An Honors Degree Project Presented for the
Partial Fulfillment of the
Degree of BACHELOR OF FINE ARTS in
PAINTING

Life/Death/Life: Exploring Cycles through Visual Metaphor

by

Lauren Kathleen Middleton

DEPARTMENT OF ART, ARCHITECTURE, AND ART HISTORY
College of Humanities and Fine Arts
University of Massachusetts
Amherst, Massachusetts
April 2012

Advisors:

_____
Jeanette Cole – Chair

_____
Michael Coblyn – Member

_____
William T. Oedel, Chair, Department of Art,
Architecture, and Art History

_____
Francis Merrigan
Undergraduate Program Director: Studio Art

As a person and as an artist, I am interested in life and death cycles as they pertain to the physical body and to human psychology and relationships. Learning to let go of people, of past loves, of places I once called home, and of beliefs about myself and others is a process that I feel deeply and consistently. My work has come to be both a document of working through painful and negative emotions and an experience of learning to use wisdom to know when it is time for something to stay or go. Sometimes I participate in this process gracefully, instinctively knowing when it is time for one thing to end and another to begin and accepting these realities wholeheartedly, conscientiously pruning what is in the way and leaving what is protective to fragile, new life. But more often, my mind rejects this process with such ferocity that I am left in wonder at the human tendency to cling to the old and the familiar; thickets of sharp thorns are created around ideas and people, barriers to the balanced cycles of growing and withering. I am continually fascinated by this idea of holding on versus letting go, and even more fascinated by the ever-present struggle to trust that letting go of one thing does not mean the end of all things, to trust that new life will always arise out of what has been lost.

The Jungian psychoanalyst Clarissa Pinkola Estés calls this concept the "Life/Death/Life nature." In her famous work *Women Who Run With the Wolves*, she writes that it:

> is a cycle of animation, development, decline, and death that is always followed by re-animation. This cycle affects all physical life and all facets of psychological life. Everything – the sun, novas, and the moon, as well as the affairs of humans and those of the tiniest creatures, cells and atoms alike – have this fluttering, then faltering, then fluttering again. (Estés 137)

She explains the cycle further with myth and archetype, likening the death aspect to a deity, Lady Death, who "has the role of the oracle who knows when it is time for cycles to begin and end" (Estés 138). Later, she expands on this idea and explains the human fear of endings and letting go:

> In much of western culture, the original character of the Death nature has been covered over by various dogmas and doctrines until it is split off from its other half, Life. We have erroneously been trained to accept a broken form of one of the most profound and basic aspects of the wild nature. We have been taught that death is always followed by more death. It is simply not so, death is always in the process of incubating new life, even when one's existence has been cut down to the bones." (Estés 142)

Artists, poets, and plenty of others have recognized and pondered this idea for years, as evidenced by Edvard Munch's words, "From my rotting body, flowers shall grow and I am in them and that is eternity" (Speyrer), as well as Sylvia Plath's poem *I Am Vertical*, which muses on the returning of one's body to the earth after death: "I shall be useful when I lie down finally:/ Then the trees may touch me for once, and the flowers have time for me" (Plath). In contemplating these ideas myself, the natural world of organic matter has always been the obvious teacher for me. Both of my parents instilled in me awe, respect of, and familiarity with the earth, the wilderness, and its hidden rhythms and powers that have provided an endless source of imagery and metaphor for my work that is both universal and deeply imbued with personal meaning. Despite the distractions of the modern, developed world, I find myself consistently pulled by the lapping and crashing of water, the moon's ever-changing size, shape, and position in the sky, and sunlight filtering through the newly unfurled greenery of early summer. My earliest days of sorting through the confusing feelings of love and loss were situated against these natural wonders, permeating these images with emotion, meaning, and memory that has continued to grow in depth and breadth, gathering new associations with each day that I carry them in me. Continued observance has revealed that the tides go out and then return, the moon wanes to blackness and then grows round again, and the same leaves that swelled with air and life at the height of summer will wither and fall, only to bud again the next spring. These cycles that nature displays with such grace, and that often feel so violent and painful to me – more akin to Dylan Thomas's ecstatic but harsh description of growing up amid the cycles of the

natural world: “Time held me green and dying” (Thomas), is the “fluttering, then faltering, then fluttering again” that Estés describes.

Among the draw of these cycles of life and death all around me in the natural world, nothing has ever felt as real, personal, or high-stakes as their presence within my own body. Traditional Chinese medicine teaches us that imbalances in one’s relationship with the forces of life and death and of holding on and letting go relate to “disharmonies” and deficiencies of the blood, especially that of the liver, which will metaphorically play out in disturbances in the cycles of the female reproductive system (Kaptchuk 254). According to Ted J. Kaptchuk in *The Web That Has No Weaver*:

> The Liver’s Blood is responsible for…unhurried cyclical movements… [It] provides for the capacity to feel and experience pain. Pain is an unavoidable and necessary ingredient of life. Blood allows for acceptance; the Liver’s Blood creates tolerance and “more room” for the limitations and boundaries imposed on human existence. … Insufficient Blood wants to make things different and causes a person to tense up or excessively resist or react to inevitable pain. (Kaptchuk 255-6)

In other words, Insufficient Blood causes a person to resist the pain that often comes with the struggle to let something go or let something “die.” Paradoxically, the cycle that this state of imbalance can harm, that of menstruation, is also perhaps a woman’s most powerful and personal teacher in learning to accept the cycles of life and death.

