Fragments of nature/laid to rest

by

Carol H. Faber

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Katherine P. Gibbs, Major Professor
Roger Baer
Lynn Paxson

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Graduate College
Iowa State University

This is to certify that the master's thesis of

Carol H. Faber

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

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INTRODUCTION

The intention of this written component is to document my thesis exhibition entitled “Fragments of Nature/Laid to Rest” and explain the inspiration behind the artwork. Twenty-five digital prints were exhibited in the Pioneer Room, at the Iowa State Memorial Union, on the Iowa State University campus in Ames, Iowa, from January 15 to February 16, 2004.

My final M.F.A. thesis exhibit was developed after a variety of course work was taken in the requirement for the Integrated Visual Arts degree. Classes spanning from studio drawing, art history, to graphic design helped to develop this current direction. This artwork is a new aspect for my artistic expression of ideas. Combining the traditional studio approach to the world of digital imagery is a new journey—a path I did not believe I would ever go down but one that I now will continue to explore as an artist.
ARTIST STATEMENT

My artwork is about how I perceive the world. My experiences, when made visual, are emotional responses to events and memories from specific parts of my life, making my artwork a kind of autobiographical record. Nature is a strong element that reoccurs in my artwork mainly because of my own experiences of growing up on my family’s farm in northwest Iowa. The farm animals, the land, and its surroundings contain a deep personal connection to the cycles of life. This connection weaves between the past and present, creating a visual dialog about the essence of life and a return to the earth. The artwork in this exhibit was created from a collection of natural objects such as grass, animal bones, and horsehair, which were digitally intermingled with encaustic paintings, drawings, and photographs to depict a specific personal experience.

The concept for this series of images comes from the life and death of a horse I once owned named Ruby. When she was just a few hours old, I led Ruby and her mare home from the pasture where she was born. On that journey, I carried this newborn foal across a stream of water that would take her life twelve years later. She died one severely cold night in February with wind chills well below zero. She fell through the thin ice of the neighbor’s pond while drinking water, another part of the same body of water I carried her over as a foal. Ruby died of hypothermia and drowned that winter’s night as the other horses looked on in helpless agitation and horror, which was evident, when they returned home without her.

The area in which Ruby drowned was inaccessible by any vehicle. Later that spring, my sister and I pulled her still-preserved body from the cold water of the pond to give her a proper place of rest. This endeavor was accomplished first by rowboat and then by a
harnessed horse. Once ashore, nature soon decomposed her body and all that remained were bones. A couple of weeks later, we moved her remains to a grove of evergreen trees and sumac on our farmland. From birth to her death, I carried her once again, but this time to her final resting place. Sometime later, I went back to visit this sight. A bird’s nest, made of horsehair, near the bones was evidence that life went on and she returned back to the earth.

I did not witness Ruby's death, but this series of artwork depicts her death and my perception of the beauty her life gave back to nature. At the time, one never thinks about simple things, such as carrying a small foal so she won’t get wet, or how that connects to the end of her life by struggling to bring her home again. A whole life of events encapsulated to return us to where we started, leaving "fragments of nature laid to rest."
ABOUT THE ARTWORK

This is the Hour of Lead —
Remembered if outlived,
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow —
First — Chill — then Stupor — then the letting go —

From ‘After great pain, a formal feeling comes,’ by Emily Dickinson
(Mins, 210)

My thesis exhibit and the concept for the artwork are a statement about how I see and feel life. Although it is exhibited around a specific event in my life, it reaches into other aspects of how I see the world. My work tends to have multiple meanings because I draw from several experiences over a span of time. In other words, my horse Ruby died twelve years ago; and, since that time, many things in my life have happened to cause me to reflect about that event and how I see my life now. In a way, the present and the past play off one another to create a new perspective. I could not have made this artwork twelve years ago because I felt too close to that event. I did not have enough distance to see all the aspects I do now. If I were to make this artwork twelve years from now it would be different than from today.

