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## Unfurling

Alyssa Matthews

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Unfurling

by

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Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

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the Upper Division Honors Program.

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Louisiana State University  
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This thesis is dedicated to my mother and father,  
and to the painters who have experienced this land with me.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would not be painting without the support and influence of the people who saw a reason to push me past what I perceived to be my limits of ability. To my parents, your support from the beginning of my tendency to make and draw are the reason I can recognize and cultivate the impulse to paint. Your love and unfailing encouragement are an ever-present reason for my persistence in making images. To my teachers, from the beginning, who have mused about the cosmos, been a rock of patience, shown me colors, made me think critically, pushed me out into the world, and allowed me to find meaning, your persistence in this medium through all measure of faith and doubt continues to teach me. Vanette Harris, Marie Smith, Kathy Reed; Michael Crespo, Denyce Celentano, Rick Ortner, Ed Smith, Kelli Kelley, thank you. Lastly, to my fellow painters, whose presence in the studio makes magic. Thank you.

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## ABSTRACT

I used to think I could make sense of landscapes. I've been painting them for a year and a half—chasing reason—before I challenged myself to abandon my grasp on the idea of a solution. My work deals with rendering the land, how and why it relates to the act of painting, and a search for meanings that, more than “make sense,” hold many senses.

I explore elements of the cane fields and lakes that surround me in South Louisiana. I search for the feeling of an event, of a specific time of day or year or human interaction with these elements. I hunt for this sense or feeling in the processes of painting by defining and breaking out of spatial circumstances, noting and negating relationships among marks, and using color shifts to create and defy spatial movement. Rhythms exposed in these processes imply the landscape, the mood, or the event. The hunt for these rhythms and free associations of meaning compels me to make paintings. This thesis chronicles my investigation into the meaning of paint, the meaning of land, and my place as an image-maker in relation to these.

## UNFURLING

South Louisiana is the light and environment that has always encased me. As an undergraduate, I felt very little pull toward any theme in my work until I began to paint the land. The experience of the rural South Louisiana landscape holds many meanings for me that all relate to associations I have with vast expanses, cluttered spaces, and specific colors. My work grapples with the transition I am making from looking at my environment to acknowledging myself as a part of my environment, from objectively observing to simultaneously interconnecting in a visual circumstance. The nature of this transition owes itself to in-depth conversations about art, contemporarily relevant and meaningful critiques, and a passionate studio environment that opened me up to influence and invited a fundamental shift in my approach. In widening my scope of sources, I have begun investigating the transubstantial nature of paint itself, as a tactile material that becomes an image, becomes a sensation. I have learned to recognize multiple personal meanings that landscapes invoke.

At the beginning of this year, I painted the land for the way I could objectify it, piece it together, impose sense on it. In working from observation, I problematically tried to find overall solutions in my surroundings and translate them to general solutions in my paintings. Disillusionment emerged in the periphery of my attachment to landscape with the move into my studio – a place inside, removed from my subject. In an effort to calm this unsettled feeling initially, I painted from memory and looked at how others, like William Beckman, Corot, Kokoschka, painted land, grasping for a specificity and a conviction that I struggled to summon, as in *Beckman Field* (Fig.1). This transition did allow my imagination to translate to marks out of pure instinct – as in the track marks in the field, and to broaden my scope of references

beyond observation. I slowly began to deeply question my perceptions, why I paint land, and, of course, why I paint.

These questions lead me to a period of experimentation, thinking and not thinking, trying to hone my perception of color relationships, understanding spatial meaning, recognizing meanings that I find and associations that I make within the weight, shape, and speed of my marks, and most importantly, trying to forget it all when I paint. With *Collapse in View*, (Fig. 2) I began to think about space and color meaningfully. I was interested in narrative, in visual human interaction with landscape, but throughout the process, the figure became more present to me in its absence. The space I created and colors I used held the figural meaning. They signified whatever part of human nature I needed to exhibit. I made drawings from sketches and photographs, collapsing 180 degrees of viewing onto one plane that reads from left to right. I am alluding to the progression of emotions in time on a whole and single flat surface, remarking on the inevitable simultaneity of several emotions in one period of time. The color I use signifies winter and summer simultaneously – a sky that churns between warm and cool greys, warm neutrals of earth to indicate winter in the expanse, warm greens and cool yellows to indicate summer in the sugarcane, and objects from my experience in both these times appear in non-corresponding areas. The gesture and movement that crop up signify an unnerving stillness, alluding again to the collapse of time and emotion experienced as a collection of moments. This painting was my first encounter with consciously manipulating paint, as paint, and what I could observe, to convey a specific meaning.

