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# Tangibility and Memory in Abstract Landscapes

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**Tangibility and Memory in Abstract Landscapes**

Kelsey Reiman

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Prerequisite for Honors  
in the Media Arts and Sciences Department of Wellesley College

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## Acknowledgements

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Yi-Fu Tuan wrote about the difference between space and place in *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. He wrote, “What begins as an undifferentiated space becomes a place as we get to know it better and endow it with value.”<sup>1</sup> He concluded that a space is anonymous, while a place is a location with a narrative. My work is inspired by the natural surroundings of Nebraska and the Wellesley College campus; places that are strongly connected to my own personal narrative. I was born in Nebraska, and I lived there until I came to Wellesley for school. My work depicts my personal narrative associated with these places through the medium of printmaking.

Printmaking is an ideal medium for working with narrative subjects because finished prints are narrative of the process that created them. Geology is similar to printmaking in this respect, because rocks are visual narratives of how they were formed. I am inspired by forms in geology because my memory is dominated by images of the landscape. Rather than working from references to depict a specific location, I work from memory because I am more interested in the feeling of being in a landscape, such as the feeling of wind, or the anticipation of a storm. These feelings are associated with atmospheric sensorial experiences that engage the sense of touch. I am interested in how tactile elements in artwork can engage the memory through the senses. I am also interested in how memory in the hands relates to making things, such as using muscle memory in techniques such as knitting and crochet. Through my work, I try depict all of these feelings using color and abstract shapes.

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<sup>1</sup>Yi-Fu Tuan. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1977, 4.

At the Southern Graphics Conference the artist Ruth Weisberg spoke about printmaking in terms of function, process and material. She described the process of printmaking as as temporal and cerebral and as as the consequence of a series of decisions and accidents.<sup>2</sup> I enjoy the process of printmaking because the process reveals possibilities for the image that I may not have been able to envision through sketching. Each step in the process is a reaction to the results of the previous step. The materials that I use for making drawings to print from are relatively permanent, so if I make a mistake, the only way to fix it is to react to it, therefore every mark is reaction to the marks made previously. Consequently, the resulting print is a visualization of the process that created it.

Poet, Jane Hirshfeld wrote, “Art-making begins when the mind enters a condition different from everyday, discursive thinking — the condition Mozart called being completely himself and I have called concentration. In this state what arises feels less made than gift ...”<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, she states, “The creativity of such a mind is not concerned with any form of deliberate making - a quiet and full attentiveness allows each moment to reveal what is called ‘original mind.’”<sup>4</sup> The process of printmaking is conducive to this kind of thought for me. There are many steps in the process of stone lithography especially, that are not directly related to drawing an image, but instead are a form of manual labor. These steps, such as graining the stone, are important to me because the carefulness and attention to detail with which I execute

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<sup>2</sup> Ruth Weisberg. “Keynote Address: Ruth Weisberg Printmaker Emeritus Award.” Presentation at the Southern Graphics Council International Conference, Knoxville, TN, March 19, 2015.

<sup>3</sup>Jane Hirshfield. "The Question of Originality." *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry: Essays*. New York: HarperCollins, 1997, 37.

<sup>4</sup>Jane Hishfield, “The Question of Originallity,” 42.

them set the intention for the rest of the process. But I also find these steps meditative, because they distract me from my normal, anxious thoughts about classes and homework, and they allow me to enter a mode of concentration that causes me to pay more careful attention to what I am making. Accidents in printmaking, such as offset registration, often reveal possibilities for the image that are more interesting to me than my initial plan, and the process helps give me the concentration to pay attention to these possibilities.

