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Facing nature, facing paint

Emily Jane Ritchey

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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FACING NATURE, FACING PAINT

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by
Emily Ritchey
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ABSTRACT

The visual portion of this thesis is made up of paintings that juxtapose built and natural forms. Particular emphasis is placed upon the element of line and the plein-air painting experience. Journal entries chronicle the evolution of my painting practice during thesis research, placing the work within the context of my life.

PROLOGUE: PAINTING TO INHABIT

When I first arrived in Louisiana, I loved the trees and light and warmth. But I missed the mountains of West Virginia. I missed the climbing, winding views of the New River Gorge. So during my first year here I would often drive an hour to Clark Creek Natural Area, just over the border in Mississippi. Half an hour into the park, the trail reaches a creek that carves through a clay-based rock flecked with iron oxide. Paths curl and climb, putting various levels of the landscape, from the tops of trees to hollows and roots, in full view.

One visit to Clark Creek changed my goals as a painter. On that particular visit, I had situated myself on the ground to draw, at the base of cascading wooden stairs. The view was a bit of an obvious one, because of the pronounced stopping place of the path. In the middle of my drawing, I was struck by a sudden mute inability to draw whatever *mattered* about the hillside and creek.

I shed my charcoal and sketchbook in a pile with my bag, and wandered towards the creek bed, where I had seen and drawn boys playing earlier in the day. Squatting at the edge, I plunged my hands into the water. I began to play, teetering on the bank where it was narrowest and tallest, digging at the red specks in the clay with little sticks, caressing the pocks and protrusions in wet stone.

It felt like the visceral experience that painting can be. I knew I could similarly plunge into the painting process. If only I could elicit a similar *response* to my painting: an experience, rather than mere recognition.

When I returned to my studio, I felt incapable of expression, just as I had felt at the foot of the stairs. At the time, I had been drawing some studies of El Greco's *Burial of Count Orgaz*ⁱ. I had also been looking at Jasper John's *Diver*ⁱⁱ. In my mind, categories boundaries between painting (action), and painting (object), looking and experiencing, became all mixed up. I began to dream a study of *Burial* as water flowing, dribbling or trickling over rocks and pebbles, rushing or pooling or swirling in eddies. I crouched in the middle of this vision, up to my elbows in acrylic painting medium.

EXPERIENCING PLACE

The following journal entries document the evolution of my studio practice during my thesis year. They are grouped according to subject.

2/02/03 Mayaguez, Puerto Rico

I used to pretend to be an artist. I was eleven. My family lived in T.A.R.S., a Tropical Agricultural Research Station in Mayaguez, Puerto Rico, where my father worked as a soil scientist. This station was an enclosed base which housed a research lab, scientist's homes, greenhouses, and slightly wild botanical gardens. I would wander around for hours in this large backyard, parking my bike to sit down and draw mangoes, yautia leaves, or the abandoned house near the back gate. Besides the challenge of playing with my art supplies, I loved the way I became engulfed in the many overgrown spaces, seemingly full of mystery.

I still search for the feeling of complex, shady enclosure I found there, in the wooded area behind the greenhouses. Sometimes I consciously try to build it into my paintings, particularly the life size works. But at other times it simply emerges as a theme in what I look at and find, no matter where I am.

03/08/03 Dorset, England

Many years passed before I had another period of immersion within my environment that paralleled my experience living at T.A.R.S. My mother's family has lived for many generations in Edmondsham, a village in Dorset, England. During the summer of 1999, I visited my Grandmother there for about a month. Although I had visited often during my lifetime, this was the first time I was primarily by myself.

There, I was free to wander around the fields surrounding Edmondsham House, and Cowleaze (Granny's house). Even though I was in a sense a foreigner in England, I also felt as though I belonged. The scale of the landscape was surprisingly small, and had only gotten smaller as I grew older. Little spaces there each hold their own story: Castle Hill, with its horse-grave, and a grassy pit at the end of Edmondsham garden--for cock fighting. Each time I painted or drew I made new memories—I felt as though I carved my own nooks and crannies, it was small enough there to do that.