I investigated these issues in isolation in the *University Lake* paintings. *University Lake I* (Fig. 3) was organized within a one-point perspective spatial condition, for which I worked from a drawing and a painting I had done from observation in the past. I looked at Antonio Lopez-



Garcia, and the way his markings, scrapings, re-workings, and more mark-making seemed to be a visual syntax, a way to communicate openness. Allowing myself the time and patience it takes to work into a painting gradually also informed my practice, as different from completing quick landscape paintings from observation in a single sitting. *University Lake II* (Fig. 4) investigated an equivocal spatial condition, in which I stepped away from observed perception and was faced with the painting solely as a painting that needed color statements to direct its push and pull. This painting pushed me further away from my tendency to want to piece together closed forms. Every form needed to remain open in order to shift, and I began to gravitate toward this sensation. *University Lake III* (Fig. 5) renders the lake in a flat space, alluding to the lake only in its bowl-like arrangement of shapes on the plane. Studying the way Willem de Kooning's surfaces are entirely composed of positive forms taught me about meanings we attach to color and shape, transitions and lines in a totally flat space. The *University Lake* paintings allowed me to accept the essential process of painting out or negating previous decisions to reconstruct a space.

Working in the studio and limiting my access to the outdoors encouraged me to take advantage of using other artists as sources for my paintings. I am influenced by the work of figural and landscape painters whose marks and overall gesture imply specificity and convey the thrust and incoherence of unruly landscape elements, whose work seems to hover between the sureness of one thing and the simultaneous dissolution of that thing. Along with the day to day influences of walking, driving, speaking with people, and experiencing emotions, are the influences of painters such as Tiepolo and Tintoretto, for their sensibility of landscape and directional movement in their straining figures; Cecily Brown and de Kooning for their use of paint as self-referential and metaphorical; Philip Guston for his use of images as language and

his sense of touch, along with Joan Mitchell and Cy Twombly, for their freely associating marks. I look at Oskar Kokoschka and Peter Doig for the way they evoke personal experience of landscape.

My experience in Italy over the summer informed my appreciation for the abstract inherent in the specific conditions of light and form that exist specifically in the work of Venetian painters. Works such as Tintoretto's *Saint Mark Freeing a Slave from Torture* (Fig.6), and after returning, studying *Ascension* (Fig. 7), introduced me to the compositional structure of human interaction that can move a viewer's eye over an area using visual rhythms. These rhythms not only communicate across a plane but they activate and notate the space that ranges from recess to projection. Movement in and out of a space animated by tension as rhythm – outstretched limbs, fingers, directions of gazes – or direction as rhythm – shadows, wings, envelopes of light, had not been a conscious part of my image-making. Observations in the landscape thereafter became very much about these rhythms and how I could use paint to signify them – within and without a fully articulated description of form. I am now at the point where I am welcoming specificity back into the studio setting, but I first needed to unlearn this idea of being specific.

The engaging nature of my studio environment is a large part of what taught me and untaught me, and is one aspect of my influence which cannot be ignored. While working on the lake paintings, I came across an image of Cecily Brown's *Canopy* (Fig. 8) in the studio. I went into my studio space and remarked to a friend that I didn't think I physically knew how to make those kinds of marks, how to be uninhibited yet so specific. She sat me on the ground, gave me a loaded brush, took my hand in both of hers, and forcefully moved the brush on a piece of primed paper, saying, "Do this. Make fifty of these." It was a challenge to isolate my presumptions

about marks that create a form and undo them without pretense (Fig. 9). I had come to a point where my dependency on a certain kind of mark built from expectations I had of description that I associated with the way to communicate structure, was barring what truths could be communicated with a paint application that lends itself to the kind of spatial rhythms and specificity of gesture I was struck by in Venetian paintings. I also needed to expand my notion of structure.