Geology, like printmaking, is a slow and temporal process, and in ways the result is a visualization of the processes that formed it. When you look at a rock you can tell where it came from based on characteristics like its color, cleavage, and other haptic and sensorial properties. Rocks and prints are visual narratives of how they were formed. I have always been interested in geology and landscapes, perhaps not from a strictly scientific point of view but instead out of visual interest in the shapes and colors of rocks. When I took geoscience at Wellesley College, initially I was only motivated by the need to fulfill my lab requirement. But I became very interested in how the visual properties of a rock or landscape could indicate their history. I was especially drawn to the shapes in contour maps depicting eskers and drumlins, landforms created by glaciers. The area around Wellesley is full of these formations. When I began working on my thesis, many of the shapes that I used were inspired by these forms. I had difficulty explaining what my work was about because I felt like I had to connect it to some personal narrative. It felt strange to me to depict the local landscape, rather than the landscape in Nebraska to which I felt loyal.

Phyllis McGibbon introduced me to the work of the artist Karen Kunc when I took printmaking my junior year. Karen Kunc lives and works in Nebraska, and after I learned about

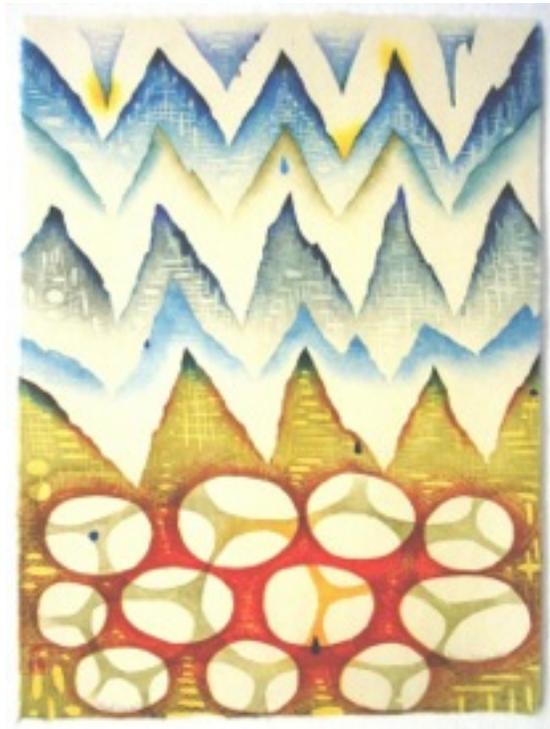


Figure 1. Karen Kunc, *Glacial Moment*. 2012, Woodcut, 14 x 10 in.

her I began seeing her prints everywhere when I was home. In January, 2014 there was an exhibition in the Museum of Nebraska Art called *Contemporary Influences in Nebraska Printmaking*. Many of Kunc's prints were included in the exhibition. Formally, I was drawn to her purely abstract use of repeating shapes and colors. I was also interested in how she was using these shapes to describe the natural world. It was also inspiring to me to see a Nebraska artist working in printmaking and making work that I thought was interesting and relevant. Because I was inspired by Kunc's use of shapes, I began thinking about my own use of shapes in relation to the Nebraska landscape.

I was drawn to working with bright yellows and greens. In order to understand why I was interested in these colors in relation to landforms, I began trying to connect the colors to an aspect of the landscape that I had experienced in real life. I began thinking about the way that the

light would shine during the summer in Nebraska right before a storm. In the middle of the afternoon the sky would turn green and the air would become still. My family lived out in the country surrounded by open fields, so there was nothing obstructing our view of the sky. I would watch the clouds darken and build until my Mom made us go down to the basement to wait out the storm. After that I was always disappointed that I couldn't watch, but then it was so comforting to be gathered with my Mom and Brother and Sister in the basement listening to the weather reports on the radio while hail pounded on our roof and thunder shook the house. When I see these yellows, blues and greens it reminds me of the sound of the National Weather Service warning, and the feeling of excitement, awe and comfort. But in my prints I was trying to project this feeling onto an imaginary landscape inspired by the forms from maps of the area surrounding Wellesley.