All of my artwork begins with personal ideas; in this case, an event in my life of significant meaning. I rarely start with clear goals or intentions in my work. I interact with the objects I collect: bones, feathers, and shells coupled with photographs of objects too large or tenuous to collect. Objects, even photographs, are like a visual diary of my life—fragmented into portions. These objects have a lifetime of familiarity, so when I start making images from them, I do not always know what memories are being emphasized. Usually, a present event triggers a subconscious memory from my past. It could be
something as simple as the way the sun hits the snow, remembering how it looked before, bringing back a flood of memories. But, something in the present always makes a circular connection to the past. Working intuitively, it is not long before I connect objects and images together intentionally toward a series of concepts.

Once an idea is formed, as in this particular artwork, it requires some specific natural objects. I asked my sister, Kathy, to collect these objects from my family’s farm in Sioux City and send them to me in Mason City. This gave the whole process a greater personal meaning because of the interaction I had with my sister and what we remembered. Most of the things I experienced, she had experienced too. Both of our perspectives together helped solidify the direction in my work. Therefore, this artwork is about more than just the life of a horse. It also encompasses the relationship I have with my family and friends, and especially, with my own father. Through part of his life he used horses to farm the land, as many of my older relatives and rural neighbors did. A whole generation of farmers, including my father, shared stories of their past—the way things used to be, and how working with horses affected their lives. Consequently, these stories have given me insight into how my life has been affected through various events and memories. I am proud to be part of that legacy—connected to a generation that had a great interest in the land, its history, and preservation.

My father had a strong interest in nature and conservation, which he actively pursued toward the end of his life by developing a county-wide watershed where my family’s farm is located. He was very interested in pasture grasses and the prevention of soil erosion. He believed that leaving a natural prairie worked best to conserve the land, and it was a beautiful testimony to nature. My father also believed, like I do, that the land will return back to the
way it was, given enough time. Appropriately, natural prairie still stands on my family’s farm today. It also forms the foundation in several of the images I created for this exhibit. The grasses symbolize the strong foundation my father gave me as a person. It nourishes all living things and envelops the path of life, providing a place to begin and end.

Because of my father and the farm, my artwork takes on a sense of place. It is about this particular land I identify with most—a small 80-acre farm of hilly woodland and pastured prairie three miles east of Sioux City, near the start of the Loess Hills. This place is where my memories still reside. Perhaps this is not clearly evident in the artwork, but this place is how I start to tell a story and use it as an inspiration. Over the years, I have observed that my work revolves back to my father and the farm where I grew up. My father died of heart disease, coupled with leukemia, when I was twelve years old. His death was unexpected, which left my mother, two sisters, and me operating our farm without him. It was one of the most enormous challenges of my life, and it is a part of who I am; and, in some way, always part of my artwork. I believe losing a parent at an early age gave me a different perspective about life and death. This concept is a natural dialog within my artwork, and I find comfort in questioning those memories with each event that now happens in my own life.

My artwork is also about the struggle of life and the complete and utter respect I have for the beauty that life offers. It glows and shimmers and gives back the energy it takes just to endure. It weaves between the past of my life to the promise of the future, layered with disappointment, wonderment, terror, and exhilaration. Life is fluid, and I found that working with objects that are inherent to water, such as shells, give a fluid effect to my artwork.
Shells, eggs, feathers, and fire all have an iridescent quality and were used as layers in my work to create the essences of life, a quality that shimmers and suggests life to me.

The bones collected are like markers on our farm, an indication of an event or where life ended and proof that something happened or existed in that spot. I used bones in my artwork as a compositional structure that changes in each image. This structure is tenuous such as life itself. In some of the images the bones dissolve into the background of the grasses referring to the concept that all things will return back to nature. Sometimes I overlapped the bones to create more interest with the background, and sometimes the overlapping adds more to the structure. The bones become shapes that identify as other images, sometimes, abstracted faces, and other times, legs or arms. I don’t really think about the things they suggested as much as the texture and color that are produced from the interaction of different objects and images together. Rather than creating an abstracted shape, particular objects, such as grass and bones, are put together to tell a story through mood and meaning.

