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Landscape to Mindscape

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Landscape to Mindscape

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
In
Fine Arts

by

Regina Scully
B.F.A. Rhode Island School of Design, 1997

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Illustrations.....	iv
Abstract.....	v
Introduction.....	1
Recording the Urban Landscape.....	2
Landscape as Entrance.....	5
The Natural Landscape.....	8
Perspective in Landscape.....	9
Process.....	10
Line.....	12
Color.....	15
Paper Paintings.....	17
Conclusion.....	19
References.....	20
Vita.....	21

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: *Katrina, Take 2*, 2006, oil on muslin, 23 x 33 inches

Figure 2: *Excavation No. 5*, 2009, acrylic on panel, 36 x 48 inches

Figure 3: *Entrance*, 2011, acrylic on panel, 60 x 72 inches

Figure 4: *Aurora*, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 72 inches

Figure 5: *Trade Winds*, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 72 inches

Figure 6: *Floating World*, 2015, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60 inches

Figure 7: *Navigation 7*, 2010, acrylic on wood panel, 36 x 48 inches

Figure 8: *Phases of Sunlight*, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 72 inches

Figure 9: *Passage 23*, 2012, acrylic on Stonehenge 100% cotton rag paper, 22 x 30 inches

Figure 10: *Translation 18*, 2014, acrylic on Stonehenge 100% cotton rag paper, 22 x 30 inches

ABSTRACT

In each of my paintings I try to create an individual micro-universe made up of elements that resonate between the familiar and the unknown. I carve up space and hybridize disparate elements, in an effort to excavate objects and spaces from our collective unconscious. By employing different perspectives, I try to encourage an experiential view of the landscape, like the one that exists for the viewer in the physical world, where sightlines are constantly shifting. These landscapes become a rhythmic labyrinth to enter and travel through, wherein the viewer experiences his or her own personal associations.

In this thesis, I will explore the painted landscape in Western and Eastern traditions and discuss different types of landscapes as they relate to my paintings and my personal commentary on the landscape. I will also examine my painting process and my personal approach to fundamental elements including perspective, line, and color.

abstract painting; mindscape; inner landscape; line; color; new landscape; urban landscape; landscape painting; Chinese landscape painting; paper paintings

INTRODUCTION

In the late fifties, while still in graduate school, Hugh Everett published a paper that showed how quantum theory predicts that a single classical reality will gradually split into separate but simultaneously existing realms. In the eighties, Andrei Linde began to discuss fractals in our cosmology, which occur as the universe expands. Simply put, fractals are phenomenon in which each part has the same character as the whole. Linde called these replicas “bubble universes,” and shortly thereafter theorists began to explain the concept of a multiverse in which many universes exist simultaneously and increasingly.

Landscape as a term in Western art refers to the delineation of space, and as Denis Cosgrove points out, “first emerged as a term, an idea, or better still, a *way of seeing* the external world, in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.”¹ Western landscapes employed linear perspective, first used in the rational practice of map-making, and at this time, the landscape mainly related to “the exercise of power over space.”²

The traditional landscape of Eastern art, in contrast, invited a spiritual contemplation of nature from afar. During the “Great Age of Chinese Landscape,” painters employed vertically stacked planes and a high horizon line, in order to create a sense of the vastness of the world.³ As Tsung Ping states in the early Chinese text, *Introduction to Painting Landscape*, “Landscapes

¹ Cosgrove, “*Prospect, Perspective and the Evolution of the Landscape Idea*,” 46.

² Cosgrove, “*Prospect, Perspective and the Evolution of the Landscape Idea*,” 45.

