

THESIS

LANDSCAPE AS METAPHOR

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WE HEARBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED  
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ABSTRACT OF THESIS  
LANDSCAPE AS METAPHOR

I am intrigued with the capacity for landscape to serve as a point of reference to our being in society. Through our relationship with landscape, our contemporary values, priorities, religion, and interactions are revealed. But landscape does more than reflect our contemporary world; it endures and reflects the history of human experiences through traces of past civilizations, and through scars of human activity and manipulation. Memory and time are reflected in my images, a reminder that the only true permanence of civilization is the land itself. Traces of past constructions --bridges, towers, fencing, trenches--serve as evidence of the cycles of civilizations. The landscape becomes an intimate part of our human psyche.

Tension and paradox pervade my images. I am infatuated with foreboding shadows of black that contrast with the clean white of blank paper. Monumental structures are contrasted with delicate, almost erased pencil or drypoint lines. In places, line and form disengages from our logical sense of perspective; here, I question our perceptions and understanding of permanence and scale. Respite is found in the vast horizons, space to breathe and a timelessness that transcends our constructed world. In the end, the landscape serves as a metaphor for our shared human experience.

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Finally, I would like very much to thank my entire family for their enduring and endless support. I recognize humbly that graduate school (and the completion of!) was attainable only with their generous and loving support.

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My work explores the notion of a common human experience that is captured visually in landscape. Seeing the landscape as a footprint of our collective histories, I find it becomes an intimate part of our psyche. Paradox and conflict pervade the images including tension and ease, anxiety and peace, the expansion of civilization and the inevitable erosion of civilization. Rich blacks contrast with clean whites of blank paper. Bold, monumental structures erode to reveal delicate, erased construction lines. Foreboding troughs cut into the landscape conflict with a sense of calm from the vast and distant horizons. With references of time, memory, and civilization, landscape becomes a metaphor for a shared human experience.

The visual elements and concepts of my work have not always been as such. In fact, the evolution of my work in graduate school was largely an exploration of how I approach art-making. Some constants, however, were an interest in such themes as empathy, political and social issues, and our shared experience in contemporary times. While I began to explore these themes expressionistically, it was not until my process began to change that found inspiration for my thesis work. Now I find that I have broadened my explorations both conceptually and methodically.

Coming from a strong interest in Abstract Expressionism, I am drawn to the immediacy of working with abstraction and automatism. The emotional weight of Robert Motherwell's work has long been an important influence, particularly his series *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* (Figure 1). Motherwell began the series in 1949 and continued to explore the theme until his death in 1991. His insistence in the ability of abstraction to maintain a specificity of subject is critical to understanding his work. In reference to his

*Elegy* series, Motherwell spoke of metaphors of “abandonment, desperation and helplessness.”<sup>1</sup> His work was the labor of turning these emotions into a visual language that translated on a universal scale. His use of black and white was a conscious and purposeful one, in part influenced by the Spanish poet Garcia Lorca. Lorca, who was executed by the Fascists in the Spanish Civil War, was the inspiration for Motherwell’s *Elegy* series. In Lorca’s poems, he references red, white and black, symbolizing “the red blood, the bleaching white of the light of the sun, and the blackness of death and shadows.”<sup>2</sup> Motherwell’s use of black and white interests me greatly, for the visual tension created between the colors and the resulting emotional impact.

The mark-making of Cy Twombly also cannot be denied as an early influence on my work. His remarkable ability to release conscious control of his marks and line translates into a visual language of its own (Figure 2). The un-possessed line found throughout his early work is evidence of the power that automatism has for allowing our subconscious to find its way into conscious existence. While the imagery is very much his own, his work possesses an archetypal quality. As the art critic Simon Schama describes it, “The atmospheric effect—for which the dread word *beautiful* seems not completely inappropriate—is essentially musical, reductively simple yet cumulatively mysterious, suggestive both of childhood and eternity.”<sup>3</sup> The result is an exploration of an unconscious language that ventures toward narration of a shared human experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Fineberg, Jonathan. *Art Since 1940: Strategies of Being*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000: 70.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 71.

<sup>3</sup> Schama, Simon. *Cy Twombly: Fifty Years of Works on Paper*. New York, NY: Schirmer/Morsel, 2004: 19.

His process, his language, and his aesthetics greatly influenced how I approached the process of my own artmaking.

It is from these influences that my early work found itself to be abstracted explorations of black line on white paper (Figure 3). Through reflections on our contemporary world and our experiences, I used automatism and expressionism to explore my emotions. By providing the means to reflect on the experiences of others, the process was ultimately a meditation on empathy. Through this work I became more and more interested in the notion of a shared human experience.

