

Shannon Rafferty
Artist Statement
SMP in Studio Art, 2013-2014

My work is about reimagining past experiences in the landscape. Before I began my SMP, I spent time in Mount Greta, PA where I was submersed in the process of drawing and painting from the landscape. During this time, I explored systems of mark making to break down the spaces around me. The landscape fluctuated between densely forested mountains to the open farmlands of Pennsylvania. This constant undulation of land challenged my drawing skills and my ability to visually organize drastically different types of spaces. As I drew more, I found that the act of drawing left me with deep memories of the landscapes. I discovered that through the act of drawing the landscape, the landscape's defining structures became embedded into my kinesthetic memory.

Besides the element of memory that I became interested in while in Mount Greta, I realized that transcribing the landscape verbatim was not as important to me as it was to poetically describe the places that I have been. No matter how much my drawing skills improved, my painted copies would never be as powerful as the actual landscape. This shift allowed me to engage in a more open-ended painting process. When I was drawing or painting a landscape, instead of painting everything I saw, I focused on the negative space or one type of mark to create a system of visual organization. Even though each painting I made over the summer was consistent within itself, each painting varied greatly from each other.

After the summer, my goal with drawing from life was to internalize form and structure. Through this practice, I was able to recall these structures later in my studio. At the time, I did not know how to integrate what I learned at Mount Greta into something that was my own. I enjoy drawing and painting from life and find it to be a challenging and rewarding practice, but I needed to go beyond just rendering what I saw. I experimented with making paintings divorced from

perception and all about intuitive response. However, the compositions and marks that I made continued to lack variety unless I worked under the influence of life observation. During the exploratory stage of the SMP, I was influenced by Jan Baltzell's lyric, abstract paintings based on memories. I found her work to be poetic, beautiful, and evocative of the landscape. Open areas, erased marks and flowing brushstrokes create a rhythmic light in Baltzell's work (Senior Arts Initiative, 2013). Unlike me, Baltzell has years of working from the structure of still-lives and landscape to reference when constructing her paintings (Schmidt Dean Gallery, 2012). I began to draw outside again, like I did over the summer, as I experimented with developing a studio practice. Over time, the paintings that I did outside infiltrated my paintings that I did inside. I was working on many different surfaces, sizes and types of painting. When something interesting happened in a smaller study, I could reference that idea in a larger painting. Additionally, in the fall I began taking multiple visits to the Blue Ridge Mountains. I did not start off directly quoting this type of landscape in my paintings, but this influence later became very important in my SMP.

During the initial few weeks of SMP, I was focused on the musical, lyrical properties of painting and its connection to rhythmic patterns in nature. I liked to think of painting as the construction of a musical composition. I was trying to emulate what I saw in the landscape by taking lines from an organic structure that kept repeating. I would overlay several of these lines and shapes until I made a melodic, landscape-like painting. For example, I did line drawings based off of a hanging basket that I had in my studio and focused on the way one curve of a leaf mimicked and flowed into the next leaf. Throughout the year, I did numerous line drawings and studies of this plant. When I felt like my paintings were becoming too rigid or impassable, I could look to the softly flowing vines to find ways of softening up the painting.

At the beginning of the year, I began reading a lot about abstract expressionist artist Joan Mitchell who was concerned with nature, memory and emotion (Kernan, 2002). Her paintings functioned like lyrical, poetic mediations on nature. Mitchell talked about painting from emotions that she collected in the landscape. She carried these “inscapes,” or memories of landscapes, around with her and painted them in the studio (Dore, 2008). She was a painter that was able to describe the feeling of space more than the actual representation of the space.

Joan Mitchell’s method of painting from remembered emotions based on the landscape resonated deeply with me as I tried to figure out how to integrate my summer experience into my SMP. Throughout my life, I have spent a lot of my time outside, running trails or going on hikes. I began to realize how influential the landscapes I had lived in were to the person I had become. I grew up in Northern Maryland and had the influences of the Chesapeake Bay, farmland and city life all within a few minutes of where I lived. An avid cross-country runner, I spent an hour or two out of every day exploring trails around my home. I realized that these experiences contributed to my own “inscape.” Looking back on those times, I could vaguely recall how certain trails and locations felt to be in, and simultaneously had vivid recollections of other places. This fluctuation between having specific to generalized memories of spaces rooted in a physical connection to the landscape led me to question the role of muscle memory in my work. My painting process is also physical, and when I work large, the movement of my body is central to the construction of the painting. I realized that I was using my athletic connection to the landscape in my studio practice. The muscle memory I had built running through landscapes and drawing them was a full-body experience that influences my reaction to the painted surface. When I paint, I mostly use a full-body motion instead of a wrist or an arm movement. One of the reasons that my canvases became larger as the year progressed was

to allow my body to travel across them. With the larger surfaces, I could walk across the paintings with my body; creating marks that had deeper, kinesthetic connections to my memories.

