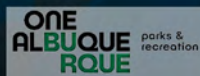


Earthbound: Mapping the Strata

Rebecca Nolda
Mixed Media



A combination of paintings in the exhibition and blog posts about the theme...

The Exhibition:
Earthbound: Mapping the Strata~ Rebecca Nolda

February 29 - March 29, 2020;
Albuquerque Open Space Visitor Center Gallery



The Blog:

<https://rebeccanolda.wordpress.com/>

Starting with an idea...

DECEMBER 5, 2019

BLOG POST

1

I started the *Mapping the Strata* series a couple of years ago when I wanted something portable to work on while painting with a Wednesday painting group. I started small with oil pastels and a sketchbook, thinking I could play around with color and different ideas that I might follow up on when I got back to my studio—much more manageable than hauling paint and canvas.

Several ideas were percolating but I was drawn to the idea of geological formations, not to reproduce them visually, but to play with the ways layers of rocks might present themselves. Different personalities, different thicknesses, different weights. A little bit of squishing, a few glimpses of intrusions. Lots of different colors.



Sketchbook and oil pastels

The little sketches (roughly 4×5 inches) were just right for playing with the idea. Oil pastels are a forgiving medium and have a dense finish when smeared or blended. They are similar to painting, but more easily combined and mushed around. The colors are rich and the surface is luscious. Perfect for exploring!

First 4 sketches:



I have a solo show coming up in March of 2020 titled *Earthbound: Mapping the Strata* at the Albuquerque Open Space Visitors Center Gallery, highlighting the paintings that came out of these early sketches. I want to dig around in the idea a little deeper...share some notes and quickie drawings and see what I discover for the next few months before the show goes up.



Mapping the Strata II



Mapping the Strata IV



Mapping the Strata VI



Mapping the Strata XII

All acrylic on gallery-wrapped canvas, 48 x 36 x 1.6

Melding geology and art

DECEMBER 10, 2019

BLOG POST

2

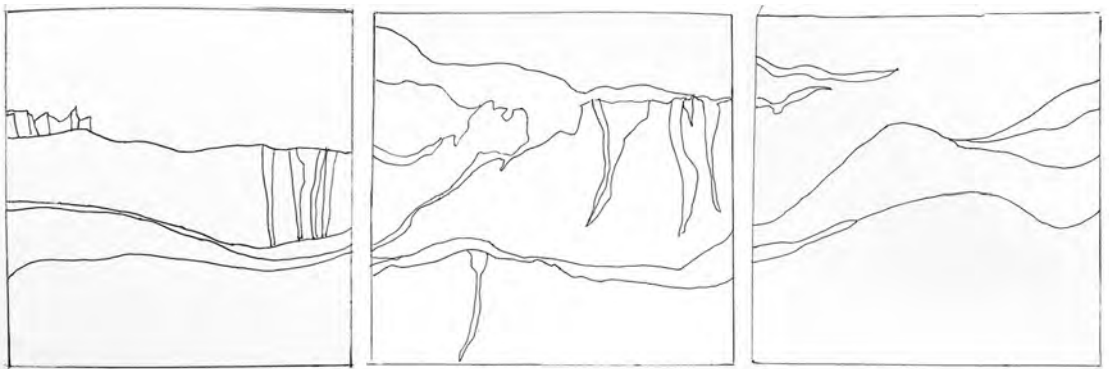


New Mexico desert

If you live in a “wild” area like I do, you can easily tune in to the terrain that surrounds you. I am close to the city but am out in the foothills and arroyos of the desert mountains, mountains a bit more distant. There’s a word that fits here: *earthfast*. It means “**firm or planted in the earth**, and **difficult to remove**.” Basically, fastened to the earth. My mapping the strata series is about looking for some way to illustrate that sense.

There is the starting place of geological stratification—the visual evidence in erosion, arroyos, collected layers of rocks. But being able to catalog that and classify what’s happening into timelines, process, residue doesn’t correlate to an emotion. A gut feeling. A response. What do those views of natural formations trigger? Immensity? Scale? Relationship? It’s as if there is a personality, an intelligence, encompassed in the rocks and dirt...much like with trees in the forest. That’s the feeling I’m after.