Blood is a universal symbol of both life and death. Fresh, bright red blood nourishes the body, transfers life from mother to fetus, and symbolizes vitality, but at the same time can indicate fatal hemorrhage, bleeding-out, and loss of the life force, too much of which leads to inevitable death. Inherent in blood is the knowledge of how to hold on and how to let go at the appropriate time, “a delicate ‘grasp and release’ maneuver” performed by the hemoglobin molecule’s central core of iron attracting and releasing oxygen with ease to allow nourishment of all the cells in the body (Shlain, Sex, Time, and Power xi). Menstruation is particularly symbolic

of the Life/Death/Life force because it is bleeding without dying, the perfect example of shedding life that has become stagnant and unusable, but always to be resurrected a number of days later – a mystical power that primitive man may have found most frightening (Shlain, Sex, Time, and Power 63). Through accepting the inevitability of this cycle in her own body, Leonard Shlain hypothesizes that primitive woman would have thus learned to accept fate (Shlain, Sex, Time, and Power 60). In an effort to explore and depict in paint the life and death processes of holding on and letting go, of accepting what is instead of longing for what can no longer be, I have chosen images evocative of the organs and processes of the female reproductive system as personal visual "equivalents" (Castro 71) for my red body of work.

Figure 1 - *unfurl*, 2012, watercolor on Claybord, 24" x 18"

Red paint has always been the logical choice for me in depicting this subject matter. Red paint has universal symbolism as "a substitute for blood" and is a "sign of *the* taboo, the blood of the woman" (Harding 57). Blood is observed as a symbol of kinship relatedness by the anthropologist David Schneider, and in the saying "blood is thicker than water" (Harper). Red is the color of cords of connection between self and other, such as that of the umbilical cord connecting mother and child, or the red thread that Chinese legend says connects each person to whom they are destined to marry (Webster 11). Red is also symbolic of passion, love, and fire. It

can represent danger, sex, and that which is forbidden; it is an agitating and shocking color for many people. While making shocking imagery was not my intention with these images, I have discovered that the emotions behind them – those of being unable to let something go or to move on according to a socially acceptable timetable – are viewed as shocking and almost shameful by other people. Painting these works is simultaneously a documentation of my horror, confusion, and self-loathing at my inability to let go of something in a timely manner, and a literal, physical process that I use to teach myself how to do so.

Paint application in the creation of this body of work has two major phases. The first stage entails Letting Things Happen. This is important to the theme of my work because it requires surrendering, letting go, and patience. It is dictated by feeling. I choose combinations of colors that call to me (in the case of the red works, primarily Cadmium Red, Cadmium Red Deep, and some Indian Red). I first focus on getting as much of the chosen pigment onto the surface as possible, typically covering almost the whole thing, and doing little planning or worrying about what shapes and patterns are created as the pigment separates and dries. My choice to paint with watercolor on Claybord panel requires this surrender because the water and pigment do not soak into the Claybord like they would watercolor paper; instead, they tend to separate and bead on the surface, making it nearly impossible to retain the shapes one first puts down. The tradeoff with this initial uncontrollability is that the surface is completely reworkable. I work flat during this initial stage, often making liberal use of a spray bottle and sponges, painting wet into wet in order to create beautiful but random color gradations and blending, allowing the water to dictate where the pigment ends up instead of trying to control it too much. This phase is akin to the method art therapist Shaun McNiff describes in his book *Art as*

Medicine in that it is "movement-based" and comes from the "responding mind" instead of the "strategic planning mind":

> Just paint. Begin to move with the brush in different ways. Watch what comes. If you paint, it 'will come.' Nothing will happen unless you begin to paint, in your own way. (McNiff 33-4)

The chance visual effects that occur are a result of how much water I use, having to get up and take a phone call in the middle, causing part of the surface to dry early, a slant in the table, or a slip of my hand. They represent the surrender to even the "wildish aspects" of cycles, played out in the unpredictable way water runs, dries, and carries pigment. I try to let the color take over for the time being and focus on how it makes me feel, creating shapes that are pleasant to make instead of worrying about what they are like right then. That will become clear in time. Knowing this takes trust, however, because at this stage the work generally appears as chaos, since the pigment is everywhere but looks like nothing, and I find I have to suspend my judgment of the work in order to carry on and complete the making of the image.

