Sympathy for the Complex:
Three Particular Experiences and How They Shaped My Aesthetic

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MASTER OF FINE ARTS
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Three Particular Experiences and How They Shaped My Aesthetic

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Introduction

I am someone who believes in the complex. In my research and expression I am willing to pursue many tangents. Too often we have a tendency to want to simplify our understandings of the world so that we may feel as though we “know” a subject. At the same time I have a desire to make the complex accessible, honoring the unknown and the pursuit of understanding.

Through drawing, print, collage and found object sculpture, my artwork presents the precarious and dynamic balance of transformative processes. My work questions the relationship between human and organic structures, evokes skepticism towards narrative sequence, and explores the way language transforms culture and shapes consciousness.

As I have spent time reflecting on the many threads my work has traveled during graduate school, three particular experiences come to mind that relate to: flow, body, and field. These seemingly simple concepts are the lens through which I propose that we look at the world with a more complex vision. It is with this vision that my artwork advocates for the beauty of the complex and the simple as a single symbiotic construct, a construct with which we can peer into the ongoing process of our world.
Growing up in Saint Paul and Minneapolis, twin cities that together straddle the Mississippi, I feel a close relationship with rivers. A fact that may not be directly apparent in my creative work, but nonetheless one that informs who I am as a person, what I believe in, and how I think. Rivers surge and flood, while their currents flow they are a force of continued transformation.

During the spring and summer of 1993, when I was 7, I remember seeing the waters of the Mississippi being high and seeing floating debris. At that age I would have had little context for these strange happenings. I know that my Mother and my maternal Grandmother went on a trip to see the flooding of Minnesota’s Red River. I remember seeing in photos and on the news half submerged homes and businesses, a roof sticking out of the water like a strange island. Boats floated down streets, homes floated down rivers, peoples possessions surrendered to the currents. Despite not having an understanding of the tragedy, I knew that the river was a thing at once beautiful and terrifying. That spring was perhaps my earliest sublime experience and images from that experience have persisted with me.

Figure 1: Untitled 72 x 30 Digital Collage inkjet print on Kozo-Shi with folds and map pins. 2012

In my second year of graduate school I pursued an untitled series in which one of my driving interests was floods and storms. Untitled 72x30 (fig 1), is a composition that responds to this impulse to render floods. Two flood scenes are digitally

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1 This untitled series from 2012 and 2013 will always use the titling system of Untitled followed by its width and height in inches. Anytime one of my works is titled in that way, it will always be from that series. In addition, there is a subseries that is always titled Untitled Remnant and then a numerical value to denote it as part of the series.
collaged multiple times in blue across the width of the composition. On the far right in the same blue, a tracing of one of Hokusai’s scenes of Mt. Fuji is digitally collaged and the tracing is of a row of houses that I have altered so that the homes dissolve into bones and driftwood, crashing upward as if cast by a powerful wave. In the center, the moon acts both as the cause of shift in tides and as witness. On either side there are renderings of the orange plastic chairs that can be found in many of the public school classrooms across America. The chairs with the flooding recall the strange feeling I often had as a child that everything could be drastically changed in a moment. This feeling was strange because the fear was coupled with a sense of being part of an incomprehensible entirety. As a child, I had no tools for articulating this feeling, which is presumably why these images have been recurrent through out my life and is likely a driving force in my creative expression.

Figure 2: Casual(Causal)
Barricade with Ladder Jutting Installation 2012

The flood of 1993 also inspired a series of rapidly made found object sculptures and installations entitled Casual(Causal). Using mostly discarded planks of wood, as well as found objects, furniture, and rope, each day I would make a new piece responding to the previous piece while keeping to a series of aesthetic rules. With a limited color pallet, I thought of these as drawings in space. They had to appear precarious, existing somewhere between something human made and something that may have occurred as flood waters receded. Ideally they would look as if they are snapshots between moments. Documenting them along the way, I had to make them with a feeling of casualness knowing they would be different the next day.
In retrospect, what is interesting about *Casual(Causal)* is that the process of making the series relates to rivers in a different way. The process of responding to the previous work became a matter of flow. Prior to thinking about making artwork in terms of flow, I thought about making in much the way one plans a journey. Each piece, or series, was a destination, for which I would pre-plan the tools and the research I would need to do to arrive at the destination, and the actual making became a necessity of arriving at the conclusion.