³ Throughout this thesis when discussing traditional Chinese painting, I am referring to the Northern Song period in China (907 - 1127).

display the beauty of Tao and men delight in this.”⁴ While Western painters sought to reproduce the landscape as accurately as possible, in Eastern art, accuracy in representation involved exemplifying the inner essence of an object.⁵

Beyond the external world and the inner contemplation of it, there are additional kinds of new spaces to consider in the current landscape. There is virtual space and outer space to investigate, as well as the way computers see space and landscape in Google Dreams. Besides a growing metaphysical understanding of other realms and universes, developments in neurology and deeper explorations of the subconscious challenge previous ideas about landscape. As Bob Nickas suggests in his book, *Painting Abstraction*, there may be “a new form of landscape: one that attempts to capture the contours of the mental landscape, offering another kind of mapping and other previously unknown vistas.”⁶

RECORDING THE URBAN LANDSCAPE

In a single moment, in a single day, human beings encounter a multitude of smaller universes. There are multi-universes in the contemporary urban metropolises. Dense with people, cultures, neighborhoods, discarded objects, re-appropriated architecture, and the decay of a post-industrial society, an abundance of matter exists in a compacted space. These different types of spaces and objects flow into each other, are stacked, fragmented, distorted

⁴ Turner, “*Classical Chinese Landscape Painting and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature*,” 111.

⁵ Turner, “*Classical Chinese Landscape Painting and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature*,” 111.

⁶ Nickas, *Painting Abstraction: New Elements in Abstract Painting*, 7.

and juxtaposed in an atmosphere both seemingly chaotic and ordered. After undergraduate school, I lived in New York, one of the largest cities in the world. For five years I absorbed visually and mentally the amalgamation of objects, spaces, and events that collide and detach, connect and disconnect.

During my time in New York, I witnessed the destruction of the urban landscape with the fall of the World Trade Center on September 11th. For months the city smelled like burning metal, and massive lights shined all night on the piles of debris while they searched for survivors and worked to clear the area. A few years later, I experienced the destruction of New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina. These events formed my concept of abstraction as it relates to the representation of the object. Both disasters altered the landscapes, forcibly transforming a once familiar, stable reality into the abstract, both physically and emotionally. With Katrina, one looked out at a dense landscape with millions of objects from our everyday lives, broken, swollen with water, cut into pieces and piled high.

As an artist who witnessed these disasters, I felt an obligation to record them. It was the landscape that I needed to paint. I made a small series of paintings from photographs that I took after the storm of the devastation. In these landscape paintings, as in *Katrina, Take 2* (Figure 1), the first abstract fragments appear to spill out around the representational objects.



Figure 1: *Katrina, Take 2*, 2006, oil on muslin, 23 x 33 inches

Beyond visually recording the disaster, my exploration of the urban environment involved a deeper commentary on the amplified excess and fragmentation that characterizes the city. Despite the dense and seemingly chaotic passages, an underlying harmony provides balance to the atmosphere of dissonance. In essence, these paintings include a dialogue between fragmentation and unity, and between devastation and rejuvenation.

In *Excavation No. 5* (Figure 2), a large arena or architectural structure implodes or shatters into millions of tiny angled fragments. A bright artificial light shines on the turmoil, and the surrounding areas merge into abstract patterns before fully receding into the black night sky. Obsessive hatch marks and bundles of black vertical lines like bars on a cell window, cover almost every inch of the surface. There is a harsh staccato rhythm to the marks suggesting anxiety, which is accentuated by the severity of the yellow, black, and red colors.