Figure 1 - *unknowing I must soon unpetal*, 2012, watercolor on Claybord, 24" x 18"

The second, much longer phase entails Making Things Happen. I generally let the entire surface dry, which can take several hours, and then start to look at the result and begin to make more conscious choices. I try to let the shapes speak to me – what do they want to become? Then I do my best to make it so. It begins quite subtley; I see the faintest glimmer of a form and I

run with it. It is important that I have gotten enough pigment on the surface during the previous stage that I can now really push it around with the brush. It is a mostly reductive working style: instead of starting with a blank surface and building up layers, as is traditionally done with watercolor, I start with a relatively opaque, pigment-covered surface and then lift away in order to carve out an image, a process almost akin to sculpture. It is somewhat additive and subtractive, where I lift away, put down more pigment, then perhaps lift away again, working the surface until I am satisfied with the shapes and values that I have created. It is also an important act of balance during this stage to choose which wild, loose elements from the first stage will remain unworked, and which areas will be reworked more forcefully. In a sense, this process satisfies the Insufficient Blood's desire to "make things different" discussed earlier, by giving it tangible form.

I chose to paint monochromatically to 1. unify the entire body of work and to 2. unify the central abstracted organic form in each work in one way (color) so that the forms' more subtle differences are emphasized, calling attention to their ambiguity and the multiplicity of meaning and association that the viewer may bring to the work. I have long been fascinated with the Surrealist painters' ability to create images that are two things at once, such as in Salvador Dalí's 1937 painting *Swans Reflecting Elephants*, in which three swans float on the surface of a lake, but their mirror

Figure 3 - Salvador Dalí, *The Metamorphosis of Narcissus*, 1937, oil on canvas, 20.12" x 30.75"

image reflected in the water is that of three elephants standing on the near shore (Universe Publishing 198), or his painting *The Metamorphosis of Narcissus* (Figure 3) from the same year which depicts the same basic structure in two ways, as both a young man kneeling with head bent on the left, and as a giant hand holding an egg hatching a flower on the right (Universe Publishing 202-3).

I construct my own central forms in such a way that they may simultaneously appear as placentas, nebulas, flowers, cardiac and vessel tissue, shell interiors, vulvas, and fruit-like shapes, but in all cases I attempt to create subjects that appear complicated, delicate, and membranous, thus giving the impression that they are indeed living, breathing structures. Watercolor as a medium lends itself to this because organic tissue is chiefly comprised of water, so there is some relationship between the structure of organic matter and the structures that are created with the suspension of pigment in water and its subsequent drying. The effects created with the watercolor's tendencies speak to the fragility, transitory-ness, and ever-moving cycles of all life. Water is never still – it is always moving and going somewhere, always changing state – and I try to emulate this in the experience of looking at one of my works. In *unfurl* (Figure 1), a vulval, flower-like form unfolds in two halfs from the center, *unknowing I must soon unpetal* (Figure 2) simultaneously suggests the interior organization of a pomegranate-like fruit and the

Figure 2 - *the birth of Venus*, 2012, watercolor on Claybord, 24" x 18"

interior divisions of the lungs or heart chambers, and *the birth of Venus* (Figure 4) evokes the curling and fluttering tissue of flower petals, while also mimicking an open shell complete with pearl, or a moon-like orb emerging from a cloud of gaseous nebula material. In this way, these works have the potential to suggest multiple forms at once and rapidly move the viewer between a micro and macro experience of organic matter.

The landscape pieces perform a similar function. These too contain a central organic form that is simultaneously mountainous and vulval, or otherwise evokes a musculature that implicates the body. These works often contain orbs as well, that function as moons when they appear high above the horizon line, such as in *sky is womb and she's the moon* (Figure 5), or pearls again when they appear lower, seemingly having been drawn down or captured by the pulsing organic life below, such as in *the sky is turning red/return to power draws near* (Figure 8).

Figure 5 - *sky is womb and she's the moon*, 2012, watercolor on Claybord, 24" x 18"

Sometimes I know a painting is finished right at the moment that what I have actually painted becomes unclear; in other words, when the work and its forms achieve multiple as opposed to singular meaning. If I go one step further or make just a few more changes, the form or setting may clearly become one thing instead of many. I like the confusion and ambiguity that is created when I stop at this point, because I like to see something new in my works each day, and I like the tension that I feel when

I cannot decide which thing the form is more like. Rendering my forms abstractly further allows for this.

While it is clearly possible to create similar effects of multiplicity in oil paint and in a more "realistic" style, such as the previously mentioned works by Dalí, too often I eventually become disappointed in looking at them and discovering that instead of the many meanings I crave, they have a more clear-cut "one or the other" approach – the form is either a swan or an elephant, either Narcissus kneeling over the stream or a hand cradling an egg – but never anything else. They are almost simple optical illusions, akin to the famous Which Do You See? tests in which one looks at an image and either sees – for example – an ornate vase or two people gazing at each other, formed by the negative space. Once you see one, you cannot un-see it, and the discovery of that part of the work immediately stops for me. I prefer to create images that are many things at once, with associations that are constantly changing, even to me. The light, what day it is, what I am thinking about – all these alter how I see my own work. I strive to create images that are concrete enough to be suggestive, but with enough ambiguous aspects that the depth of their meaning only grows over time, that with each day and life experience that passes, they take on more and more new meanings for me. Only the passage of time can truly tell if I have succeeded in this.

