

## ABSTRACT

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THE MYSTERY THAT PREVAILS:  
DRAWING FRAGMENTED WORLDS.

Sarah Anne Laing, MFA, 2010

Directed By:

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Art

The body of work I have made for my thesis exhibition is built from organic imagery that hints at diagrammatic filtering of information, but repeats, contorts and layers to become an unsettling conversation between the known and the unknown. In this essay, I discuss my use of repetitive drawing and the rendering of strange, shifting landscapes as a means to describe the uncanny nature of my surroundings as I move from one place and experience to the next. At the same time, I discuss indirect concerns of shared displacement and discontent within a world of unforeseeable changes.

THE MYSTERY THAT PREVAILS: DRAWING FRAGMENTED WORLDS.

By

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Utilizing the metamorphic process of drawing, I create works that examine our disconnection with the ambiguous nature of our universal landscape. My interests lie in the need for a reengagement with one's sense of place within a world in transition, while at the same time referring to my own geographical and biographical transitions. These drawings act as a diagrammatic response to outside information and are an attempt to capture my relationship to place and the uncanny nature of my natural surroundings. The resulting abstract environments can be seen in a micro/macro context, animal or landscape, recognizable yet alien. The imagery lacks any situational framework and ultimately resides in a place beyond representational or recognizable scale

My work is a constant search and discovery through drawing. I make work about understanding my relationship to my surrounding landscape, and the butterfly effect of global events that inevitably affect my personal sphere. This is less about socio-political concerns than it is about an individual sense of detachment, and lack of any solid sense of direction. I find drawing and tracing a means to filter outside information and represent shared experience. From personal trepidation, to environmental discontent and Star Trek, this essay is a record of my thought process and the resultant practical outcomes.

## Chapter 2: A Growing Sense of Displacement

My drawings and prints begin with imagery from my surrounding natural environment. I am Scottish. I was born in Edinburgh and raised in the historical market town of Lanark. Sitting on the River Clyde just north of the Borders, Lanark has a population of fewer than 10,000 residents, and is a commutable distance from the largest Scottish cities of Edinburgh and Glasgow. It has a strong sense of identity strengthened by the many of its residents who remain there their entire life, alongside their parents and grandparents

The patriotism of Lanark is perpetuated by the many annual rituals which have been followed for more than a century: Lanark Lanimers, the oldest gala day in Scotland, includes the crowning of a local girl as “Queen” and a fancy dress procession; Whuppity Scoorie, a pagan festival for warding off demons<sup>1</sup>; and the Perambulation of the Marches (technically part of the Lanimer celebration), where a locally elected Lord Cornet leads the town population around the boundaries of Lanark, ensuring the boundary stones remain intact. In Lanark, the natural landscape is synonymous with ritual, superstition and identity. I moved to Lanark at the age of four and, as such, I never felt myself to be a true “Lanarkian”. I do not associate my own sense of identity with the celebration of this small town, or its rituals. I have however retained an attachment to the landscape of the countryside.

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<sup>1</sup> For details on origins of Whuppity Scoorie see Duncan, Chik J. "Whuppity Scoorie Day". *Bella Online*. <http://www.bellaonline.com/articles/art16143.asp>



My early art practice at University level lead me to reexamine the fascination with superstition and religious ritual in relation to one's natural surroundings. These landscape based rituals play an ever important role in retaining a sense of understanding, control and purpose in one's environment. There is no need to move. Within religion and traditional ritual, people know their place and role. The colloquial shortsightedness that I grew up with has fueled my detachment from any one particular place. With this permanent sense of detachment from place and ritual, I can be a constant explorer, not just of the geographic landscape, but of my own role in a much larger, social landscape.

My early mixed media paintings were a response to Robert Rosenblum's text, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko*, where I developed an admiration of the work of 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic painter Casper David Friedrich, and in particular, *Monk by the Sea*. This piece became influential upon my practice, not for any overwhelming presence of "The Other", but for the realization of the finite existence of all things and the void of an uncertain future. A study of the sublime in landscape is arguably the most common source of reference for any budding landscape painter, but I wanted to create work that conveyed depth, darkness and mystery that prevails in relation to our own personal existence, despite God and despite science.