My work is rooted in nature. I have never wanted to escape the part of my life that shows where I came from. Although I do not currently live on my family’s farm, I still have a strong connection to nature and all its wonder. I believe my artwork has even more natural aspects now because I am not as close to nature as when I lived in rural Iowa. On the farm, life and death teeter in a precarious balance. It is an all-encompassing realm of experiences. I believe it is important for all artists to use their talents and skills to express their unique lives, while being genuine to their own spirits. My hope as an artist is to use what I know best to express my own experiences and feelings I have about the world in which I live. For all of us, it is certain that life ends from what we experience now. It is the ultimate truth.
Our lives are a final remembrance of how we once lived, what we believed, and how we hopefully made a difference, if ever so slight, in someone else’s life.
ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

When it comes to being influenced by other artists, my greatest interest lie with artists who can describe themselves through their work in an autobiographical way using nature as their inspiration. Materials and the processes of making “art” are of great personal interest to me. I am strongly drawn to visual texture and tactile qualities and admire artists who create this quality in their work. There are many artists who leave impressions on my visual sense and conceptual development. During my studies in this degree program, I became interested in a few new artists whom I had not studied before.

Mary Frank’s work has great appeal because of the concept she uses behind her paintings. Drawing from her past relationship with her parents and her childhood background in dance and music, her paintings are a symbolic language of “visible sound.” She references a relationship to sound in her writings and artwork titles. Mary Frank acknowledges that she draws upon many sources, music being one of them. She states:

There are artistic sources, and there are life sources. Sometimes I don’t know one from the other. Music has been a great source for me. I often listen to music while I work. (Herrera, 39)

Her paintings are types of visual stories rendered in heavy textural painted surfaces—elements of the earth and nature handled in almost “primitive,” yet expressive, style. Her use of color is a quality that glows in the expressive soup of marks on layered, two-dimensional surfaces. Images of people and animals are staged to struggle against a dramatic setting in nature such as typhoons and rocky cliffs. Words painted into these
compositions also reference her writing. It is clear she uses these stories in her work to express her ideas. In Mary Frank’s 1999 sketchbook she writes:

She said the Shamans when they are good (and) strong, when their voices go straight to the heart—then, people say the voice has gone from the mouth like a horse and onto the singers hand and onto the world.
(Nochlin, 19)

This writing is depicted with human and animal forms struggling with nature, its dangers, beauty, and sublime qualities. These figures scream, groan, and yell their way to the surface of the paint with visible expression. A woman running with hands flaying and mouth open seems to be speaking or yelling a message that is too urgent to stop. Yet, other imagery, such as a horse, is static, stuck in deep water. If the horse is a symbolic representation of the voice, maybe this imagery suggests there is no way to verbalize this message other than the visible symbols. Her use of natural elements, coupled with a narrative style, certainly has influenced the way I view my own work.

Arthur Dove is another artist whom I have a greater appreciation for after studying the method of encaustic drawing. He was an artist that contributed to the vision of early American abstract painting but was also innovative in the experimentation of artists' materials. He was interested in capturing the true essence of objects in the natural world and how to reveal a certain quality of light in painting. Arthur Dove discovered the use of encaustic emulsion, a process of mixing wax into oil paint. Almost all of his final paintings were done in encaustic emulsion, which suggests that he found a medium that had finally reproduced the quality he sought from colors of nature—luminescent and bold. I, too, found
that encaustics hold a certain intensity of color that other mediums cannot quite match, but I had never experimented with the emulsion process.

In studying Dove, I also examined a great deal of Georgia O’Keeffe’s work. Dove and O’Keeffe were part of Alfred Stieglitz’s circle of exhibiting artists. This group of artists, Arthur Dove, Georgia O’Keeffe, John Marin, Marsden Hartley, and Paul Strand, would often exhibit work in close proximity to one another. I found many influences of O’Keeffe’s paintings represented in Dove’s artwork. O’Keeffe’s inspiration was everything that Dove sought, and she thought highly of him. She believed that Dove's work encompassed the very quality he searched for during his artistic life. O’Keeffe said once, comparing artists Arthur Dove to John Marin:

Dove is the only painter who is part of the earth. You don’t know what the earth is I guess. Where I came from the earth means everything. Life depends on it. You pick it up and feel it with your hands … No, Marin is not of the earth. He walks over the earth, but Dove is of it. (Newman, 24)

Arthur Dove embodied O’Keeffe’s very ideas of nature. Yet, Dove worked diligently to capture a true quality of nature in his paintings. His interest in nature and the rich colors he used influenced my interest in the medium of encaustics. His work is a tribute to nature and all its sublime qualities.

