Landscape/mindscape: a partial inventory of influences

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Fine and Applied Arts
in Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

LANDSCAPE/MINDSCAPE:
A PARTIAL INVENTORY OF INFLUENCES

by

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May, 1983
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Thesis Proposal for the Master of Fine Arts Degree

College of Fine and Applied Arts
Rochester Institute of Technology

Title: Landscape/Mindscape: A Partial Inventory of Influences

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Approval, Assistant to the Dean for Graduate Affairs: Fred Meyer Date: 10/1/82

Final Committee Decision: Date:
I will produce a series of woven works exploring Nature and Landscape as it affects my life and perceptions. Various techniques will be used in the final pieces.
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INTRODUCTION

Landscapes surround us and influence us in many ways, some subtle, some obvious. For me, the land--nature, is a driving force, influencing my attitudes, my work, my feelings, my mindscape. I find my actions and reactions touched by places I've been, things I have seen and experienced. I would like to share these feelings, experiences, my special places in this series of works.

I find the inventory/cataloging process a means of helping me share and communicate through my work. This inventory is very partial. The actual work spans approximately a six month segment of my life. It is also an inventory of some 29 years, drawing on and from my past. The inventory can only be partial--the inventorying process is ongoing and will not stop until I do.

Titles are important to me. Titles afford the viewer a means of better understanding, as Edward Levine states "... we cannot experience the artist's vision without a means to touch it, to make it visible."¹

A title offers clues to the artist's thought processes. It says that this piece has content--"meaning ... beyond it's corporeal com-

ponents." A title helps open the door to that ivory tower in which many artists and their works dwell. It can be a humanizing factor, making a work more accessible to a viewer.

In order to make a place in life for art, art has to be willing to make a place for life. We must bring back meaning and human reference. Perhaps we have to bring back subject matter, certainly we must make our references to human experience accessible and not hermetic. Perhaps we have to bring back content, certainly we have to be courageous enough to air our beliefs about the world in a way that will allow our audience to perceive them.

Some of my works have dual titles which serve to identify a physical landscape and to offer insight into my mindscape. A dual title says: here is a place which is special to me. It also has attached meaning beyond its physical entity and exists on more than one level.

In designing, I begin with a realistic image and through the creative process the image evolves, changes and often simplifies into a more abstract form. This non-realistic, non-recognizable format allows me more freedom with form and color. I am able to concentrate on the moods, feelings and concepts I want to evoke in each piece. As Cynthia Schira pointed out in a recent interview

"I'm not trying to make pictures of a landscape. I'm much more trying to get across a kind of feeling that one has in a particular place. The kind of peace or emotion you would feel in that place..." 

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MATERIALS AND PROCESSES

The pieces were woven in a tapestry-rug technique on a floor loom. They are plain weave, the most basic weave, and one I continually return to.

I dyed most of my weft yarns, since the colors I wanted, the subtle shadings, variations and nuances found in hand-dyed yarns are not always commercially available. I was able to mix dye powders to obtain the colors I wanted and stop dyebaths at any point when the color reached the desired intensity. Acid dyes were used on all except the last two pieces, BEACH COMPOSITE and FALLS/JOYRIDE, on which I used fiber reactive dyes in a very low ratio of dye to fiber in order to obtain subtle tints of color. Weft yarns in all pieces were wool or a wool-mohair blend.

Warp yarns were a natural 6/3 rug linen. The warp for NIGHT-RIDE/CHILDREN OF THE NIGHT was dyed to coordinate with the weft colors for this piece, but I did not feel that this step was necessary in subsequent pieces since the warp is visible only at the edge where the natural linen color does not detract from the piece.

I experimented with a different approach on BEACH COMPOSITE, since it was smaller, I tried a smaller diameter, colored cotton warp, threaded in a rose path pattern. This was woven as tapestry, but the warp was allowed to show through. However, I found that this process was giving a visual result which I found incongruent with my previous
work in this series. While the effect was pleasing, it was irrelevant to the statement I wished to make. After careful evaluation, I decided to weave this piece in the same manner as the others.
ABOUT THE WORK

Nine tapestries were woven in the thesis process, of which seven move in a direction I felt positive about, and five which I selected to be exhibited.

I began with images derived from landscapes. These images were very similar in appearance and feeling to paintings I was producing at this time. I did not feel strongly about these first two pieces--they were quite ordinary and were not projecting the qualities and ideas I wanted to convey, as they were not pushed beyond the actual landscape image.

As I designed further, I tried to focus more on the emotion and feeling, the color, shape and qualities I remembered about places and what made these places special to me. If there was a particular feeling I wanted to express, I tried to choose color, line and form to convey this feeling.

