8-8-1989

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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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

THE UNFOLDING OF GEOLOGIC SPACE

By
Anne L. Brown

August 8, 1989
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to acknowledge the insight of Professor Philip Bornarth to help me complete the writing of this thesis.

I also wish to thank my parents and my friend, Louise Bucolo. My parents, my mother in particular told me my destiny was in my own hands in my decision to return to graduate school. They have lent many helpful hands of support and love during the last two years. I thank Louise Bucolo, a true friend, who gave me a good place to live and her friendship to carry me through my first cold winter in Rochester.
I think of life as one big expedition, with challenges to surmount and new horizons to savor. My decision to attend Rochester Institute of Technology presented me with the challenges of a major expedition. Before leaving Florida, I properly outfitted myself with warm clothing. One of the garments I purchased was a warm sweat shirt with three inspiring phrases printed on the front: "For exploring new lands and wider horizons", "Pioneering new territories", and "Conquering new frontiers". By moving to Rochester to continue my education and in researching my thesis "The Unfolding of Geologic Space", I have found personal insight in those three phrases. Before embarking on my journey a friend gave me a diary. I never wrote in it. I have been "saving" myself in order to write this thesis. This is the writing that matters.
INTRODUCTION

"Each grain of sand, each minute crystal in the rock is a tiny clock, ticking off the years since it was formed. It is not always easy to read them, and we need complex instruments to do it but they are true clocks or chronometers. The story they tell, numbers the pages of earth history."

Patrick Hurley

The earth reveals little of the geologic forces that have created the land. There are sporadic earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and major floods. But none of these can come close to the volatile activities the earth experienced millions of years ago.

It is not the origins or the newness of these geological forms that have captivated my awareness, but the aging and erosion of the earth. From wind swept rocks to plunging waterfalls the earth unfolds. The unfolding shapes of mountains, plains, ledges and rocks are not merely different land masses, but ruins and remnants of the erosive process.

My interest in this thesis was to produce a series of landscape paintings that did not just depict
the typical perimeters of a pastoral, horizontally composed picture plane, but to go beyond it. I sought to incorporate the dynamic tensions that exist between the earth and forces of nature that act as the catalyst in producing the unfolding gorges, rock formations and vistas.

There were many times of indecision and uncertainty in trying to uncover this idea of unfolding geological space. In the journey through the painting process there was both discovery and rediscovery in the forms of technique, visual understanding, and regional documentation. I was encouraged by my research in the study of the geology of this region, the efforts of preceeding artists and personal experience that have lead to my ongoing interest in the land. By exploring each area, I have been able to see a clearer understanding of what the "unfolding of geological space" means to my series of paintings.
"In the course of time the level of the sea became lower, and as the salt water flowed away this mud became changed into stone."  

Leonardo Da Vinci (1452-1519)  
From his notebooks

As observed by Da Vinci in the above epigram, much of the mud that was the prehistoric ocean floor during the Paleozoic period became stone as the salt water receded. What type of stone was the result of such a geological action? The result was sedimentary rock. Sedimentary rock covers 75 percent of the earth's crust. Some of the deepest and richest layers or strata are unique only to this area of the northeast. Millions of years of dead plant and animal remains, compressed by water and later the ice age form the stratifications. The results is a conglomeration of stratas of gases, anthracites and butimins, interspersed by other layers of fossilized trilobites, brachipods, limestones and sandstones. It is a rock that provides our best documentation of the earth history and a source of a great many materials necessary to modern civilization. Compared to igneous and metamorphic rock, sedimentary rock is easily eroded. It is this fact that allows for
a great concentration of cataracts in this region of New York. Each gorge, glen and gully reveals the stratification and more importantly a variety of shapes. It was by visiting, studying and drawing these natural forms that I developed a greater sensitivity towards the shape of the land.

It is the remnant shapes, a combination of cliffs and canyons, that for me carry an aura of monumental immortality. From rivulets to mighty waterfalls the action of the water demands that the earth around them follow their course. Compared to man, the thundering waterfalls and surviving rock strata do seem immortal. Actually, quite the opposite is the case. Waterfalls, the master carver of the land, the well spring of lush greenery veiled in its mist, is one of the most ephemeral of all natural actions.

