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Traversing landscapes of converging worlds

Michael G. Williams

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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TRAVERSING LANDSCAPES OF CONVERGING WORLDS

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By
Michael G. Williams
B.F.A., University of Alaska, 2002
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
TRAVERSING LANDSCAPES OF CONVERGING WORLDS.....	1
The Atchafalaya Basin.....	5
The Barrier Islands.....	8
Old Growth	10
CONCLUSION.....	14
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	15
VITA.....	16

ABSTRACT

Traversing landscapes is a body of work that translates my experiences of outdoor travels in the unique and remote places in Louisiana. These experiences are transformed into semi-organic constructions that are derived from forms and materials present in the natural landscape and the forms and materials used to navigate these environments. The materials used exemplify the contrasts and also the connections that exist on the ever-converging paths of mankind and nature. Though the struggle in the relationship between man and nature has always existed though time. It is at present, our time now, that we can see the greatest contrast and the need for a unified relationship.

TRAVERSING LANDSCAPES OF CONVERGING WORLDS

I am compelled, like many people, to explore the outdoors. I enjoy the solitude and the simplistic way of living that goes hand in hand with spending time in remote places and undeveloped environments. Coming to Louisiana from the northern regions of the country, I was drawn to the unique outdoor environments that Louisiana has to offer. Some of these places, like the Atchafalaya basin, are like no other in North America. I set out to explore these environments as both an observer and as an artist. Upon my initial explorations, I quickly realized how wild and untamed these places could be. At the same time I was also struck by how the traces of man's hand on the environment are still, even in these remote locations, almost inescapable.

Being an active participant in the natural world is a source of inspiration for me.

Knowing the lay of the land and how to navigate through it gives me a sense of self-sufficiency and creates a bond between myself and the natural environment. It is at these times, when this bond or relationship is formed, that I feel a spiritual connection with the world. It is through recognizing this relationship that I believe, we are able to recognize that we are a part of a much larger and a more complex system than ourselves - and that we are all active participants within this complex system that transcends ourselves. Such recognition reveals that, as participants in an environment, we are responsible. Being in these places allows me the opportunity to consider the consequences that my actions have

upon these environments as I interact with them. This also makes me aware of the effects others have had upon the environment. Seeing these effects instills in me the need of stewardship for these environments.

When looking at this body of work and my methods implemented to produce it. One may be inclined can draw connections to artists like Richard Long, Martin Puryear and Simon Starling. Over my academic career I have been introduced to different methods, materials and motivations for creating artwork. The previously mention artists have at some point in my career been a sources of inspiration for my methods of research, craftsmanship and intent.

Understanding Richard Longs work and the methods of his research has allowed me to take my work in a broader direction of post-studio research. Through his work, I am able to more clearly see the value of how my experience in the world relates to my work. Like Long I spend extend periods of time in the field documenting my travels.¹ The work that comes from my research is not as simplistic in form and use of materials as Long's work is. My work uses a wider range of materials, natural and man-made, that are compiled to articulate my experiences in the field.

One can also make comparisons in my work to the work of Martin Puryear.² The way Puryear uses form and natural materials and his craftsmanship is related to my approach to my work. I am drawn to his work because of its simplicity and his method of

¹ A good introduction to the works of Richard Long is *Richard Long: Walking the Line* by Richard Long and Denise Hooker, (Publisher: Thames and Hudson, 2005). This book serves as an excellent example of how Long's sculptures were influenced by his encounters with nature. Using stones, boulders, driftwood, clay and mud, Long removed these materials from their natural environment and brought these materials into both museums and houses.

² Crutchfield, Margo, *Martin Puryear*, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 2001. Puryear employs traditional craft techniques in assembling pieces through such methods as wrapping, tying, and lamination. Puryear's minimalism and his use of materials shares certain affinities with my work.

execution. My work displays similar aspects while combining natural and man-made materials creating a more complex visual object but holding true to the ideals of simplicity by using unfinished wood and traditional methods of joinery.

Simon Starlings resonates with me, as some of his work also speaks to environmental issues and the physicality of experience. There is a relation between his work and mine in that he works with objects that he has physically used or transformed. In this work the intention is that the act of their transformation, representation and function gives these objects their value or merit as art. A significant difference between my work and Starlings' is that the actual objects that I use in my exploration are not present in my work. Rather, my work is a representation of objects that I use and of the physical experience of being in a place. My work is not meant to be seen as a call to environmental activism. It is meant to encourage the ideals of stewardship for the places that we value because of their beauty and their rarity.