Georgia O’Keeffe’s vibrant use of colors in oil paint is something I admire, but it is her use of compositional structure within her natural subject matter that intrigues me. She uses natural objects to frame what the viewer is to see. Her painted landscapes and natural forms are rich with color that almost glows, drawing the viewer in for a closer look. Her influence in my recent work is most apparent even though I did not intend to reference her
work directly. Her smooth abstract paintings of bones come to mind in both my digital prints and drawings on paper. Of her early drawings Alfred Stieglitz wrote:

O’Keeffe’s drawings were of charcoal-bold strokes suggestive of violent waves, whirlpools, high winds or flames. Having no precise subject matter, they also seemed to suggest an equivalent to the artist’s interior self. (Rathbone, Shattuck, & Turner, 52)

O’Keeffe’s images, like Dove’s, celebrated nature through their unique perspectives of the internal quest to find one’s self. Their work would guide any artist looking for inspiration expressing the wonders of nature.

Another artist I studied is Susan Rothenberg. Her paintings have a unique sensibility and distinctive quality. Her work speaks of her life’s experiences. Susan Rothenberg explains her use of color related to her childhood:

I don’t very often go about making a painting based on an idea about color. That blue is a childhood memory, and I guess it stuck with me. It’s a color that definitely appeals to me emotionally. (Auping, 30)

Certainly, Rothenberg’s use of painted marks relates to her emotional content, but her surface technique is also appealing. Her oil paintings have a rough opaque surface resembling the effects that one can achieve with the encaustic medium. Her use of white layering into color is a technique I experimented with when working with encaustics, even though Rothenberg works in the medium of oil paint. Her large use of shape and surface creates a structural tension that gives her paintings added dynamics.

Finally, the photographs of Minor White are a compelling testimony of nature which I have been interested in since teaching photography. Personally, the most compelling images
are his close-up abstractions of natural forms. The majority of his images evoke beauty through textural balance of values and subtle nuances of rich tactual qualities. They are enchanting with a calm and serene mood that makes one compelled to look for more. Some are lonely—almost meditative—and aspire to be monument to nature and life.

There are many artists I connected with, but none of them influence me as much as my own life’s experience. I certainly take knowingly and unknowingly parts and pieces from influences in my life and combine them into a strong sense of my own style. I believe it is important to research other artists to find common connections leading to a greater understanding of one’s own artistic growth. Learning from others helps to strengthen one’s own path and realize this endeavor is not accomplished alone. These artists are exemplary examples; and, in some way, we are all a part of that history.
ABOUT THE PROCESS

When I started my M.F.A. degree in Integrated Visual Arts I was confronting the technology I had avoided, specifically how to use the computer to make my own “art.” I have always been a traditional artist, and I am familiar with most of the current computer software programs through years of teaching a wide variety of art courses. Yet, I never had great success connecting the computer to the process of making my own artwork. It seemed too distant, or that the computer screen kept me from the surface—a surface through the process of drawing on paper I could touch.

For me, drawing is a direct connection to the surface, and, being able to touch a material seems to convey greater meaning. The movement of the hand and arm is a more immediate connection to one’s own body that makes the physical connection a fluid interaction from head to hand. The quality of marks on paper is developed through a feeling or mood one has while interacting with the surface of a drawing. I have always believed that drawn marks on paper seem clearer and crisper than those made on a computer using a drawing or photographic software program. Making changes to these drawn marks on paper is done directly by rubbing, erasing, or layering over with other mediums. A tactile relationship to the surface gives the process of making visual images a more complete experience and a barrier when confronting the computer.