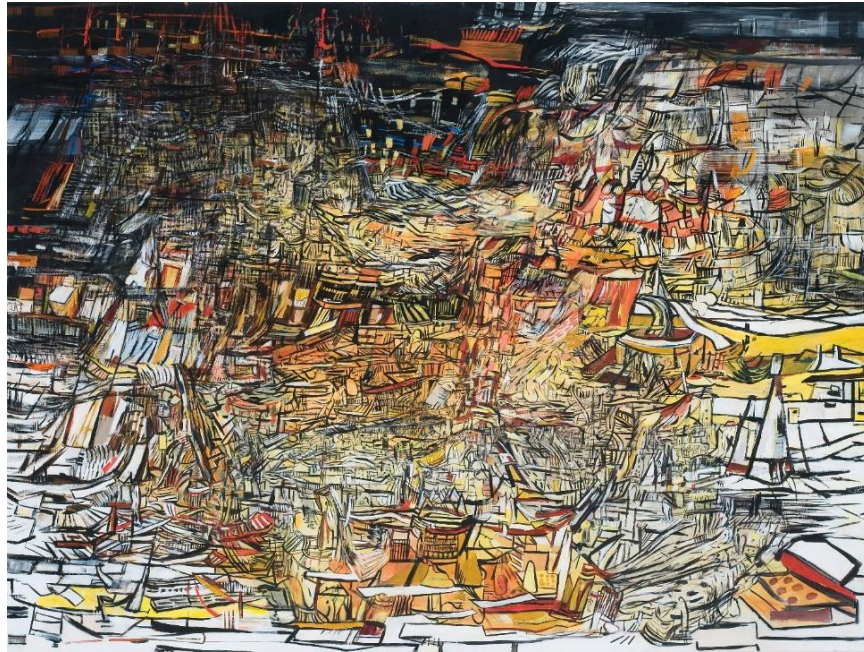


Figure 2: *Excavation No. 5*, 2009, acrylic on panel, 36 x 48 inches

LANDSCAPE AS ENTRANCE

A painted landscape can be like a window or portal through which the viewer enters a different place and another reality. In traditional Chinese painting, a landscape was considered great if it had the “power to send our spirits wandering” and “take us out of ourselves.”⁷ The Chinese painter, leaving large areas of the paper or silk open and untouched, did not try to make a complete and final statement and instead considered the landscape, “a starting point”

⁷ Sullivan, *An Introduction to Chinese Art*, 145.

or “the opening of a door.”⁸ Taking a break during the day to contemplate and enter a painted landscape, in the mind’s eye, was widely recognized as “a source of spiritual solace and refreshment.”⁹

In the Western tradition, the epic paintings of Bosch and Bruegel have always pulled me in and surrounded me. In these landscapes, different scenarios incorporating elements of mythology, spirituality, religion, and narrative play out and mix with the natural landscape, creating an active, fantastical and mysterious world. These paintings portray the vastness of the world and the endless different realities happening at the same time, while also showing the importance and detail of each individual scene.

In the physical world, the viewer experiences a landscape from multiple viewpoints. We look around, both slowly and quickly, so that some views are sharp and some blurry, we tilt our heads to look from different angles. We experience a higher horizon line when we sit and a lower one when we stand. The viewpoint shifts as we do. With this approach, the painting becomes more of a vehicle for the subconscious mind of the viewer to travel through and experience.

⁸ Sullivan, *An Introduction to Chinese Art*, 144.

⁹ Sullivan, *An Introduction to Chinese Art*, 145.

This methodology can be found in traditional Chinese painting and is referred to as “view[ing] the part from the angle of totality.”¹⁰ Traditional Chinese painters intentionally avoided perspective and shadow because it “involve[d] a view from a determined position, and include[d] only what [could] be seen from that single point.”¹¹

In the painting *Entrance* (Figure 3), loose architectural forms coincide with elements from the natural landscape. Many different perspectives are used to convey a multi-dimensional view of the structure, and pockets of loose narrative are positioned throughout.



Figure 3: *Entrance*, 2011, acrylic on panel, 60 x 72 inches

¹⁰ Sullivan, *An Introduction to Chinese Art*, 143.

¹¹ Sullivan, *An Introduction to Chinese Art*, 143.

THE NATURAL LANDSCAPE

While Manhattan is built on a grid and is dominated by squares and angles, New Orleans is shaped by a winding river, and the overall design of its streets is like a spider web. As my distance from New York grew, the right angles and triangles that had filled the urban space started to curve and open up. The body of paintings in my exhibition titled *Elemental* allowed natural elements from nature to come into the work and there were more open spaces. In *Aurora* (Figure 4), a miniature Manhattan skyline is in the distance and the detritus from an urban landscape flows down the center.

