

ELSEWHERE, WITHIN HERE

A THESIS

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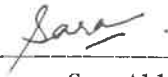
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OF

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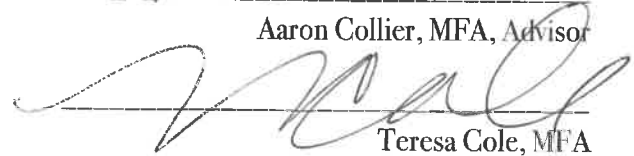


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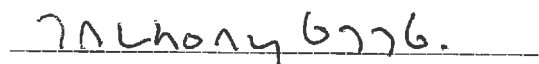
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## INTRODUCTION

*“Every voyage is the unfolding of a poetic. The departure, the crossover, the fall, the wandering, the discovery, the return, the transformation.”<sup>1</sup>*

-Trinh T. Minh-ha

*Elsewhere, Within Here* is a body of work that deals primarily with the way that I interpret and interact with the ideas of place and mobility. This inquiry is shaped through personal experiences of travel and a lack of rootedness to a particular geographical location throughout my adolescent years. The constant relocation that I was subjected to during the most formative years of my life has irrevocably impacted my perception of place-attachment and home. The indeterminacy of terms like place and home invariably takes the guise of the following questions: Is ‘home’ the various hostels that I stayed in during my childhood years? Is it the city where I spent a significant part of my life under the guardianship of my grandparents? Is it the city of Kuwait where my parents are permanently situated? Is it this foreign place where I currently reside? Or is it, at the end of the day, something merely conceptual as opposed to geographical?

Treating the surface of the ground as a constant, I establish my perceptions of place through the lens of mobility. This stands in contrast to the staticity and concreteness of the images that I reference through my paintings. The work features images taken from five different cities that I

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<sup>1</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Elsewhere, Within here*, (New York: Routledge, 2011), 40.

have either visited or lived in in the past six months: Lahore, Kuwait, Istanbul, New York and New Orleans. Instead of depicting the post-card aspects of the places that I experience, I am drawn more to the representation of features that typically go unnoticed. The ground, with its immensity of detail and aesthetic allure, serves as an appropriate subject matter for that exploration. Besides the communicative potential that is revealed through the textural qualities and nuanced colors of the ground, its ubiquitous nature presents familiarity regardless of where one is situated in the world.

The title *Elsewhere, Within Here* comes from a book by Trinh T. Minh-ha that deconstructs notions of travel, home, immigration and exile in a post-colonial context. The text has proven inspirational and informative in my exploration of the aforementioned ideas.

## DISPLACEMENT

*“Continent, city, country, society:*

*the choice is never wide and never free.*

*And here, or there... No. Should we have stayed at home,*

*wherever that may be?”<sup>2</sup>*

-Elizabeth Bishop

Displacement, touristic or otherwise, can lead to transformative experiences. The encounter with a social world that is unlike what one is accustomed to evokes feelings of curiosity and discovery in response to the unanticipated. However, the experience is superimposed with a transversal of instability as there is very little to identify with; there are no noticeable constants. The sense of disorientation is similar to one that results from the loss of a steady horizon. The tilting and blurring of the horizon line causes the observer to lose their steady position, disrupting the traditional sense of perspective<sup>3</sup>.

This body of work was borne out of a similar sense of disorientation that I was confronted with upon my first encounter with the Occident when I relocated to New Orleans in 2018. I was met with a conflation of new cultural, social, and historical landscapes that left me unanchored and disoriented. In the midst of the readjustment process, I sought to reevaluate the dominant

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<sup>2</sup> Schwartz, Lloyd, and Sybil P. Estess, *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1983), 23.

<sup>3</sup> Hito Steyerl, “In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective,” *e-flux*, no.24 (April 2011): <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/24/67860/in-free-fall-a-thought-experiment-on-vertical-perspective/> Steyerl describes the downfall of our traditional sense of orientation through the lens of J.M.W. Turner’s *The Slave Ship*. She describes the observer as being ‘upset, displaced and beside himself’ at the sight of the tumbling and tilting horizon which results in the dissolution of one’s ideas of space and time.

themes of my art practice and the ground proved to be my most powerful ally in this quest. It provided me with a sense of familiarity that I desperately needed, and hence immediately latched on to.