Last summer, I returned to Europe. This time I lived in Paris for one month and briefly visited Barcelona, Toledo and Madrid.

6/30/02 Barcelona, Spain

Overall my favorite place to relax while traveling this summer have been the parks. They are filled with a leisurely spirit. While in Paris, I spent a long time in the Jardin de Tulieries , usually returning to a spot near three Rodin sculptures.

Now I am in Barcelona, in the Parque Ciutadella. I like this park very much. It's much less formal than the parks in Paris. It includes ping-pong tables in various places, paths made of sand and even a zoo complete with parrots on-the-loose.

I just saw a little dog jump into a fountain for a dip, with the owner calling after him. Paris dogs are too well-trained to even consider cooling off in the water, and gardens there seem to be upkept with crews of men wielding garden shears! Such mass pruning would be ridiculous here, where varieties of trees grow in lovely chaos.

I made a drawing of the trees surrounding grand entrance stairs that lead to a bricked-in archway. Here, the nonsense need not be explained—stairs are allowed to exist in peace despite their forgotten use. Like the memory of gardens in Puerto Rico, this park has a soft ripeness. It is shady and overgrown, like a comfortable house.

6/05/02

I am in Madrid, visiting Real Jardin Botanica, close to the Prado Museum. I am most impressed with the variety of trees, each labeled with name and native country. I like this kind of garden because of its height. I am within it, rather than looking down at it. It is not overabundant in color, but infinite in type of branch and leaf.

(translated from Spanish) If only I had a garden like this close to me! The afternoon light illuminates the branches and leaves until they shine like slivers of glass. When I return to Baton Rouge, I'm going to find something comparable. This garden is like a grand symphony—not of color but instead different types of plants—like living marks in space. When the light falls over this trunk, it is like the entrance to a painting: light over shadow over light, and finally, the profound space of the sky.

EXPERIENCING PAINTING

Summer: Absorb

My experience of looking at paintings came to fruition like never before during my month-long visit to Europe in the summer of 2002. None of the pieces in my thesis exhibition are direct transcriptions of master artists' work, but they do stem from my experience as a viewer of painting. A few particular artists and paintings are especially relevant to my current body of work.

6/11/03 Reflections upon *Le Jardin a Bougival*ⁱⁱⁱ, by Berthe Morisot, 1884.

I surprised myself by liking this painting. It communicates the atmosphere of a place very well. I am not familiar with the place but I have occasionally found it here in Europe: the corner of a garden. It is like a village house in England at morning time. Nothing seems overstated, though marks multiply across the image. They are ordered in the way of shapes chosen by light rays, or like schools of fish. The bottoms of the plants are not visible, but implied. I gaze over the glittering roses off to the roof tops, then back to the house, an intimate space again. I am always drawn back to one grounding vertical mark and arc of a stalk. This painting is a very safe place, but vibrant. I'd like to live here.

06/04/02 Reflections upon the Piet Mondrain Exhibit, Musee d'Orsay

In the same room as the earliest drawings and pastels of trees, there are many small works that are more planar and geometrical, dating from around 1898-1901^{iv}.

In these, slabs of color are laid in simple shapes, often using only slightly differentiated hues. They depict the most ordinary surroundings: the crack of light behind a shed a door, a bridge, road and rural buildings. Sometimes the horizon line is pushed way up, creating an uneven proportion of earth to sky. In others it is lost altogether within a patchwork of walls, roofs, and openings. The size of each piece (these are no bigger than twenty inches) lends to a certain intimate relation with it. They are unassuming, yet visually striking.

6/18/02 Reflection upon Cezanne paintings, Musee d'Orsay.

I am visiting a room full of Cezanne paintings, in the Musee d'Orsay. What I like about these works are Cezanne's framing devices—I am funneled in and around the picture by a garden wall, or a vertical windowsill, or the corner of a building. When I sit down and look longer, some of the paintings that I had previously passed by start beckoning me.

