

Engaging Feeling: The Subject of Landscape in the Twenty-First Century

The Problems of Landscape

How can landscape be represented under the conditions of the Anthropocene? Established pictorial conventions construct a human subject viewing a landscape (from a distance) as an *overtly visual* object, an incongruous idea in an interconnected world, and yet it persists. The aesthetic structures of representation that have carried this formulation of the landscape image over the past 500 years or so have remained remarkably static, and in this chapter I argue that their ocularcentrism is inadequate to the experience of landscape today. I contend that the images of landscape from the backgrounds of fourteenth and fifteenth century Franciscan painting that came prior to this representational system instead provide a valuable opportunity to recalibrate the landscape image for contemporary experience. These pre-perspectival visions of wilderness spaces that contextualize the stories of hermetic saints and biblical figures can help twenty-first century eyes habituated to representational aesthetic structures to connect more with the landscape as a multi-dimensional and affective reality. As an artist I use these early Italian paintings to explore how landscape images can encompass ideas of co-subjectivity and of embodiment, and the following chapter is built around a discussion of works made in my studio between 2018–2022. These explore an empathic and material engagement between human and nonhuman so necessary at this precarious juncture in human history.

Despite the linguistic preoccupations of art history in the 1970s and 1980s, when the various processes of deconstruction saw previous perceptualist accounts of images replaced by more interpretive models, an assumption has remained that the landscape image is a kind of duplicate of the visual experience of the landscape “out there” in the three-dimensional

space of the world.¹ It continues to be taken for granted that images of landscape (those produced through perspectival painting as well as by photographic technologies) act as equivalents; that the image has a direct connection with what it is picturing, rather than recognizing, let alone foregrounding, its technological mediation and its ideological and semiotic framings. As art historian Christopher Wood has remarked, “We know the representation is not reality; and yet to a point we react to it as if it were real.”² This representational system continues to shape ideas of landscape today, privileging the sense of sight and favouring images of beautiful views. Perspective’s success in convincingly mapping three-dimensional space onto a flat two-dimensional surface embedded representational structures into later photographic and digital technologies, which subsequently continue these ocularcentric and spatial assumptions. These sit behind many of the problems associated with the normative landscape image, including its function as aestheticized leisure-space within capitalist systems, and its definition as background—the ‘natural’ space in front of which human ‘cultural’ stories are enacted. Their persistence prevents any alternative notions of space from emerging, which sits—like a kind of pre-existing fact—outside discourse, unhelpfully dominated by perspective and other visual technologies.

Early depictions of what are primarily wilderness settings, such as those painted by Giotto di Bondone (c.1267–1337) in the Arena Chapel in Padua, instead offer the opportunity to reexamine these assumptions of space and its visualization as landscape through an expanded sense of empathy that prioritises embodiment over ocular veracity. The work on the tactility of form of the early-twentieth-century art historian of the Renaissance, Bernard

¹ Art historians, including Norman Bryson, associated with the New Art History school of thought, saw the need to understand images as signs rather than as representations. See *Calligram: Essays in the new Art History*, ed. Norman Bryson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), at xii–xxix.

² Christopher Wood, review of *The Origin of Perspective* by Hubert Damisch, trans. John Goodman, and *Le Jugement de Pâris* by Hubert Damisch, *The Art Bulletin* 77, no. 4 (December 1995): 677–82, at 678.

