

Grounding, In Touch

by

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Grounding, In Touch

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Abstract

Grounding, In Touch, is an exhibition and supporting paper that documents and discusses the transitions my pre-existing painting practice took towards artistic embodiment, using clay, my body, and the land as a form of expanded landscape painting. As an artist and a settler on unceded Syilx territory (unceded: land not given over by treaty), I want my art practice to allow me to reflect and heal my relationship to the land here.

The land of the Okanagan Valley is my case study. I look to settler scholar John Wagner to help identify problems in framing the landscape in a way that produces an unsustainable aesthetic. The connection felt between body and land struggles to be interpreted through the English language. I introduce Debra Bird Rose's idea of 'shimmer' and the local Indigenous nsyilxcən word *temxulexw* to speak to the land and our body's interconnection. I introduce three female land artists as key inspiration for moving my artwork from the studio to the land.

Walking and observing are discussed as an integral part of creating a ritual to create with the land. I work on the ground with my body and materials, allowing me to produce works that break from pictorial representations of the Okanagan, instead speak to real and tactile experiences. I discuss my choice to work with clay and canvas on the land to ground myself. I relate the pushing and morphing of the clay to my experience of 'shimmer' as I attempt to replicate the pulse of the land through my movements. The gestures I make with my hands alludes to the process and the resulting form of each artwork. With my thesis artwork and support paper I participate in the conversation of how to move forward in care and respect for lands we live on.

Lay Summary

Grounding, In Touch, is an exhibition of ceramic relics and photographic documents of my movement out of the traditional frame of landscape painting and on to the land. The artworks and accompanying written paper demonstrate my attempt at bridging settler colonial aesthetic appreciation of the land with Syilx concepts of care. I commit to an evolving, reflexive practice that continues to open the dialogue between land artists and settlers. I demonstrate a practice that engages with the Okanagan land acknowledging its colonial past and present. This thesis suggests by walking, touching, moving, composing, and shaping on the ground level and at a pace that matches the land's rhythms, I hope to achieve a new aesthetic within the settler land art frame and to work towards redressing these unceded lands in ways that will help and heal rather than consume and ruin.

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Dedication

To my Mother, a true force of nature

Chapter 1: Introduction: Meeting the Land

My practice starts with walking. As my feet meet the earth, my body holds what I hear, see, touch, feel and understand. My body is the vessel through which I experience the world. Through a regular practice of walking, I can slow my pace down to the pulses of the land. Walking builds connection to my body and allows me to realize my innate connection to land. My body is also the site where I process the grief of the global climate crisis, and more specifically the impacts climate change has on human and non-human life in the Okanagan Valley.

I arrived here in August 2019 from Toronto, Ontario. I was excited to capture the beauty of the Okanagan scenery through paint. To me the Okanagan represented a mountainous, water-rich paradise with lots of fruit and wine. However, after living in Kelowna for a semester, I noticed a gap between my ideas and ideals of the land in contrast to Syilx care and knowledge. I noticed how much of these traditional lands were subject to commodification with high-rises being built daily and the hundreds of neatly groomed orchards and vineyards. I began to research Okanagan's settler history and found that I agreed with the main idea behind anthropology professor John Wagner's article: *Landscape Aesthetics, Water, and Settler Colonialism in the Okanagan Valley of British Columbia* that "the long term, successful marketing of [this oasis-like] aesthetic is contributing to ecosystem degradation" (Wagner 23). As a settler himself, Wagner acknowledges the pleasing aesthetic is related to the fact that "orchards and lakes [are] set among a dramatic, arid and mountainous backdrop" (23). I thought back to my Google search of the Okanagan Valley while I was still living in Toronto and how blatantly the images frame the landscape in this way. As an artist, I felt inclined to devote my painting practice to unlearning

this practice of oasis-like framing and to heal my relationship to the land by expanding beyond the frame. Each step towards creating the artistic work is one that has allowed me to leave the walls of the studio and the frame of a canvas behind, and to move deeply into the world.

I find inspiration in female and Indigenous land artists' work whose respective practices focus on making connections to the land through site-specific practices, often focusing on healing the hierarchy between humans and nature. I have taken inspiration from these artists' works and use the idea of site-specificity to attune myself to the land here. In other words, my life and the life of the land are inextricably linked. I look specifically to artists Marlene Creates, Ana Mendieta and Rebecca Belmore for the ways they use the land gently to convey our intrinsic interconnection to it. I talk about these artists in opposition to artists such as Robert Smithson, one of the founders of the Land Art movement who is known for his grand excavations and alterations of the earth. I discuss how Creates, Mendieta and Belmore offer a gentle, yet radical way forward in art making. A way that respects and appreciates the land, while also leaving the audience with an impressionable statement. As an artist I wish to use my practice to participate in the conversation of how to move forward living on and with the lands I am privileged to be on.

Besides the art of Mendieta, Creates and Belmore, the eco-feminist and decolonial theory of 'shimmer' has enriched my art practice. The term 'shimmer' is translated from the Yolngu (The people who live in the Miwatj or north-east Arnhem Land region are known generally as Yolngu, which simply means 'people') word '*Bir'yun*' by ethnographer Debra Bird Rose ("Yolngu"). 'Shimmer' explains the life-force energy behind all living things and is the force that creates a pulsing, animate world. I compare 'shimmer' to the nsyilxcən word *temxulexw*,

which I learnt in a webinar by local Syilx elder Jeanette Armstrong. Like ‘shimmer’, the word *temxulexw* relates to the life force behind all living things and explains a worldview where all life is connected. My art practice is devoted to rediscovering this interconnection through making. I believe through understanding our interrelatedness we may be able to collectively heal the land and ourselves.

In transitioning my work away from the studio, outside my practice begins with walking followed by noticing the sensorial changes in my body. The art I am engaged in echoes the land’s constant flux during those moments. The process is an embodied experience. This is when I am most present and responsive to the shifts in the environment, to the movement of the clay and noticing my own body. This practice promotes accelerating awareness in the moments of creation. I am fully there. All my senses are heightened. Currently the works are an expansion of my previous painting practice beyond framing and into the realm of performance. I ‘paint’ with my hands and my body. The land is the canvas that holds everything. The land and I dance together to mark down these rhythms. This paper is a document of that dance.

1.1 Out of Touch

Prior to beginning my MFA in September 2019, I was primarily a painter. I had spent much of my undergraduate studies at Brock University developing my painting practice. I would pair idyllic landscapes of Western Canada with symbols of a dystopic elements that warned viewers of the horrifying effects of climate change. A good example of this would be my painting *Playground*, from 2018 (Figure 1.1). *Playground* is representative of a post-apocalyptic ‘wonderland’ and a climatically stressed landscape that is too far gone. The trees and plant life

are covered in a haze of radioactive material, while light beams and arrow shaped meteors fall from the sky. This landscape is a place of awe, inviting us in through the pastel hues and wondrous elements, mountains, and rainbows. However, as the viewer looks more deeply this world is less than inviting and all the beings appear trapped by their dystopic fate. This painting and the suite of paintings made with it were created and framed by my idea of the 'West' as serene, sublime, and unaltered. I juxtaposed the pristine mountain-scape with the symbols of pollution and climatic distress that is noticeable when living in eastern Canadian cities. I enjoyed playing with these binary ideas in my practice. I place the 'West' in quotations because my knowledge base has expanded, and I find that my former ideas (settler ideals) about the 'West' were idealized and not representative of the whole truth.