Fig. 1. *Fractures and Faults*, Oil on Canvas, 12" x 12", 2019.

The first painting to emerge in this series of paintings was *Fractures and Faults*. The painting captures a small fragment of a sidewalk that I felt compelled to notice on a stroll to the art supply store. It features the underground structure of live oak tree roots breaking apart the surface of a concrete pavement. Despite the fact that the image is characteristic of New Orleans, it features an element of the city that goes largely unnoticed.

My decision to find meaning in overlooked spaces stems from an aversion to readymade routes and prepackaged tours of places that lay everything out for the consumer; everything, from the route chosen to get to a specific place to the time spent at a particular spot, is preplanned; there are no detours; nothing is left to chance. Contrary to this, a great chunk of my work hinges on fortuitous encounters: there are days where I could encounter magic threaded within the grit on the paths, and days when all that is revealed to the eye is the uninspiring, drab asphalt in varying tones of grey.

*Dwindling, Swelling, Rising, Sinking* is another painting that I would like to expand on in light of the aforementioned thought. The painting is based the beach that directly overlooks the Kuwait Towers, an important landmark and symbol of modern Kuwait. My decision to focus on the sandy, eroded structure of the ground as opposed to the 600 foot tall towers in front of me is rooted in my affinity for the disregarded and the ignored.

‘Adventure can only survive in the small empty space of intervals and interstices’<sup>4</sup>; with the beginning of this body of work, I stepped out of my comfort zone to embrace the notion of exploring the unfamiliar. A large component of my practice has emerged from this transition; a

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<sup>4</sup>Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Elsewhere, Within here*, (New York: Routledge, 2011), 40.



component that involves treating the ground as subject matter and engaging with it as a palimpsest of experience. It necessitates treading unfamiliar paths without a preconceived final image in mind and landing on spectacular discoveries.