Here are some quickie sketches playing around with a simplified view of strata:



Imagining some possibilities for strata paintings in my sketchbook (ink)

Da Vinci and folded strata

BLOG POST

3

DECEMBER 19, 2019



Sketch by Leonardo da Vinci showing details of folded strata in the mountains of Italy (ca. 1500 AD)

“In geology, the stirrings of discovery are evident in the ink sketches of the great artist and inventor Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), who carefully drew the true shapes of rock bodies in sketches to **understand the natural shape of the earth....**” from Earth Structure by van der Pluijm and Marshak

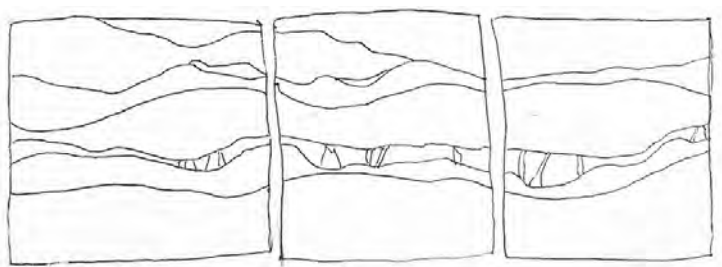
I think “understanding the natural shape of the earth” is somehow attuned to a scientific perspective, not a poetic or artistic one. Geology as a discipline suggests that cataloging and describing geological processes and formations *contains* nature in some way. But it really remains out of my grasp from that view.

We scratch the surface with documentation and details, but we can’t own the immensity of it. Levels, layers, organic materials... rocks, dirt, vegetation. Embedded fossils. There’s a passage of time, a story, that is recognizable but not encompassed by description. I think it has to be felt on a different level.

I like to do quick sketches that somehow reflect a flow across the landscape, trying to capture a rhythm from what I see. Below are three little sketches and the small paintings that resulted:



Appreciating strata in Sedona, AZ, 2014



Sketches of an imaginary land formation in three pieces



The triptych that came after the sketches, each 6×6 acrylic under epoxy



Desert sweet



Stand-up rocks



Drifting across



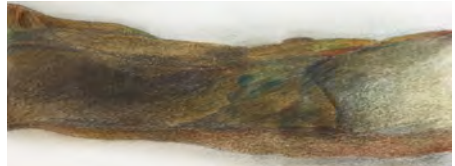
Faraway mountains

All triptychs, acrylic on panel with epoxy resin
7.25 x 19.5 x 1.5

Following a dialogue and inserting artistic license

DECEMBER 26, 2019

Part of the impetus for me in making art is to express a concept that can only be done visually. So if I can grab hold of an idea (even a tiny snippet), I can sometimes expand that into a theme or series just by exploring. In this case, it's the dialogue between art and geology...and my resulting series, *Mapping the strata*.



A ribbon of landscape, color pencil sketch on paper (my sketchbook)

Although living in the high desert has rekindled my interest in geology, I really have an old love: my geology class in college, specifically the textbook. Beyond the appeal of the textbook itself (the font, the paper, the images, the friendly explanations of natural formations), I was taken with the idea of explaining how something came to be and continues to evolve. I was given a perspective for the whole natural world around me. Making art sneaks in there as an interpretation of geology outside the limitations of scientific reality. It is poetic and ephemeral.

I found this remarkable painting when I was rooting around in art and geology on the internet:



"Mountain at Dusk," © Othmar Tobisch, 2009, Sumi ink on paper

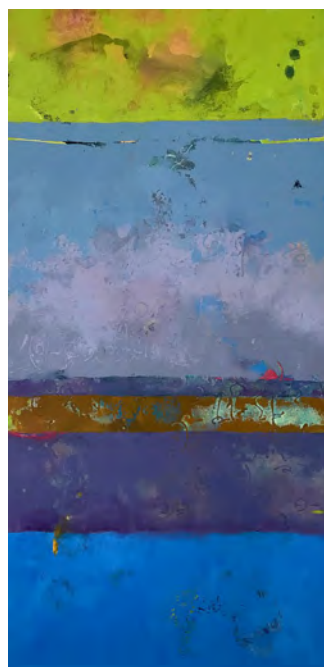
"Such seemingly disparate disciplines as visual art and the geological sciences may appear unlikely mates. Yet in my experience, there are some common threads between these areas of activity which are worthy of bringing into one's awareness....In the twentieth century, a wide variety of artistic work displays an interface with the geological sciences on levels ranging from simple use of rock as medium to sophisticated use of geological metaphor."

Othmar Tobisch, "Connections between the Geological Sciences and Visual Art," Leonardo, Autumn 1983.