Berenson (1865–1959) can help to develop this idea. Certainly his research into the “imagination of touch” in painting, with its basis in psychological aesthetics, can inform an approach to landscape that moves beyond ocularcentrism.³ He recognised that sight in itself is unable to stimulate knowledge of the “third dimension,” and that the mark of “greatness” in painters such as Giotto and Masaccio lay in their ability to “somehow...stimulate our consciousness of tactile values, so that the picture shall have at least as much power as the object represented, to appeal to our tactile imagination.”⁴ Berenson is suggesting that the tactility established by the formal qualities of the work of art can act on our imaginative powers in ways that the visual is not able to. He argues that it is the painting’s ability to stimulate a physical response in the viewer—through its qualities of ‘bulk’ or mass, rather than through any visual accuracy—that enables the viewer to connect to what is pictured. Indeed, the writing of his contemporary Vernon Lee (1856–1935), specifically her work on the energy of bodies, develops Berenson’s ideas and opens further possibilities for a less ocular picturing of landscape.⁵ Her argument, based on what she calls ‘bodily activity’—what we might refer to as affect or empathy—as a response to the life-enhancing powers contained within the work of art, is similar to Berenson’s ideas of the tactile imagination. Both prioritise the latter’s formal qualities as the vehicle via which life’s vitality is increased. This formalism of an empathic response towards the depicted human body (as opposed to the narrative or iconographic content) explored a signifying connection between visual language and the body that anticipated the turn towards materiality that occupies much art historical discourse today.

³ Bernard Berenson, *The Florentine Painters of the Renaissance: With an Index to Their Works* (New York and London: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1896), at 4.

⁴ Berenson, *The Florentine Painters of the Renaissance*, 5.

⁵ Vernon Lee and Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, *Beauty & Ugliness: and Other Studies in Psychological Aesthetics* (London: John Lane, 1912), first published as “Beauty and Ugliness, I and II,” *Contemporary Review*, 72 (1897), 544–69 and 669–98.

If Berenson and Lee were focussed on the felt, or bodily, connection between the viewer and the human form in the works of art they examined, can we extend their formalist approach to engage with the non-human, landscape forms depicted in these works? Do these then facilitate an empathic response to landscape at large, breathing new meanings into the term? By returning to this pre-seventeenth-century history of western representational practices, it is possible to think about landscape with a focus less on visual preoccupations, and more on bodily connection. These constructions of landscape came prior to the accommodation of perspectival space to scientific rationalism. As such, they offer a different trajectory for landscape and begin the necessary process of unravelling the dualities that bind it to the categorization of space as Cartesian extension. The strong sense of the human body carried within the depiction of arid caves and osseous chasms in these paintings can trigger a physical empathy within the viewer. These works move the landscape image away from its problematic ocular/spatial assumptions, towards the bodily-spatial instead. Recent material feminist thought, especially that developed from the early work of Elizabeth Grosz and Donna Haraway, furthers this loosening of Cartesian categories so that a physical correspondence is foregrounded.⁶ This idea of the landscape image can actively broaden current iterations of image-space (generally) and the visual representation of landscape (specifically). These backgrounds present us with the opportunity to reassess the predominant techno-visual structures of landscape space and instead to consider its agential possibilities, unlocking twin problematics in the process—that of the visual hegemony of representation, under which ideas of landscape enforce an uncritical image of extensive space, and that of the discursive, whereby language supplants materiality and experience.

⁶ Works such as Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), and Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–99 are central to this area of thought.

Expanded Subjectivities

If this empathic response to the human form in the work of Giotto and Masaccio suggested an immediacy to Berenson, I will argue counterintuitively that landscape's inherent trait of distance, rather than standing in opposition to any contiguity, can in fact serve to facilitate a move beyond human/landscape and culture/nature dualities. The etymological root of empathy implies a gap: *in* [en] *feeling* [pathos] carries the sense of moving from one point to another, of connecting with something or someone *other*, as opposed to sympathy—*together* [syn] *feeling* [pathos]—which conversely suggests a naturally shared experience.⁷ Distance is a characteristic of landscapes such as those of the Arena Chapel less in the usual spatial/visual sense, and more in their temporality. Seven hundred years have lapsed since the imagination that created these mountains and skies existed, and this separateness heightens the sense of otherness or strangeness that can help reconfigure optical associations with landscape today.

The Artificial and the Real (fig. 1) accesses the strange qualities of temporally distant landscape by setting the bodily and material sensibilities of medieval and early Renaissance depictions within the familiar illusionistic space of the photographic. Hand-modelled clay forms are photographed in front of a projected photographic image. These are loosely based on the rocky landscapes of Giovanni di Paolo's *Saint John the Baptist Retiring to the Desert* in the National Gallery in London.⁸ Their forms interrupt the suggestion of extensive space in the mountainous projection, while simultaneously performing it through a *repoussoir* effect. They work as a point of rupture: unsettling the photographic and in doing so, emphasising its

⁷ "Empathy" and "Sympathy," Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed July 13, 2023, <https://www.etymonline.com>.