Figure 1: *Sunspot-Sparkle*, 2006

Drawing is significant in my early paintings, present in the form of diagrammatic screenprinting and intricate winding tusche washes in lithography. Splashing methylated spirits into tusche creates marks almost impossible to render in any other medium. The marks squirm, contort and weave in and out of themselves. They reflect the strangeness of distorted creatures below the surface of rippling water. These paintings are constructed in layers, the first being a lithograph on paper, and the ambiguous underwater movement. The second layer is oil painting of tangible, earthy landscape tones. The third is a thick layer of varnish that dries to a glassy surface, softening brushstrokes and pushing back the underpainting. The fourth layer is flat, matte, diagrammatic screenprinting. Typing words into Google that I presumed would relate to modern scientific endeavor sourced the imagery for the final layer. The search results would range from cheesy science-fiction imagery to the sexual behaviors of insects to architectural models. Diagrammatic imagery is the mapping of

a simple breakdown of information in order to better understand and uncover how the natural world works. Ironically, these images appear strange and otherworldly when isolated from their research context.

## Chapter 3: The Revolving Door

When I draw an image that appears both as recognizable and unrecognizable form, I have created an autobiographical response to my relationship with my current place. Scottish born, Trinidad based painter, Peter Doig, describes his magical- realist approach to painting landscape as a feeling “...of being attached to the earth, but only just, like in a dream” (Adams)

It is this detachment from the real that is at the crux of my own practice. For most of his painting career, Doig has searched through his memories of moving from Scotland to Trinidad to Canada to England, and back to Trinidad. These moves have left him with a fragile relationship to the landscape, and in his paintings, just like memory, we are given a fragment of a larger picture. The narratives are left ominously open: a single figure in a canoe floats across a vast lake. Or we are seeing through the artist’s own eyes: peeking through trees, or down into a murky reflection. The paintings may be forest settings, or snowy ski slopes, but they always sit in the surreal, irrational space between the tangible reality and fleeting nostalgia.

I moved to the United States during the peak of economical, political and environmental upheaval and a mounting global dissatisfaction. My own unrest as a Non-Resident Alien seemed to reflect the sentiment of my generation. A generation of university graduates destined to return back to live under their parents' roof: the "Boomerang Generation":

A flexible labour market – with greater youth unemployment, more unpaid work placements as entry routes and a decline in young people's earnings relative to older workers – means less income and stability to cover rising living costs, especially housing. And the growth in casual relationships and singledom means the pooling of resources to cover the costs of living is less likely. These factors have all contributed to the rise of the boomerang generation over the past few decades. (Short)

Now this detachment from place becomes a symptom of a larger, social crisis. A leap into post-college life becomes one, less of endless possibilities, as unnervingly hollow prospects.

## Chapter 4: Fragmented Worlds

The work presented as my thesis exhibition is a reaction to my transition to the United States of America and indefinite status as a resident here, while indirectly referring to a greater transitioning global and social landscape. The works are primarily layered, repetitive line drawing on Mylar. Repetitive drawing is a meditative activity. Once I have found a starting point, I can create an internal, ruminative response to otherwise very specific external material: a landscape of outside information. The source imagery is no longer taken from the earthy countryside, but from a more general landscape. I look through National Geographics for snippets of far off lands I have never visited. Melting Ice caps reference environmental distress. Chinese rice paddies are curiously tiered and appear from afar like scaled animal skin or insect shell. They are an ominous reference to current reality soon to become the stuff of fantasy, or – just like the Hanging Gardens of Babylon - stories of past natural wonders.

