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My Promise to Nature.

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MY PROMISE TO NATURE

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

Kathleen McVea

M.F.A., Louisiana State University, 2023

August 2023

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to my family and friends for your love and support leading up to and during the MFA process. I especially would like to thank my parents, Tom and Toni McVea, for helping me make this dream a reality and supporting and believing in me every step of the way. I am so blessed to have such wonderful parents. There have been many ups and downs these past three years, but having my family's unwavering love pushed me past the most challenging times.

To the LSU School of Art faculty - thank you for making the last three years an exceptional learning experience that was both exciting and rewarding. To my committee members, Courtney Barr, Lynne Baggett, Kristine Thompson, and Richard Doubleday – thank you for constantly pushing me out of my comfort zone and injecting thought-provoking and insightful feedback. I have the deepest gratitude to have had the opportunity to get to know and learn from you all, and I truly appreciate your investment in the success of all your students. Richard, you significantly impacted my growth as an artist by constantly feeding my creative brain with information to facilitate better work. Your positive and encouraging approach is your superpower which recharged me many times when feeling stuck. You are a great mentor and friend.

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Abstract

My Promise to Nature is a body of work created to emphasize the importance of conserving natural habitats in Louisiana's Tunica Hills. The decision to do Land Art and select the Tunica Hills as the subject did not come to me right away. Nature and family have been woven throughout my work throughout my time in the M.F.A. program.

This was not out of reach, and I was already extremely passionate about the subject. It might be a pain due to location, but my family owned 400 acres of property in the Tunica Hills with a cabin that they had placed into a conservation easement. So, I decided to go spend a weekend up there and reacquaint myself with the land. I wasn't sure if this trip would turn into anything, but after my first expedition on the four-wheeler through the trails of the forest, I knew this was the perfect subject for my project. I took my thesis as an opportunity to use my creativity and design background to highlight the importance of the preservation of the Tunica Hills.

Inspiration was almost immediate from the blooming of the vibrant beautyberries on the property at that time. It was an almost natural instinct to create when out exploring the land. I remembered further back on the daisy trail, a bright green moss-covered stump, and knew the two would look brilliant together. I made many trips into the woods to cut somewhat ugly shrub branches with these magnificent beautyberries. I would strip the berries from the shrub branches and place them at the base of the stump, and it took many trips, but I finally felt satisfied that there were enough berries, and it was the perfect time of day to photograph. I knew I had to capture it perfectly, knowing it would not last through the night.

I had never considered Land Art for my thesis. It developed through the

introduction of land artists and through exploration and curiosity. The Tunica Hills are very unique, with distinctive soil contributing to the rare natural plant and wildlife habitats and hardwood trees that should be treasured and protected. I was raised in this area, and my family owns property in the Tunica Hills, thus have spent a significant amount of time closely observing the land. In 2011 my parents made a decision to put this piece of property into a conservation easement. At the time, I didn't understand what a big decision this was for them. It is a contract with the government that you will care for and preserve this forested land and all future generations and/or owners. It will remain intact as a natural habitat forever. Using my background as a designer and photographer, I have created compelling land art. The purpose of this work is meant to highlight the importance of the preservation of this type of land and its contribution to the environment and wildlife in many ways.

INTRODUCTION

The air is pure, and the view serene as I leave the porch of the camp in Tunica Hills. There's a cliff that drops off at the backside of this weathered wooden rickety porch. I hop down the steps, head over to the four-wheeler, and down the steep hill, over the creek, and back up, navigating the rough terrain. This is not a new experience for me, but I'm amazed at how breathtaking this area is every time I make the trip. Just getting out here from civilization, I had to navigate sharp curves, potholes, and fog and dodge wildlife. Our 400 acres of land in The Tunica Hills is a beautiful, quiet place to retreat, recharge and feel refreshed. The only sounds I hear are the trees, the creek, and wildlife, at least until I crank up the noisy four-wheeler. It's a marvelous escape into untouched land. Although it may feel like you've entered a different world, it's only about an hour and a half from Baton Rouge. Some describe the area as rolling hills, but The Tunica Hills have very steep hills and drop-offs into ravines, and the trails must be navigated with care.

This land is a part of me. I grew up admiring the stunning landscape, but I could only truly appreciate its importance as an adult. My parents have always loved West Feliciana Parish and called the Tunica Hills "Heaven on Earth". They made sure that four children understood and viewed this area as a very special place. I was taught from a very young age that humans must preserve and protect natural habitats not just for magnificence but because they are extraordinary and rare. My parents purchased the estate in 1986 and decided to protect it permanently, putting it into a conservation easement. It will remain intact forever. It can never be clear-cut or divided into pieces and sold off. In a way, this was a statement to us, me and my siblings, the future

inheritors, that it is our responsibility to cherish and take care of it for many generations to come.

My thesis project is meant to highlight the beauty and significance of the Tunica Hills in West Feliciana Parish through an artist's perspective. For many months I have explored this picturesque area, creating compelling land art and using my background as a designer and photographer. Through imagery, I show how humans can interact with nature without negatively disrupting the environment.

My Heaven on Earth

I was born and raised in St. Francisville, really the country of St. Francisville, and we were constantly exploring and finding ways to entertain ourselves. I loved a good swimming hole or riding four-wheelers around the farm or down the slopes of the Tunica Hills and searching for arrowheads in the creek bottom. I understood from an early age that West Feliciana was a special place.