I found that I could overcome this barrier and learn how to make the connection to surface. This seems a simple task to achieve; but when one avoids technology to make fine art images, the mental barrier tends to be the greatest obstacle. I struggled more with the physical aspect of making images related to how I felt when I made it, than I did
accumulating knowledge using the computer. The visual results had to be the same as my drawings on paper. I encountered the greatest struggle creating a relationship between my feelings and the visual mood within the images. I do not create artwork "out of chance" or random marks; it has to feel right when I make it, and visually relate to how I feel it emotionally. As an artist, this never changes. Being genuine to my “art” is being genuine to myself. I expect a certain amount of experimentation through the process, but my own internal compass is the same. The computer tends to decrease the connection to feeling because the process is one step removed by touch; therefore, I had to use visual effects, diverse materials, and objects as a way to make the connection. Overcoming my trusted way of working on paper to develop a new way of seeing and working digitally on the computer is the culmination of this exhibit.

The artwork for my thesis exhibition was born out of the process of animating still images created on the computer. The initial group of images I created were from photographs scanned into the computer, digitally enhanced or manipulated in Adobe Photoshop®, to create a short animation using Macromedia Director®. In my first attempt to learn the animation program, I was not impressed with the initial visual results; however, the second set of images exceeded my expectations. I did not have any photographs of the concept I wanted to animate, but I had a few real objects. I then directly scanned those objects using a flatbed scanner and combined them with photographs. This resulted in a better visual effect. Working from objects, as in a drawing from still-life objects, appealed to my traditional artistic approach. All of the objects used for my artwork were collected from my family’s farm—something I naturally do when I start work on a series of drawings.
The objects helped to close the gap between the computer, and it created a connection to a drawing process I was familiar with.

In my third attempt at making an animated sequence, I took compositional ideas from a large connected charcoal drawing I had drawn earlier (Fig. 1). I used the conceptual idea of this drawing; but, in theory, I replaced the drawn objects with scanned objects. The process did not use scanned photographic images but rather all real objects scanned digitally into the computer. This, coupled with a new way of thinking about a photographic software program, created a group of images rich with detail and texture. These images had a new depth that I could only explain as being enhanced because the objects were directly scanned as a first-generation image at a high resolution (Figs. 2 – 7). I believe that, paired with a new perspective, this helped me to achieve what I always thought was impossible.

This way of thinking isn’t new, but it was for me. Prior to this, I had always used Adobe Photoshop® as an art-making tool for drawing and manipulating images. When I started to think like a photographer, using layers as a photographic negative, all possibilities changed. I suddenly could create new depth in the layering process by adding color or changing the opacity. Each change in one layer would effect all other layers, creating several different possibilities. It was an exciting process. I did not believe that thinking differently would help me to create such a diverse range of effects with just a scanned object or image. These effects were similar to my drawings, giving way to the possibility that these images could also work as still individual images on their own. I could duplicate the dramatic effects achieved in the medium of drawing to my digital images.

The final connection that related the digital prints to my drawing techniques was to bring back the drawn mark as a digitally scanned image. I used a new medium called
encaustic. Encaustic is a method using heated wax to create an image. Unsure of the results I would achieve, I created many new textural drawings by using wax sticks on paper heated underneath by a hot plate. I drew down colors that would enhance the previously scanned objects in structure and color. I also used china markers, charcoal, and oil pastels to achieve a variety of visual effects.

These encaustic drawings had intense color pigment and helped to achieve the rich colors I created in the digital prints. I also experimented with the encaustic process applying melted wax directly to the digital images. This was a nice effect, but it changed the compositions too much and had some physical limitations. I chose to print the digital images larger providing a greater area for the application of wax on the surface. The process of printing larger provided more choices of paper. I selected an absorbent matte finish printing paper that would match the qualities of drawing paper. This gave the digital prints a finer quality while enhancing the colors. The larger surface gave more open areas to work in hand-rendered effects, but the larger digital images were far more striking without the addition of encaustics. The encaustic process did not improve upon what was already achieved digitally. I decided to not add encaustics to the surface of the prints. Instead, I scanned the encaustic drawings and added them as digital layers in my images. I came "full circle" back to the process of drawing, and I solved the barrier of working with the computer to create my own images.