Figure 1.1 *Playground*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 6ft x 7ft

1.2 The Wildness of the ‘West’

Landscape paintings and image-based advertisements informed by the white settler culture of the ‘West’ attributed to my past imagined idea of the land in the Okanagan valley. Settler colonial images of the land often commodifies the ‘West’ as a vacation destination or retirement dream. In John Wagner’s article published in 2008, he outlines that "settler culture has led to the production of a landscape aesthetic that reproduces colonization as an iterative cultural practice," (26). Wagner states that the “Okanagan Valley of British Columbia was constructed as an agricultural society in the first half of the twentieth century but is now being reconstructed as a retirement center and recreational playground” (23). Framing the land in this way limits the land to resources and commodification. My culture, white, Euro-centric, patriarchal settler culture, has perpetuated these Western ideals through history. Through a settler lens, the Western landscape, specifically the Okanagan, appears to be paradise, a land to be discovered and full of resources for the taking. Since the early 1900s brochures were being circulated through the England and the United States advertising the Okanagan as “the land of fruit and sunshine” (26). Drive almost anywhere in the Okanagan and you will see this notion actualized into hundreds of pristine orchards and wineries that have displaced local flora. Wagner states that the Okanagan was transformed in the early nineteen-hundreds via the “commoditization of a landscape aesthetic built around the lush, oasis-like qualities of orchards and lakes set among a dramatic, arid and mountainous backdrop” (23).

With a settler frame of mind, I was excited to grow my painting practice in the Okanagan region, with its gentle rolling mountains and freshwater lakes. I was sold on my idea of paradise and was pleased to escape the urban bustle of Toronto. However, as I stated before, after a few

weeks of living here I began to understand that this aesthetic was not the whole truth. Although the scenery appears oasis-like, the Okanagan suffers from water-shortages and an annual fire-season that threatens the flora and fauna. Theology professor Michael S. Hogue explains the discrepancy between the way we see the land versus the realities of a particular landscape in his article *Aesthetics: The Art of Ecological Responsibility*. He states, “humans produce images and inhabit in addition to the world of nature, a second, constructed, symbolic world” (142). White settler culture has produced these symbols that make the Okanagan appear as a fruit-laden, lush green garden oasis (Figure 1.2.). In this advertisement one will notice that the land looks like a well-organized, lush garden. This advertisement completely ignores the true arid climate of the Okanagan and advertises it as an oasis.

Summerland, Peachland and Naramata were developed by J.M. Robinson who bought huge plots of land in these respective towns in 1912. Robinson wrote, “twelve years ago the site of today’s producing orchards was an arid cattle pasture, covered with sage brush, cactus and scrub pine” (27). The advertisement is an example of the reasons for the ever-increasing divide between the worlds of nature and humanity in settler culture, or as Hogue states “our symbolic world is out of synch with our first world of nature” (143). This advertisement (Figure 1.2) that I have included for the Okanagan represents the land as it now, after large-scale alterations. However, if you compare these images to the reality of the semi- arid desert landscape and its flora, the symbolic world does not match the reality.

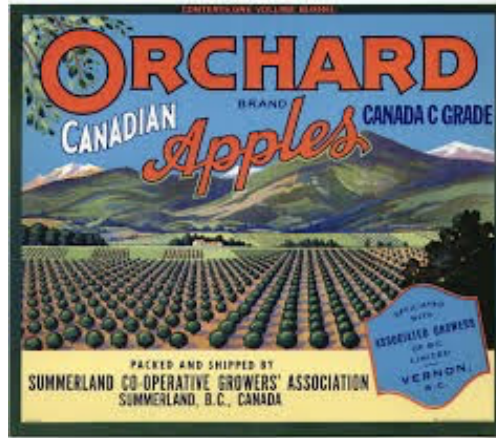


Figure 1.2 Vintage Okanagan Apple Crate Label

Wagner suggests a potential solution to the contradiction between the use of the land and the reality of its limitations suggests that “achieving a culture of sustainability will thus require the development of a new landscape aesthetic, one grounded more deeply in local ecological realities” (34). As a settler scholar, Wagner is advocating for other settlers to work towards understanding these ecological realities and try to produce an aesthetic that aligns with them. As an artist and a settler on unceded Syilx lands I felt that I wanted to help bridge the divide between settler colonial land aesthetics and models of Indigenous relationality/care for the land by creating art that would challenge the settler aesthetic and still speak to the overwhelming beauty of the Okanagan land. As a way of imaging the path forward, I began walking. I walk to notice, and I walk to understand. The pace of walking versus driving or flying allows me to slow down and attune myself to the pace of the land and allow it to reveal its realities. Walking allows me to experience the land at the ground level. Through walking I begin to dedicate myself to a practice that is consistently evolving.

As we experience the real-time effects of global climate change, particularly here in the Okanagan region, human connection to the land is critical to changing our course. Using the land for its resources without recognizing its need to be cared for has left traditional Syilx peoples excluded from resources that are rightfully theirs. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang articulate why colonial management is incommensurable with Indigenous perspectives “the disruption of Indigenous relationship to land represents a profound epistemic, ontological, cosmological violence” (5). The land in the Okanagan has been severely altered and excavated for its resources so that in the next several years the Okanagan valley expects “increased rainfall, severe temperature fluctuations, reduced snow peaks, changes to stream flow, droughts, wildfires [and] crop diseases” (Schwann 173). If nothing is changed, “we risk leaving behind altered and consumed landscapes; landscapes that no longer yield or sustain diverse life” (172) as settler environmental designer and architect Alyssa Schwann states.

Like the settler scholars Wagner and Schwann discuss, it is up to us (settlers) to make these changes. I have dedicated my art practice to unlearn the ways in which land is viewed and treated within the dominant settler culture. Within the confines of a two-year MFA, I chose to focus on healing my settler- colonial relationship to land as act of positionality that relates my cultural experiences to my artwork. It is important to state that Syilx land is not Syilx land without Syilx people and the knowledge of the land belongs to the Syilx. I consider this is my evolving practice and when I use the general term ‘land’ I imply a deep range of earth-time, Syilx people and colonial histories. My art practice has evolved from a two-dimensional painting practice to an expanded painting practice where I create on the land directly. I ask myself if I can unlearn my settler perspective through touch and tactile experiences? Using my body,

keeping to the rhythm of nature with the tempo of my walking and using my hands and body to touch the earth directly, I can slow down to the pace of my environment and reattune my body to its flow.

I hope that my evolving, reflexive practice will continue to open the dialogue in developing non-colonial relations to land between land artists and settlers. I aspire to demonstrate a practice that engages with the Okanagan land as it is and acknowledges its colonial past and present. Instead of painting and framing the Okanagan as an oasis to be consumed, I dedicate myself to working towards creating art that listens to the land and does not control or attempt to erase the voice and life of the land. This includes the vast biodiversity of species in the Okanagan that are at risk: the arid desert climate has been taken over by water-greedy irrigation systems and the land that has been consumed by resource commodification such as mining and urban sprawl. By walking, touching, moving, composing, and shaping on the ground level and at a pace that matches the land's rhythms, I hope to achieve a new aesthetic within the settler land art frame and to work towards redressing these unceded lands in ways that will help and heal rather than consume and ruin.

1.3 Women, Art and Land

As an artist, I am inspired by the work of Marlene Creates, Ana Mendieta, and Rebecca Belmore because they use their respective art practices to advance alternatives to patriarchal culture and settler value systems. Land art is defined as “art that is made directly in the landscape, sculpting the land itself into earthworks or making structures in the landscape using natural materials such as rocks or twigs” (“Land Art”). In the 1960s, when land art was becoming an established art genre, “the movement was most often presented through the

practices of male artists starting with Robert Smithson, ... [and] his peers such as Walter De Maria, Alan Sonfist, Hans Haacke and James Turrell” (Takac). *Spiral Jetty* by Robert Smithson is the most well-known work of this genre (Figure 1.3.1). Works like these required a lot of labour and often huge machines that can break-up the earth. It was a popular idea that “Smithson presented a kind of practice that was believed not to be manageable by women” (O’grady). This is because throughout the land art genre “a certain cowboy archetype persisted: the Great Man as a brawny, blue-jeaned wayfarer, striding into a wide-format horizon equipped with welders, bulldozers and manifestoes” (O’grady). The pervading ‘cowboy’ archetype made it difficult for the women who helped define the movement to be recognized.



Figure 1.3.1 *Spiral Jetty*, 1970, Robert Smithson. Courtesy James Cohan Gallery.

The artists that have inspired my practice on and with the land are artists that subvert the monumental works of their male counterparts. Artists Marlene Creates, Ana Mendieta and Rebecca Belmore have used their careers to generate works that offer a gentler relationship to the land and reaffirm the notion of the earth and the land as a nurturing and humbling force with many lessons to teach.

