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INSTINCT



**INSTINCT**

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## ABSTRACT

*Instinct* represents an exploration of an inner wilderness by way of an outer one, premised on my beliefs about the continuity of these seemingly disparate landscapes. This body of work is meant to trace the organic growth and evolution of a project that could be seen in turn as psychological, personal, spiritual, and artistic. My work has always been an act of reverence for the natural world. There is an element of science in it, in the desire to study and observe. But there is an element of spirit, too, in the continual reaching for something just beyond the visible. To this end, these layered encaustics and charcoal drawings describe a return first to some of the fundamental mythic archetypes that inform my creative process, and eventually, to the simplest visual elements of our world: light and dark. *Instinct* explores—through appropriately monochromatic and simple media—the interplay of these forces: the way in which they define our world, map our landscape, and determine what is known to us...and what is unknown.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To the many teachers whose creative worlds I have shared over the past two years, particularly my two mentors, Darlene Campbell and Joe Gerges. Your artistic wisdom and generosity of time and spirit have deeply enriched my experience and expanded my vision, abilities, and artistic practice. Thank you as well to Perin Mahler and F. Scott Hess, whose steady presences and thoughtful shaping of my journey have been essential to my growth during my MFA candidacy.

DEDICATION

To my mother, for her tireless strength, support, and love.

## EPIGRAPH

## Lost

*Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you  
Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,  
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,  
Must ask permission to know it and be known.  
The forest breathes. Listen. It answers,  
I have made this place around you,  
If you leave it you may come back again, saying Here.  
No two trees are the same to Raven.  
No two branches are the same to Wren.  
If what a tree or a bush does is lost on you,  
You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows  
Where you are. You must let it find you.*

David Wagoner

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## INTRODUCTION

In the simplest possible sense, my work is an exploration of the boundary between *light* and *dark*. I address this literally, with image and execution, but also metaphorically: this work speaks of the known and the unknown, the seen and the unseen. On one hand, my work addresses the extremes—the space and emotion associated with a deep darkness defined by a small amount of light, and the atmosphere and feeling of a vast brightness that all but blinds one to the shadows. But the moment and place of transition are equally important; on a more complex and personal level, it is an exploration of the *penumbra* (in the Latin, the “almost shadow”), the point of interaction between opposing forces, the point where each both defines and obscures the other. A liminal space that is in both realms...and neither. An ambiguity and abstraction in the midst of harsh definition.

These works represent an exploration of an inner wilderness by way of an outer one; they hinge on my belief that the natural world is not only an inherent part of us as human beings (and we of it), but that it is the original, exquisitely sensitive mirror in which we find our own inner terrain and wildness reflected. This idea of continuity and reciprocity between landscape and psyche was intrinsic to the belief systems of the early inhabitants of our world (often called “primitives”). We see it reflected in myths, legends, and stories both ancient and modern. I am interested in the primal sources and archetypes of our human stories—stories which, at a fundamental level, are nearly always developed in direct response to the natural world we inhabit as a way of explaining, understanding, and relating to the land and elements.

I am drawn to many aspects of the natural world for subject matter. *Instinct* deals with emotionally and psychologically charged spaces, sometimes in the forest, sometimes elsewhere. It involves elements of natural structure, instinctive action, and my own imagined spaces that relate metaphorically to my inner landscape. Drawing (in a variety of forms) is my primary methodology, as it is extraordinarily well suited to my conceptual pursuits. The attributes of a monochromatic medium—at its core, an act of playing light against dark in

order to achieve form and illusion—echo the distilled, elemental aspects of the images. Drawing is a medium in which every choice is evident, every mark present and accounted for. It is intimate, intuitive, and direct.

My objectives with this work center primarily around both living and cultivating an experience of conscious observation, imaginative perception, and instinctive knowledge. There is a comfort with ambiguity present in these pieces—a respect for and acknowledgement of Mystery that I wish the viewer to sense, feel, and experience. A co-existence with the unknown and an awareness of its essential role in both wilderness and psyche is fundamental to my work. I wish to provide a space for stillness, for these quiet presences to co-exist, for the viewers to feel the emotional charge of my landscapes, and to contemplate or wonder about their own unknown depths.

## **DESCRIPTION**

This body of work follows the organic growth and evolution of a project that could be seen in turn as psychological, personal, spiritual, and artistic. It began with a fascination with the concept of the *penumbra*, the “almost shadow.” I am drawn to this unassuming Latin word for both the literal and metaphorical implications of the idea it represents. The penumbra is the literal meeting of light and shadow, where each defines the other; it is what makes my work possible at the most basic level of technical execution. But symbolically it is also a liminal realm, a place where boundaries are obscured, where definitions quietly dissolve. There is a certain beauty and possibility that dwells in that twilight world between extremes. In the breath after one cycle ends, before another begins—in the moment before the pendulum swings back—there is a pure and complete silence that seems to me to hold all the potential of the world.

As a person (and artist) who has always struggled with a persistently crisp, judgmental, categorizing mind, a constant voice that seeks and attempts to correct error, that obsesses over definition and detail, it seems fitting that I would be drawn to these liminal

moments, to the penumbral realms of the natural world. There is no place for judgment or criticism there, and I find the peace of that silence to be a revelation. I am drawn to visual manifestations of the liminal in nature, whether in the form of the actual penumbra between light and shadow, or other metaphorical extensions of that idea. Intertidal zones and damp bits of forest between land and water, pockets of fertile soil in the recesses of barren limestone, dusk and dawn, and very frequently, the simple play of light and shadow, without more than a hint of the shape that may have cast it. The series of three small drawings,



Figure 1. Robin Cole Smith, *Penumbra VIII, IX, X*, 2011-2012 charcoal on panel, 8" x 6" each

*Penumbra VIII, IX, and X* were a part of this exploration (a continuation of an earlier series dealing with the same subject) which focused on the play of light across snow along the edges of shadow cast by snowy pine

boughs. The series of small encaustic pieces that court the abstract (*Traces*) are yet another way of approaching the same idea. They inhabit the liminal space between realism and abstraction, beginning with representational drawings layered together until they lose their grounding in recognizable imagery, and then worked yet further until they coalesce once again into something that takes on pattern and logic of its own.



Figure 2. Robin Cole Smith, *Traces I, II, III*, 2013, encaustic and charcoal on panel, 6" x 6" each

As I worked more with the penumbra, I found myself increasingly drawn to the extremes that create it. It seems only natural that a fascination with the transitional would lead one to consider in new ways what lies on either side of that transition. What happens

when the pendulum swings back? What does darkness really *feel* like in the depths of the forest? What does it mean to navigate that as an artist? What does the searing light of a sunlit, snow-covered field become when it reaches the edge of the trees? Mythologically speaking, the division of light and dark after a state of initial unity (a state not unlike the penumbra) always characterizes creation; all “systems, boundaries, religion, symbolism, etc.



Figure 3. Robin Cole Smith, *One of those moments that is the opposite of blindness*, 2012, charcoal on mounted paper, 32” x 96”

are derived from this act of discrimination and the setting of boundaries made possible by the coming of light” (Neumann 107). Several of my drawings explore these ideas. *One of those moments that is the opposite of blindness*<sup>1</sup> addresses the sensation of light so intense that, though it draws out every pine needle in sharp relief, it leaves you blinking and bewildered, with the landscape seared onto your retina. Similarly, *As certain dark things are loved*<sup>2</sup> explores the opposite—the black depths of the rainforest at dusk, a feeling of being cradled and subsumed by the dark, fecund mystery of that ancient growth.



Figure 4. Robin Cole Smith, *As certain dark things are loved*, 2012, charcoal on mounted paper, 32” x 48”

<sup>1</sup> Title is an excerpt from Anne Carson’s *Autobiography of Red* (39).

<sup>2</sup> Title is an excerpt from Pablo Neruda’s love sonnet *XVII* (209).

In traditional symbolic language, in mythology, and even within the context of everyday thought, *light* and *dark* carry their own connotations of the *known* and the *unknown*. This makes sense biologically speaking, of course, but for many people it reads on a deeper level as well, even if they cannot define it in any precise way. Light represents the rational, the mind, the *enlightenment*, the navigable, known world. It is vision and consciousness, safety, knowledge, and civilization. Darkness, on the other hand, represents the opposite: the mysterious, the instinctive, the underworld and unconscious. It is the bottomless depths of the sea, the reaches of deep space, or even the endless interior of our own minds. It is the unknown, the preternatural, the wilderness both within and without.<sup>3</sup> All these connotations and many more, both explicit and implicit, were present in my mind when I conceptualized these two drawings. But it was not until I began work on *As certain dark things are loved* that I began to feel I was finally nearing something essential, something nearer the heart of what I wanted to say as an artist, and what I felt compelled to explore as an individual. That elusive, essential something had to do with the unknown, with unfamiliar terrain that called to me both in wild nature, and within my own thoughts. I realized (with a somewhat amusing irony) that no amount of reasoning, thinking, conceptualizing or mapping was going to get me where I wanted to go. Here, there are no maps. It is a place of instinct, not reason. One of mystery and faith. Like Gilgamesh, I realized that the black depths of an apparently endless passage were the path to my destination, and that my only option was to begin running, with faith that I would eventually reach what I seek.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For some, “evil” might also top this list. Notably, this idea it is not a part of my list at all, and possibly not even a part of my belief system, though that discussion is not relevant here.