The water that changes the shape of the land is also an action of self-consumption. Eroding the strata of its ledges minute by minute, changes take place. At some incalculable moment in time the waterfall will erode back to its source where it will perish. Acts of engineering may delay it, but no act of man will ever stop it. It remains for me as with preceeding artists to show reverence to this environmental deity. Not necessarily paying homage by way of scientific data or
photographic replication, but by trying to capture the impressive harmony found in the dynamic action and atmospheric light that surrounds it.
FOUNDING VISIONARIES OF AMERICAN LANDSCAPE PAINTING

Artists of earlier centuries have conveyed their feelings for nature. The driving force to paint a land image is as diverse as the subject itself. There is one common thread that is found in these earlier artists and that is a resounding intuitive love of nature.

The "love affair" with nature was never more evident than with the artists born during the infancy of the United States of America. Here, after a revolution that began a new democracy, was a land of uncharted frontiers. Artists with new visions, whether they painted the subtle nuances of their backyards, such as the Hudson River Valley, or followed expeditions to the western vistas of the Louisiana Purchase were shredding apart the European ideals about landscapes. My research found the American painters grappling to replace or adjust away from the conventions set by Claude Lorraine. The Claudian landscape was one often more perfect than nature, bathed with themes Biblical in character found among the vine covered Roman ruins. While I have given a simplified definition of the
Claudian, mode it provides the background from which the American painters began.

The American painters were close to the wilderness, to Native Americans, and to a geology that harked back to the primitive unveiling of Creation. The artists not only looked toward geologic formations for their natural Power, but for something else. Geology became the great Creation myth in the early nineteenth century. This myth, the basic premise of American landscape painting, was the omnipresence of the Divine Mind, revealing itself in every pebble and tree. This concept was part of a larger philosophy; the Trinity of God, Man and Nature which was at the core of the nineteenth century universe. From the Trinity nature was captured into another Trinity that of religion, science and art. Interwoven in this complex philosophy, I discovered another underlying belief. The belief was the Nature's truth and purity was revealed by God through the the eyes of the artist and given further validation by the disclosure of scientific study. As much as the sciences could contribute to the understanding of the earth's origins and geology in the early nineteenth century. Uncovering Nature's truth would also reveal God's purpose and assist man in the reading of His (God's) natural (geologic) text. The
hypothesis assumed if man could read the age of the earth through the use of geologic data then the text of the Bible would not have to be burdened to provide the date of the Creation of man and earth. Embraced by some artists, and scorned by others, the public nevertheless fed off the concept until Charles Darwin disclosed a new concept. Then new ideas evolved.

A love for the pristine wilderness and an understanding of the above philosophy led artists such as Asher Durand, Thomas Cole and Frederic Church to be concerned with the ravages of the frontiersman's axe as he headed west. While the paintings of Cole were done to reveal the splendor of nature, his writing reveal the anguish of becoming civilized.

because in civilized Europe the primitive features of scenery have long since been destroyed or modified. . . And to this cultivated state our western world is fast approaching; but nature is still predominant, and there are those who regret that with the improvements of cultivation the sublimity of the wilderness should pass away; for those scenes of solitude from which the hand of nature has never been lifted, affect the mind with a more deep toned emotion than aught which the hand of man has touched. Amid them the consequent associations are of God the creator—they are his undefiled works, and the mind is case into the contemplation of eternal things.3/

Thomas Cole
"Essay on American Scenery" 1835
Other artists following in the footsteps of Cole, saw nature teetering on the edge of great change. They feared it would succumb to the westward expansionists; the trappers, gold miners and land mongers. Some painters felt they were cloaked by destiny to capture the primitive spirit of the land and reveal it to the general populous. Other painters saw westward expansion as a chance for adventure and to further their career. Whatever the reason, artists through the nineteenth century put forth a splendid effort to capture the American landscape.

