

Endangered Islands, Isolation & Integration: Ecological Fragility & Flow in Three Artistic Maps

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Abstract:

My artistic watercolor maps depict geographies of the natural world in an experiential, immersive way by combining multiple ground-level and aerial views into mosaic-like compositions. This approach essentially “compresses” these geographies by accentuating edges and contrasts within and around them—edges that tend to be relatively sharp to begin with in the places I choose to represent, slicing them up into islands and island-like environments. Examples include vegetation zones along steep precipitation and temperature gradients, oceanic islands with unique species and ecosystems, and relicts of native habitat in urbanized areas. Since these islands—often ecologically unique and sensitive by definition—are particularly and increasingly vulnerable to human impacts, a key motivation in capturing and further compressing them cartographically has been to convey a sense of their fragility (Sears 2021, 2023). But attempting to preserve them (or any part of nature) is itself a form of human intervention not only because of the resources required to fight today’s mounting threats: nature has never been static in the first place. While on one hand the faceted, sliced-up structure of the maps expresses my urge to isolate and freeze these environments in time and space, that same pattern of edges also contains a quality of movement that could be read as “natural” ecological flux, flow, and continuity, with a human component. I think of these different readings, respectively, as representing two environmental imaginaries: *isolation* and *integration* (Sears 2023). They seem contradictory, but I see many of my maps as reflecting both simultaneously in different ways and degrees. Three of the most recent, depicting Lord Howe Island (Australia), the Lomas de Lúculo (Peru), and Lion’s Head (South Africa), are particularly representative in illustrating how geographical conditions of compression and contrast are infused with these more fundamental ideas about ecological stability and change, boundedness and interconnectivity.

The first of these three maps, *Perched* (Figure 1a), is inspired by Lord Howe Island off the coast of New South Wales, covering only 15km² but harboring a surprising diversity of striking species and ecosystems found nowhere else. Its environment is remarkably intact compared to so many other oceanic islands. But it has not escaped impacts from invasive species, and its rugged, cloud-forested southern end in particular—an ecological island-within-an-island—will likely be transformed by climate change. The map’s multiplicity of perspectives aims to capture this squeezing of spectacular variety into such a tiny area, and infuse it with a quality of rarity, preciousness, and increasing vulnerability. The composition’s vertical orientation gives it a particular feeling of top-heaviness and instability, further captured in the work’s title, suggesting ecological precariousness. The dynamic quality of the faceting might evoke the island’s evolution in the broadest sense—*integration* with both natural and cultural processes, local and global, across many time scales; however, I read it more as the immanent shattering of a delicate crystal, the *disintegration* of an idealized image of spatial and temporal *isolation* that I still grasp onto.

The “island” depicted in *Oasis II* (Figure 1b) is delineated by urban development rather than by water; like in the previous example though it also contains an ecological island-within-an-island (this one even more distinct). These nested islands are the Lomas de Lúculo, an urban park in Lima, centered on one of many seasonal “fog oases” (the bright green island-within) scattered throughout this desert region. Those located in urban areas are particularly threatened by unregulated land uses, on top of climate change that is likely to disrupt the coastal fog patterns. My goal was to capture the experience of these parallel natural and human-created contrasts, underscoring the fragility of the natural one and of the oasis ecosystem itself with its uniquely adapted species. But unlike in *Perched*, just because of how the overall composition happened to take shape as I worked out the desired spatial relationships, the feeling of movement in this work strikes me more like a sweeping, unifying flow than immanent disintegration or collapse—energizing rather than unsettling. The edges feel more fluid than brittle, more connecting than dividing, more *integrating* than *isolating*. Despite my aim of emphasizing them, they seem to be in perpetual, “natural” flux, both human-caused and not.

The third map, *Headland* (Figure 1c), represents another island defined by an urban edge; this work strikes me as balancing qualities of isolation and integration rather than leaning toward one or the other as in the first two. This particular island is Lion’s Head, an urban park and dramatic granite peak in the middle of Cape Town; it protects a

remnant of the unique and highly biodiverse *fyf* ecosystem, greatly reduced by urbanization and still impacted by it. On the isolation side, the map highlights the city-nature contrast along with a sense of the park's endangered-ness; the island also seems on the verge of shattering, even more dramatically than Lord Howe. But that shattering feels explosive, just as easily suggesting strength as fragility, and on the integration side it energizes the composition in a way similar to *Oasis II*. It is more of a spinning motion in this case, focusing attention inward on the park, suggesting to me not so much physical flow and evolution as more intangibly the fundamental human-ness of the place as a mental image—one aspect of the inseparability of nature and culture. As an escape from the city but physically looming over it, the island feels like its beating heart or center of gravity—psychologically separate and “pristine” though in reality far from it. Isolation, as a constructed image of pristine-ness, could therefore be considered *part* of integration, which incorporates the very existence or constructed-ness of that image.