The result of the searching and designing process was NIGHT-RIDE/CHILDREN OF THE NIGHT, a piece which I think is successful and which I feel strongly about.

The next two pieces, SNOWFIELDS and CLOUDFIELDS, were designed in a similar manner, however, I don't feel I pushed the design process far enough. I did not dye the yarns for either of these works and was not pleased with the result of the color effects. They didn't quite capture the qualities of snow and winter light which I was after,
although I think SNOWFIELDS is more successful in this respect. Looking back at SNOWFIELDS, CLOUDFIELDS and the first two pieces, I can see a positive growth of design and technique. However, I did not feel that either piece was graduate level work and elected not to include them in the body of work to be shown.

I found a design process which allowed me to free my mind and hand, to put on paper, and into fiber, the image and idea I wanted to convey. The remaining four works were designed and executed much more easily and rapidly.

The space I'm dealing with in my work is the actual, physical space and depth of the woven surface. I am not intentionally after a perspective type of space—-one shape appearing to be in front of or behind another—although this may happen occasionally through the use of color.

Color usage is decorative\(^5\) in that colors are not used to intentionally create an illusion of space. Colors are not chosen to represent parts of a landscape, i.e.: grass is green, sky is blue, but for personal reasons stemming from my reactions to the image and the feelings I am trying to evoke in the work.

Working with large, flat areas of color, I did not want these areas to become uninteresting by being completely solid colors. I relied on the physiological phenomenon of the eye blending colors, by intentionally using unevenly dyed yarns and in some areas, two different color yarns together to create nuances and irregularities in the color areas.

An interesting thing happened while weaving the samples for these pieces. I was using two small diameter weft yarns to match the diameter of the thicker rug yarns. I discovered that when bubbling the smaller doubled weft, an unevenness occurred, caused by one yarn being pulled slightly more than the other. After beating the pick into place, a small nub remained on the woven surface. I found that this slight texture added interest to the work by breaking the flat, frontal quality of the surface. I enjoyed the interplay of the textural and flat areas and decided to utilize this random texture as a design element in my work.
NIGHTRIDE/CHILDREN OF THE NIGHT

60" × 40"

wool, linen
NIGHTRIDE/CHILDREN OF THE NIGHT

I do a lot of night-time driving, usually on back roads. Trees close in the sides of the road and are visually limited to large dark masses. Color is dark, rich and goes to reds and blues.

Blue and red are the two most popular colors. I tend to color code people and generally find they fall into red or blue categories, as they also fall into day or night categories.

The night is a time of influence, of mystery, calm and quiet, yet also a time of contrast, excitement and change. Things are not always as they appear to be.

The children of the night are those influenced by the night, those who enjoy the darkness and who are renewed by it to rejoice in the splendor of another day.

The colors of this work are those red and blue night colors, greyed somewhat as colors are at night. The diagonal lines and red shape focus attention slightly off center and then lead the eye out and downward causing an up and down movement. The unevenness of the grey dyebaths create a striated effect in the large color areas which breaks the space more effectively than flat color could.

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7 "Listen to them--the children of the night. What music they make!" (Raymond McNally and Radu Florescu, The Essential Dracula, [New York, NY: Mayflower Books, 1979], p. 60.)
I am pleased with this piece. It was the result of soul-searching and self-doubt and was a turning point in my designing process. It came out of a great deal of pain and frustration. The need to do this piece was so strong I feared at times it would never happen and was quite relieved when I cut it off the loom. I feel I was successful in incorporating into NIGHTRIDE/CHILDREN OF THE NIGHT many of the thoughts and feelings I wished to express.
PURGATORY CHASM

30\(\frac{1}{2}\)" \(\times\) 44\(\frac{1}{2}\)"

wool, linen
Purgatory Chasm is a State Park in Massachusetts, which I visited as a child. I remember being awed and impressed with the huge rocks, tumbled haphazardly against one another. I felt very small and almost overpowered by it all, yet at the same time invigorated by the wildness and power of the place.

Purgatory is a transitional place, a way-station on the road to another place. It is walking that fine line between sanity and insanity, that mental state in which I am most uncomfortable, but out of which I work best.

I'm not entirely pleased with this piece. The intensity and placement of the orange as well as the intensity of the light blue I find disturbing. While I liked the colors in the skein, they have a very different effect when woven--something I found common in this process. The strong color is reminiscent of the power which impressed me so long ago.

The design of this piece was pushed almost too far--to the point where, I feel, it lost much of its spontaneity. Ironically, what saves it is the jarring quality of the light blue and orange colors.