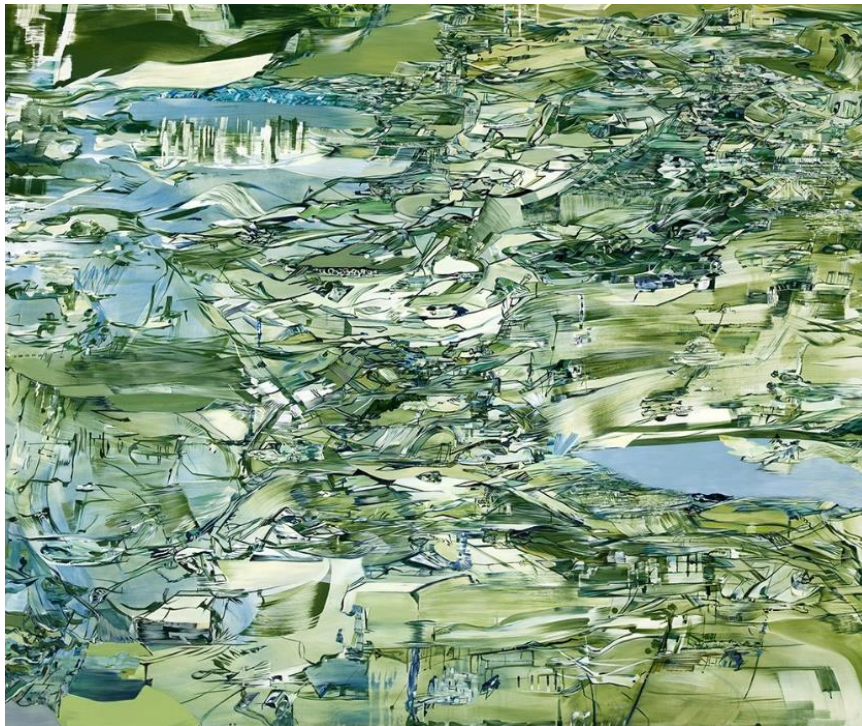


Figure 4: *Aurora*, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 72 inches

The atmosphere is that of a natural landscape coalescing with urban activity. Both the natural and urban elements are represented in various greens, and punctuated with delicate black lines and patches of white. The perspective shifts in different ways, but primarily appears to be seen from an aerial viewpoint. There is no sky or suggestion of a horizon line, and at the top of the painting, the terrain continues to move up and off of the canvas. There is a clear reference to bodies of water such as lakes and tributaries, but they are painted with a pale blue that appears a little too artificial and bright. The blue of the water is more like the color of a bright sky, which in this painting is absent. Also significant in this piece is the merging of the straight line with the circle, and the clear bending of the urban rectangle into curvilinear lines.

PERSPECTIVE IN LANDSCAPE

I do not consider perspective in a conscious way when making my paintings, but use intuitive perspective where lines recede but do not converge at single points the way they do in linear perspective. My motivation is to create the illusion of depth and distance of varying degrees and angles and scale throughout the picture plane. Having been educated in art in the West, I am able to call on Western traditions in an intuitive way and allow them to coalesce with an inherent Eastern approach. Sometimes there is an architectural passage or the suggestion of an interior, which I intuitively feel out with the brush and rework until it gains weight and volume.

The high horizon line employed in Chinese landscape painting created an illusion of vastness. There is not an evident horizon line in my paintings, but there is often the partial suggestion of one at the top of the painting. This also functions in my painting to give a sense of unlimited distance across the landscape.