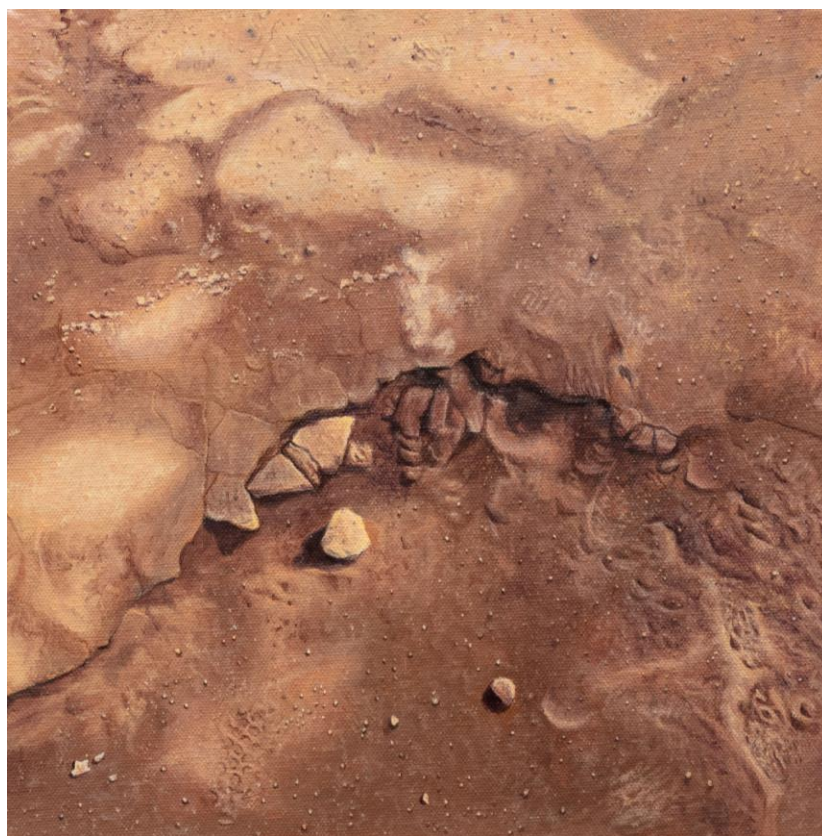


Fig. 2. *Dwindling, Swelling, Rising, Sinking, Oil on Canvas, 12" x 12", 2019.*

## DISINTEGRATION

*"I see buildings falling in Glasgow. I see rubble. I ask myself where that rubble goes. I discover that it's crushed and then used to build new pedestrian streets- so people are walking on the ghosts of tower blocks."<sup>5</sup>*

-Cyprien Gaillard

The idea of disintegration that alludes to the passage of time runs through the entire body of work. The paintings depict sections of the ground that are in varying states of erosion. The brokenness of tiles and asphalt on the ground surface points to the coexistence of nature and the built environment, or how one may invade the other. Weathering and erosion act as agents of transformation that modify the surface of the ground constantly. Even though erosion is a product of atmospheric agencies, it is sped up significantly by humans' interaction with the land.

Speaking of this inevitable decay of constructed sites, Miles Orvell in his article 'America in Ruins: Photography as Cultural Narrative' states: "The essential vulnerability of the built environment is part of the larger tendency of systems to run down, to move from order to disorder- the process of entropy ... Human construction is itself the outcome of a struggle between nature and spirit, where spirit triumphs in its effort to build some kind of structure out of existing materials. When the process is reversed, when a building begins to crumble, it becomes the expression of nature's own "art," taking back what human art had tried to create.

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<sup>5</sup> Cyprien Gaillard, "New Romantic," Interview by Jonathan Griffin, Frieze, Issue 130 (April 2010): 85.

The shift becomes a cosmic tragedy which makes every ruin an object infused with our nostalgia; for now the decay appears as nature's revenge for the spirit's having violated it by making a form in its own image<sup>6</sup>. This description of the interplay between the order and disorder that characterizes constructed sites is particularly poetic and expressive.



Fig. 3. *A Wave in Cinders*, Oil on Canvas, 12" x 16", 2019.

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<sup>6</sup> Miles Orvell, "America in Ruins: Photography as Cultural Narrative," *American Art* 29, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 9-14, <https://doi.org/10.1086/681651>.

The idea of entropy is central to the work of Robert Smithson, an artist I look to for inspiration. Being a land artist, his work automatically puts him in the category of those who explored the idea of place through their work. His work primarily deals with order and disorder and a futility of construction, given that everything is bound to disintegrate with the passage of time. Hinting at the inevitability of disintegration in architectural sites, he stated that ‘buildings don’t fall into ruin after they are built but rather rise into ruin before they are built’<sup>7</sup>. He referred to all new material construction as ‘ruins in reverse’.



Fig. 4. *Robert Smithson, Non-Site: Line of Wreckage, Painted aluminum container with broken concrete, framed map, and three photo panels, 59" x 70" x 12.5", 1968.*

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Smithson, "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey" (1967), in Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1996), 68–74.

*Non-Site: Line of Wreckage (Bayonne, New Jersey)* is one of his many works that is grounded in this idea and reflects his interest in places that are in transitional states, whether under construction or falling apart. This sculptural work was constructed with materials scavenged in New Jersey, particularly rubble from Bayonne.



Fig. 5. *Points of Divergence*, Oil on Canvas, 12" x 24", 2020.

*Points of Divergence* is one of the prime examples of architectural disintegration in this series of paintings. It features a section from the floor of the Wazir Khan Mosque in Lahore that is known for its elaborate frescos and intricate tile work locally known as *Kashi-kari*. Constructed in the year 1641, every facet of its structure has undergone a significant amount of wear and tear. The

broken brick-paved floor of the courtyard, just like everything else in the building, serves as a reminder of the splendor that characterized its past. Observing these ravages of the past sets one adrift in time as punctual chronologies are slowly undone.