I am watching a still life of a vase of flowers by a window, called *The Blue Vase*^v. First I am drawn by the color—simple grey-blue, but one that reads as light (I can almost imagine the coast outside that window), then a complimentary orange/yellow ochre showing how the light cuts in diagonally. The upright vase, slightly off-center, is the clearest blue of all, with red fruit beside it. It seems like the vase and flowers have all the presence of a person in a portrait.

I love Cezanne's order. It is an order that is a beautiful balance: present but not forceful, sincere, just slightly in-motion, built up slowly, slight diagonal by slight diagonal. Sky water, building, and branches fit and slip together like a moving puzzle, leading from shape to shape then around into shadow.

I had not realized how the palette was limited in the dark values. Modulations are most present in the middle values: reds, blues, and occasionally greens. These bright notes are given as rewards to surprisingly insignificant objects: books on a bookshelf, a chimney in the distance, a curving petal.

PAINTING EXPERIENCE

Fall: Meander

I return to Louisiana. As I begin to paint again, I find myself working outdoors more and more. I usually watch things that I am interested in painting before beginning with a physical canvas. At this time I have been watching a particular circular bush outside the entrance to the studio.

9/6/02

They are cutting down the vines and bushes that surround the stadium building. When I returned a few days ago I found my plant upturned, swirling upside-down and shriveled.

Today, there is no trace of it whatsoever. I walk around the side of the building to find a few stalks hidden, crawling up the windows, their baby yellow color poking up hopefully.

Granny died a few days ago. I talked with Mom, finally. I'm not sure what to write...I feel sad and disconnected with my family, so far away in England. Granny's house (Cowleaze) is covered with vines, too. The windows have funny latches that open the panes upward toward the sky.

9/29/02 Dorset, England

I'm at Cowleaze for Granny's memorial—back after three years. I'm enjoying the many memories I have of this place. I've gone walking a fair amount, and found myself in some of the spots that I painted and drew last time I visited. Today I saw many chestnuts that will be ready later in the autumn.

Granny planted a white cedar tree for me when I was born. Since I was last here it has grown in girth more than in height. I've never seen it in the fall before, when it has a beautiful waxy substance on its leaves that makes it look blue. I brought a small branch inside but the blue soon disappeared.

I have been busy visiting family. The house is a bustle of activity and I can feel Granny's presence here and in her garden. Some old friends came to visit and walked around the walled garden next door, talking about rhubarb pots, peach trees in the greenhouse, and comfrey.

3/23/03

Returning to Baton Rouge, I am transplanted in time and place. My visit to England was a visit to the past, to say farewell. Sitting in the places I had inhabited three years earlier, I felt at home, even though I was a foreigner. "In a funny way nothing makes you feel more like a native of your own

country than to live where nearly everyone is not”, the American writer Bill Bryson concluded, after living in England for twenty years.

Back in Louisiana, I have begun to think of outside and inside painting spaces as if they were different countries. Like Bryson, I am somehow more aware of my presence as an artist when I am outside, in a foreign environment.

3/18/03

My studio is what I bring with me. When I used to paint from branches assembled inside my room, I was removing a natural form from its ordinary context. Moving myself outside is another kind of juxtaposition. In the end, the change benefits me. The limitation of a few brushes, a small palette, and merely a few hours a day has given me more focus.

10/26/02 Fossil

It is really something to be affected by the weather so. I am working on Fossil, but it has been raining almost every day, from an old hurricane passing over. I had planned to go out canoeing, and then to paint, both Friday and Sunday. Instead, I am inside working on the computer and singing the rain, rain go away song. But this is part of it too. I am relinquishing my will to something larger.

10/20/02---10 A. M.

I am on my third visit to Fossil. Today the air is heavy, not the cool light mist of last time. The trees in the distance are blue and the crickets are very loud—more noticeable than the cars on the road beside me. The sky is dark, providing more interesting contrast with the light portions of the poles. In this light, the colors in the foreground seem more saturated, too.

