BETWEEN TWO WATERS

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI‘I AT MĀNOA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

IN

ART

DECEMBER 2011

By

Emily C. McIlroy

Thesis Committee:

Yida Wang, Chairperson
Jaimey Hamilton
Debra Drexler
Dedicated, with all my love, to the enduring spirit of my beautiful twin brother,
John Ross McIlroy.
Table of Contents

List of Plates………………………………………………………………………… iv
Introduction......................................................................................... 1
Between Two Waters................................................................. 3
Process, Healing and the Ocean............................................... 11
Conclusion......................................................................................... 17
Bibliography......................................................................................... 19
Plates................................................................................................. 20
List of Plates

Plate I: Between Two Waters .................................................. 20
Plate II: Between Two Waters I .............................................. 20
Plate III: Between Two Waters I, Panel I ............................... 21
Plate IV: Between Two Waters I, Panel II ......................... 22
Plate V: Between Two Waters I, Panel I (detail) .............. 23
Plate VI: Between Two Waters I, Panel II (detail) ............. 23
Plate VII: Between Two Waters I, Panel III .................... 24
Plate VIII: Between Two Waters I (detail) ...................... 25
Plate IX: Between Two Waters I (detail) ......................... 25
Plate X: Between Two Waters I (detail) ......................... 26
Plate XI: Between Two Waters II ........................................ 27
Plate XII: Between Two Waters II (detail) ...................... 28
Plate XIII: Between Two Waters II (detail) ................. 29
Plate XIV: Between Two Waters, Installation View .......... 30
Plate XV: Between Two Waters, Installation View .......... 30
Plate XVI: Signage Statement .......................................... 31
Plate XVII: Exhibition Announcement (front) ............... 31
Introduction

One day in 2002 a woman found a glass bottle that had washed up on the Isle of Sheppey. Furled inside the bottle was an unsigned letter, written in French, from a grieving mother to her dead son, Maurice. “For a long time he traveled between two waters, between two lights…,” the letter read, “because I couldn’t let him go, I was holding him back.” Now, with his mother’s written sanction, he had “reached harbor again, on a faraway shore” (Liebreich).

Since the death of my twin brother in May 2007, I have endured suspension between a world I cannot yet enter, and a world to which I no longer feel I belong. The world I was once a part of suddenly vanished, replaced by a horizonless space hovering somewhere between what once was and what had now become, between the absolutism of the past and the unknown and unimaginable of a disfigured present. Cast adrift between the depths and the surface of a shoreless ocean, I have been floating between anger and forgiveness, between holding on and letting go. I have been treading between what I consciously know and what I unconsciously cannot accept, bobbing between the confines of my body and a dissolving perception of the world remaining around me. I have both constrained and been constrained by entangled ties to my twin. I have held onto him with fierce tenacity, an inflexibility of will that has kept me—perhaps the both of us—swimming from one threshold to another.

The creation of my thesis exhibition, Between Two Waters, has been a conversation with the twin I have lost, with the world that is without him, and with the creature that is my grief. It is an essential yet still only partial revelation of my extraordinary love for him and for our twinship, and of my struggle to accept and overcome his death. It is a releasing of him from me and me from him, a reclaiming of the life that is mine, and the ways in which my twin remains alive in me. From conception to completion, these artworks have come to symbolize a relationship with grief that has been mediated by the ocean, and are born from the giving away of that grief to the sea, to the universe. My twenty-four-year-old sense of self perished with the death of my twin, but out of this extinction a new existence has emerged.
Governed by forces that both haunt and harbor, torment and befriend, enslave and liberate, my new world is as perverse and precarious as it is suffused with possibility.