## CULTURAL ALLUSIONS

*“The quality that we call beauty, however, must always grow from the realities of life, and our ancestors, forced to live in dark rooms, presently came to discover beauty in shadows, ultimately to guide shadows towards beauty’s ends.”<sup>8</sup>*

-Jun’ichiro Tanizaki

Cultural allusions are also prominent in most of the paintings. These allusions or references to particular cultures that I stumble upon during my explorations represent the individuality and character of a particular place and the diversity of cultural dimensions. There is a plethora of examples highlighting the relationship between architectural form and culture in literature: Walter Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project* investigates Parisian arcades in light of industrial capitalism, Jun’ichiro Tanizaki’s *In Praise of Shadows* highlights the cultural impact of the Orient on the architectural preferences of the Japanese population, Georg Simmel’s essay *The Ruin* posits architecture as an extension of the human spirit itself, etc. A notion that underlies these influential texts is that the interconnectedness of architecture and cultural identity is a direct result of the interactions between people and their natural environment over time. Architectural environments have characteristics that define them and differentiate them from others. These characteristics are influenced by a number of factors including both conscious and unconscious perceptions of one’s past, one’s daily experiences and behaviors, belief systems, and one’s future aspirations.

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<sup>8</sup> Jun’ichiro Tanizaki, *In praise of shadows* (New Haven, Conn: Leete’s Island Books, 1977), 18.





Fig. 6. *Supernova Debris*, Oil on Canvas, 20" x 24", 2020.

Symbols and signifiers, be it in the form of pattern or text, are inextricably linked to the aesthetic preferences of people who inhabit the region and ultimately impact the shaping of particular architectural sites. This is perhaps the most apparent in paintings like *Supernova Debris* that depicts a tessellation of multisided polygons, a language of geometry that is mostly characteristic





Fig. 7. *Prejudice and Error*, Oil on Canvas, 30" x 24", 2020.

of Islamic art and architecture. The particular pattern, taken from the Lahore Fort in Pakistan, is derived from a complicated arrangement of interlaced circles and four-sided polygons. Geometric patterns are one of the three types of non-figural ornamentation styles employed in Islamic art, the other two being vegetal motifs and calligraphy. The Metropolitan Museum of Art states how ‘whether isolated or used in combination with non-figural ornamentation or figural representation, geometric patterns are popularly associated with Islamic art, largely due to their aniconic quality.’<sup>9</sup> *Prejudice and Error* also features a patterned floor of a dilapidated structure in the Walled City of Lahore that was architecturally reformed in the Mughal era.

The nature of correspondence between culture and architecture is also noticeable in *Enamored of Distance*, a painting that depicts more than one element tethered to the Turkish culture and heritage. The first cultural allusion, and perhaps the more prominent one, is channeled through the Turkish *Boncuk*, or the blue evil eye charms embedded within the concrete flooring represented in the painting. Despite being centuries old, these charms that are believed to ward off evil eye are a popular cultural symbol of present day Turkey. Besides their usual blue, black and white aesthetic, these amulets are also associated with the tradition of glass making in the Mediterranean where they are believed to have originated. ‘

Another aspect of this painting rooted in the Turkish culture is the Iznik tile that serves as the focal point of the painting. Iznik tiles are a remnant of the Ottoman heritage and are crafted with painstaking detail. The Iznik craftsmen replace a significant quantity of the traditional clay that is typically used in ceramics with quartz for the base of the tile and the under-glaze. Intricate floral

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<sup>9</sup>The Metropolitan Museum of Art, “Geometric Patterns in Islamic Art,” accessed March 15, 2020. [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/geom/hd\\_geom.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/geom/hd_geom.htm).



Fig. 8. *Enamored of Distance*, Oil on Canvas, 18" x 24", 2019.



Fig. 9. *Nazar Charm*.<sup>10</sup>



Fig.10. *Iznik Tile*<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Contributors, "Nazar: The Powerful Amulet against Evil's Eye", WeMystic, <https://www.wemystic.com/nazar>.