For the body of work *Traversing Landscapes of Converging Worlds*, I sought out places that are unique and valuable to us, as residents, of Southern Louisiana. The places that I explored illustrate the diversity of environments of this region. The three environments represented in this body of work are the Atchafalya basin, Barrier islands, and Old growth cypress forest. I translated my experiences in each of these environments into sculptural forms that incorporate ambient sound recordings taken during my trips. This allows the viewer to become more immersed in this work and reflect on what their eyes and ears are offering to them.

When I enter these environments I use my modern camping equipment and tools. I take into the field current satellite maps, along with a G.P.S. (Global Positioning System) to best navigate my routes. The clothes I wear are made of high performance synthetic fibers that dry and wick moisture quickly while holding body temperature. The ambient sounds of my trips are recorded digitally to keep an audio record of these environments. My mode of travel in these places ranged from Vibram rubber soles under foot to boats made from ABS plastic and fiberglass-covered wood. Just entering these natural environments with all of my high-tech gear to experience and document them draws a great contrast between the natural landscape and myself.

These sculptures are informed by the materials and forms I bring into these environments as well as the materials and forms that I find in the landscape. The ambient sounds that are recorded are used in these sculptures to immerse the viewer in their environment. I often find both natural and manmade sounds in the landscapes of Louisiana. My choices of materials were made to highlight the contrasts that arise when man and nature cross paths. As well as providing a contrast, these materials combine in their purpose, forming a relationship that is complete in and of itself. Man has always been at odds with his environment. We live in a time when this contrast between man and nature is perhaps more glaring than it has ever been before. It is in recognition of this contrast that, perhaps we can see the necessity of acting and being a part of the environment rather than a conqueror of it.

These constructions are semi-organic wooden structures that offer methods of

shelters derived from each environment visited. Each wooden form is covered with rip-stop nylon giving the form its function as shelter. The nylon coverings are silk screened with manipulated satellite and topographic imagery from each place that was traveled to. This imagery functions as a layer of information that connects each construction to its place of inspiration. By combining natural material like wood and a synthetic material, like rip-stop nylon, I use their contrast as a metaphor for the intertwined and sometimes forced relationship between man and nature. Each piece is titled with G.P.S. coordinates that was recorded during my stay in these places. By doing this I highlight the contrast between these organic constructions to our man made tools and the mapping systems I used to explore them. I present these contrasts to refer to a gulf that exists between man and nature. I also combine these contrasts to comment on the need for man to work in unison with nature even though the way we live often requires us to impose ourselves upon our natural environment. The point is, this imposition doesn't necessitate a personal irresponsibility or declare our independence from nature it is quite the opposite.

The Atchafalaya Basin:

The 18' boat form titled *N 30°49.877 W 091°25.285* is a representation of my travels in the Atchafalaya basin. My kayak was a strong influence upon this piece as it allowed me to navigate this new and intriguing place.

0/16/06

I launched my boat with the thunder of interstate I10 above me. I paddled out a canal between East and West bound traffic into the constant southerly flowing current of Henderson lake. I made my way through the veins of the turbid water that braided the basin. Ten minutes down current the roar of I10 disappears and is replaced by the stillness of the basin's vegetation leaving only the sounds of my paddle striking the water and the ripple of the gliding hull of my boat. I cut southwest down an arrow-strait canal to head to the main part of the lake. The canal I now travel was dug when Henderson Lake was used for oil and gas exploration. Not much further along a Great Gray heron takes flight from a cypress tree sounding his almost pre-historic alarm call to let everyone in ear shot know of an intruder. As I reach the far end of the canal I see houseboats tucked into the side canals. The sound of a gas-powered generator rings out as I pass but disappears as I reach the large part of the lake. The water bugs scatter and then settle down as I stop in a group of cypress knees to watch the setting sun light up the clouds with fiery pink and gold.

This experience was intriguing to me. There was a constant reminder that someone has been here before that came from the sound of gas-powered engines or by simply paddling down carved waterways, decades old. Yet the wildlife is in abundant numbers and is in close proximity.