11/1/02 Green Trapeze

I have been immersing myself in greens. My friend tells me it is the color of transition, in its straddling of cool and warm. I have mixed up various palettes, each using a different green base color. I improvise each next color to add, and how much, depending on the original green. I paint them on little pieces of gessoed paper, laying the color variations into squares or rectangles, small or long. I want to see what the hues and values look like next to each other. The most interesting palettes are the ones that dip into the adjacent colors—either blue or yellow.

10/12/02

I have been painting Trapeze, in black and white, even though I originally conceived of it in green.

It was so much harder for me to paint it than to draw it. I am going back in the morning when the light is emphasizing different areas. What has become clear to me is how approximate everything is, especially with the light changing. It is important to establish contrast right away, and consistently as I paint it. In the morning, the leaves are lit at the top. Much later, around 6 p.m., the bottom leaves are illuminated like jewels.

3/06/03

Mon. few showers (30%)

Tues. cloudy (20%)

Wed. cloudy (20%)

Thurs. partly cloudy

Fri.-Sun. T-storms.

11/28/03

When I step out of my car to paint a motif I have been watching while driving, my experience changes significantly. It is as though I have been immersed in water. When I look at the motif while driving, the image is like listening to a melody in my head. When I begin to paint it, I have stepped into a room full of music. The grass is always wetter than I imagine, the sun more blinding, the wind more gusty, and the clouds faster.

11/02/02

Sometimes I wonder if I am only painting so that I may participate more fully in my surroundings. When I meet a new place, I walk until I am tired, walk some more, then return to the best stopping place. I pick one thing to watch. Slowly what once seemed simple and still becomes complex: the act of watching is complex. I am here, a woodpecker is ahead and to my right. The light is leaning this way, warming my cheek. The wind slips around grass blades. Later it makes the leaves above me stir, like a rain stick. Here, I cannot forget where I am, unlike an inside studio. When I remember, I step back from my work.

Winter: Reach

“Drawing from life demands that one first plunge one’s mute gaze into the plentitude of nature’s presence, which is beyond language, and experience of the absolute;” Remi Labrusse^{vi}

6/18/03 Diamond (corner)

The small tree I have been studying has suddenly changed.

In late summer I began to draw it because of two stalks that burst above the others, trimmed into proper shape. These two branches extended out, echoing each other. I returned again during the fall, adding studies in conte crayon and acrylic to a sketchbook drawing.

Now it is December. I was thoroughly surprised to find when I first returned that the two branches still hadn’t been clipped. So I have set about painting an oil study for a seven foot canvas back in my studio.

Today, after all these months, just after beginning to paint again, the branches are suddenly gone. I’m sure it’s been done to spite me, as none of the surrounding vegetation has been touched. So, after wishing I’d left a funny note to the yard maintenance people, I admit it is hopeless. I am thinking of how to make it work without having the physical subject before me. After all I have my drawings, and everything up until the branch break-away is here before me.

Now that my model has been taken away, I am left with a realization that a painting goes beyond what can be possessed. A painting is a lush physical construction. But it also reaches toward an unspeakable meaning; it is that striving that I admired so in the branches themselves. Maybe with them gone I will reach a little more for that.

Spring: Touch, Taste, Feel

“Most gardens are failures, mere assemblages of prettiness neatly spaced. In short, décor. The *act* of gardening is never a failure, there’s a giving and a respecting that bounce back. The best garden is an assembling of varied forces, with an eye to what may result coupled with hope for the unexpected.” Kenneth Lash^{vii}

I have been painting the base of the shrub by the wall of our next apartment building. I’ve been working on it for three months now. It has emerged from sketchbook versions to a small canvas, to a large black and white acrylic painting.

11/21/02

Today, I am resolving Touch (my first life-scale work of this location). In the measured, sporadic pace of this stage of painting, I take lots of breaks between intense periods of looking and short periods

of painting. One break, I hunker down between the wall and that vertical parade of small trunks. Looking up, just beyond my painting field, I notice three points of convergence—a concentrated energy of twigs inside the cove of this shrub. They are nests. I am so surprised at how completely unaware I had been of them, even though they inhabit a small space I have been observing since August.