Marlene Creates is a Canadian land artist based in Portugal Cove, Newfoundland. She creates land works and “works with photography, video, scientific and vernacular knowledge, walking and collaborative site-specific performance in the six- acre patch of boreal forest where she lives” (Creates). I am most influenced by her gentle bodily impressions within the grasslands in her work *Sleeping Places*, 1987 (Figure 1.3.2). Creates writes that “this series was completed during the two months of [her] journey around the island of Newfoundland. It shows [her] imprint on parts of the island’s landscape in the course of a season. The land has a memory” (Creates). The notion that ‘the land has a memory’ resonates with my feeling that the land is an animate being that feels and is impacted by our use and care of it and stresses the importance of redressing my relationship to it and unlearning settler cultural behaviors. Like Creates, I hope to work in a way that does not alter the land, but instead speaks to the relation between myself and the environment.

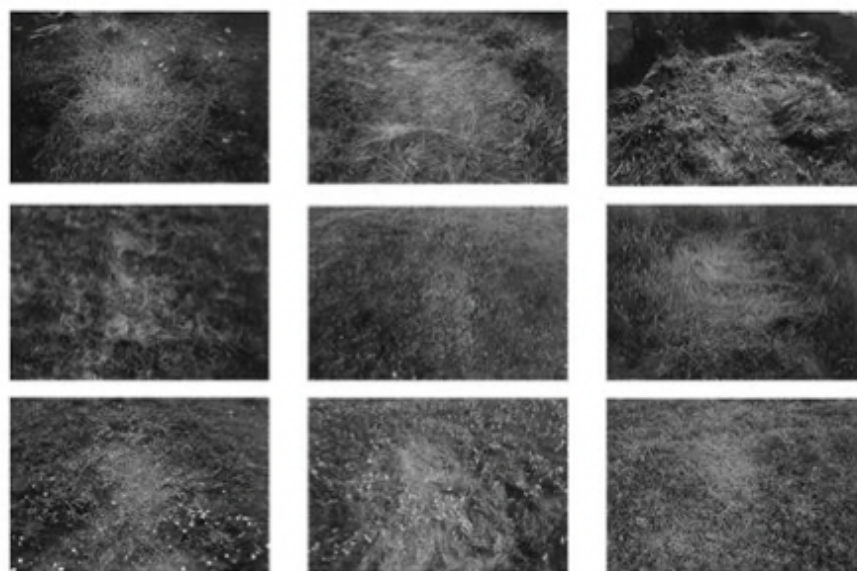


Figure 1.3.2 *Sleeping Places*, 1987, Marlene Creates

Although subtle, Creates' works provide a break from the grand excavations that were symbolic of the land-art genre. She states that her early works "were done as a reaction and in deliberate opposition to the Earthworks that [she] was aware of at the time...taking a bulldozer or a dump truck to the land seemed antithetical to [her]; [She] did not want to inflict any large-scale permanent changes on the environment" (Lewis). It is worth acknowledging that gentler approaches to land art were also being generated by male artists such as Andy Goldsworthy about a decade later, however the land art genre was dominated with male artists completing grand excavations particularly in the sixties and seventies. The slight compression of greenery of Creates' silhouette in the grass speaks to the nurturing quality of the land when one recognizes and does not take for granted its gifts. A soft place to lie down. A way to recharge one's body. A way to notice one's inherent connections to the environment. To me Creates' work is quiet and tender, her soft imprints in the land are discrete and temporal. The life span of the marks her

body leaves against the ground follow the rhythm of the nature instead of work to enforce permanent change. Her body would leave an imprint on the grasses and after she got up and left the grasses would return to its original form.

Comparatively, the late artist Ana Mendieta would use her own body as the vehicle to translate her “primordial impulses which she saw as an abiding respect and wonder for the equalizing forces of nature and an awareness of the individual’s place in time and history” (Howard 35). Like Creates, Mendieta’s art practice challenges and subverts the grandiose gestures of some of her male counterparts. Her art practice was dedicated to discovering new ways to talk about the idea that “nature is alive, reproductive and eternal” (Howard 169). I am particularly drawn to her *Silhueta* series. Although Mendieta’s practice is like Creates in the way she uses her body’s imprint as means for creating her work, the methods she uses to make a silhouette in the earth with her body are more explicit; she uses her body and presses it into the ground creating a silhouette that she repeated across landscapes (Figure 1.3.3). She often laid into the ground with her arms raised upright. This was her way to convey “her ongoing study of ancient cultures and fascination with cross- cultural archetypes; and an interest in goddess iconography” (Howard 23). The repetitive motif of open palms with arms upraised, in Mendieta’s work, invokes the ‘Great Mother archetype’ that dates to the Prehistoric age, and was often used in art works as a posture to denote sudden epiphany and knowledge of connection to the land (Neumann 116). The symbolism of the “upraised arms is unquestionably religious, whether we interpret it as a prayer, invocation, or magical conjuring” and is a “clear expression of the magical function of the Feminine” (Neumann 114-115). One of the most common interpretations of this posture “[stresses] the magical character of the attitude, which is

accordingly assumed by priests or priestesses of the Great Goddess or by supplicants who wish to establish a connection with her” (Neumann 116). The arms raised upright gesture is used in most of Mendieta’s *Silhueta* series as she found her body more and more connected to the land and stated that her art was a way to bond with the universe (Howard 25).



Figure 1.3.3 *Untitled (from the Silhueta series)*, 1976, Ana Mendieta

Both Creates and Mendieta’s practices have influenced me to gradually replace the synthetic materials I use such as paints and to work more with natural materials and with my body and the land itself. Mendieta’s *Silhueta* series encouraged me my practice to shift from painting and two-dimensional expressions to work using my body, particularly my hands on the land directly. As I began to use clay to ‘paint’ the land I would often find myself repeating the

arm's upright motion as a symbolic opening to the life force of land. The clay would move with this gesture and echo the opening my arms and hands had created. As I was moving and thinking about the rhythms of the land and my body together, I began to understand the importance of touch. Mendieta's body touching the ground is symbolic of the interconnection humanity has with nature. To me, the silhouette of her body's impressions into the earth reminds me of where we all come from and where we are all going. The ground is our home.

The notion that our bodies/ beings are inherently a part of and connected to nature is a way of life and knowing that has been established by Indigenous communities and cultures for centuries. Rebecca Belmore is Anishinaabe, a member of the Lac Seul First Nation and is an internationally recognized multidisciplinary artist. Belmore creates "evocative connections between body, land and language" (Rebecca Belmore). Belmore's works are performative and activist in nature. She is known for her time-based performance pieces, using natural materials, that speak to the violence against traditional lands and its peoples. Belmore will often use the clay from her homeland in Manitoba that is dug up from the Red River Valley, so that in her performance the clay stands for land (Rebecca Belmore).

I am deeply influenced by Belmore's work *Clay on Stone*, (Figure 1.3.4) that was created for Nuit Blanche 2016 in the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto. *Clay on Stone* is a durational performance that lasts from sunrise to sunset. Belmore works on her hands and knees and covers the large stone floor of the Walker Court with clay from the Red River Valley in Manitoba, in her home territory. Working on the ground she writes the words "land", "water" and "breathe" before covering the words hours later with more clay. By covering the words that stand for the pillars that sustain life, Belmore makes a statement of the erasure of these rights for Indigenous

peoples in Canada at the hands of colonialism. Belmore created this work in the monumental space of the Walker Court, reengaging the space to speak of the buried culture, land and people that the AGO flourishes from.

Keeper, 2018 is a similar performance where Belmore uses the residual bucket and clay left over from *Clay on Stone*. in (Figure 1.3.5) We see her sister Florene in (Figure 1.3.5), washing the floor with a clay-soaked rag. Around Florene the clay is beginning to dry and crack, “which brings up ideas of not only the land but also the absence of water—a parched earth” (Nanibush). Belmore discusses that she named the performance *Keeper* because “it’s about the idea of women having the knowledge to care for the earth.” (Nanibush). Both Belmore’s *Clay on Stone* and *Keeper* make me think of the powerful connection between land and body. Belmore inspires me to redress my own relationship to the land here in the Okanagan. Her work empowers me to think as a woman and an artist that I too can be a caretaker.