⁸ Giovanni di Paolo, *Saint John the Baptist Retiring to the Desert*, 1454, egg tempera on wood, 12 x 19" (30.5 x 49 cm), The National Gallery, London, NG5454, <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/giovanni-di-paolo-saint-john-the-baptist-retiring-to-the-desert>.

constructed nature. They reveal a productive temporal and spatial complexity hidden within the representational landscape image.

Mining the affective and material qualities of earlier spatial imaginaries enables me to present an idea of landscape that moves away from perspectival norms (the space of representation) to address twenty-first century predicaments. Berenson's writing on Giotto's figures focuses on their ability to give, "tactile values to retinal impressions."⁹ *The Artificial and the Real*, alludes to this hapticity via its mimicking of the traditional diorama of the natural history museum that houses its objects in a realistically painted natural environment, combining science and theatre in the process. Here, the digital print of the completed work is placed in a deep frame to suggest a diorama. The hand-modelled landscape forms become the focus of the illusion and of the notions of care associated with museum practice.¹⁰ The work builds on Berenson's theories of tactility, producing an empathic response to the painterly forms and directing attention away from landscape as optically guided external space. This process opens the possibility of understanding empathy as a term that includes being 'in feeling' with non-human bodies.

Lee, credited with developing the term empathy in the visual arts, recognised the affinity between her ideas and those of Berenson.¹¹ The psychological aesthetics she developed with her companion Clementina Anstruther-Thompson and their research into the latter's bodily responses to artworks, resonated with Berenson's idea of "tactile values," but went further too.¹² Whereas Berenson saw that a work of art would stimulate the imagination through its suggestion of the "bulk" of its bodies, Lee saw that works of art can generate an

⁹ Berenson, *The Florentine Painters of the Renaissance*, 5.

¹⁰ *Natural History Dioramas: History, Construction and Educational Role*, ed. Sue Dale Tunnicliffe, Annette Scheersoi (Dordrecht: Springer, 2014).

¹¹ "Most histories of modern aesthetics rightly credit Lee with broadening understanding of the critical term *empathy*...in the English-speaking world." See Joseph Bristow, "Vernon Lee's Art of Feeling," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 25, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 117–139, at 125.

¹² Vernon Lee, review of *The Florentine Painters of the Renaissance* by Bernard Berenson, *Mind* 5, no.18 (1896): 270–72.

empathic response far greater than that created by reality itself. In her review of *Florentine Painters*, the overlaps in their research are evident to Lee, and she develops Berenson's thinking further:

[F]irst, all vivid perception is due to the conversion of ocular impressions into feelings of bodily activity; second, such bodily activity produces a sense of *living* in those who experience it; and third, painting having the means of producing such a condition by processes more direct, more efficacious and more economical than those of reality, painting possesses the power of enhancing the sense of our own vitality.¹³

According to Lee, the life-enhancing powers contained within the work of art show how emotion is crucial in an appreciation of form. This suggests that the work of art becomes the tool via which empathic responses to landscape can be produced. These arguments have become relevant again today, especially in terms of feminist theory's development of a new materialism that moves away from the intractable dichotomies shaped by language/reality. The painted wilderness that provides context for these fourteenth-century Franciscan stories presents an opportunity for redefining the human/nonhuman and cultural/natural binaries maintained by the traditionally conceived, visually orientated landscape image. Their distance is not optical but temporal, and their rocky forms are human in scale, the opposite of a panoramic or sublime landscape view. Any habitual understanding of landscape as separate and in the distance—its consistent positioning as background scenery in front of which human narratives are played out—is challenged. By adapting these early landscape forms, with their affinity for the human body, *The Artificial and the Real* can consider the landscape image in new ways.

Penitential Landscapes

¹³ Lee, quoted in Joseph Bristow, "Vernon Lee's Art of Feeling," 127.