*Between Two Waters* explores the physical and psychological features of this disfigured territory— that of the bereaved. It seeks to simulate a world devoid of certitude, a place warped by the vanishing of innocence and frozen by the dissolution of narrative. In essence, it documents my sustained experience of a pervasive liminality, a constant and unceasing sense of being suspended between the outside world and my own subjectivity, between the relentless passage of time and my own broken temporality. This paper will discuss the ways in which the evolving life of my grief is both formally and conceptually registered in the works of *Between Two Waters*, and how their creation relates to the larger frameworks of trauma and contemporary art. It will examine how my encounters with the ocean, as well as the subsequent formulation of my process, have both reflected and regulated the intense pain of grief, while also providing an unexpected passage toward healing. Casting light on the ways in which the death of my twin has shaped my experience of being in the world, it will show how ongoing cycles of destruction and creation— this process of becoming—is both preserved and prevailingly present in the works of this exhibition.
Between Two Waters

Comprised of two large-scale works—rendered in charcoal, black pastel and oil paint—*Between Two Waters* positioned viewers between a sweeping waterscape and its towering, wraith-like companion (plate I). Created on hand-sanded sheets of gessoed paper, the works invoke the ocean and its underwater forces and life forms as a visual representation of my relationship with the sea, and my continuing journey through a realm of shifting space and unbounded time. Drawing on a repertoire of seemingly unearthly imagery, I sought to conjure a world of “in-betweens,” a place to which I both do and do not belong. Unyielding and mercurial, the forces of this world both parallel and mediate my own process of grieving, and work to reshape the pain of loss into something new and pregnant with life.

The first of these two pieces, *Between Two Waters I* (plate II), was installed along the southern wall of the UH Mānoa Commons Gallery. Occupied by voluminous abstract forms, the left two panels of this five-paneled, 6’ x 21.5’ vista provide a point of entry into the work, guiding the viewer into a weightless garden of organ-like structures (plates III, IV). Untethered to any apparent ground or horizon, these shapes emerge and recede, pulse and loom, blossom and fold in on themselves. They materialize and then deteriorate, solidify and then rapidly dissolve. They give rise to, morph into and interpenetrate one another, with the vestiges of earlier forms cropping up from and between the shadows, their origins long since entombed in the substrate. The occurrence of various unidentifiable phenomena are recorded on the paper, appearing as a dynamic layering of brushstrokes, watermarks, stains, abrasions, rifts and erasures (plates V, VI). At times this alien matter almost reifies into recognizable structures—arteries, bones, viscera, mysterious flora or underwater fauna—but then suddenly the discovery becomes something else altogether, as one beholds a miasma of smoke or a passing cloud, and the moment of comprehension dissipates.

Responding to my own experience of trauma and healing, this layered, interwoven and alternating movement of subject and space in my thesis work attempts to reflect an experiential continuum of loss and recovery, the emergent and dissolvable quality of my sense of being-in-the-world. As psychoanalyst and
philosopher Robert D. Stolorow discusses in his 2007 book *Trauma and Human Existence*, emotional trauma essentially destroys one’s sense of being in space and time. Stolorow explains that the essence of this trauma lies in the shattering of absolutisms that make up everyday life, in a “catastrophic loss of innocence that permanently alters one’s sense of being-in-the-world” (16). Casting us outside the horizons of normal day-to-day life, trauma opens up a gulf between the vitality of the world we once knew and the isolated subjective space we now inhabit, revealing the perilous unpredictability of a universe in which one is never invulnerable, and in which continuity of being can never be assured (16).

According to Stolorow, bridging this fissure between inside and outside, subject and object, is paramount to understanding the complex experience of human emotional life, and to recognizing how we regulate or misregulate responses to emotional trauma in particular. Stolorow emphasizes that emotional experience—specifically that associated with loss and trauma—depends on its regulation within relational systems and intersubjective fields, encounters and exchanges that occur between beings or entities. When our painful and traumatized states are experienced outside of a relational home in which they can be held and integrated, he explains, we lose our sense of being and connectedness, becoming frozen and deadened to existence. When such a home for our painful affect emerges, we regain our sense of being, warming and livening to the world once again (26).

In the months following my brother’s death, I felt that I had mistakenly awakened in a dark and voluminous world, a world in which time was made up of glares and shadows, not minutes or hours. I was marooned on an invisible ledge somewhere inside expanding space, secluded and shivering and indistinct. I was all alone in the blackness, stranded somewhere between an irretrievable past and an unintelligible present, a once vibrant material reality and a now harrowing subjectivity. My life became a perpetual search for portals that could take me across this rift, for any dangling lines leading back to an ordered, meaningful existence. In essence, I sought to regulate my experience of what Stolorow refers to as the “unbearable embeddedness of being,” the interface between the world around us and our sense of being in that world, or, perhaps equally important, our sense of that
world being in us (16). In my grief, this interface had become a kind of phantom, a pane of fogged glass separating two adjoining worlds. Passage between these two disparate realms—when achieved at all—was aberrant and always in flux. Fleeting moments of connection with a fluent sense of space and time dispensed treasured doses of enlivenment, while the turmoil of grief inevitably prompted a swift return into lonely darkness.