Figure 1.3.4. *Clay on Stone*, 2016, Rebecca Belmore



Figure 1.3.5 *Keeper*, 2018, Rebecca Belmore

With Belmore's example, I choose to work on and with the land directly as opposed to trying to represent it in a painting. This shift was further precipitated by the COVID-19 virus because my art practice was called to change and move from the studio to the land. Not being able to access our studios for five months and losing valuable contact with other artists and students encouraged me to be more creative with how I was approaching my work and I began to experiment outside. A few months into the summer and the pandemic, I was working less with paints and brushes and more with clay, flora debris and my hands. Losing in-person contact made me crave touch and the tangible world. Belmore's work reminded me to pay attention to the key elements that sustain life and not take them for granted. I turned to the "land", the "water" and my "breath" by focusing on direct and tangible experience. I was able to leave behind the representation of the land in my paintings and instead work in holistic way that

promoted my desire for connection and touch. I am grateful for this shift in my art practice as it has allowed me to connect and ground myself.

Chapter 2: Ritual of Healing

There is so much knowledge and ability for growth in the practice of slowing down and noticing. The movement from creating in the studio to working on the land allowed me to work on my personal relationship to the environment. The practice of walking on and working with the land has slowed me down and allowed me to feel grounded. It has opened my eyes, ears, and the rest of my senses to experience and notice my body's inherent connection to the land that I once felt fleetingly but did not understand. Through the action of walking and observing I have been able to tune into my relationship to the land in a tender and empathic way. I believe that the land is an animate being and has its moods, through walking I can pick up on subtleties that hint towards the land's peace and woes. When I listen deeply to land, I act in a way that is contingent to it and I relate to it. My practice is made in relation to the land I walk on, it is "designed specifically for a particular location and that has an interrelationship with the location" therefore it is always "site-specific" ("Site-Specific"). As I move closer and closer to becoming attuned with the land, my practice becomes more immediate at responding to the specific place. I can create art that speaks to the land as it is, rather than choose what to include and what not to include inside the frame of a painting.

2.1 Shimmer

Throughout my increasingly nature based outdoor practice I have begun to feel a part of and not separate from the non-human world. The late anthropologist and feminist theorist Debra Bird Rose discussed the possibilities for healing by tuning into the world in her essay and lecture *Shimmer, when all you love is being trashed*. Rose has dedicated a large part of her career to

working alongside Aboriginal Australians in efforts of reconciliation. In her essay she introduces the “Yolngu term *bir’yun*, which translates as “brilliant” or shimmering” as a concept that holds the capacity to redress extinction, especially the extinction of angiosperms and flying foxes in Australia. She notes that “*bir’yun* or shimmer, or brilliance, is -people say- one’s actual capacity to see and experience ancestral power” (Rose 53). ‘Shimmer’ relates to the life force behind all living beings and their interconnection. When one experiences shimmer, they feel a part of the living breathing world. I feel ‘shimmer’ most when I walk and notice the moving sun flecks on the lake waves, the sudden opening of blossoms in the spring, the flora reaching up to the sky and moving downward again in the winter, people dancing on the land and the gentle rolling motion the wind makes in the tall sage brush. The interconnection of humans and the land is integral in one’s experience of shimmer, nothing happens in isolation, instead everything moves together as one. As I engage in my regular practice of walking, I am slowly tuning myself to the pulse to the surrounding land. I can no longer help but stop and notice, feeling the land’s vibrations. Seeing/ observing is often the first shift I notice within my body as I walk. The sage, the dusty rolling mountain, the myriads of tiny holes in the rock face that is home to many is what I begin to see. This causes me to feel captured in the moment and begin to feel more, “brilliance actually grabs you. Brilliance allows you, or brings you, into the experience of being part of a vibrant and vibrating world” (Rose 53). As I continue to walk and notice my other senses activate, my body responds to the land through feeling. I feel tender toward every blade of grass and rock face. I wonder, what are they feeling? What have they seen and experienced? Shimmer is ever-present, it is our human capacity to notice it, that can change. I believe the more one can slow down to notice it, the more one feels connected to it.

Reflexivity contrasts with the concept of the Anthropocene, which is defined as “the current geological age, viewed as the period during which human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment” (dictionary.com). To experience shimmer, one must be reflexive. When I create art, I have found that I must slow down and take time to respond to the land. I am asking what would it be like if we worked with the land instead? What if we responded to its fluctuations, its woes and its magic? Marlene Creates, Rebecca Belmore and Ana Mendieta have been committed to working this way and I would like to follow in their soft but strong footsteps.

I feel that the relational and dynamic life-force that comes from experiencing shimmer (*bir'yun*) relates to the local Indigenous nsilxcən word *temxulexw* which was discussed by award winning writer, scholar, activist and Syilx traditional knowledge keeper Dr. Jeanette Armstrong. The word *temxulexw* roughly translates as “the cumulative reality of aliveness” and is a word that is over 12,000 years old (Armstrong). The word does not speak of a concept, but rather a dynamic system that is based in reality. The word and the Syilx traditional knowledge systems that it is based on have been seen as holistic, meaning a second-tier knowledge system to science which is a knowledge that promotes specific outcomes (Armstrong). Whereas holistic knowledge systems have the capacity to teach us how to feel and intuitively know about our world, resulting in more feelings of care. I believe understanding the word *temxulexw*, like the word *bir'yun*, is a way to see ourselves’ as a part of and not separate from the land. Therefore, my art practice asks me to pay attention to the web of relationships that are based in the reality of being a human on this land. I wonder, how can I as an artist create work in relation to all other beings here in Syilx territory? How can I make the experience of this life-force visible to my

artistic sensibilities? How can I create art that grounds myself and posit alternatives to the ways of being I am used to? I will begin by walking.

2.2 Transitions

I am continually fascinated by the visceral shift I sense in my body as I exit the urban/suburban life of subdivisions and highways to enter the world of the more-than-human. I recall feeling this bodily shift as soon as I was old enough to wander into the woods near my Grandparents cottage in Haliburton, Ontario, traditional homeland of the Ojibway Nations and the Huron/Wendat Nation. When I stayed at the cottage, I would walk towards the wall of dancing green leaves. The forest's edge was like a curtain beckoning me inside. To this day, once I enter a forest, my senses are bathed in sparkling light, thousands of varying greens and the smell of dampness in the air. I find that forests are the perfect portal "where the self and the world fuse in an embodied encounter" (Chaplin). The further I walk into a forest the more I dissolve into it. This feeling relates to my understanding of the broad ideas that define eco-feminist theory. According to researcher and curator Monika Fabijanska, "ecofeminism is grounded in spiritual feminism which insists that everything is connected, and that nature does not discriminate between soul and matter" ("The Feminist Art Project"). The connection between soul and matter is a reality that Indigenous peoples have been trying to tell us (settlers) about for centuries. Fabijanska's research "concerns eco feminist art not ecological art Eco-feminist art is concerned with the relationship between the women and the earth/nature/environment it can at times be ecological but often is not, think of Ana Mendieta" ("The Feminist Art Project"). As I am walking, I often think of how my art practice could help me dissolve away my settler

preconceptions and ideologies of the Okanagan. I wonder if it possible to create an art practice that echoes the visceral shift our bodies feel when we feel connected to the land?