A key process in this reconsideration of landscape involves the removal of narrative features so that the medieval image then re-appears as contemporary, no longer grounded in a specific cultural context, nor located in a historical moment. This process enables the landscape forms to become unfixed and mobile, travelling as historically destabilized entities. In *Baume/Balm* (fig. 2), I have painted a wilderness mountain space derived from one of the frescos in the Magdalen Chapel in the Lower Basilica of St Francis in Assisi, Italy, attributed to Giotto and his workshop. The chapel was decorated in the early-fourteenth century with a fresco cycle that unfolds around the walls showing narrative scenes from Mary Magdalen's life, with wilderness landscapes providing most of the settings.¹⁴ The referenced fresco is positioned high up towards the vaulted ceiling and depicts the mountain and cave of Sainte Baume in southern France, the site of the Magdalen's earthly thirty-year retreat. She is seen naked in her cave, being given a cloak by the hermit Zosimus, a story that has conflated her life with that of another early Christian saint, Mary of Egypt, a layering of the Magdalen legend that is commonplace in her hagiography.¹⁵ My process of removal (here of the figures of the Magdalen and Zosimus) raises a series of questions that address how landscape backgrounds operate in terms of discourse and how, with the subject matter dislodged, the spatialized forms and the materiality of the image itself (rather than the narrative meaning) generate affect.

This method destabilizes the dominant definitions associated with the landscape image. Rather than a panoramic and perspectival view, something separate and 'over there'—the work reconfigures the dynamic of culture/nature through the absencing of human narrative. The painting becomes culture *and* nature. In the spirit of Elizabeth Grosz (and of Luce Irigaray), it “unNaturalizes” the dichotomy through an inversion that moves the

¹⁴ On the chapel's fresco cycle see Penny Howell Jolly, “Gender, Dress, and Franciscan Tradition in the Mary Magdalen Chapel at San Francesco, Assisi,” *Gesta* 58, no. 1 (2019): 1–25.

¹⁵ Jolly, *Picturing the “Pregnant” Magdalene in Northern Art, 1430-1550: Addressing and Undressing the Sinner-Saint* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), at 3.

landscape from a background on which human subjectivity is enacted to a subject unto itself, a cultural rather than ‘natural’ form. Indeed, as Grosz states, “[i]f subjectivity is no longer conceived in binarized or dualist terms...then perhaps other ways of understanding corporeality, sexuality, and the differences between the sexes may be developed and explored which enable us to conceive of subjectivity in different terms than those provided by traditional philosophical and feminist understandings.¹⁶ Her project loosens the tightly bound construction of (male) subjectivity, and her “body-as-subject” redefines the binary pairing of mind and body or matter. *Baume/Balm* extends this “body-as-subject” towards the landscape, traditionally paired as the natural object to the cultural subject in this Cartesian dualistic system. By drawing on the Magdalen’s association with spiritual transformation; her body’s permeability and its instability that is highlighted by Jolly, I have appropriated her specific landscape spaces in order to change landscape definitions today.¹⁷ In this way Grosz’s methodology extends to something more like the material feminism described by Stacey Alaimo:

One of the most significant and thorny questions that arises from a radical reconsideration of matter is the question of agency. If we are to understand nature as something other than as a passive resource for the exploits of Man, and if we are to understand the human body as something other than a blank slate awaiting the inscription of culture, we must reconceptualize bodies and natures in ways that recognize their actions.¹⁸

Exploring the “actions” or agency of the Magdalen wilderness landscape allows us to retrace the themes associated with her through the landscape itself. This inevitably involves understanding the Magdalen via a process of layering—the layering of symbolism in terms of her landscapes and the layering of her meanings on top of those of Christ himself—but also of “unlayering” vis a vis the stripping back of these narrative layers to reveal how their

¹⁶ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* at vii.

¹⁷ Jolly, *Picturing the “Pregnant” Magdalene*, 2.

