

Mapping the Storm

As the wind picks up strength, a breeze turning into a howl, the horizon darkens faster than one would believe possible. The day's joys turn into dark uncertainties in the face of an approaching storm as we question whether we can weather. How long must we endure, if indeed we even can? Can our resolve stand stronger than the gales, the downpour, the flood? What will we lose before the skies clear? Looking down from the stratosphere, we could see the clouds gather and the forming of the vortex. Yet from such a helpless distance, what could one possibly hope to do, but offer silent words of comfort.

1. Forecast

After a great deal of experimentation, *Mapping the Storm* arose as a response to where I found myself during graduate school. Being torn between North Carolina and Ohio, but never fully present in either, I felt a constant disconnect with my sense of place. The beginning of graduate school also left me feeling lost and dazed, further unsure of where I stood. This groundlessness was only ever exacerbated by larger sociocultural, political, and ecological climates. Having once had a home, I was left as uprooted as though in the wake of an earthquake. Although I once thought I knew so much about art, it turned out I knew very little. Where there was once a functioning government and political system, there are storms of dysfunction and animosity. All the while, the Climate Crisis looms larger, entirely unchecked. Although I initially tried to escape the weight of these upheavals storming through my mind, it eventually became evident that it would be far better to pour the energy of my life into my work; an Abstract Expressionist inspired approach to giving my thoughts and emotions form.

Mapping the Storm is an artistic atlas, a mixed-media collection of charted abstract environments that were created in response to sensations of being lost, groundless, and without control. Within these large-scale works, I thought of myself as a cartographer, utilizing different

languages of mapping to construct paintings and drawings that simultaneously create and navigate these storms.ⁱⁱ As theorists such as R.G. Collingwood would say, I sought to use my art as a means of working through unknown emotions.ⁱ These works convey the process-driven nature of my work and my interest in materiality, particularly in response to Contemporary artists such as Mark Bradford and Anselm Kiefer. With influences ranging from Romantic Landscape painters to Abstract Expressionists, my work is also in conversation with the legacy of art that contemplates the Sublime. In speaking of vast storms, there seems to be a dark irony in the fact that the Coronavirus obliterated my thesis exhibitions as surely as the economy.

2. *The Cartographer*

In the midst of an Ohio winter, I was contemplating how environment and being in a different climate was affecting me and how that could be explored in my work. This led me to make one of my most intriguing early moves, when I collected chunks of dirty snow from roadsides and parking lots and created a gritty atmospheric drawing through melting, pooling, and evaporation on primed unstretched canvas.ⁱⁱⁱ Not only was the work visually intriguing, but it also opened possibilities for working with environment, atmosphere, and playing with landscape.

I spent a great deal of time meditating on my work as I drove the roughly 514 miles, through shifting landscapes and weather patterns, separating Carrboro, NC from Oxford, OH. Since I was relentlessly dependent on Google Maps as I constantly navigated the two, maps became immediately important for me both conceptually and as objects. I was interested in the idea of using my studio practice to chart my experience, but didn't want to speak only of my own existence. However, a simple google search reveals 9,010,000 results for "millennials feel lost," providing a path for my practice that reaches far beyond myself in this particular place and time.

ⁱ Nigel Warburton, *The Art Question* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003) 49

So rather than trying to chart specific experiences, I began to work on the idea of mapping the sensation of being lost, creating abstract environments that viewers have to navigate with their own compass; experience.

The long history of cartography validates that humans have long sought to make maps in order to understand where we fit in the world around us. According to the Archeological Institute of America, one of the oldest surviving maps and possibly the “oldest known graphic depiction of space” is the Pavlov Mammoth Tusk Map, thought to be made in 25,000 BCE.² Although humans have been making maps and art since time immemorial, both are still incredibly relevant in a contemporary context. I was also heavily influenced by Contemporary artists that incorporate mapping into their work, such as Mark Bradford and Amy Schissel. I began thinking about the functionality of a map and how that changes without a physical anchor or a destination. How does the idea of a map change if it doesn’t lead you anywhere practical, or there is no key to tell you how to read the map? How does this impact the viewer’s experience?

The summer of 2019 was also an important time for the development of this concept due to the vicious hurricane season, which led to near constant exposure to synoptic weather charts. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2019 marked “the fourth consecutive above-normal Atlantic hurricane season.”³ Hurricane mapping radars are visually striking, even as they present a system of information both massive and terrifying.^{iv} Exploring the power of the satellite perspective of these systems had a significant impact on my work. In exploring cartography and considering what kind of environments to create, I also

² Mammoth Tusk from Pavlov – The Oldest Moravian Map?, Archaeological Institute of America, 2019, <https://www.archaeological.org/event/mammoth-tusk-from-pavlov-the-oldest-moravian-map/>

³ Active 2019 Atlantic hurricane season comes to an end, NOAA, <https://www.noaa.gov/media-release/active-2019-atlantic-hurricane-season-comes-to-end>

thought about the connection between the chaos of a storm and how that connects to being lost within a turbulent environment. Being inspired by hurricane meteorology radar imagery, I was interested in the idea of a storm distressing an environment to the point of a complete breakdown within the artistic space. How could I depict a storm so catastrophic that a viewer wouldn't quite be able to totally differentiate the ground from the atmosphere? What would such a storm leave behind?