2.3 Observing, Looking, Listening

Walking and observing have become an integral in creating a ritual to work with the land. Walking the ground is a way for me to greet and acknowledge the land. It is our first hello. It has become a repetitive process, making me think about Robin Wall Kimmerer's ideas surrounding ceremony in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Kimmerer states that "ceremonies large and small have the power to focus attention to a way of living awake in the world" (36). My long walks lead to reflection, a process called "ecological imagination" by Papaschase Cree Scholar Dwayne Donald "as a way to pay attention to the relationships that [one is] enmeshed in" (6). My rhythm of walking and noticing gradually slows down as I attune myself to the pace of the non-human. What if I were to walk as wildflowers come into bloom? Or like how the grass sways in wind? Is there a way to match my pace with the pulses of the land? I wonder if there was a way my walking could slow or speed up to the pace of the 'shimmer' I was experiencing. According to Rose, shimmer "is a process of encounter and transformation, not absorption, in which different ways of being and doing find interesting things to do together" (51). Through walking and sensing I propose that I am slowly transforming. As Kimmerer asks "What else can you offer the earth, which has everything? What else can you give but something of yourself? A homemade ceremony, a ceremony that makes a home" (38). I often grapple with this question, feeling there is little I can do. Maybe the most I can do is notice.

2.4 Walking to Heal

The ritual of walking began as soon as I moved to Kelowna in September 2019. I was immediately taken by the landscape and began daily walks and hikes to become familiar with my new surroundings. As I walked, I noticed that the landscape was not what I had imagined. Coming from Toronto, Ontario, parts of Kelowna felt like I imagined Mars to be, with its desert colours and sandy rock faces which are home to many unknown inhabitants. It was not until October 2019, when UBCO professor Nancy Holmes gifted us an eco-retreat at Woodhaven in the Lower Mission, that I began to feel slightly less timid with my surroundings. Woodhaven is tucked into a forested space and is home to small riverbed behind the house. I felt so comfortable there because it reminded me of my Grandparent's chalet, covered with trees and home to many deer. I began to relax. Looking back, I am grateful Nancy gifted us time and space to reflect on our burgeoning MFA journey. Within the first hour I walked out to the riverbed and around the property, I became excited and wanted to create. The experience reminded me of a passage in Anne Truitt's daybook where she proclaims artistic impulse relies on the ability "to catapult [oneself] wholly, without holding back one bit, into a course of action without having any idea where [one] will end up" (16). With that notion, I gradually let go of any reservations I had surrounding looking or being ridiculous and made my way down to the creek. There I walked over large rocks seated at the edge of the water, in which I dipped my whole head upside down and watched my hair flow with the current and documented some of my greetings to the land (Figure 2.3.1). I enjoy creating in this space. I like how my ideas move and transition just like the water of the river. By walking and interacting with the land I was also deepening my understanding of myself and how I too am in a constant state of flux.



Figure 2.4.1. *Untitled (Woodhaven)*, Silver gelatin print, October 2019

I continued to walk daily, following intuitive impulses telling me when to listen and when to create. At this point I was still fixated on the idea of the studio and taking my walking meditations inside to record them with paint. Within eco-feminist philosophy there is often a “radical abandoning of the traditional art space” and “[as artists] we're focused on care, not on marking or changing the environment” (Fabijanska). In March 2020 the pandemic began. I abandoned my studio practice and began to create art during my walks outdoors. This new process became more and more ingrained in the way I could make things using my intuition. By June 2020 I noticed how the ritual of walking allowed me to really observe, to truly see and notice. I was beginning to slow down physiologically. Now when I walk on to the land my body experiences a visceral shift almost immediately as if the non-human world washes away the debris and old ideas created by my urban life. Time slows down. Worries begin to fade away. I can note the gentle rustling of the trees and the stirring of the tall blades of grass, the Brown-

eyed Susan's waving their long stems up at the sky. I stare towards the ground and see innumerable details of life, burgeoning and sprouting from the earthen floor. The sounds of birds and dragonflies capture my focus. I cannot help but feel a part of this symphony and its ever-changing melody.

During the summer of 2020 I conducted practices of observation in Stephen Coyote Ridge in Glenmore, Kelowna, a small but extraordinary biologically diverse landscape that is surrounded by residential development. Moving my art practice outside made me think about how I could experience reciprocity with the land. Creating art in reciprocity with the land challenges the plein-air paintings I had seen during a trip with my tenth-grade French class to the Louvre. In Paris, "the French term *plein air* means out of doors and refers to the practice of painting entire finished pictures [outside]" ("*Plein-air*"). The Impressionists would sit outdoors to capture fleeting light and the flux of the outside world. The artists that worked '*en plein air*' wished to capture the essence of the landscape. In my opinion, plein air paintings would require the artist to experience some reciprocity with the land, however the artists often chose to depict the land as an isolated subject ignoring humanities connection to or impact on nature. To me these paintings are largely dedicated to a voyeurism of the land. By voyeurism, I mean the painters would choose the frame from which to work from. Artists would even bring a view finder to search for the best composition, in which was often based on the most pleasurable or beautiful view. This connects to the "a particular motif that emphasized the seductive qualities of sun and fruit, as well as orderly, green rows of fruit trees, and panoramic views of the lake or mountains or both" that are present in the advertisements for the Okanagan (refer to Figure 1.2) (Wagner 28). By framing the land in this sense, the artist then produces an image that allows for

the idyllic scenery to be separate from human and more than human life. This contrasts from the “Syilx aesthetic rooted in a diverse appreciation of landscape features”. For example, “when water is mentioned, it is mentioned in the context of its value as fish habitat or as a source of life for other species, or for its cleanliness in relation to its use for drinking, bathing or spiritual purposes” (Wagner 29).

These artists were framing the landscapes and often focused solely on a brief, fleeting moment. I wished to take a more embodied approach. I wondered what it would be like to note both the internal changes I felt in addition to the external ones I was experiencing. Would that help in my understanding of the interconnection of my body and the land? During my first visit to Coyote Ridge, I chose to sit by the pond inlet and meditate there for a while. When I took five or ten minutes to slow down in a specific site, I became more receptive. I painted noting all the senses I had experienced. I recorded the changing responses that I observed in my body (Figure 2.4.2 and Figure 2.4.3). “As a westward breeze passes by I find my body bent slightly west like the blades of grass.” I recorded these words in the moment using a small round brush and gouache paint I could carry with me. As a magpie called from a distant tree my body became more alert, and I made a mark on the paper. As I dipped my toes in the glassy surface of the pond’s edge and felt the mud under my feet my body calmed, I made another mark. I documented the sensations that arose as I tuned into ‘shimmer’ or the life force of the pond. Working this way entices me to notice and to create a practice/ ritual of re-attuning myself to the land. Although, I was beginning to feel limited by the frame of a painting. I asked myself what is my next step forward? How do I leave the frame behind?



Figure 2.4.2 *Untitled (Coyote Ridge Observational Study)*, gouache on paper, June 2020

2.5 Touch/ Impression

As a child I would cannonball into Eagle Lake, Ontario on Anishinabek territory. I would be sure to do this after it got dark out because the dark would calm my eyes and give energy to my other senses. Running and breathing, my body would note my surroundings, the wading sound of boats returning home, a warm moist breeze against my skin, the smell of the lake and the leaves. I would feel my body levitate for a short moment and crash! the glassy surface of the water would erupt. I was swallowed whole into what felt like a sort of water-womb. I would feel like an amoeba or a fish. Underwater I would feel more than human, the permeable membrane that makes up the perimeter of my body felt like it completely dissolved within the water. This specific memory of being encompassed by the water is powerful. In the few seconds that the

waters of Eagle Lake covered my whole body, I felt part of something bigger than myself. This memory always impresses upon me that I am part of something more. I think it was because I was fully immersed in the waters of Eagle Lake that in my mind there was no separation between us. I was the lake, and the lake was me. There are moments where our bodies leave one reality and shatter some sort of invisible barrier to enter another. This moment was one of them. I believe I was able to feel this way because my whole body was immersed in water. I think back to this moment often. It makes me curious if there is a way, I could express the feeling of interconnectivity behind this experience in my art practice?