The older I get, the more I understand what my Dad means when he describes the land as “heaven on earth.” It is an extraordinary and priceless gem worth protecting. What has driven me to create this body of work is to help show in an artistic way what we lose when land and nature are viewed as a commodity rather than a gift. Shouldn't we all get on board to preserve places like this? These creations are meant to demonstrate the wonder of nature and how we, as humans, can interact in a way that avoids taking or disrupting this ecosystem. I want my work to be viewed as an example of how mankind can interact with natural environments, which was the reason my parents decided to place their four hundred acres into a conservation easement. I have

a better understanding of how important a decision that was for my parents. The land cannot be clear-cut, cannot be developed, and cannot be divided into small sections and sold off for maximum profit.

It would be devastating to destroy these areas from the earth forever. The unique areas we have left should be viewed as a gift, and every individual needs to have some understanding that they are disappearing at an alarming rate. *“According to the Louisiana Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy (Wildlife Action Plan), published by the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries in December 2005, “...only about 25 % (50,000 to 100,000 acres) of Louisiana’s southern mesophytic forests remain intact.””*

My intent is not a call to action but more of an encouraging whisper. I want to challenge people to “Look at the land this way, Look at the beauty, look at what it has to offer, and how important it is to preserve it.” It’s possible to step into this world and create something stunning yet leave as though we were never there.

INSPIRATION AND INFLUENCE

For seventeen years, I focused on Art Direction and Graphic Design in the Advertising Industry. I could tell you all of the best and most creative companies, designers, etc., However, what I knew of other forms of art or famous artists was embarrassingly limited. It has been a great expansion of awareness and knowledge of Fine Art, over the last few years. This has been a very rewarding benefit of coming back to get my Masters in Fine Arts at my age. I'm sure everyone has their preferences and what work or artist impacts them the most.

The first time I was introduced to "Land Art" that made the biggest impression on me was from the feedback from a committee member after my graduate review and viewing my book "Beyond the Surface," in which I really began to explore and incorporate nature in my work. I was instantly captured by Andy Goldsworthy's work. All of his work inspires me, but I am particularly fond of '*Sycamore leaves edging the roots of a sycamore tree,*' '*Rowan Leaves and Hole.*'

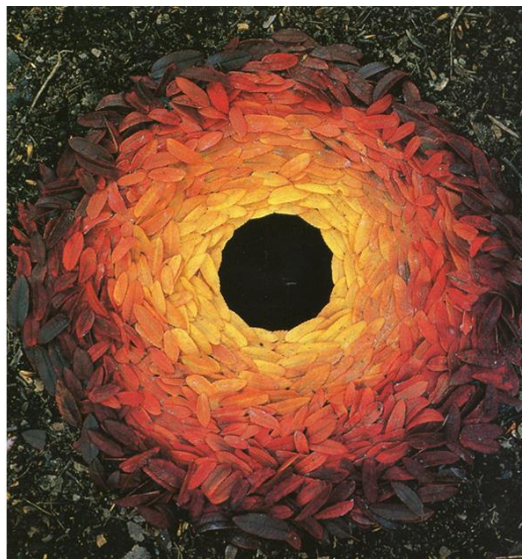


Image 10. Andy Goldsworthy. *Rowan leaves laid around a hole, Yorkshire...*, 1987.



Image 11. Sycamore leaves edging the roots of a sycamore tree, Hampshire, 1 November 2013.

He focuses on creating projects that enhance the beauty of nature, the effect of time, and the relationship between the human and the land.” I would say the biggest difference between my land art and Goldsworthy’s work is that I create in an area, at least currently, where it will likely never be seen by another human’s eyes in real life. I am still fascinated by his work and his use of ephemeral art creations.

Now with first-hand experience of ephemeral art creations and have only imagery to capture my art with a camera. I really understood the delicacy and preparedness you must have in working with natural objects. For example, when extracting the beautyberries from the branch you must be delicate, or you will smush them and must be prepared to use them or they lose their vibrant color. am certain other “Land Artists” have made those same mistakes.

Another Land Artist that made an impression is the great Robert Smithson and his *Spiral Jetty* as a pioneer in Land Art. Although I found the famous *Spiral Jetty* by Smithson impressive for what he was able to accomplish, our approach and the way we

work is very different. His use of heavy machinery and the fact that it was changed mid-construction, requiring 6,650 tons of rock feels very wasteful and mechanical. Certainly, a separation of the way I interact with the earth.

Another great pioneer of Land Art is Richard Long. I can very much appreciate the simplification and conceptualization of “A Line Made by Walking.” He used his body and the repetitiveness of walking the same path every day as a medium. This seems more in line with the Land Art moment, as most say ephemerality and the rejection of the commodification of art are what defines that period. I don’t think I could claim my body as a medium quite like Long’s “A Line Made by Walking.” I do have to use my body and sometimes repetitiveness to create my pieces but in a different way. My body is used to gathering, lifting, cutting, collecting, and the repetition of many trips back and forth to capture my vision. I feel more connected to his circular creations outside of a traditional museum. Those feel a bit more personal and reflect more of the same idea of creating something where it may not ever be seen by anyone else. Only captured by photography.

But it is disappointing that most of the pioneers of Land Art eventually abandoned their belief in working out in nature and their rejection of the commodification of art at some point. It’s not something I’m passionate about, so I’m unsure why I find it disappointing. My going out into nature and creating is more about how I feel about the land and my personal connection to it.