PROCESS

I like to look at painting as an alchemical process, archaic and secret, that breathes life into the lifeless substance of paint. A romantic process full of ritual. I like to paint at night. I feel a surge of energy around 5 or 6 o'clock, and it is a time when the world starts to quiet. At twilight, the reality of the day begins to recede and the buzz of technology fades. Sometimes it feels like a thin mystical veil settles over the studio, replacing the logic and reason. As the night becomes deeper, so does the knowledge that most people around me are dreaming and it feels more comfortable to take risks in the painting.

Intuition plays a large role in my process. If it feels right, then it is right; if it feels off, then it is off. If when I approach the painting, a color jumps out at me, I use it. If a brush jumps out and falls on the floor, I try that one first. It is a constant process of sifting through these thoughts.

It is common for a painting to be worked on in the studio for six months to a year. During this time, I look at it from different orientations, often painting on it while in these different positions. I also turn the painting around every few days so I can't see it and will work

on another piece. Sometimes it works out that I do not look at a piece for a few weeks, and I appreciate the fresh new viewpoint this allows when I pull it back out again.

For each painting to become its own individual and unique world, it needs time to mature and develop. It is important to begin each painting in a new and different way, so it will have a particular personality early on. In *Trade Winds* (Figure 5), I used several different pieces of wood like stamps that could be dipped in paint and printed on the canvas. Between sessions of stamping the canvas, I went in with a tiny brush to add dimension and color. For a long time, the dominating colors in this painting were dark navy blue, red, and white. As the color unfolded, perspectives began to shift. The center and bottom of the painting look like they are seen from an aerial point of view while at the top, the viewer appears to be level with an architectural structure that could easily be climbed.

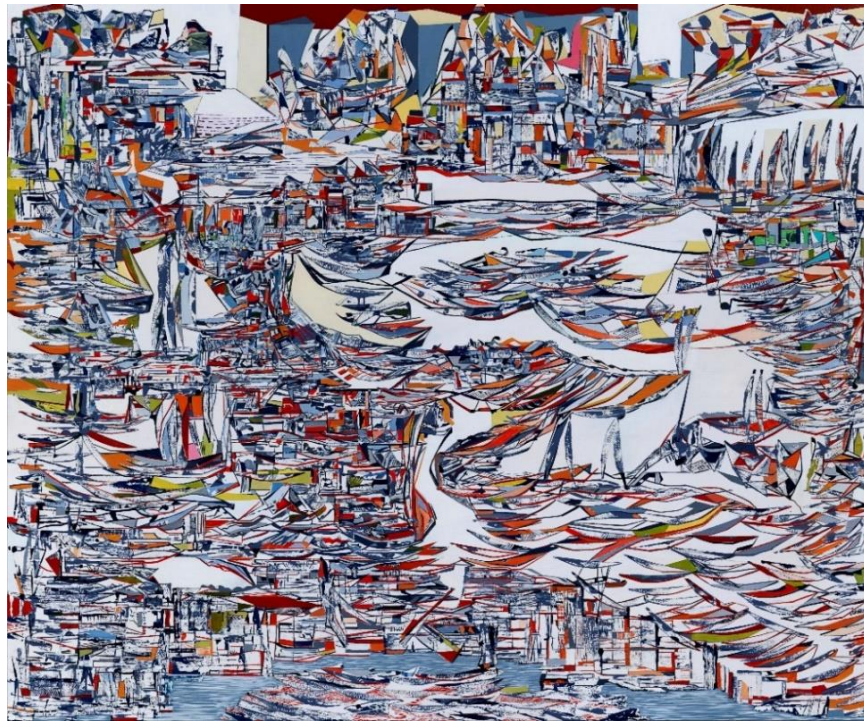


Figure 5: *Trade Winds*, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 72 inches

LINE

The definition of line is a mark that spans the distance between two points, or the path of a moving point. The use of line is fundamental to my work. I use line to delineate space, to create levels, to build up forms, to create structure, and as an element in itself. Repetitive patterns of line suggest concentrated energy. These patterns also represent the molecules and atoms that make up matter. Directional lines serve to lead the eye around the painting or between levels. In *Floating World* (Figure 6), dark grey gestural lines give structure to a pale ethereal world. Pale grey lines also swirl behind the scene suggesting movement and emerge to the surface at times to boldly define an edge or contour. Some of the lines, especially when painted with color, have a playful lyrical quality, which softens an area or guides the viewer's eye to another part of the painting. While most of my line work is freehand and intuitive, I also use rulers and a level at times to create various structural lines.