The verb ‘to impress’ has dual meaning, one “is to affect deeply or strongly in the mind or feelings”, the other meaning is “a mark made by or as by pressure; stamp; imprint” (“Impress”). I will speak to the first definition now and the second later in the chapter. As an artist, I am perpetually in search of this feeling. I walk onto the land to be impressed, to remember “the web of relations I am a part of” (Dwayne Donald), to remember myself. In *Braiding Sweetgrass* Kimmerer suggests that the English language fails to explain the phenomenon of being ‘impressed’ by the non-human, pleading “something is missing, the same something that swells around you and in you when you listen to the world” (119). The connection felt between body and land struggles to be interpreted in the English language. I propose that this feeling of connection relates to Rose’s idea of ‘shimmer’ and the Syilx word *temxulexw*. Rose correlates events like these to “reciprocal capture” in Western thought, stating that “for philosopher Isabelle Stengers, ‘reciprocal capture’ is “an event, the production of new, imminent modes of existence” in which neither entity transcends the other or, forces the other to bow down” (594). I believe that experiences of ‘shimmer’ are felt; they ‘touch’ you.

From the moment I chose to move my practice outside I found I was more open to moments such as these. Working directly on and with the land opened my body to ‘touch’ and being ‘touched’ by the land which would allow me to directly react to the sensations I was feeling. I often create works barefoot relating to the mindfulness theory of ‘grounding’, a process which our bodies “electrically reconnect to the earth when our skin is in direct contact with it” (“Grounding”). I believe that it is the immersive quality of touch and the process of ‘re-grounding’ to the land that takes me back to that place of bodily understanding. Prior to June 2020, I attempted to make paintings shifting between the physical studio space and the grounds just outside of it, although I found the frame of the painting limiting. How was I supposed to speak to the expansive feeling within a 4’ x 4’ canvas?

In the winter of 2020, I began to experiment with this ‘inside/outside’ model. I wanted these paintings to document my direct experiences on the land as they were happening. Snow negative (Figure 2.5.1) is a painting that articulates the experience of sensation while laying directly on the snow. The experience of creating this painting is documented in my studio journal:

There is a halo of sensation and in my minds’ eye it is made up of electric colours: neon orange, pink and red surrounding my body, the ground is cold, and I feel myself slowly descending into the snow, the heat of my body gradually melting my impression into it. Sparkling ice pellets send minuscule jolts through the perimeters of my arms. The cold spikes in thousands of tiny tingles that move through my whole body. I slowly work my way off the ground and examine the gentle impression my body has left on the snow. My

body stings. I feel alive and wish I could pick up the impression in the snow like an invisible veil and take these sensations with me in my backpack.



Figure 2.5.1, *Snow Impression*, acrylic, snow and spray paint on stretched canvas, 36" x 36", December 2020

I collect myself and rush off to the warmth of my studio. I sit in a blue chair and think about the space between my body and the snow that I just lay upon. I find myself preoccupied with questions: where does my body's borders end and nature begin? Does my body have finite borders or am I more permeable than I think? This experience lying in the snow had blurred my ideas around the boundaries of my body. It seems that I am more permeable than I once thought. As I laid in my impression a third time, it occurred to me that my body was lightly impacting the environment and I was the cause of the melting snow. I went back inside and painted another layer. I laid down a final time. I felt connected to this embodied process and decided to add melting snow to the paint around

the frame of the silhouette. I took a step back from the work to observe the results. I can see myself in the painting, but I sense the land does not have a strong presence on canvas and separates my body from its experience from the land. This process did not feel aligned with my experiences of shimmer or match the reality behind the word *temxulexw*.

Although *Snow Impression* serves as a place to document my thoughts, the results are not as immediate as I hoped for. I found myself wishing to expand beyond the frame and limitations of painting to embody the aspects of the surrounding environment in my paintings. I thought of the “eco feminist art that [emerged] in the late 60s when the development of conceptual art, spiritual feminism and the exclusion of women from the art market pushed their inventiveness far beyond the limitations of painting” (Fabijanska). I chose to follow in the footsteps of eco-feminist artists “radical opposition of painting and the use of natural materials as in the works” (Fabijanska).

The alternate definition of the verb ‘to impress’ is “a mark made by or as by pressure; stamp; imprint” (“Impress”). I think of how earth artist Ana Mendieta would outline her body on the land in varying ways that would be specific to the site she worked on, out of flowers, fire, or the clay from the earth itself. In her work she would “[posit] alternatives to patriarchal culture in the name of the feminist, that includes a kind of ecological sensibility that emphasizes reciprocity between body and land, and a resistance to colonialist conceptions of land” (Howard 57). Comparatively, I think of how land-artist Marlene Creates would walk for miles and sleep in/on places in the landscape and photograph her impressions in her work *Sleeping Places*

(Creates). The notion of the reciprocal cycle of being ‘impressed’ by the land and ‘impressing’ gave me new inspiration to finish pieces completely on the land.

As the weather grew warmer, I would bring a backpack with me that held a 60” x 6’ piece of raw canvas and spray paint. As I walked and observed I would pick up fallen branches and other flora debris from the ground. I would intuitively pick a spot to begin the painting. I would lay down like Creates in *Sleeping places* and Mendieta in her *Silhueta* series and place the flora around my body, often with the help of a friend. I would then get up and spray paint the entire canvas revealing where my body and other beings had been together.

Grounding (Figure 2.5.2) represents an intermediary between my body and nature, the place of contact, the portal through which I was beginning to unlearn the separation of body and land by using ‘touch’. Like the permeable boundary of body, the canvas is a place of ‘encounter and transformation’. The method for creating this work allows me to speak to the specifics of place by gathering the flora directly from the land. I lay down in an effort to ground myself in these places and participate in the dialogue of the land. *Grounding* appears hazy or ghostly. The small intricacies of the flora in *Grounding*, speaks to the mountain landscape and the specific flora you would find on your scale up the mountain. The silhouette of my body is hazy and appears as a portal to walk through. There is something somewhat mournful about the gaping void in the center that I hope serves as a warning for our lost selves to find and fill these voids soon. Both these canvases showcase the beauty of natural forms yet leave a void that calls out to be remembered and emphasized.



Figure 2.5.2, *Grounding*, 60" x 6', spray paint on raw canvas, 2021

2.6 Thinking through Clay

Clay represents the earth in my artwork. Clay “forms as a result of the weathering and erosion of rocks containing the mineral group feldspar (known as the ‘mother of clay’) over vast spans of time” (sciencelearn.org). I began to work with clay in spring 2020, again thinking about the eco-feminist and Indigenous artist’s “radical opposition of painting and the use of natural materials in the works” (Fabijanska). I still spent a lot of time walking and observing outdoors, however instead of bringing canvas as my intermediary to reconnect to the land, I would bring clay. Clay is such a rich material with vast historical lineages. Upon my arrival in September 2019, I attended the show *Ionic Bonds* curated by Charo Neville at the Kamloops art gallery. *Ionic Bonds* was based on “the act of forming objects out of clay and permanently fixing them with fire [as] one of the most ancient culture practices. Going back thousands of years, ceramics have been integral to the process of human development”

(Kamloops Art Gallery). James Trainor from BOMB magazine wrote about artist Brie Ruais and explained clay's lineage to our bodies stating, "it is the stuff beneath our feet, tugged from river bottoms and bogs, eroding moraines and stream banks, the primordial substance from which everything emerges and become reassimilated" (Trainor). Since leaving my brushes behind I use my hands as the primary tool to create. This shift in my artwork reveals clay's relationship to my body and its movements like the soft impression in *Creates Sleeping Places*, Mendieta's *Silhueta's* and Belmore's performance endurance body work in *Clay on Stone* (Figure 1.3.4). As a material, clay allows my work to become a process of tactile unlearning. I use clay to work directly on the ground with my hands and body. Through touch I can be in relation to the land rather than creating distance from it rather than using a framing device that central to the tradition of western landscape painting. An embodied commitment to unlearn through touch the separation between land and body within the settler colonial context that has been embedded within me from an early age. The hand is exaggerated in my work leaving pinches, mini recesses and fingerprints. Through gesture the clay moves from a lump of earth to the place where the land and my body get to know one another and expression of reciprocity between my body and the land (Figure 2.6). With my hand emphasized, connections are made to process, and the resulting final form reveals its own creation.



