

Charting the Badlands: Mapping Ancient Shorelines

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"... we bring our own worlds to bear in foreign landscapes in order to clarify them for ourselves. It is hard to imagine that we could do otherwise. The risk we take is of finding our final authority in the metaphors rather than the land. To inquire into the intricacies of a distant landscape, then, is to provoke thoughts about one's own interior landscape, and the familiar landscapes of memory. The land urges us to come around to an understanding of ourselves." (Lopez, 1986, p. 247)

As recently as sixty million years ago, the Western Interior Seaway stretched from the polar north to what is now the Gulf of Mexico, bisecting the North American continent. Sixteen hundred kilometers at its widest point, this shallow, warm inland sea was replete with complex, flourishing plant and animal life. Its water levels cyclically rose and fell over its thirty-million-year life-span, shorelines fluctuating radically, varied layers of sediment accumulating on the shallow sea floor, animal and mineral, sand, ash, mud and silt. Continental plates shifted, mountains rose, the seaway receded, canyons formed, deserts spread. Processes continue as land and seas shift, rise, form, recede, advance in endless mutation.

This long-disappeared inland sea underlies the San Juan Basin, the area in the American Southwest in which I walk and draw, a landscape that has evolved to badlands over tens of million years of geologic change. Badlands are distinctive land formations in which layers of clay-rich soils

deposited on the seabed have been extensively eroded by wind and water over millennia. Characterized by deep gouges, banded color, and a near-absence of vegetation, they are often highly inaccessible and difficult to navigate by foot. In geological terms, they are relatively fragile monuments to deep time that can be easily compromised thorough mining and other resource extraction activity. As environmental public policy-making turns toward the increased development of badlands by the energy and mineral industries, there is an urgency to experience the terrain in a state less-touched by excavation, drilling, road construction, and exploratory infrastructure, while also mapping the impacts of this development.

Today, I engage with this ancient waterway and its geological legacy in *Charting the Badlands*, an ongoing drawing project inspired by geomorphological processes, topographies and complex landscapes of the American Southwest. I walk through badlands terrain, gather soils to use as drawing media, and return to the studio to draw from the memory of place. By physically walking the land, collecting handfuls of soil to transform into pigment, I seek to bridge the raw elements of the landscape with a gestural cartographic sense, raw materials working as aesthetic guide. Drawing actions may echo geological processes of sedimentation, deposition, erosion, purposed to map an experience of natural space, fragments of lived time, glimpses of an imagined geological past or future, as embodied in mark and material.

While they are not literal representations of place, the drawings evoke the surface of the earth as seen at altitude, with the viewer moving within and over the terrain. Both temporal and spatial scales are rendered mutable by and through drawing, the body's space described by the boundaries of the page. Drawing offers a phenomenological, sense-based way to consider landscape and deep time on an intimate scale, compressing miles into marks, eons into moments. Walking this terrain affords connection to both a direct experience of the land and a time beyond the body's memory, with drawing materials and gestures bridging moments in history. The studio becomes space for projecting backward and forward into the life of the image, fusing geological visual referents with what it feels like to be in this harsh and elementally-raw environment, where sere heat, wind and sun are hostile to the flesh but at the same time make the space compelling, alive, other-worldly, underscoring being in *this* world, living on *this* planet. The landscape invites and challenges, demands and rewards attention, an attention lent and redoubled through the act of embodied drawing.

I integrate materials I collect by hand from the land into my drawings, including natural oxide pigments, silt, clay and soils, and burned piñon and juniper charcoals. This embedded meaning invites a viewer to consider both the history and substance of the drawing materials and the land itself. My drawings originate from, and are deeply influenced by, spaces I inhabit prior to their making. Texture, shape, color, and concept emerge from the field in which I am immersed. I use media that can be layered and manipulated, with each mark echoing the surfaces and forms I have seen or touched, memory brought back to the page through the body. These drawings are structures on paper that seek to capture the history and physicality of the landforms and architectures I encounter, while evoking living, natural, systems, performed through the drawn gesture.

In this practice, drawing sites the land as a primary source of both inspiration and raw marking material. The component shapes in *Charting the Badlands* reference the history and physicality of waterways, arroyos, canyons, and



Figure 1. Aerial view of San Juan Basin Badlands. Drone photograph, Cary Brooks, 2019.



Figure 2. Aerial view of Schneckloth gathering pigments in San Juan Basin Badlands. Drone photograph, Cary Brooks, 2019.

ancient shorelines long-disappeared. By walking the land and using the soils a self-referential drawing medium, the drawings invite a movement in both temporal and physical scale, a consideration of the history and context of the land embedded within the image, as well as the ground upon which one physically stands.

As Lopez entreats us to give attention to the land, insofar as it 'urges us to come around to an understanding of ourselves,' the act of drawing from the landscape allows insight into our own relationships to time, terrain, human impact and absence. How do we abide as individuals within our private and public environments? How do we create and maintain ethical relationships to one another within

landscapes that are ever-evolving, some at a faster pace than to which we may be able to easily adapt? Drawing the planetary past through the moment of the present imparts a sense of possibility, a conceptual and bodily reminder that planetary change is constant on a radical scale, that my own human body and experience constitute the most minute of existential elements. The act of geologically-inspired drawing centers me within the present bodily moment while affording perspective on deep time and constant planetary change.



Figure 3. From *Charting the Badlands*, 2019, Sara Schneckloth. Earth pigment, ink, watercolor, graphite.

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References

Lopez, B. H. (1986). *Arctic dreams: imagination and desire in a northern landscape*. New York, Charles Scribner's Sons.