<sup>4</sup> In the relevant episode of this Babylonian epic (one of the oldest surviving works of literature, with fragments dating back as far as the 18<sup>th</sup> century BC. Slightly later fragments title the story *He Who Saw the Deep*), the hero Gilgamesh decides to enter the underworld in an attempt to reclaim his friend Enkidu, the wild, primitive man who represents Gilgamesh’s animal nature, instinctive knowledge, and pre-rational powers. After granting him access through the gate, the guardians of the netherworld explain that the only way to reach the lands he wishes to visit is to travel the path/tunnel of the sun, a seemingly endless stretch of blackness that the guardians claim will eventually emerge into the netherworld. However, Gilgamesh must run, because this is the path the sun travels; if he still occupies it when the sun returns on its trip beneath the earth, he will be burned alive (*Babylonian Gilgamesh*).

This is how I arrived in the world of myth and archetype, which (though somewhat unusual) for me manifests itself through the visual language of the landscape; it is my personal mythos, and a way of speaking about the small portion of the vast human story that I represent. Images of the natural world are my native language. Though I am somewhat unclear as to how this came about, since I cannot recall a time, even as a very young child, when my stories were not told in terms of mountains and forests, rocks and trees, streams and plants and animals, it persists as my most natural mode of visual expression. I express my experiences through the space and atmosphere of the forest in the way another might through characters and explicit story. For me, this imagery exists *without* the burden of identity or a human presence acting out a narrative, visually speaking. Even when I am dealing with specific archetypes, as I occasionally do, it never feels natural to me to include a human presence, or create a staged story in a civilized, cultivated setting. I approach these archetypes, in all their ancientness and universality with imagery that echoes these qualities. *The Passage* originated with a specific myth, and even a specific character (though the final image indicates these origins only by mood and composition): it is an embodiment of the story I touched on above, in which the hero Gilgamesh braves the darkness while moving forward with faith that he will emerge into another world. I was struck by this image—of a powerful man running hell-bent through an endless darkness in search of a primitive knowing, a lost part of himself. In this sense, Gilgamesh represents the archetype of both the Hero and the Wanderer, a pilgrim on an uncertain journey with faith as his only guide. It was this *feeling*, rather than the sense of an individual or a particular story, that I wished to portray in my drawing.



Figure 5. Robin Cole Smith, *The Passage*, 2012, encaustic and charcoal on panel, 45" x 30"

The extreme darkness of *The Passage* was necessary to convey that sense of mystery and an underworld journey, albeit through a place of fecundity and beauty, in the case of my drawing. The vertical shape composed of filtered light and open space beyond so much darkness contributes to a mirroring between destination (distant, atmospheric light) and present location (specific, alluring details of leaf, earth, bark, and stone). The echo between present and future, near and far, earth and air along a vertical strip of light within an expanse of darkness is intended to tug at the viewer, drawing him/her through the tangled depths, into the “passage.” The verticality and living timber of the composition is mediated and grounded by the horizontal fallen tree entering into the nearer mid-ground. This line and texture serves to both interrupt and interact with the planes of ground described otherwise only by cascading twigs and foliage. And the existence of a small cairn<sup>5</sup> on this interrupting element reminds us of a presence—once there, but no longer—of whoever has previously made this passage. Perhaps once, it was the idea of Gilgamesh, later a nameless Wanderer, or a pilgrim, a seeker; the “who” is far less important in the end than the emotional sense of passage: a darkness waiting to be navigated.

The original ideas that became my drawing *The Sentinels* have their roots in the Gilgamesh epic as well, though the final piece is not so closely tied to it as *The Passage*. Prior to his trip to the underworld, Gilgamesh is in company with his friend/brother Enkidu, and they journey beyond the Seventh Mountain Range to the heart of a cedar forest to kill Humwawa, the great and terrifying guardian of the cedar forest where the gods dwell (*Babylonian Gilgamesh* 466). While translations differ, most agree that Gilgamesh had to face the seven “terrors” or “radiances” of this God, sometimes as other gods, sometimes in the form of seven great trees, sometimes simply a display of power. However the translator

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<sup>5</sup> Historically and culturally these have served several purposes. In the distant past in the British Isles, a “cairn” was the mound of stones stacked over a fresh grave to keep animals away, and the collecting and stacking of such stones was a part of the burial ritual. Other times (and more commonly now), these small piles of stones are trail markers, directional indicators for travelers, particularly present in areas where the path is unclear, and one might be lost; in this instance, they are guideposts. In other cases, they are prayers in physical form (sometimes called “prayer stones”): a traveler will stop upon seeing such a stack of stones, say a prayer, and add their own stone or pebble as a token. In each case, these cairns indicate a deeply intentional act: a life to be remembered, a direction given, a passage marked, a prayer offered.

chooses to think of these guardians, for me the story itself always carried an echo of the moment while exploring the forest (whether the literal green depths, or those of mind and soul) when one inevitably comes up against a wall of immense power, of physical or spiritual obstacles that guard the passage one wishes to travel. This is the moment, most particularly in the wild, when I am forcibly reacquainted with the idea that I am the visitor here—this is a realm where the power and belonging is not mine, but that of the local inhabitants, be they human or more-than-human, plant or animal or land. It is for me to acknowledge their power, to be humbled by the magnitude of the wilderness I wander.

As I considered the ideas and composition for *The Sentinels*, I began to think more deeply about the archetypes that recurrently appear in the many stories of our human



Figure 6. Robin Cole Smith, *The Sentinels*, 2013, encaustic and charcoal on panel, 30" x 45"

cultures. I have a tendency to be drawn to the beautiful elements—or at least, those *I* see as beautiful, though they may differ vastly in character from what one might traditionally imagine in this category. For me this includes looming darkness and mysterious depths, it includes barren landscapes and stormy skies, dry grasses and tumbles of stone in addition to the lush, luminous, and expansive sights that characterize traditionally beautiful or even sublime landscapes. What I rarely spend time on, however, is the violent or unnatural, the disruptive element that is nearly always the result of a human presence (here I do not include the death inherent in natural cycles—only that which indicates an outside, destructive force). Archetypally speaking, however, an act of violence and destruction is an important element of the “cosmic drama,” as it is sometimes called. Its relevance here concerns my drawing *An End*. I developed the idea for this piece in response to a period of profound misery, a time

when I felt that a structure of beauty and potential had been violently sliced away from its foundation. At the same time, I asked myself, as I often do when searching for imagery, “What does a primal force with both great destructive and great regenerative power look like?” I was seeking an image that echoed three primary themes: a powerful and primal femininity, an act of violence and sense of unfulfilled potential, and a sense of fertility and regeneration.

I chose the vertical format of this piece in response to several of these goals. In terms of the symbolic and abstract shapes, vertical spaces are generally associated with the feminine and female anatomy. Similarly, in mythological and symbolic terms, trees often represent the masculine (the phallic) and thus, the felling of a tree is a form of symbolic castration, and refers to the archetypal event of destruction—sometimes represented in myth as a separation of masculine and feminine or the slaying of the “son/lover” archetype by the Great Mother

(Neumann 70). Together, these two symbols represent something more: the sense of a space having previously been occupied by a living presence—one that is now palpably empty. The emptiness of the vertical space in the foreground above the tree stump emphasizes this lack. The bright white and high contrast of the cut surface highlights the unnatural act of violence that resulted in it. But despite this, there is a sense of slow growth—a return of vines and creepers, the reincorporation of raw material that is the unique province of “mother” earth. This simple story, of an established presence, a shattering act of violence (or sometimes, the “fall”), and a rebuilding from the broken pieces to attain an often higher state of being or consciousness are the base ingredients for any legend. From a psychoanalytic standpoint, it is the establishment of the ego, the subsequent wounding or dissemination, and the rebuilding/renewal at a higher, more unified level of consciousness. While *An End* focused on the universal pattern of destruction and rebirth, the part of the pattern which has always



