

*The Relationship Bodies Hold with  
One Another in Correlation with Personal Place and  
Memory*

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*Do you remember being born? Are you thankful for the hips that cracked?*

- Warsan Shire

## **Abstract**

A mass of land and our physical selves are both represented using the same word, body, and much of the language used to describe bodies of land and our bodies are synonymous to one another. My thesis explores these similarities, and the visual ways in which a physical body collects and represents time the same way a body of land does. Through lithography, handmade paper and bookmaking techniques I capture the state of variable physical memories within the bounds of static mediums. In this thesis I discuss how the land, maps of Montana, my family history, and the impression of print all interconnect with my own body. I will contextualize my work with contemporary visual artists and poets who each in their individual way interpret terrain.

## **Introduction**

This thesis examines the relationships that bodies of land hold to the physical body as it relates to the nature of the memory image, calling attention to personal forms of land and how they have moulded specifically my female body. The following writing explores these similarities, and the visual ways in which a physical body holds time the same way a body of land does. Through investigating how land can imprint memories, working specifically through paper and print, I review the impact of place and determine the ways in which the memory of land, and the history of place, can imprint on the body as much as our own bodies imprint on the earth itself. What follows chronicles the root of my ongoing studio investigations into how best to capture the state of variable physical memories within the bounds of static mediums.

## **Mapping Complexities**

The way in which we record land has remained the same since the prehistoric era when man first needed to plot the terrain around him as a reference to find food, water, and other resources. These cave paintings and land markings were not standard by any means; they varied from each collective of peoples but were easily recognized by the singular tribe that created and read them. Mark Erickson, a contemporary artist and architect, creates maps with a similar personal goal. The lines used in his work are not

spatially to scale, they are relative marks simply dependant on those that are around them. The drawings are only of what Erickson has deemed important; the deep blue of a large river are notated clearly, the small squares of assumed buildings, the lines that possibly denote roads in and out of the picture plain, and the small grey dashes that might indicate grasslands from rock. The marks of Erickson are specific to his experiences and interpretations of the land being depicted, and ultimately are from memories of roughly what he remembers of the area.

### **Memory Maps**

Our memories are accessed in a complex code; it “seems that our memory is located not in one particular place in the brain, but is instead a brain-wide process in which several different areas” “act in conjunction with one another (sometimes referred to as distributed processing).” Our brain processes code, and each memory that can be recalled in our brains relies on a unique code to come together and stimulate different moments to create a memory. “ Each element of a memory (sights, sounds, words, emotions) is encoded in the same part of the brain that originally created that fragment (visual cortex, motor cortex, language area, etc), and recall of a memory effectively reactivates the neural patterns generated during the original encoding. Thus, a better image might be that of a complex web, in which the threads symbolize the various elements of a memory, that join at nodes or intersection points to form a whole rounded memory of a person, object or event.” When recalling a memory the brain is processing a specific code that is unique to the person recalling and is reliant on past experiences, past codes, past perceptions, reliant on the history of memories. Our brain creates a

map of experiences ready to access and combine many sections of memory code. A map that is unique from person to person and relies on specific previous experiences of that person for a full memory to be formed.

### **Forming Code Onto the Page**

It is the uniqueness of Ericksons maps that keeps them formally engaging. A viewer can denote and interpret the general spatial land qualities of the work while the specifics of place and importance remain with him. Noted in his works are the complexities of his memories of specific space where only he, or those with similar experiences within the space denoted, can access the experience fully.

My printed work *Supported & Nourished* focuses on the textural relationships of land and memory; in particular the land of Montana. An emphasis on this place exists not only because of its vastness and the incredible variations of texture within the landscape, but also because my family has a deep history within it. The men in my family have owned land in the same valley for over two hundred years. They have remained in the same valley since migrating in the early eighteen hundreds and have not stirred since; something has driven them to stay. I believe it is fascination of place that drives them, and that same fascination keeps calling me back. Through creating my own maps I elaborate on how specific structures of land influence or conjure memories for me and I begin to answer the questions of why place, why point of origin, and ownership is so important.