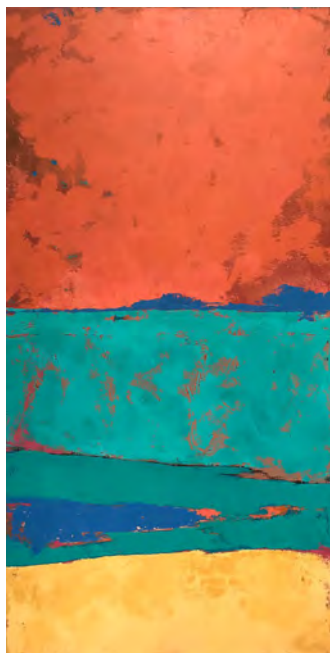
Enlarging the minuscule or diffusing the large enables metaphor and abstraction. Painting representational landscapes, of course, is one approach, but hovering in the space between landscape painting (capturing a landscape in a painting) and *reacting* to a landscape as an abstract response in painting, seems a perfect outcome.



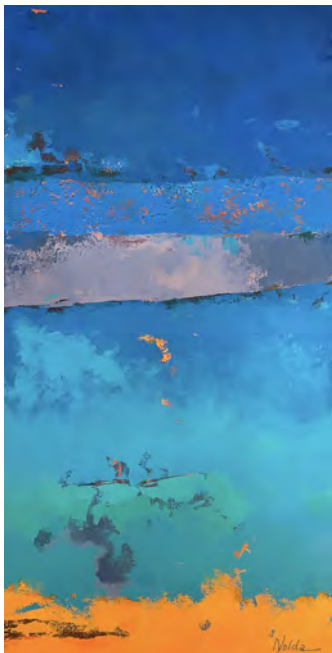
Mapping the Strata VIII



Mapping the Strata VII



Mapping the Strata XI



Mapping the Strata XVIII



Mapping the Strata XIV

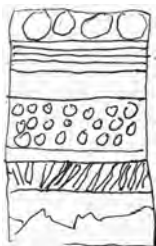
All acrylic on gallery-wrapped canvas, 48 x 24 x 1.6

Finding community

JANUARY 3, 2020

BLOG POST

5



Imagining layers in my sketchbook

I started the *Mapping the strata* series in somewhat of a vacuum, since the idea hadn't come from seeing what other artists had created. I was just tuning into my small piece of the world. Now, having opened the door to a vast variety of interpretations by googling "art and geology," I love what I've stumbled across. I am intrigued by what other artists are doing or have done. I feel like I've opened a door and have joined a community that I didn't know existed.

I don't think we are all doing the same thing or maybe even anything similar. I wonder—are we recording? Imagining? Extending the meaning? Having fun? Maybe it doesn't matter. Maybe we are just led by the complexity and beauty of geological formations and want to create a satisfying visual response that couldn't exist otherwise.

Here's one association of art and geology, in [Geology North](#), that I found—the geologist/artist, (either Stephen Marker or Ian Patience—neither identified on the website as the artist), says:

*"Geology, like all disciplines has its own set of concepts and I'm not alone in finding many of these concepts fascinating in their own right as well as exciting on account of the possibilities they offer for shaping the form and content of artworks....I enjoy the way rocks and minerals are moved and changed over time. They may be deposited at the surface of the earth, broken, eroded, transported, deposited, buried, subducted, melted and then redeposited prior to a new and different cycle. These **reworking** processes have their equivalents in the ways artworks can be reworked and recombined to produce new and surprising results."*

Examples of his reworked art on the right:

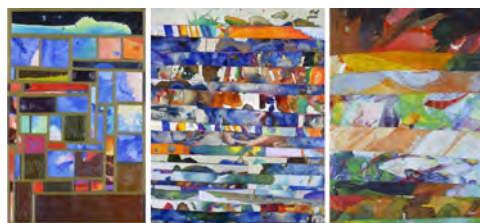
These are like weavings or stained glass. All about layers or integration of elements. I like it!

Reworking struck a chord. When I started this series, I was painting all abstract compositions, but that's become a little bit of a moving target. In spite of the fact that I'm not drawn to working representationally, I skated a little closer in a recent triptych, which was painted on "reworked" canvases. Hmm. Notional landscape, reworked.