Figure 7. Robin Cole Smith, *An End*, 2012, encaustic and charcoal on panel, 51” x 15”

intrigued me most is the archetype of the “Great Mother” or the “Primal Mother,” the original feminine force that literally, in many myths, gives birth to the world. It is the primordial, fertile darkness out of which all things come, “the primal soup, the cosmic sea [that] corresponds to the fetal state where we float timelessly through the unconscious sea, wafting on the great tidal currents of blood and protein” (Hollis 110). Whether conceived of on the level of “cosmic drama” as a stage in collective human development<sup>6</sup>, or on a



Figure 8. Robin Cole Smith, *The Source*, 2013, encaustic and charcoal on panel, 68” x 34”

metaphorical level in reference to the sacred feminine, or an individual level in terms of psychology and individuation (or even the biological process of coming into the world), I have found the endless mystery of this idea fascinating. It is a force at once fertile and violent, calm and chaotic, nurturing and terrifying. At one point, while studying this history of the Sacred Feminine/Great Mother archetype, and reading and thinking extensively about what it means to me and how it has manifested in my life, I was surprised to realize that all the principles of primal feminine energy that had been pooling in my psyche for years seemed to spontaneously coalesce into a particular image. *The Source* is an image that addresses this question for me, one that answers, in my own visual language, to all the emotion and mythological weight carried by this

idea. It depicts a dark, moist, close, deep-earth, chalice-like space. A narrow passage that collects darkness, water, and traces of both life and death. It’s something about quiet darkness, a wide unknown, the unconscious and its subtleties existing, moving, eddying

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<sup>6</sup> The four stages in the pattern of the cosmic drama in myth are chaos (as described above), creation, separation, and coming home. The psychoanalytic approach takes the view that layers of psychological development 1. follow the same structure within a single individual, within humanity as a whole, and throughout humanity’s developmental history. Thus, the psychological development of an individual echoes that of the evolution of human kind, and 2. “‘Stages’ of consciousness exist not as epochs but as layers (individual and collective) which do not lie atop one another in an orderly arrangement, but, as in the geological stratification of the earth, early layers may be pushed to the top and late to the bottom” (Neumann 42).

beneath the surface. It is a dark, fecund fertility, a well-spring. An unknowable, forgotten divinity. A subterranean power. In the words of Jung, it is “the mysterious root of all growth and change; the love that means homecoming, shelter, and the long silence from which everything begins and in which everything ends” (Hollis 56).

Thus, I wanted this piece to describe a sensed connection between two realms: the known world of light and structure, and the erosion, change, and natural process that ultimately trickle down like water into the passage of that silent, unseen well that waits quietly below the surface of both earth and psyche. My compositional decisions—a dominantly vertical format, a soft but complete darkness in much of the space, a small amount of light at the top (or metaphorically speaking, the conscious realm) that defines only a portion of the subject—all echo elements that are either historically, mythologically, symbolically, or personally associated with femininity. The additional, somewhat indefinable light source that describes the space at the bottom of the composition is just that—indefinable. It is not particularly clear where it originates, or how we can know this space. Indeed, much of it remains unknown. It is a soft light which, while it mirrors the light at the top in some ways, is of a world entirely its own.

While it is possible to describe many of the conscious decisions associated with this composition and the thoughts that determined my visual choices, they are not at the core of this piece or any other. What I am after, and what makes *The Source*, in its inception and concept, feel particularly honest to me, is an instinctive way of thinking. Or perhaps feeling. That is the level on which I respond, that is the place whence my truest ideas come. Instinct is what draws me into the natural world, and evidence of the instinctive patterning already in place there enchants me. I am drawn to myth and archetype because it speaks to the tendencies of humanity at this level—the patterns and instincts so ingrained in our psyches and culture that we are inexplicably drawn to them. These familiar patterns only exist because so many individuals have lived them, have read them, recounted them, and experienced them. There is something about the image in *The Source* that instinctively says

*primal or sacred feminine* to me. There is something about a severed tree and its unoccupied vertical space that says *An End* to me. There is something about the forbidding presence and composition of *The Sentinels* that says *guardians of a realm*, and of the enticing, filtered light and abundance of growth in *The Passage* that says *come this way as you navigate mystery*.

Since the project of explaining these impulses, important though it may be, always felt to me to be somewhat superficial by comparison, I wished to create a few pieces that would bypass that need, and speak more directly to the emotional charge I associate with



Figure 9. Robin Cole Smith, *Instinct I*, 2013, encaustic and charcoal on panel, 16" x 16"



Figure 10. Robin Cole Smith, *Instinct II*, 2013, encaustic and charcoal on panel, 14" x 14"

instinctive response. In a way, I simply asked myself, "What does instinct look like to me?" The answer to this question was the series of small nest drawings, *Instinct I* and *II* (and to some extent, *Instinct III*). To me, these are tiny crystallizations of this idea. They are small moments of coalescence and inherent order in the natural world, evidence of one of nature's creatures responding to an internal blueprint that they do not even know they possess. Even the process of drawing these pieces followed such a pattern, beginning with a loose and seemingly random series of gestural lines surrounding a central space, then slowly delineating dominant forms and shadows. It is a push and pull of value, adding shadows, and removing lights for individual blades of grass, adding more shadow, and pulling out more lights. A gradual layering of shape that eventually began to mimic the layering of twig and grass in these structures, a chaotic mess of lines that ever so slowly began to pull together into a recognizable form, gaining dimension, complexity, and solidity. I had absolutely no conscious idea of how to draw these incredibly complex natural objects when I sat down; it was only by responding to them instinctively, moving forward with faith that it would somehow come together despite all evidence to the contrary, that I was able to mimic the instinctive nest-building of the birds with my own actions.

*Instinct III*, though still a part of this series, represents a slightly different approach. While I felt that the small size of the first two drawings was essential to their effect (I sometimes wish I'd drawn them even a bit smaller), they still felt very much like an outsider's observations, despite the architectural process of drawing them. What would it be like to draw or build something like this at the same relative scale as the birds? How would an essentially human-sized nest read differently from these others? How might the viewer relate to something of this scale? These were the thoughts behind the third drawing, a four foot square rendition of the same subject, drawn in more or less the same way. While the technique was similar, though, everything else was different. The gesture involved literally exhausted my arm. The scale of the marks was completely different and actually more relevant to my tools in some ways, allowing me to be more naturalistic and expressive with my scribbles of charcoal and flicks of the eraser. I wished to create a drawing that would read less as a reflection on a remarkable natural phenomenon, and show more of the human process of intuitive translation and interpretation, and the physical process of building an image.

I tried to make a nest, once. I sat outside attempting to weave a ball out of springy willow twigs, to create a structure in which I could embed a variety of other twigs and grasses and items I had collected until it became a tiny, enclosed, nest-like object. After a number of frustrating hours, I finally gave it up, settling for a fragile semblance of a ball that persisted in falling apart at the lightest touch. A friend of mine (whose name, amusingly, was Wren) saw it, and was surprised that I had brought it even that far. She asked me if it was difficult to make, and I responded that it was, and surprisingly so. "I know!" she exclaimed in response. "And just think—birds do that, and they don't even have *hands*." Her off-hand comment, which made me smile at the time,



Figure 11. Robin Cole Smith, *Instinct III*, 2013, encaustic and charcoal on panel, 46" x 46"

has stayed with me ever since. For a creature following its instincts, filling its niche, it cannot do otherwise than build a perfect nest; the pattern is so deeply a part of the individual that it is not only necessary but, in a way, effortless. We accomplish with reason and the ability to reflect what other creatures accomplish purely by being what they are; beavers need no courses in hydrology and physics to dam a stream and create their own landscape. The animals of the plains need no maps for the migration of their herds, salmon need not understand the difference between the properties of salt water and fresh water. And while the scientist in me is fascinated by this knowledge and wishes to spend my days observing and recording, a deeper part of me responds to those inborn currents of the natural world, and the blueprint of the psyche that we all possess. My goal with this body of work—and as an artist in general—is not only to pay tribute to these parts of myself, but perhaps more importantly, to begin to respond to the world instinctively, to fully and meaningfully inhabit my social and ecological niche.

## **RESEARCH**

The sources of inspiration in my work tend to be widely varied and primarily literary, though they stretch across disciplines and media from poetry, prose, classics, and linguistics, to depth psychology and the natural sciences, to visual art itself. My way of integrating research, however, is a bit unusual for the visual artist in that it influences me very primarily—in some cases, exclusively—on the level of concept and content, and rarely in execution, composition, or any other predominantly visual manner that would affect the way in which I actually create images. This is, in part, due to my background. Not only was I trained first and foremost in literature (my artistic studies came later), but as an artist I operate much more on the level of abstract idea, concept, emotion, and instinct; the visual, odd though it may seem, comes later. It is a way of presenting, of communicating, but it is not the driving force. Thus, visual research plays a relatively small role in this body of work, and in my work in general.