Another studio influence on my painting practice has been collaboration. A fellow painter and I have been making simultaneous portraits of the other on the same surface (Fig. 10). The work of folding two spaces into one, treating two paintings as one, standing in two spaces that are one is informing the way I perceive the space within the vegetal forms I paint. Painting this way forces me to notice separate parts that are at once whole: leaves that are stalks, bending forward that is folding backward, stems coming out that are simultaneously going underneath. More importantly, this sort of challenge asks me unanswerable questions about identity within an image, within the way an image is painted, similarity and differences of tactile quality, boundary of marks, communication and non-communication within myself; these questions remain prevalent and importantly open-ended in my painting practice. The struggle to maintain an openness of edges, and allowing this negotiation of boundary to become the form of the painting, allows the space to unfold and is a directly translatable issue I address in my work.

*Winter Roil* (Fig. 11) is about this kind of open-ended form. The movements in *Winter Roil* reference what harvested cane fields and vegetation do in winter, left unattended, in disarray. It is a folding and reaching, unfurling, yet heavy and wilting activity animated by marks that signify forwardness and recess. The culmination of my unlearning is exhibited in this work. The specificity of gesture is not restricted to description; the specificity of color and mark

acts as a metaphor for alternating wilt, decay and extended outstretch. Color is limited to a range of dull ochres that approach the warmth of flesh tone, and space indicates a rising plane – these elements work to signify the multiple meanings that exist in the action, gesture, or appearance of something, each equally accessible and readable through passages of surface. Sugarcane as a host for this significance contains various meanings that are open to interpretation as specifically cane, according to my experience observing it, and also as signifying the tendency of cane as the tendency of human nature.

The entangled vegetation in my landscapes, for me, convey something about the nature of emotions and rhythms of human tendency. Part of my awareness of the properties and potential of color and mark within landscape stems from continuously observing the figure. Through figure studies, I'm learning to limit my color to reference specific light when I abstract the land. The specificity of light in forms and in a space apparent to me in an observed situation translate to decisions I make about rendering elements of land. Linking figures to their space in an observed circumstance translates to the way I render activity within a space in the vegetal forms I paint. I associate a sense of flesh with leaves, bodily movement and emotion with the reach of stalks and wilt of damp underbrush. I associate specific light with emotion that underlies human gestures and can be represented by the activity of landforms. Figure studies present a realm in which I can explore where a line becomes a mark and where an edge vacillates between two forms, becoming both (Figs. 12, 13, 14). Simultaneity becomes meaningful in the specific. The element of gestural specificity that becomes apparent in the paint stems from immediate influence of visual surroundings.

I have begun to re-appreciate value in immediate visual source material in a new way as a result of still life studies and continuously painting the figure from life (Figs. 15, 16). In

exploring vegetation as a subject on a large scale, I am bringing dead cane-like vegetation into the studio and setting up artificial light sources in order to have access to a sense of light and form more grounded in my perception. In *Sur la Bord* (Fig. 17), I am continuing to explore the ability of entangled vegetation to imply the internal contradictions we embody as humans – who we are outwardly which conveys and conceals who we are inwardly. However, I do not want to develop a tendency to overstate complexity by generalizing and making marks arbitrarily; I believe the kind of specificity of light or gesture in an observed circumstance allows for more complex or specific associations beyond interconnected forms in general. In one sense, I am coming back around to observed circumstances, but with a changed way of perceiving.

This year, I have questioned why I paint. The answer was a door to a lifelong pursuit of more questions founded in my new understanding of the ability of paint to be paint and simultaneously, substantially something outside this. An essential part of my upbringing has been my Roman Catholic background. This influence, as I grew to own myself as an artist, became something I accepted as congruent to making images, but beyond that, it remained beside the point or only meaningful symbolically when it came to making art. It wasn't until I began hearing and recognizing more and more of this term we use, the otherness of paint, that its tactile qualities, its ability to visually stimulate, psychologically impact, and do this through the senses, that I began to understand my impulse to use paint in a different light. Something about the concept of transubstantiation in the Eucharist – experiencing or knowing the divine as real through the senses by means of changed substance – started to translate for me the process of using paint to make an image. A painting communicates a person's reality that can be known or experienced through the senses by the means of a substance that has become suddenly more than pigment in a tube. Recognizing the transcendence of images through something so primal as the

materiality of paint spoke volumes to me about my identity within my Catholic tradition. What spoke more, however, was slowly being able to equate the active struggle in the process of painting, to believe that I can get paint to be something other than itself, with the active tension of believing in the transubstantiation of the Eucharist. For me, the inherent presence of all-consuming faith, and simultaneously sobering doubt, is the necessary and driving contradiction that allows me to call myself religious or a painter. For me, it is the same and essential struggle.