Devoid of defined space and familiar physical laws, I intended *Between Two Waters I* to be a visualization of this trauma-related chasm, an embodiment of an enigmatic and irresolute “in-between.” Moving between representation and abstraction, opacity and transparency, detail and gesture, the piece pictorializes a continual vacillation between feelings of loss and connection. Where moments of recognizable form surface in the work—corals, organs and bubbles—I sought to suggest an emergent feeling of being in concordance with the world, times in which my grief found a home in a person, being or experience that brought me back into a shared existence. Where moments of this same form simultaneously erode or evanesce, I aimed to impart intermittent losses of this connectedness, a retreat back into a sense of separation and seclusion. As shown in plate VI, for example, the defined edges of undulating corals become dissolved and abraded by a combination of charcoal washes and a highly scoured surface, conveying this fluctuating sense of solubility in the communal fabric of space and time.

My interest in this oscillation between union and severance, engagement and isolation, is reiterated in the overall composition of the piece. Approaching the third panel of the work, the cumbrous forms and zephyrous hues that command the left side of the image become subject to entropy (plate VII). The piece moves from relatively distinct contours and light values into an expanse of amorphous marks and deep blacks. As substantive form unravels into obscurity, existing associations with waterscape, landscape or the body rapidly atrophy. Light falls into darkness. Space expands and contracts. Shifting from a microcosm of organic forms into a macrocosm of infinite space, what once seemed like bubbles suddenly take on a planetary presence. Water becomes air, sea melds into sky. All points of contact with
recognizable matter vanish, swept into an abyss of obliterated corporeality and consuming shadows.

In dislodging any connections to firm ground, I desired the viewer to establish his or her own position within the piece, to recover a sense of balance and discover some sort of stabilizing cadence. I aimed to convey that with the destruction of one’s experiential world, there comes a challenge to understand and employ new sets of mechanics, to accept and embrace new ways of seeing and experiencing that are defined by an imaginary physics. The paintings of California-born artist Darren Waterston similarly unmoor viewers from the laws of the material world, situating them between fixed locations. In works such as *Threshold* and *Blue Field*, one could be submerged in a body of water looking upward toward the surface, or simultaneously gazing down at reflections from above. “There is, as Waterston points out, no place to touch down anymore” (Baas, 28). Although the scene depicted in *Between Two Waters I* may be absent of stable ground, I intended for the piece itself to function as a kind of landing pad, a space in which the unsettling flux and perturbations of emotional life could be acknowledged and avowed.

Switching from faded washes into stark contrast, from black-and-white into color, the achromatization and re-saturation of the piece also functions as a metaphor for feeling embedded in the world. Where plumes of pigment billow and flow and pool in the work, I sought to depict a certain vigor in the spaces and forms they occupy. In contrast, through the apparent etiolation of these same forms and spaces, I aimed to suggest sustained exposure to enervating forces, and severance from a crucial source of nourishment and vitality. My experience of the world has always been largely defined by a heightened sensitivity to color, but after my brother’s death, these intensely chromatic perceptions receded into a pallid world, a world in which color was no longer salient. I possess only a small collection of vividly colored memories from that first year of grief, but they are stained with the same earthy scheme. Permeated by ambers, sanguines and titians, they are the colors of the body—of flesh and skin and blood. Perhaps most indelibly, they are the colors I remember from my most painful hours—the colors of the unhealing scabs that scarred my knees after dragging myself to the casket of my dead twin. Persisting to surface
when I feared I was fading away, they are the colors that assured me I still existed, the colors that informed me I was still alive.