When I do consider visual research, I am generally hesitant to name particular artists or art historical movements or theory as major, primary influences in my work (this is, of course, not to say that I have been in any way immune to slow and subtle currents from these categories) simply because I have not had a great deal of exposure to them until very recently, and much of my artistic direction developed in response to other, primarily literary, influences. One notable exception to this statement is Andrew Wyeth—an artist to whom my initial and memorable exposure occurred at age 13, an event which, in retrospect, seems a formative one in my artistic development. His work has been quietly simmering in the back of my mind since that time.

I respond to Wyeth on both a stylistic and a conceptual level. He seems to inhabit a middle ground somewhere between realism and abstraction; his work strikes a balance between an extremely high level of description and a general comfort with ambiguity that I



Figure 12. Andrew Wyeth, *Ice Pool*, 1969, watercolor on paper, 21 ½" x 29", private collection (Venn 145).

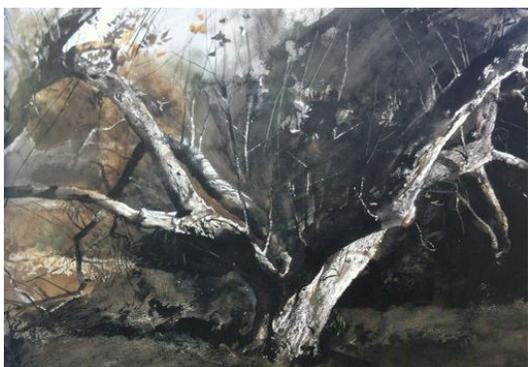


Figure 13. Andrew Wyeth, *Grimes Golden*, 1956, watercolor on paper, 19 ¼" x 27 ½", The Harry and Mary Dalton Collection (Venn 95).

strive for constantly in my own work, but do not always achieve. His minimal subject matter and quick, light hand are particularly evident in many of his landscapes that, despite a high level of detail, seem to exist without the heavy narrative impediments and difficulty of story that I often find in other such work. Any symbolic guidance he does choose to provide generally occurs through the help of selective detail or titles. The work allows for ambiguous or multiple readings, and flexibility between connotation and denotation. His love of specificity is evident without being oppressive to the viewer. At one point I recall reading a description of his “visible scenes and exteriors” as “informed by an invisible intensity

and interiority,” which I find to be not only highly descriptive of his work, but also one of my foremost goals with my own endeavors.

“Intensity and interiority” are also the impetus behind much of my other research. The pattern that characterizes my studies, and which I have followed in my explorations and analysis of my source material, is essentially this: I notice a tendency or feel a pull in my thoughts and ideas. It prompts me to read and research, exploring related disciplines and schools of thought. Almost inevitably, I find great minds and writers of the past and present who have wandered the same road, and I begin to integrate their ways of conceptualizing these unwieldy and abstract ideas into my own creative structure. It is a process of building; as these ideas solidify, they give rise to more, which also prompt reading and exploration, and are in turn further refined. While this process helps my thoughts and impulses to flow effectively and gives rise to new ones, and while it can in some ways help to explain my decisions after the fact, I hesitate to delineate a particular mode of integrating specific sources; this would, after all, quite thoroughly negate everything I have stressed thus far in terms of *Instinct*, both as an idea/action, and as the title of this body of work.

Nevertheless, I am indebted to many great minds for the inspiration, particular qualities, and modes of approach in my work. The visceral reactions I have to the works of talented wordsmiths and visionary poets such as Pablo Neruda, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Anne Carson stir the depths of my creative engine in a way that speaks more to instinct than logic, and more to emotion than thought. These unique qualities of the written word—itsself an abstract concept that, used in a certain way, can be extraordinarily descriptive and precise—are similar to those I strive for in my work. This balance between abstraction and specificity is both my great challenge, and one of my primary goals as an artist. A poet pushes with meter and simple language against the constraints of a prescribed form to reach something beyond the boundary of those very constraints. In much the same way, I endeavor to create work that, by the very precision and normality of its description, opens a door to something beyond the ordinary, and potentially beyond the visible.

In considering what it is that so moves me in these passages, I recall the words of David Bayles in *Art and Fear*: “There is a difference between meaning that is embodied, and meaning that is referenced” (55). This is, largely, at the heart of the issue. My favorite passages pluck at my soul not because they describe, precisely, what I am to feel or think. They don’t explain. They show, in a way, though one cannot really show with language in the same way as images. It is almost as if, like a familiar scent, they bypass the rational, evolved centers of our brain and go straight to the limbic system.<sup>7</sup> If the animal part of our human biology—the part that recalls scent with a sometimes alarming level of memory and emotion—could comprehend poetry, I believe this is what the experience would be like. Moments of refined, crystallized meaning, free of specific time, individuality, or narrative: “It’s written that the voice of the god of Israel / was the voice of many waters. / But this was the sound of trees growing,” or “the noise of a pond thrown into a stone” (Donaghy 40). In the words of Rilke, “You would cry out as purely as a bird when the quickly ascending season lifts him up, nearly forgetting that he is a suffering creature and not just a single heart being flung into brightness” (*Duino Elegies* 41).

I have always lived with a level of awareness of this *felt* meaning, curious as to how certain things affect people on a visceral level that they can never fully explain. And in fact, the truest experiences seem to offer least in the way of explanation. I was aware of these currents within me, of the visual material they drew me to, of strong preferences and repellences that steered my life and, later, my art. I would see these elsewhere in the world, too, but I felt isolated in certain ways by the depth and power of this connection to some unknown force that seemed to dictate my life, decisions, and actions both major and minor. Jung speaks of a feeling of “rootlessness” in modern consciousness, a separation and loss since the days when the rational and the instinctive, the conscious and the unconscious worked in tandem in primitive humans, and were preserved, in many ways, in myth,

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<sup>7</sup> Scent is the only one of the senses received by this primitive part of the brain, which lags several evolutionary leaps beyond our most advanced clusters of neurological wiring. It is the part in charge of fight-or-flight, basic survival, and instinctive, gut reactions. It is primarily responsible for our emotional lives and the formation of memories (hence the strong response in these two categories to smells, even from the far distant past).

tradition, and ritual—all of which are rooted in instinct. But when they become separated, the result is the sense of drifting over a vast sea where we once had a deep and sturdy rudder that bound our world above the surface to the one below it. It was this sense of “rootlessness” that brought me to many of my current ways of thinking, and influenced my interests and pursuits, both personal and artistic. It seemed to me that there was a return on the horizon. Whether a collective change or simply a shift in my personal paradigm, the sense of needing to return, reintegrate, and remember was overwhelming.

With this conviction came a sense that, for me, it is this realm—the dark, intuitive world of age-old knowledge, natural order, and instinctive decision-making—whence my most successful and honest artistic pursuits come. This pull back towards a center, or source, demands a sort of simplification that would free my work from the analytical bog in which it sometimes becomes mired. Early on, this inclination expressed itself in a purely visual sense. I would refine complex subjects back to their most basic elements: a pattern hovering in space, the articulated limbs of a tree crisp in an expanse of white, an elimination of all but the most necessary design elements. My preference for drawing, I believe, is a part of this same pursuit. A distillation of my subject matter and the choice of a simple, direct, intuitive medium (and additionally, a monochromatic medium) were all my attempts at reaching back through the layers of reason and analysis to something simple and intuitive. Since that time, I have learned more about this impulse in myself, where it comes from and what forms it takes—on the social or collective level as well as the personal. These ideas are not new, and they are certainly not unique to me or my work. There was a sort of comfort in finding echoes of this search for a rudder in the writings of C.G. Jung, Erich Neumann, David Abram, Theodore Roszak, Bill Plotkin, and others.

While there is a certain irony to the idea of *researching* these topics, I cannot help but have a voracious appetite for the knowledge of so many generations of great thinkers, and perhaps more importantly, so many different intellectual dances around what, in the end, seems to be the same subject to me: that which is, in a sense, the “language of soul.” Myth is

the original and perhaps even today the most genuine way of approaching these great topics, a way of discussing humanity's version of the natural blueprint, the inborn impulse that allows us to build our own nests and stories—however flawed—with such conviction:

Myth represents the crystallization of basic experiences of life construed through various forms of imagery. Such imagery lies beyond intellectual comprehension, yet is experienced meaningfully. Mythic images help us to approach the mysteries...myth is a way of talking about the ineffable...myth is a way of continuing the conversation when the awesome silence gathers. In theory and system one sees the language of mind; in myth one sees the incarnate language of the soul. (Hollis 23)

James Hollis speaks of myth as a rarified form of the greater human story, a way of evading the “heresy of literalization” that even scientific concepts often suffer. How many students of advanced chemistry or quantum mechanics are actually a bit surprised to find that an atom is nothing remotely akin, as it turns out, to the perfect globe represented by the beach ball in their science classroom, with dozens of tiny positively or negatively charged tennis balls whipping around it in predictable orbits? Symbolic language is not without a purpose; our great stories, much like the bottomless complexities of the molecular world, simply do not lend themselves to immediate or complete understanding. The symbolic (in this case, the mythological) modes of understanding the world are essential, in fact, so long as they are “understood as symbols, that is, images that point beyond themselves towards movements in the soul” (Hollis 79). This is part of what I take into consideration in my own work. While I do not construct images with blatant or easily quantifiable narrative symbolism (white for innocence, a clock for time, etc.) it is my hope that the images speak to certain observers on this level, as images which “point beyond themselves towards movements in the soul,” free of the crippling sort of literalization that comes from those unwilling to let them exist on the symbolic or purely emotional plane. It is a way of asking oneself, as Hollis says, “What, on the invisible plane, supports your life on the visible plane” (142)?