Painting can also surprise me. I am reenergized to stay here, to keep looking. I have prepared a canvas with oil ground for another painting, this time with color.

3/15/03

“on some moonlit nights, when [Monk Hau Kuang] had not fallen asleep, he would watch the moving shadows of the flowering branches as they entwined on his shutter and would try to reproduce their forms with his brush. At dawn he would be able to contemplate his finished work, all imbued with the spirit of the moonlight, and it would truly contain the ineffable essence of flowers.” Chinese treatise from the Song period^{viii}

Each night that I drive home to St. Gabriel, I make note of the orange atmosphere in the sky. On the right, an orange glow blushes up from the chemical plants just up the road. On the other side, a blue green glow emerges from the floodlights of Hunt Correctional Center. In between, the road and fields peel out in purple, earthy shadows.

I pull into my parking spot. On my way to my door, I crouch down in front of the shrub I have been painting. The light from my apartment building shines over my shoulder towards the leaves, casting a greenish light on them. Behind the shrub, an animated shadow reflects the permeating glow of the orange light out on the street.

I cannot see the depth of my colors while I am painting at night. But when I bring my work inside, I see a pairing of colors; glowing caves, dissolving walls; percussive strokes above deeper chords of value. This little corner I have been watching is a mirror of the larger circumstance I live in.

11/1/02

From a moving vantage point (walking, running, or driving), the landscape around me seems deceptively fixed. It is from such a moving vantage point that many of my small paintings have first beckoned me. When I finally I stand still to paint them, I become attentive to small shifts and adjustments within the space, even though it is faraway. I hope that these paintings retain some of that initial implied distance, as well as the intrigue that pulled me towards their subject.

From the beginning the larger paintings are subject to a much wider array of change. They may depict a small space relating to the size of my body, but the amount of change within that space unfolds more and more. They seem endless as they break down into smaller and smaller units. I repeatedly have to return to my initial gesture keep from getting lost in one area or another.

It is pleasing to be working large again, after working on the small paintings. I like the shift between one size and the other. For the large pieces, I move physically across the canvas space, move the canvas up and down, and walk far away to view. Working that way is like dancing.

The small paintings are contemplative. Movement within the space takes place in my head. I don't often have room to carve as I would wish. For them, I think in slivers.

POSTSCRIPT: SUMMER

“Everything we look at disperses and vanishes, doesn’t it? Nature is always the same, yet its appearance is always changing. It is our business as artists to convey the thrill of nature’s permanence along with the elements and the appearance of all its changes. Painting must give us the flavor of nature’s eternity.” Cezanne^{ix}

1/14/03

I remember in Puerto Rico that my Dad would wolf down his dinner, and dash out of the house with his camera slung round his neck. The occasion was that rare golden evening light of Mayaguez. I would join him in this picture “catching” contest, relishing the experience intensely. I felt little sparks of pleasure with every shutter snap, documenting that diminishing light crescendo, as if it would never happen again.

Now I experience my subject so differently. Instead of a hurried accumulation, I choose one vision at a time, and paint it crosswise: one moment after the other, on days over months. They are the transformation of a few individual motifs. I build a painting up slowly, leading the looking from one space to the other: hiding here, revealing there, weaving around and in and across. My hope is that the all-at-once first impression will slowly unravel and accumulate with a continued gaze.

6/18/02

In the day-to-day world, the impetus to keep moving is strong. Sometimes I buy into the illusion that if viewed only for an instant, a view can become frozen, and will be the same when I return to it. I am unnerved when I find it is not so, when I finally stop moving to observe it.

Perhaps that is why I enjoy looking at a good painting. It is actually still, and when I continue to contemplate it I can make progress. It is somewhere still to move *within*. Being a painter gives me a little familiarity to get around in that place. I recognize certain colors, brushmarks, and shape relationships. It is meaningful to discover motion within this stillness, rather than the constant flux of the actual world.