Figure 6: *Floating World*, 2015, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60 inches

The *Navigation* series is a collection of monochromatic paintings that investigate line, brush work, rhythm and intuition. By removing all color, I was able to focus on the different functions of the line by itself. These paintings did not require the slow maturing of the paintings in color. They were not going to be layered. I wanted the brush to have one chance to make the mark as in a drawing where erasure is impossible. With this series, as in *Navigation 7* (Figure 7), I learned to trust my intuition and make each mark once and with intention. I had to cultivate a consistent rhythm for patterns and then know how to let the brush free to create a sweeping line of structure.



Figure 7: *Navigation 7*, 2010, acrylic on wood panel, 36 x 48 inches

In traditional Chinese painting, there is a strong connection between painting and calligraphy. This idea of painting “is that it is a kind of calligraphy itself, insofar as both [are] representational methods that carry a particular cognitive as well as aesthetic function.”¹² In fact, there must be “a just correspondence of the type of brush-stroke with the object depicted.”¹³

Though my canvases are large, one of the main brushes I like to use is a small liner brush. Tiny repetitive brushstrokes help dig out forms from the two-dimensional plane of the canvas, and patterns of dots or lines give shape and volume. Giving attention to the small forms is important because it helps to emphasize the vastness of the large canvas. A favorite book I keep in my studio is of photos from the microscopic world. Seeing pictures of everyday objects magnified thousands of times reveals an infinite amount of detail that makes up matter. When broken down, everything in existence is made up of tiny lines and particles.

Van Gogh’s innovative and soulful use of line in his drawings and paintings emphasizes and illustrates the inner quality of what he sees. Patterned lines, marks, and dots enunciate and create volumes of objects and the spaces between them. Like other working artists after Japan was opened to the West in 1853, Van Gogh welcomed the influence of Eastern art on his work. By viewing and collecting Japanese prints, Van Gogh absorbed the abstracted beauty of the bold elegant lines, flat areas of vivid color, and intuitive perspective, and incorporated these elements into his work.

¹² Turner, “*Classical Chinese Landscape Painting and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature*,” 114.

¹³ Sullivan, *An Introduction to Chinese Art*, 142.

COLOR

If the alchemical process of painting is “form-making at its most direct and most flexible,”¹⁴ then color is the Prima Materia, a formless base of all matter and a starting point. Through the act of painting, color is transformed into a universal language of emotional meanings recognized and understood by the collective unconscious. At first view of the painting, *Phases of Sunlight* (Figure 8), a brightly lit expanse of undulating orange seems to pulse with activity. A closer look reveals more variations of orange as they are interspersed with horizontal lines and vertical forms made up of different yellows, reds and magentas. It is sunny and warm in this reality, and the bright colors radiate an uplifting energetic quality. In the places where the oranges are splashed against the canvas, there is a feeling of abandon. To temper the glowing heat, passages of grey and blue tones break up the brightness at different points. Intermittent tiny dark blue shapes and lines, like fragments of ocean depth, dot the landscape periodically, marking points of contrast. Grey-green passages, bands of turquoise, pale pink expanses, and dark contour lines suggest sites of human activity and the existence of other emotions maybe not quite as cheerful as the surrounding sun-filled colors.

¹⁴ Kahn, Wolf. "Uses of Painting Today," 114.