In thinking more about my environments and the idea of terrain I discovered the lesser known "terrane", which the Oxford dictionary defines as a "fault-bounded area or region with a distinctive stratigraphy, structure, and geological history." I wanted this definition to apply to my individual pieces, as edge-bound explorations of environments with distinct storm history and artistic upheaval. Inspired by the idea of stratigraphy – the literal geologic or archaeological order of the layers of the Earth – I began to think about orders and disorders of history through mark-making and artistic layers. In regards to the actual state of the earth, the stability of the structure and geological history is crucial to the integrity of the environment. However, I began to think about how the disorder of an unstable environment could communicate a sense of storminess. I began to visualize the earth, the sky, and the sea pushing and churning against each other as an outlet for my unrest.^v As Titus Kaphar said, "rather than making paintings about something, you make paintings that reflect that thing."⁴

3. The Maps

The idea of terrane and structure also fed into the development of an artistic vocabulary: which included radial lines, evaporated washes, brushstrokes, rendered topographic relief,

⁴ Mary Louise Kelly, Meet The MacArthur Fellow Disrupting Racism in Art, NPR, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/10/04/654476095/meet-the-macarthur-fellow-disrupting-racism-in-art>

stylized mountain ranges, mapping routes, and surface elements such as dirt, grass, spackle, string, salt, and papier-mache. By playing with shifts in perception, the ways the way visual elements recede or emerge, I could depict restless, unsettled, and distressed environments. I find that I am most engaged with my work when there is a certain amount of uncertainty, uncontrollability, and experimentation, where I allow for accidents and discovery.

Mapping the Storm is composed almost entirely of works on paper. I've always appreciated the role of paper in regards to the development of humanity's civilization, and this appreciation has only increased in light of the increasing dependency on digitalization. In a similar vein, I've always appreciated the metaphoric significance of paper in the way that it is both incredibly fragile yet remarkably resilient. For *Mapping the Storm*, one of the main processes of mark-making is to pool inkwash horizontally and leave the pools to evaporate over long periods of time. As the liquid slowly evaporates it gradually leaves behind subtle ink reticulations, a process which also reflects on temporality and the human condition; present so briefly, only to leave behind traces. In the same way that the water slowly returns to a greater natural system, so do we leave behind tangible traces as we eventually return to the immense unknown. In order to play with depth, as well as visual and chromatic complexity, I most often repeat this process many times in order to create a dynamic surface with a vast and complex record of evaporated time. In addition to this metaphoric significance, I use these pooled reticulations to create the spaces that I map. For the most part I mix hazy greys, blues, and purples to create groundless atmospheric environments, while I can also make hard edges that often resemble outlined continents from a satellite perspective. Conversely, the ink reticulations can also often resemble cosmic nebulae, which helps to leave the viewers unsure of exactly what kind of environment is being mapped or charted. In order to bring more sedimentation and

earthiness to the work, I also used leftover brewed coffee grounds. The majority of my work starts with an expansive application of washes that would be left to pool on primed papers placed on the ground. As I meditate with the work, I respond intuitively to the traces that remain from the evaporation of the inkwash.

One of the main ways I responded to the work, as well navigating and exploring the environments, has been through the use of line. The first use of line that was incorporated into the works were straight radial lines that were inspired by Mark Bradford *Scorched Earth* series and the map for Fire Emblem: *The Sacred Stones*, a 2005 video game.^{vi} Not only did the radials add a more technical kind of depth to the drawings, but they also added order and a touch of logic to the chaos of the evaporated reticulations. These radials quickly expanded into clusters, where many radials and innumerable lines that come together to form pockets of rectilinear density. These clusters also came about from conversations with advisors when the work called for more systems of information, and were inspired by internet mappings.⁵

Arguably the most significant use of line that solidified the language of mapping within the series was the use of the grid. While the introduction of the radials added a measure of order to counteract the randomness of the liquid mark-making, charting the environments and defining parameters within the space of the compositions was an important turning point within the work. In order to complicate depth and shift visual perspective, I would often chart the grids in response to fields of reticulations, sometimes pulling the grid forward while also letting it fall away. Almost all of the grids I used for this body of work were, in inches, sets of three (alluding to the idea of a “holy trinity) or seven (a spiritual, mystical, or lucky number). I believe there is a work or two that feature a five inch grid, which interestingly is considered “unpredictable,

⁵ Chris Harrison, Internet Maps, <https://www.chrisharrison.net/index.php/Visualizations/InternetMap>

always in motion and constantly in need of change.”⁶ Additionally I also implemented multiple grid systems of different measurements in the same piece, whether over-top-of-one-another or from side-to-side.