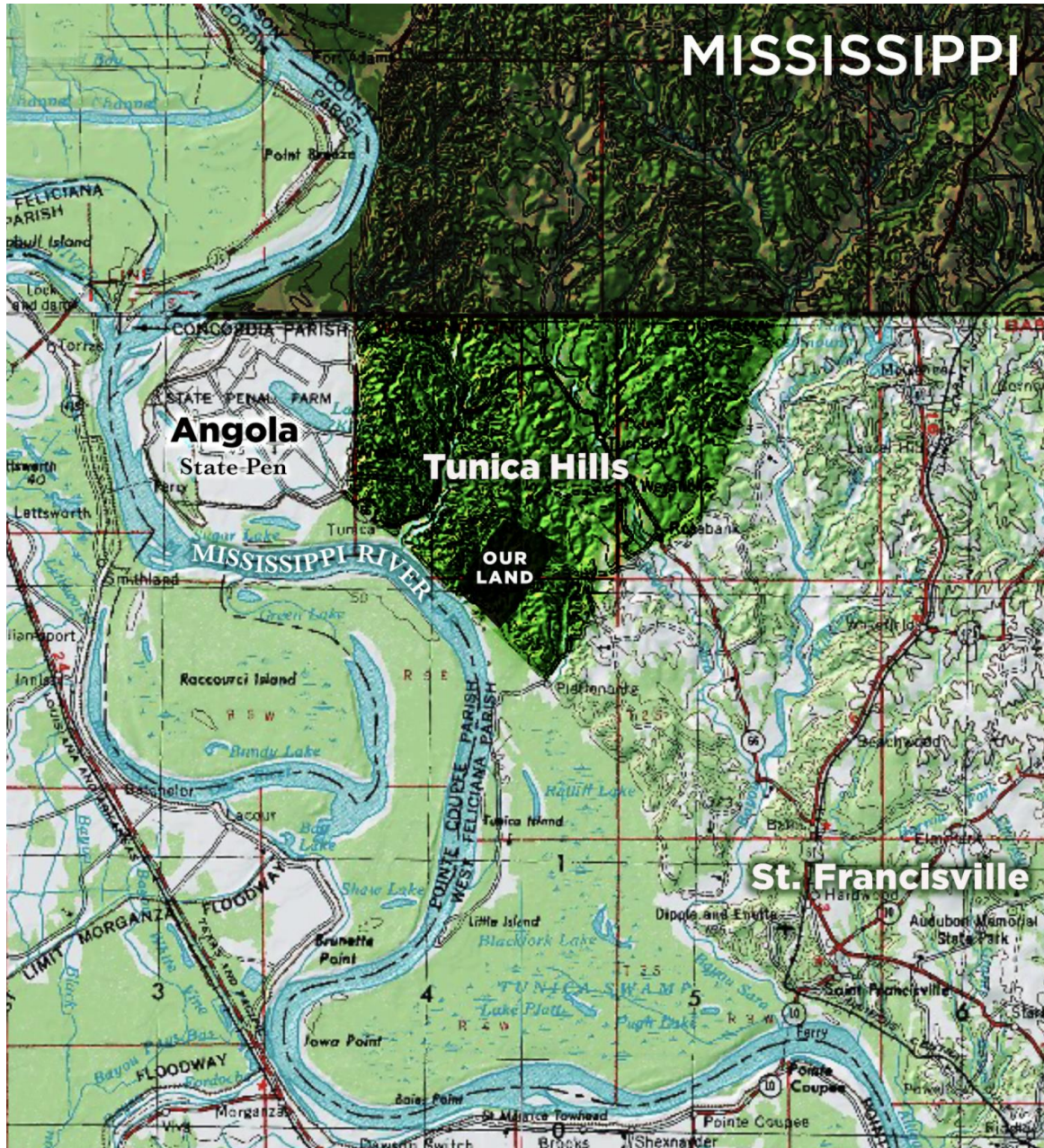
One area in West Feliciana that is most vital to protect is the Tunica Hills. My parents own a 400-acre tract of land and put it into a conservation easement to

safeguard this natural area forever. This was the point when I decided to use my love of creating structures from natural elements to highlight the importance of protecting natural habitats in my thesis work.

THE LAND IN TUNICA

Location

Image 1. Tunica Map



Our tract of land is located in the west-central portion of West Feliciana Parish, east of the Mississippi River and northwest of St. Francisville along the southern edge of the Tunica Hills within the southern end of the Loess Bluffs, that follows from the east of the Mississippi River to the Ohio River. (See images 1 and 2)



Image 2. McVea Land Map

Tunica Hills History

I've always known The Tunica Hills were unique, and marveled at the landscape with distinct inclines and narrow ridges, unlike any other place. Its geological history dates back to the Glacier Period when dust storms blew in from the West, creating loess hardwood-friendly, highly erodible soil to the region. You feel as though you've been completely transported because there is quite literally no other place like it. Our property is covered in hardwood with a freshwater creek, Polly Creek, that runs through it. There are steep peaks and bluffs over 200 ft in elevation and a depth of up to 200 feet.