¹⁸ Stacey Alaimo, “Trans-corporeal Feminisms,” in *Material Feminisms*, ed. Stacey Alaimo and Susan Hekman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 237–264, at 244.

meanings can be understood in terms of the empty landscape form. The wilderness landscape, especially the cave itself as a site of rebirth, is a trope that appears repeatedly within the stories of the Magdalen's life, but also within the lives of other, largely male, figures including Christ, Moses, Saint Jerome and Saint Francis, all of whom spent time in the desert or in caves in some form of spiritual retreat. Art historian Amy Neff has described these wilderness landscape settings as "transformational," and as arid, dry places they facilitate a spiritual awakening and rebirth, carrying ideas of death as well as life.¹⁹ The cave is specific in this sense, understood as a place of death (as a tomb) as well as of life (as a womb). This dual association shapes the depiction of these wilderness places. The symbolic layering of the cave as tomb/womb is particularly effective in terms of the specific femaleness of the Magdalen and helps to unravel the typically male processes of spiritual awakening so that the traditional (exclusively male) boundaries of subjectivity are loosened. Moreover, as Jolly has described, the Magdalen came to be perceived as possessing both male and female traits:

She appropriates characteristics typically ascribed to elite males...she closely parallels popular Renaissance male saints, like Jerome; she preaches in public, prophesises, and serves as a witness, all duties more normally gendered "male"; and she cures her own carnality through intellectual acts like contemplation and playing music. But at the same time, her essential femaleness serves as a source for her remarkable authority: her body's permeability and ruptures are those of a woman, as are her submissive roles as Christ's lover and pregnant Bride; even her special ties to mourning, widowhood, and burial practices reflect the duties of women in European society.²⁰

This layering of meaning and continual resistance to fixed definitions are crucial to an understanding of the landscape spaces she inhabits that rely on her affective traits, and her attributes attach to the cave, which as background trope shapes her meaning and facilitates

¹⁹ Amy Neff, "Byzantium Westernized, Byzantium Marginalized: Two Icons in the *Supplicationes variae*," *Gesta* 38, no. 1 (1999): 81–102.

²⁰ Jolly, *Picturing the "Pregnant" Magdalene*, 2.

the processes of death, renewal and rebirth. However, in *Baume/Balm* there is no Magdalen. The cave and mountain are left without a story to allegorize, and the human narrative is stripped back with only the bare mountain remaining. Framed by three trees, its white cliffs contrast with the black hole of the cave. These features, including the deep blue of the sky which metaphorically emphasizes the darkness within the cave, now carry the affective meaning of the original work in themselves. The mountain's scale is in line with that of the no-longer-present human figures, and the cave feels more like a bodily orifice than it does a representation of a geological feature. There is a sense of the landscape being an embodied form, an equal operator to the human subjects which were once within the image. Understanding landscape as "body" in this way establishes an affinity and enables its conception as non-human subjectivity. This forces a reappraisal of ontological definitions (of space, of the separateness of bodies in space, of Cartesian dualisms), and moves us beyond the strictures of representation *as* space. It opens crucial questions that surround the landscape genre and shows possibilities for the latter to engage deeply and less optically with the Anthropocene and its interconnectivities.

Additionally, the cave in medieval Franciscan imagery is associated with rebirth not only through its womb-like characteristics, but also specifically through its depiction in these landscapes as a wound, an allegorical reminder of Christ's wounded and crucified body.²¹ Holy figures who spent time in solitude in these places, would undergo spiritual transformation and renewal. The thirteenth-century scholastic philosopher Bonaventure continually references mountains and caves in his writing in order to indicate Christ's crucifixion wounds. These allusions would have been understood as such at the time the frescos were painted. Indeed, Neff has shown how Bonaventure's account of Francis's

²¹ On the allegorical meanings of Franciscan wilderness landscapes, see Neff, "Byzantium Westernized, Byzantium Marginalized."

stigmatization was specifically described in this way: “[T]he cave was the ‘cleft in the rock’ of Canticles 2:14, the ‘hollow place in the cliff’ which for mystical Franciscans ... was an allegory of the wound in Christ’s side, refuge for the soul and source of salvation.”²² The Magdalen’s cave thus would have been understood in terms of the wounds of Christ. Indeed, her trauma of loss and the melancholia she embodies were healed by the time she spent in retreat in her cave in Sainte Baume.²³ It is from this context that *Baume/Balm* explores the bare landscape as an embodied subject without a human figure to frame. The cave suggests a wound that might itself need healing, and the empty wilderness landscape serves not as an illusionistic representation contextualized in terms of a human subject, but is instead a signified and allegorized excess, underlining the permeable nature of the barrier between objects and subjects.