Another strong artistic influence during the creation of my SMP was contemporary painter Ryan Cobourn. As an abstract painter working from perception, I found his process to have interesting ideas that I could borrow. For Cobourn, the painting is not a record of his environment, but a field to be discovered. He considers his process to be metaphor for the mutability of nature (Plotkin, 2012). Cobourn strives to find a balance of naturalism and abstraction, and the presence and breakdown of forms (Samet, 2014). Cobourn's process helped to fill in what was missing for me in Joan Mitchell's practice since perception was at the heart of her work. His paintings were places where he manipulated and reformed his observations. Mitchell was all about intuition and memory, but Cobourn was about intuition and perception.

Although I was looking at abstract expressionist painters and those influenced by this movement, I was cautious of prescribing to these labels. I realized that my work borrows from ideas rooted in abstract expressionism and formalism. While the formal elements of the painting are important to me, I am mostly focused on my experience in the landscape and my responsiveness to surface and material than I am to purely formal qualities. I am not making marks for the sake of gestural expression, but I deliberately place down lines and shapes to correspond with my memories of place. My paintings are not non-objective paintings that have organic components, but are reflections on my involvement in the landscape. In my work, my concerns are rooted in my experience outside of the painted surface.

It was during the Mid-term critique of the fall semester that I was presented with the same critique as I was over the summer. The marks in my paintings were too analogous and my paintings started to have the same composition. To increase variety in mark making and to challenge my

response to the canvas, I began to pour and drip paint as a way to begin or enliven an already worked-on painting. This addition to my practice forced me to incorporate new marks that I would not have made before. Even though I started to add these spontaneous movements, I found that the spills of paint still felt like organic forms in the landscape. For example, the way that the paint would spill could begin to interact with a contour line drawing I made. The intersection of marks started to create pockets of spaces of varying depths within the canvas. These spaces began to feel like the trails that I frequently hike through. As this happened, I used paint to pull out and accentuate these illusory pockets of spaces. Many of my paintings are created with opposing diagonal lines. These diagonals interweave to create pouches of depth that feel like the intertwining of branches and the complicated intersection of curved trees that I frequently saw on my walks.

This was one of the first painting practices that I had which felt sustainable. When I made large drawings and paintings in the past, I enjoyed the physical and mental grind of tightly rendered drawing, but wanted something else to happen. Now, I let go of my preconceived notions of what the finished product should look like. Muscle memory influenced the movements of my body as I painted, shaping how the paint landed on the canvas. The array of marks I created reminded me of a certain place and determined how I would respond to the canvas. I allowed myself to further experiment with form and mark. I limited my color palette to five or fewer colors, plus white or black, to achieve a sense of coherence in each painting. Painting with a limited palette created more distinctive color interactions and allowed me to explore mixing subtle shifts of color. My new interest in this kind of softer color transitions fed my interest in the Blue Ridge Mountains over the next few months.

In the winter and early spring, I realized that the Blue Ridge Mountains were accomplishing what I wanted my paintings to accomplish. I found the subtle color and hazy atmosphere of the

mountains to be analogous with my painting goals, so I began to collect notes and drawings during my visits. I found myself taking what I saw from the mountains and further paring down my palette in the studio so that I had a clearer connection to my source. Instead of layering brush marks on top of marks like what I was doing in the fall semester, I started off focusing on a specific contour derived from the mountains. These contours came from on-site drawings and my mental picture of the mountains. Whereas earlier in the SMP, I let the gestural marks determine what kind spaces I would develop, I now had a more deliberate intention from the start. I still did not know what the final image would look like, but I knew the feeling or property of the mountains that I was seeking. My process was still very open ended, but I was searching for marks that felt like the coolness of the Blue Ridge, not forms that just felt like any landscape. Many times I whited out large parts of the canvas if I lost the openness and drama of the mountains I was seeking to describe.

