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Painting as Data: A New Way of Analyzing the Landscape

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PAINTING AS DATA:

a new way of analyzing the landscape

Hannah Moll, Landscape Architecture Honors Thesis

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PROCESS AND REFLECTIONS

Introduction to the Site

During the 2016-2017 school year, this thesis documented the Arkansas Agricultural Research and Extension Center through a unique process of photographic and analog means to better understand and analyse the functions and systems ingrained in the landscape. This landscape was chosen because of the breadth of existing available data (soil surveys, hydrological maps, topographic maps, agricultural mapping, etc.) and the opportunity to examine an ever changing landscape through agricultural research practices. The AAREC was founded in 1888 at the University of Arkansas, and the goal of the farm was to diversify agricultural practices because many farmers in Arkansas solely grew cotton, which was detrimental to the land and crop yields after years and years of production. Arkansas and many other southern states needed help meeting demands, and they needed the evidence to help prove to farmers that a rotating crop system would alleviate their troubles. As one farmer said, “We do not want science floating in the skies; we want to bring it down and hitch it to our plows (Strausberg 9)”. Today the AAREC is home to state of the art agricultural research department, and this thesis studies 290 acres of the farm located on the east side of Garland Avenue on Drake Street in Fayetteville, Arkansas (Figure 1).

Introduction to the Project

Each of the works in *Painting as Data* tells a story of the land. Dimension lies in the stroke and the etch. Each mark provides information about texture, transparency, and color. The precision of the stroke and line evokes emotion- sometimes emitting tension, sometimes an overwhelming sense of calm. The land speaks its own language through hydrology, geology, and ecology, and people cultivate the land with the help of modern machinery and engineered

chemicals. Together this land is the Arkansas Agricultural Research and Extension Center. As Anne Whiston Spirn says, “Not everyone will be farmers or fishermen for whom landscape is livelihood, but all can learn to read landscape, to understand those readings, and to speak new wisdom into life in city, suburb, and countryside, to cultivate the power of the landscape expression as if our life depends upon it. For it does”(Spirn 26). This thesis explores the following question: how does painting enrich site analysis and the reading of the landscape as a way to discover and analyze both quantitative and qualitative data in landscape architecture?

Scraping paint across the canvas and soil across the earth- they are both a part of an additive and subtractive process that generates. Scraping cultivates a future for new growth. When paint is scraped across the canvas, transparency gives way to underlying information- color, texture, and form. It is a generative process that layers information, thus creating new information. Painting naturally lends itself to an experiential, ephemeral, and phenomenological approach to analysis because of these properties. Painting is a gateway to a new type of analysis in landscape architecture.

The AAREC is a place rooted in time, cultivation, and order. Time in the temporal sense, but also the ephemeral. Cultivation in the agricultural application, but also of the mind and body. Order with a mathematical precision, but never able to fully contain an organic, living form. Impressions of each of these factors are imbedded in the essence of the paintings. Whether the painting carries a more experiential analysis or a more technical form of mapping, each painting speaks to the land as they speak to one another.

Painting Process

Painting as Data contains two central components: a collection of 29 paintings titled *Agricultural Horizons* and a triptych panorama titled *Field B4 - 7:00 AM*. Each of these

collections studies the Arkansas Agricultural Research and Extension Center across the four seasons and layers diverse sets of information into the paintings to better understand the landscape's functions and systematic relationships.

In the first collection shown in *Figure 2*, a continuous horizon transforms across the seasons changing in scale, content, and dimension. The clarity of the paintings is sharpened in some of the works, while it is obscured in others. It is important to understand and analyse the landscape through these different lenses. These lenses add focus and dimension to layers that are not always the most prevalent in the typical analysis process. Mapping the landscape in both a subjective and objective manner allows for exploration, discovery, and formulates a new form of data through the method of painting.

All of the works in *Agricultural Horizons* are composed of several layers that are both additive and subtractive. Each piece started purely as a painting looking at a specific phenomenon on the site, such as perceptual information gathered through site walks and photographs. Some of these paintings remained without laser etching to imbue ephemerality and highlight a strong presence of form and color, but many were documented, then taken into Adobe Illustrator to layer in an etching performed by a laser cutter that would enhance the story being told by the work. These laser etchings included data and mappings of agricultural, geological, and hydrological information, as well as photographs taken on the site. In Figure 3, photos demonstrate the process of addition through acrylic paint, subtraction etching with the laser cutter, and a final additive layer of acrylic paint to bring the piece to completion. This process was constrained to 12"x16" and 18"x32" panels because this was the size of available laser cutters. Despite the size constraint, the process allowed for flexibility and a fluid evolution for each work, where mark making with paint and precision with the laser cutter could combine to create vivid impressions of the landscape.