Many of these experiences and lessons seem on one level almost beside the point when speaking of the body of work of a working artist. But for me, as an undergraduate, my body of work was the experience and responsibility of learning what painting means to me for the first time. I assumed in the beginning, in contemplating what a body of work is, that I had my subject, and I would simply need to make a lot of paintings from it. I was completely unaware of the amount of ground I had never thought to cover. Each painting undid a presumption I had made about paint and deconstructed my sensibility into something that was simultaneously more encompassing and specific, more intentional and meaningful, more believing and doubtful, and ultimately, more true to my human experience. I am learning that my associations with the land are actually as entangled, as shifting, and as engaging as my honest experiences of reality. This body of work reflects the unfurling of my ever-renewing and persistent struggle to articulate meaning through the visceral means of paint and a visually tactile land.

## FIGURES



Figure 1

Alyssa Matthews, *Beckman Field*, Oil on linen on board, 18 x 24in., 2009.

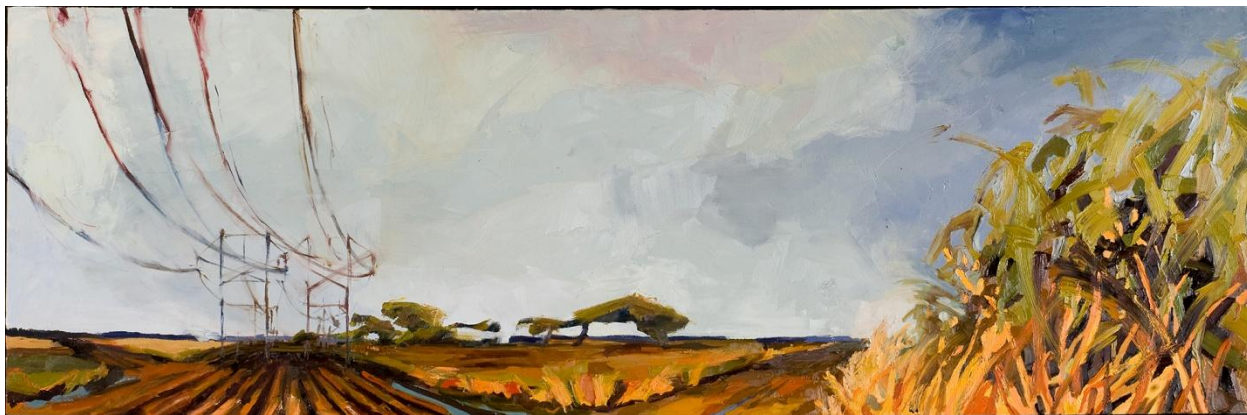


Figure 2

Alyssa Matthews, *Collapse in View*, oil on canvas, 24 x 72 in., 2009.





Figure 3

Alyssa Matthews, *University Lake I*, oil on board, 36 x 48 in., 2009



Figure 4

Alyssa Matthews, *University Lake II*, oil on paper, 22 x 30 in., 2009.





Figure 5

Alyssa Matthews, *University Lake III*, oil on canvas board, 18 x 24 in., 2009.



Figure 6

Jacopo Tintoretto, *St. Mark Freeing a Slave from Torture*, oil on canvas, 416 x 544 cm., 1547-8.





Figure 7

Jacopo Tintoretto, *Ascension*, oil on canvas, 17'8" x 10'8", 1579-81.



Figure 8

Cecily Brown, *Canopy*, oil on linen, 203.2 x 203.2 cm, 2003-4.





Figure 9

Alyssa Matthews, *Untitled*, oil on paper, 4 x 9 in., 2009.





Figure 10

Alyssa Matthews, Zachary Cummings, *Coalesce*, oil on board, 24 x 48 in., 2010





Figure 11

Alyssa Matthews, *Winter Roil*, oil on canvas, 48 x 72 in., 2009.



Figure 12

Alyssa Matthews, *Figure Study*, oil on masonite, 11 x 14 in., 2009.





Figure 13

Alyssa Matthews, *Two Figures*, oil on paper, 11 x 14 in., 2009.





Figure 14

Alyssa Matthews, *Figure Study*, oil on board, 11 x 14 in., 2009.