Material Considerations

Copper Landscape Series: Under the ground over the sea (fig. 3) is a series of small papier-mâché relief paintings that develops these ideas of the cave through a symbolic connection with the material, invoking the arguments of matter’s agential possibilities that have occupied material feminist thought.²⁴ The cavernous rocky forms draw directly from the paintings of Giotto, Sassetta, Botticelli and Sano di Pietro, where wilderness backgrounds frame stories of birth and death, revelation, and insight. The emotional weight of these earlier works reverberates within the series and pertains to the complex feelings about landscape in twenty-first century experience, wrapped up as it is in issues such as climate change, movement of resources and migration of refugees across ancient pilgrimage/trade routes.

²² Bonaventure, *Legenda maior*, chap. XIII, 5, quoted in Neff, “Byzantium Westernized, Byzantium Marginalized,” 83.

²³ Baume means both “balm” in high French and “cave” in Provençal. See Jolly, *Picturing the “Pregnant” Magdalene*, 192.

²⁴ The theme of many of the arguments in Alaimo and Hekman, eds., *Material Feminisms*.

Through their modelled bas-relief forms, the paintings explore a physical and affective connection to the original paintings, drawing the latter out of two dimensions and towards three, experiencing and defining the landscape through touch as well as sight. Their materials allude to the physical spaces they describe: the pigments and metals that come directly from the underground. They are images that explore the space of the palpable. As such they present a question to the predominantly metaphorical nature of overtly visual two-dimensional, illusionistic painting. Their hapticity reveals the suppressed tactility of visual experience articulated by Berenson and Lee, the illusionistic picture plane being replaced by a physical equivalent, and the flat surface on which the illusion would usually operate, interrupted by the papier-mâché forms. They defy the habitually descriptive nature of the painted illusion, instead addressing the desire to complete what Lacan refers to as the lack within looking, attempting to connect the gap between image and reality, illusion and experience.²⁵ They shift the visual sign from the realm of representation towards the realm of the material, the wounds of extraction insisting on the landscape's own need for healing. This affective power is not provided by an external narrative, but by a kind of "in-between-ness" that manifests in the works, produced by the bodily-ness of their forms and their prioritised materiality; the visual and the haptic pulling against each other, and the papier-mâché disrupting the idealising tendencies of pictorial illusion that have historically taken precedence over the tactile and the material.²⁶ The series operates within the materialist feminist framework that Alaimo explores, which understands matter as "variously, material-semiotic, inter-corporeal, performative, agential, even literate," with the work exploring the boundaries between the categories of landscape and human, focussing on the material and tangible dimensions of painting. Alaimo goes on to challenge the "discursively oriented

²⁵ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Vintage, 1998), at 106.

²⁶ Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, "An Inventory of Shimmers," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 1–25, at 1.

studies of human corporeality” that “confine themselves to the corporeal bounds of the human,” and instead argues for material feminisms that “open out the question of the human by considering models of extension, interconnection, exchange, and unravelling.”²⁷ These caves do this by evoking the underground spaces of the orebody, ultimately converted into the shiny copper leaf that acts as the paintings’ ground. Here the cave is mineral as well as spiritual, and the wilderness landscape carries dual meanings. Mined and depleted, it is a place of extraction that demands atonement.