When I began working on my thesis, I found it difficult to express what my art was about. I was not interested in depicting specific places or landscapes. I began to understand it as I tried to think about why I continually interested in the same shapes, colors and gestures. Yi Fu Tuan wrote:

People tend to suppress that which they cannot express. If an experience resist ready communication, a common response among activists ("doers") is to deem it private - even idiosyncratic - and hence unimportant. In the large literature on environmental quality, relatively few works attempt to understand how people feel about space and place, to take into account different modes of experience (sensorimotor, tactile, visual, conceptual) and to interpret space and place as images of complex, often ambivalent feelings.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place*, 4-5.

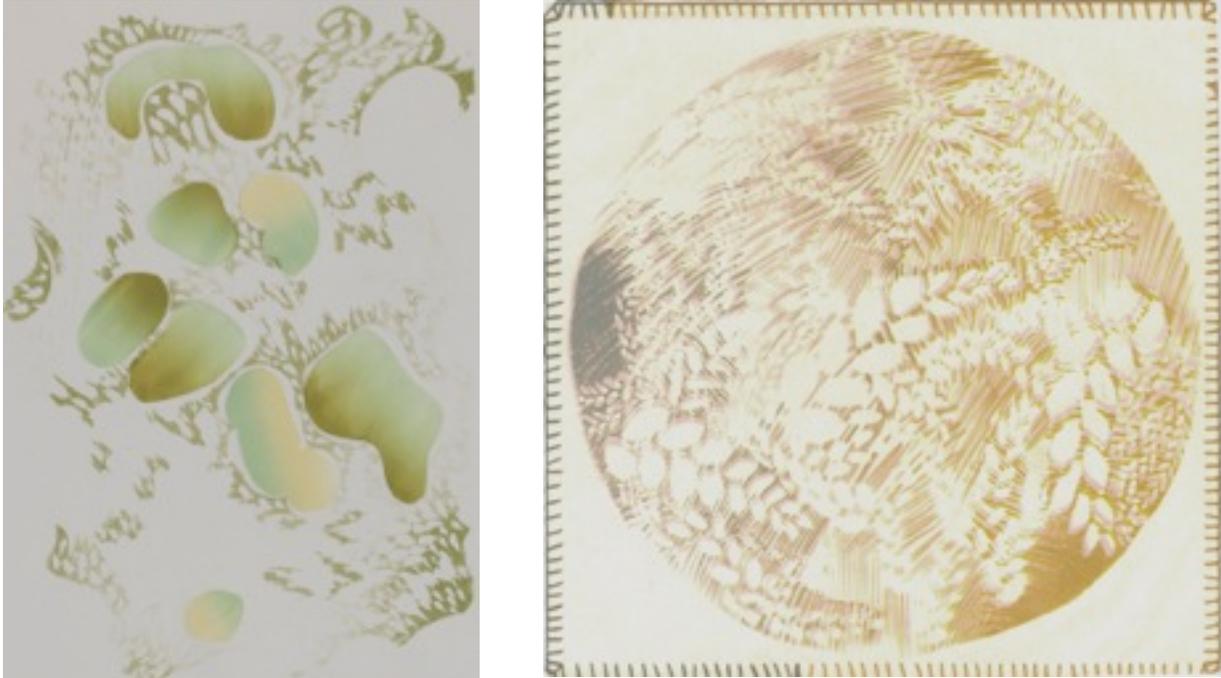


Figure 2 and Figure 3

I realized that there were many other feelings associated with being outside that I was trying to express in my prints. For example, the first stone lithograph (figure 2) that I worked on reminded me of a shadow or a reflection of tree branches on a pool of water. Having spent the summer before I began my thesis at Wellesley, I spent a lot of time walking around and lounging by Lake Waban. I noticed myself watching the shadows and the reflections of the tree branches blowing on the ground and listening to the sound of the wind in the trees. It is always extremely windy in Nebraska. When I first came to Wellesley I often felt like I was indoors when I was outside because the air felt still, and it felt somewhat eerie. I am interested in watching the branches move because it is a visualization of the air itself moving. Here I experience the wind more visually and aurally, compared to how I experience it in Nebraska where there are many fewer

trees. This idea became much clearer to me when I found myself circling back to it with my last stone lithograph (figure 3). In this image, the shapes of the leaves became much clearer, and I layered two of the same images on top of each other using offset registration to create a sense of movement and vibration.