Text is also an important part of my painting process. Words that I consume - everything from books, to poems, to song lyrics – stick in my mind and pop into my head while I am painting and something I see in what I am creating jogs their memory. These lines have found their way into the titles of these works and serve as mantras during their creation, because often, in their out of context and cut-down states, they contain more ambiguity and meaning than if they were part of a longer passage. The multitude of feelings and ideas that are contained in these

short lines help remind me of all that I wish to convey in the work. M. Esther Harding explains this phenomenon:

> Of a symbol we can never say "this is this," or "that is that," translating each factor into equivalent terms of the known. For the symbolic creations of the unconscious contain layer after layer of meaning which cannot be exhausted in a word. (Harding 64)

Thus, words first help me to arrive at my subject matter, and then later help me to describe it.

In both the red close-ups and landscapes, an overall sense of symmetry, along with a sense of movement, have become very important in the functioning of the compositions. The bilateral symmetry of the central form, the feeling that you could fold it vertically down the center of the panel, indicates an organic subject matter and speaks to the balance of cyclical movements that these works are about obtaining. Estés writes about learning to balance the Life/Death/Life nature through the lens of a romantic relationship:

> Rather than seeing the archetypes of Death and Life as opposites, they must be held together as the left and right side of a single thought. It is true that within a single love relationship there are many endings. Yet, somehow and somewhere in the delicate layers of the being that is created when two people love one another, there is both a heart and breath. While one side of the heart empties, the other fills. When one breath runs out, another begins." (Estés 142)

I see each half of these paintings almost as separate works that nonetheless have a communicative relationship with each other. They are not exact mirror images of each other, and although I rotate the panels as I paint so that both halves are more or less evenly worked, the left sides tend to be more articulated than the right sides. They could be thought of as sets of lungs, cross-sections of flowers or other organic materials, or the two halves of an open shell. As in these works, there is imperfection in the symmetry of all life, so their inexactness does not trouble me, and creates a visual tension that attracts and holds both the eye's and mind's attention.

In developing my own personal visual language to convey the Life/Death/Life idea, studying the life and death imagery and techniques of the 20th century American painter Georgia O'Keeffe has been instrumental. O'Keeffe is famous for her "sensual, vulvar flower" paintings (Shlain, The Alphabet Versus the Goddess 126), as well as her renderings of cow and bull skulls, often juxtaposed with flowers against the New Mexican landscape. Although these two different images seem unrelated, Shlain argues that the skulls mimic the form of the female mammalian reproductive tract, unifying both the flower and skull images as abstracted representations of the feminine (Shlain, The Alphabet Versus the Goddess 125-6). Interestingly, O'Keeffe often chose to paint both the flowers and skulls head-on, creating an equivalency between the two forms that supports this connection. Regardless of her intentions, O'Keeffe's paintings of organic structures are suggestive of other forms, and can be seen simultaneously as representative of both sides of the life and death cycle (flowers representing life and skulls representing death), and as a larger metaphor for this cycle played out in the female reproductive system. In finding a way to paint my own floral, vulval, and other organic structures, O'Keeffe's compositions, vibrant use of colors, and treatment of edges and layers have been greatly informative.

Figure 6 - Georgia O'Keeffe, *Small Purple Hills*, 1934, oil on board, 16" x 19.75"

O'Keeffe's landscapes have slowly begun to inform my work as well. In looking at her landscape works, I became intrigued by her rendering of the hills and mountains of New Mexico, and the relationships she created between the earth and the sky. O'Keeffe painted the land with exagerrated curves, folds, depressions, swells, and hollows that implicate the body. While oil paintings such as *Purple Hills* from 1935 and *Small Purple Hills* (Figure 6) from 1934 appear as more convex forms, and *The Mountain, New Mexico* from 1931 and *Red Hills Beyond Abiquiu* from 1930 are rendered with less depth and appear more convex, all of these works place the landforms head-on, at eye level with the viewer, and with a high horizon line and very little sky (Lynes, Poling-Kempes and Turner 72-95). Among other things, this results in "a tendency to distort scale towards monumentality or to leave it ambiguous" in terms of the land forms (Castro 106). In other works, however, such as the watercolors *Light Coming on the Plains II* (Figure 7) and *Light Coming on the Plains III* from 1917, tha land is minimized and flattened, and an expansive sky is emphasized (Castro 166-7).

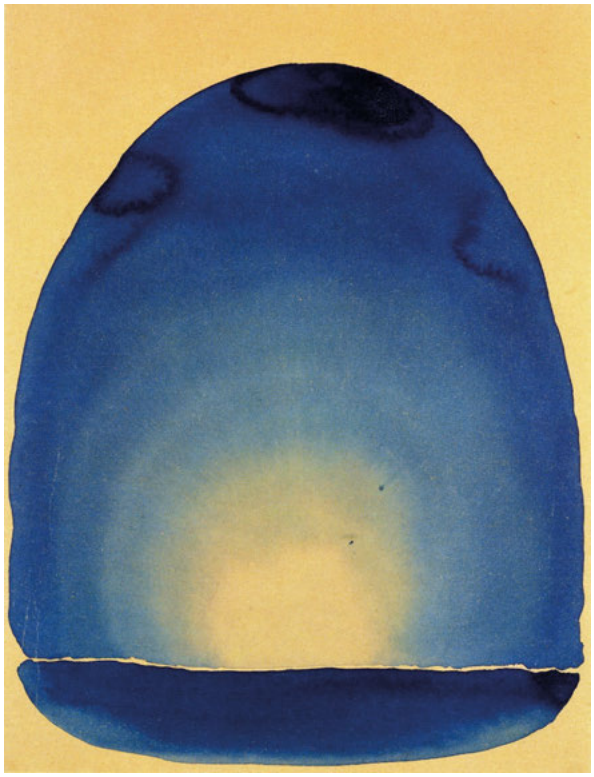

Figure 7 - Georgia O'Keeffe, *Light Coming on the Plains II*, 1917, watercolor on paper, 11.875" x 8.875"