Figure 15

Alyssa Matthews, *Still Life*, oil on paper, 15 x 17 in., 2010.



Figure 16

Alyssa Matthews, *Banana Tree Study*, charcoal on paper, 22 x 30 in., 2010.

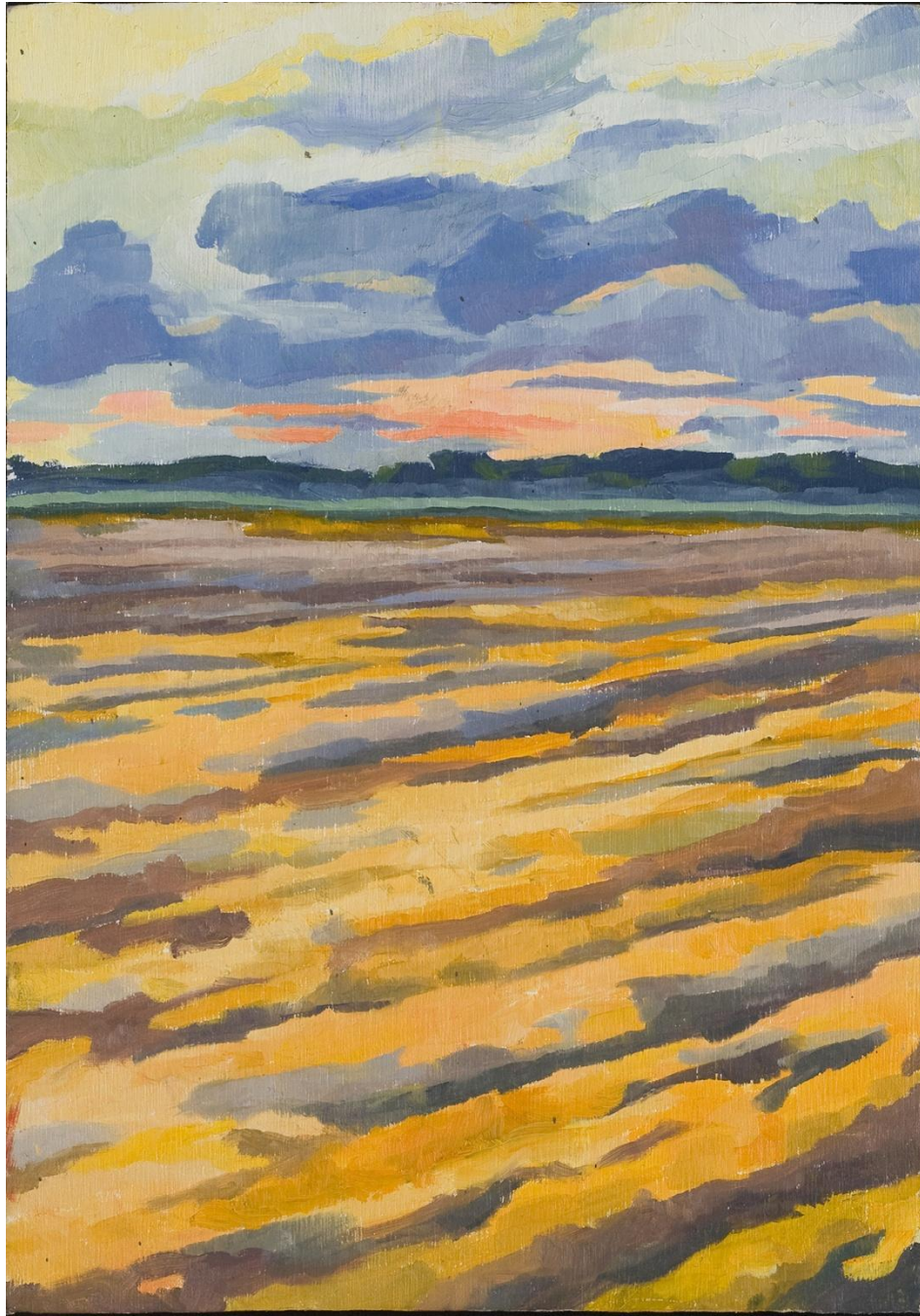




Figure 17

Alyssa Matthews, *Sur la Bord*, oil on canvas, 48 x 60 in., 2010

APPENDIX: ADDITIONAL PAINTINGS & DRAWINGS



Alyssa Matthews, *In Blue*, oil on board, 9 x 15 in., 2009





Alyssa Matthews, *Mid-Morning*, oil on board, 10 x 12 in., 2009



Alyssa Matthews, *Morning Field*, oil on board, 12 x 18 in., 2009





Alyssa Matthews, *Orage*, oil on board, 5 x 9 in., 2009



Alyssa Matthews, *Night Studio*, oil on board, 10 x 12 in., 2009





Alyssa Matthews, *Cane Study*, charcoal on paper, 18 x 24 in., 2009

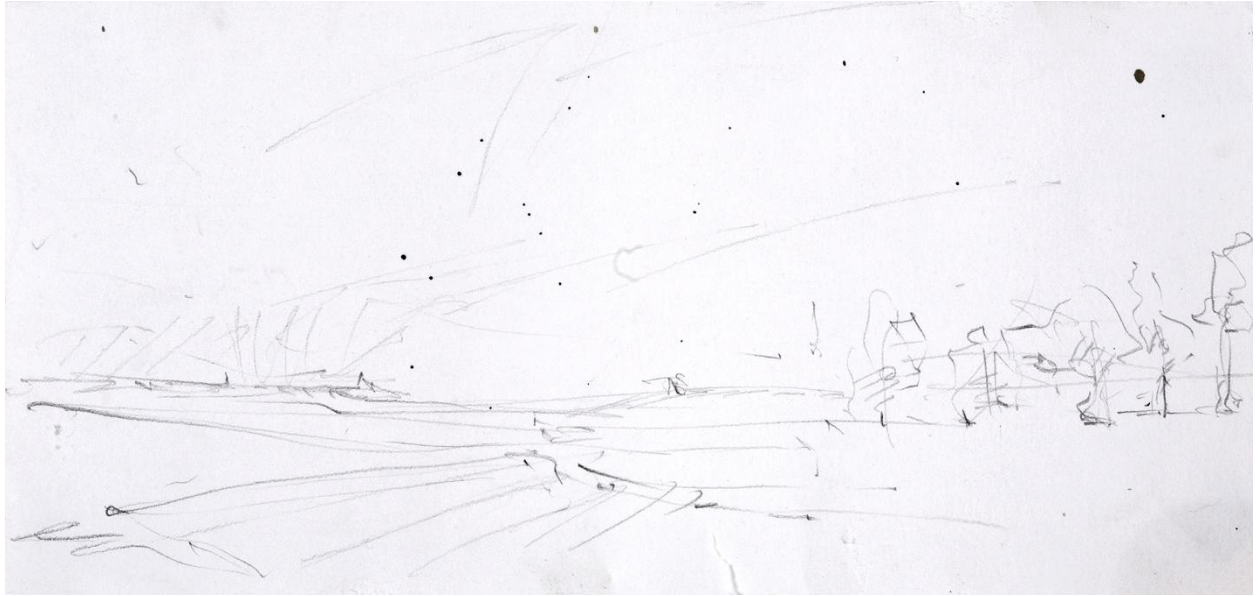




Alyssa Matthews, *Marks Study*, oil on paper, 4 x 12 in., 2009



Alyssa Matthews, *Lake Study*, ink on paper, 9 x 12 in., 2009



Alyssa Matthews, *Study for Collapse in View*, graphite on paper, 4 x 8 in., 2009



## VITA

Alyssa Matthews was raised, the oldest of four children, in Lafayette, Louisiana.

Drawing was a part of growing up, and early on she was encouraged to explore various means of artistic expression. Her first introduction to art in a broader context was her last year of high school, entering the Lafayette Parish High School Arts Academy, where she was encouraged to pursue painting and drawing at the undergraduate level. As she maneuvered through possible career options at LSU – Arts Management, Art Therapy, Education – she came to the full understanding of the fulfilling and necessary struggle of simply, and not so simply, making paintings. Teaching is an experience she finds very rewarding, and she has been teaching since the fall of 2008 for a non-profit organization called Centre for the Arts in New Roads, Louisiana. She will earn her BFA in Painting and Drawing in 2010 from LSU, graduating *magna cum laude* with honors. She will be attending the University of Connecticut for graduate school in Studio Art, making, drawing, and painting continuously, in pursuit of meaning and new, unsolvable landscapes.