Here's the sketch I started with:



Sketch of imaginary landscape; ink on paper



And here's the final piece:



"Mapping the strata XVI"; acrylic on gallery-wrapped canvas; 40 x 90; triptych



Mapping the strata XVI
 triptych, acrylic on gallery-wrapped canvas
 40 x 90 x 1.6



Intrusion
 mixed media on panel
 10 x 10 x 1.6



Substrate
 mixed media on panel
 10 x 10 x 1.6



Terrain
 mixed media on panel
 10 x 10 x 1.6

My rocks...

JANUARY 12, 2020

BLOG POST 6

A rock in the Sandia mountain foothills

I wonder about the rock at the top of the trail. How did it get plopped up there? I appreciate it as an anomaly. I thought I might find an answer as to how it got there by looking through some online geology books. Not so. I didn't anticipate that the scientific language and concepts would be so alien to me.

I believed I could probably open a textbook (I did take geology in college) and pick out a starting point for rocks (boulders?) forming and moving around—understanding my particular rock would fall into place. Instead I strayed into appreciating it as a magical interruption in my walking trail.



One of the pieces I read while combing through geology texts online was this:

“Everywhere the rocks are crumbling away; their fragments are creeping down hillsides to the stream ways and are carried by the streams to the sea, where they are rebuilt into rocky layers. When again the rocks are lifted to form land the process will begin anew; again they will crumble and creep down slopes and be washed by streams to the sea.”



*A balanced rock—same
foothills*

William Harmon Norton was speaking poetry when he wrote that in 1905 in [*The Elements of Geology*](#). And that's where I'm at—the poetry of land formations. I would love to have a time lapse film of that rock arriving in that particular spot, a compression of the reality of slow-moving rocks that “...crumble and creep down slopes....” This moment in time when I'm walking on that trail and passing that rock would be in the middle of the story.

These rocks all have something to say. I know that science can give us the facts, but I think it is the artists and poets that will weave a tale that creates a different boundary for “reality.”

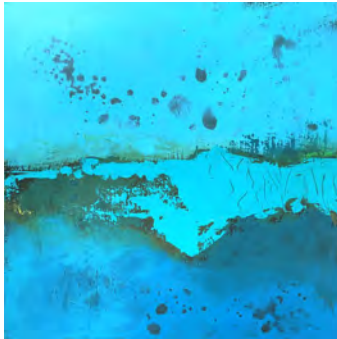
Here's my version of rocks posed in an imaginary landscape:



acrylic on panel, 7×19, coated with epoxy resin



Little strata 2



Little strata 3



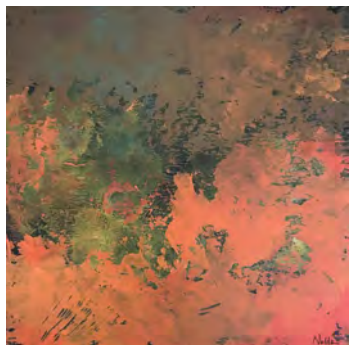
Little strata 4



Little strata 10



Little strata 15

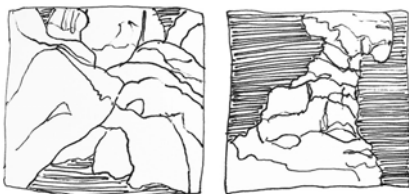


Little strata 16

All mixed media on cradled panel
8 x 8 x 1.5

Back to ground zero...kind of

JANUARY 19, 2020



Very quick line drawings of the Fiery Furnace in Arches NP

I thought of my strata series as an interpretation of an idea. An interest. A theme. A way of researching and making the “under-ground” of a painting—the layers that accumulate to create a face (top surface), in this case a response to geographic/geologic formations in my neighborhood. What is covered up, what peeks through? How do I organize a concept, a visual

presentation? I wanted to put on my scientist cap and find correlations between artists and scientists when considering geological data (visual and digitized, captured in deep information files or just observed). I wanted to find a correlation between science and art that made sense to me.

Carl Andre says:

“...Science is creating and comparing, and art is creating conditions that do not quite exist. That is why art is different from science. The ideal of science is to create at least theoretical models of things we hope have some correspondence with what exists; whereas with art, you try as a human being to create something that wouldn’t exist unless you made it.”

