter through? Can we imagine the rituals that may have taken place in a particular location? I believe that our imaginations can offer an alternative perspective on what our conditioned minds tell us is real. By accepting the notion that magic exists all around, that the ordinary is actually extraordinary, we may connect to something greater than ourselves. I identify this as an illusory goal; a gesture of hope. “Each one of us, then, should speak of his roads, his crossroads, his roadside benches: each one of us should make a surveyor’s map of his lost fields and means….thus we cover the universe with drawings we have lived.”[4]

I was moved by the book *The Forest Unseen*, where the author, David George Haskell, spends a year observing one square meter of old-growth forest of the Cumberland Plateau in Tennessee. He reports his almost daily observations through the changing seasons, from the perspective of a biologist and ecologist and the resonant impact it has on his inner life, ably expressed in a philosophical and poetic tone. He refers to the one square meter as his mandala. The idea is that “the truth of the forest may be more clearly and vividly revealed by the contemplation of a small area” [5], rather than a huge swath of land. The premise of the book is to use the
mandala as a metaphor for finding universal truths, an understanding of the world through the lens of the miniature. After a year of observation, what Haskell comes to realize is that his study of the mandala enhances self-knowledge; after all, this process of observation became a daily meditation. "As I have come to know the mandala, I have more clearly seen my ecological and evolutionary kinship with the forest. This knowledge feels woven into my body remaking me or, more precisely, waking in me the ability to see how I was made all along." [6]

After discovering this book, I decided to create a methodology inspired by it. I selected a location of interest, Dennings Point in Beacon. The main reason for selecting this site was what its history represented. It was once the location of Dennings Point Brickworks. It began operations in 1885 on 65 acres of land and operated for over 50 years. In its heyday it turned out a million bricks a week, some of which ended up in the Empire State Building and Rockefeller Center. However, by 1939 they had used up all of the local clay and ceased operations. It managed to transition to other forms of manufacturing making composite wood, concrete and paper clips, however by 1980 all operations ended mainly due to the depression that overcame Beacon. Now the brick factory is a modern day ruin with broken foundation walls, graffiti-tagged sections of existing brick walls, and in the center there is no roof left; it is open to the sky. There are bricks and litter scattered all around, and vegetation has seeped in, covering the ground and some walls. The ruin is in the shape of a very large rectangle. The site has an eerie and simultaneously beautiful quality. The brick factory ruin became my Mandala. I made several visits to this site over the course of twelve months. At this site, I photographed the ground, sky, fallen leaves, plants, and old factory ruins along with the views of the Hudson. I also spent
time meditating and writing here. I collected sample materials from the site such as bricks, rocks and leaves, recorded sounds and noted any specific scents that exist here. The thing that I was most captivated by was the changing sky, and how the light projected through the trees and ruins, and out towards the water onto the horizon. I made some drawings of the ruins, views, trees, and rocks. Many of the drawings included in the thesis installation are directly inspired by my observations recorded at my mandala. It is through the sensual bodily experience of the surroundings translated into abstractions made visual that represent the lived experience.

I use various materials to construct my work. I look for materials that interest me and that can convey the impressions or narratives I want to develop based on my research. Thus far, I have used wood, (natural and manufactured), string, clay, paint, paper, wire, plants, nails, glue, concrete and 3M ceramic roofing granules, silverpoint, drawing mediums like graphite, charcoal, oil pencils and pastel. Silverpoint is one of the oldest drawing tools that can create fine lines that change when exposed to air over time, like the ephemeral nature of the landscape. My iPhone has been extraordinarily handy. I use it to take photos, make notes, write poems, and other random thoughts. In my limited use of clay, I have constructed objects that are also connected abstractly to things I see on and off trail.

For my thesis show, titled “Rock Paper Scissors,” I created an installation inspired by my mandala at Denning’s Point. There is an installation of 32 drawings, some framed, some unframed, some on torn paper, some on perfectly proportioned paper. The drawings constitute a catalog of observations over the past 12 months. There are several drawings containing interpretations of rocks, along with actual rocks mixed
into the wall installation. I believe rocks contain energy and when you draw them you perceive and can make visible the energy contained in them.

The drawings were made using graphite, ink, charcoal, gouache, and pastel. To create the installation, I determined the size and then proceeded to hang different kinds of paper to form a grid that spans 20 feet by 6 feet. To provide structure and another layer of interest and support to the installation, I included hand-built frames for a third of the drawings. The frames are a combination of traditional frames with mitered corners, and unusually shaped frames. Rocks made from concrete or clay rest on top of and inside some of the framed drawings. One of the drawings is of negative space surrounded by a frame to encourage the viewer to question the notion of “art”, to ponder the subjectively empty space and what the future drawing might be, or not.

In addition I created “Blackstar”, a 3’ x 2’ meteorite-like rock inspired by David Bowie’s last album “Blackstar”. I wanted to include a rock that visitors would have to navigate around, and wonder why it exists in the space among other natural elements, but eerily from another planet maybe. It relates to an eerie kind of feeling that I experienced at Dennings Point, a dystopian atmosphere. “Blackstar” is made of concrete and coated with Lucas 3M ceramic-coated colored roofing granules in black with a bit of glitter added.

I also installed “Lowlands” along one of the walls, which consists of 14 feet of 2”x4”s set on pieces of bricks found at Denning’s Point. Various clay and wooden objects sit on top of the 2”x4”s as a collection of objects that could be uncovered, or made based on existing elements and observations at Denning’s Point. The idea for this
installation came from the remnants of the old brick factory still present at Denning’s Point.