There was a conflict operating in my work, however. I was drawn to working automatically yet with a focus on concept. I struggled to combine the two processes and often felt limited in visual ideas, language, or inspiration. The process was cathartic, yet I was often frustrated at my results. Over time, it became evident that I was too attached to the automatic process and conceptual ideas that were inhibiting my creativity.

This first began to change after my semester experience in Paros, Greece. For four months, I worked both on large scale drawings and small prints. However, I now have found that it was the actual experience of living on Paros that influenced me most. I was immediately fascinated with the ancient feel of the land. The island was a rolling landscape of worn-down mountains, marked with Byzantine roads, stone walls hundreds of years old, and Greek ruins in unsuspected places. Living on land that had been inhabited for thousands of years, with such a rich and interesting history, brought new meaning to the landscape for me. The earth was suddenly alive to me; a rich tapestry that reflected the history of civilization, literally from its infancy to contemporary times. For me, the worn and scarred landscape became a metaphor for the timelessness of human

experience and of the cyclical nature of time. I found peace in this realization, that our contemporary times are fleeting and almost inconsequential when set against the backdrop of millennia of civilizations that have come and gone. I became infatuated with the grandeur of the landscape that seemed to understand the transitory nature of civilization much more deeply than I.

I believe it was the ability to come to terms with our contemporary times that allowed me to change my approach to artmaking. This I believe was integral, as I opened up to exploring visual ideas in a methodical, thoughtful manner, rather than the quick, expressionistic manner of my previous work. By allowing my process to slow down, I immediately found that ideas began to flow much more freely. My creativity became less hindered. With this new, methodical approach, it did not take long after my return from Greece for landscape to enter into my work.

My process is now based on observations of the topography and landscape of my surroundings. While I reference these observations, I allow my imagination to create a fictional landscape that is based more on intuitive or instinctual impulses. Specifics of time and place are irrelevant, and the viewer's emotional encounter with the space becomes more important than descriptive details. The landscapes move toward the archetypal.

I have now come to realize that my use of landscape is the exploration of the land as a record of civilizations past and present; our collective experiences become a part of the land, imprinted in its topography. As a result, I broke down my explorations into two categories, as seen in the two separate series entitled the *Built Landscape* series and the *Constructed Mass* series.

In the *Built Landscape* series, worn-down mountains dominate the skyline. There is a vastness to the landscapes created by the focus on a distant and dark horizon. Incongruous troughs cut into the empty, natural landscape (Figure 4). While I approached the creation of these images on an intuitive level, French philosopher Gaston Bachelard's book *The Poetics of Space* articulates some of what I explore in my landscapes. Bachelard investigates the relationship between space and our psyche. By examining how we relate to spaces that are intimately part of our lives, he reveals that our consciousness, our memories, our imagination—ultimately our humanness—is inseparable from these spaces.

One of the dominating features of the landscapes in the *Built Landscape* series is the strong sense of vastness. There is something arresting in the vastness, a solitude and quietude that provides a sense of tranquility. Bachelard points to another French writer, Oscar Milosz, who poetically articulates the connection between our sense of the world's immensity with our own "intimate depth of being."<sup>4</sup> Milosz writes, in reference to looking at the night's sky, "I had the feeling that I was looking into the ultimate depths, the most secret regions of my own being; and I smiled."<sup>5</sup> As Bachelard points out, it is the union of the solitary universe with the solitary viewer that paradoxically unite in serenity.

The tranquility of the deep space is contrasted with the ominous and aggressive man-made crevasses that cut into the landscape. These crevasses are unsettling, both for their scarring presence in the natural landscape, and our association of this shape with graves or cellars. Again, Bachelard proves helpful in describing our association of

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<sup>4</sup> Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1994: 189.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 189.

underground spaces with the mysterious, ominous as well as the unconscious. “In our civilization, which has the same light everywhere, and puts electricity in its cellars, we no longer go to the cellar carrying a candle. But the unconscious cannot be civilized. It takes a candle when it goes to the cellar.”<sup>6</sup> It is this unconscious descent that is uncomfortable and perhaps threatening to our terrestrial world of conscious reality. Bachelard points to the capacity for certain spaces and images to resonate on an unconscious universal level.

Tension is also created in the vertical directions of the deep recesses with elements of construction that soar above ground. Although abstracted and faint, the imagination finds traces of bridges, towers, fencing and cables (Figure 5.) The references are not solid; line is erased, redrawn, then erased again. The faint presence of lines across the empty paper allows their simplicity and delicacy to maintain an almost disappeared yet significant presence. It is through these means that I am exploring the notion of landscape as memory of our past --a topographical narrative of the cycles of human activity-- as fundamental as an act of building. Yet there remains a conflict of ominous scars in the landscape contrasted with a tranquil understanding of the passing of time, of the coming and going of civilization.