This question leads to one of the main considerations in my work of which I was always peripherally aware, in a way, but had not conceived of in such specific terms until I came across the writings of David Abram, one of the most significant literary influences in my life and creative work. His first book, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, explores the gradual dissolution of the once fundamental connection between human beings and the animate earth, the impact this has had on our society, culture, values, and choices, as well as the bigger question of what might be necessary to facilitate a return to this state of awareness. Abram's project is one of a "realignment with reality," a respectful, gentle, but insistent repositioning of our values and specifically our language in the fertile soils of the earth whence it came. This text speaks to a similar goal in my own work, though where Abram uses words, I employ imagery. Like Hollis, Abram speaks of the visible and invisible planes:

Imagination is not a separate mental faculty (as we so often assume) but is rather the way the senses have of throwing themselves beyond what is immediately given, in order to make tentative contact with the other sides of things that we do not sense directly, with the hidden or invisible aspects of the sensible (58).

Abram speaks of something behind or beyond matter that we can never experience directly except through imagination, or perhaps those far reaches of perception that are guided and enhanced by imagination.

It is this spirit, this sense of "magical realism" (to use a literary term), which characterizes much of the art and literature that most moves and inspires me, and which I strive to bring out in my own work. It is the sense of heightened reality, the feeling of emotion and presence intensified by the very ordinariness of description within an image. Ann Carson both describes and demonstrates this phenomenon in a passage of her collection of poetry and prose, *Plainwater*, saying, "I will show you the photographs if you like, but really, in this case they are not helpful. Because the light is not something you see, exactly. You don't look at it, or breathe, you feel a pressure but you don't look. It is like being in the same room as the man you love" (156).

It is this very “pressure” that I feel in the world around me, and most particularly in the natural world. It is what draws me both aesthetically and spiritually to particular images and compels me to recreate certain moments to the best of my ability. Anne Carson is a poet who does this skillfully, who not only feels that same presence in the life around her, but who is equally compelled by the tidal forces of instinct and emotion. My acquaintance with her poetry some years ago has had a far deeper and more lasting impression on me than I would ever have anticipated. Most importantly, Carson does with simple language and compelling economy what many poets fail to do with all the variety and complexity and quantity of English at their disposal. Carson describes a “man as beautiful as a live feather,” or the roses which “stood straight and pure on their stalks, gripping the dark like prophets” (*Autobiography* 112, 84). In her world,

Buildings [lean] back out of the street.

A little rackety wind [goes] by. . . Somewhere beneath

this strip of sleeping pavement

the enormous solid globe is spinning on its way—pistons thumping, lava pouring  
from shelf to shelf,

evidence and time lignifying into their traces. (*Autobiography* 98)

Carson takes a sort of animist worldview, allocating a type of presence and perhaps even intelligence to the world around us as was so common in “primitive” societies.

Theodore Roszak, in his text on Ecopsychology, *The Voice of the Earth*, explains a time when

things were once transparent to the human eye; greater realities moved behind and within them, were seen in this and that, here and there as if through a lens. This is where the concept of “spirit” comes from, this once-homely, utterly normal sense that something other than matter moves behind matter, animates it, sustains it. (93)

In my view, this is a way of defining instinctive knowledge. This is where it comes from: an animated, responsive, immediate way of looking at the world, a fluidity between the seen and

the unseen, the perceived and the intuited. But this innate knowledge has shifted in character and expression with the evolution of humankind towards an ever more conscious, ever more self-aware way of being:

It loses the immediate responsiveness we find in animals; instead it comes to be expressed in rite, ritual, myth, symbol—teachings and images that embody what was once instinctual. What simpler creatures understand unreflectively by way of an odor, a color, a physical hunger, we must learn by way of discursive intelligence from a folk tale or a religious ceremony. (Roszak 92)

And interestingly, in *The Voice of the Earth* Roszak also suggests that “[p]erhaps this is what art originally was: an act of collective imagination meant to recapture the memory of instinctual union. The naiveté and clarity of primitive art may stem from this primordial function” (92). While I am not concerned about my art functioning in the same way as primitive art, I am in many ways inspired by the idea of such clarity towards a “memory of instinctual union.” This is what drives me to make the work in the first place—a mental or emotional flicker of something that, once pursued, reaches backward through the maze of human consciousness like Ariadne’s thread to something ever nearer the core of my connection to the natural world.

One of the most important chapters in my own navigation of this maze, my personal “pursuit of soul” (and one which has deeply influenced the content, aesthetic, and direction of my artwork), occurred through the guidance of a community associated with Bill Plotkin, author of *Soulcraft* and *Nature and the Human Soul*. These two books—as well as the many personal experiences I have had with his organization, the Animas Valley Institute—have informed my beliefs, spirituality, and sense of ritual and reverence regarding the natural world, all of which I strive to reveal in my work. Plotkin explores two distinct (but complimentary) realms of spirituality: the upper (that of light, transcendence, collective, and enlightenment), and the lower (the dark, individual underworld of personal mystery and discovery). *Soulcraft* weaves the connections between these two realms—with a primary

focus on the latter—into a framework of ecological awareness and an earth-based spirituality that would have us reconnect with the wild world in which we live. This book speaks to an awakening on both the individual level, to our unique gifts and role in the world, as well as the collective level, to our responsibilities to each other and our planet. Many of the personal and spiritual beliefs that inform my artwork follow the paradigm described in this book, and many of the experiences I draw on for subject matter and personal meaning occurred through the guidance and community of the Animas Valley Institute.

While the ideas and theories in Plotkin’s writing influenced me greatly, it was largely his personal definition of “soul” and my experiences in the wilderness and in beginning to know my own soul that have left the most lasting impression. Plotkin defines soul as “a thing’s ultimate place in the world,” where “place” refers to its role or function, how it fits. He specifies “ultimate” place because he means what is specifically, uniquely, at the core of a thing or person’s identity: its meaning, its *raison d’être*. Each thing occupies a specific place in the web of life—one that only it can fill (*Nature* 37). If ever there was a word—or rather, idea—that has suffered more attempts (and mis-attempts) at definition (with the possible exception of “God”), I do not know it. But in the chaos of efforts to understand and define this term, I find remarkable similarities at times between minds, between phrasing, and even between epochs. While Plotkin alternately calls it the “deep structure” or “primary organizing principle,” Rupert Sheldrake refers to the “morphic field” of a person. David Bohm speaks of “implicate order,” Bucky Fuller of “pattern integrity.” Robert Johnson writes of the “blueprint or primal pattern,” and Thomas Betty of the “primary organizing, sustaining, and guiding principle of a living being” (*Nature* 37). But these are all simply ways of referring to deep structure or deep pattern, something as necessary and powerful as it is innate.

The widely varied fields of study from which these writings arise and the numerous intellects that supply them have all contributed to the way I conceive of my ideas, my images, and my objectives with both. It seems every part of my continued research, be it

scientific, psychological/psychoanalytical, mythological, or spiritual circles back to the idea of an organizing principle, an instinctive logic that we have, in many ways, left behind in the course of our evolution towards the conscious beings we are today. If I were to look at things from a distance, and parse my methods into a logical structure, I could say with relative confidence that *this* is what is behind my connection to the natural world, artistically speaking. It is a yearning for something lost, and it is only

when we slip beneath the exclusively human logic continually imposed upon the earth [that] we catch sight of this other, older logic at work in the world. Only as we come close to our senses, and begin to trust, once again, the nuanced intelligence of our sensing bodies, do we begin to notice and respond to the subtle logos of the land.

(Abram 268)

As an artist, I am in search of the “subtle logos of the land,” and its echo in the basic structure of our psyches.