Lowlands, 2019, Dorsky Museum, New Paltz, NY
Clay, paint, wood, twigs, found bricks, wood.

Rock Paper Scissors 2019 (Detail, Installation Dorsky Museum, New Paltz, NY)

Rock Paper Scissors 2019, Installation View, Dorsky Museum, New Paltz, NY
Black Star, 2019 Dorsky Museum, New Paltz, NY
Concrete, wire mesh, ceramic coated roofing granules, glitter, bricks
Sky Scrapper 2019 DorskyMuseum, NewPaltz, NY
Wood, clay, string, twigs, aluminum metal, gold leaf, birch log, paint, staples, bubble wrap
Sky Scraper, 2019, Additional View, Dorsky Museum, New Paltz, NY
I have been influenced by various movements of art history and individual artists. In November, 2018 I went to see *Ree Morton: The Plant That Heals May Also Poison*, a retrospective at ICA in Philadelphia that included over 40 works. I instantly felt a kinship with Ree, fueled by her sensibility, her humor, the subjects she was drawn to, her material choices, and the use of drawing installation that spanned the different periods covered in the exhibition. The exhibition includes work that Ree made over a period of nine years, as her life was tragically cut short at the age of 41 due to an automobile accident. Remarkably, though, she was able to create a great deal of work during those years. Ree was an early practitioner of installation art beginning in the early 1970’s. Her work is material-based and has a ritualistic hand-made quality that is emotional, hermetic and poetic. “The work all looks like it’s in a forever state of formation.” [7] “*Souvenir Piece*” from 1973, is most likely a memento of a vacation spent with her kids in Newfoundland. It commemorated a period that Ree had said was the happiest time in her life. The installation included a low-to-the-ground handmade table with a painted lime-green field, and on top sat a variety of hand-built wooden objects with various-sized rocks placed on top of them. Hung in random fashion on the adjacent wall were six abstract drawings on canvas of varying sizes, each with a hand-built frame that communicated with the objects on the table in a diagrammatic manner. From the pictures to the sculptures, the notion of the miniature, something precious, is contained in memory made present. I am deeply drawn to this work because these simple forms act as gestures that speak to a universal truth contained in memory.
Souvenir Piece 1973 (detail, Installation at ICA, Philadelphia, PA)
Kate Newby is a contemporary artist from New Zealand who creates installations that exploit the poetics of the everyday while she draws from her surroundings, disrupting space to externalize and reinterpret the formerly hidden. She intuitively makes visible the invisible. In 2016, Kate was invited to the Poor Farm in Little Wolf, Wisconsin to create an exhibition. The Poor Farm, established in 2009 facilitates artist residencies, artist projects and year-long exhibitions at the former Waupaca County Poor Farm built in 1876. In her exhibit, “Maybe bigger. Deeper” Experiment VIII (2016-2017), Kate examined the geography of the Poor Farm and exposed the unseen histories, the overlooked and ignored spaces. Inspired by local geological conditions, she studied the composition of the earth there, and she responded to the landscape and the history of the place by placing her rock-like formations (based on her earth studies) in a variety of settings: lawns, window sills, inside a studio, and studio steps. Her objects, when fired, mirrored the “real” objects. Hers were made using pit-fired
stoneware and earthenware, porcelain and glass. She made large quantities of the stones, and other rock-like bits setting the objects in areas to be encountered as one walked around. The poetic placement brings a life-force to these stones that a casual observer may not have noticed prior to Kate’s intervention. Her work seems to be engaged with the idea that space, matter, and human interaction are all intrinsically linked: “the power of a body to affect other bodies includes a corresponding and inseparable “capacity to be affected;” there are two equally actual powers, that of acting, and that of suffering action, which vary inversely one to the other, but whose sum is both constant and constantly effective. [8]”

I am thoroughly engaged with Kates’ work, and the nature of her practice. I share her interest in finding deep meaning and resonance in the things that are usually hidden or ignored, and making them visible through their history, for others to savor.

*Maybe Bigger. Deeper* 2016 Installation View 2016 Great Poor Farm
The idea of creating an installation for any kind of object is, for me, the notion of looking deeper into the reality of our existence, and to allow for the magic around us to unfold. Gaston Bachelard in The Poetics of Space deftly describes what it is like to be in a meditative state and the rewards to creativity that it can bring. “Immensity is within ourselves. It is attached to a sort of expansion of being that life curbs and caution arrests, but which starts again when we are alone. As soon as we become motionless, we are elsewhere: we are dreaming in a world that is immense. Indeed immense is the movement of motionless man. It is one of the dynamic characteristics of quiet daydreaming.” [9]
Rock Paper Scissors is an installation of works created through a gestural impulse of the places and memories that I have collected over the past 12 months. I believe that I am at the beginning of a process that will inform the way I go about creating work in the near-term and distant future.

I am deeply interested in mining the history and ecology of place in an effort to discover links related to the human condition that can heighten our awareness of the world around us and of the impactful exchange that exists between us and the natural world. Like the peoples of Oceania, and scientists such as David George Haskell, making rituals inspired by the natural world can only strengthen our connection to ourselves, our community and urge a deeper appreciation for the world we’ve been given.
Bibliography


3. Wiley Online Library. Article – The (Re-)Appropriation of Spirit Beings-Spirits of the Dead and Spirit of God in a Sepik Community.