The even line, repetition, lack of colour and clear black on layered transparency are a product of an architectural or methodical approach to the construction of the drawings. With ambiguously intricate imagery on milky transparent Mylar, I suggest fantasy and movement. Multiplied, twisted and running to the edge of the paper, these pieces of landscape cumulatively form a confusing amalgamation of information without resolution. The landscapes disintegrate and rebuild. They are an ecological breakdown, an infestation or a cancerous growth of cells. They are the result of a series of individually chosen actions, which present mutation absent of foreseeable

conclusion. These images can at first appear fantastical, but on closer inspection, reveal a representation of real circumstance. They move and change without ever becoming or landing, signifying a world in flux or landscapes with almost human qualities.

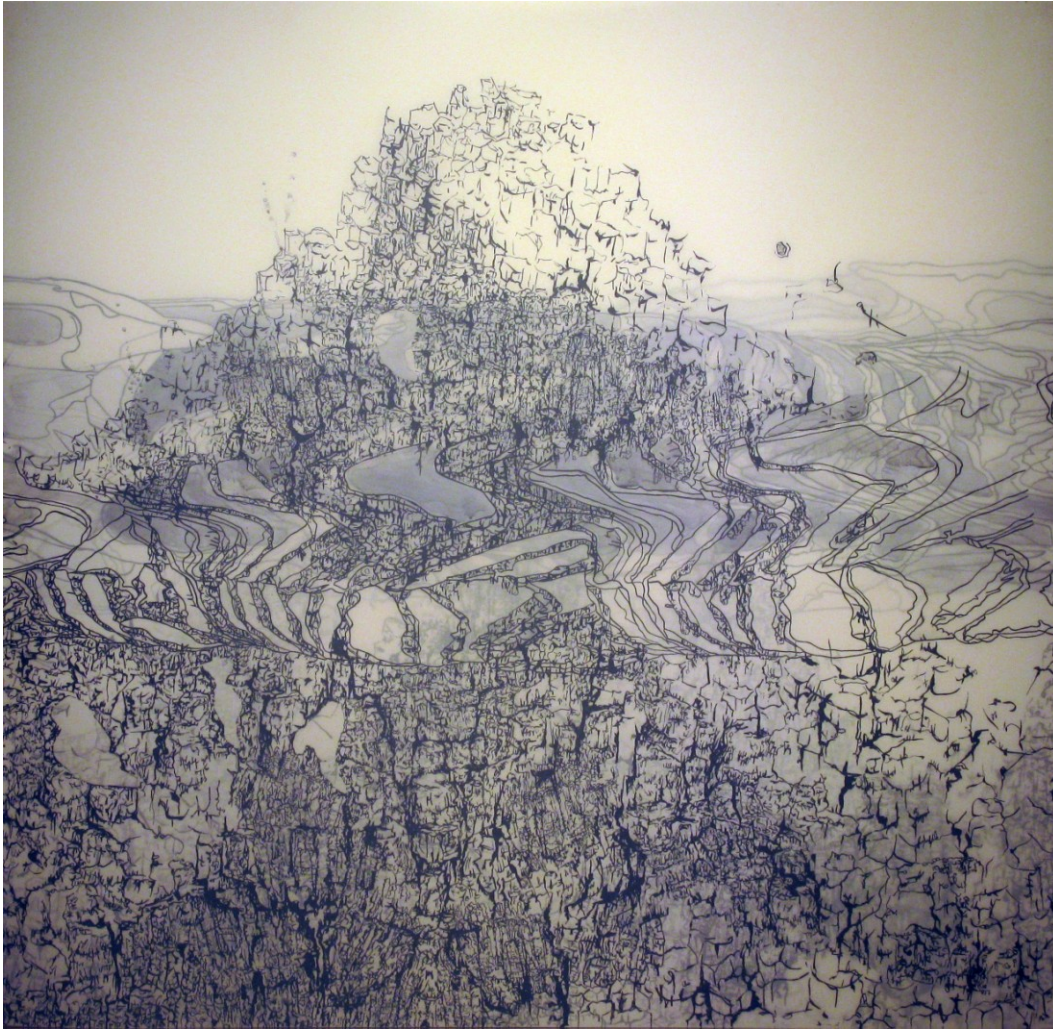
I often have to pull a work apart, removing dense portions of drawing in order to create an unexpected stopping place, preventing a comfortable, predictable flow. Hung directly on the wall with pins, the Mylar can move and undulate. The forms run right to the edge of the paper, suggesting infinite growth. There is no frame or glass barrier. The viewer can first take in the whole form, then look closely into its many components.