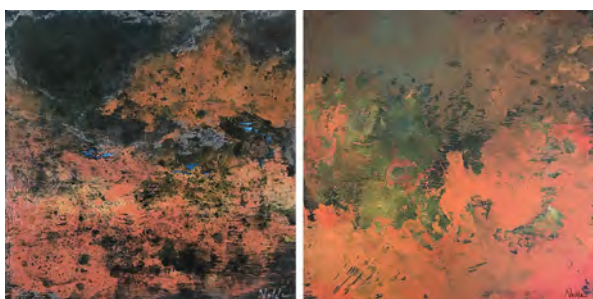
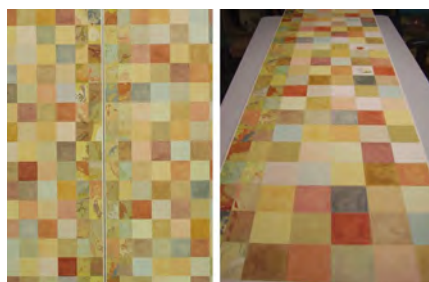
from Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972

I like the idea that artists create “something that wouldn’t exist unless you made it.” I’ve come to the conclusion that art and science might be operating on parallel platforms. Both are organizing information that, together, can offer an expansive interpretation of a thing, a phenomenon.

Here’s an artist (photos on right) who seems to bridge science and art, Nien Schwarz. She takes literal geological imagery and turns it into art (*Earth Matters*, scientific earth samples, original hand-coloured geological maps of Australia):

She says: “‘The Earth’s geological fabric, the ground beneath our feet that sustains us all, underpins my arts practice.’”

She uses earth materials to make many of her art works—a literal application. So it’s not so much an inside-out kind of artmaking, but more of a collecting of bits and pieces to organize them in a new way that reflects an expanded viewpoint. In the piece above, the grid seems apropos.



I’m going more for how I feel when I think about rocks, dirt, ravines—an imagined soul of the stuff. On the left are two small pieces I just finished. I think they have a bit of crunch and grit.

“Little strata 15” and “Little strata 16”; acrylic on cradled panel, 8 x 8 x 1.5

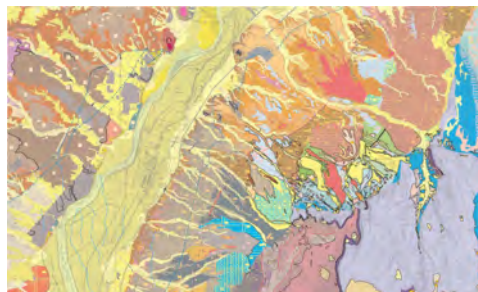
Fault lines and Superman

JANUARY 22, 2020

BLOG POST

8

I like this map of the geology of the Bernalillo and Placitas quadrangles (New Mexico)—truly a work of art. I captured it on my computer right before the final grid lines and descriptors were in place. It reminded me of a series I did a few years ago—the *Fault Line* series. At the time I was thinking about fault lines as margins for change—appearing as gaps, folds, or points of friction and pressure. When I did the paintings, I wanted to recreate the feeling of objects, things (anything really that could be pulled in by a fault line event) that were pulled to that margin and held there in a kind of new stasis.



In some ways, they were a kind of hedge against a Superman movie I saw where the earth split in an earthquake...and I think Lois Lane fell into the giant crevice. Of course Superman saved her by flying really fast to her rescue. I had the impression that the earth has a mind of its own and we might be just jostling about on the surface. So, I made paintings with the kind of “split” that I liked better. The pieces in mine have more glue.



Paintings from the Fault Line Series – water media on paper

Looking back, the Fault Line series is a precursor to the Mapping the Strata Series, and they share a reflection of physical geography/geology, imagined and real.

Collaboration...hmmm

FEBRUARY 5, 2020

BLOG POST 9



Rock ribbons in the Sandia foothills

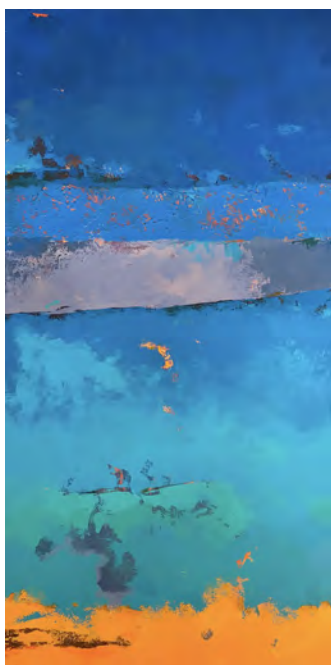
Collaboration suggests that two or more people are creating with a *common* goal in mind. But I think there might be something like side-by-side collaborating when it comes to art and science—more like adjacent ideas creating a bigger playing field, not looking for a shared outcome. I discovered a project called *On the Endless Here*, a collaboration between artists and geologists in the UK in 2014.