1/14/03

Ending a painting is like reading the end of a good book. There is a sadness for hopes unexplored—an image is chosen and others are turned away...that is why I like to link one painting to another. I work in the same place, or close by, using the same palette and the same light to make the connection. Even if the new work is not fruitful, it serves a purpose: it helps to complete—or let go of—the previous work.

11/20/02

I've become adjusted to the muddy details of working outside. I know to expect the surprise of rain, wind, wet ground and mosquitoes. Their significance has faded. Now I am left with a sense of slow seasonal change. I focus on the light of the day, of this moment, and on my painting right now. I know that as I continue to work, the stable elements will remain, and the others will continue to evolve. One day, the marks of the moment will gel with the slower, more established elements of the painting to create the right balance between order and surprise, structure and gesture.

Then I will let go.

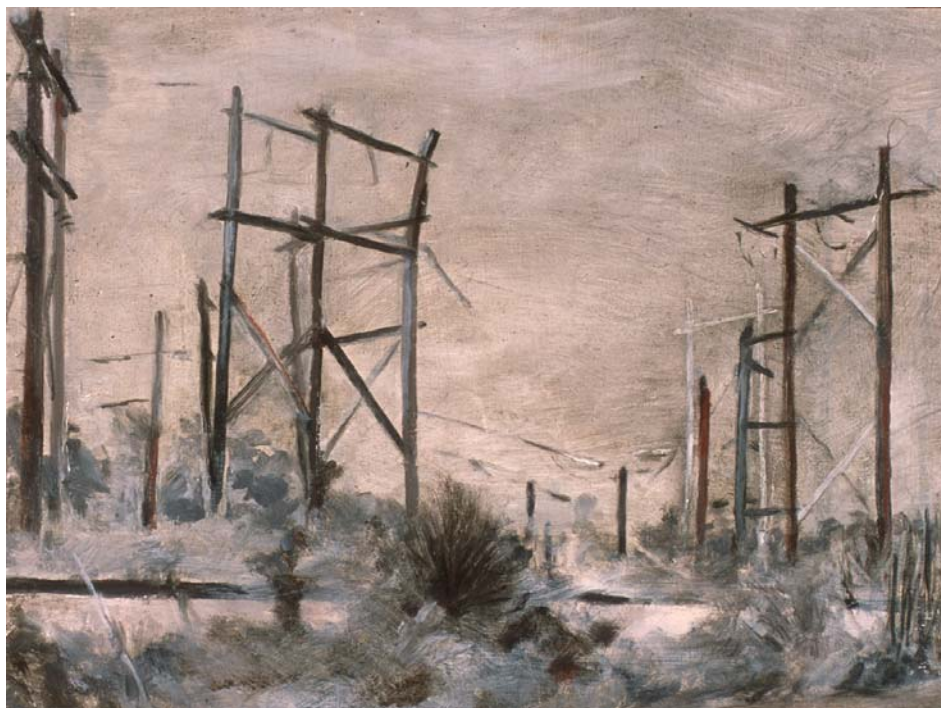
ENDNOTES

- ⁱ *The Burial of Count Orgaz*, by El Greco. 189”x141” 1586-1588. Santo Tome: Toledo.
- ⁱⁱ *Diver*, by Jasper Johns. mixed media, 86 ½”x71 ¾”, 1963. Collection Sally Ganz: New York.
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Le jardin a Bougival*, by Berthe Morisot Oil on Canvas, 73 x 92 cm, 1884. Musee Marmottan Monet: Paris.
- ^{iv} Piet Mondrian’s paintings from this period include:
Farm with line of washing, c. 1900, Oil on canvas, 31.5x37.5cm Gemeentemuseum: The Hague.
Tree on the Kalfje, 1901-2, Oil on canvas, 23.5 x 37.5 cm Gemeentemuseum: The Hague.
View of a Farmhouse, c. 1898-1900, Oil on canvas, 26.7x36.5cm, Private Collection.
- ^v *The Blue Vase*, by Paul Cezanne. 24 3/8” x 20 1/8” Oil on canvas, 1889. Musee d’Orsay: Paris.
- ^{vi} Labrusse, Remi. “The desire of the line” In *Henri Matisse Ellsworth Kelly plant drawings* Paris: Ginko Press, Inc., 2002. p. 24.
- ^{vii} Lash, Kenneth. “Notes on Living with Landscape” In *Landscape in America* Ed. By George F. Thompson. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995. p.17.
- ^{viii} Labrusse, Remi. “The desire of the line” In *Henri Matisse Ellsworth Kelly plant drawings* Paris: Ginko Press, Inc., 2002. p. 24.
- ^{ix} *Joachim Gasquet’s Cezanne: A Memoir with Conversations* translated by Christopher Pemberton. London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd. 1991. p.148.