In the *Constructed Mass* series, I continue to explore the notion of the land as a diary of human activity. However, I depict spaces that seem to have a foreboding feel as the result of conscious human creation. Encroaching spaces feel claustrophobic. Dug-out trenches referencing mining scars remind the viewer of what the human hand can do to the landscape. And again, the landscape serves to record this human activity.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 19.

In “Constructed Mass: Landscape No.4” (Figure 6), I began with a series of thumbnails to develop the larger print. I began creating spaces that have an artificial, man-made quality. Driving through the ever-developing back roads of Colorado, I was confronted with construction areas that inspire such images. The scarring trenches and clawed earth struck an ominous chord with me.

As I explored translating these scenes into my work, the photography of Anselm Keifer became very influential. Keifer’s photographs often focus on cavernous interior spaces that explore the collective histories, mythologies and memories of Germany’s experience during Nazism.<sup>7</sup> His images of dilapidated architectural spaces evoke an apocalyptic atmosphere that intrigued me. The claustrophobic and menacing mood he captures, I realized, was in part due to the placement of the viewer within the towering architectural spaces (Figure 7). I began to visualize spaces that encroached on the viewer and dominated the viewer.

My first step, therefore, in creating *Constructed Mass, Landscape No. 4* was to create a space in which the viewer is dominated by the towering architecture. In contrast to the restful expanse of the horizon, the viewer is confined to an uncomfortable space. Dark walls and an ominous darkening sky add to the atmosphere of the image. Technically, I created a rich and varied texture by manipulating hot soft ground on the plate. By keeping the soft ground hot, I can create textures that are much looser, varied, and not confined to the recognizable patterns of materials run through a press. After etching the plate, I repeat the process over and over until I achieve the dense, foreboding blacks.

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<sup>7</sup> Saltzman, Lisa, Nisbet Peter, Ed. *Anselm Keifer, The Heavenly Palaces: Merkabah*. New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2003: 14.

My goal, however, is not to create a solely uncomfortable image. In the next state, therefore, I deconstruct my image by applying the man-made quality of the construction; the interior structure serves as a reminder of its constructed origin. Using drypoint, I add delicate, geometric, grid-like lines that loosely refer to the skeleton of the building. Where line interrupts logical perspective and the blacks of the walls bleed past logical conclusion, I question our perceptions and understanding of permanence; again, a reflection on the tentative stability of civilizations.

In both series, while I maintain an obvious infatuation with rich blacks it is often the juxtaposition of these rich blacks with the whites of pure paper and delicate line that intrigues me most. In addition, and particularly in the *Built Landscape* series, there is conflict created in the sharp, draftsmanship quality of the line with the natural fluidity of the landscape that provides another element of tension. Undoubtedly, the visual impact from using black and white is the result of the longtime influence of Motherwell. I find, perhaps, that from Abstract Expressionist markings to contemporary constructed spaces, the elegy endures.

To continue the element of tension throughout the works, I find that the unworked paper provides a flatness and materiality that breaks from the illusion of space created in the images. Again I use line to reinforce this opposition of flatness with deep space by including lines that contradict the logical use of perspective lines. The viewer is continually brought back and forth from illusion of depth to the flat picture plane. And while my use of line in many of the pieces is much more ordered than the expressionistic and quick handling of my earlier works, I find that my Twombly-inspired infatuation with line --particularly his erased line-- remains in this later work, but presents itself in a

much more methodical and meditative manner. In addition, the limited palate of his early work is evident in my own minimal palate.

I can now point to another contemporary artist, however, who provides a visual and conceptual influence on my current work. John Virtue is a British artist living in London, whose recent series, *The London Paintings* are rich, rhythmical and tension-filled depictions of the London skyline (Figure 8). With the striking blacks and whites that I have so long been attracted to, Virtue uses the cityscape as a metaphor:

“Virtue’s art arises from opposition and paradox. Black and white, drawing and painting, description and abstraction, history and its denial—from these apparent opposites it derives its vital energy and mystery. His London paintings concentrate on these contradictions. Indeed...Virtue has found an arresting and poignant metaphor for a universal human experience.”<sup>8</sup>

His raw paintings encompass emotion and experience that transcend narration, time and simple visual description.