The quality and mood in these digital prints are equal to that of my drawn marks on paper, and with every variation my images improved (Figs. 8 – 26). However, not all of the objects I scanned were successful. With each object, I learned something new about color, layering, and the effects I wanted in my work. I am intrigued with this process I have
discovered. The result displayed for my thesis exhibition was something, at the beginning, I could not have predicted. The artwork exhibited for my M.F.A. thesis exhibit has been an extraordinary experience (Figs. 2 – 26). I will continue to pursue the digital ideas I developed, as well as my traditional approaches. I am excited about the possibilities I may discover in creating new work.
CONCLUSION

Through this experience, I found the most powerful aspect of working digitally is the same as the traditional approach of creating artwork. In whatever process, media, or tool an artist engages in, the most important aspect about expressing visual ideas and images is to remain true to one’s genuine self. Artists have always been faced with change; it is an inevitable fact of life. It is far more rewarding to be engaged in the aspects of every technology available to see where it might lead, rather than avoiding it completely.

The process of creating this artwork has made me think differently about surfaces. This technology, aware that there are limitations, gives the possibility to interact with the world at another level. The computer and its devices have become a complex technological camera with capabilities to manipulate the image it captures in endless configurations. Each natural object, drawing, and photograph related to my personal memories was encapsulated as preserved layers through the interplay of color and light. These images are like fragments of my life suspended as visual thoughts about a time and place that will never pass this way again. This was an ephemeral experience “laid to rest” in the context of self through the process of making visual images, or what I refer to as my “art.”
Figure 1.
*Forces of Nature I* © 2001
Charcoal on Paper. 45” x 87”
Figure 2.
*Earth Marker I* © 2003
Digital Print. 30" x 20"
Figure 3.
*Earth Marker II © 2003*
Digital Print. 30" x 20"
Figure 4.
*Earth Marker III* © 2003
Digital Print. 30" x 20"
Figure 5.
*Grounds for Belief* © 2003
Digital Print. 20" x 30"
Figure 6.
*Prairie Compass* © 2003
Digital Print. 20" x 30"
Figure 7.
Evident Direction © 2003
Digital Print. 20" x 30"
Figure 8.
Place of Origin/Endemic Grave © 2003
Digital Print. 30" x 20"
Figure 9.
*Under the Sumac* © 2003
Digital Print. 30" x 20"
Figure 10.
*Blue Dance/Erratic Rhythm* © 2003
Digital Print. 30" x 20"
Figure 11.
Remaining Light © 2003
Digital Print. 30" x 20"
Figure 12.
Into the Night © 2003
Digital Print. 30" x 20"
Figure 13.
Amethyst © 2003
Digital Print. 30" x 20"
Figure 14.
Ruby © 2003
Digital Print. 30" x 20"
Figure 15.  
_Nestled in Memory_ © 2003  
Digital Print. 20" x 25"
Figure 16.
*Lustrous Life 1* © 2003
Digital Print. 20" x 25"
Figure 17.
*Lustrous Life II* © 2003
Digital Print. 25" x 20"
Figure 18.
*Just Below the Surface* © 2003
Digital Print. 20" x 25"
Figure 19.
*Swept Away* © 2003
Digital Print. 20" x 25"
Figure 20.
*Cradle Grave* © 2003
Digital Print. 20" x 25"
Figure 21.
Above the Ice © 2003
Digital Print. 20" x 30"
Figure 22.  
*Between Birth and Death* © 2003  
Digital Print. 25" x 20"
Figure 23.
January Thaw © 2003
Digital Print. 25" x 20"
Figure 24.
*The Fall* © 2003
Digital Print. 25" x 20"
Figure 25.
*First Frost* © 2003
Digital Print. 25" x 20"
Figure 26.
*Blue Shade* © 2003
Digital Print. 20" x 30"
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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