This work can be seen as a window into fragments of a world under constant change. I draw the creation of something new, yet not necessarily improved, or a catalyzed situation that is growing out of control. I understand the basic human need for resolve - the need for certainty - and the paradoxical excitement to explore new possibilities.

### *New Ground and Accretion*

*New Ground* (figure 1) began 23 feet long. The drawing was intended to show two separate formations interacting and fighting against one another. One formation was a twisting, snaking landmass that hovered in the middle of the white ground. I saw this form as large and slow and heavy. It was almost completely static, apart from the long twist in the center, which gave it an animalistic presence. A second formation

grew across the length of the plastic, eating in and out of the landmass in parasitic activity. I wanted this piece to suggest a turning over of power: one large, looming form being broken down and eaten away by a smaller, but equally intimidating mass.



**figure 2: *New Ground*, 2010**

My intentions were that a drawing of this length would reinforce the notion of an infinite act of destruction and creation, without advancement. Frustratingly, the act of creating the work mirrored my intention for the piece, and I could not seem to bring the drawing to any resolution in its long format. It remained in an uncomfortable



limbo between becoming something, and never beginning at all. It was once I had cut the work into sections that the work gained some focus. Cutting and layering the work created a window for a portion of a shifting landscape. The square format suggests infinity while accentuating the ambiguity of the scale. The composition is now completely void of hierarchy. The forms feed in and out of each other giving the piece a melancholic, fleeting presence.

This work could not have been made without the initial process of repetition and the amalgamation of information and material. Cutting down and rearranging a intensely worked, time consuming drawing is a distressing, but necessary act that brings a piece to completion, without compromising the continuous transition of the subject matter.

I repeated this process of cutting and reassembling in the creation of *Accretion* (figure 2). Here human lips and lichen swell together in a manner that is both grotesque and resembles cartoonery or caricature. The cell-like forms multiply into a large tree or plant that is disturbingly reminiscent of brain tissue. Jeanine Weber writes of Philip Guston's later paintings, that what he was able to capture, was both the point where what one remembers and what one knows to be logical collide and create, "...the uncanny as return-of-the-repressed and the uncanny as anguished uncertainty."(61) In *Accretion*, there is the recognition of a natural form, but the inability to place that form specifically. Perhaps it comes from the human body or perhaps from the landscape, but the uncertainty of what it is gives the image a perverse character. This capturing of the uncanny was described in 1967 by Guston:

It's the unsettling of the image that I want... It must of necessity be an image which...has not only made up its mind where to be but must feel as if it's been in many places all over this canvas, and indeed there's no place for it to settle – except momentarily. Yet it must have its past. It must feel as if it's lived. A picture is finished when it's in this unsettled, hovering state; not indecisive, though, because it's lived a long time everywhere else, lived in me, lived in previous paintings of mine, and now in this picture it's in a new and very particular situation...it's won its freedom from inertia, you might say (Weber 61-2)

### *The Chase*

*The Chase* (figure 3) was the second piece to be made from the disassembling of *New Ground*. I set out to draw a simple mountain range composition interacting with a “swarm” of traced lithographic marks, but again the piece began to grow without any clear end point. Reading of the eruption of the Eyjafjallajokull volcano in Iceland I found an opportunity to bring a stronger autobiographical narrative to my practice. The ash moving across Iceland and down over the United Kingdom, grounding flights (Booth, Carrell). A slow cloud of ash moving across land masses conjures an awesome mental picture.