“These silty deposits, as well as the underlying soils, are highly erodible, and the action of centuries of rainfall-runoff has sculpted this region into a series of deep ravines, steep slopes, and narrow ridge tops. The Southern mesophytic forests that have developed on the bluff lands offer a diverse habitat that supports some species of plants and animals not found elsewhere in Louisiana.”¹



Image 3. Erosion Image 1



Image 4. Erosion

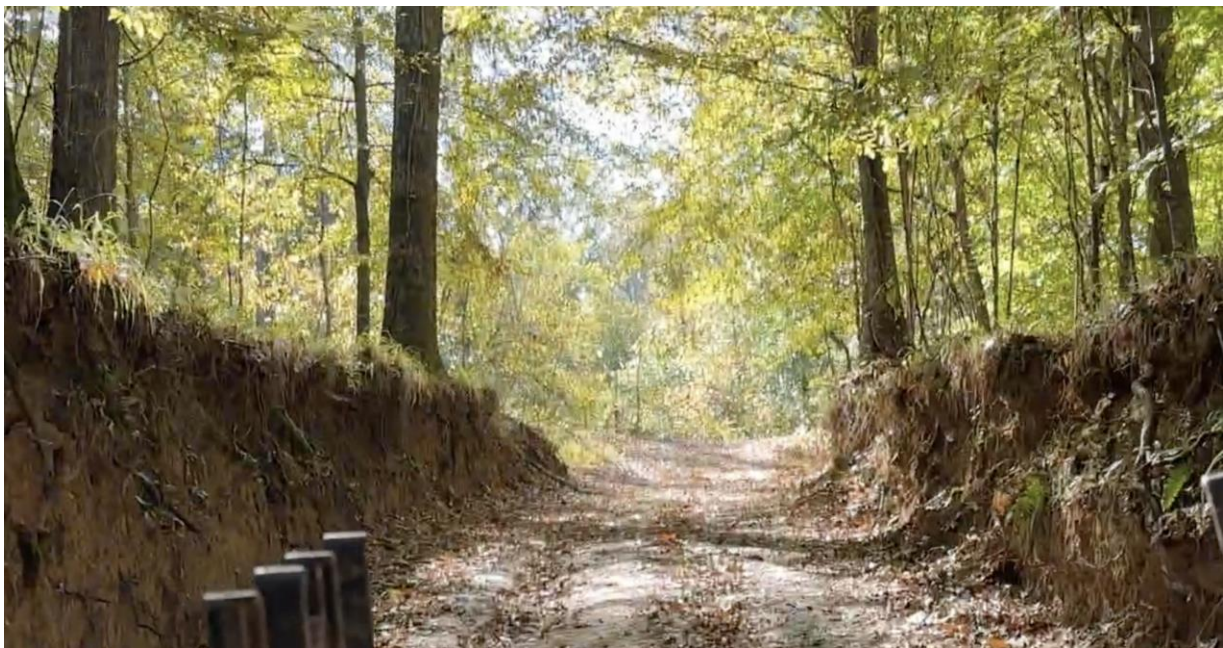


Image 6. Trail Image 1



Image 7. Trail Image 2



Image 8. Trail Image 3



Figure 9. Trail Image 4

Significance to Louisiana

As stated previously, “According to the Louisiana Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy (Wildlife Action Plan), published by the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries in December 2005, “...only about 25 % (50,000 to 100,000 acres) of Louisiana’s southern mesophytic forests remain intact. At least 20 state-rare plant species occur in the West Feliciana loess hills, and therefore have potential habitat on the Property. There are 24 state listed species of concern that occur in bluffland forests.”¹

Why are Conservation Easements so Important?

The 2020 Forest Action Plan identifies three primary threats to Louisiana’s forest resource:

- 1. Lack of active management on private lands,*
- 2. Challenges to forest health, and*
- 3. Challenges facing wildland fire management.*

According to the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry “Nearly 90% of forests and timberland are privately owned...nearly half of forestland is held by private corporate entities.” ““87 percent of forestland and 88 percent of timberland in Louisiana are in private land holdings (families, partnerships, and forest industry). Nearly 49 percent of forestland is owned by corporate entities while families and individuals own 37 percent.”¹

The majority (51%) of landowners indicated that their forestland was acquired through inheritance, albeit some “inherited” land is purchased at a steep discount or from other heirs, and inheritance accounted for 71 percent of family-owned forestland area. Seventy-eight percent of landowners have owned their forestland for 10 to 49 years. Nineteen percent of landowners have acquired their property in the last 10 years. Louisiana’s family forest owners are aging, and issues related to land transfers, parcelization, and fragmentation are expected to increase in the next decade. Only 8 percent of landowners, affecting 25 percent of family forestland, have a forest management plan.”

What is our objective as landowners?

You can’t simply let nature be. There is an active role humans play in protecting these areas, and it’s a lot of responsibility. The trail systems must be maintained to make sure invasive species that could damage the area are removed. You must have an active presence to manage and maintain the property. Not just any piece of land qualifies for a conservation easement, but if it does qualify, that means it’s important to the state of Louisiana, and they are supporting your decision to protect this specific area. It is a contractual agreement between the state and the landowner to care for and preserve it forever.



Image 9.

The aesthetic, ecological, scenic, and regional significance of the area alone is enough of a reason to keep it intact. The land is also very important for environmental reasons like maintaining and enhancing air and water quality and the natural aspect of the area. To prevent habitat fragmentation and to support the Black Bear Restoration Plan. It seems to be working as we have spotted many black bears on game cameras and their prints in the sand. I photographed a print myself.

Bear Print

It will serve to further the restoration of the Southern mesophytic forests associated with the property. My parents want to keep the land intact to safeguard the land for future generations.