The artists were categorized for what or how they painted. They were labeled the "Hudson River School", "Luminists", and "Painters of the West". Regardless of such labels many artists traveled to Europe, the prairies, or both, and artistically bridged many categories: they were individuals. George Inness, for example, painted in the Hudson River style early in his career, but by the end of his life chose to incorporate a totally different approach to his landscapes and rarely painted from an actual site. He vehemently denied belonging to any group.

I will use these categories specifically to illuminate the time frame in which each artist developed techniques and studied. My research and observation of what they accomplished and the methods they developed helped to reinforce my own work.
Jasper Cropsey, Asher B. Durand, Thomas Cole and Frederic Church were stalwart members of the Hudson River School. But in fact they did not just paint the surrounding countryside of New York State. In their attempt to develop a niche away from European culture, they studied not only in Europe, but also in the frontiers of North America. Claudian ideals of pictorial perfection in landscape painting were slowly giving way to painting of actual observations. By painting the land in its primeval condition, these artists were able to place a stamp of respectability on their style. No longer were they provincial, untrained painters from a rebellious colony.

Direct response to nature became increasingly important. Spontaneity, reaction to light, air and minute details found in nature were recorded. Sketch books were filled with quick studies of rocks, water, plants and trees. On location studies strengthened the paintings which were later produced in the artist's studio. The incorporation of on site studies to capture the immediacy of nature also brought about a change in the application of paint. Evolving slowly, a smooth canvas was not always the end result, the quest for spontaneity, for light, allowed the quality of the paint to become part of the painting.
Another faction, the Luminists, comprised of Frederic Church, Martin Johnson Heade, Fitz Hugh Lane and John F. Kensett sought to capture the quiet essence of nature through the use of tranquil light. Their paintings contradicted the spontaneity of Plein-airism, for there is little to suggest that paint was ever applied to the canvas. Painted in tonal realistic views, they are subdued in mood and almost always horizontal in composition. Their response was more objective intimacy than that of the spiritually inspired Cole, Durand and Church. Their works were also scaled down from the large works of Church, Bierstadt and Moran that the public often paid to see. The light the Luminists conveyed is cool and plainly evident, clouds are almost non-existent. Their sources relied on locations familiar to man but divested of human association. Turning away from the use of primitive and untamed nature so popular before, they preferred disciplined, quiet compositions, minimizing the artists' presence. The view became part of the composition or as Emerson quoted, "a transparent eyeball."\(^4\)

While the Luminists have an important niche in the development of American Landscape painting, their influence in my paintings is minimal. A third group of painters, those who established their reputations with
paintings depicting western expansion and geography, lent considerable support to my thesis.

Overlapping the earlier influences of the Hudson River School and the Luminists, the paintings of Albert Bierstadt, Sanford Robinson Gifford, Thomas Moran and Thomas Worthington Whittredge, offered the eastern public a true impression of the West. As "Painters of the American West" they comprised the core of a new generation of landscape artists. Pioneers in every sense of the word, they surmounted great hardships and introduced the use of photography in their efforts to document the vast western land. The equipment in wet plate photography was heavy and clumsy. Although it was difficult to transport to many locations it was nevertheless used by the artists whenever possible. Photographs provided the painters with a permanent record of the detail of the geology that was part of the inherent shape of a site. This detail is something on-site sketching did not always give the artist. Artists traveling west before the 1850's did not have the luxury of photography.

Karl Bodmer, George Catlin and Jacob Miller were artists that accompanied western expeditions in the 1830's. Surviving the travail of sickness, lack of supplies and Indian attacks, they did not often reach their projected destinations. In returning to the east,
they provided valuable information to those that were to follow. Railroad companies, cartographers and geologists were just a few of the new entrepreneurs to hire artists for such expeditions. Not all survived.

