

Fracturing, Flux & Fragility: Mapping Ecological Islands & Edges

Darren Sears

Hang Art Gallery, darren@darrensears.com

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Abstract:

Ecological islands - native habitats defined and isolated by environmental factors or by land use - and the edges surrounding them have risen to the forefront of environmental consciousness as climate change and other threats shrink, degrade, and obliterate them. The spatial condition of *endangered-ness* is difficult to capture in pictorial landscape representations or aerial views alone; depicting geography in a simultaneously spatial and immersive way requires more complex, innovative forms of representation, bridging art and cartography. As I have described previously (Sears 2021) my own such explorations, in watercolor, were not initially inspired by environmental concern. Combining personal and scholarly perspectives, this talk will analyse these works in light of a new preservation-minded motivation for capturing rare and isolated slices of the natural world. This motivation derives from a knowingly idealized image of spatiotemporal separation and stability, yet the works unintentionally reveal a tension between the imagined pristineness of these islands and their more fluid, contingent reality - a reality disheartening today in its extent yet arguably “natural” in its essence.

I will begin by reviewing how the watercolor maps first developed. Sharp edges and contrasts in the natural world, and the slivers of distinct ecological character they define, have long struck me as compressed, empoweringly “knowable” versions of natural spaces or phenomena that we tend to think of as larger-than-life (Sears 2021). An urge to compress and clarify these islands and edges further first led me to piece together travel photographs from disparate places into imaginary, surreally sharp environmental juxtapositions lacking an overall sense of linear perspective. These photomontages evolved into “fractured” watercolor paintings capturing both naturally- and human-created islands of distinct ecological character. With the incorporation of aerial views to fill out the spatial patterns, and an increasing focus on real geographies that I can explore and document in depth, the compositions have become more intricate; the environmental heterogeneity tends to be contained more in the overall map than between one fragment and the next. Each work captures an “omniscient” spatial view from above at the same time as multiple scenic views within (Figs. 1 & 2).



Figure 1 (left). *Crystallize*, watercolor on paper, 52'' x 40''; inspired by Isla Incahuasi in the Salar de Uyuni, Bolivia. Figure 2. *Oasis*, watercolor on paper, 38'' x 38''; inspired by the fog-fed desert oasis of Bosque Fray Jorge, Chile.

These accentuated “worlds-at-my-fingertips” have become expressions of ecological fragility now that we - literally - hold the fate of the natural world in our hands. But while this new objective is less self-interested than the original empowerment-oriented one, it is still essentially about exerting control. The very idea of preservation - of freezing these islands and edges in space and time - works against the natural environment’s state of constant change that is a product of both natural processes and human influences, and is not only unrealistic but also distracting from environmental problems that are more widespread and closer to home (Corner 1999; Cronon 1996). Much has been written about how physical images have created and reinforced this psychological image of a timeless “nature,” including both perspective (pictorial) and aerial views that frame it as an object to be gazed at from a distance (Abbott 2008; Corner 1999). My own representations aiming to depict seemingly intact ecological islands as precious and fragile *specifically* by heightening their relative smallness and boundedness - making the edges themselves the subject of the works - do not attempt to avoid this quality of distancing and objectification.

Yet paradoxically and unintentionally, the works’ fractured style itself begins to break down this feeling of apart-ness in space and time. The multiplication of fragments, particularly in the more complex compositions, deemphasizes the scenic quality of each individual view in favor of the spatial relationships between them. The perspective zooms out to take in the overall map - not “distancing” each scene further but rather disrupting the *linear* perspective between single “object” and single vantage point. At the same time this zoomed-out perspective avoids becoming a similarly distancing and objectifying aerial view because the individual scenic views draw the observer back “down to earth.” This zooming in and out - shifting between scales and perspectives - prevents a static, focused gaze on either the overall island/archipelago viewed from above or any one piece of it framed at ground level (Czerniak 1998).

This “vertical” shifting by itself, however, still keeps the viewer at some remove from the place: the individual ground-level views, while not all conventionally picturesque, are still generally “scenic.” To be truly immersive a visual representation must contain a sense of going beyond the visual - of bodily engagement and “lived” individual knowledge deeper than “all-knowing” vision - specifically by suggesting movement through space on the ground (Abbott 2008; Corner 1996). My more intricate compositions, structured around unfolding sequences of views along my real-life paths of travel across islands and edges, do incorporate an aspect of this temporal, personal dimension. The spatial configurations of the “routes” and of the views along them are distorted to reflect the different weights, tempos, and trajectories of my impressions. Although these “journeys” are usually somewhat camouflaged within the overall compositions, viewers are encouraged to generate their own immersive experiences by seeking them out.

The fracturing of the works, again particularly in the more intricate compositions where the contrasts are spread out across more fragments and their edges, also creates a more general sense of temporality and dynamism - of flux and flow, suggesting the perpetual hum of both ecological and cultural processes. This energy and, paradoxically, continuity through fragmentation is reminiscent of the analytic cubists’ blurring of object boundaries - an integration-through-disintegration intended to capture the motion and interpenetration of the pictured objects themselves and/or the shifting perspective of the viewer (Antliff and Leighten 2001). My works have come to express a temporality similarly capable of intertwining subject and object - of viewer and island - but also similarly suggestive of the notion that the latter has no purely objective reality. Nature has no meaning outside of human experience or imagination.

But if the “pristineness” and “preciousness” of these islands is no more than a culturally constructed image, I believe that image does not necessarily lack cultural value, and that we can still to some extent lament its increasing untenability. In fact my works’ dynamic quality itself suggests yet another level of tension between this subjective reality of the natural world and its “actual” reality of flux and flow: the integration-through-disintegration can tilt toward the latter, evoking shattering glass. I do not expect these tensions to resolve themselves in my representations or in my mind, but now that they have surfaced, my next step might be to engage them more deliberately.

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