Figure 2.6, Process shot of X, November 2020

2.7 Materials Matter

Clay and textiles have rarely been thought of as ‘fine-art’ materials. However, artists do use these materials to challenge the traditional ideas around fine art and craft and “often in direct response to the politics of their time” (“Making Knowing: Craft in Art). In February 2020 I attended *Making Knowing: Craft in Art, 1950-2019* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City. All the works in the exhibition were made from clay, beads, textiles, and other material associated with craft. In the exhibition the “artists reclaim [these] visual languages that have been coded as feminine, domestic or vernacular” and they “challenge the power structures that determine artistic value” (“Making Knowing: Craft in Art) I chose to use clay and 100% silk satin for my final art works because of their ability challenge the frame of landscape painting. I found that although I was not using paint and canvas, the materials I chose have complex histories too. I chose to use porcelain and opalescent paint in my *Wallflower series*. I recognize that porcelain is known as a luxurious material with a colonial history. It was “introduced to

Europe in the fourteenth century, Chinese porcelains were regarded as objects of great rarity and luxury” (MET). I wished to challenge the traditional use of the material by creating works that would move the material towards its original form (being of the earth) instead of making precious objects. The malleability of porcelain records gestures in the moment of relation to site and talks to my role in the creation, bearing vulnerability to the presence of the land and my own body. The finished piece is fired, and the outcome is an unrefined form. I have added opalescent acrylic paint to a few of my clay pieces to allude to my understanding of the concept of ‘shimmer’ when creating these works. I use a mixture of porcelain, Navajo red clay, hand-dug clay from Vernon and a grey stoneware in my work *X*. The clays I used with the omission of the hand-dug clay has been refined to meet certain aesthetics standards and by mixing them together I am purposefully defying this refinement. I was more interested in combining the various clay bodies and moving them all together toward the earth, as if the clay was finding its way home.

I photographed the outcomes of both my art works *X*, 2020 and *V* (*open V*), 2020 and printed them on 100% silk satin fabric. Like porcelain, silk has a colonial history and is widely regarded as luxurious. I wanted to create a challenging aesthetic and enjoyed the dynamic of the raw clay images on such a fine material. I wished to reference the experience of ‘shimmer’ in the creation of these works. Printing on silk satin textile added lightness to the image. The air circulation makes the loose material flutter evoking an aesthetic ‘shimmer’ that could possibly catch the viewers eye as they moved through the exhibition and called them to walk closer. I thought of how Belmore has been asked to share her thoughts on creating works that are aesthetically appealing, she states “with art you can make beauty, and at the same time you can address the ugly” (Belmore).

By using materials that are natural although refined and regarded as beautiful and luxurious in unrefined and raw ways I can challenge the materials typical uses and narratives. I think of outcomes of aesthetic refinement in terms of how Wagner views the settler colonial landscape aesthetic in the Okanagan arguing that “the widespread introduction of irrigation technologies thus led to an entirely new orientation of people to the landscape... [displacing] grasslands, shrub-steppe, wetlands and riparian habitat with the orchards, vegetable gardens, highways and towns” (28). I defy this imposed neat, orderly aesthetic and create with intuition and openness to the lands voice and movement. The clay and I unravel together, creating a new narrative with the land.

Chapter 3: Reflections on Making

3.1 Wallflowers

Wallflowers is a series of small ceramic pieces that were created during my walks. I created *Wallflowers* on the shoreline of Okanagan Lake, Kelowna, in the ponderosa pine forest near Lake Country and on rock formations in Rose Valley, Stephen Coyote Ridge, and near Knox Mountain. Each piece is created by pressing shapes of soft clay against, around or through natural features in the landscape to make a series of impressions. Finger marks and gestures from shaping and pressing the clay are left on the surface from my hands. Once a piece is finished it goes through a process of two firings in an electric kiln to solidify the form and the impressions. I learned about the specific elements of the land while creating each piece. For example, on the full moon of October 2020, three friends and I pushed hunks of clay together on the sand beach near Knox Mountain (Figure 3.1.1) After the *Moon* was fired, I noticed that the sand turned pink, which I later learnt meant there was potassium in the sand. The sunset pink colour of the fired sand relates to the colours of the Okanagan and pushes the ‘aesthetics’ of place I proposed earlier in John Wagner’s article. I use porcelain in my work for the materials’ plasticity and ability to hold and alchemize matter that transfers on the gestures during their making. The porcelain starts out in a semi-solid form, moves into various shapes with touch, uses air to harden and fire to solidify.



Figure 3.1.1 Process of *Wallflowers (Moon)*, October 2020

I created a ceramic wall installation entitled *Wallflowers* to be featured in the window gallery of The Alternator Centre for the Contemporary Arts from January 15-23, 2021 in downtown Kelowna. At the center of the installation, I placed two open-palmed porcelain sculptures of hands invoking the ‘Great Mother archetype’. The open-palmed motif dating back to the Stone Age was often used as posture to denote sudden knowledge of connection to the land (Neumann 116). The open hands (Figure 4.1.2) are central to the overall installation as they relate directly to my hands. The fingerprints and hand gestures thread through all sculptures connecting them to each other. Through the making of the *Wallflowers* series, I was able to become more attuned with the life and land around me.



Figure 3.1.2. *Open Palms*, (porcelain and opalescent acrylic paint, Alternator Gallery, Kelowna, January 2021

As I was placing each individual piece on the wall I was reminded of the individual stories and process behind each work. Each piece represents a memory of walking the Okanagan landscape and meditating on a particular phenomenon. For example, Figure 3.1.3 is the completed sculpture and relates to Figure 3.1.4 as an iterative process. For the piece in Figure 3.1.4 I walked out to the forested area that lies behind UBCO. I have hiked there before and have always been drawn to the tall spindly trunks of the Ponderosa pine trees. I grabbed a piece of porcelain clay from my backpack and pressed it against the tree with my hands. Figure 3.1.3 displays the middle of the process as the clay begins to cling to the bark of the tree from my pressing and a form begins to take shape. I chose to work intuitively allowing natural forms and lines to emerge in the clay. I began to feel really intimate with the tree as my hands responded to

the texture of the bark and made impressions in the clay. I peeled the clay off the tree and observed the impression. I gently wrapped the piece, still soft to touch, and carried it to my studio where it dried and then went through two firings to cement the form and its impressions.



Figure 3.1.3 Process of *Wallflowers*



Figure 3.1.4, *Wallflowers series (Ponderosa Pine)*, porcelain and acrylic paint, 2021

Each piece in my *Wallflowers* series iterates this ritualistic process of walking, observing, touch and impression. Each piece is almost void of colour, the polar-ice porcelain is a material known for its transparent-like quality. The wallflower series are relics of a time past; they fade in and out of the white wall to articulate the theory of ‘plant-blindness’ coined by two biologists Wandersee & Schussler. Plant blindness is defined as “the inability to recognize the importance of plants in the biosphere and in human affairs...[and] the misguided anthropocentric ranking of plants as inferior to animals and this, as unworthy of consideration” (Wandersee and Schussler 82). Though I recognize the word ‘blindness’ is ableist, I feel that the importance of plants is felt as much as it is seen and there is not necessarily a hierarchy of senses but are often experienced together holistically. I spaced the pieces out in a way that requires viewers to walk by and slow down to see or touch the forms that both emerge and recede off the wall to comment on the life-force, or the land’s life that is often overlooked. In this way the display and the gestures made by the tree, rock, sand, flora and my hands echo each other. I have chosen to create these works without much colour in hope that the viewer is required to take the extra time to notice the impressions.

While creating *Wallflowers* I would note a feeling of connection to my body and the land, it was subtle at first and then stronger each time I re-entered the land. I felt electrically charged and physiologically expansive, as if my body were melting over the landscape like butter. I relate this feeling to experiencing shimmer, Rose says that “shimmer...helps call us into the multi-species worlds” (53). Through noticing the pulses and gifts of the land, Rose assures us we see and are a part of that ancestral power “that the world is composed of multifaceted multispecies relations and pulses” (55). I responded to this sensation by painting the edges and small recesses

of the sculptures with opalescent acrylic paint. I felt that the addition of the opalescent paint speaks to the residual material that stems from my painting practice. I also enjoyed how opalescent paint literally shimmers and allows each piece to glimmer slightly (Figure 3.1.5, 3.1.6) I added a small amount of iridescent paint to each piece so that the small details shimmer in the light.