## **As Above, So Below**

Nuances in the landscapes texture from an aerial perspective reflect in my printed works; the crisp ridge of a mountain are compared to the dry shallow serenity of a crop field. French artist Elisabeth Couloigner focuses on these same textures within her work. Prying at collections of small textures found within the natural landscape and compiling them within a single page. Couloigner often uses rock and pavement like textures throughout her work as well as bark and fern like patterns. Her work could be interpreted as abstract realism and often has no clear perspective or scale choice. Her framing of these natural textures often leaves the viewer uncertain as to how close they are to the physical thing she is referencing.

When looking for aerial textures I often turn to hand plotted maps of Montana, most of these maps originated in the span between the early 1800s through the mid 1900s. Created with a base grid that is most often printed lithographically with handwork from a cartographer delineating specifics of the land being plotted, these maps are the first access point to my printed works. These maps are often found in the digital archives of the Montana Historical Society; while looking through this source I also come across multiple geological surveys of the land. Surveys including scientific descriptions of the quality of landmasses, soils, flora and fauna, as well as climatological observations found throughout the Montana landscape. All of these variables go into informing the textures of the print work produced as well as the color palette that is rendered in the work and the overall presentation of subject matter. I often approach my work scientifically and read the textures being created and manipulated as small



studies of the landscape/memoryscape changing my own lens from macro to micro, fluctuating back and forth, to challenge what is being observed. Maya Lin is a contemporary artist often challenging what her own viewer is interpreting; I am often reviewing her work not only for its terranean content, but also for the interpretation of scale. Lin asks her viewer to consider their own scale within the context of her pieces. Moving back and forth and asking the viewer to sit within the fluctuating macro and micro terrain she is creating. Asking her audience to understand their own being and presence within a space and consider their impact on terrain.

### **Language as Image**

In collaboration with visual work I write poetry as a means to express what my visual language cannot. Through poetic writing I am able to examine figures in my work, relate back to specific memories or people that have left impressions upon me; and more thoroughly give life to my printed works and provide greater depth to the image that is on the page. Much of what I write myself and the work I read gets interpreted as an image because what is being read on the page creates an image in one's mind. Therefore when writing and reading poetic works I often take font style, text size, line spacing, page orientation and scale within the page into consideration. Just like framing a piece of visual art all of these things go into consideration when framing my own writing and interpreting what I read from other poets. If work is framed improperly the interpretation from the viewer could be incorrect or mislead, this is why when I chose to incorporate text within my work, specifically my poetic texts, every element of that text gets evaluated. I believe text, even one word, can create a visual image in one's

mind and when that text is being considered as a visual medium it needs space within the page that it sits to be interpreted. Take the excerpt below from my writings about the print works *Between* and *Supported & Nourished* I write about the textures and images being created as figures themselves.

*Small dots that reticulate the the edge of a line but do not cross it; swarming to the boundaries of its edge and following so closely to the path it cannot touch, a pink line that is thick and moves back and forth creating a nest of warmth if you fall, waiting to catch you, radiating blooms that pollinate across the page fill the space where something waits to grow and blossom.*

To be read as a visual work the text needs room within the page to sit and be interpreted. These textures I write about are memoryscapes; they hold moments of tension between myself and the land, moments where I have felt pressure or stress, strength and comfort as well as sitting as abstract realism in form as a plotting of physical land.