I first learned the lesson of flow on the Saint Croix River. When I was 19 years old, I worked at a camp where each week we took a new group of young people on a three-day canoe trip down the river. Being on the river each week under different conditions and with people of different abilities, I had to learn to be all right with not knowing which campsite we would arrive at. I had to learn to just go with the flow. By extension I started to think about narrative differently. In a way, stories can be reduced to a transformative experience, one where the subject begins, goes through a transformation in the middle and ends transformed. There is a problem with this way of thinking as it presumes that we actually arrive, transformed and complete. Like the flow of a river, transformation is a constant. There may be different paces but the process of change is always happening.
Like rivers, my artwork embraces the constancy of flow and transformation. Works like *Untitled 12x15* and *Untitled 16x18* (fig 4) feature multiple superimposed images. In keeping with this sense of flow, some of the superimposed images are drawings based on the *Casual(Causal)* series. The superimposition of images engages the viewer to move through the image and not just across the surface. Further, the entire series recycles the same cast of images, acting as signs whose significance is mysterious and seem to change in relationship to what they are superimposed upon.

The flow, transformation and recurrence of signs in the *Untitled* series of 2012/13 is reminiscent Jorge Luis Borges' short story *Garden of Forking Paths*. In the short story it is revealed to the protagonist that his ancestor's, Ts'ui Pên, mysterious rough drafts of a novel and labyrinth are actually one and the same. The key to the mystery is to understand them as a "garden of forking paths." Rather than proceeding linearly, Ts'ui Pên's novel is one where at every possible turning point every possible outcome is written as if they occurred simultaneously. While the *Untitled* series doesn't share the same collapse of narrative, as a series, the viewer is invited to follow many different pathways, finding relationships within individual compositions and between compositions. These pathways lack beginning, middle and end, and like a river, the decision of where to enter and exit is left entirely to the viewer.
Another important consequence of both the 1993 flood and the summer spent guiding youth down the Saint Croix is that I have developed a strong interest in the complex relationship humans have with the natural world. Like rivers, humans are transformative agents in the ecology. Part of the reason why the Mississippi flooding caused so much damage is that we have transformed it a great deal in order to allow us to live near it. Through trenching, locks, and levees we have attempted to narrow and deepen the river, control the flow of its currents and prevent it from meandering. As a result, people have built homes and businesses in places that were once floodplains; floodplains that were historically replenished by the river in spring. Marshes that once lined the river acted as filters, absorbing some of the pollution that the currents carried downstream. Now, because of our imposed control, it is safer for us to live along the Mississippi and rivers in general, but there are fewer fish and those that there are, are not safe to eat. This, like other environmental issues, is often on my mind when I draw and compose. Uncertain of what can or should be done, my artwork focuses on the complexity of the problem rather than offering solutions. Through my artwork I advocate seeing equal value in all transformative processes while calling upon us, humanity, to hold ourselves accountable for the consequences of the choices we make.
I distinctly remember the moment in which it rained and I knew what rain was. Before that my earliest memories of nature are blue, grey and brown. Not the damp blue, grey, and brown that is often accompanied by fire red and the decaying smells of autumn, no this was their dry hue. There must also have been green because I remember sprinklers and the trees didn’t whither and die, so maybe it was the dryness itself that made the atmosphere blue, grey and brown. The drought of 1989 ended somewhere before my fourth birthday in Minnesota.

A specific moment from that hot dry summer is etched into my memory: I am walking through the doorway from the dining room into the kitchen on my way the backyard. One of my parents is doing the dishes, they say my name and I look up. Using their fingers they spritz my face with cool water, a playful and refreshing act. Closing my eyes and recalling this action, I can feel the first few drops hitting my face and nose. I can see the drops elongated through space, some closer, some further away. In their arc, I can trace their flow and transformation as they hurdle towards me. Frozen in space and time through memory, each drop carries with it a reflection of the room, my parents and myself. This is how the body encounters my artwork.

Before going into depth about this image and how it relates to the body, I think it is best we give it a name and for lack of a better word we will say *asperges*. When using the word asperge, I want to make it clear I do not want to invoke the Catholic tradition, as it is something that I did not grow up with. Rather, I am interested in it from its Latin root meaning to sprinkle or to spring forth, sharing its history with “sparse” from the Latin *sparsus* meaning “scattered.” We can also trace its connection back to the old Greek *sphereg* as well as forward to other words we know today like asparagus, spring and spear. For our purposes, asperges will refer simultaneously to springing forth and to the past tense scattered. In this way we will use asperges as a superposition of dispersal and dispersed.