This palette of transparent corals, pinks and ochres is threaded through the piece, emblazoning the otherwise colorless layers of charcoal drawing. Integrated subtly into the work, these hues operate independently of form, subject to their own encounters with the surrounding forces. A fading streak of crimson bleeds out of a cavernous hollow. Stains of burnt orange and oxidized yellow emerge only to be corroded, diluted or bleached. Watery peaches and pinks are ingested by shadows, and a metallic mist makes a floating descent into the abyss (plates VIII, IX, X). Arising and receding with protean ethereality, color becomes an agent of visual movement, as well as a descriptor of how my own sense of saturation in the world was made mutable in the aftermath of my brother’s death. By introducing selective areas of pigment into the work, I endeavored to convey the vagarious divides and mergers between the material world in which we exist, and the emotional and psychological worlds that exist within us, specifically in the wake of loss.

If the expansive, five-paneled Between Two Waters I depicts figurations and disfigurations in the space-time of grief, then its 13’x52” vertical companion, Between Two Waters II, can be read as imaging an inhabitant of this unshaped territory (plate XI). Adrift in a column of inky darkness, a weightless form emerges. Appearing as a composite of various viscera and assorted anatomical structures, the being seems to be a product of bizarre somatic mutations. A blooming, umbrella-like head bobs in the highest quadrant of the piece. Below this colossal bell, wafting tissues unfold out of blackness. Spinal-like forms spiral up along an indeterminable axis, and long tentacles enswathe uncoiling entrails (plates XII, XIII). The creature is suspended in an effusion of bubbles. It is flushed with golds and purples and reds. Delicately yet rudimentarily articulated, there is no logical order to the arrangement of its parts. Appearing to be absent of any sensory organs, its existence is relegated to an unperceivable dimension. There is no impression of where it has come from, or to where it may go. Like the venter of my own body, which at times seemed to be little more than a host for grief, the creature contorts and writhe against invisible forces, unfurls inside indefinite space.
The first night after my brother’s death, I laid awake in bed and closed my eyes. Surrounded by mute darkness, I had a spontaneous vision of myself as a giant transparent jellyfish, organ-less and unknowingly adrift in an empty, current-less ocean. An alien organism had begun incubating inside of me, a formidable and ungovernable existence. Over time, this embryo evolved into its own corporeality. It seized, mutated and congested the confines of my body. Like the being depicted in my work, it existed without recognizable function. It breathed without lungs, bled without a pulse. Unrestrained in its cycles of contraction and expansion, its presence was often distressingly claustrophobic, crowded by my inability to free myself of its fetters. Eventually, however, I came to find comfort in the company. Like a pearl beginning as an irritant inside its host, the creature that emerged in me somehow became precious, something I created to help protect me from my pain. *Between Two Waters II* is a monument to this metamorphosing life form, an emblem of the being that was and is my grief.

Seeking to reinforce the concept of this image as a rendition of my internal, visceral relationship with grief, I situated the work within its own interior space. Using two 14’ x 8’ walls, I partitioned a section of the exhibition area into a separate room with an 18” gap left in the middle. Displayed on the rear wall of this dark, cave-like enclosure, the piece was only partially visible from the main gallery floor, but could be viewed through the towering shaft running between the front walls of the room (plate XIV). I calculated the opening to be slightly slimmer than the average human shoulder width, in order to make passage into the enclosure a somewhat awkward experience, and to heighten the viewer’s awareness of his or her own body as they approached the piece. In denying visitors complete, unobstructed access to the work, I desired to emphasize the impossibility of comprehending the totality of another’s subjectivity, while simultaneously suggesting the potential to gain glimpses of this inner life through moments of intimacy and engagement.

The extreme verticality of *Between Two Waters II*, accentuated by the narrow opening in front of it, was configured not only as formal correlation to the primary axis of the human body, but as a suggestion of potential movement within an alternate dimension. As an open ocean swimmer and diver, I found that my physical freedom
to sink and rise between floor and surface, depths and shallows, mirrored my psychological travels between the thresholds of the “in-between”—between experiences of physicality and disembodiment, connection and isolation, conscious thought and unconscious expression. This kind of weightless mobility stood in strong contrast to my everyday experience of an anchored, planer world, and turned my gaze inward toward the gravity-less whims of my psychological and spiritual life. Composing *Between Two Waters II* within a dramatically columnar format, I sought to situate the viewer in relation to this less-charted dimension, and to evoke a sense of wonder, curiosity and reverence for that which lies outside the bounds of complete comprehension.