By 1845 the expansionist spirit - what a New York journalist christened the Americans' "Manifest Destiny" to settle the West, had reached its zenith. The zest of those seeking fame, fortune and thrills was not quelled by the perils that continued to exist. Artist's striving to link nature to nationhood were also undaunted by such dangers. Poignant stories of dreams that succumbed to death proliferated. The saga of the Kern brothers is one. Benjamin, Richard and Edward Kern were artists/ scientists from Philadelphia. In 1848 they joined John C. Frémont in a railroad survey expedition. The party headed west in October, Frémont being hopeful of proving that it was feasible to cross the Rocky Mountains in winter. In December, hampered by snow, cold temperatures and high elevations (which few were acclimated to) caused serious trouble. Frémont divided the expedition in hopes of finding help. Food became scarce, the men scattered, the resulting situation left ten men dead. The expedition was a failure and unprovable charges of cannibalism haunted many of the survivors. In this calamity, Benjamin was killed by Ute Indians. Edward and Richard survived to
join an expedition to Navajo country headed by James H. Simpson in 1849, joining subsequent expeditions as well. Richard was killed by Pah-Utah Indians on the Gunnison Pacific Railroad survey of 1853. Richard's fragile watercolors of New Mexico and the Rocky Mountains survived.
"We see many spots in the scenery that remind of our New Hampshire and Catskill hills, but when we look up and measure the mighty perpendicular cliffs that rise hundreds of feet aloft, all capped with snow, we then realize that we among a different class of mountains."

Albert Bierstadt
Rocky Mountains,
July 10, 1859

The transcontinental railroad continued to be a dream in 1859, the year Albert Bierstadt began his first trip to the Rockies. Securing a letter of introduction from John B. Lloyd, President Buchanan's Secretary of War, Bierstadt was able to join Colonel Frederick Lander's wagon train. Using such connections was the only way many artists could guarantee a place for the long journey on the Overland Trail.

Resolved to make the most of this long expedition in cramped conditions, Bierstadt and his companion F.S. Frost, a Boston artist, packed for the trip. They brought along not just the usual art supplies but the cumbersome new process of photography. In the months Bierstadt spent out west he continued to rely on sketches and small oil studies to document the series of large paintings he produced when he returned to his eastern studio. Bierstadt spoke of the obstacles of photographing mountain scenery, referring to the awkward wet collodion plate process. He and Frost were painters, not technicians. Most of the photographs from
this first expedition were of such poor quality they were not offered for sale. The following year, Bierstadt's brothers, Charles and Edward, entered the photography business. They issued a catalogue combining their work and fifty-one photographs of Albert's western studies. Only four of these, judging by their titles were of pure scenery. In my research, I saw the difficulty Bierstadt encountered in this early period of photography. His photographs of Indians, miners and campsites have better definition, which was by no means excellent. His studies of pure landscape are confusing. Trees and foliage both near and distant seemed combined into a single mass.

The need to authenticate the grandeur of the West was so prevalent that no matter how poor the quality, artists continued to use photography to support their observations. Even in the early years of photography, Church and Bierstadt relied on this new technology to assist in the development of their landscape paintings. Later in the nineteenth century, Moran, Whittredge, Gifford and others continued to advance the use of photography as a vehicle to document and develop landscape painting. Painters not only used photography, but also enlisted the abilities of others.
Whittredge and Gifford teamed up with photographer William Henry Jackson and Dr. Ferdinand v. Hayden, a physician turned geologist, on a summer trip to the West in 1870. Their supporting interests were of great help to the painters. Jackson was not the only important photographer to join Western expeditions: Alex Gardner, Timothy O'Sullivan, Eadweard Muybridge and Carlton Watkins were also pursuing the chance to document the frontier. Painter Thomas Moran made no effort to conceal the fact that he consulted scientists to lend authenticity to his paintings. He significance of this fact became apparent in 1872 when Dr. Hayden joined the effort to have Yellowstone declared the country's first national park. He submitted to Congress, Jackson's photographs and Moran's paintings as evidence of Yellowstone's geologic uniqueness. Congress approved of preserving this area.