Figure 4, Toadstool Geologic Park

Whenever my family took vacations we always went somewhere within driving distance, usually ending up in state parks in Nebraska, South Dakota or Colorado. The destination that left the most indelible impression on me was Toadstool Geologic Park, in the Nebraska Badlands. I was fascinated by the landscape because I felt like I was in a completely different place than the repetitive landscape that we had driven through for hours to arrive at the park. The rock formations were so strange that they seemed more representative an extraterrestrial landscape than Nebraska. I am remember my grandpa explaining to me how the eroded surface of the rocks

had been created by wind and water. Looking back I realize that the surface of these rocks are another visualization of wind, but they also relate to memory and history because they show how the rocks formed over time. It makes sense to me to connect images inspired by geology to my own personal narrative because my memory is dominated by images of the landscape.



Figure 5. Sheila Hicks, *Pillar of Inquiry/Supple Column*. 2014, 18 ft.

I am also interested in memory that is not only visual, but also tactile and sensorial. Last fall, I visited the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston when were exhibiting *Fiber Sculpture: 1960 - Present*. I was inspired by the color and tactility in all of the works, but I was especially interested in the work of Sheila Hicks, who was also born in Nebraska. I was drawn to the combination of color and texture in her 2014 work, *Pillar of Inquiry/Supple Column* (figure 5). I wanted to run my hands down the long strands of fiber, and could imagine how it would feel. I was interested in how the work of art engaged my tactile senses visually. I listened to an

interview with Hicks in which she responded to a question about the desire to touch her work. She said that viewers did not need to touch her work because: “Experienced or educated eyes with accumulated confrontations with touch and their surroundings memorize tactile experiences and visually they understand when they see something through their eyes what it feels like. So it somehow becomes inextricable with people who think look and touch. It is like food, once you’ve tasted it, you have a memory.”<sup>6</sup>



Figure 6, My sister throwing a pot while I waited for my turn

I am interested in creating these tactile and visual associations in my own work because my earliest experiences making things were very tactile. My Grandpa taught k-12 art in Nelson, Nebraska, when I was younger. My Grandma also worked at the school and they would always take my Sister and me to school with them on the weekends and during the summers when they

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<sup>6</sup> “Shelia Hicks.” Narrated by Tyler Green. The Modern Art Notes Podcast. *The Modern Art Notes*, October 2, 2014, <http://manpodcast.com/portfolio/no-152-sheila-hicks/>.

were catching up on work. My grandpa would take us to the art room and try to teach us to throw pots. Throughout my entire education I have always felt at home in a studio classroom, because it reminds me of this experience. This memory also relates to why I am drawn to the process of lithography. Lithography is a process that engages all of my senses, from the smell of ink and gum arabic to the feeling of gum arabic between my fingers as I spread it onto a stone. The process reminds me of the smell of clay, and how clay felt between my fingers.

As a Media Arts and Sciences major, much of my class work was done on the computer. Many of the projects I created were never even printed out as physical objects, but remained purely digital. I was still working with creating images, but I often felt unmotivated to work on projects because they were on the computer. I find it harder to focus when I am working on a computer and I get bored quickly. When I finally took printmaking my junior year, there was something really satisfying about mixing ink, rolling it out, and putting something through the press to create an image. Something that could quickly be done on the computer in Illustrator could take hours, using traditional print methods. But, I was motivated by the excitement of lifting the blankets to see how my prints turned out.