The servitude will “protect, link, and expand key wildlife habitat complexes within the Southern mesophytic forest and riparian forests; and provide protection to the functions and values of riparian forests and wetland ecosystems.” It will conserve “existing resources and wildlife habitat improvement.” It will “protect working timberland and historic properties from being developed and converted to uses of lower ecological and environmental value.”

There are many drawbacks and responsibilities of the landowner for this kind of

property once placed into a conservation easement. It's hard work and a commitment to take care of this precious land with ongoing forest management, protecting it from invasive species and overpopulation of certain wildlife as well as maintaining the trail system.

We must “preserve the ecological integrity and biological diversity of the property and create the potential for restoring or increasing biological diversity and native plant communities, especially Southern mesophytic forests and small stream forests of the region.”

The largest and most important responsibility is forest management. In order to remove unwanted stems in favor of stems of a healthier quality and future higher timber, there must be improvement cuts. Previous harvests have sustained uneven-aged mixed hardwood and hardwood-pine habitats supporting hard mast trees. A thinning or improvement cut will enhance terrestrial wildlife habitat while stimulating robust growth and health of the forest structure. “The appropriate and sustained clearing in the hardwood-pine and areas of the property will promote wildlife habitat qualities beneficial to many upland and grassland wildlife species, many identified in the Louisiana Wildlife Action Plan.”

Why is thinning so important? As outlined in the Easement document, “thinning will allow sunlight to penetrate the forest canopy to the forest floor, encouraging soft mast production and growth of vigorous herbaceous vegetation. Thinning will also serve as an opportunity to improve the species composition and remove inferior or non-preferred species for wildlife habitat enhancement as well.”

We also have to control two things, the first being the non-native invasive species

of trees from penetrating the forest. They must be dealt with swiftly and removed chemically. For example: The Chinese parasol, Chinese tallow. And secondly, maintain the balance of wildlife and overpopulated species, which involves hunting or trapping. For example, the overpopulation of Does and the invasive wild hogs.

PROCESS

This process began in the Spring of 2022 when over a period of several months, I amassed a considerable collection of rocks and stones that encountered on some of my nature walks. I was drawn to them by their varying sensual surfaces and distinctive visual forms. I began to describe, define, and curate these groups of stones in ways that inspire me. Viewing this work as a graphic designer, as part of the design process, I began photographing and arranging them into a more structured order or sequence.

This process of making unexpectedly started to develop through uninhibited explorations into a creative body of work which eventually manifested in book form. This process of creating felt very different than any way I had ever worked before. Less controlled, unpredictable, freeing, and exciting. Starting from one white rock to collecting white rocks, then into organizing and categorizing. As shown below, a study of these rocks (stones) in different compositions, then further manipulating those images.