Since the evaporated inkwash is particularly convincing as atmosphere, I began using papier-mache and spackle to create terrestrial surfaces. These textures became an essential element in the tension between micro and macro perspectives and a strong juxtaposition against the atmospheric washes. I expanded and complicated this language when I began to directly reference topographic relief by drawing mountains, gorges, and chasms with graphite and charcoal.^{vii} The symbiosis between these two approaches helped to challenge audiences’ perception of the work, since it often took time and exploration to discover such distinctions. Introducing such a tangible anchor into the environments also opened up different ways of conveying scale and vastness within the works.

4. On The Radar

While I have been influenced by Abstract Expressionism and Romanticism my entire artistic career, I drew more inspiration from the two movements for this body of work. Romanticism has always had an impact on the mentality of my art, as I prefer to make art as a reflection on the human condition and contribute to a greater humanistic potential. Furthermore, I was thinking about the legacy of Romantic Landscape painting, especially in regards to using environment as a sublimely or spiritually metaphoric space. This became especially relevant when I began to focus on stormy environments, due to my immense adoration of these environments, especially J.M.W. Turner and Thomas Cole. I became particularly interested in

⁶ Hans Decoz, Number 5 Numerology: A dynamic force, <https://www.numerology.com/numerology-numbers/5>

the way these artists depicted their stormed spaces, particularly Turner due to his energy and abstraction.^{viii}

Having learned more about Abstract Expressionism during my studies, I was interested in using my artistic practice as a space to explore the state of my emotional well-being during this time. Having grown up in the rural South surrounded by traditional ideals of masculinity, this was generally uncharted territory for me. I was simultaneously interested in active spontaneity from artists such as Pollock, as well as color field spirituality of artists like Newman. In my mind, one of the most interesting ways I could chart my existence in my environments was with the mentality of an Action Painter, by using mark-making as a means to map my exploration of the drawings. Additionally, I have long been interested in art as a means of exploring the sublime, the forces that exist beyond complete human comprehension. Few grandiose statements have made more of an than declaring that “instead of making cathedrals out of Christ, man, or ‘life,’ we are making it out of ourselves, out of our own feelings.”⁷ However I am not only using my feelings as markers for my pathways, but an unquenchable thirst in questioning my own spiritual nature. I gave up on Christianity long ago, but there is a reason my work so often seeks a satellite perspective of a vast space, a view from the eyes of God.

There were three notable events that heavily impacted my thesis work: the NYC trip; seeing about nine of Anselm Kiefer’s paintings in person in MoMA SF; and seeing the Amy Schissel’s work for her visiting exhibition. In addition to these, I was introduced to the work of Mark Bradford, which has had a significant impact on the direction of my work. The first of these was going to NYC in the winter of 2018, where I was introduced to Jack Whitten and saw how important Modernism remains in the art world outside of an academic context. The latter of

⁷ Barnett Newman, “The Sublime is Now,” in *Art in Theory: 1900-2000*, ed. Charles Harrison & Paul Wood. (Blackwell Publishing, 2003) 580

these was particularly impactful in conjunction with my Modernist art history classes, both of which contributed to this body of work being more influenced by my interest in the legacy of Abstract Expressionism. In response to these elements, I was particularly driven by the desire to try and use my artistic practice to exteriorize the turmoil of my interior experience during this time. While I saw many phenomenal works of art while in NY, seeing a retrospective of Jack Whitten's paintings at the Met Breuer was by far the most influential, especially since I had never heard of him before. This was around the same time I was introduced to Kiefer, so part of this interest was due to being experienced dynamic and highly dense and textural paintings. These ideas resonate within Whitten's paintings as well, but I was really interested in the way he was able to connect the personal nature of his work to larger sociocultural issues.