The size of the hill-forms relates to the hand and body rather than to an illusion of extensive space. The copper further disrupts any visualising of extension, creating a reflective surface that comes directly from the extractive and transformational process of the mine, its bright material presence contrasting with the dull paint of the modelled landscape forms. These material contrasts are indexical in nature and build on Georges Didi-Huberman’s description of the index as the trace of a “past enigma,” a “symptom” (as in Christ’s wounds), or a “material imprint” or “blow” (as in the processes of copper mining).²⁸ The enigma contained in these works is bound up with what he describes as “figurability,” which vacillates between the “iconicity” of the hills (in that they resemble their originals) and the paintings’ “indexicality” that disassembles: the reflective copper surfaces, the traces of the hands which modelled, the fingers that poked. These works express a tangible experience of the image within the customary, optical one, while the copper leaf makes apparent the hidden material processes of the underground. This indexical appropriation of early western landscapes expands the visual/semiotic loop of representational images, which inscribes meaning only to subjects (landscapes operate within allegorical terms in this circuit), instead

²⁷ Alaimo, “Trans-corporeal Feminisms,” 244.

²⁸ Georges Didi-Hubermann, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), at 7–8.

exploring the material body of the landscape within the feminist terms of the “material-semiotic.”²⁹

The absence of the human subject also highlights the vulnerability of the exposed and bare landscape. How to care for this ‘other,’ this non-human subject? The traits of these landscapes also suggest a wounding or healing, which, removed from their previous connection to Christian narrative, points to a new ecological ethics. Jane Bennett has argued for an intrinsically “vibrant matter,” to redistribute agency between objects and subjects. She employs Theodore Adorno’s concept of “non-identity,” an “elusive force [that] is not, however, wholly outside human experience,” a “presence that acts upon us,” not “subject to knowledge” but “‘heterogeneous’ to all concepts.”³⁰ She continues, “we knowers are haunted, [Adorno] says, by a painful, nagging feeling that something’s been forgotten or left out. This discomfiting sense of inadequacy of representation remains no matter how refined or analytically precise one’s concepts become.”³¹ That which is left out, to which Adorno refers, reveals an inherent force that exists beyond our ability to make objects mean something. It manifests in my process of separating the landscapes from their original narrative so that they can exist outside the specific symbolic or allegorical framework of their models. In these original paintings, the crags and caves suggest the spiritual rebirth undergone by the hermits and saints that have repeatedly inhabited these wildernesses, but this happens in relation to the narratives that populate these stories and was understood by Christian viewers within these terms. These specific geological spaces were affective because they were seen within the context of the art and preaching of the time. This is hardly the case

²⁹ Alaimo, “Trans-corporeal Feminisms,” 244.

³⁰ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Economy of Things* (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 2010), at 14.

³¹ Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B Ashton (London: Routledge, 1990), at 5, quoted in Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 14.

now, nor is it my intention to re-establish a late medieval Christian ideology with my painting. Without the religious framing, what is doing the affecting?

The removal of the human figures triggers an empathic connection with the material form itself, the bodily-ness of the landscape features themselves. *Copper Landscape Series* goes further than the allegorical merging of landscape, human, and the divine that occurs in the original Franciscan imagery, for here the landscape features are not infused with significance from a transcendental god. Rather, their forms suggest an immanent force outside and beyond our symbolic structures, akin to Adorno's non-identity. Recasting landscape as a thing-in-itself replete with affect, rather than seeing it through the customary lens of representation as object or background, opens a new space of understanding or connection. Berenson's and Lee's articulations of "force" and "vitality" resonate here and, rather than seeing this imagery as the dawning of a Renaissance sensibility that is defined by its use of perspective, this painting series, with its caves and landscape features, suggests a way of subverting these habitual definitions instead.

Feeling Landscape

Finally, let us consider how this empathic engagement with the forms of early western landscapes acts as a mechanism for mitigating the feelings of grief and loss brought on by ecological collapse. According to art historian Michael Ann Holly, "[a]ttending to paintings [from the past] is the product of naming rather than looking. This is the most primal, unavoidable, and irrevocable loss. What does not fall within the purview of established schemes stays in the remainder, always on the outside of the framing propensity of language.