I traveled to New Mexico for two weeks to study O'Keefe's life and work in the context of the landscapes she painted in preparation to create my thesis work. One key question I had was to understand the sense of scale of these landscapes in person in order to better appreciate

how O'Keeffe translated this into her paintings. In being immersed in the landscapes she painted for an extended period, I was struck by how much visible sky there is, and how small the landforms often seem in comparison. Because most of O'Keeffe's landscapes focus on the dips and folds in the earth and include little, if any, sky, I was not prepared for the feeling of an immense sky above me when I arrived. I concluded that although O'Keeffe's landscapes abstract the exact forms of the earth structures, exaggerate their colors, and often alter their sense of depth and scale, the feeling that one has when looking at the same structures in person is often the same as when one looks at the painting. Seeing the landforms in person that O'Keeffe painted gave me an appreciation for her subtle but powerful abstraction of the landscape in order to evoke a specific feeling and a sense of momumentality that makes even the smaller hills into large, muscular structures that hint at an inner, rippling life.

Figure 8 - *the sky is turning red/return to power draws near*, 2012, watercolor on Claybord, 24" x 18"

In my own landscape works, I have tried to emulate O'Keeffe's grace in abstracting the landscape to convey the feeling one gets from it as opposed to rendering it as a work of realism. My own works, such as the aforementioned *sky is womb* (Figure 5) and *the sky is turning red* (Figure 8) contain much more sky than many of her paintings, simply because that is what struck me the most upon being in the landscape myself: looking up and seeing the full moon with so

much empty space between it and the land I stood on. I was also deeply impressed upon learning that the northern New Mexican landscape, nestled between the Sangre de Cristo ("Blood of Christ") and Jemez Mountains, sits on the second largest rift valley in the world and is near the Valles Caldera, an area that was incredibly volcanic thousands of years ago. The combination of imagining the hidden inner workings of this geologic activity under the earth, and observing so many of O'Keeffe's concave landforms that she painted head-on like her flowers and skulls, inspired me to paint my own mountains in an almost cross-sectional way, allowing the two halves of the forms to simultaneously deviate and meet at the center line, giving the impression of material erupting or bubbling up from below, exemplified by *leaving terra* (Figure 9).

Figure 9 - *leaving terra*, 2012, watercolor on Claybord, 24" x 18"

Other painters of these Southwestern landscapes seem to have been inspired in the same way, leading to a similar approach. For example, the American watercolorist Keith Crown (1918-2010) was known for his abstracted New Mexican landscapes such as *Taos Mt. &Talpa from the Mesa* from 1994 and *Tres Orejas Near Taos* (Figure 10). Both of these works emphasize the strata in these landforms, creating a cross-sectional view and hinting at the region's history of geologic activity, particularly in the bright, magma-red layer that hugs the bottom of *Tres Orejas* (Keith Crown).

While my foray into zoomed out landscape compositions with large skies is in some ways a departure from the close-ups of smaller organic structures, they are simply a continuation of the vaginal, floral forms in that the cavernous mountain can be a visual equivalent for that part of the body, a crossroads or doorway, a place of transformation or passing from one thing to another, and a continuation of the life and death metaphor. In Chinese medicine, the body is often described in terms of a landscape, using nature metaphors such as the elements of water, wind, and fire to explain its various harmonies and disharmonies (Kaptchuk 240). Acupuncturist Lorie Dechar explains how "these images give us a way to bring dignity and meaning to simply random psychological symptoms" (Dechar 59-60) and equates the master acupuncturist to a mountain, "a connecting link between heaven and earth, through the effortless yet absolutely precise placement of the acupuncture needle – a celestial lancet – in the point on his patient's body" (Dechar 7). On the subject of the body and landscape, she writes:

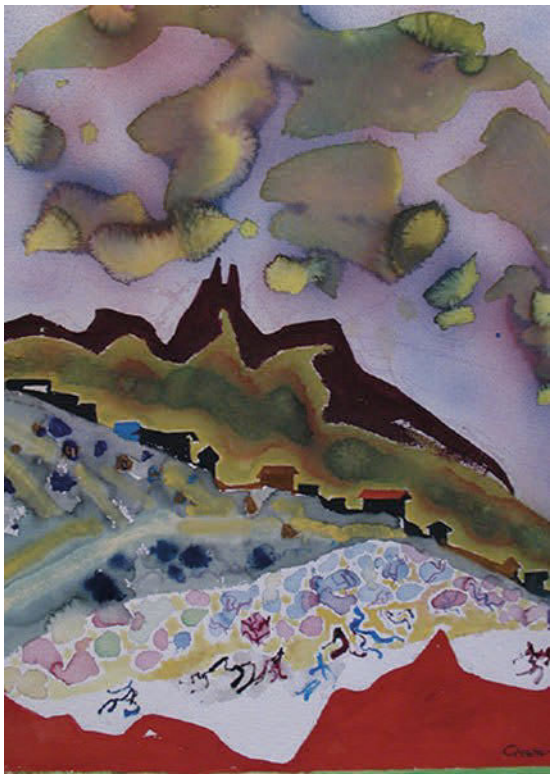

Figure 10 - Keith Crown, *Tres Orejas Near Taos*, watercolor, 30" x 22"

> The Chinese word [for the acupuncture point] is *xue*, which refers to a cave, a hold or hollow space. So the acupuncture point is viewed as a doorway, a nothingness, an opening in the material matrix of the body. (Dechar 36)

These hollow spaces in the earth, like the female reproductive spaces in the body, can serve as places for transformation, letting go, and unblocking, both metaphorically and literally, in the

cycles of life and death. Kiiko Matsumoto and Stephen Birch expound on this idea in their work *Hara Diagnosis: Reflections on the Sea*:

> The xue were locations on the surface of the earth, divined using the relationships of symbolized principles. Many of these principles are shared with acupuncture theory. The choice of these xue, or locations in the landscape, was determined by many factors, including locations of mountains, rivers, and nearby streams. Once found, these locations were used as gravesites. Here, the energies of the earth were in harmony with the energies in heaven. These places represented propitious spots to bury the dead, since the harmonious geomantic relationship would ease the passage of a corpse's energies into heaven and earth." (Matsumoto and Birch 20)

Thus, while my close-up organic forms represent a place of letting go that is internal, the landscapes contain similarly structured external "locations" that serve the same function.

The contemporary pianist and singer-songwriter Tori Amos also explores this connection between blood, the body, and the land in her concept album *Scarlet's Walk.* She talks about the idea of each person's individual "body map," in that the people and feelings of one's past "are written on your body and they've made you what you are" (Amos). In *Scarlet's Walk*, the main character, Scarlet, takes a journey across America looking for pieces of her history and body map. Much of the focus is on Scarlet's (and Amos's) connection to the native people of North America, such as the Cherokee, who were forced to leave their land for the Trail of Tears by European settlers, where many of them perished (Amos). The writer Neil Gaiman, a personal friend of Amos's, introduces the album and describes Scarlet as "a girl…who may be the land and may be a person and may be a trail of blood" (Gaiman). This description, containing multiple meanings and metaphors, draws another connection between the body and the land through the force of blood.

My red body of work can also be interpreted as containing these connections. In a sense, creating these works is part of finding pieces of my own body map, a way of healing and reclaiming lost soul parts, as shamanism would describe it. McNiff writes: "Shamanic cultures

throughout the world describe illness as a loss of soul. The shaman's task is to go on a journey in the search of the abducted or lost soul and return it to the sick person" (McNiff 21). He goes on to explain:

> The shamanic notion of soul loss is a metaphor for soul's tendency to elude the grasp of consciousness as well as its more primal detachment from feelings. The soul cannot be lost in a literal sense because it is always present with us. However, we do lose contact with its movements within our daily lives, and this loss of relationship results in bodily and mental illness, rigidification, the absence of passion, and the estrangement from nature. It is the nature of soul to be lost to that aspect of mind that strives to control it. … The loss of soul is a necessary element of our work, a prerequisite, because its absence stimulates a longing for its return. (McNiff 21)

Thus, creating these works also functions as a mechanism for understanding how the pieces of people and places I have had to leave behind are still carried with me. In explaining her view of the influence of the Trail of Tears on the song "Your Cloud" from *Scarlet's Walk*, Amos says:

> So much of it is about segregation, even of a raindrop, the separation of that, the tearing apart of a tear. Extracting that, cutting that apart, the division. It's about separating that which you cannot separate, not really. There will be strands, there will be molecules. And taking those people from their land, the land of the ancestors. Taking a child away from its mother. That doesn't mean that there aren't pieces of that child still in that mother just because it's been [] delivered from her womb. Because a couple separates doesn't mean that there aren't pieces of him still in her." (Amos)

Studying the Life/Death/Life nature has taught me that letting go does not have to be the violent, unpleasant struggle that it so often becomes when fear of losing the familiar surfaces. We retain the intangible marks that emotional experiences have left us with: "nothing is gone… it's just, on your body map" (Amos). McNiff's assertion that soul is not truly "lost," but simply made unconsciouss, and that "the experience of soul is a fleeting sensation of consciousness, [] never a permanent or fixed condition" (McNiff 21) assures me that finding and reclaiming these pieces in my visual work will be a continual process that I will participate in again and again.