When we encounter a scene, a series of signs and signifiers asperge from object reality through our attention and into our consciousness. Because our ability to observe is in essence sequential and we are only able to take in a given scene as our body and focus moves through space, at no point are we able to fully observe a scene and the detail of each part of the total scene. Instead we must pass through and across a series of partial observations, catching a spattering of signs as we go.

In my wall installation *To Dance With Stormy, A Chipped Tooth*, I heighten this phenomenological in the body of the viewer. In doing so I borrow from artists like Judy Pfaff, Sarah Sze and Julie Mehretu, all three of whom utilize the language of architecture to guide us through imagined and real space, while grand shifts of scale make us aware of our inability to fully see the complexity of the systems that their work relates to.
To Dance with Stormy takes advantage of the full height of the room, demanding that the viewer remain some distance from the wall to take in the whole scene. There are two large movements from this distance. On the left, bundles of baby's breath rise up like smoke signals or storm clouds dispersing into the upper atmosphere and an embellished stick points you sharply across to the second movement, a leaning chair, precariously perched far above the viewer, which causes the eye to cascade down the wall to the ground and a small pile of scattered stones. The arrangement is set up in such a way that the eye wants to continuously swirl around the installation, but a single small dark spot in the middle of the composition interrupts that movement. The spot is lichen, its function from this distance is to put the viewer off kilter and beckon them to inspect closer. At the distance from which the viewer can see the details of the piece they become aware of the impossibility of taking in the whole at once.

The concept asperge is more directly represented in To Dance with Stormy by the baby's breath or gypsophila. Each sprig is a single spray, the seed nodules acting as individual drips suspended in time, stems tracing their trajectory, becoming an emblem of the asperge. In this way the gypsophila is not just clouds or smoke.
signals, but also the spray of cresting waves like in the flood drawings prior. The encounter with the gypsophila like the moment of water hitting my face when I was a child, is one in which the viewer is made aware of the encounter with a focal point while also simultaneously observing the textural whole of the bundle. By way of an odd coincidence of language, gypsophila has a further connection to asperge in that its name refers to its relationship to gypsum, which aside from being chalk and an ingredient in plaster, is a mineral whose spear like projections gave it the Old English name of *spærstôn* (spear stone).

*Figure 8: Detail; To Dance With Stormy, A Chipped Tooth*

The body of the viewer is moved another way through the lichen. Placed a foot below standard viewing height, the details of the fringed apothecia of the lichen along with its black hairs and the texture on the map pin holding it in place demands the viewer bend over and look closely at its surface. This action mimics the way in which lichen would be encountered in nature, and, in some ways, it also inverses the asperged expression of the gypsophila. Rather than the viewer passively receiving the dispersal of information they must be active, and to the audience behind them their act of inspection becomes part of the greater subject. In this way it recalls issues of the relationship between the microcosm and the macrocosm, as well as human involvement with the world.

Whether it is moving through the gallery space, encountering the gypsophila or inspecting the lichen in *To Dance With Stormy*, what is crucial in the physical experience of the asperge is that it is, in essence, liminal. There are other ways in which the image of asperge relates to my work. The idea of the “garden of forking paths” described in the section on flow, as it relates to the *Untitled* series is one example. The signs are sprinkled amongst the different parts and their relationships springs forward to the viewer as they interact across the totality of the series. In this way we can say that the aesthetic of the asperge is one that makes visible the concept of flow and transformation as it relates to the act of the body observing the field of the image.
In the previous sections, I used specific experiences as metaphor for principles that guide how I look at the world and how those perspectives shape the conceptual and material expression in my work. In Flow, we saw the world as a procession of changes that not only describes an approach of making but also advocates an ethic of responsibility towards the world and an understanding of interconnectedness. In Body, I examined one way that people encounter phenomena and how this way of encountering is essential to my aesthetic approach. Body dealt with both visual field and depth of field. However, there is a third way that in which field can be understood: as the conceptual and material space generated by the relationship of elements. That is a field as defined and organically emerging from the relationship of vectors or principles.