A new bond was forged, linking the artists to the photographers and scientists. Artists attempting to paint nature with sublime freshness and the geologists and photographers striving to uncover the topographic splendor of a new land. The philosophic vision that prevailed during this period saw them as the archaeologists of Creation, a cooperative venture to uncover the beginning of time; revealing the raw structure and power of the earth.
In researching how the foremost landscape painters of the nineteenth century chose to select, study and envision nature, I learned much more than is actually written in these few pages. The information presented in these pages embodies the books, articles and broadcasts that I have reviewed in supporting this thesis. The research helped to align my intuitive feelings for geologic imagery with the actual series of paintings that I have created.
BEGINNINGS

This thesis is to be the last formal vestige, or personal mark, required after two years of study. The paintings are complete, the show is over and now my recollections are to be written. It is not really the end, but the beginning, the birth of a new idea. A new way for me to paint a new way for landscape painting to exist. These were two new beginnings I discovered in my thesis "The Unfolding of Geologic Space."

Beginnings are occurring all the time. Upon reflection, the beginning of this thesis really started when I was very young. It is probably by virtue of my childhood that I am drawn towards geology and landscapes. The first home I remember was in a rural area, surrounded by fields, woods, rocks and springs. They were not just natural forms, they were my friends. When my younger sister did not feel like playing, I entertained myself. I created mud pots, rearranged rock piles into forts and attempted to climb every tree on the property. In time, exploration beyond our property revealed a vine-covered, pre-revolutionary iron forge.
Its uniqueness destined to obsolescence by new technology. This was Eastern Pennsylvania, but my horizons did not stop there.

My parents love to travel. Many summers and once during part of a school year we traveled. Rarely did we visit the same place two years in a row. Many people go to the same beach, lake or resort year after year--not us. It was more exciting to see something different. By the age of eight, I had visited all the major national parks in the continental United States. Which park is the most memorable? They all have features which captivate my senses, but here are a few that are visually inspiring: the red choir-like rock spires in Bryce Canyon, Utah, a rushing river in a deep gorge at Zion, Utah, Bridal Veil falls in Yosemite, California and the smooth sculptured rock formation at Joshua Tree, California. My mind seems to contain a carousel slide tray of these locations always ready to project some fantastic place at a moments notice. It is only in recent years that I realized this information could be incorporated into my art.

How could I bring about the union of my travel interests and my art? Could I make it a new and meaningful experience for me? Painting landscape was nothing new; my high school and college preparation followed very conservative ideas in this area. I always
produced the conventional figure drawings, still-lifes, and landscapes. Yes, at time they were boring, but I had no radical role model to help me depart from them. Seeing a new concept by an artist in a book was of little help. Having the opportunity to talk to other artists also working out new ideas was the best remedy. In any event, change from my smooth application of paint and my more or less traditional style was something I did not think I could achieve by myself. This is what I thought when I arrived at Rochester Institute of Technology.

Returning to the Northeast to attend R.I.T. was like a breath of fresh air. The City of Rochester--fresh air? It was not the urban areas that uncovered cob webbed memories of Pennsylvania, but the countryside surrounding the City. For over seven years, my eyes had grown accustomed to the flat plains of Florida. The waters of brilliant blues are only outdone by the bright sun. It is a lovely place, but this Southern atmosphere does not bode well for one to find golden hills, hazy purple fields or deep mossy ravines. After being in Florida, my eyes forgot all about these colors. My first paintings at R.I.T. sadly show my memory loss.

I was determined to rejuvenate my sensitivity to the local landscape. Every free moment I would drive to a new location. It did not matter if it was not always considered a magnificent place such as Letchworth. What
was important was how much new visual information I could absorb. Armed with both a camera and a sketch pad, I visually recorded my visits to every site. I amassed a collection of hundreds of photographs and many sketches. By the end of my first year, I felt I was beginning to "see" again.

This "seeing" the landscape actually progressed slowly. I visited many locations in Western New York and many times I would return to a particular place as a part of a monthly routine. By doing this, I watched the seasonal changes that affected the shape of the land. At these locations I would sit, sometimes for a few hours, sometimes for a few minutes. The wind and the weather are difficult to predict. Even on cold and blustery days I would take photographs. These were the days sketching on location was often futile. Whether the location was the ice covered rocks of the Lake Ontario shoreline or the windswept hills near Hornell, New York, each photograph was saved. Each photograph provided me with an accurate recollection of an area, and added visual information to the small collection of sketches I had compiled. The charcoal sketches and watercolors I completed heightened my sense of awareness to the shapes that occur in the land I was visualizing, but the photography did something else. The photos allowed me to see many possibilities. There were times I saw the
possibilities in the photographs that comprise the paintings "Confluence" Ill. #2, "Vortex", Ill. #3 and "Beyond the Edge", Ill. #4, but I did not have the confidence to be able to communicate my idea of unfolding geology via those locations. They are locations that give the viewer a different perspective. First, I had to see this perspective, then I had to believe I could do it.