As I began my thesis this year I thought that I wanted to work digitally. I spent the summer doing research about computer graphics in the computer science department, and I wanted to create some kind of interactive application where I could apply my knowledge of programming computer graphics and creating art on the computer, but I had no idea where to begin. Phyllis McGibbon assigned a project to her printmaking class where we cut out shapes out of Sintra that fit together into a square and then inked up the shapes and printed from them. I was drawn to the way that the Sintra embossed the paper and how new shapes were created by

overlapping shapes (figures 7 and 8). After working on that project I realized that I really wanted to be working in the print studio, and I began to realize the importance of incorporating tangible elements into my work

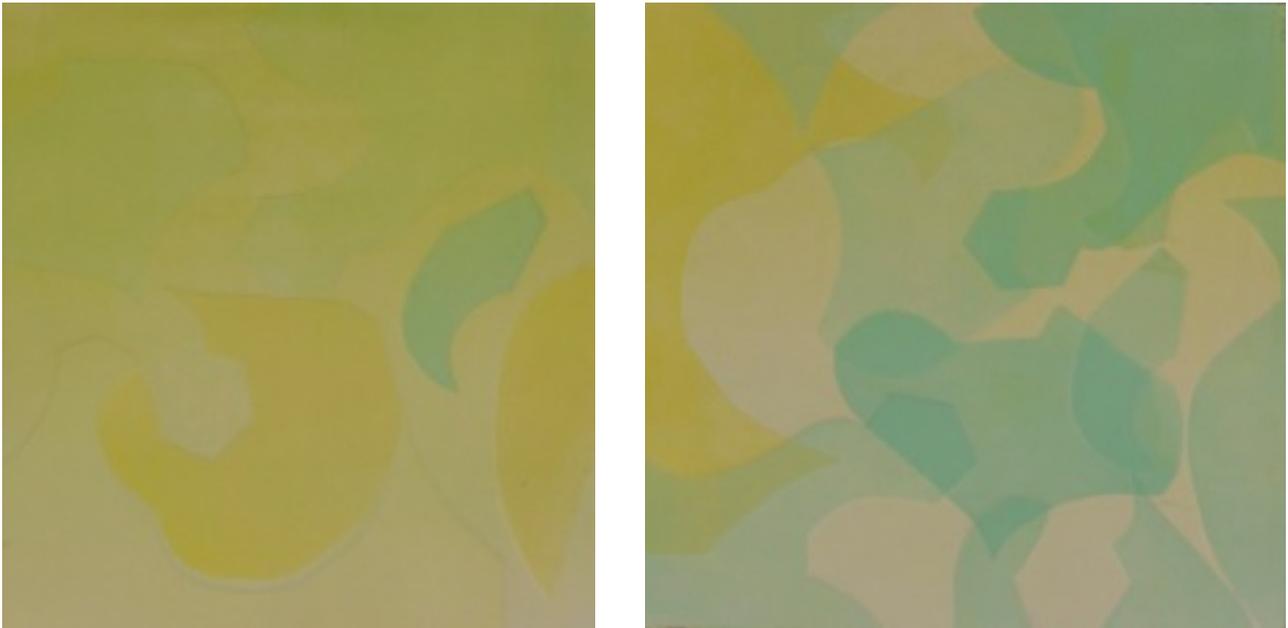


Figure 7 and Figure 8

When I introduce tangible elements to prints, such as embossing or stitching, I think it makes them more interactive by engaging the viewer's sense of touch. We interact with so many images on a daily basis, even on a touch screen. Most digital images lack real tactile elements. So introducing them to my prints causes the viewer to interact with them in a different way. It engages the memory in the way that Sheila Hicks was talking about with her fiber sculptures. Even if the viewer does not touch the print, they know what it would feel like. Therefore prints engage the viewer on a different level than an image on the screen because they engage viewers sense of touch.