PURGATORY CHASM was woven with modified dovetails (see Figure 1, page 14) joining the colors. This gave a jagged appearance to the edge of the color area and eliminated the need to sew up slits usually caused by color changes in the tapestry process. It also
produced a ladder-like effect which I felt had potential as a design element in future work.
Figure 1. Modified Dovetail
BEACH COMPOSITE

25" × 18"
wool, linen, mohair
BEACH COMPOSITE

The beaches I remember from childhood were rocky and rugged, strong places that forced one to take them seriously.

This piece is a composite of many beaches--Maine, Iceland, Canada, the Cape, Florida. It is my ideal beach--quiet, foggy perhaps, no umbrellas, volleyball or blaring radios. It is the beginning and ending of land and water, a place to collect oneself, to renew and regenerate, a place of power.

This piece is the smallest of my thesis works. It is also the most realistic, in that it is recognizable as a landscape, even though the image is greatly simplified. The colors are foggy, twilight in-betweens, hinting at stronger tones. I prepared ten dyebaths for the colors of BEACH COMPOSITE, more than any of the other works, and although I am satisfied with the colors, I'm not completely satisfied with the way they work with the extremely simplified shapes.

I almost feel that this piece was a study for a larger, more abstracted work. It was a learning process, as I was using fiber reactive dyes, a type I had not previously used on wools. The results were satisfactory and encouraged me to use these dyes on the larger piece FALLS/JOYRIDE.
FALLS/JOYRIDE

39" × 57"

wool, linen, mohair
FALLS/JOYRIDE

Joyriding—going somewhere, anywhere, just for the hell of it, because one is full of life and energy—is a product of an automotive society to which I fall heir. The ability to be able to move where and when I want is important to me.

Joyriding is also that point one reaches while weaving when mind, body and machine are one entity. Responses are automatic and one feels one could continue forever. In the weaving of this piece there was a point when I reached that plateau of joyriding.

FALLS/JOYRIDE is another composite image. I was influenced and impressed by many waterfalls, but the one which pushed this piece into existence was Niagara Falls. A friend and I went joyriding one rainy Sunday and ended up at Niagara Falls. It was a miserable day for sightseeing, but the greyed greens and blued greens of the water, the foam and mist were all the more impressive because of the inclement weather.

I was influenced by the various colors in the depths of water, both in waterfalls and from previous visits to the ocean. The yarns were dyed with fiber reactive dyes to approximate these colors.

The modified dovetail was used as a design element in this piece. This created subtle, yet visible vertical-diagonal direction within the work, enhancing the color areas, some of which are so close as to be almost invisible.
The textured surface effect (see page 7) was employed as a design element which compliments and adds to the total effect of the piece.

This work has an elegant, yet lighthearted feeling to it which I hoped to achieve and I am pleased with the result. It is, in many ways, joyriding, a marvelous state to be in, no pressing thoughts, no cares, cruising along, being entirely in the here-and-now. I don't get there often enough.
ANOTHER ROAD/PARSIFAL

72" × 47"
wool, linen
ANOTHER ROAD/PARSIFAL

There is always another road, leading from somewhere, leading to somewhere. A road is a process, a continuum. Each ending leads to another beginning as each road leads to another road.

My favorite character of the Arthurian legends is Parsifal, the naive, child-like and foolish knight who didn't realize his strengths until tested. I have always felt a kinship with this character. Like Parsifal, I am searching, while trying to maintain some semblance at least, of innocence and child-like wonder at the world, to look at the world each day with new eyes as I travel the road. Parsifal symbolizes the unrealized potential in so many of us.

The colors in ANOTHER ROAD/PARSIFAL are variations of reds and purples, some reading almost as blue. They are the colors of the sky just after sunset, and in the sense that evening is the ending of day, these colors are ending colors, but as evening also heralds a new day to follow, these colors are symbolic of new roads for me to travel.

This is the largest of my thesis works. I enjoyed working at this scale and was pleased that I was able to accurately estimate the amounts of each weft color needed in the piece. I employed the use of unevenness in the dyed yarns, color blending and slight surface texture to enhance this work.

The eye moves through the piece via color and line toward the lower left where the shapes converge. There is then an upward swing
and the eye jumps to the red shape, bringing the movement back along the top to the center.

I feel it is a strong piece and reads well on both the literal and the implied levels. Although this was not the last piece to be woven, it was the last to be designed and is the ending piece of this series. It is also a beginning, a jumping-off point for me.
CONCLUSION

The thesis process has caused me to be more aware of influences in my life and my work. I have developed a stronger confidence in myself as an artist and in my ability to incorporate my ideas and feelings into a woven image.

A conclusion is an ending. Ending implies beginning. I've come to the conclusion that there are no conclusions, only more beginnings.
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OTHER SOURCES