When I came across it online, I imagined geologists and artists crouched down amidst rock formations, generating overlapping ideas and images—kind of an onsite cross-fertilization. When I looked at the catalogue that followed the project though, it seemed that the artists had taken on the role of field techs rather than producing work inspired by the geology surrounding them. Anna Kirk Smith, the originator of the project, said, “I have slowly morphed into wearing ‘geology goggles,’ admittedly looked through with a puzzled artistic bent. Metaphorically and literally, I am digging for narrative.”

So...when I was reading geological papers and looking at geology books for a perspective that would inform my strata series, I came up short. Hence, the *parallel* feeling of collaborating, in my case with virtual scientists. I’m still in the mode of visual interpretation and responding to feelings. I have discovered that I am not so interested in the how or why of geological formations, but more in the WHOA!...look at that! How do I respond to that visually? How does it make me feel?

Here’s a painting I just finished that is way more about the response than about the science:

“Mapping the strata XVIII,” acrylic on canvas, 48 x 24





Mapping the Strata X



Mapping the Strata XIII



Mapping the Strata XV



Mapping the Strata XVII

All acrylic on gallery-wrapped canvas, 48 x 36 x 1.6

In the company of others

FEBRUARY 11, 2020

BLOG POST 10

I've been cruising the internet looking for other artists using geological formations as a source of inspiration. I think we have a common interest (maybe), but the differences are great in the interpretation. It's fascinating.



Per Kirkeby, "Vermisst die Welt"

Here's my most recent discovery—Per Kirkeby. In his obituary in *Artforum*, he is described as “heavily influenced by his training as a geologist” and that he “created work that synthesized nature and art.”

Kirkeby, himself, says: “I believe that painting...is structures. Each application of paint to a surface is structure....A sort of geology. As when, in a constant process, sedimentation and erosion makes the earth we live on like it is now.”

I like his cumulative layering. It doesn't seem representative, but more *felt*, like he ran his hands over a part of the landscape before he painted it.

Next is Othmar Tobisch, who also combines training in geology with visual art. He says:

“I am working with a variety of materials and concepts to investigate the human condition and man's connection to the earth and the cosmos. In the history of our earth, rock shows a record of countless cycles and transformations through geologic time. These changes in the earth, and the models man constructs to comprehend them are potent metaphors for the continual change man experiences in his life, whether measured in second, decades, or centuries.”



Othmar Tobisch, "Landscape with Clam Mound"

And finally, two pieces from Anna Kirk Smith, who was behind the project, *On The Endless Here*, which brought geologists and artists together on a geological survey in Great Britain.



She says: “I believe that the one of the greatest strengths an artist can possess is an honest, far-reaching curiosity, communicating and flipping facts into intuitive artworks, offering the viewer several ways into the piece: emotive, social or through wonderment.”

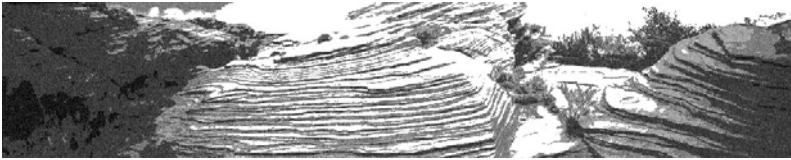
These are big ideas! What appeals to me about these artist geologists is the scope of those ideas and how they are captured visually. Their work and ideas are an amalgam of science and art on a wide, encompassing scale. Great stuff.

Morphing strata

FEBRUARY 16, 2020

BLOG POST

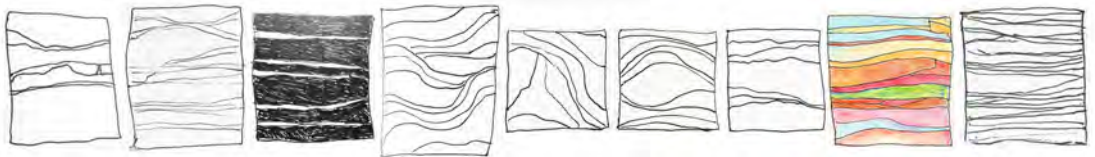
11



Real strata in nature (photograph)

I've been wondering about that transition from representation to symbolism and, specifically, when it