In The Sympathy of Things: Ruskin and the Ecology of Things, Lars Spubroek, architect and author, presents an argument for John Ruskin's idea of the Gothic as being critical to the future of digital tools in architecture. He proposes an aesthetic he calls digital Gothic. His argument can be seen as a way of describing how the combination of redundancy and variation provides the active rigidity that reverberates through the ethos of Gothic architecture, rendering it organic, and how that organic expression can be expressed in new ways through digital technology. While not as academically rich, I arrived at a similar concept intuitively after reflecting on my encounter as a young person with the computer program, Conway's game of Life, commonly called Conway's Game of Life. While playing with it I began to see how using only a simple grid and a set of rules you could arrive at the immensely organic.

Life is an example mathematical concept of cellular automata. Mapped out on a regular grid of cells in which each cell has a finite number of states, say filled in or empty, cellular automaton advance generationally to form a pattern obeying a set of fixed rules, typically a mathematical function. As a very simple example, imagine an infinite piece of graph paper. Fill in a cell, this first square we will consider the zero generation. Then follow the subsequent rules: if a cell is filled in, fill in the first neighboring cell on each of its edges (North, East, South and West) unless that new cell would share an edge with more than one cell of the same or previous generation. The automata would proceed as in the following image:
A slight variation of this simple rule is one that I use as a background pattern on many of my pieces, for example Islands in Crackling Blueness.

![Image](image.png)

*Figure 9 Islands in Crackling Blueness: inkjet and collage.*

In 1970, John Horton Conway devised the more complex cellular automata entitled the *Life* that through time and a two-dimensional grid of cells was designed to be a
In 1970, John Horton Conway devised the more complex cellular automata *Conway's Game of Life* that through time and a two-dimensional grid of cells was designed to be a very simple simulation of life. In the cellular automata each cell exist in two possible states, 'alive' (black) or 'dead' (white). Every cell interacts with the eight cells that are immediately adjacent or *neighbors*. At each point in time the following transitions occur:

1. Any live cell with fewer than two live neighbors dies. Under population.
2. Any live cell with two or three live neighbors lives on to the next generation.
3. Any live cell with more than three live neighbors dies. Over population.
4. Any dead cell with exactly three live neighbors becomes a live cell.

Reproduction.

Each generation proceeds as a function of the previous one with 'births' and 'deaths' happening simultaneously.

Conway's simple program is an example of emergence, but before we get there, I think it is important that we return to its possible relationship with the gothic. By adding a third state of cells in which the cell receives a third color for having formerly been 'alive,' while changing no other rule (that is they are still technically dead), interesting patterns emerge. Most interesting is that if by drawing a straight line of whatever length greater than six cells, the pattern of the 'corpse' cells looks astonishingly organic. With intricacy increasing as the length of the line increases, it eventually starts to look like a Persian rug. How interesting! From a single 'rib' all sorts of beautiful seemingly organic patterns can arise.

![Figure 10: Examples from Conway's Game of Life seeded with simple straight lines](image)

Through Spuybroek's understanding of Ruskin's rules, let us examine this strange relationship between *Life* and Gothic motif. Spuybroek changes the order of and list of the characteristics of the Gothic as: redundancy, changefulness, rigidity,
naturalism, savageness, and grotesqueness. The outer edge of the shape formed by the ‘corpse’ cells (once they reach a certain level of complexity) is astonishing with repeated but changeful branching and forms. Through time, redundant ribs form into interesting tessellations. They appear natural and after all, they arrive from a natural system simulator. However, where it differs with the Gothic is in savageness, on the largest scale there is no break with symmetry, no broken forms, everything is smooth and continuous.

Figure 11: John Ruskin Plans of Piers

So there is something interesting going on here in both the overlap and differentiation. From the two examples, *Life* and Ruskin’s idea of the Gothic, something that to our eyes feels organic emerges from the vectors of seemingly simple principles. This emergence through the harmony of the simple and the complex can be seen throughout nature, from the way crystals form to how trees know where branches should grow, how organisms emerged from simple replicating machines, and even, according to some theorists, how consciousness emerged.

The initial way in which my work responded to emergence was by way of Richard Dawkins’ initial description of memes. A meme is analogous to a gene in that it is a replicating machine, only instead of replicating proteins, a meme is a mimicked behavior or idea that spreads from organism to organism. An earworm whistled by a neighbor that is stuck with you all day causing you to whistle is an example of a meme. Just as a gene’s longevity within a population is defined by its fidelity in replicating itself, so is a meme’s.