That absence is then deepened by time's distancing. Language makes vanish what it first sought to preserve: the compelling visuality of the work of art."³²

An urgency is now required in the process of examining historical works of art that can prepare and teach us how to deal with loss, with the grief associated with living within the conditions of the Anthropocene. The method of *engagement through making* that is central to my work—reproducing works from the past in different forms—challenges this problem of language that Holly identifies and instead facilitates an affective connection to the material and landscape elements of past painting, rescuing them from the double obscurity of background form and past time. With this process comes perhaps the most important lesson, as it performs or rehearses the present ecological conundrum of both holding on and losing or letting go.

Wilderness Landscape (Weight of the world) (fig. 4) draws from Domenico Veneziano's mid-fifteenth-century painting of *Saint John in the Wilderness* in the National Gallery in Washington, D.C (fig.5). The original painting (11.1 x 12.5 inches) creates an intimacy of form, with the figure and landscape in secluded harmony. When the solitary figure of John is removed from the landscape the religious framing loosens, and the themes of penance and the divine that leave their trace on the landscape forms themselves are foregrounded. This loosening contributes to the ethics that Bennett's materialism explores, and shape images and possibilities of future world-making. As eco-philosopher Tim Morton suggests, "[t]o love extension ... is to love the thingly quality of the other, in the ultimate, Cartesian sense: to respect what is truly other about the other."³³ Such is the nature of *Wilderness Landscape*, which seeks to develop the idea of an affective or empathic response

³² Michael Ann Holly, "Patterns in the Shadows," in *InVisible Culture: An Electronic Journal for Visual Studies* 1 (Winter 1998), <https://ivc.lib.rochester.edu/patterns-in-the-shadows/>.

³³ Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), at 179.

to the *materiality* of the landscape image, rather than a sympathetic response to the *figures* placed within it.

The landscapes of the paintings that Berenson admired for their feeling of the “third dimension,” work here to replace the perspectival space that governs current ideas of landscape. There is a solidity of form in their rocky mountainous terrains that does not adhere to any normative association with ideas of space and representation, and their emphasis is on the material, on bodily connections. The lack of narrative or the complete absence of the human subject inscribed on their surfaces shifts attention away from the passive role these spaces habitually occupy. This action highlights the object in a construction that traditionally favours the subject and is reinforced by the exposed materiality of the empty surfaces of the painted landscapes. It contributes to a sense of loss within the works, an abandonment that calls for empathy and highlights a shared embodiment between viewer and viewed. The Magdalen’s ambiguous traits, at once female and male, her melancholia and yet the hope and creativity that this engenders are an example of how it is possible to reshape habitual definitions of landscape as a natural scenery in which human subjectivity is enacted, a notion already complicated by the Anthropocene era where categories of human and landscape have in any case become blurred. To our culture’s thorough commodification of experience, especially visual experience, my artworks propose difference. They connect body and eye, reconfigure commodified time, and extend the human to the non-human. There is a pressing and urgent need to alter landscape’s increasingly unproductive positioning in terms of western subject/object dualisms, to understand it not as an aestheticized background or leisure space, but as a co-subject, an interconnectedness that requires a recalibration within the collective landscape imaginary.

Figure 1 Henrietta Simson, *The Artificial and the Real*, 2019–2022, archival print on paper, wooden frame, 19 x 37 in. (48 x 94.5 cm) (artwork © Henrietta Simson; image provided by the artist)

Figure 2 Henrietta Simson, *Baume/Balm*, 2018, oil on canvas, 48 x 48 in. (122 x 122cm) (artwork © Henrietta Simson; image provided by the artist)

Figure 3 Henrietta Simson, *Copper Landscape Series: Under the ground over the sea*, 2022, papier-mâché, oil and metal leaf on jute, each 12 x 12 in. (30 x 30cm) (artwork © Henrietta Simson; image provided by the artist)

Figure 4 Henrietta Simson, *Wilderness Landscape (Weight of the World)*, 2018, oil on gesso panel, 12 x 18 in. (30 x 45cm) (artwork © Henrietta Simson; image provided by the artist)

Figure 5 Domenico Veneziano, *Saint John in the Desert*, 1445–1450c., Italy, tempera on panel, 11 3/6 x 12 1/2 in. (28.4 x 31.8cm), National Gallery of Art, Washington, Samuel H. Kress Collection (artwork in the public domain, CC0)

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