I was also interested in interaction in relation to books. I am interested in the way that viewers can interact with and handle images in book form by turning the pages and looking at

the front and back of the page. After taking a class in book arts, and working in the Book Arts Lab with Katherine Ruffin this year, I found myself more interested in the structure and bindings of books than the content of the books. I was drawn to the idea of making books on a smaller scale because I wanted viewers to be able to hold them in their hands. I had been interested for a while on working on a small scale because I think it requires some effort from the viewer to step in and look at the artwork. I was also interested in bookbinding because it seemed like such a familiar skill to me, since I had learned embroidery from my mom. I wanted to make books, but I struggled with ideas because I thought that books must have some sort of clear linear narrative.



Figure 9 and Figure 10

David Teng Olsen showed me how to wax my prints to make them transparent, and I became interested in layering images over other images. First I layered different prints over each other, and attached them along just one edge because I wanted to retain both layers so that each image could be viewed separately or together (figure 9). Then I layered two of the same image

on top of one another because I liked the way the offset registration of the white on top of the green created a sense of dimensionality and movement (figure 10). I was also interested in how the image changed with the distance between the two layers, when the top layer was lifted. I thought of them as books because of the way the viewer could interact with them by lifting the top layer, like turning the page of a book.



Fig. 11. Dorothea Rockburne, *Locus*. 1975, Set of Six Aquatints Printed in White, 46 x 30 in each.

When I was working with creating book structures, I was concerned with how people would interact with them. Ideally, I wanted people to be able to hold them in their hands and interact with them tactilely. However I was concerned about the fragility of the prints, and in reality I did not want viewers to touch them. After seeing a set of prints by Dorothea Rockburne titled *Locus* at the Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha, I slowly came to the realization that the

interaction could be based on the viewer walking and moving their body around a print to see how the light interacts with the material, rather than handling it with their hands. The prints were so simple because from far away they only looked like creased pieces of paper. But when I stood near them I noticed that they were very subtly printed on with white ink to enhance the dimensionality of the folds and creases in the paper. The printing very elegantly called attention to the beauty of the way that the light fell across the paper. But the subtle prints do not translate well through photography, therefore in order to experience them you must see them as physical objects. These prints were so quiet compared to Andy Warhol's *Camouflage* prints that were near them. They held my attention much longer because of their subtlety I had to put some effort into understanding them. Right before I left Wellesley for winter session I had created two prints composed of repeating abstract shapes printed in very light blues, greens and yellows. I intended to fold the prints into single sheet folded books after I had waxed the prints to make them transparent, because I was initially interested in how the shapes overlapped when the print was folded into a book. However, waxing only made the print translucent, rather than completely transparent. Therefore it was hard to distinguish the overlapping shapes. I found that when I unfolded the book the creases created originally to make the book structure enhanced the print by making it more dimensional and varying the amount of light that fell over each area of the print. I was also interested in how the light shone through the print, and how the light weight Japanese paper moved and changed the way the light fell as people walked by when I hung it in the hallway. When I saw Rockburne's *Locus* prints at the Joslyn, my interest in how light shines on and through paper was clarified and solidified. This realization, combined with Sheila Hick's description of tangible memory, lead me to the conclusion that viewers do not necessarily need to

physically handle prints in order for there to be the kind of interaction that I was seeking.

However, the physical presence of the viewer is important to me, because this interaction cannot be captured digitally.

When I began making what I considered books, instead of using a traditional book binding stitch to sew the pieces together I used a blanket stitch since it was only two layers, and it makes the edge look finished. Then I experimented with sewing around all of the edges, which made me begin to think of the prints as quilt blocks, or pieces of a larger whole. Many people with whom I discussed my work were interested in seeing my work in a larger scale. There was not a single image that I was interested in putting the energy into making larger, because I had many ideas that wanted to work with, and I was not ready to focus on a single one. Therefore, it made sense to me to continue working with smaller prints. Each print felt like a continuation of ideas I had been using previously. I often worked with ink I had saved from my last project, but I changed it by adding a different color to the ink, or putting it with different colors. Consequently, when displayed together in the context of the gallery, each of the individual prints work together when arranged as a larger whole because they are united by color and shapes.