## **Representation of Land**

“Language is fossil poetry” wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1844, “as the limestone of the continent consists of infinite masses of the shells of animalcules, so language is made up of images, or tropes, which now in their secondary use, have long ceased to

remind us of their poetic origin.” (p.13). The ways in which we describe land have become non descriptive in some manner and we forget the nuances in the natural language that used to exist. “Landscape is lost: through the loss of beauty, the loss of freedom” “and the loss of meaning.” (Rackham); our relationship to land has lost meaning. In our present day there is a dissociation our society holds with nature; we build up, over and across great plains of land for the expansion of our own kind, very rarely considering the impact we have on the earth or its fertility. This agent that allows us habitation on its surface is often being disregarded as living. Robert Macfarlane, a writer focusing on society's current linguistic stance with the land, put it best “We inhabit a post-pastoral terrain, full of modification and compromise” (Macfarlane, p.7). In Macfarlane’s book *Landmarks* he explores the relationship our current society holds with the language used to describe land. Often examining how our technosphere has eliminated younger generations from needing to learn the language used to describe different plots of land because of their great distance with the interaction in the land itself. He also details the many natural words our common language has cut out of use because they are no longer needed in our everyday interactions with one another. This means that our disconnection to nature is growing greater and greater the more we progress as a society and expand. In a pure pastoral time heartland musicians such as Woody Guthrie, John Denver, and Pete Seeger were evoking the presence of woman in land focusing on the preservation of the land's fertility. These activists were working in a time when environmental issues were being discussed most openly in political and social surroundings. In 1905 Theodore Roosevelt proposed legislation to found the

United States Forest Service as an effort to protect forests and grasslands in the United States and to assess the quality and conditions of forests in the U.S. Roosevelt had become aware of the impact the Industrial Revolution had on the nation's land and the lack of conservation efforts put for by the congressional community to halt or regulate such growth. During Roosevelt's presidency 150 national forests, 51 federal bird reserves, 4 national game preserves, 5 national parks, and 18 national monuments were established under the USFS and over 230 million acres of public land were preserved. Environmental awareness only grew and under the administration of Woodrow Wilson in 1916 the National Parks Service was established. In 1946 the Bureau of Land Management was set in motion and the country only continued to grow as an ever more aware nation; in 1970 the Environmental Protection Agency was created for the purpose of protecting human health and the environment. The EPA was the first government agency to recognize the industrial impact on the land and form legislation to protect the land from pollutants and harmful practices as a means to preserve bodies of land. Between this time frame artists like Guthrie, Seeger, and Denver were at their most prolific still maintaining the fight for ecological sustainability and respect. They were poets wanting their audience to see the land as a mother, as a womb for life, as a space for creation. Their work often harkened the essence of mother and the sacrifices that land and mother shared for the procurement of their children. Woody Guthrie makes this declaration in no better way.

*The wind of the upper flat plains sung a high lonesome song down across the blades of the iron dry grass. And this is the canyon womb, the stickery bed, the flat pallet on the the floor of the earth where the wind it's own self was born.*

Woody Guthrie, *House of Earth: A Novel*

Guthrie remarks on the land as a figure; living and breathing in our space, always participating in the cyclical practice of sustainability and growth. He expresses the land as a female entity giving birth to elements around her such as the wind that rustles through the grasslands and the creeks that babble across brook and stream giving life to everything that comes into contact with them. Guthrie and other artists like him place the earth as a female giver, as a mother to all organic specimens on this earth, including ourselves. This idea of the land as a mother is most clearly represented in the artist book *This Is How It Begins*; I reflect on what happens when the creatures that birthed us are taken advantage of; when we walk over their terrain as if they could never be affected by our steps. The book directly compares images of the female body to aerial photographs of land, examining the relationship between the female form and masses of earth as terrain. Shedding light on the notion that both bodies, that of women and of land, are both property and throughout our history have been owned by others and through great activism their independence has been fought to be preserved.

Why did you not warn her,  
hold her like a rotting boat  
and tell her that men will not love her  
if she is covered in continents,  
if her teeth are small colonies,  
if her stomach is an island  
if her thighs are borders?