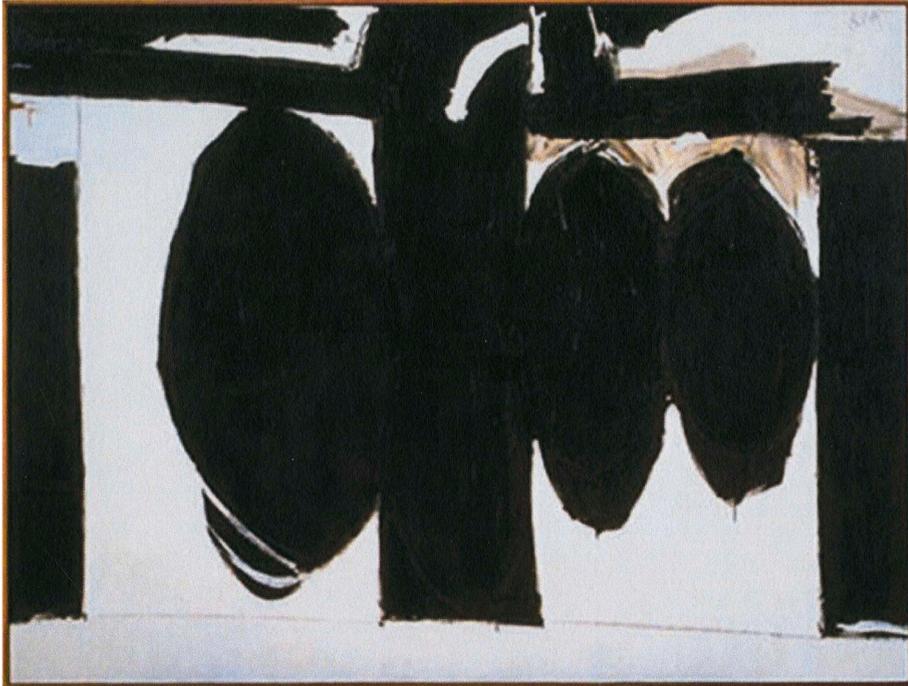
My four months in Greece introduced me to a new rhythm, outlook and means for reacting to our contemporary world. As a result, my artmaking process has evolved, my creativity has expanded, and the images and ideas I now explore feel intimately and deeply my own. While my early influences of Motherwell, Twombly, and other expressionists remain, it is the atmosphere captured by John Virtue and Anselm Keifer that directly influences my current imagery. I am eager to explore this body of work more, particularly the saturation of darks in the *Constructed Mass* series, with the

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<sup>8</sup> Moorehouse, Paul. John Virtue: London Paintings. London: National Gallery Company Limited, 2005: 50.

imagery of the *Built Landscape* series. In the end, the work continues to feel young, and I am eager to continue this exploration of landscape.

The intimate and inseparable relationship humans have with landscape is indeed part of our human experience. As the land becomes a footprint of our histories, the land in turn leaves an imprint on our psyche, telling and retelling our stories. The space created is indeterminate, a reflection of our own indeterminate present and future. Vast spaces, contradictions of black and white, delicate and bold, restful and ominous--in my work these visual explorations act as a metaphor for our shared human experience.



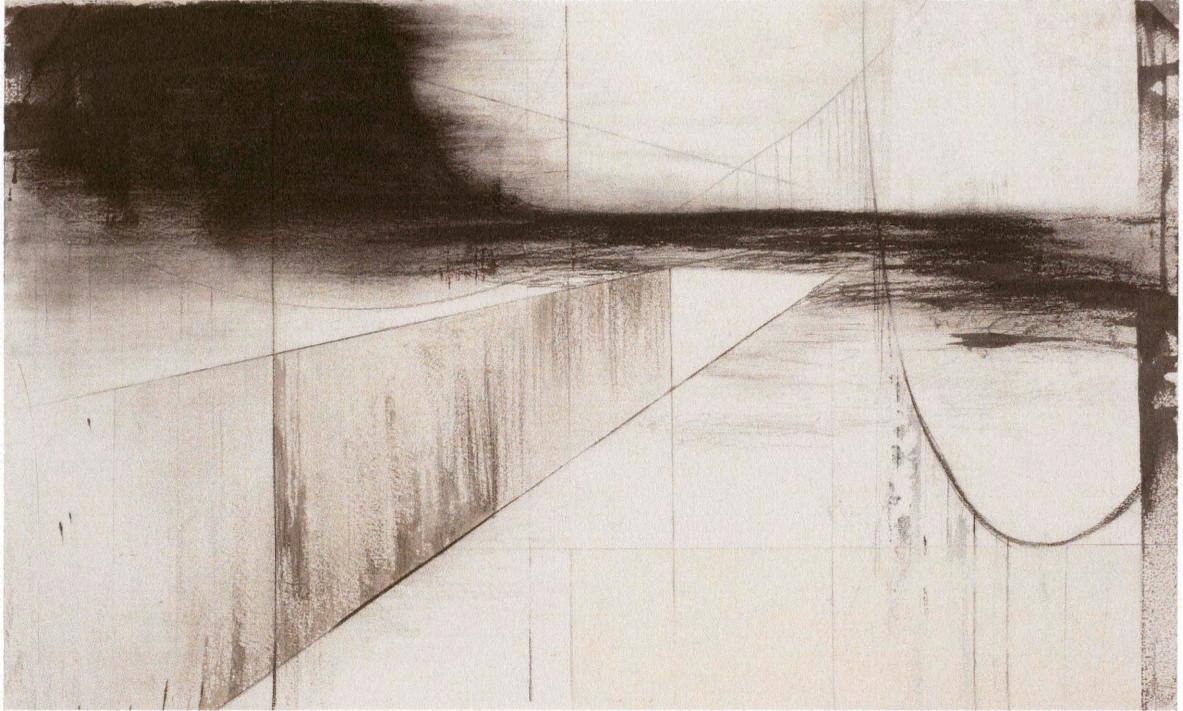
**Figure 1:** Robert Motherwell, *Elegy to the Spanish Republic, No. 57*, 1957-60. Oil on canvas, 84 x 108 in.