**Figure 3: *The Chase* 2010**

Glasgow based, American born artist Ilana Halperin relates geological changes to occurrences in everyday life:

Increasingly interconnected events of a political, historical and everyday nature are progressively drawn together to form a narrative. Each story explores the changeable nature of landmass, using geology as a language to understand our relationship to a constantly evolving world. (Halperin)

At a time when the ash of the volcano was moving across the UK, preventing flights and forcing the evacuation of many local residents (Booth, Carrell). I was receiving snippets of information about the volcano from the news and from friends' disgruntled updates about cancelled holidays. The swarm of unusual tracings in *The Chase* reflects the unexpected shift of people being forced to move at the mercy of the volcano. The interrupted drawing in *The Chase*, is not specific to this one natural phenomenon, but reflects my fragmented relationship to personal and national events in Scotland as my time in the US lengthens. Whether it has been losing and regaining contact with friends who have no internet access, finding holiday photographs on facebook, or learning of family tragedies, I have maintained a fragile and inconsistent communication with events from back home.

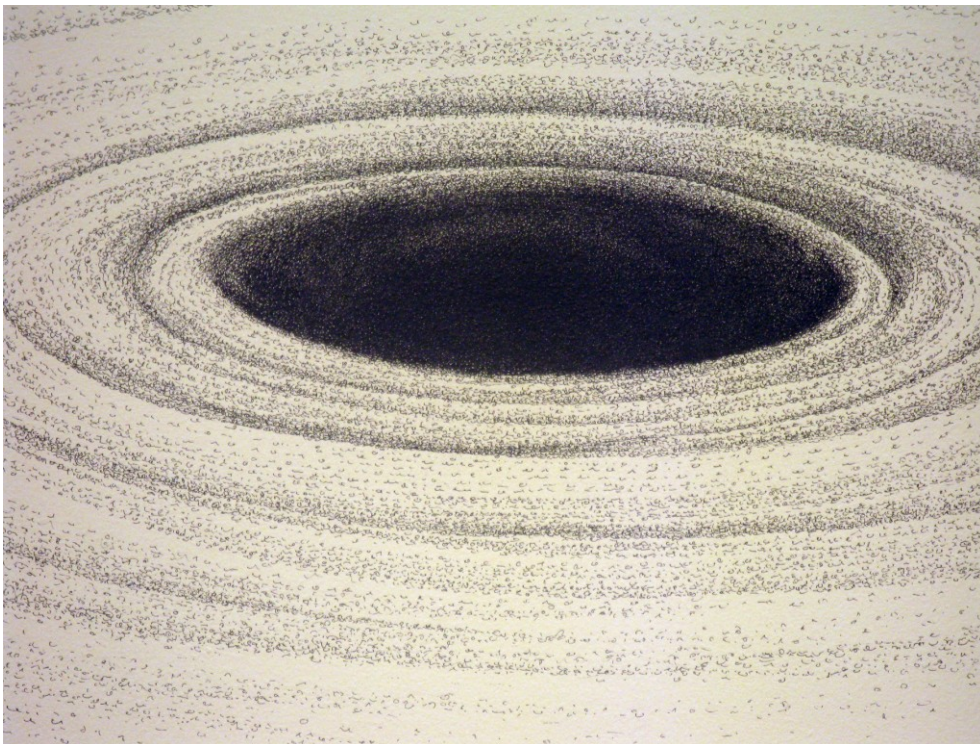
### *The Big Goodbye*

*The Big Goodbye* was developed from series of drawings of holes I made at the beginning of 2010. I see the black hole as an ironic personal narrative marking the end of my formal education, and my jump into the unknown. Sometimes they feed in and out of one another implying endless cycle of hollow prospects. I began to draw these holes on the wall in response to the work of 2009 Turner Prize winner, Richard Wright.

Wright's intention is that none of his work will be left once he dies and none of his work will ever be collected. He references the frescos of the Renaissance uses the

same technique to create his highly intricate wall paintings. The works remain for the length of an exhibition, before being painted over and lost forever (Higgins). The primary decision not to preserve the work both heightens and lessons its preciousness. It asks questions about the importance of materiality, "I am interested in the fragility of the moment of engagement – in heightening that moment," he said. To see a work knowing that it will not last, he said, "emphasizes that moment of its existence" (Higgins).