While using red to paint largely vaginal and floral imagery is an endevour I have been working on for some time, the second, green body of work I produced is relatively new in terms of subject matter and, to some extent, technique. Although the use of green presents a large visual departure from the red body of work, in subject matter and meaning these green works are simply an extension of the same thought, much as the oxygen-carrying hemoglobin molecule in red blood cells and the chloropyll molecule in plants only differ by a single atom (Shlain, Sex, Time, and Power 39).

Figure 11 - *the sky of the sky of a tree called life*, 2012, watercolor on Claybord, 24" x 18"

Green is also connected to Liver Blood in Chinese Medicine; the color corresponds to the Liver and the Wood element in 5-Element Theory, and relates to the seasonal cycles of Spring, Birth, and New Growth (as it is evocative of the spring shoots of plants) (Chow and Smith). This also connects to McNiff's explanation of the lost soul:

> The Liver houses the Ethereal Soul (Hun) and Liver Blood in particular "anchors" the Ethereal Soul… The Ethereal Soul is responsible for the 'coming and going' of the Mind (Shen)… When Liver Blood is deficient, the Ethereal Soul is not rooted in Liver Blood and this may result in its excessive 'coming and going.' (Chow and Smith)

My transition from red to green at this time makes sense in the context of other traditional systems as well. It is a common practice in food and herb-based medicine to see greens, especially bitter greens (such as dandelion and arugala) as a tonic for early spring. Bitter greens are viewed as liver cleansers, unblocking the ailments of both literal and metaphorial winter.

After processing all that I could with the red, green presented itself as a sort of cleanse to make room for new energy and ideas.

Unlike the red works that are focused on a central, abstracted object with bilaterial symmetry, the green works display a different compositional pattern, where abstracted forms resembling foliage twist, curve, and undulate through the composition, crossing over the centerline seemingly at random. While the shades of green (combinations of Cadmium Lemon, Cadmium Yellow, Winsor Green Blue Shade, Winsor Green Yellow Shade, and Winsor Blue Green Shade) evoke sunlight filtering through foliage, the forms resemble multiple backlit scenarios such as leaves, hand-like forms, seaweed, or cells under a microscope. These works are painted more loosely and are even more abstracted then their red counterparts, which lends to their representation of a feeling, impression, or memory, rather depicting a specific object or landscape.

While the red works embody the struggle against stagnation and to let what is dead go, the green works are a calmer impression of the memory of a time before an awareness of loss, the height of life and summer when the barrenness of winter is a distant memory and the impending autumn is still far away. I have childhood memories of this season reminiscent of W. D. Snodgrass's description of a father pushing his daughter on the swing in his poem *Heart's Needle*:

> Here in the scuffled dust/ is our ground of play./ I lift you on your swing and must/ shove you away,/ see you return again,/ drive you off again, then/ stand quiet till you come./ You, though you climb/ higher, farther from me, longer,/ will fall back to me stronger./ Bad penny, pendulum,/ you keep my constant time/ to bob in blue July/ where fat goldfinches fly/ over the glittering, fecund/ reach of our growing lands./ Once more now, this second,/ I hold you in my hands. (Snodgrass)

These stanzas embody the feeling present throughout the poem of the father's increasingly estranged relationship with the daughter from his previous marriage as the seasons pass, and the

experience of letting go, both psychologically and literally, of a child, and allowing her to become independent. The juxtaposition of the tree image and the child swinging, being pushed away, but always falling back again to be held for a moment, largely inspired these works. As a child, I saw hand-like forms in the leaves of sassafrass and oak trees, and like in 'Heart's Needle,' my memory of swinging up towards this foliage, leaf-hands stretching out to meet me at the top and human hands waiting behind to catch me again is tinged with sadness, both for its symbolism of leaving one thing behind for another, and the unattainability of this state of innocence at this point in my life.

Like the red works, I have tried to imbue the green compositions with an inherent movement suggestive of growing life. The green forms can be seen as tree foliage moving in the breeze, such as in *the trees, like lungs, filling with air* (Figure 12), underwater plant life swaying in ocean currents, such as in *once more now, this second, I hold you in my hands* (Figure 13), or microscopic cells moving and dividing, such as in *under the ancient trees, lie down again and again*. Terrence Malick's 2011 film *The Tree of Life*, which explores the influence and inherent conflict of the natural world's both gentle and destructive tendencies within human patterns of relating, has sequences that depict this evolution of life from the smallest single-celled creatures, to the formation of more complicated underwater plants, to

Figure 12 - *the trees, like lungs, filling with air*, 2012, watercolor on Claybord, 24" x 18"

terrestrial canopies of green with sunlight filtering down, that were a significant visual influence on these works. In this way, the green pieces, like the red works, move the viewer back and forth between a micro and macro impression of life.

The moon-like objects present in some of the green works, such as *the sky of the sky of a tree called life* (Figure 11) and *once more now* (Figure 13), again speak to the cyclical aspects of growing and withering. In ancient times, the moon was seen as a "fertilizing influence," responsible for both the fertility of women and of the crops that the people depended upon to eat (Harding 84-92). The moon and its deities, such as the Babylonian moon goddess Ishtar, were also believed to control the rain, springs, and dew, whose moisture "cause[s] the earth to bring forth the green things." Thus, the image of the moon went hand in hand with that of the lushness of a desert oasis, a bright spot of green life emerging from a barren space; and like the watery forces they ruled over, the moon goddesses were seen as both life-giving and destructive in their dual nature (Harding 110-1).