IMAGES



Meander
Oil on canvas, 16"x 20"
2003



Fossil
Oil on panel, 9"x 11 ¼"
2002



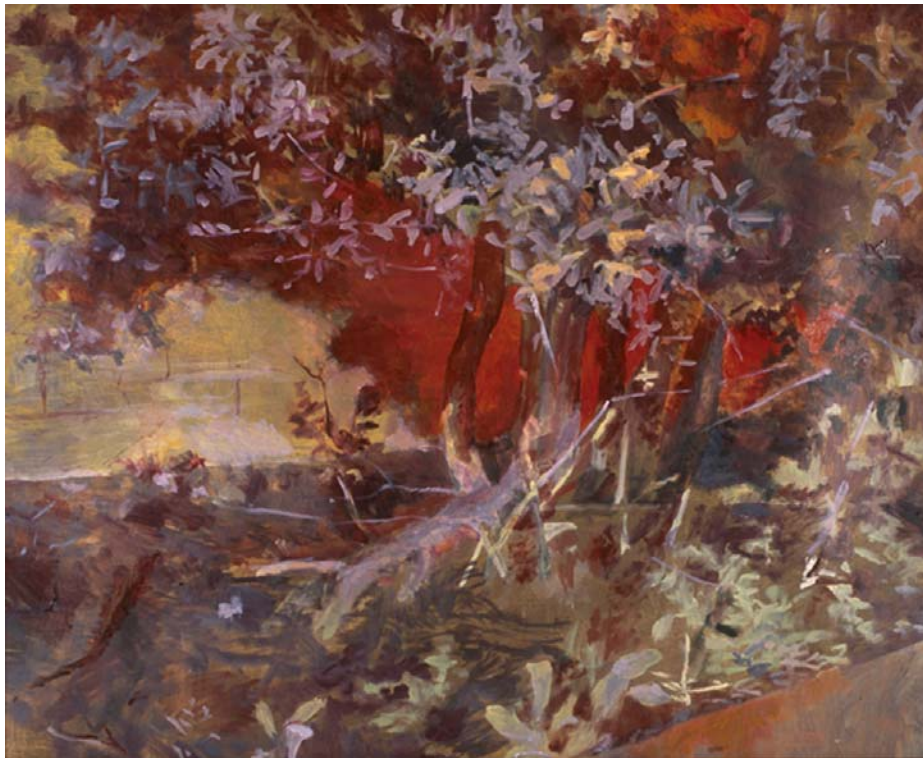
Trapeze
Oil on panel
9"x 12"
2002



Taste
Oil on canvas, 32"x 40 "
2003



Touch
Oil on canvas, 29"x 37"
2003



Feel
Oil on canvas, 30 1/2"x 37 1/2"
2003



Diamond: (corner)
Oil on canvas, 33 ½" x 83 ½"
2003

VITA

Emily Ritchey was born in Brasilia, Brazil, in 1977. That year a white cedar was planted for her in the village of Edmondsham, England. From the age of nine to fourteen she lived in Mayaguez, Puerto Rico. In 2000, she earned a bachelor of fine arts degree from Marshall University, in Huntington, West Virginia. She now resides in Saint Gabriel, Louisiana. She will receive the degree of master of fine arts from Louisiana State University in May, 2003.