Figure 8: *Phases of Sunlight*, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 72 inches

PAPER PAINTINGS

While my large canvases unfold in detailed layers over time, the paper is always a new point of departure for my painting. Painting on paper has been a consistent part of my process for years. Using the same brushes and paint allows me to spontaneously switch between paper and canvas. Sometimes a certain color combination or a specific form first appears on the paper and is later intuitively incorporated into the painting. Other times, I consciously re-create a section of the paper piece on the canvas. The works on paper and canvas inform each other, while also offering separate contexts for the same materials.

Since there is no way to go back and erase, working on paper reminds me to be completely present and to apply the paint intuitively but with focused intention. While marks on the canvas can be quickly wiped off, the raw paper absorbs the paint instantly. The only option for dealing with mistakes is to embrace the accident and find a way to make it work.

The two works on paper included here are 22 x 30 inches, which is a common size currently in my studio. In the first piece from the *Passage* series, (Figure 9), most of the surface is covered with large sweeping green brush strokes. Orange and red patterns and marks punctuate the edges of the green. The whites of the unpainted paper become shapes of negative space that jump toward the surface from behind. In the second work, *Translation 18* (Figure 10), dark red dots gather and string themselves in lyrical curves across grey-colored paper. Pale blue squares gently emerge in a few areas of the landscape to soften the edges of the dark red lines and keep the eye moving around the composition.

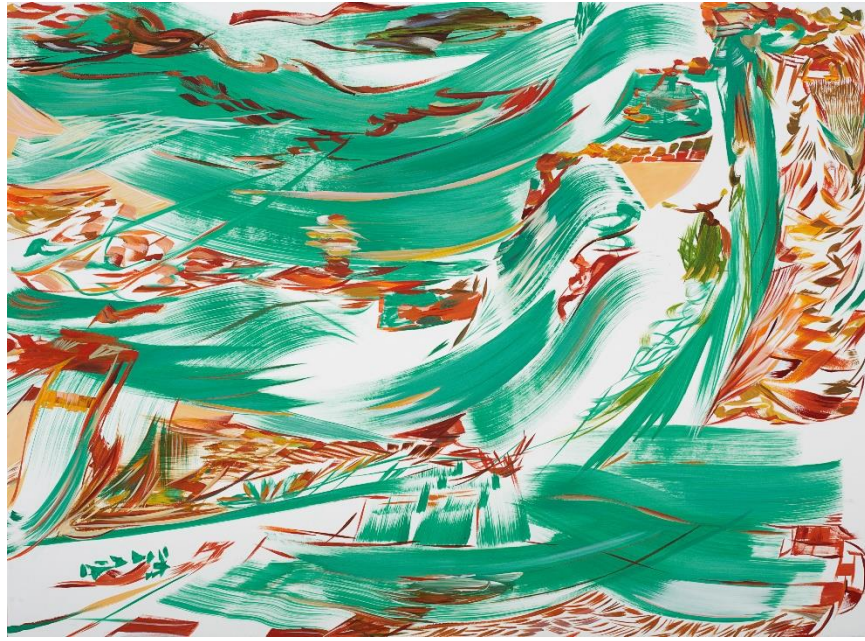


Figure 9: *Passage 23*, 2012, acrylic on Stonehenge 100% cotton rag paper, 22 x 30 inches



Figure 10: *Translation 18*, 2015, acrylic on Stonehenge 100% cotton rag paper, 22 x 30 inches

CONCLUSION

Whether urban, natural, representational, or abstract, the landscape is a universally understood and flexible construct for synthesizing multi-dimensional, futuristic domains with the abstract realms of the heart and mind. Both grounded and ethereal by nature, the landscape communicates both the outer material world and the inner spirit of the artist and the viewer. In my paintings, I work to widen the “angle of totality,” so that my landscapes encompass the primal, natural world and the global multiverse of our time, while also reflecting the emotions and mindscape of our collective unconscious.

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