**Figure 2: Cy Twombly, *Untitled*, 1960.**  
Oil, pencil, and oil stick on canvas, 37 1/2 x 40 1/16 in.



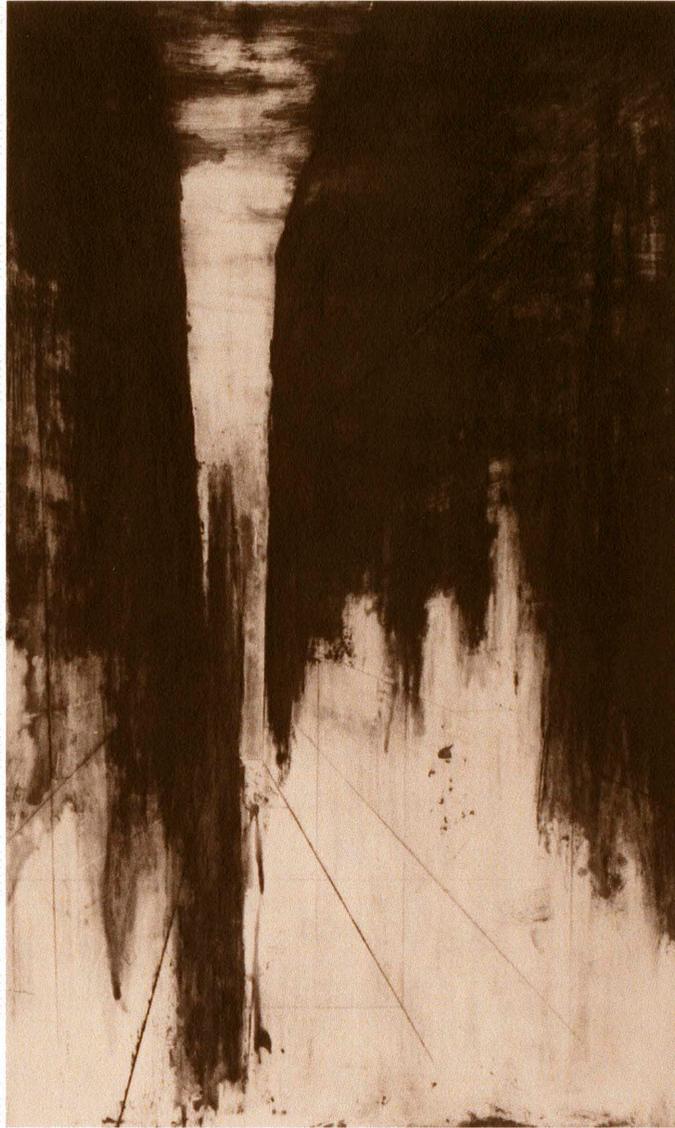
**Figure 3: Katharine Hopkins, *Plato's Cave*, 2004.**  
Charcoal, pencil and tracing paper on drawing paper, 28 x 42in.