<sup>12</sup> Contributors, "Rüstem Paşa Tiles", İznik Çini, <https://www.iznikcini.com/blogs/news/rustem-pasha-tiles>.

and geometric patterns are then painted onto the tile in rich, vibrant hues. The subsequent glazing and firing processes further intensify the colors before the tile is finally ready to use. Iznik ceramics are a prominent feature of important public spaces and monuments in Istanbul such as the Topkapi Palace and the Blue Mosque.

Despite the presence of cultural illusions in the work, the viewer is not expected to draw exact associations or think of specific geographical locations upon encountering the work. The intention behind creating the work is an attempt to heighten the sensitivity of the viewer to the passage of time and to invite them to pay attention to the communicative potential of visuals that usually go unnoticed.

## FORMAL ASPECTS AND PROCESS

The tones, colors, and precise mark making that I employ with the realistic depictions of the ground are choices governed by the subject matter. There are areas of the painting where the brushwork is muted and almost invisible and areas where it is swifter and looser. Sometimes, the gesture of the hand is easily discernable, and at other times it is almost imperceptible. The tight marks are usually reserved for areas that require precision and the looser, more noticeable ones are devoted to generic descriptions. Moreover, the use of multiple glazes allows for an illusion of depth that is impossible to achieve with direct painting.

For this body of work, I have mostly stuck to a cool palette and its fairly neutralized derivatives. I resort to a warm palette only in certain areas of the final layers to give an illusion of advancement. The palette usually constitutes a wide tonal variety, with several tints and shades of each hue that allow for a successful communication of chiaroscuro and volume. I tend to avoid loud, jarring contrasts and prefer to stick to muted and nuanced transitions. Moreover, I often find myself gravitating towards analogous and monochromatic color schemes.

The rigorous process of executing each painting is indicative of a deep commitment to the ostensibly simple surface of the ground. Some depictions of place are life-size, while others are either enlarged or shrunken. Some surfaces are depicted as perpendicular to the viewer's line of vision, while others offer a subtle shift in perspective and allow for some spatial recess. This is meant to avoid predictability or a fixed pattern in the way that the viewer moves from one piece to the next.





Fig. 11. *Between Two Eternities*, Oil on Canvas, 24" x 12", 2019.

My process involves visiting places and taking photographs of visuals that I find interesting. Once I have compiled the photos, I analyze them, pick out ones that I find particularly appealing and edit them to execute compositional decisions. Each photographic source that I choose to paint presents a unique set of challenges in terms of color accuracy and composition. Moreover, with areas of minute detail, I tend to improvise and veer away from the reference photo, which can be frightening and exciting in equal measures. With each painting, the goal is always the same, but the path that is taken to achieve the end result is definitely unique. For instance, in the painting titled *Mutation*, I followed the general positioning of forms, however I departed from the reference image in several areas by changing the shapes of the forms, altering the temperature in certain parts of the painting and inventing details and information in others.

Photographic sources are pivotal to my art practice. The importance of photography to any photorealist painter is perfectly summed up by Foucault in the following quote. Referring to pop artists and photorealists, he states that what these artists produce ‘when their work is at an end is not a painting based on a photograph nor a photograph made up to look like a painting, but an image caught in its trajectory from photograph to painting’ and that ‘they do not incorporate images through their painting technique, but extend technique itself into the great sea of images.’<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Catherine M Soussloff, *Foucault on Painting*, (United States: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).



Fig. 12. *Mutation, Oil on Canvas, 30" x 24", 2020.*



I find myself specifically paying attention to the remnants of human presence strewn across the path I take: the hard edges of a bobby pin embedded in layers of mud, the saffron colored streaks of *paan* on the road, the glint of Mardi Gras beads against the matte, monochromatic spread of pebbles, initials of lovers' names carved onto the once freshly cemented pavement, spray painted graffiti on floors near train stations, an arabesque of hair on an otherwise pristine marble floor, footprints stamped onto an expanse of sand. These visuals direct my thoughts to the millions of people who may have halted at the exact same spot as me at a moment in time. It makes me cognizant of how I am literally always walking in other people's footsteps. What cultures and places did those people belong to? What collective histories did they share? What chain of events led them to halt at that particular spot? Where were they headed? The questions that come to mind are endless.