On the wall, I see my black hole drawing as doorways or portals set into my current environment. *The Big Goodbye* is drawn from an automatic language of ink marks spiraling inward. It is a melancholic joke about jumping into the next big adventure or being sucked into nothingness.



**Figure 4:** *The Big Goodbye* (detail), 2010

## Chapter 5: Where No One Has Gone Before...

In order to contextualize the work under one set of ideas, and in particular, accentuate the notion of an endeavor into an unknown future, I chose to title many of my works after the *Star Trek* series episodes of the late sixties. The original series follow the journey of a United Federation of Planets starship, The Enterprise, on its exploration mission to discover new planets and the life on them. William Shatner's voice introduced the opening credits with the words, "Space: the final frontier. These are the voyages of the starship *Enterprise*. Its five-year mission: to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no man has gone before."

Star Trek came to America at a time of great social and political change. Its depiction of technological advancements, fearless endeavor, acceptance of alien life, and one united Universe appealed to a generation of young people looking toward a changed environment. Star Trek was an uplifting prospect to a young generation waiting for first man to land on the moon, but it was not just a show that spoke of mankind's capacity for discovery and human advancement.

For the ears of the young and impressionable... Star Trek meant something... The Enterprise was not merely a huge metal spacecraft. It was modern humanity as a thrilling journey toward the unknown. Intergalactic conflicts were not contests over vague ideologies, but

fights for human rights, human freedom and human destiny.(Porter, McLaren 34.)

Thinly veiled behind alien costume and interplanetary dispute were issues of racial relations and the cold war. Star Trek served as a reflection of the issues of the time.

Furthermore, Star Trek could suggest a world without religion, or the need for a God. There were many instances of the crew coming up against one form of deity or another, but these encounters usually resulted in deity being exposed as less of a biblical being, than an oppressive, totalitarian humanoid. The first of these encounters came in classic Star Trek episode, “Who Mourns Adonais?” where the crew find the Greek god Apollo. He demands their worship, but the crew refuse. Mankind has surpassed its need for gods.

These are promising, optimistic liberal- humanist ideals, but under this liberation from the oppression of religion came the loss of any moral core or predestined resolution to the journey:

Displaced from the center of the universe, slipping loose from assurances of divine redemption, knowing that we are only one of many life-forms – and perhaps not the most intelligent or powerful of them – living under the shadow of self annihilation, frightened by the stubbornness of our ancient follies, entertaining dark musings about

our innermost nature, we cannot but wonder, Who are we humans to think we can find a bright path and survive to travel it? (Walker, Lundeen 21.)

Star Trek celebrates the abounding potential of human ability, and at the same time leaves us with the worrying realization that we alone are in control of setting the world – and the Universe - to rights. Titling my work after Star Trek provides connotations of exploration, alien worlds, and humankind's ability to face the unknown and be stronger and wiser for it. But floating through an infinite universe comes with a disarming sense of having no one to look out for you, but yourself. Star Trek presented an exhilarating, yet ominous future.



## Chapter 6: Conclusion

My drawings convey the shared urge to progress and explore. At the same time, I research a constant struggle with the role we play in a larger environment, and how to combat that which is out with our control. The act of repetitive drawing and tracing illustrates the act of passing through time: a search without a goal, while simultaneously reflecting my own transitory relationship to the place I am in.

It is inherent within human nature to want answers and security of knowing. But a world of opportunity is a far more liberating prospect than one of fate. Growing and mutating recognizable landscape forms, and using the antithetical nature of Mylar: both natural and synthetic, I discuss the constant push and pull between human capability and unruly natural forces. As much as we want to be in command of our domain, there are still factors and elements of chance with which to contend. These may be ecological, or the product of a combined manmade effort which has snowballed beyond containment. My work ultimately communicates a tenuous grasp on existence, where we sit between the foils of potentiality and the opening of new realms.

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