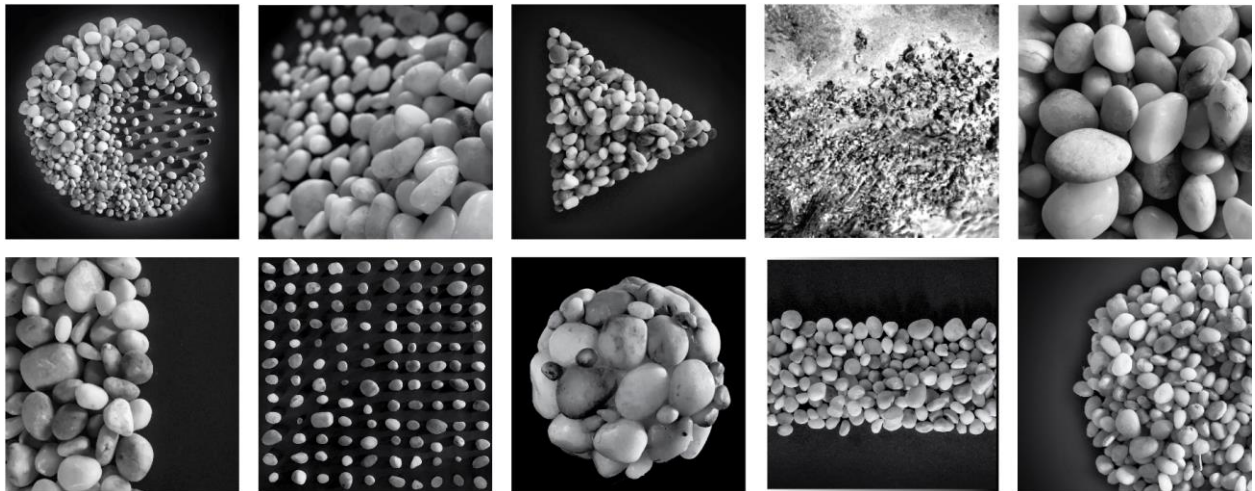


Image 12. Rock Study Images 1

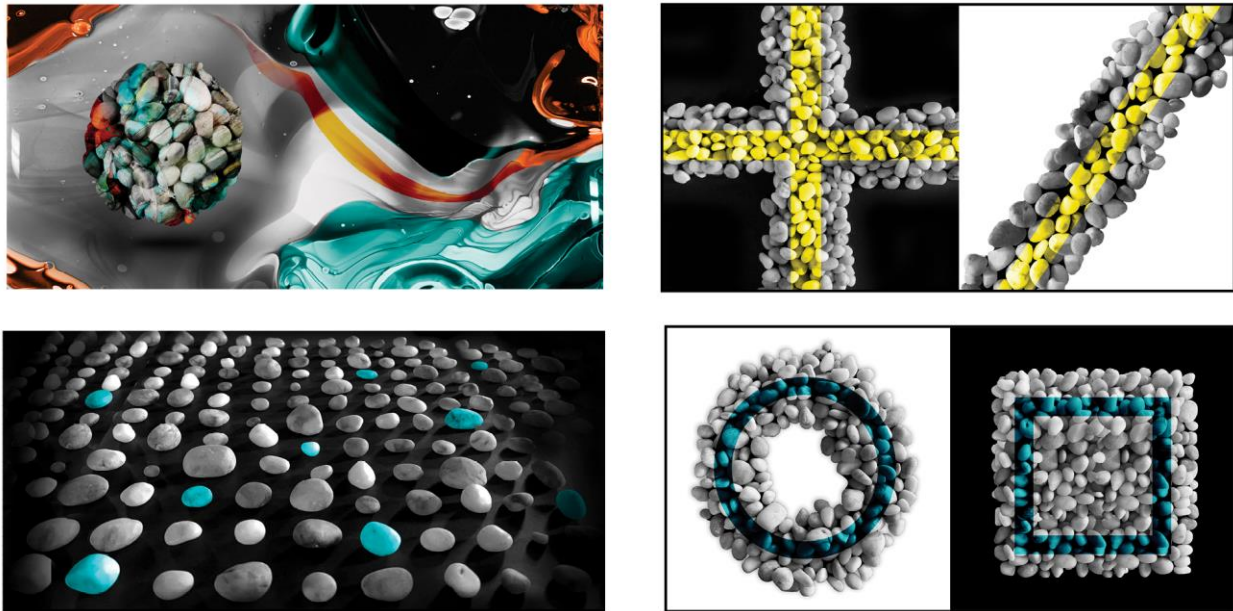


Image 13. Rock Study Images 2

This performative act, the notion of serendipity and unpredictability, is, for me, a means to put some structure or classification on the chaos of nature and the universe. These designs and my play instinct brought me to a place of contemplation and curiosity. I reflected and considered the following question, “What kind of impact do we as humans have on nature and this wonderful, serene place we cherish so much?” My being back in West Feliciana Parish and making these constructions there led me to consider how human activities have had a significant impact on this area that is so spectacular and important. This Parish had been under significant pressure for many years to develop but the larger landowners in the area have tried to keep it to a minimum. There are certain development restrictions, signage presence, and so forth that keep it somewhat under control. The people who have lived in the area and/or grown up in the area are doing what they can. The fact is that you cannot stop development, but you can encourage responsible development.

Being back here, these questions came to mind, and I started trying to understand why it mattered so much to me. The answer was fairly obvious in that I was raised to love and respect nature and its beauty. I grew up in nature, not in front of a TV. My siblings and I were always told to go play outside, so playing in nature was how we learned to entertain ourselves. Our playground were fields, forests, lakes, and streams in one of the most beautiful areas in Louisiana, West Feliciana Parish.

With the artwork I've created as an M.F.A. student, nature and family were consistent subjects, as they are a huge part of who I am as a person. Understanding my love of nature, and its need for preservation in combination with my love of design, pushed me to create compelling structures from natural elements. This was my ah-ha! moment. There is a huge profit to be made from development and from this comes the frightening realization of what happens when natural areas are seen as a commodity.

CREATING

I took frequent trips to Tunica staying many weekends at our wooden cabin. I packed my little Honda Accord and my cat, Tux, and off we went. Like the beginning of any creative project, I was unsure how this would develop, but I began driving around our land on the four-wheeler and reacquainting myself with the trails and the amazing landscape. Being familiar with the land, I know that although I can't see the opening of the trail, it's there. I steer the four-wheeler towards what looks like brush, and there's an immediate 45 degree drop down the gravel trail. Sheer momentum takes you down as you grip the brakes on the handle to slow the descent down the gravel trail. You must be very cautious not to let a wheel go over a deep, washed-out spot that would certainly tip or roll the four-wheeler. The descent is intense but over before you know it. It's a rush and exhilarating, but not for amateurs. Now that you are at the lowest point of the land the creek is soon to follow. You must cross the creek to get to the rest of the property but again, needing to use caution. Has there been a lot of rain, or is a storm coming? You better know, or again, you could find yourself in a compromised situation.

You must constantly watch and be aware of your surroundings. Most of the time you're ascending or descending. There are many areas where you're driving at the peak and on both sides, it drops off hundreds of feet down. There are areas on parts of the trail that may have washed out since the last trip literally creating holes. It is dangerous but it's spectacular.

Image 14. Beautyberry Gathering Image A and B

My first trip out in a very long time I was inspired. This incredible natural forest I knew this was the perfect subject for my work. I noticed the entire area was covered

with amazing bright berries, American Beautyberries. (see images 14 through 16) The color was striking in its pearlescent bright magenta. I started cutting some of the stems off the shrubs in (what we call) “The Chufa Patch.” I go further down “Daisy Road,” and I’ve gathered quite a bit, but there are so many it doesn’t even look like I’ve been there.



Image 15. Beautyberries Extracted



Image 16. Drowning in Beautyberries

Interrupted by the thunder, I am reminded that I am alone out in the wilderness with no cellphone service and that I should start heading back. Getting stuck on the wrong side of the creek in a bad storm can be very dangerous. Mother nature is not forgiving. When I get back across the creek, I go back to the camp to take shelter on the back porch with the stunning panoramic view. It’s so calming. As the rain hits the tin roof, you cannot help but doze off. When the weather relents, it has mercifully cooled down, and I can resume my work.