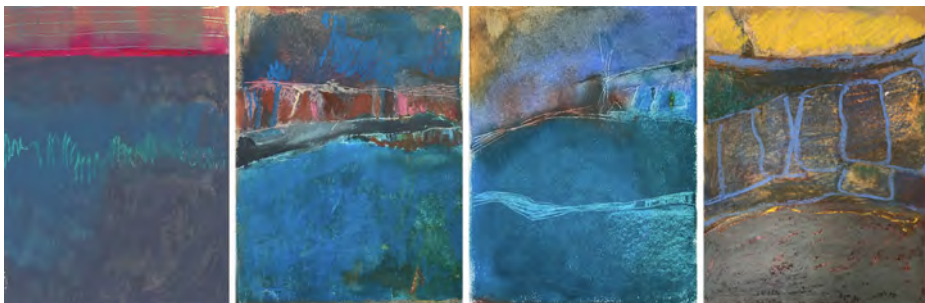
occurs in artmaking. For myself, I think of abstract painting as a step away from reality, but still very much related. There are stories and ideas behind each painting that I make—and a gut response to what ends up on the canvas. That dialogue of putting paint on canvas and adjusting the next layer to fit is always in answer to a question or two: “What does it remind me of? What does it need next? What color talks to the other colors already in place? or challenges them?” I think the whole process is more intuitive than planned, more unconscious than it is describing scientific understanding.



Small sketches of stratification, quick and simple

When I started the *Mapping the Strata* series, I very quickly got caught up in creating sketches of horizontal lines across a space—almost obsessively. It's a reference to the layers that occur out in the physical landscape, but also a nod to the foothills overlapping as they recede in the distance. These stratifications of terrain seem symbolic of time passing and earth shifting. I like the “feel” of the way all of this looks.

I also kept on with the small oil pastels in my sketchbook. Here are the most recent:



Each about 5 x 4 inches, oil pastel on paper

What keeps me going is the interest in discovering new ways to “capture” strata...

Mapping??

FEBRUARY 19, 2020

BLOG POST 12

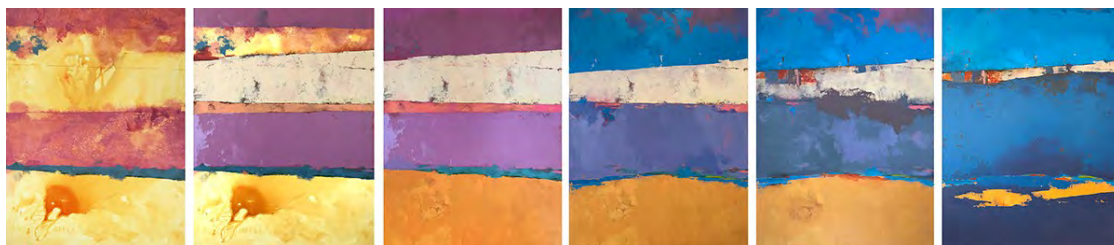


I hadn't thought of *mapping* as something apart from *strata*—*Mapping the Strata* as a theme for this series seemed like a visual response to what I see out in the environment, the abstraction of physical geography to make paintings. Rocks, arroyos, sedimentation, layering of stuff all becoming somewhat symbolic. I liked that the paintings coming out of that idea had the feeling of geological formations without looking exactly like them.

Then I backed up a little and thought just about *mapping*. How is it defined? Does my use of it make sense? I looked it up at dictionary.com: “1) to sketch or plan; 2) a maplike delineation, representation, or reflection of anything;” and Wikipedia: “Mapping can mean cartography, the creation of maps, graphic symbolic representations of the features of a part of the surface of the Earth, or any other astronomical or imaginary place.” Well, I thought—that fits. I'm kind of in the imaginary anything place. Not representation per se, but more graphic symbolic interpretation.

It seems like EVERYTHING can be mapped. Processes, directions, plans, geography, on and on.... But back to mapping the strata, I thought there was a lovely parallel to the stratification I was tuned into in the physical world when compared to the development of a painting. My paintings evolve as layers, maybe mimicking a natural process?

Here's a "stratification" of one painting:



“Mapping the strata VI,” steps 1-6, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 36

In ***The Power of Maps***, Denis Wood says:

We are always mapping the invisible or the unattainable or the erasable, the future or the past, the whatever-is-not-here-present-to-our-senses-now and, through the gift that the map gives us, transmuting it into everything it is not...into the real.



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