The format and installation layout of *Between Two Waters II* was designed not only as a reference to the body and as an indicator of vertical movement, but as a spatial analogy to the contiguous worlds of inner and outer experience, and as a way to emphasize the shifting relationship between perceiver and the perceived. Visitors to the exhibition had to initiate their own advancement toward the piece in order to discover its full dimensions, and were confronted with the option of either entering into or remaining outside the installation space. Some individuals seemed to construe the partitioning walls as an intentional barrier, and viewed the work only from a distance, while others appeared to interpret the opening as an invitation for closer investigation. A number of guests commented on how they sensed their bodies shrinking as they approached the soaring piece, and yet others noted that for them it was the art itself that seemed to expand. In providing multiple points of access to the work, and by giving audiences a specific choice about where and how to encounter the image, I intended for each visitor to create his or her own unique experience. Offering opportunities for radically different points of engagement, I attempted to highlight the interdependency of subject and object, and the ways in which our view of the material world is contingent not just upon how we locate our bodies in time and space, but on how we formulate our own sense of time and space within ourselves.

In creating the works of *Between Two Waters*, I aimed to bridge a shared outer world of stable space and calibrated time with an inner life governed by the lawlessness of perception, emotion and affect. Merging the familiar arena of objects
and images with the often ineffable spaces we subjectively inhabit, I sought to connect two interdependent realities which are frequently cleaved by traumatic experience. I aspired to express both the ebbs and flows of feeling saturated or desiring to feel saturated in a communal physical world, as well as to convey a pattern of breaks and reunions with a coherent sense of time, and therefore with a coherent sense of self. I intended to create a space within which viewers could perceive, engage with, and participate in a dynamic encounter with my works, providing a relational home for individual and collective experiences of painful affect. Through my conception, creation and eventual completion of Between Two Waters, I desired to synthesize multiple visual, spatial and architectural metaphors for the intimate interface between personal experience and participation in a shared materiality, between the private waters of one’s body and the common waters of the world.
Process, Healing and the Ocean

A month after my brother’s death, I dreamt of watching waves swelling, forming and then breaking out in the ocean, but then suddenly they became extremely large, and rolled from the beach out towards the sea, instead of the other way around. As author and spiritual teacher Joan Halifax observes, “The experience of grief often moves one into the wilds, where the forces of the elements, as well as the presence of creatures, plants, land and water forms, the sky, and spirits conspire to break open the husk that has protected us from a deeper truth” (16). Like the waves in my dream, my grief moved me from the familiarity of suburban Arizona to the wilds of Hawaiian waters. Reckless and irrepressible, it swept me from solid ground into the uncertainty of the open ocean, where the perils and prospects of a formidable world could house the wreckage of my loss. In time, this underwater cosmos became my truth, my sanctuary, my own private parable for pain. Evolving in concert with this deepening relationship to the ocean, my working methods for Between Two Waters became patterned by a growing understanding of its rhythms. Guided by a cadence of currents, waves and pulses, my process emerged as an analogy for my own experience of grief, and came to mirror the ways in which severance from a connection I once experienced as enduring and absolute altered my sense of being in the world.

Although Between Two Waters began as a formal manifestation of my own trauma-related chasm, the project soon developed into a process-oriented pursuit that paralleled my journeys between thresholds. In contrast to many of my previous works, which were carefully conceived and diligently executed, the pieces in this exhibition evolved organically through space and over time. They began as a purposeful exploration of loss and grief, eminently inspired by my transformative relationship with the ocean, but were free of commitment to a specific outcome or destination. Guided by a strong sensibility and an extensive collection of underwater imagery, I worked in collaboration with my surface, my supplies and a shifting series of impulses. Relying on intervals of creation and destruction, restoration and obliteration, I composed a way of working not unlike the ebbing and flowing of the
tides, the inhales and exhales of the breath, or the intimately connected throes and
solaces of grief.