When I feel I have a sufficient amount, I start stripping the shrub branches and

extracting the bright berries. I gather up all the berries, and search for the stump I spotted earlier, and I head in that direction.



Figure 16. Beautyberries Extracted

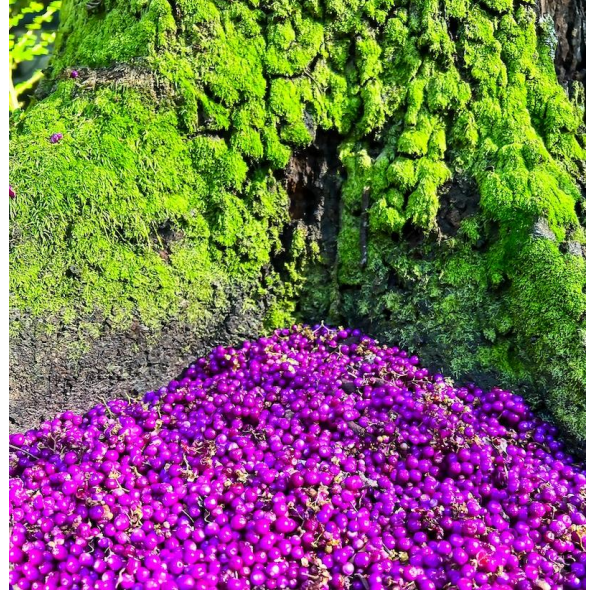


Figure 17. Drowning in Beautyberries

The stump is covered with this magnificent, vivid, green-colored moss, and I know these two belong together. I have a vision for my creation, and I begin to cover the base of the stump with the berries and the gathering process begins. This takes many trips through the trails, and I repeat until I feel satisfied.

Country Roads Magazine described this beautifully. “McVea pointed herself towards *that* spot, *that* tree—the one she remembered from some previous trip, that was covered like fur in the most magical emerald moss. When she found it, she poured her bounty into the waiting arms of its roots. The pile she left there was bright and bulbous, clanging against the textured green of the tree in a way that was magical in its *almost* unnaturalness. Only a human could have put this here, but the forest could still claim it.”²

When the lighting is perfect, I photograph my work. The next day, I returned to the stump out of curiosity, and all of the berries had vanished. I was certain a lucky white-tail deer or wild hog had a feast the night before. It was as though I had never been there at all.

Over the course of many months at Tunica Hills, I allowed the elements of nature be my guide for inspiration. I settled into a routine always taking the buggy (AYV with a cover and shield) out to serve two purposes. I needed to knock down all of the enormous spider webs that had formed across the trails and, secondly, to scout the area for the next creation. As the seasons change, so did the elements I would use in my work. It was always exciting to see what I would find since my previous trip or maybe something I overlooked that I now saw. Taking notes on things I may not need at that moment but wanted to come back to.

Every day I spent out in the woods, I would walk the creek at least once a day and marvel at its beauty. You can drink the water straight out of this creek it's so pure. It was a place I found to reset my mind, rest, cool down, and reflect. I continued to pluck the white rocks out of the stream for many of my pieces.

The Hills never disappointed. I always found something that inspired my next piece of work, like the soft ferns flowing down over the steep ravines or the bright green shoots that grew straight up out of the ground like towers in woods near the creek called horsetail. I made mental notes out riding around, knowing they would make their way into my work, but I had not yet decided how I wanted to use them.

In the Fall, the trails would change colors depending on what leaves were carpeting the forest floor. I found and began collecting these beautifully colored leaves

and remembered a very intricate and intertwining vine system. I thought about how the two might work together, so I brought my leaves to these vines and patiently glued every leaf I collected, covering each vine with a different colored leaf. It was interesting playing with natural elements and creating something almost supernatural.

I came upon an interesting tree that, like many others, due to erosion, the roots were exposed, but this one had a huge hole shaped like an inverted V which is highlighted in the photograph by yellow leaves. I was looking for an opportunity to show the silty soil that's so specific to Tunica and, by nature, erodes easily. It speaks to the history and how the area was created during the glacier period by sandstorms from the west, creating the terrain of the area.

I wanted to showcase the hardwood, which is the most important aspect of the property, and I used limbs from the different trees to construct one of my pieces. I describe the elements used in my work not as much as my finding them but as them calling to me in a way. I enjoy that the work changes between very constructed and organized to some that feel more organic. It works together as it all comes from nature but can only be formed by mankind.

I make this same trip and repeat this creative process or ritual of scouting the area, gathering, creating, and photographing for months accumulating a "collection of these ephemeral Tunica sculptures, photographed." I think about how precious this land is, how easily it can disappear, and how that parallels my work. I create land art, and once a piece is complete and photographed, and immediately subject to change. It cannot be recreated or photographed the same way.