Painting as a medium is extremely relevant to my work. My decision to depict my subject matter in paint is rooted in the extremely slow painting process that acts in concert with the depiction of surfaces that have evolved over a long duration of time. Painting is chronological, as is the process of wear and tear. To employ a medium that could capture such a slow occurring phenomenon with a shutter click in less than a second would not offer the same parallel. Moreover, my fascination with the specificity of oil painting as a medium has also factored into this decision. The practice of thoughtfully weighing and balancing horizon lines, vanishing points, hues, tones, transparencies, wet and dry brush marks, and color variables greatly intrigues me.

## ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

*Vija Celmins*

When it comes to process and technique, Vija Celmins has been a primary influence on my practice. The precision of Celmins's touch makes itself felt. There's a mimetic wit noticeable in most of her works. Even before one tries to box her drawings and prints into a particular stylistic category, the eye is immediately drawn to their accuracy. She maintains a uniform degree of precision over every inch of the paper. The viewer can look anywhere on the surface and discover some detail of whatever is being represented.



Fig. 13. *Vija Celmins, Desert, Lithograph on Paper, 12.4" x 16.4", 1975.*

One of the four lithographs made from a series that Vija Celmins did of the day sky, the night sky, the surface of the ocean and the desert, this is the only one that points to the ground as subject matter. There is a suggestion of the ground being situated in a place, however, the viewer is not provided with any contextual specificity whatsoever. There's no horizon line so the viewer is forced to encounter the limited information present within the confines of the lithograph. However, what this image lacks in context, it makes up for in its painstaking and obsessive attention to detail. While this image does refer to place, it looks at it in conjunction with the idea of representation and realism. The notion of time enters the equation in more ways than one. In the Modern Art Notes Podcast, Vija Celmins says to the interviewer, "sometimes I think that something I have made has no meaning except that it has the meaning of a block of time that I took to make it". Moreover, a sense of temporality is suggested through the surface of the ground and how it alters with time. In her depictions of constellations, moon and oceans using precise techniques, there is a balance between the abstract and photorealism that I particularly feel drawn to.

*Ellen Altfest*

Ellen Altfest has also proven to be another major influence on my art practice. Working on a one-to-one scale, her art evolves out of a direct observation from life and each painting, being extremely detailed, typically requires several months to over a year to complete. Altfest, unlike other painters, does not economize on mark making or use of color to generalize areas within a composition. The diligent mark making is uniformly applied to each part of the surface, which is something that I also aspire to do.



Fig. 14. *Ellen Altfest, Tree, Oil on Canvas, 8.125" x 11.25", 2013.*

Compositionally the paintings are all tightly edited and framed, almost encroaching on the subject's space whether it be a patch of the model's skin or the wrinkled surface of a cactus plant. The subject matter is usually cropped at unlikely places, imploring the viewer to take a moment to make sense of what is being depicted. I find myself approaching my subject matter in a similar, deliberately controlled manner.

The painting *Tree* that was displayed at the Venice Biennale in the year 2013 features a detailed section of a tree trunk as the subject matter. Despite being a small painting, it was painted from life over a span of thirteen months in a forest in Connecticut. Not only does the rigorous process of painting this piece serve as a testament to her stamina, it also points towards her deep commitment to a seemingly ordinary object. Describing the harsh weather conditions that Altfest had to endure during the making of this artwork, an article from New York Times<sup>13</sup> explains how when the cold became too extreme, the artist had to purchase a snowsuit on eBay to alleviate the condition so she could continue to paint. Her commitment to the craft of painting is indeed laudable and definitely serves as an inspiration.

