Talk for Earth Day

Welcome everyone and thank you all for coming. My name is Monique Belitz, (1) and I am a MFA student here at UNM with emphasis in drawing and painting. When I applied for Earth Day participation I originally envisioned a display of my New Mexico landscape panoramas during the presentations, but I then accepted the offer to give a talk myself. After all, a power-point presentation will enable me to better share the different ways the landscape of New Mexico and its history have informed my paintings during the last three years. (2) All my work is on paper, of which some are mounted on stretched canvas or on cradled boards. All pieces incorporate to some extent collage as well as a range of different mediums such as pencil, crayon, charcoal, watercolor, felt pens, oil pastels, acrylic paint and acrylic inks.

I would like to start with a quote by N. Scott Momaday, a well-known New Mexico Native American writer: “Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth, I believe. He ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience, to look at it from as many angles as he can, to wonder about it, to dwell upon it. He ought to imagine that he touches it with his hands at every season and listens to the sounds that are made upon it. He ought to imagine the creatures there and all the faintest motions of the wind. He ought to recollect the glare of noon and all the colors of the dawn and dusk.” N. Scott Momaday. The Man Made of Words: Essays, Stories, Passages, 1997.

(3) I see the land as a palimpsest, a surface with layers of events etched in it, layers of geologic changes, layers of human incursions mingled with traces of plants and animals. Some of the traces are ancient, others more recent, yet all connect us, the present inhabitants of the space called New Mexico to all former ones, as ancient patterns are linked to modern ones, one informing the other. I am aware of the rich history embedded in the land which provides me with a deep time line, one I am used to, as I was born in Utrecht, a city in the Netherlands founded in 50 CE.

(4) I came to New Mexico from Oregon where I had lived for twenty years. One big attraction for me was the migrating water fowl found during the winter months at the Bosque Del Apache, South of Socorro. The sandhill crane has been migrating south for over 2.5 million years and is deeply interconnected with Native American beliefs and depicted on ancient Mimbres and Hohokam pottery. (5) The cranes, the snow geese and the blackbirds became the focus of my

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first panorama on paper, called “Song of Solitude”. (6) As I was more interested in the patterns of flocks than in individual birds, I used the long Vs of cranes and snow geese in flight to create unity in this large painting, creating a net of dots (7), connecting the four directions above a large river valley with vistas over multiple mountain ranges (8), an openness and space where the viewer feels tethered by the wildlife.

Layers of space and of time are found in my second panorama called “Land’s Lament” (9). Painted during an artist residency near Chilili last year, it represents to some extent the rolling foothills extending east from the Manzana Mountains to the Plains. The pattern of the shrubbery morphs (10) into a pattern of buffaloes who formerly roamed the grass lands of New Mexico. Ghosts of buffalo run freely in my imagination, no fences anywhere breaking up the land, hindering the wildlife (11). The buffalo shapes are borrowed from ancient cave art in homage to Howling Wolf, a Southern Cheyenne Indian artist famous for his ledger book drawings in the 19th century. In the middle ground to the left (12) I started for the first time to use lines in a way that allows multiple interpretations. The lines describe the landscape in a topographic way and connect the left with the right side of the piece; they could be interpreted as roads on a map, or as paths created by bison migrations, or, the red color of the sanguine crayon might evoke connotations to the uprooting and displacement of native people.

Further exploring the meaning of red lines (13) I also incorporated them into a large freeform piece called “Ancient Prayer”, which actually depicts Capulin Volcano in NE New Mexico as seen from above. I visited this national monument during last fall break, saw the low sand dunes at the edges of the yellow grasslands, leftovers of an ancient sea, and experienced the spectacular view from the crater rim into three neighboring states. The road leading up to the rim inscribes a spiral onto this perfect cinder cone. From the air it must look like a giant petroglyph encoding the message that the original inhabitants left, or rather had to leave, their homeland. That experience together with the loss of the original short grass prairie due to the fencing of the land with its attendant overgrazing led me to make this painting. It consists of multiple torn pieces of heavy watercolor paper which can be read as lava flows. (14) The curvilinear lava puddles are then covered with a pattern of fragile yellow grasses which follow the contours of the land, while (15) fences and farm roads leading to derelict farms from the dust bowl era crisscross the land in a straight fashion, disregarding the flow of the land. Rivulets of red sanguine seep away from the volcano, reminders of the violent past (16).
I pursued the aerial view of the land for a while in a short series of small pieces relating to the Camino Real, especially the stretch called the Dead Man’s Journey, between Truth or Consequences and Socorro. The Rio Grande used to go underground there, causing great hardship for the Indians traveling North and South, and later for the Spaniards, Moors and Mexican natives who went up and down the Camino Real. I was thinking of trade paths, enemy attacks on the columns of humans and vehicles (17), the confrontations of natural obstacles and the river as a life-giving force (18).