Image 17. My Promise to Nature Images 1-6

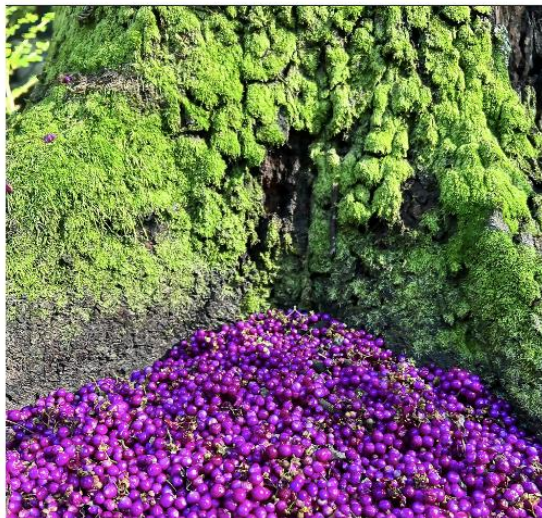


Image 18. My Promise to Nature Images 7-12

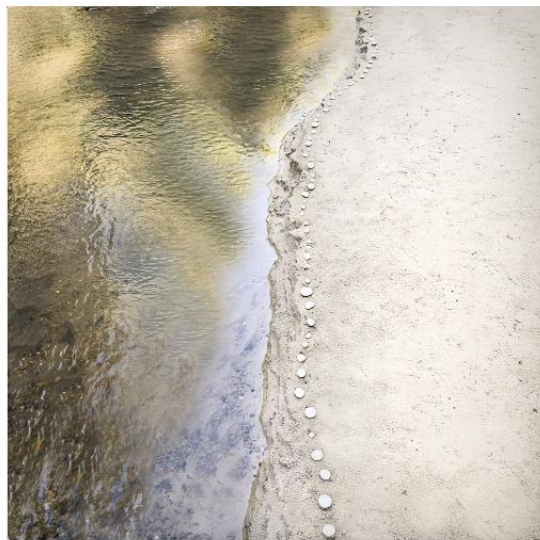


Image 19. My Promise to Nature Images 13-18

PART OF THE PROCESS WILL BE “OH S%\$!” MOMENTS

Part of the process is being exposed to both the good and the bad of mother nature. As stated previously, I spent many weekends up in the Hills working and when you are out there, it's just you and mother nature. There's no cell service and nature is unpredictable. I found myself in compromising situations a few times that I can laugh about now. My first “uh oh!” experience was after a big storm had come through and I was walking along the creek and suddenly my legs were sucked down into sand past tall boots up to right above my knees. It happened so quickly I had hardly any time to react. I manage to flail my body to the right slightly which thankfully was solid sand. It took a second to realize that I had stepped into quicksand. It took quite a bit of time, but I was able to pull my left leg out first, then my right which was quite difficult since my tall boots were suctioned to my feet. I made it out and even managed to dig out my boots.

The second “oh no!” situation was cutting the horsetail. I was deep into the brush when I heard a grunt/snort kind of sound I immediately knew I was not in a safe situation. It was a wild hog which can be very mean with large tusks. Not something you want to “bump” into. I immediately ask myself, “Where's my gun”? It was back at the four-wheeler, which I made sure would never happen again. I slowly placed the horsetail weeds onto the ground and backed out of the woods to the four-wheeler, grabbed my pistol, and returned to the site. I shot into a stump near where I heard the sound coming from, and it ran off. I'm again reminded that we may own the property, but this is not my land alone; this is shared land.

REFLECTION

What I have learned is that my going out into nature and creating is more about how I feel about the land and my personal connection to it. I took my thesis as an opportunity to use my creativity and design background to highlight the importance of the preservation of the Tunica Hills. It is a nod to every landowner, including my parents, with an invaluable piece of property that needs to be cared for and protected and does so because it's the right thing to do. It's a choice. You can destroy it, which is a very lucrative option, or you can choose to protect it forever. Some might describe or feel the need to define that belief as being an "environmentalist," but I don't feel it needs a label; it's just the right thing to do.

This creative outlet I have found in land art is something I will enjoy doing for many years to come. When dividing the two words land and art, it makes perfect sense how I found my passion in combining the two. My love and connection to the land I cherish, in combination with my love of art. Selecting this topic for my thesis is one of the best decisions I've ever made, I feel like I've finally found something I want to say through my artwork. It's an important message, and I will continue to create and seek out opportunities to use it as my voice. The land will be with me until the day I perish, so I have unlimited access for the rest of my life. I have made a promise to nature, to our land, to care for it and protect it. This will involve frequent trips in which every trip is an opportunity to continue this body of work.

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Vita

She has ever fallen into any specific group or type, as there are many different facets and interests that make up who she is. She grew up in the country fishing, driving four-wheelers, feeding calves, taking horseback riding lessons, and playing in creeks and lakes. She's social, sporty, family-oriented, independent, handy, creative, outspoken, and girly but a tom girl as well. She stayed very busy in my youth with activities.

After graduating high school, she chose to follow the family tradition of going to Louisiana State University. The first McVea went in 1895. She started my college career towards getting a degree as an elementary education teacher and in her fourth year, she took an art class and knew instantly that this was her passion and where she really needed to be. Her teacher recognized my talent and dilemma and introduced me to graphic design. She went home, told her parents, took out some student loans and changed directions entirely.

After graduation she pursued a job in Dallas, Texas working in the Advertising Industry where she spent the next seventeen years working with some of the most talented people in the business. She landed on the most creative, big brand clients like Gatorade, Tropicana, Frito-Lay, etc., but after many years she again changed directions. She moved back to Baton Rouge to be back near her family and decided to apply to the M.F.A. program at Louisiana State University. She plans to receive her Masters in the Summer of 2023.