I decided to hang my work as an installation in the gallery for the show because I each print that I created throughout the semester work together and support each other. I do not see each image as resolved on its own, but rather as a piece of a larger whole. Furthermore, I decided to hang my prints suspended from the vents away from wall so that light can penetrate them and they can move with the air. Finally, I was inspired by the work of artists like Judy Pfaff who create installations out of abstract pieces. When I visited her show at a gallery in New York last fall, I was interested in the way that her installation created an imaginary environment.

Finally, my work is inspired by and refers to decorative patterns and domestic objects. Displayed individually, I would want someone to hang my prints as decorative objects in their home. I always try to fill my space with objects that make me feel calm and happy, and I believe that others try to do the same. I am inspired by patterns in the home, therefore it always something that is in my mind when I am making images. I love reading interior design blogs like DesignSponge where people give tours of their homes and describe why they have certain objects in their homes. It is interesting to me how objects accumulate meaning, and are not displayed wholly for aesthetics, but because of personal meaning.

My Mom has many quilts and afghans in her house that were mostly made by my women in family. My mom takes care of and values them differently than objects that are from a store, because they have sentimental value due to the labor that was required to make them. My grandma taught me to knit when I was in 5th grade and I needed to learn for a 4-H project. Since then, I have always had a knitting project that I work on during downtime. I find it comforting to have something to do with my hands while I am watching television or riding in the car.

I later learned to crochet and became interested in crocheting as way to manipulate color. My favorite thing to crochet is granny squares because they are small, so it is possible to use scraps of leftover yarn. Each granny square is an opportunity to make color combinations within the square, but then it is possible to make even more combinations by putting the squares together. Most of my yarn was given to me by my grandmas or family friends who were trying to cut down their stash of yarn, so it is mostly odd and ends of unfinished projects of leftover yarn. My favorite challenge in knitting and crocheting is trying to make these disparate scraps of yarn into a cohesive color palette, or a perfectly un-cohesive color palette. My favorite homemade

blankets are ones that look like the colors were chosen randomly, because they often have the most interesting and unexpected juxtapositions of color. Finally knitting and crochet is worked two dimensionally, but the ultimate product is a textural three dimensional object. While you can use shaping to produce dimensional objects, knitting is only worked along the length and the width of the fabric.