N 30°49.877 W 091°25.285 takes on the form of my mode of transportation and my tent because it is necessary for spending any extended time in these places. The wood used for this construction is cypress. This was chosen because it is one of the most dominant species of tree in the Atchafalaya basin. I took ruff-cut cypress and mill it into calculated strips. By doing this I show the contrast of how man's hand leaves its mark when working with natural materials. But in my constructions I allowed the strips to run wild, crossing and overlapping as they break away from the rigid outline of the boat form. This gives the cut strips an organic feel allowing this manipulated natural material to reflect this natural state. White rip-stop nylon is used to cover the form referencing the materials that I use and bring into the environment. One such example is my tent that is made of the same rip-stop nylon fabric. Covering the form allows it to function as a shelter as the boat form hangs in the gallery. This form hangs so that it obstructs the viewer's path as they move through the gallery. The viewer becomes an active participant by having to move around the form or duck under it to step under its canopy. Under the canopy the viewer can hear the ambient sounds recorded from the Acthafalaya basin. These sounds range from my paddle striking the water to the wind and animals that occupy this place. Satellite imagery is printed on the fabric from Lake Fausse Point located in the western edge of the central Atchafalaya basin. I traveled to this place several times in the fall and the colors reflect the colors seen in the basin as winter drew near. In this environment I see evidence of a co-existence between man and nature as I paddle down pipeline canals. I see this relationship and responsibility in the plants and animals reclaiming what has always been their home *and* man setting these places aside

to minimize impact of their own industry. The basin will never be disrupted again like in its height of oil and gas production because we know now how delicate and diverse this ecosystem is and the need for it to be protected. In this I see a relationship or bond with the natural world that is a contrasting and cooperative environment.

The Barrier Islands:

The 10' tall double curve screens, titled *N 29° 15.125 W 089° 57.114*, were inspired by the barrier islands of the Louisiana's Gulf coast. While at Grand Isle I traveled by foot and by kayak. I was intrigued by the man made constructions set in the landscape for the purpose of protecting the Island and its inhabitants.

4/6/07

The wind blew hard at night but by morning had calmed considerably. Despite this, things were still a little chilly. I was hoping that the rain from the cold front would stick to the north. Noon came with full sun and even less wind. We hauled our boat over the sand levy through the wind-flagged brush that separates our campsite from the Gulf of Mexico. We moved down the beach to a spot where the breaking waves were small. A small flock of sand pipers hurried their pace in order to stay ahead of us. It was early spring, the migratory season for seabirds in the Western Hemisphere. There were birds of all kinds everywhere. A good push off the shore and in the boat, a few hard strokes to get

out of the breaking waves to the put on my spray skirt, and we were on our way. After a few more strokes we were in the gently rolling waves that headed for the beach. We paddle west into the wind and out to get to large rock breakers offshore. The rock breakers are long piles of rocks placed offshore by man to offer protection for the beach to buffer waves of violent storms. The birds that have gathered on the rocks called out to one and other. As we approached alarm calls of different birds were passed along group of birds on the rocks. Some birds were taking off and others were keeping a watchful eye on us as we passed. Dolphins were in the shallows between us and the beach feeding during the low tide. There was a very young dolphin swimming with a much larger adult. They surfaced together several times traveling parallel with us. We paddle past the remains of a fishing pier that was destroyed in Hurricane Katrina. The traces of Hurricane Katrina can still be seen all over the island a year and a half after that violent storm wreaked havoc upon this region.

Walking along the backside of the sand levy away from the beach we noticed that all the live oaks that were still standing were dead. They were killed by the saltwater from the Gulf in Katrina's storm surge. The plants on the levy lay close to the ground and were contorted by the almost constant wind.

N 29° 15.125 W 089° 57.114 is an upwardly thrusting form made of two curved walls that face each other. These walls, curving up and out from their base references the ever-present wind and waves found on the barrier islands. This form also refers to the

man-made barriers or walls like the sand levy and the offshore rock breakers that protect this unique place. Oak was used in this construction in remembrance of the live oaks lost in Hurricane Katrina's storm surge. The oak is milled and used in the same way as in the boat form. The oak strips cross and overlap as they reach upward terminating at varied heights, giving the form an organic shape. The rip-stop nylon that covers the walls is printed with manipulated satellite imagery of Grand Isle. The printing is used to create a horizon line for the viewer when they pass through. The printed images create a horizon line that is formed by the two colors that represent the sky and the Gulf of Mexico. This is the view that we often seek when traveling to Grand Isle and to other places like it. I encourage the viewer to reflect on the vastness of the view of endless sky and water.

Like the boat form, the viewer interacts with this form by walking through it. This action of walking through the work references to my actions and experience traveling through this environment.