In keeping with the organic subject matter and bodily references appearing in
the work, both pieces were executed on panels of prepared print paper, which served
effectively as a kind of skin, a resilient surface upon which an entire history of
phenomena could be exposed and recorded. Heavily gessoed and finely sanded, the
paper provided a burnished, satiny white substrate capable of supporting wet, dry,
water and oil based media. Using a simple collection of charcoal, water, rags and
sandpaper, I began the works by drawing and wiping away, drawing and then wiping
away again. I would render an expanse of coral or a flowering of jellyfish lobes, and
then smear what I had drawn. I would walk away, contemplate, and return to
superimpose new forms over the old. Where passages became too recognizable or
crowded with detail, I would douse them with solvents, or whittle away at the surface
with shreds of sandpaper. I pulled moments of form back out of inky washes, and
applied more charcoal over fresh abrasions. Later, I introduced select and subtle
moments of color, brushing on streaks of oil paint, pushing pigments around with
mineral spirits, scouring and flushing those away as well.

Through months of drawing, painting, rubbing, wiping, sanding, staining and
other mark-making manipulations, the panels became a form of palimpsest, an
accumulation of alternately emergent and effaced inscriptions. My method of
gradually layering and removing materials created a sense of transparency in the
pieces often associated with water-based media, such as ink or watercolor. In plate
IX, for example, textured coral structures remain visible through thin layers of
pigment and charcoal. This way of working also allowed me to uncover the vestiges
of earlier drawings inhumed in the surface, and at times I would find records of lines
and marks that I had no recollection of making, such as those shown in the center of
plate V. The accumulated histories of each form had become so layered and entwined
with one another that separating them in space or unraveling them in time became
impossible. The works felt foreign to me, alien—waterscapes and creatures whose
topographies and bodies I had shaped, but which I could swim in or gaze upon and
still be completely disoriented.
Rendering and erasing, shaping and un-shaping, elaborating and economizing, I came to rely as much on gestures of elimination as I did on invention. Alternating between such extremes, I discovered new and unexpected ways of connecting movement with rest, preservation with eradication, loss with recovery. In joining seemingly contradictory methods of working, this process emerged as a reflection of my own endless pursuit of harmonizing the inconsonant, of reconciling past with present, duration with collapse, disjunction with continuity. The panels had become not just the objects of my aesthetic creation, but an arena in which I participated in a series of encounters, in which I practiced the act of gesture not just as it related to my own lived experience, but as lived experience itself.

This kind of process-based painting first emerged in the art world after the end of World War II. Influenced by the surrealist use of automatism, existentialist philosophy and psychoanalytic theories of the unconscious mind, process painters such as Robert Motherwell, Clifford Still, Franz Kline, William de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, Lee Krasner and other members of the New York School became focused on self introspection and subjective experience as the subject matter of their work. For them, the canvas became an extension of the mind, and painting was an immediate, spontaneous enactment of thoughts and emotions (Fineberg, 36). As Harold Rosenberg said of American action painting, “The work, the act, translates the psychologically given into the intentional, into a ‘world’—and thus transcends it” (590). This emphasis on process and bodily experience as defining the content of art has been central to the evolution of art practice since the 1940s, and shifted the interest of many artists towards an exploration of performance, mark-making and a visceral engagement with materials. These trends occurred across all media in the second half of the 20th century, including the Happenings of Allan Kaprow, the paintings of Agnes Martin and Joan Mitchell, and the sculptures of Lynda Benglis and Eva Hesse.

Rosenberg’s original idea of action and process as a means of revelation and transcendence has been reformulated in contemporary art theory in relation to the writings of philosophers such as Martin Heidegger and Gilles Deleuze. In her 2005 book *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*, Jill Bennett
specifically discusses the capacity for art-making to function as a language of trauma, and explores what art itself might tell us about the lived experience of conflict and loss. Drawing on various literary, theoretical and philosophical sources—especially on the works of Deleuze—Bennett seeks to “establish a nexus between art and thought as it is evinced within art practice,” reflecting on the process or “coming into language” of trauma-related art, rather than the subject matter represented in the work itself (2,7). Bennett, like Stolorow, suggests that trauma is never exclusively subjective, but that it is always lived and negotiated at an interface, on the fluid boundary between “insides” and “outsides” that makes the experience of trauma—as well as art engendered by traumatic experience—fundamentally relational (12).