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<sup>13</sup> Randy Kennedy, "Warming to Painting in the Cold," The New York Times, accessed March 16, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/09/arts/design/ellen-altfest-and-13-months-of-venice-biennale-painting.html>.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, the body of work that I have created in the past seven months is an amalgamation of several thematic and formal concerns. Ideas of place and home heavily govern our sense of belonging and impinge upon our psychological wellbeing. As human beings continue to wrestle with these dense ideas, they continue to modify the ground that they walk on by adding to it or taking away from it, beautifying it or defacing it, building upon it or razing it, sometimes intentionally and sometimes not. As human beings continue to mark the environment they inhabit, accountability is largely laid to rest. For individuals who consciously decide to alter the surface of the earth anonymously, there is a definite, undeniable appeal: it allows them to experience a freedom of expression without the pressure of being judged. Contrary to this, those who decide to engage in building processes and adornments get to experience the joy of creation.

At this point in time, the ground holds my interest more than any other visual phenomenon. Gazing at the fractured skin of the Earth heightens my sensitivity to the passage of time, making me think long and hard about the communicative potential of visuals that usually go unnoticed. This leg of the process is almost addictive. It compels me to go to unfamiliar places and recreate the experience that I have grown so fond of. As pebbles, gravel, dirt, and sand ultimately make their way into my work, I cannot help but daydream about future excursions.

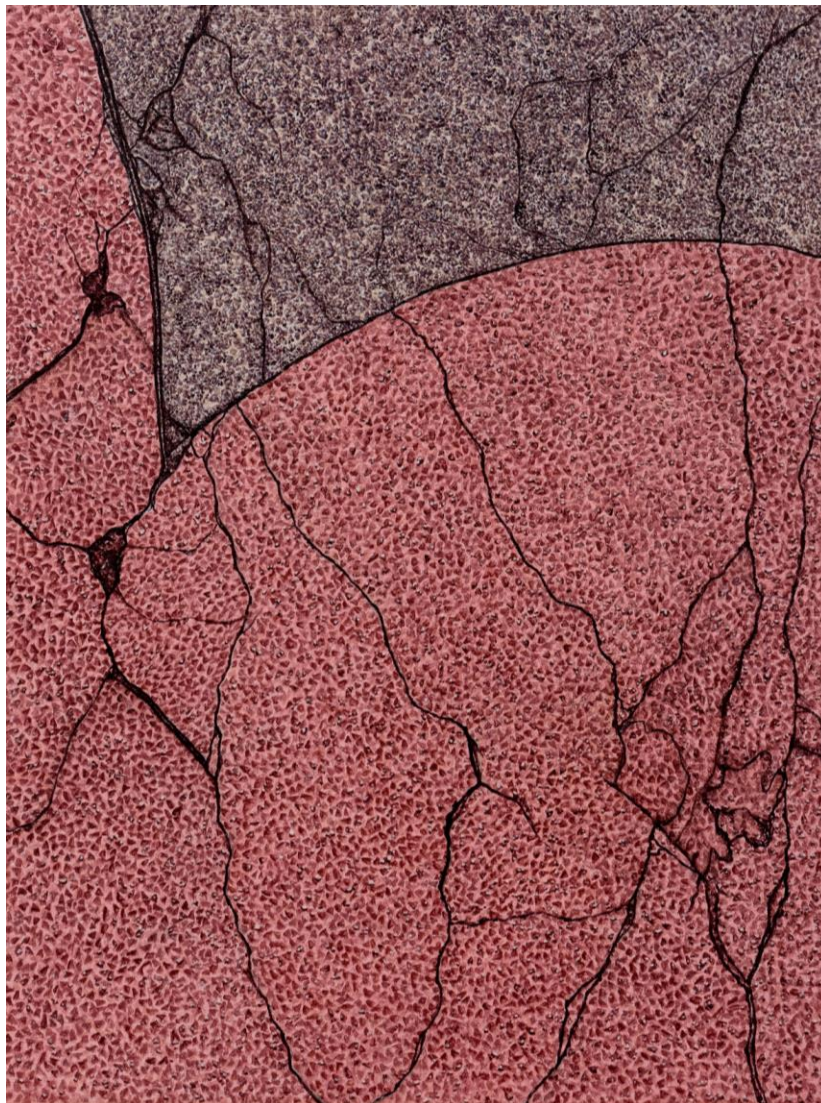


Fig. 15. *Bifurcations, Oil on Canvas, 16" x 12", 2020.*



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