Now that I was able to clearly identify the role of memory in my work, I was able to relate my observations of the landscape and memory to my painting process. In my paintings, I translate the process of recalling memories by shifting illusory depths throughout the canvas. Some areas sharply recede next to other areas where the view is obstructed and brought back to the foreground. Memory is like this, since it alternates between generalized pictures and sharp recollections. Landscape also has a similar process of eroding and preserving. In my paintings, I constantly subtract and add forms, leaving a history of brushstrokes underneath. The dynamics of the image undergo constant revision as the composition develops. Earlier layers peek through or are wiped away, alluding to the disintegration of nature and the traces of existence that are left behind. Similarly, memories can also be smudged and represent distorted illusions of the past. Every time a memory is accessed, it is reformed and manipulated from its original state.

As I was thinking about layering and reforming in memory, landscape and my paintings, I began researching contemporary painter Cora Cohen. I am drawn to her paintings because of their quietness and uncanny moments that I was trying to bring into my work. In her paintings, Cohen paints with veils of color and includes traces of her physical environment. She allows parts of the painting to be open and others to be dense. Many of her paintings have a disparate element, which adds uncertainty to the image that I find to be very present in both memory and the landscape (Jablon, 2013). Some landscapes are defined by what they are made up of, like the coastal plains and densely forested areas of St. Mary's. Others are defined by absence or openness and a lack of immediate barriers such as the Blue Ridge. However, within all landscapes, unexpected elements can be found that reshapes interpretation of the space. I would describe my work like Cohen's, saying that it is abstract by definition, but that I study and include representations from the world (Kohler, 2013).

For example, in my more recent paintings, like Hawksbill, I began by masking off contour lines from a drawing that I made of the Blue Ridge. Large white areas organize the composition. Some of these areas are overlaid on already painted portions and others are simply the white of the canvas. The white areas function both as the foreground and the background. The dark, black portions in the center and left edge recede back into space behind the white overlays. The white overlays are translucent and mimic the layers of hazy fog over the ragged horizon in the Blue Ridge Mountains. The masked marks in the bottom portion of the canvas feel sharp and aggressive next to the softer gray masking in the upper left corner. These marks help to create an overall downward tug to the right. The tonal range of the painting is large, but the color is limited, ranging from blue and purple grays, to dark blacks and hints of pale yellow. This juxtaposition of different types of line and masking relates to the jumbled nature of recall and the unexpected moments in the landscape.

Likewise in the painting titled Roan, I again combine several different types of masking. One of my main focuses in this painting was to limit the all-overness of my marks and to create a dynamic relationship between warm and cool neutral colors that I saw in the mountains. Two diagonals arranged in an almost perpendicular cluster of marks define the composition. In this painting, I have carved out densely masked areas with white paint to calm down the commotion of the under painting. The white area in the bottom of the painting, although it is painted as negative space, comes forward from the colored marks. This kind of layering functions like the landscape; layers of the past are eroded and sometimes jut through the topmost layer. In the landscape, weathering and time erodes the topmost layer while in my studio, tape, masking fluid and white paint break down and conceal the underlying surface.

In sum, I paint with the goal of creating poetic descriptions of places I have been through recall and my response to material. Central to my work are my concerns for landscape, memory and instinctive reaction to material. In memory, it is unclear what is invented and what is real. Over time, memory degrades and reforms. Memories shift depending on our moods and activities; they are as responsive to the present as they are to their origin. This same process of degrading, reforming and responding is what I do when I paint. I explore the role of memory in my relationship to the landscape through the recall of visual forms. My goal is to not recall how a space looked, but how a space felt. I paint to emulate the properties of a particular landscape in my work without literally copying the landscape.

Like my layered paintings, our memories are sub-terrain structures that are hidden yet constantly effecting. They are in the past like our memories, but they are informing and giving rise to the current condition. This same idea happens in the landscape, where the foundation for the present is found in the hidden topology of an earlier time. In memory, painting and landscape, one thing forms

the next, but also interferes with the present. Particular landscapes, like the mountains and the trails I run through, mimic the process of recall and I seek them out when painting. My process is never absolute and I allow uncertainty exist when I paint. I do not have a prescribed method for each work, but I let my painting unfurl as I go, allowing my memories of the landscape to interact with spontaneous drips to rebuild the surface.

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