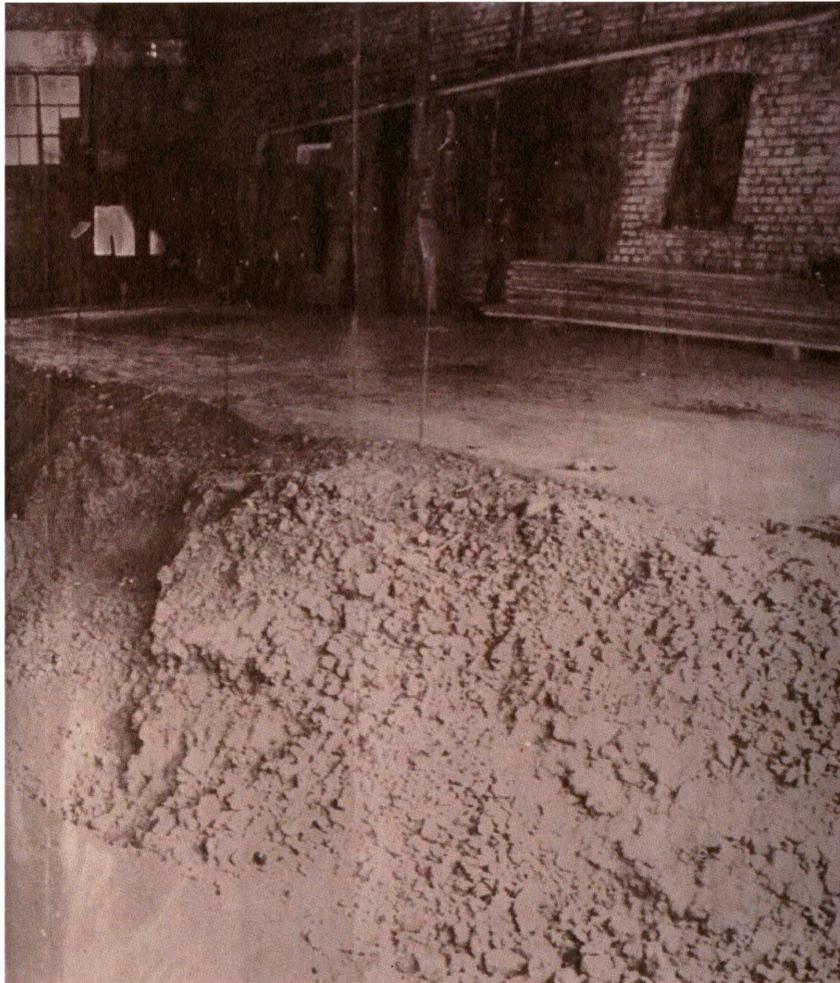
**Figure 4:** Katharine Hopkins, *Built Landscape No. 2*, 2006. Charcoal, ink, graphite and tracing paper on handmade Mexican paper, 31 x 52 in.



**Figure 5: Katharine Hopkins, *Built Landscape No. 3*, 2006.**  
Monoprint with graphite and charcoal, 44 x 32 in.



**Figure 6: Katharine Hopkins, *Constructed Mass (Landscape No 4)*, 2006.**  
Etching and drypoint. 31 x 54 in.



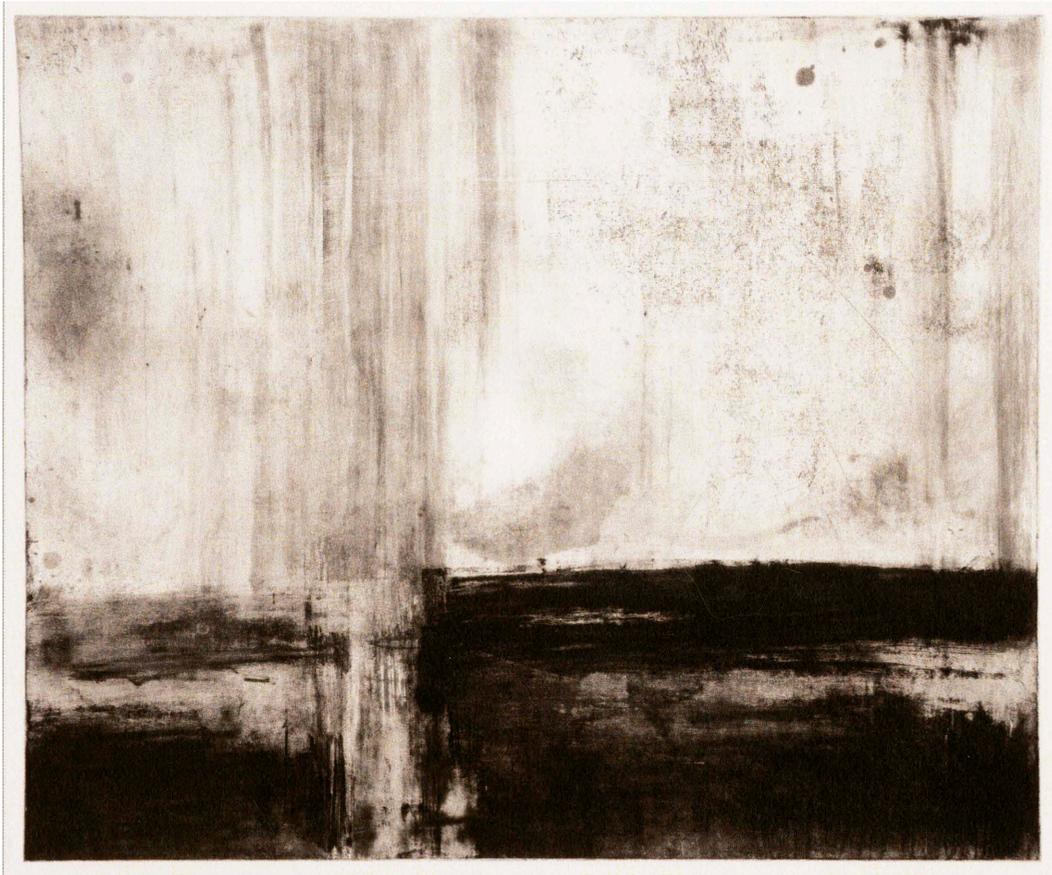
**Figure 7:** Anselm Kiefer, *The Heavenly Palaces: Merkabah*, (detail) 1990.  
Ashes and acrylic on gelatin silver prints,  
mounted to board in handbound book, 100.8 x 71 x 8 cm