This echo, a sense of mirroring between land and psyche, is the final and perhaps one of the most important ideas in my work and research. Like the others, it began with an ill-defined but strong personal experience of the concept that prompted me to research—both through literature and experience—in order to understand it more thoroughly. I felt a pervasive dissatisfaction with the way that, as Abrams describes,

The speaking self looks out at a purely “exterior” nature from a purely “interior” zone, presumably located somewhere inside the physical body...for there is no longer any common medium, no reciprocity, no respiration between the inside and the outside. There is no longer any flow between the self-reflexive domain of [modern]<sup>8</sup> awareness and all that exceeds, or subtends, this determinate realm. Between consciousness and the unconscious. Between civilization and the wilderness. (257)

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<sup>8</sup> “Modern” is my word, a replacement particular to this context for Abram’s “alphabetic” or “alphabetized.” His term, while fitting, requires the entirety of the text from which it came to be used and understood in the way he intended it. His argument has to do with the changes occasioned in human civilization by the shift from oral to written culture, and the consequent division not only between individuals, but between people and the land.

A desire for this “respiration” between inner and outer is what ultimately led me to embark upon the spiritual and wilderness-based experiences I had with the Animas Valley Institute, backpacking through the wild canyon country of Colorado and Utah, and fasting alone for days in the high desert. Though I have always loved the outdoors, and felt a kinship with the flowers, trees, land, and most particularly animals, this experience was entirely different. It was the first time I had ever created the space, physically and psychologically, that would allow for the nuanced sort of perception Abram describes, or the subtle echo of one’s own “language of soul” in the surrounding landscape.

I grew up in a region where, though we lived in the midst of suburban comfort, it required only half an hour to be well into the mountains, and little more than that to be truly apart from civilization. It is the type of landscape where one is ill advised to go hiking even for a brief afternoon jaunt without at least some basic survival gear. Less than an hour from a well-maintained parking lot and a sign-in sheet at the trailhead, one can be lost in an alpine wilderness that threatens exposure, dehydration, extreme weather, and wild animals. Though I never felt particularly threatened, I was always aware of the power of my native landscape, the thinness of the veil between my comfortable campsite and a very real survival situation. Even among the manicured streets of our neighborhood, I was always aware of a wilderness at my back. Little did I realize how engrained this feeling of living along the boundary was until I left; the first time I made my home in a region where the entirety of my geographic orientation could not depend on the jagged peaks of the Rockies rising to the west, I felt thoroughly disoriented. A sense of anxiety hovered beneath my daily routine, and I did not recognize for some time what it was.

This was the beginning of my adult awareness of a sensitivity to place that has been with me for as long as I can remember. I carried it with me when I left my home, and honed my understanding of it during my explorations overseas and throughout the American west where I wandered more than 9,000 miles on my own, noticing and exploring the identity and energy of each landscape I visited. Some seemed to fit me and have a feeling of nativity and

familiarity—others felt utterly alien. It was during this time that I made the decision to pursue a more intentional, ecologically based exploration of soul in an effort to understand this connection with the land, both for personal reasons, and in pursuit of a deeper conviction in the direction of my creative work.

It was these pursuits—my wanderings, readings, reverence, and ritual—both on my long journey and in the southwestern desert that began to draw me ever more deeply into relationship with the landscape. In my days alone in the desert, I truly made, for the first time, time and space for such a relationship. As I waited in silent expectation, without the distractions of companionship, study, entertainment, or even food, the familiar mental chatter finally began to subside. In the unfamiliar and vast silence of my own mind, and beyond the shockingly loud beating of my heart, I began to hear new voices all around me: the distant yip of coyotes, and the patter of gravel shifting on the slope. I could hear invisible water beneath the streambed, or the near-silent hum of a sleeping beehive above me. Questions would arise in my mind, and as I cast them out into the landscape around me, answers would return on silent cat-feet in the darkness. The world was so much more alive than I had ever known—and I was very much a part of it. For the first time I felt myself simply an animal like any other, one to which the landscape and its more-than-human inhabitants responded naturally, as I did to them. This realization was a joyful one, in the sense of belonging I have never quite felt before, but sorrowful as well; how *much* I did not see in my daily life. How animate the world around me was, and how ignorant I was of the vast wealth of it. How ignorant I have been of my place in it.

For the first time, I deeply felt the landscape as the “topography” of my own mind, both conscious and unconscious. What I saw outside mirrored what I felt, and what I felt mirrored the land itself until the relationship became so close that I scarcely felt a division between the two. I was, for a brief time, like the ancient people that Jung describes:

The country [primitive man] inhabits is at the same time the topography of his unconscious. In that stately tree dwells the thundergod; this spring is haunted by the

Old Woman; in that wood the legendary king is buried...thus does primitive man dwell in his land and at the same time in the land of his unconscious. Everywhere his unconscious jumps out at him, alive and real. How different is our relationship to the land we dwell in! Feelings totally strange to us accompany the primitive at every step...a whole world of feelings is closed to us and is replaced by a pale aestheticism. (93)

A pale aestheticism is most assuredly what gripped me when I returned from my time in the wild, no matter how I fought it. A cold rationality began to once again insist that engaging in a silent conversation with the colony of ants inscribing their movements across the stone or the neighboring owls with their resonant calls was foolish or childish. One cannot hold this cold voice at bay completely—not and live in the modern world, at least. But what of those of us who wish to continue the conversation? Where do we turn when, as Hollis says, “the awesome silence gathers?” Or perhaps more accurately, when the ceaseless and deafening noise drowns out all the other voices?

“Once upon a time,” Roszak writes, all psychologies were ecopsychologies. Those who sought to heal the soul took it for granted that human nature is densely embedded in the world we share with animal, vegetable, mineral, and all the unseen powers of the cosmos...it is peculiarly the psychiatry of modern Western society that has split the “inner” life from the “outer” world—as if what was inside of us was not also inside the universe, something real, consequential, and inseparable from our study of the natural world. (14)

*Inseparable*: this is precisely the conviction that has been with me for much of my life, but particularly since those days in the desert. As an individual, but most particularly as an artist, I live with constant awareness of the continuity between myself and the earth, of the sometimes clouded but ever present mirror between my unconscious and the equally untamed elements of the world around me. I am sensitive to any imposed distance within this connection. I feel oppressed by cities, for example, in a way I can barely begin to explain—

as if some invisible umbilical cord has been severed, or my personal magnetic north is so thoroughly confused that I lose my sense of earthly residence entirely. I am always returning to nature, in mind, spirit, and art when I cannot do so physically. My work is my way of continuing the conversation, of paying tribute to the constant mirroring between inner and outer, psyche and earth. It is my way of walking the boundary between civilization and wilderness—an attempt to live *into* being human as fully as possible, but a human bound to, indebted to, and a deeply a part of the earth.

## **METHODOLOGY**

My ideas tend to begin in the abstract. Often, there is a particular scene or image towards which I feel strongly drawn—but even this feeling begins in the instinctual realm. It took me a number of years to learn that my natural inclination for reasoning, logic, and building conceptual frameworks for my pieces was not actually helpful in terms of producing meaningful work. The abstract realm I speak of is the space that precedes this logical dissemination and parsing of ideas. It is a space where I allow thoughts and emotions, and most importantly, instinctive inclinations to float freely in their pre-visual, and sometimes pre-verbal form. I find journaling to be helpful at this stage, as I do not feel as cramped by the confines of language as I tend to be by specific visual images. I am often able to write about these amorphous feelings and thoughts in a way that does not force me to pin them down; such is the elasticity of language, itself an abstract concept.

While I sometimes arrive at an idea through a careful cultivation of this process, eventually refining it to specifics, more often I find myself surprised by ideas and images that appear, seemingly, out of nowhere. I sometimes explain it as a sensation of things “bubbling up,” perhaps from that vast sea of the unconscious upon which we all drift. Whether they come from some personal locale in those waters or the greater ocean of the collective unconscious, I do not know, but many of the ideas that seem the most resonant to me arrive in this way. I can sometimes precipitate this event by questioning myself, as I described:

“what does this—whatever it may be—look like to me?” On rare occasions I find, to my surprise and delight, that some quiet part of my mind has an answer to this question.

Generally, however, these images appear spontaneously.

Lacking the rare advent of an entirely intact idea, visually and conceptually complete, I tend to move forward with the intuitive leanings and abstractions mentioned above. It is after processing these ideas somewhat in mind and often journal that I return to my image archives: photos from travels, sketches, written ideas, thumbnails, sometimes even dreams. Often, the “bubbles” that rise from my conscious/unconscious ocean are inspired by what I have seen in the past, approached in a new way; therefore, searching old visual records is important and relevant (particularly as it frequently seems to take me a year or more to fully process, internalize, and respond to a given environment—particularly a new landscape—in which I have spent time). Or, if possible, I would at this point return to the wilderness, seeking a place or subject that suits the feeling and desire in my mind/body.