Each season in *Agricultural Horizons* tracks changes in the landscape through use of color, texture, and distinct mark making. The summer sky is vibrant and active, and it slowly becomes more quiet and muted during the fall and winter months. As the sky changes hue, the land transforms into rust and yellow ochre during the fall when the soybeans begin to die back, then a deep green arises when the cover crop, ryegrass, emerges. The colors in the spring become more vivid in the ground plane and dramatic in the stormy skies.

Figure 2.2

1. Vibrant summer sky
2. View of crop rows and ordered stakes
3. Tractor and altered land
4. Layout of crops grown in 2017
5. Aerial of crop layouts and enlarged color shifts
6. Abstraction of color in ordered rows
7. Linear irrigation system tracing the field
8. HUC 8 hydrologic map

Figure 2.3

9. Figure ground in contrast with the earth it is projected from
10. Rigid grid form juxtaposed with organic nature of vegetation
11. Soybean crop in the morning light
12. Organic form of soybean remains in plan view
13. Silhouette of soybean crop
14. Color fields of crop in plan view
15. Rows of alternating crop species
16. View of rich hillside with muted fall sky
17. Rows of crops featuring tractor path
18. Hillside approaching the pond
19. Soil mapping diagramming sand and silt levels

Figure 2.4

20. Strong horizon and focus on topographic changes
21. Aerial of field patchwork
22. Quiet winter expanse
23. Deep winter sky
24. Vivid cold night

Figure 2.5

25. Muted haystacks
26. Cool, spring morning working on the greenhouses
27. Layered vegetation
28. Aerial of fields
29. Bird’s eye view of eastern farm

In the second collection, an experiential panorama examines field B4 of the Arkansas Agricultural Research and Extension Center over a calendar year. This collection was inspired by a 7AM photo log of the AAEC seen in *Figure 4*, where photos from 3 locations on the site were taken each week to follow changes in agricultural growth, seasonal patterns, and in situ nuances. Shown in *Figure 5*, a 12 foot long triptych inspired by the 7:00 AM Photo Logs studies time on the shifting landscape. This interpretation of the landscape through acrylic paint, graphite, and pastels give dimension to the dramatic morning skies and the soybean and rye grass plots below. Examining the landscape through both photographic and analog means is important to accurately communicate the modern landscape.

Conclusion

Returning to the initial question of this research, painting enriches and enhances site analysis as a way to discover and analyze both quantitative and qualitative data in many ways. The medium of paint opens doors to unexpected discoveries simply through its physical properties of transparency, ability to hold texture, and infinite range of colors; it is important to have physical contact in the process of analysis because each mark becomes a part of the motion and memory an individual learned from the landscape. Each individual has the ability to capture new information and formulate this memory into motion through painting. Each individual's perception will be different, and each painting will lead to many interpretations. This is a generative process that frees landscape architects to think beyond typical modes of analysis. The methods used in this research could be applied to any landscape architecture project, and it would open a line of communication between the landscape architect and the client to look at the landscape through a different lense- paintings are accessible to all.