Warsan Shire, *Ugly*

## Self As Terrain

Working with handmade paper I view each sheet like patches of skin, the course calloused kind that sit on the bottoms of feet, the wrinkles in hands that only appear after age and use, and the soft callows of the back of one's knees. I incorporate the technique of pulp blowouts in *This Is How It Begins* to explore the tenderness and delicacy of materials in relation to myself. The blowouts are usually made with a translucent sheet of abaca combined with a cotton-abaca blend sheet that has pulp in its sheet blown or taken away to create a shape; for my work this is usually a floral silhouette. I work with the silhouettes of flowers I have collected from Montana and use them as a placeholder of myself in the work. They sit as tender moments where I reveal my vulnerabilities, my ability to be hurt, my memories that are precious.

In the artist book *This Is How It Begins* images of aerial photographs are paired with photographs of the female body. Both images come together to create one spread of terrain, easily claimed and manipulated by others. A particular spread holds an image of a mountainous aerial photograph of Montana to the left and an image of a woman's stomach with a c-section scar to the right. The scene shows a representation of scarring and how both land and women have given birth to creatures and been scarred. The work compares the act of birth that the female body goes through and the earth as a mother who gave birth to our own mothers. Hues of pink evoke the presence of innocence and softness, but as the pages become darker in pink hue they become waxed and harder to penetrate or leave an impression upon; like the building up of thick burned skin or the tissue layers that sit under our tinted flesh.

In the book series *Memory of My Youth in the Mountains* I focused my attention to tactile and visceral materials: handmade paper, hair, wax and lard. I was particularly focused on a piece by Joseph Beuys with the same title not only for the use of materials but also the impact those materials had on him when he was young. In his youth Beuys' military aircraft was "shot down over the Crimean Front in the Ukraine. Beuys claims to have been promptly rescued by a nomadic tribe of Tartars, who apparently saved his life by greasing his bruised and battle-weary body with animal fat, before wrapping him entirely - so as to raise his temperature - in felt. The importance of ancient healing aids - in this case, fat and felt - for enriching and sustaining the human mind, body, and spirit, would come to play an important and highly visible role in much of Beuys's subsequent work as an artist." (Borer). Beuys is reliant on fat as a means of preservation, and uses it as such throughout his work. This is how I began to see the series, as a means of preservation.

The handmade paper in my series *Memory of My Youth in the Mountains* acts as skin; parts that have calloused over or naturally become thick over time, while also keeping places that remain still soft and can be bruised or punctured more easily. Translucent abaca is a skin like paper and successful in creating the soft texture of skin, it is why it can be seen throughout the work. While the fiber itself is strong and resilient, when pulled thinly the paper becomes susceptible to the elements it comes in contact with, much like my own body and the land of the earth. The book series act as a collection of memories, nonspecific, but generated to my youth in a particular time when a young girl learns that she will someday become a woman. The books explore what that



transition means, the act of menstruation, the development of fatty tissues throughout the body, and the ideas of femininity that surround young women. Through the use of red pigment, handmade paper, waxing, lard coating & dipping, and the incorporation of my own hair from when I was a young girl as spinal backbone to the books I develop the concept of young womanhood. An idea that was thrust upon me when I was a young girl and in the mountains of Montana for the first time on my own.

I was placed in a space that was unfamiliar to me and needed to survive, surrounded by peoples and family I had only met once before, I was new to them and they to me. I became impressionable, absorbing their ideas of me as truth. Absorbing others ideas of my female body and what it means to be a woman. I began to notice that I was under attack, that my body, my femininity, my choices as a woman were something to be negotiated with others, owned by others and argued about. While making the series I referred to the poetic works of Warsan Shire, a woman who so accurately represents the female body as territory in her work. Shire brings to attention the experiences young women have with their bodies as places to be owned not just physically by others but mentally and emotionally when they are put under attack by others opinions. She calls out the cycle of abuse, the act of body ownership that we are not simply born with, but it is learned. It is a learned behavior to claim someone else's body, to feel the right to have power over it; more importantly though it is an act that women are not warned about. Shire asks her audience to consider these learned acts and the impacts they have on the ways in which the bodies of others are interpreted.