Traumatic memory, laying outside the ordinary realm of intelligible, articulable memory, is ultimately affective in nature, manifesting as emotions and sensations in the body rather than as representational or narrative thought (23). To paint or create out of an experience of trauma, therefore, requires “tapping a certain kind of process; a process experienced not as a remembering of the past but as a continuous negotiation of a present with indeterminable links to the past” (38).

Columbian artist Doris Salcedo has cultivated a unique approach to this way of working, collecting clothing, furnishings and other physical traces of Columbia’s violence victims to incorporate into her meticulously constructed sculptures. For Salcedo, “the process of making is a process of encountering these objects” (Bennett, 67). In slowly transforming her materials into a language of pain, she intends them to suggest the duration of trauma in memory, rather than to be understood in relation to specific characters or past events (Bennett, 67, 69). Salcedo’s work, like my own, does not provide an image of trauma itself, but rather registers the sustained experience of loss. It is concerned “with the ways in which pain imposes itself over time—and with the ebb and flow of affect” (Bennett, 65).

The ocean, in its constant mediation between past and present, became the medium through which I was able to tap the process described by Bennett, a process that, like Salcedo’s, would become a way of living and perceiving as much as a way of making. I had discovered, through my imitation of the phenomena I observed in nature, a way of organizing my thoughts and emotions into a world, a means of
knitting together the fabric of space and time which had been so savagely shredded by the trauma of losing my twin. Relating my own experience of loss through the act of creating, I opened up an additional, regulatory locus for persisting feelings of grief.

In providing me with a metaphor for my own process of grieving, my relationship to the ocean also offered me an initial passage toward healing. As Terry Tempest Williams observes in her book *Finding Beauty in a Broken World*, there are places “where beauty remains hidden and miraculously intact. This is a transcendent space where one leaves one world and enters another, exactly what one would desire for a resting place” (25). For me, the water became this transcendent space, a realm in which I happened upon rare moments of acceptance and peace, in which the idea of healing seemed somehow vaguely possible, and in which I sensed reassuring moments of connection with the spirit of my departed twin.

In an article entitled “The True Nature of Mourning,” writer Meghan O’Rourke discusses this power of nature and metaphor in attenuating the throes of grief. Following the death of her mother, a friend suggested that she find her own personal metaphor for where her mother was, where her presence could be detected. For O’Rourke it was the sky—the wind—especially as experienced in the vast solitude of desert landscapes. She explains:

Loss is so paradoxical: It is at once enormous and tiny. And this, too, I think, is why I’m drawn to landscapes that juxtapose the minute and the splendor; the very contrast is expressive of what I feel...Having my sense of smallness reflected back at me made me feel more at home in the majesty outside of my comprehension. It also led me to wonder: How could my loss matter in the midst of all this? Yet it does matter, to me, and in this setting that felt natural. The sheer sublimity of the landscape created room for the magnitude of my grief, while at the same time it helped me feel like a part—a small part—of a much larger creation (37).

As generous in what it provides as it is ruthless in what it claims, the ocean became my own measure of sublimity, an enduring symbol of all that is alive and abundant, as well as a numinous reminder of my own assured impermanence. In the presence of its waters I felt, as O’Rourke felt in the landscape of the desert, the profound significance of my loss even amidst the grandeur. Entering the sea, my grief could loosen and unravel into the expansiveness of the space around me, seep into and be
absorbed by an eternal tide of losses, an ebb of sorrows receding beyond all apparent horizons.

In reflecting the spatial and temporal patterns of the “in-between,” the ocean served as a natural embodiment of the subjective space I had come to inhabit. Through its innate attunement to the forces that governed my emotional life, it recognized and acknowledged the various dimensions of my grief. Extending these regulatory qualities into my own creative process, I attempted to instill the works of *Between Two Waters* with a sense of simultaneity and passage between places, to produce a multi-temporal orchestration that reflected the essence of sensation as experienced through memory and through time, of journey itself. This endeavor looked to a conceptualization of existence that permitted experiences of moving between fragmentation and unity to be commensurable, for in the absence of this possibility, my sense of self was left scattered between immovable horizons, and any sense of meaningfulness felt hopelessly lost. Simulating the natural course of weakening and regeneration necessary to healing, the works of this exhibition chronicle an ongoing process of both erosion and evolution. They reflect a common yearning for connectedness to that which has been lost, and by extension, to an ineffable spiritual reality greater than ourselves.
Conclusion