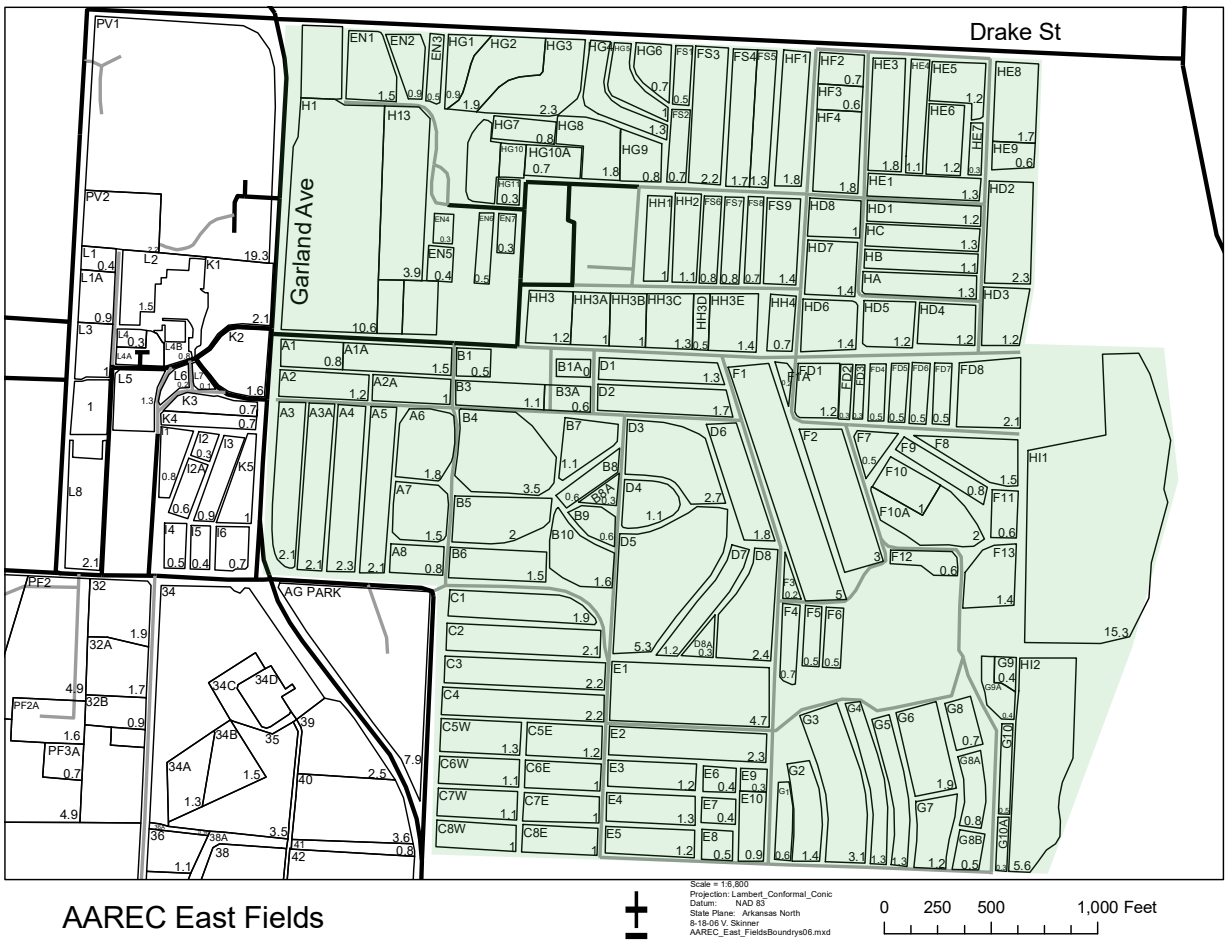


Figure 1: Arkansas Agricultural Research and Extension Center
Skinner, Vaughn. “AAREC East Fields.” Fayetteville: U of Arkansas, 2006. N. pag. Print.

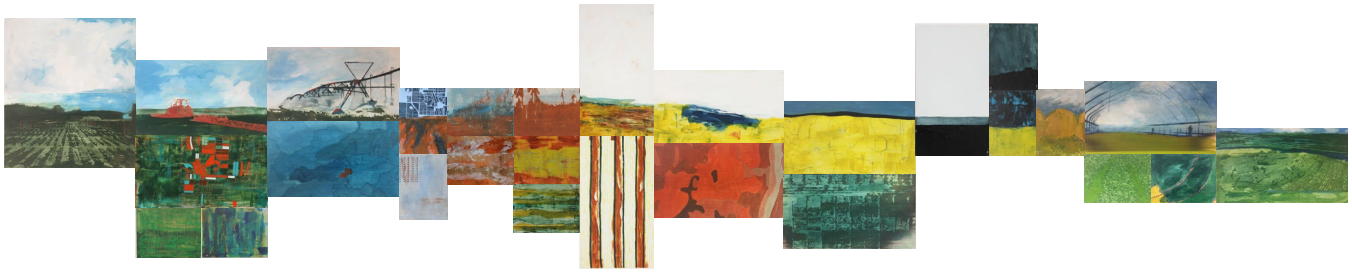


Figure 2: Agricultural Horizons
Acrylic on panel and laser etching, 18” x 32”, 12” x 16”

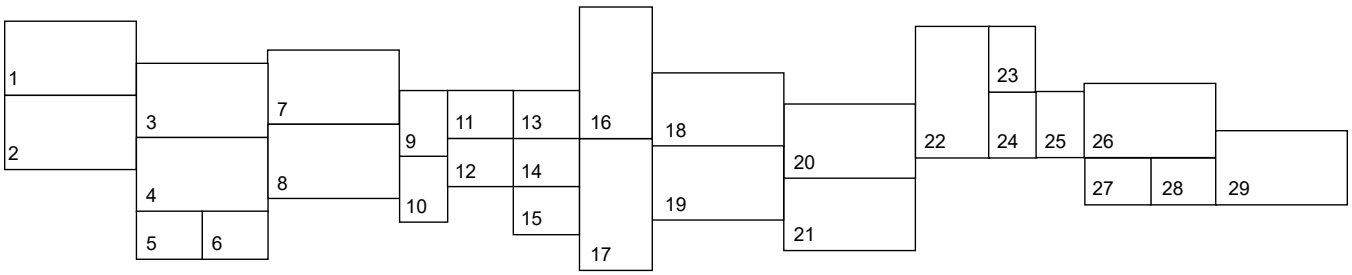


Figure 2.1: Agricultural Horizons Diagramatic Layout
Acrylic on panel and laser etching, 18” x 32”, 12” x 16”