My recent piece, *Instinct I* followed this pattern. I had a residency some time ago that gave me full, unrestricted access to the archives and collections of both the local nature center and the natural history museum. I spent hour after hour there, particularly enchanted by the bird nests. I looked through hundreds of them. I drew a few, and photographed others. But I left with my feeling of interest in them somewhat unsatisfied. I thought about them for some time—nearly two years. I collected several during that time. I kept them in boxes or on shelves above my bed, and then, eventually, forgot about them. Recently, however, I woke up one day with a strong pull towards this imagery, an almost bodily feeling of the concentric motion and containment and detail and delicacy and engineering of these beautiful structures. And then a bubble rose to the surface and burst—and I knew precisely the drawing I wanted to make. A small, intimately sized drawing, perhaps 12 or 16 inches. A square format that would echo the symmetry of the nest (from a viewpoint directly above it), but allow for a slight compositional disruption and re-balancing when I moved the center of the nest just off from that of the square. Something with a variety of grasses, leaves, and materials that would

allow for a complex interplay of edges. It would be an encaustic piece—the first I had done of such a shallow space/object—and the layering of wax would allow some strands of grass and curls of leaf to spring forward, and the complex tangle of materials beneath them to recede. I wanted it to have a feeling of both intimacy and depth; therefore, I would darken the interior of the nest, hinting at something more universal—a sense of closeness and safety, but also one of being drawn inexorably inwards. I'd use vine charcoal for the lower contrast portions, and perhaps some darker charcoal pencils, but reserve those more primarily for the upper layer(s). This image formed itself nearly completely in my mind, lacking only specific details that my memory and experience of similar nests to date couldn't provide. I only needed to find the visual information and references to support it.

My process changes from drawing to drawing depending on my level of devotion to detail and accuracy, and how closely I intend to follow my reference. In this case, I didn't feel strongly about it, so I tackled the first layer (speaking in encaustic terms) of this particular drawing with looseness and confidence, moving quickly to the second layer, which necessitated working much more slowly, with great attention to edge and depth, knowing that this final layer (I decided this drawing would only have two, given its complexity) would come forward in the encaustic process and have a stronger presence than the other. When the drawings and transfer process were completed, what remained was a significant amount of time spent adjusting, refining, editing, and coaxing the bits of grass and leaf into their visual roles, working both with and against the natural tendencies of the wax to recede and blur certain elements, and bring others forward into sharp relief.

The formal elements of my drawings tend to be subservient to the process outlined above—they are generally supporting elements for the broader conceptual ideas that make up a given composition. In certain instances, the opposite can be true—form creating, rather than following, content—or sometimes there is simply no clear boundary between the two. For the most part, however, I use form as a descriptive tool in/following this process of idea development. The form of *The Passage* began with the idea of just that, prompted by

Gilgamesh's tale—a passage through a metaphorical darkness, a narrative of continuous, determined movement towards an unknown goal, with faith in the existence of this goal as the only guide. But in other, similar drawings, the idea—and more specifically, the emotional and physical sensation of being pulled forward toward an as of yet mysterious destination—was nearly the same. A vertical format felt important for this particular piece, in part for conveying the presence and height and depth of the forest, and in part for some reason I cannot quite describe. Many of my formal decisions are made in this way: I can only explain it as instinctive—certain decisions feel right, or essential. Others do not. I must simply follow my gut, so to speak.

This type of internal leaning, imagination, and intuition characterized the ideation process for *The Source*, perhaps more so than any other piece in this body of work. The landscape in this drawing is entirely imagined. While I used a number of reference photos in the creation of the study to help me accurately articulate the planes of particular rocks and the shape of ferns, it represents, for the most part, a true visual manifestation of an internal landscape. The original sketch for this piece, buried in a passage of my journal as a quick visual note from the moment when the idea “bubbled up,” is only a couple of inches tall. There's a slightly larger version a few pages later, with a bit more detail, but still very obscure—particularly considering the size I ultimately decided to make the final piece (about six feet). Therefore, I spent a good deal of time constructing a detailed graphite drawing that would delineate each of the main forms, planes, and light patterns within the piece. My work requires detailed references—whether in the form of photographs or sketches—because my encaustic process does not allow for editing to any great extent after a given step is complete. Not only do I need to be able to see the nuances of the picture accurately enough to know how to divide the layers of my drawing for suspension between separate layers of wax, but I need to know at the time of the earliest stages/layers what the later ones will contain. After completing my graphite study—a delicate and easily readable drawing from a structural standpoint—I darkened and altered it on the computer until its character, value structure, and

atmosphere matched that of the original sketch. Only then did I have an image ready for large-scale printing that could act as a reference for the final drawing.



Figure 14. Robin Cole Smith, studies for *The Source*, 2013

As with the *Instinct* series and *The Passage*, the vast majority of the imagery in my work has its inception in the natural world. Even an image like *The Source* could be characterized in this way; it may be an imagined landscape, but the mental library of images that brought this about also comes from my time spent in nature. While my own psyche and personal history inform the way in which I experience the wilderness (the archetypal patterns of humanity as a whole have their role as well), the specific imagery of my work is generally drawn primarily from observation. This act—that of the careful observer, the wanderer, the fanatical naturalist—is itself a defining part of my methodology, and part of the reason I focus on drawing as my primary medium. It is a natural and immediate way of responding to observation. And while my drawings can be complex and involved, they remain at a fundamental level a recording of this initial act.

I make it a priority to explore new territories and landscapes, to spend unhurried time responding physically, emotionally, and visually to the natural world. Through hiking and camping, travel and residencies, I spend long periods of time in the wild, uncultivated world. During this time, I journal extensively; the written word is my first and most native way of responding to the force, flux, and beauty of the world around me. It is well-suited to recording the quiet flickers of instinct and emotion that characterize the beginnings of my

artistic ideas, which are only later translated into image. In this sense, while observation and recording—itsself an act of reverence, in my eyes—is a key step in my process, it does not always follow immediately after my initial exposure to a given landscape or moment or object. It is more a means to an end, after a more non-specific, abstract, and primal level of emotional and psychological response.

I love to draw on-site, when possible, and have spent many hours in the midst of dripping, green groves and swarms of mosquitoes while tracing the gnarled contours of a spruce with my pencil, or drawing shadows as they cascade across my paper from the branches above. However, this is sometimes impractical, and specifically so now that I work primarily in encaustic, or on a scale far too large to carry through the woods. Therefore, I sometimes make sketches on site (time allowing) to record my initial responses, observations, and the hierarchical scale of value, distance, and shape that is so evident when standing in the woods. Generally, I spend a great deal of time photographing as well, so that various aspects of the environment are available to me on an informational level later on in the studio. I sometimes work primarily or exclusively from photographic references, particularly in instances where I am responding to a given environment months or years following my departure from it.

I am careful with the compositional elements of any sketches or drawings made on-site, even if they are tiny thumbnails or visual notes. I am also an extremely conscientious photographer—this part of my visual record-keeping carries remnants of a time when I thought photography would be my primary artistic medium. When I do choose to work primarily from a photographic reference, I rarely make large-scale compositional alterations because the initial photo was composed with great care to begin with. They are not casual snapshots. While I never received the formal training in composition that I might have in a BFA program, I have—as do many artists—a feel for composition that I find to be far more reliable than any paradigm, model, or rule an outside source could provide (though they often end up following these rules anyhow). Here, too, I follow my gut, capturing images on paper

or film with great care, but without significant deliberation: I simply observe and record, and the compositional decisions that give my drawings their character occur quietly somewhere in between.

Though traditional charcoal drawings on paper or wood supports still make up a portion of my practice, this body of work is primarily composed of layered encaustic drawings. I begin with the practical elements: the building of the cradled mahogany panels I favor as a support surface, and the many layers of encaustic priming with a highly absorbent ground to provide a reliable bonding surface for the encaustic medium. The drawing process, initially, is a very separate pursuit from the preparation of the support. The transparent nature of encaustic allows me to use it as a layering medium, suspending one layer of black carbon above another in beeswax and damar resin (the components of encaustic medium). I complete the drawings on vellum in their entirety before beginning the wax process, so that I can see clearly how the separate layers of drawing will align. I end with two to five layers of drawing, each on a separate piece of paper, which I then transfer—interspersed with layers of wax—onto the primed surface, with the help of a heat gun and burnishing tools and blades in the transfer and fusing process. The result is a technique which is certainly related to the traditional notion of encaustic, but which weds it with a very contemporary approach to drawing, and stretches the medium to the extremes of its stability, translucence, luminosity, and shine.