Figure 13 - *once more now, this second, I hold you in my hands*, 2012, watercolor on Claybord, 24" x 18"

As these works are my first foray in using green to express the concepts of life and death cycles, I expect them to evolve significantly in the future. This green body of work is painted in a similar style to the red works (mostly reductively, and with mostly rounded forms), but I am curious to pursue them in an even more abstracted manner that focuses on the more geometric

shapes and large range of tones that occur when sunlight filters down through layers of leaves. Working in a more precise manner on a more absorbant surface to achieve this patterned effect appeals to me, and I intend to explore it as part of my next body of work. I am also increasingly intrigued by video as a medium with which to explore the Life/Death/Life subject matter because of its ability to capture movement and repetition, elements that are integral to the topic but limited in painting.

Regardless of medium, I expect to continue making work related to the Life/Death/Life nature, and my personal experience with it, for years to come. The key element is the ambiguity of the forms' identities, which allows for a multiplicity of meaning and a unification of a literal, physical experience of life death forces (such as the female reproductive cycle or the blooming and withering of a flower), and a metaphorical, intangible experience of life and death (such as learning to let go of relationships and ways of being that no longer serve). In both cases, the synthesizing idea is Estés's writings on the Life/Death/Life nature, with which one learns to trust that the loss or diminishing of one thing will always be followed by an incoming flux of new life. My work ultimately serves to honor the Life/Death/Life force and the parts of ourselves we are all called on, again and again, to leave behind.

APPENDIX

In addition to my two-week research trip to New Mexico and the body of visual work I produced, consisting of twenty 18”x24” watercolor paintings on Claybord panel, my thesis project culminated in an exhibition of my work at the Augusta Savage Gallery, located in New Africa House on the University of Massachusetts Amherst campus. The exhibition, titled “Life/Death/Life: BFA Thesis Exhibition by Lauren Middleton,” ran from April 17th to April 20th, 2012. The visual work that made up both my thesis project and the gallery exhibiton is documented and inventoried on the accompanying compact disc artifact, while this manuscript descibes the process and ideas behind its creation. The exhibition announcement card is also included as an additional artifact.

WORKS CITED

Amos, Tori. Scarlet Stories. Epic/Sony Music Entertainment, 2002.

Castro, Jan Garden. The Art & Life of Georgia O'Keeffe. New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1985.

Chow, Winnie and Valerie Smith. "Traditional Chinese Medicine Theory Part I, Fall 2010." New England School of Acupuncture lecture notes.

Dechar, Lorie Eve. Five Spirits: Alchemical Acupuncture for Psychological and Spiritual Healing. New York: Chiron Publications/Lantern Books, 2006.

Estés, Clarissa Pinkola. Women Who Run With the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype. New York: Ballantine Books, 1995.

Gaiman, Neil. Scarlets Walk Intro by Neil Gaiman. 2011. Jason Elijah. 26 February 2012 <http://www.yessaid.com/scarletintro.html>.

Harding, M. Esther. Woman's Mysteries: Ancient and Modern. New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1971.

Harper, Krista. "Kinship across cultures." Anthro 106 Culture Through Film lecture powerpoint. Amherst, 6 March 2012.

Kaptchuk, Ted J. "Google Books." The Web That Has No Weaver. New York: Contemporary Books, 2000.

Keith Crown. 11 March 2012 <http://keithcrownpaintings.home.mchsi.com/Crown/Home.html>.

Lynes, Barbara Buhler, Lesley Poling-Kempes and W. Frederick Turner. Georgia O'Keeffe and New Mexico: A Sense of Place. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.

Matsumoto, Kiiko and Stephen Birch. Hara Diagnosis: Reflections on the Sea. Taos: Paradigm Publications, 2011.

McNiff, Shaun. Art as Medicine: Creating a Therapy of the Imagination. Boston: Shambhala, 1992.

Plath, Sylvia. 'I Am Vertical' by Sylvia Plath. 2012. 9 March 2012 <http://www.neuroticpoets.com/plath/poem/vertical/>.

Shlain, Leonard. Sex, Time, and Power: How Women's Sexuality Shaped Human Evolution. New York: Penguin Books, 2003.

—. The Alphabet Versus the Goddess: The Conflict Between Word and Image. New York: Penguin/Compass, 1999.

Snodgrass, W. D. Heart's Needle- Poets.org. 2006. 3 April 2012 <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15302>.

Speyrer, John A. Peri-Natal Themes of Death & Dying in The Art of Edvard Munch. 1995. 9 March 2012 <http://primal-page.com/munch.htm>.

Thomas, Dylan. Fern Hill. 2012. 9 March 2012 <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15378>.

Universe Publishing. The Portable Dalí. New York: Universe Publishing, 2003.

Webster, Richard. "Google Books." Soul Mates: Understanding Relationships Across Time. St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 2004.