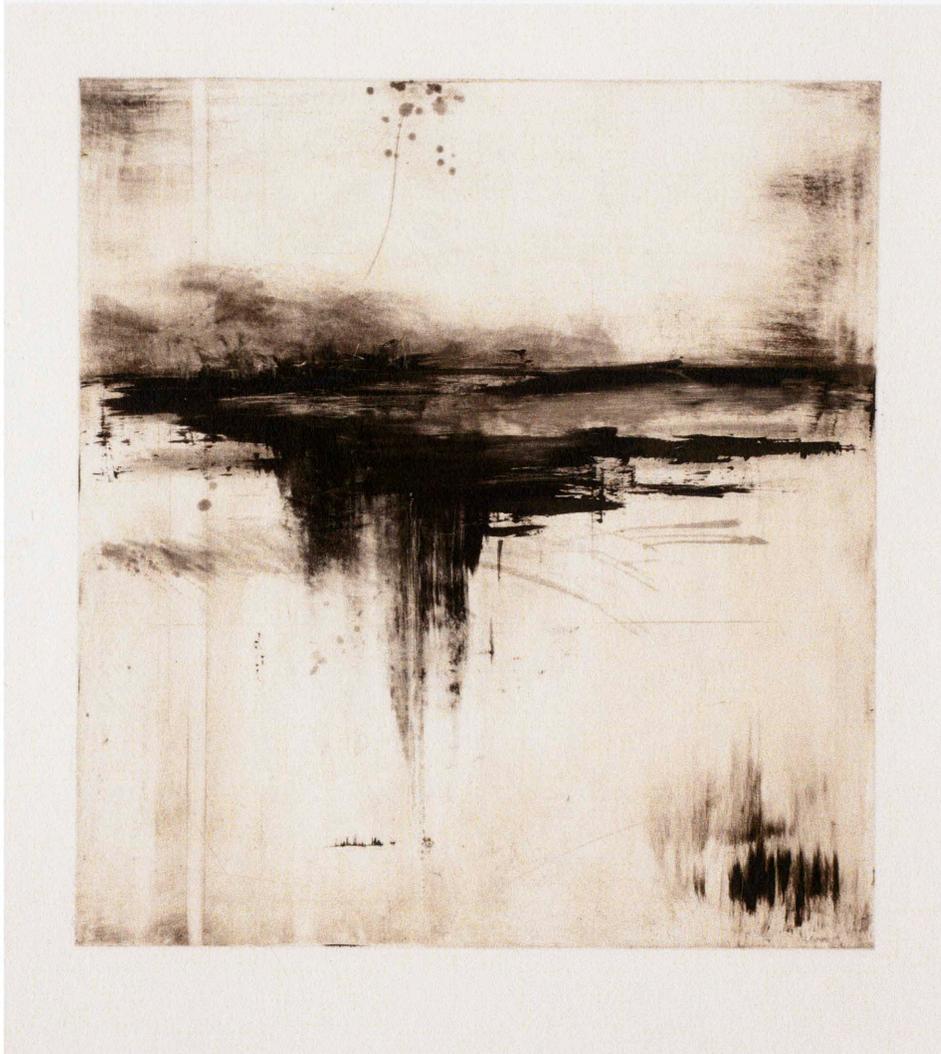
**Figure 8: John Virtue, *Landscape No. 706*, 2003-4.**  
Oil, acrylic, black ink and shellac on canvas, 244 x 244 cm.