I went in search of traces of the Camino Real to the East of T or C but I was not able to find any. Instead I came to the part that is now being developed into the Space port of New Mexico! Again I was facing the co-existence of the past and the most contemporary of developments in that area. Libby Lumpkin, who will soon be a new faculty member in the art history department, wrote in an essay called New Mexico, about a similar irony back in the 1940s, when she juxtaposes the feverish development of the atomic bomb at Los Alamos and Georgia O’Keeffe’s landscape paintings: “O’Keeffe’s reification of New Mexico as the embodiment of the philosophical tradition that holds Nature to be essentially simple and good was apotheosized at the very moment scientific and intellectual discourse repudiated that model.” My piece Mixed Blessings (19) -Trinity Site recalls that irony, as Trinity Site is located close to the Bosque del Apache.

Another painting (20) was inspired by the monotonous landscape of that same area, a coastline of rock overlooking a sea of desert shrubbery stretching endlessly into the distance, with traces of all kinds of human and animal migrations traversing this ocean. (21)While working on these latter pieces my imagination of humans pushing through this inhospitable stretch of desert became so strong I had to give them shape, ambiguously though, as I saw them as ghosts of former migrants who I did not want to tether to a particular race nor time period. (22) With rock-like outlines and bent in the direction of their journey these ghosts fit into the landscape as just another pattern, while the traces they leave on the desert floor attests to their humanity and their search for hope. (23) Although I was originally thinking of arroyos cleaving the desert skin, with my anthropomorphous shapes to scale, the torn paper shapes took on a life by themselves and insisted instead on being read as continents with humanity crossing oceans to seek a better future. This was aided by the gessoed canvas unexpectedly accepting watercolor in the sky and “arroyo” areas, giving them the aspect of large bodies of water. The dimension of
migration had become enlarged in this piece, and being an immigrant myself, I happily accepted this unexpected shift in perception.

I was captivated by my anthropomorphous migrants and kept playing (24) with them as positive shapes juxtaposed by negative shapes, reinforcing the concept of ghosts of people. Their varied sizes seemed interpretable as a representation of migrants from different eras. In my mind I saw centuries filled with families trudging through the desert, trying to stay alive, losing loved ones; the number of the figures grew, their footprints arranged themselves into broken ruts; (25) while filigree plant motifs were trying to grow over and silence the past. Two different pieces came out of these watercolors: (26) one with the bleached-out desert as side panels framing the never-ending procession of humanity from the bottom to the top; the other one (27) an artist book enclosing the traversing humans (28) on one side while displaying the inhospitable desert on the back (29), both crossed by sanguine raffia lengths, a metaphor for the border, inhuman, restraining, and dangerous.

(30) I am aware that art can silence the past, or validate it. American landscape painting has romanticized, dramatized, and sentimentalized the land in the past, often celebrating conquest over indigenous people and nature. Treating the human figure like just another nature element emphasizes the value and meaning of the land. It is not owned by humans; instead it allows us as well as other creatures to find a home in it. As I am spending time creating patterns, my thoughts roam the land and feel its brittle surface. I see a lack of respect for nature as well as a lack of awareness that everything is connected, that breaking one link starts a ripple effect of loss. As my beliefs coincide with contemporary concerns regarding preservation, restoration, environmental responsibility and sustainability, my representation of the land as a fragile vessel of time, history and beauty, implicitly requests respect and balanced stewardship for the land.

(31) I would like to end this presentation with a quote by Adriel Heisey, a well-known photographer of prehistoric sites: “In our fervor to command our world, we may do well to draw a lesson from one of archaeology’s most pragmatic strategies: leave some places untouched out of respect for our ignorance” (Adriel Heisey 35).

Thank you so much for your interest.

Monique Belitz