Figure 2.2: Agricultural Horizons, Summer
Acrylic on panel and laser etching, 18” x 32”, 12” x 16”

Figure 2.3: Agricultural Horizons, Fall
Acrylic on panel and laser etching, 18” x 32”, 12” x 16”

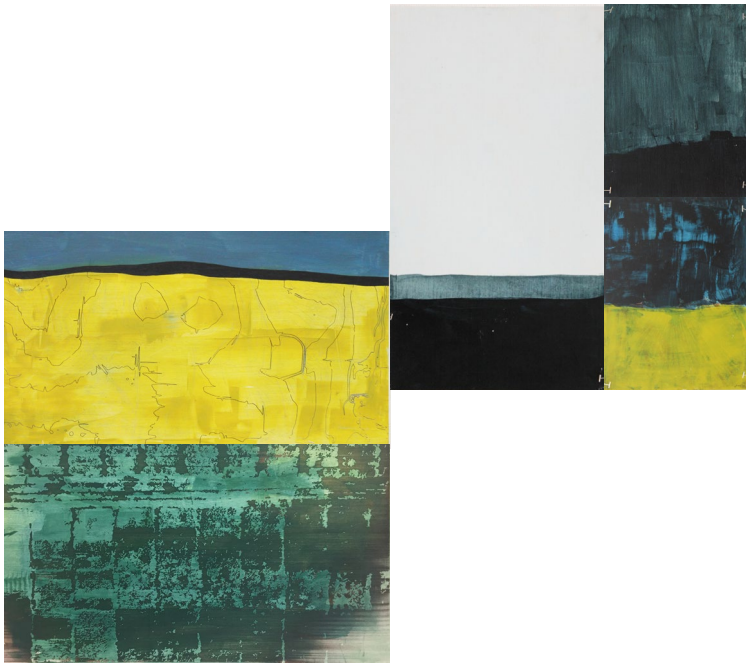
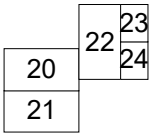


Figure 2.4: Agricultural Horizons, Winter
Acrylic on panel and laser etching, 18” x 32”, 12” x 16”



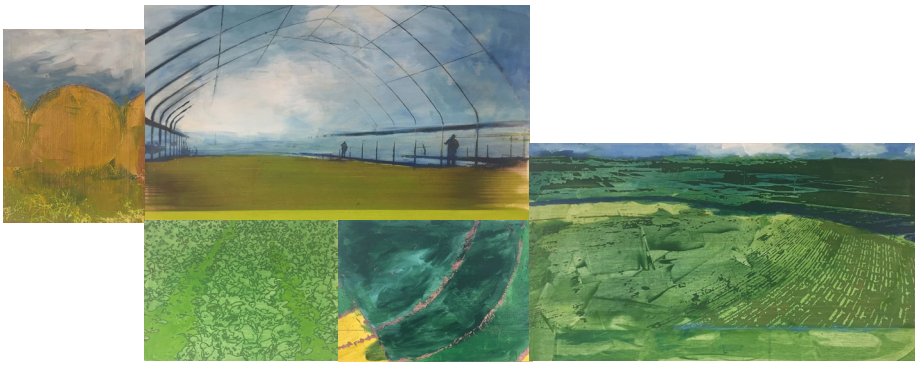


Figure 2.5: Agricultural Horizons, Spring
Acrylic on panel and laser etching, 18” x 32”, 12” x 16”

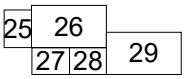


Figure 3: Process Paintings
Acrylic on panel and laser etching, 18” x 32”

Figure 4: 7:00 AM Photo Logs
A photo log was compiled from photographs taken each Tuesday morning at 7:00 AM from October 11, 2016- February 28, 2017. The three books can be read horizontally to view images from one individual week, or each book can be read vertically showing one location and its changes from one week to the next.

Figure 5: Field B4 - 7:00 AM Triptych
Mixed-media on panel, 32” x 96”

Works Cited

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Strausberg, Stephen F. A Century of Research: Centennial History of the Arkansas Agricultural Experiment Station. Fayetteville, AR: Station, 1989. 9. Print.