Figure 3.1.5. *Wallflowers* (Installation shot), Alternator Gallery, Kelowna, January 2021



Figure 3.1.6. *Wallflowers* (Installation shot), Alternator Gallery, Kelowna, January 2021

The quality of the light and shadow behind and around each low-relief work adds contrast that allows the viewers to notice the work. Installing the sculptures in a semi-circle was an attempt to further echo a shimmering gesture (Figure 3.1.7.). I felt this shape speaks to ideas of expansion and transformation and connects each piece to the other into a pattern that correlates to patterns found in nature. However, the almost uniform spacing between each sculpture does not allow for a break in viewing or seeing the pieces as individuals connected to the whole. With more spacing the viewers will be able to pause within the installation and notice the specific land features, trees, rocks, flora that the pieces were made in relation to.



Figure 3.1.7 *Wallflowers*, Installation image, Alternator Gallery, Kelowna, January 2021

3.2 X

Just as the valley begins to quiet and bring forth the last set of sunny warm days in November, I set out to make a clay piece on the land near to Kalamalka Lake. I have walked there many times before and was struck by the land's expansiveness and biodiversity, home to both meadow-like grasslands and desert shrubbery. Walking this land was one of the most powerful times I experienced shimmer. I felt held and carefully suspended in the grace of all the living beings together. As I walked this time, my friend and fellow colleague Sam Neal helped me carry 120 pounds of clay out unto the land and took photographs as I made a large clay *X* (Figure 3.2.1, 2, 3). The duration of the performance, which I view as a performative expansion of my painting practice (painting the land with clay and using my body as the brush), lasted about 45 minutes. I placed four large lumps of clay on the ground, took off my shoes and began spreading the clay with my arms and legs outwards creating four tangents (like our arms and legs) to reach out and expand on the land. While creating this piece I became mesmerized by the

feel of clay, squishy and malleable between my fingers. The labour of creating this work was tiring as I pushed and spread the clay as if trying to anchor my body in the ground. The pushing and morphing of the clay relate to my experience of ‘shimmer’ as I attempted to replicate the pulse of the land through my movements. The land and I danced together and co-created this temporal sculpture. I stopped only when all four tangents were large enough to lay my body inside. In this way the clay was an intermediary between my body and the land. I was getting closer and closer to the land each time I pushed. After *X* was completed, I began to think of maps and how in the beginnings of colonialization a ‘X’ would be placed over the land that was coveted, completely ignorant of the lifeforms and people that already lived there. I wanted to create an expanded painting that subverted that gesture and create a piece that would only take up the space of my body and nothing else. My intention was for the clay to be able to disappear over time if it were to be left outside. I chose to take it back to my studio, leaving no trace behind.



Figure 3.2.1 *X*, porcelain, Navajo red clay, hand dug clay from Vernon, grey stoneware,

Kalamalka Lake, November 2021



Figure 3.2.2, Process of X, contingent to Kalamalka Lake



Figure 3.2.3, Process of X, Kalamalka Lake, November 2021

3.3 \ /

I work with clay to ground myself. I work in forests, near lakebeds, pond inlets and on mountain sides. The purpose of grounding is to electrically reconnect to the earth. I use my body as the force of expression as I touch the clay and then the clay touches the earth. My work I/was created in December on the side of a rock face that is located where I temporarily reside near Knox Mountain (Figure 3.3.1) I walk by this rock face nightly and enjoy noticing its textures and the subtle way it responds to the changes in the atmosphere. One night at a particular moment I noticed how the willow tree on the other side of the road cast dancing shadows onto the rocks surface like a fleeting theatre performance. As I approached this large rock wall, I cast my hand's shadow onto the surface. As my hands met the bumpy and rough rock, I imagined the various forms this rock has taken due to its location near the Okanagan Lake. I felt the rock was beckoning me to make work with it.



Figure 3.3.1, \ / (open V), porcelain on rock, December 2021

Once I placed the clay on the ground, I softened it with my hands and feet until it was workable and responsive. \ / is built up of a series of gestures my body created as I pushed the clay upwards and outwards. \ / was completed by pressing clay onto the rockface, and forms manifested as I pressed the clay in rhythmic pushes upwards with the heels of my hands (Figure 3.3.2). I attribute this up and outward gesture to Ana Mendieta's *Silhueta* series where she

repetitively traces her body in the arm's upright pose that speaks to the 'Great Mother archetype' and her body opening to the elements of the land she works on. The clay's tactility recorded my movements and expressions, as well as my continued journey of opening to the elements and responding to the land. The result is a form made in relation to my body that symbolically opens up to my environment- Syilx territory.



Figure 3.3.2. \ / (*open V*) process, Knox Mountain, December 2021

Chapter 4: Relics of Experience

This paper and my art practice are the documentation of my expanded relations to the land. Settler scholars John Wagner and Alyssa Schwann address the concerns with settler colonial relations to the land in the Okanagan Valley. Schwann pleads that if we do not change, we risk losing biodiversity and will be left with “landscapes that no longer yield or sustain diverse life” (172). Wagner suggests that if we wish to achieve a culture of sustainability, we must develop a new landscape aesthetic that is rooted in ecological realities (34). Decolonial practice and Indigenous theory are critical for healing settler colonial relations with land, however it is up to us settlers to heal land to human relations. My specific research here draws on my studio art practice within the confines of a two-year MFA degree however, as an artist unlearning settler-colonial ways continues. I have created a new ritual for myself in making art, beginning with walking and following by noticing the sensorial changes in my body highlighted by touch and movement. Currently the works are an expansion of my previous painting practice into the realm of performance. I ‘paint’ with my hands and my body and the land is the canvas that holds everything. The land and I move together to mark down these rhythms. Once the work is completed, I peel the clay gestures off the land and take it back into my studio. There I can think more about the work and what its ultimate outcome will be. I fire most of my works in a kiln so that they become an archive of the experience in their gestures. I think of the product as artefacts and a nod to the work that I have done beyond the studio doors.

According to Anishinaabe artist Rebecca Belmore, as humans “we are a part of nature, we are elemental, we destroy, and we create” (Enright). By moving with the land and expressing its pulses of life force energy moving through and out of me I feel a part of and not separate from

the land. My work with clay allows me to present a tactile unlearning of settler colonial land values in the Okanagan region. Viewing the land as commodification and resources creates a hierarchy between humans and nature, stripping away the reciprocity and mutual care that can be experienced. Through the continued regular practice of walking and working outside I have built connections and notice the life force of the non-human. I have found that labour is necessary for redressing my relationship to the land and grounding myself here. This laborious and committed work is how I express my care for the land and the non-human life held within. The ritual I have built to redress my relationship to the land and create art is one that has been healing for the ways in which I think and view the Okanagan Valley. I have organized this paper following the journey of expanding my painting practice beyond its traditional frame and onto the land. As I walk from place to place and grow in understanding along the way. Before I lived in Kelowna, a place I have grown to understand as unceded Syilx territory, I felt the dichotomy of settler land values versus the Syilx way of life that respects and cares for the land reflected in the word *temxulexw*. Micheal Hogue calls artists to create with nature declaring that “[advanced] aesthetically attunement to nature is one of the most important moral imperatives of our time” (144).

Attunement “is a kinesthetic and emotional sensing of others knowing their rhythm, affect and experience by metaphorically being in their skin, and going beyond empathy to create a two-person experience of unbroken feeling connectedness by providing a reciprocal affect and/or resonating response” (Erksine 1998). My art practice is an exercise in connecting to this embodied practice and in turn the Okanagan. Now, each time I step onto the earth, I feel called to participate in the dance of the land. I do not take for granted the way stepping onto the ground

directly sends ‘shimmer’ up my spine. My new pace has become integral to the way I practice art, my understanding of the Syilx word *temxulexw* and my role as an artist. Working this way opens a dialogue between my body and the land. My MFA show *Grounding, In Touch* will be held at that Lake Country Gallery, where I intend to extend the dialogue to the greater audience of Okanagan residents.

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