Like a gene code, memes evolve by way of variation, mutation, competition and inheritance, complex ideas emerging from simple units of exchange. In this way it can be said that language emerged from a simple set of guttural utterance into the complex flourish it has today. This idea was one that I attempted to simulate in the *Untitled* series. By using a liquid archive of drawings/matrixes as individual meme units or signs, I was creating an ecology and each image was a freeze frame in their co-evolution. Unfortunately, I couldn’t figure out how to remove intention from the equation and so this aspect of the work was less successful than other aspects of the series. Learning from this, I made a series of thirty-inch by forty-inch collages in which I used islands as a metaphor for the ecology that these signs exist in. Rather than simulating the ecological forces, I was drawing connections between the idea of ecology and linguistic development.

In the piece *Islands in Crackling Blueness* fig 6+ map-like drawings of islands sit in a field created by cellular automata, suggesting an ecology adrift in a sea of simple principles made complex. In the piece *Island: Cliff by the Sea*, we see a single island
in profile, drawn on top of and merging into a background that looks like a zoomed in part of the *Untitled* series. In the island’s green vegetation we can see tracings of images from the liquid archive. The cliff face is a sedimentary rock with tracings embedded in them from that same liquid archive, as if fossils. From the whole scene a golden ladder rises, suggesting the long reach of generations, yet the ladder is broken, alluding to uncertainty. Two additional ladders spread like wings, suggesting alternate potential, as they emerge out from the pyramid shaped cutout that the island rests behind.

![Figure 12 Left Island: Cliff by the Sea. Right Apostle Islands](image)

The piece *Apostle Islands* is drawn from a specific set of islands off of Wisconsin’s Lake Superior coastline. The piece features a superimposition of styles: detailed impressionism, expressionism, maps, and the cellular automata, evoking each of these aesthetics as ecologies of memes, all of which share a common landscape.

It was through making the triptych *Dilapidated Assembly* that I arrived at how my work really relates to the idea of emergence, and what the principles are that my aesthetic emerges from. In each part of the triptych I have traced the same drawing, I think of the original image as the matrix while the light table and my hand are the press through which the matrix is repeated. Each drawing is both a repetition of and a variation of the original. This simple act is reminiscent of Ruskin’s principles of the *savage* and the *redundant* in that the image is repeated but, through the imperfection of my hand, is varied. By shifting the paper and adding and subtracting information in the tracing, my hand engaged in what I had been doing through digital collage. However, it was through the act of doing it by hand that I became aware of what I was doing. It is through the act of decision-making and mistakes that the organic emerges in my work, and through it the
interests I outlined in flow: interests such as the equity of transformation and our accountability as transformative agents.

Repetition and modularity are key concepts in my aesthetic and appear in multiple ways. Whether through the Casual(Causal) sculptures or through the To Dance With Stormy: A Chipped Tooth installation, or any of the other installation projects or versions of my work, there is a suggestion of precision in the placement and an implication that the parts can be moved. In the Untitled series, the repetition of images from my liquid archive suggests that the significance of the signs exists within a context.

However, this idea of repetition and modularity for me does not stand on its own. If it did, the logical path for my work would be for me to repeat varied images along a grid, or for me to focus on hand making enormous cellular automata. This indexing or mathematical approach would succeed in conveying the complex in an accessible way, yet to my mind it would lose the feeling that the complex nature of the world offers. For this is reason the asperge is key to my aesthetic, by this suggestion of things simultaneously dispersing and dispersed, and by having a kind of spread of images, my work asks the viewer to draw connections. Through making connections between these different vectors, a flowing transforming field emerges. The asperge and the emerging field are together my aesthetic, which could be labeled through a portmanteau of the two words aspergence.

Aspergence is an aesthetic and a way of seeing in which the shifting forms of relationships is place in higher importance than the subject of the vectored signs. The resulting conceptual space of these is a field, a field that is at once sensory and
cerebral and the feeling of searching for understanding is amplified within it. The aspergent field aesthetic is a way of describing the phenomenological lens with which we interact in the world, whether it is walking into a gallery, through the woods or interacting with the politics of a social situation. It is the space in which our awareness is flowing and transforming through a procession of experiences in which relationships between signs are drawn and others dropped. The space between experiencing and identification is amplified in the field of this aesthetic.

Within my work, this aspergent field aesthetic is one that through modulation, embellishment, and hand drawing asks for sympathy from the viewer. I not only present aspects of the complex and the precarious state of potential disaster, but also invite sympathy for them. After surveying my research during the masters program, I can move forward by honing in on presenting the aspergent field sympathetically, by focusing not on making the complex accessible, but rather by invoking the desire to access the complex.