## Print in Practice

Within printmaking the body is needed not only for the production of a print but also for the intimacy in the printing as well. There is a kiss that happens in letterpress when the ink on the type so delicately lays on the page during printing. That same ink impression happens in lithography, but through a different means, by force. While the page holds a soft thin layer of ink on its surface, it was placed there with great pressure and patience. The medium is demanding, and finicky, it is thirsty and sometimes unkind; it is very much living. I have such attraction to it for that reason, it is its own person and has its own body and form. Much like a person or our own bodies it cannot be controlled. It can be manipulated and changed in order to better suit your needs, never controlled, but in order to get a print you have to be willing to manipulate it for at least a small amount of time to get what you want.

The same care and consideration goes into the care of the land. A manipulation of the land goes into cultivating crops, into the milling and tilling of the soil to be most fertile. There is a delicate balance that goes into working the land for our benefit and acknowledging that it is allowing us to be inhabited. "Every natural place is open to being known. And somewhere in this process a person begins to sense that they *themselves* are becoming known, so that when they are absent from that place they know that place misses them. And this reciprocity, to know and be known, reinforces a sense that one is necessary in the world." (Lopez, p.17). There is a great exchange that happens between the land and us as beings upon it. Right now we sit in a place of

privilege on the land unaware of the presence of a living, creating thing beneath our feet.

Dear dirt, I am sorry I slighted you,  
I thought you were only the background  
for the leading characters—the plants  
and animals and human animals.  
It's as if I had loved only the stars  
and not the sky which gave them space  
in which to shine. Subtle, various,  
sensitive, you are the skin of the earth,  
you're our democracy. When I understood  
I had never honored you as a living  
equal, I was ashamed of myself,  
as if I could not recognize  
a creature who looked so different from me,  
but now I can see us all, made of the  
same basic materials—  
cousins of that first exploding from nothing—  
in our intricate dance together. O dirt,  
help us find ways to serve your life,  
you who have brought us forth, and fed us,  
and who at the end will take us in your arms.

Sharon Olds, *Ode to Dirt*

## Conclusion

On the previous page sits a poem by contemporary poet Sharon Olds, she is expressing her thankfulness to the earth and in particular the dirt that covers the surface of this planet. She praises the dirt for its sacrifices and ultimately allowing humans, plants and animals to live and partake in its nourishment. This poem informs my own relationship to the land, for many years just walking across its surface unaware to the fact that it sustains my way of life. On this planet's surface crops are grown, livestock are raised, buildings are erected, and people are entombed. The circle of life is allowed to continue and thrive. I relate this work of writing to my own mother and the women in my family. I have been unaware to the sacrifices they have made for me; allowing their bodies to stretch and scar and become an incubator for another being, giving up all time and resources to their children. Both land and mother sacrifice for their children, giving their bodies away to others needs and wants, doing so willingly and unwillingly, but ultimately wanting those they are giving to to prosper.

The earth and mother need to be considered as one. They are living, giving, nurturing creatures who have sacrificed for their children to be here. They must be acknowledged for their sacrifice. Moving forward consideration to the planets must be given and respect for sustainability. If life is to continue it must be sustained, like relationships we hold with one another we must hold the same with the earth and the land we impact. To conclude I leave a quote from Theodore Roosevelt, said many years ago, but still relevant in political climate of today. As we move forward consider the impact one leaves, on the people around and the earth we walk upon.

*It is vandalism wantonly to destroy or to permit the destruction of what is beautiful in nature, whether it be a cliff, a forest, or a species of mammal or bird. Here in the United States we turn our rivers and streams into sewers and dumping-grounds, we pollute the air, we destroy forests, and exterminate fishes, birds and mammals -- not to speak of vulgarizing charming landscapes with hideous advertisements. But at last it looks as if our people were awakening.*

Theodore Roosevelt

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