What was I really seeing? In examining my photographs I found some had more strength than others. The strength was in seeing the various tensions that took place between different angles and shapes the land produces. Seeing continuous horizontal planes across a field is visually relaxing. Seeing various diagonal lines resulting from a cliff are much more dynamic. This was the beginning of seeing the unfolding of geologic space. I was seeing shapes create a new visual energy.

Could this energy in any way be applied to my painting? Would I be able to convey it to the viewer? My old way of smoothly applying paint did not convey any amount of spontaneity. I felt the inference of spontaneity in the application of paint would help the viewer feel such energy. But using the angles and shapes found in the natural geological land masses would bring about a sense of energy, too, as long as the shapes were applied and utilized in an unconventional way. My first
attempt to paint rushing water and waterfalls within the landscape had little of the dynamic energy I was hoping to find.

I kept experimenting with the different ways of looking at the shapes that were found in the rocks and the cliffs of the land. In addition to doing this, I also continued to pursue the use of palette knives to apply the paint. By using the knives, I kept myself from becoming too tight in my application of the paint. This method of painting is very spontaneous. Unexpected colors and textures appear and often very pleasing accidents result.

What were some of the results of the new approach I tried to develop? Some paintings followed conventional composition and others did not. Each one represents a different view of the earth. Each one contains dynamic tensions attributed to water.

"The Gorge", Ill. #1, a view of the upper falls at Letchworth uses a very harmonious group of colors. While there are very stable horizontal and vertical lines in the composition, there are also sensitive diagonals to be found by the cascade and in the water below. "The Gorge" was the first painting of my Thesis. It was also the first painting in which I poured the paint onto the canvas. The waterfall is actually pure pigment with little alteration.
While "The Gorge", Ill. #1 is somewhat conventional in composition, the triptych "Confluence" is not. It is twelve feet long with rushing water cutting across the canvas panels diagonally from right to left. In this painting, the paint was poured onto the canvas in the first application. The "Confluence", Ill. #2, gave me new confidence to complete the next two paintings.

In "Vortex" Ill. #3 and "Beyond the Edge" Ill. #4 the paintings combine the use of sharp diagonals and light to dark passages. The effect of the palette knife keeps the viewers eyes moving from one subtle color to the next. I feel these paintings are the most cohesive. They share a sense of distance, great depth of field and suggest the wind passing over the rocks. They also incorporate a wider range of value in the colors used to create the overall luminosity they emit. The compositions are a radical departure from the horizontal planes representative of my earlier landscapes.

My final painting "Ledges", Ill. #5, faces off three strong rock ledges on the left side of the canvas against one large rocky cliff on the right. It is bisected down the middle by a mighty passage of white water. The water disappears into the distance behind the large cliff on the right. This painting with a dark sky and dark ledges is the most foreboding of the series.
Perhaps knowing this was the last painting for my thesis, I unconsciously gave it an ominous quality.

The completion of my thesis is not ominous, for as I stated earlier, it is really just the beginning. I must remember with this beginning to carry forward the knowledge and sensitivity I have found into other acts of creation. I am capable of creating not only landscape images, but other images as well. Each time I create, each time I give a dream a cause or reason to exist, a new beginning is created.
FOOTNOTES


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Visit to Chimney Bluffs area along the shore of Lake Ontario, March 1988.

Visit to Watkins Glen, July 1988. Extensive sketches and photographs taken at this location.

Visit to Letchworth Gorge, approx. fourth visit, September 1988. Extensive photographs taken during this visit.

Visit to the Lower Falls of the Genesee River, October 1988. Extensive photographs taken of this location.

Visit to the South Central Region of New York, November 1988. Photographs taken in Dansville, Adrian and Hornell locations.