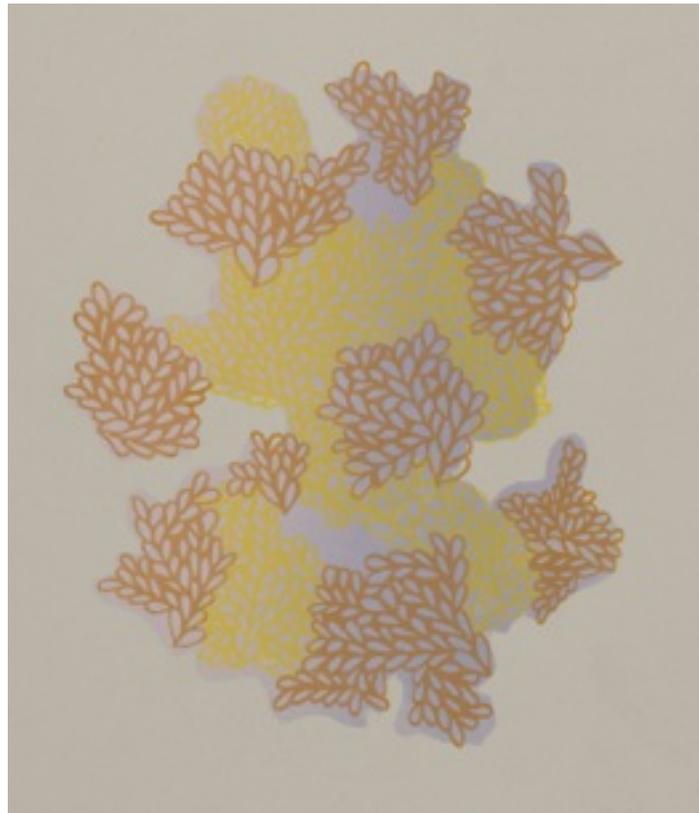


Figure 12

My experiences knitting and crocheting have impacted my approach to printmaking. Both printmaking and knitting are repetitive, detail-oriented processes. Crocheting has shaped how I think about color. I think the reason I found the Sintra shapes project so satisfying was because I was able to physically move the shapes after I had inked them to see how the different colors would look next to each other, like I was moving around granny squares to make an afghan. In

addition, I like to think about my prints as objects, instead of two-dimensional images, even though they are created two-dimensionally. Finally, the act of knitting and crocheting is another form of memory in the hands. Just as hands remember what it feels like to touch a fabric, they can remember motions. While knitting can be difficult to learn initially, once I learned I never had to think about it again because of muscle memory. This has influenced my approach to drawing because I often repeat a mark or gesture to create an entire composition (figure 12).

I also associate knitting with my experience of the Nebraska landscape, because both are not something that I think about or could explain the specifics of verbally. They are both things that I feel like have an innate and intuitive understanding of. Nebraska's landscape is fairly predictable and repetitive. But rather than finding the landscape boring, I think of it as kind of meditative to watch the landscape pass by out the window and see the gentle and repeating pattern. Driving through the landscape is the main way that I have experienced it. I spent the most time driving through Nebraska during the summers when I was in high school and after my first and second year of college. My sister and I worked for the educational service unit. Many small schools in Nebraska order supplies ranging from toilet paper to colored pencils from vendors in a group in order to save money. We received the products at the warehouse and then sorted them and delivered them to the schools. We spent every day driving to schools across the state delivering supplies. Usually my sister did all of the driving and I just watched the landscape pass by out the window. My favorite destination was the Sandhills because I like to watch the repetition of the round forms of the hills.

At the Southern Graphics conference, the artists Lindsey Clark Ryan spoke about the intersection between art and science in printmaking. She had collected a series of prints that

depicted the moon and called them accidental moons. She discussed how almost any circle in the right context could be interpreted as a moon. While we understand the moon to be a spherical object, because we view it from such a distance we see it as a two-dimensional circle. Therefore, a circle has become a graphic shorthand from the moon.<sup>7</sup> I identified with what she was saying because I just created a print of a circle that ended up looking like a moon. This prompted me to begin thinking about how distance can turn almost any object into a more graphic and abstract form, rather than a specific realistic object. When we were traveling through the landscape during the summers, I could only understand the landscape in the distance rather than specific features of the landscape because we were moving too quickly to look at details. Furthermore, at Wellesley, I am almost two thousand miles away from the subject matter that I am depicting. When I fly home, I am approaching the landscape from 30,000 feet and it looks like abstract forms and lines.

Distance is not only physical. Since I do not live in Nebraska anymore, I work from memory, separated by the distance of time. I work from memory, imagination and nostalgia rather than references because I am more interested in depicting my feelings of growing up in Nebraska, rather than any specific landscape within it.

My work depicts my internal landscape, which is shaped by the landscape surrounding Wellesley College and the state of Nebraska. Using abstract shapes and colors I try to convey the feeling of being in the landscape, based on my memories and experiences of these places. I

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<sup>7</sup> Lindsey Clark Ryan. "Art, Science, and the Historical Perspective in Contemporary Printmaking." Presentation at the Southern Graphics Council International Conference, Knoxville, TN, March 19, 2015.

incorporate tangible elements, such as stitching and embossing in my work in order to engage memory through the sense of touch and to create a more tactile interaction with the viewer.

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