**Figure 9: Katharine Hopkins, *Built Landscape No.1*, 2006.**  
Charcoal and graphite, 26 x 44 in.



**Figure 10:** Katharine Hopkins, *Untitled*, 2006.  
Etching, 24 x 28 in.



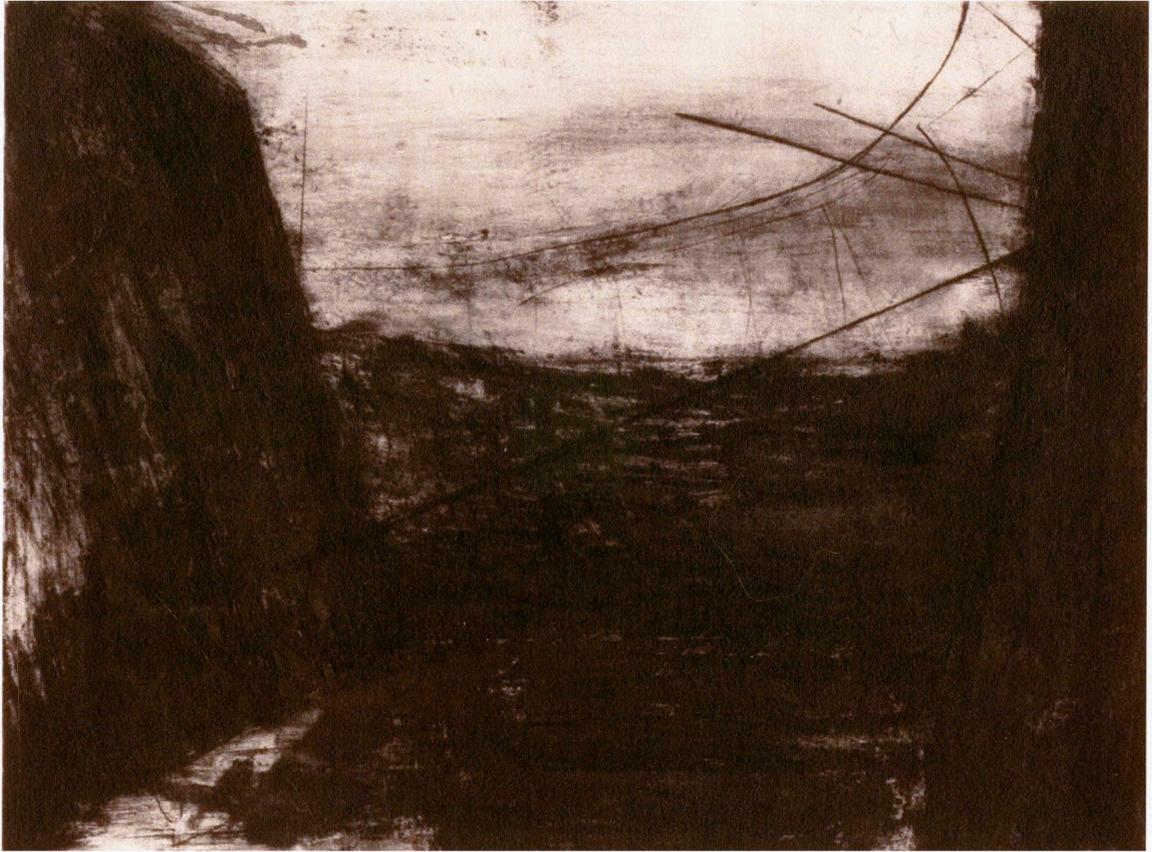
**Figure 12:** Katharine Hopkins, *From Here and There*, 2006.  
Monotype with spitbite and drypoint, 26 x 24 in.



**Figure 13: Katharine Hopkins, *Untitled*, 2006.**  
Charcoal and pastel on paper, 3.5 x 2 in.



**Figure 14: Katharine Hopkins, *Constructed Mass (Landscape No. 3)*. 2006.  
Etching and drypoint, 24 x 36 in.**



**Figure 15:** Katharine Hopkins, *Constructed Mass (Landscape No. 1)*. 2006. Etching and drypoint, 17 x 21 in.

Image List: Portfolio

1. *Build Landscape Series No. 1*. 2006. Charcoal and graphite, 26" x 44".
2. *Built Landscape Series No. 2*. 2006. Charcoal, graphite and collage, 31" x 52".
3. *Built Landscape Series No. 2* (detail).
4. *Built Landscape Series No. 3*. 2006. Monoprint with graphite, 44" x 32".
5. *Untitled*. 2006. Drypoint and etching, 10" x 22".
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12. *Constructed Mass (Landscape No. 2)*. 2006. Etching and drypoint, 18" x 24".
13. *Untitled*. 2006. Monotype with spitbite and drypoint, 26" x 24".
14. *From Here and There*. 2006. Monotype with spitbite and drypoint, 26" x 24".
15. *Monthly Vestments*. 2005 Handmade book with poems and illustrations, phototransfer and etching 5" x 8" 1 ½". Collaboration with CSU English department faculty, Matthew Cooperman.
16. *Monthly Vestments* (detail, January).
17. *Morning After Tuesday*. 2005. Collograph and etching on copper, 11" x 52".
18. *Evening After Tuesday*. 2005. Collograph and etching on copper, 11" x 52".
19. *Song From My Sister 1*. 2005. Etching with charcoal and pastel, 36" x 24".
20. *Song From My Sister 2*. Etching with charcoal and pastel, 26" x 20".