Between Two Waters was an expression of loss and a collaboration with the ensuing journey toward healing. It explored the altered sense of space and time in which I experienced myself in the wake of trauma, and served as a representation of my shifting sense of saturation or embeddedness in the world. Documenting an indissoluble narrative laced with beginnings and endings, discords and harmonies, losses and recoveries, I strove to depict movement from one extreme to the other, and to reveal the interdependence between the material reality of our surroundings and our ever-changing experience of ourselves. Ultimately, in the same way as Stolorow seeks an “understanding of individual experiences of losing and finding one’s sense of being” (27), this exhibition sought to pictorialize it.

In making the works of Between Two Waters, I sought to register my relationship to past experience not as an embodiment or recollection of characters and events, but as lived sensation. Bringing my inner psychological world into contact with an outer universal one, I aimed to produce works which would chronicle an interaction with, rather than a representation of, memory. Bennett observes that such imagery—imagery created by extracting affect from narrative and isolating embodied sensation—“promotes a form of thought that arises from the body, that explores the nature of our affective investment, and that ultimately has the potential to take us outside the confines of our character and habitual modes of perception” (44). Incited by emotion, spectators of this imagery are driven into more critical modes of thought and inquiry. They are able to circumvent ordinary processes of perception, ultimately moving toward discovery of a deeper truth (37).

In creating Between Two Waters, it was my intention to establish a basis for such empathic connections in the viewer. As embodiments of my own lived experience, the works of this exhibition bear witness to the enigmatic nature of the relationship between human subjectivity and the outside world, acknowledging an ongoing odyssey of liminality and loss. Like the interwoven fabrics of the mind and body, the pieces are both blemished and ornamented by their evolution through time—an indissoluble constellation of the scars and garnishes that have become their past and their present. Imaging the invisible, they seek to create sites of
intersubjective encounter and engagement, to generate introspection and insight through the arousal of sensation, and to provide a relational home for experiences of otherwise alienating affect.

I believe there will always be times when I travel between two waters. I will tread in the vastness between what once was and what now is, between life and death, between memory and imagination. I will swim between a sense of being in the world, and the feeling of having lost that being altogether. But now, I believe I can also come to touch the sand, to find sanctuary in new harbors and on once unseen shores. I can, in surrendering the physical presence of what I’ve lost, make room for life again. I can heal.
Bibliography

21-29. Print.

Bennett, Jill. *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*. Stanford:  


Halifax, Joan. *The Fruitful Darkness: A Journey Through Buddhist Practice and  


Print.

Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Ed. Harrison, Charles, and Paul Wood. Malden,  

Stolorow, Robert D. *Trauma and Human Existence: Autobiographical,  
Psychoanalytic, and Philosophical Reflections*. New York: Analytic Press,  

Plate I: Between Two Waters

Plate II: Between Two Waters I
Plate III: Between Two Waters I, Panel I
Plate IV: Between Two Waters I, Panel II
Plate VII: Between Two Waters I, Panel III
Plate X: Between Two Waters I (detail)
Plate XII: Between Two Waters II (detail)
Plate XIII: Between Two Waters II (detail)
Plate XIV: Between Two Waters, Installation View

Plate XV: Between Two Waters, Installation View
With the loss of a loved one, once fixed horizons become unmoored, passages between points in time collapse, and concealed specters suddenly emerge. The works in this exhibition invoke the ocean and its underwater forces and life forms to conjure this world of uncertain space and immeasurable time—the territory of the unabsolute and the in-between.

Untethered to the familiar physics of everyday life, these works seek to explore a realm that moves between inner and outer experience, between the recognizable and the outlandish, between a sense of saturation in materiality and a longing for what is not and cannot be. Emerging from a repetitive process of rendering and erasure, preservation and effacement, the creation of these images parallels an endless pursuit of reconciling past with present, duration with collapse, disjunction with continuity.

Suspended somewhere between the shadows and the surface, these artworks suggest entry into a world that is as unstable and sinister as it is suffused with hope for healing—an alien, wayward realm in which all is lost, and anything is possible.

Dedicated, with all my love, to the enduring spirit of my beautiful twin brother, John Ross McIlroy.