These imaginaries of isolation and integration, though opposites, seem to overlay and coexist in the maps rather than being in tension or even poles of a continuum: they exist on different planes, one based on imagination or idealization and the other on physical reality. The balance of the two depends on the particular composition as well as the individual viewer; I can recognize both to some degree in each map even though isolation is the quality I intend to evoke. This layering, or compartmentalization, might also extend to the real world, and inform attitudes toward the importance, feasibility, and very meaning of nature preservation.

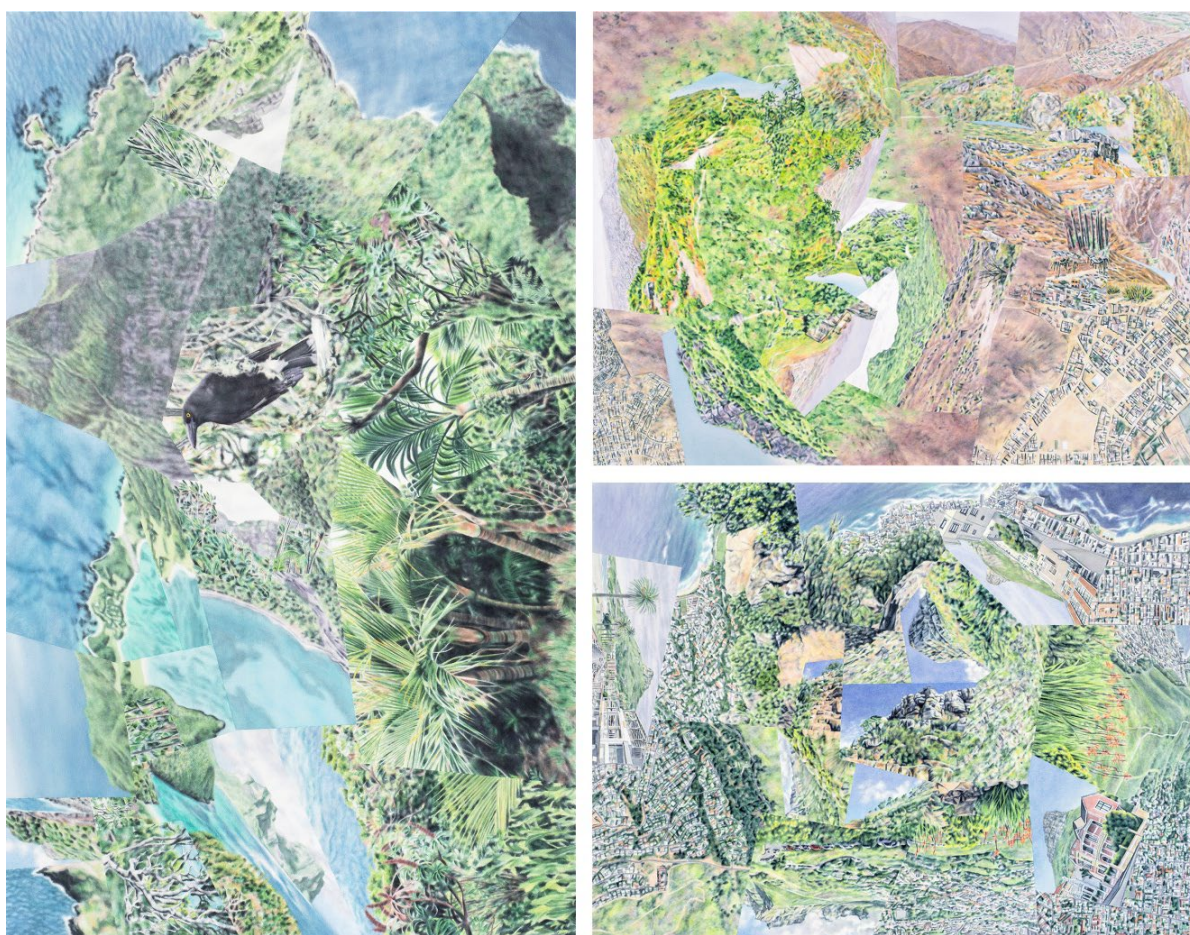


Figure 1a (left). *Perched*, watercolor on paper, 52"x32." Figure 1b (top right). *Oasis II*, watercolor on paper, 30"x40." Figure 1c. *Headland*, watercolor on paper, 30"x40."

References

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