Old Growth:

The three tall narrow forms in titled *N 30° 49.877 W 091° 25.285* were inspired by the cypress trees of Cat Island. At Cat Island National Wildlife Refuge one can find a stand of old growth cypress. This stand of trees is located on an over 10,000-acre floodplain that is flooded annually by the Mississippi river.

5/2/07

Dropping from 175 feet above sea level to 35 feet I felt the air turn cool as I wound my way down gravel roads west of Bayou Sara. After crossing over Blackfork Bayou I stopped at a locked gate on the road and went into the wildlife refuge. There were a series of gates here restricting vehicular travel into Cat Island when the water levels are high on the Mississippi. From here out, I was forced to move on foot. Walking down the gravel road overhead ibises flew over in pairs and in larger groups holding their formation. The ditches were filled with water and fish that intermittently broke the surface with a splash as they fed. As I walked deeper into the refuge all kinds of birds could be seen and heard. Blue and white herons sprung from the tall grass and snowy egrets gathered in the road up ahead. Reaching the place where the snowy egrets were in the road I found high water from the Mississippi flooding my path. The cypress trees here had immensely broad trunks. They looking like heavy undulating skirts dressing the trees as this organism had grown and spread over the years where it was rooted. . The silvery gray colors of the cypress contrasted sharply with the dark tones of the rest of the forest. Their broad bases and knees push up out of the ground like huge bones of an archeological dig. Knowing that there are trees here that are 500 to 1,000 years old gives this place a sense of unspoiled wilderness. The lowland forest is very dense and by walking a few yards one can easily disappear from sight.

Because of the topography around Cat Island and its orientation to the Mississippi river, these trees were not easy to access so they were left alone. Being left uncut the old growth forest of Cat Island is the home of the largest cypress tree in North America. This tree is the largest tree east of the continental divide.

Though the high water prevented me from seeing this famous cypress tree, what I did see was an excellent example of this lowland forest. At first, I was disappointed by being halted by the rising water that lay in my path. But this was a learning opportunity that challenged me to attune myself to this new environments I was experiencing for the first time. I was quickly reminded that in the eight months I have been focusing on this body of work, exploring unique places, and encountering Louisiana that there is still much to learn. Having the Mississippi alter my projected plans seems fitting. It was the environment dictating the outcome my travels. I will leave this place for a time and take this new experience and knowledge and use it to help me better navigate such environments in the future.

Luckily this forest has been set-aside as a refuge because of its diverse ecosystem. This refuge holds the only section of old-growth forest in the state of Louisiana known by both the National Wildlife Refuge and the Louisiana State Parks. Another reason for its protection is that it functions as a major destination for migratory birds that travel in their yearly pilgrimage along the Mississippi river.

N 30° 49.877 W 091° 25.285, takes shape as a group of three conical forms stretch up to the ceiling and a few feet above the floor. These conical forms have one open side.

The open sides face inward to the inside of the grouping of forms. The viewer can pass through the group and come out on other sides or step into the conical forms interior and be immersed by the materials and sounds used in this construction.

Like the two preceding pieces the viewer becomes an active participant in the work. The viewer's physical actions, while experiencing the work, references to my initial physical actions of traveling and experiencing this place. Each of the three forms is covered with rip-stop nylon that is printed with manipulated satellite imagery of the lowland forest. Standing between these towering forms the viewer is in closed to instill the feeling of the density of this lowland forest. The form also offers a place of refuge and cover, referring again to the density of the lowland forest and the ability to easily disappear for site.

CONCLUSION

This body of work was built to provide the viewer with a sense of the places that I have experienced. It is meant to offer the viewer an opportunity to reflect on these environments and consider what these places might mean to us as individuals who cannot escape the natural world. This work highlights the contrasts between man and his environment while at the same time illustrating how they can work together. Some of the places I visited may be subject to great change in our lifetime. These changes of our natural environment will, in effect, change us, as we are part of them.

If we can plan carefully when altering the environment, like we do when we need protection from it, we can coexist and minimize drastic changes that may disrupt both man and nature. We need to develop a relationship where man will be able to coexist with nature. Now more than ever we are forced by our past actions to pay attention to our impact upon the natural world. We realize how delicate of a balance there is between our actions as industrialized nations, and the effects our actions have on the environment.

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VITA

Born in 1971, Michael G. Williams grew up in Tidewater Virginia. In 2004 he received his Bachelor of Fine Art in sculpture from University of Alaska Fairbanks. His work has been exhibited through juried and invitational shows nationally. He will receive his Master of Fine Arts in sculpture from Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, at Summer Commencement, August 2007.