It is an involved and lengthy project, different from the more straightforward drawings I have done in the past, and I have found this working process to be slowly shaping and transforming my actual drawing technique. I am aware, when working, that part of what makes layering so intrinsically beautiful is its translucence; and part of what makes the translucence so beautiful is the simultaneous visibility of disparate drawings on separate layers, marks upon marks with differences of clarity and temperature depending on their place before or behind depths of wax. It is a truly a case of the whole being more than the sum of the parts. As a result, I have learned to draw in a way that takes this into account,

often re-drawing certain passages in extreme detail on each layer, despite knowing that, when combined, many of these details will disappear into darkness. But it is a darkness of depth and texture only achievable with the conscientious creation of its component elements—a superficial layer of black would never achieve the same end. My process, once so meticulous, so careful with each mark, has therefore relaxed; I often leave passages loosely indicated, or with a different level of finish than I would on a traditional drawing because I know that it will change so substantially when combined with wax. The layering may obscure it, the wax may melt or change the shape of it, a bubble may destroy it, scraping may obliterate it, an upper layer of wax may penetrate too deep with its heat and move the pigment.

The wax is enormously unpredictable; a half-second too long with the heat source can liquefy the medium holding my charcoal drawing to such an extent that the image washes away like silt in a stream. I can—purposely or accidentally—boil the wax, or cause bubbles to appear mysteriously from lower layers only to rise and burst on the surface, either obliterating portions of the drawing, or (depending on the size, temperature, and level of intentionality) add beautiful, organic textures that could not be achieved any other way. Encaustic has thus provided my very traditional charcoal drawings with another language of mark to inform their visual conversation, one unique to this earthy, unpredictable mixture of beeswax and resin that has a pattern and purpose and mind entirely its own. My process, meticulous though it may be, particularly when compared with the traditional uses of encaustic, has actually loosened and freed my drawing considerably into a realm of fluid mark and anticipation.

## **CONCLUSION**

On a cross-country trip some years ago, I stopped along the side of the road somewhere in northern coastal Oregon. No particular reason, or particular place. It was simply an inviting, wooded area in the full bloom of late spring, and I wanted the chance for

a quick wander before dark. I parked my car and scrambled down the steep rock ledge that dropped away from the side of the road. After landing in a heap at the bottom, I looked around and was astonished to find myself next to a wide river entirely invisible from the road, despite apparently running alongside it. It was dusk in the mixed deciduous and cedar forest, a palette of greys with incongruous vibrant greens in the clinging mosses and the deep cobalt of water so clear I could see every twig and pebble and hovering trout in the gathering shadows. It was utterly still; not a breath stirred the damp air, and the soft rush of the water was the only sound. I stood on the smooth, fissured rock of the banks, taking in the quiet beauty of that place before the light faded. I expected darkness to creep into the ravine at any moment, given the late hour, and yet it did not—the twilight pallor persisted for what seemed an incredibly long time. I discovered a large crevice in the rock, five or six feet deep, which had filled with water from the river. It sliced through the limestone from riverbed to hillside before disappearing beneath a tumble of boulders into the brush. A movement caught my eye in the placid water: a salamander. I followed as it swam fluidly through the pool between the rocks, without so much as a ripple. And then, to my amazement, I saw that there were others. Many others. Dozens. Their lithe, brown shapes were suspended at intervals in the depths of the pool until the last ones disappeared into darkness. I watched as they paired off, swimming together in an effortless rhythm. They were mating. In this hidden crevice, next to a hidden river, next to a highway along which people drive, unknowing, every day, was an entire universe: a silent, amphibian ballet in the clear depths, illuminated by the half-light of a clinging twilight.

I do not know how long I watched the salamanders. The light never seemed to change, even after my legs began to ache from perching above the space in the rocks. But suddenly, it was dark. Very dark. I left the creatures to their dance, and looked once more across the river, realizing only now that I could scarcely make out the opposite bank. With finger and toe-holds I climbed monkey-like back up the rock, and emerged onto the side of

highway where an enormous pickup truck promptly roared past me, leaving my heart pounding. I got back into my car, where I sat for a long time.

This scene, in its silent, suspended perfection, was so complete in its eerie beauty that it stayed with me for weeks afterwards. It was, possibly more than anything else I have ever witnessed, an embodiment of heightened reality, of that otherworldliness within the ordinary that has always so enchanted me. It is these timeless moments, existing with the same pristine beauty today next to a highway in Oregon as they might have just beyond the primordial soup of countless eons past, familiar yet wholly *other*, that are largely responsible for my artistic pursuits. Throughout the course of my MFA candidacy I have evaluated and reevaluated my relationship to such phenomena, to my natural-world subject matter, and the still somewhat indescribable magnetism that draws me to it. I have come to many conclusions, some of which are outlined over the course of this paper, and some of which are simply small evolutions of an understanding so innate that it will always evade description. Not the least of these discoveries is an awareness of the sometimes gap between the intention behind my work, and the way it ultimately functions as an image. This is an inherent difficulty for all artists, but particularly those working with deeply personal content in a genre with a distinct history, such as landscape.

Though I will doubtless spend my life striving to close these gaps, to create work that truly conveys my sense of moments like this one with the salamanders and compels the viewer to experience my drawings with the same level of investment and intellectual consideration that was behind their creation, I'm not sure that I will ever *really* achieve this. Nobody will ever see the world the way I do, and no act of communication will occur without the difficulty of translation. What I will do is strive to make deeply soulful work, drawings that will, if nothing else, attempt to electrify the point of interaction between observer and observed, desire and fulfillment, impulse and creation. Beyond that, I will continue to search for a natural balance with one of the greatest challenges I face with my work: that of integrating my desires and my innate nature—two intimate and personal forces

that are often strangely at odds with each other. My search for the rawness and spontaneity and confidence I so admire in the hand of other artists is continually challenged by a mind naturally compelled to describe, inform, perfect. *Instinct* represents a step towards this goal, if not necessarily the attainment of it—an ongoing act of finding a voice that I hope will one day communicate beyond doubt the soulful endeavor behind it.

I made the choice to pursue an MFA largely on account of many, many unanswered questions: about the world, about myself, about the desire to create. I have always felt compelled to seek answers. I was—am—always striving towards some goal, though I don't understand fully what it is. The guidance of a masters program, I thought, would help me to find these answers. And perhaps in some ways, it has, though they were not the ones I expected. The choice to be an artist is, at its core, the choice to be an eternal seeker, a pilgrim on a journey that will never truly end. The conviction I have gained is not one of understanding, knowledge, or attainment: it is one of appreciation for the mystery. Additionally, it is that of a return, a re-knowing, a recovering. And implicit in the “re” of each of these words is the important sense that the destination is something already there, already within us. As an artist, it is an understanding that, as the old Zen parable and later W.B. Yeats said it, “I am looking for the face I had before the world was made” (107).

## Wild Geese

*You do not have to be good.  
You do not have to walk on your knees  
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.  
You only have to let the soft animal of your body  
love what it loves.  
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.  
Meanwhile the world goes on.  
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain  
are moving across the landscapes,  
over the prairies and the deep trees,  
the mountains and the rivers.  
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,  
are heading home again.  
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
the world offers itself to your imagination,  
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting –  
over and over announcing your place  
in the family of things.*

Mary Oliver

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## APPENDIX A



Plate 1. Robin Cole Smith, *Penumbra VIII, IX, X*, 2011-2012, charcoal on panel, 8" x 6"



Plate 2. Robin Cole Smith, *Traces I, II, III*, 2013, encaustic and charcoal on panel, 6" x 6"



Plate 3. Robin Cole Smith, *One of those moments that is the opposite of blindness*, 2012, charcoal on mounted paper, 32" x 96"



Plate 4. Robin Cole Smith, *As certain dark things are loved*, 2012, charcoal on mounted paper, 32" x 48"



Plate 5. Robin Cole Smith, *The Passage*, 2012, encaustic and charcoal on panel, 45" x 30"



Plate 6. Robin Cole Smith, *The Sentinels*, 2013, encaustic and charcoal on panel, 30" x 45"



Plate 7. Robin Cole Smith, *An End*, 2012, encaustic and charcoal on panel, 51" x 15"



Plate 8. Robin Cole Smith, *The Source*, 2013, encaustic and charcoal on panel, 68" x 34"



Plate 9. Robin Cole Smith, *Instinct I*, 2013, encaustic and charcoal on panel, 16" x 16"



Plate 10. Robin Cole Smith, *Instinct II*, 2013, encaustic and charcoal on panel, 14" x 14"



Plate 11. Robin Cole Smith, *Instinct III*, 2013, encaustic and charcoal on panel, 46" x 46"



Plate 12. Robin Cole Smith, *Isle of Poets*, 2013, encaustic and charcoal on panel, 24" x 36"

ARTIST'S NOTE

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