The impact of experiencing these kinds of works became significantly more pronounced after the summer of 2019 when I was able to see several Kiefer paintings from the 80's and 90's at MoMA San Francisco. In response to this experience when thinking about creating turbulent environments, I made *Turbulence* and *Desecrated*,^{ix} which were important early works. When I first saw the work of Kiefer, I was struck by how complex and dynamic the surface of the paintings were; as intense as the meaning behind the work. Although it isn't something I'm directly interested in at this time, the way Kiefer uses history as a medium all-its-own is incredibly powerful. Furthermore, Kiefer often uses mythological references in his work, not only a strategy I've always admired, but also utilized for the work in figure ix. I also aim to make large scale artwork, so Kiefer's *Untitled* from 1980-86 and Whitten's *Atopolis* have had a significant impact on the ambition of my work.^x

Similarly, Amy Schissel's *Hyper-Atlas* work has helped inform working with paper, as well as providing reference for ways of collecting many different systems of information

together in a cohesive work. Not only does she utilize different languages of mapping to create vast environments, but Schissel and I also have similar abstract drawing and painting sensibilities and approaches. Additionally, the drawer in me is immediately taken with the way she constructs these environments while staying in black, white, and grayscale. In different ways these ideas are also relevant to my relationship with Bradford's work, but I've been especially inspired by his [Scorched Earth](#) series, which not only deals with elements of human struggle but also plays with the language of mapping. Furthermore, while Whitten and Kiefer have many pieces that focus on building the surface of paintings, Bradford (as well as Kiefer) tends to build up many layers only to then destroy them; which is an incredibly engaging idea to me. Ultimately, these artists have shown me revitalizations of contemporary painting that drove me to push my work to be larger and more densely surfaced. Additionally, I have seen all of these artists' work in person, which has shaped my focus on the *experience* of a viewer being physically confronted by a work of art. Although contemporary artists have to work within the internet sphere and depend on digital representations of their work, within this body of work I sought to emphasize the experience of the viewer-art interaction through scale, subtlety, and texture.

In addition to looking at contemporary artists, I've looked a wide variety of maps and charts to inform this body of work. My interest in maps was can be traced back decades, as I've always been excited by those of Fantasy/Sci-fi novels I'm reading; such as J.R.R. Tolkien and Terry Brooks. As I mentioned previously, one of the earliest and most prevalent references for me was Google Maps. On one hand, this is due to the fact that I was using the platform constantly in traveling back and from my two states of existence. On the other hand, in thinking about the relationship between micro and macro being one of my prevalent themes, I was

thinking a great deal about being able to play with the concept of digital “zooming” in my physical pieces. One of my foremost goals was create stormy environments by having constant perceptual shifts, which therefore undermined the inherent stability of the space, so I was interested in being able to maintain a vast distance that incorporated pockets of closeness.

I also became extremely interested in older nautical charts, such as the one featured in figure xi. One of the most interesting aspects of the nautical charts came in understanding the function of white when doing more research on how to read these charts. As someone who is drawn to high-key sensibilities, I was fascinated to learn that these systems of information often use white as a marker of deep space. For me, this was an extremely interesting contrast to traditional academic drawing, where white is most often reserved for marking a reflection of direct light (this usually being “on top” of the subject being drawn). This idea is also an interesting concept in contrast to another mapping system I’ve been heavily interested in, meteorological synoptic radar, where white usually indicates clouds that would be closest to the satellite perspective. In order to offset the oceanic and the atmospheric and expand my visual language, I also often referenced topographic relief maps.^{xii} While Ohio’s vast grey skies were informative to my work, I missed my mountains and sought to proxy them into my work.

5. The Storm

While I discuss of the specifics in my *Exhibition Rationale*, I’d like to take a moment and be candid about the culmination of my thesis work. Unfortunately, the experience of the viewer being confronted or enveloped by the physical artwork – a critical aspect of these works – has been lost. Since I was depending on being able to arrange the work in the gallery space to create a kind of artistic ecosystem, pivoting to a theoretical exhibition was challenging. Since I can hardly imagine what I would have done in an imaginary future – and lost use of my studio space

– I worked to embrace the format and finished several pieces digitally. While there were previous discussions about my work’s position in regards to installation or easel painting, there is now only the domination of the screen. Salt to the wound, considering I was using scale and texture to undermine digital sensibilities. On the other hand, I think the digital touch adds another interesting perceptual speed to the work, especially juxtaposed by tangible expressionistic brushstrokes. In response to the amount of uncertainty in America due to the pandemic, I decided to retreat to the familiar safety of hanging 2D works on the walls for my proposal.^{xiii} Although it feels like my work was flipped upside down, I think the digitalization also gives the work a more direct and interesting connection to live weather radars.

6. Aftermath

Where do we go from here?

Not only a solid title for a new body of work, but also a question on minds of millions of Americans. Unfortunately, I am possibly moving on to a more chaotic and uncertain environment due to our current critical circumstances, so I will continue to develop the ideas that build my thesis. While I am still vitally interested in scale and experimentation, it’s difficult to know the direction those developments will go due to an immediate lack of adequate studio space. An unexpected silver lining that has arisen is the development of my digital works, and while I transition out of graduate school, these will likely be where most of my energy goes.^{xiv} During graduate school, I asked myself many questions that I had to put on the backburner in order to focus on a coherent thesis body of work. This is only a new beginning, and I’m immensely excited to keep developing this body of work, as well as pushing my work forward in new and dynamic directions.

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