INTO THE EARTH: AN ARTIST’S CAVE EXPLORATION

A Master’s Exhibition of Drawings
Presented
to the Faculty of California State University, Chico

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Fine Arts in Art

by
Linda L. Neely
Spring 2015
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CAVE EXPLORATION

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THE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY

SPRING 2015

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ABSTRACT

INTO THE EARTH: AN ARTIST’S
CAVE EXPLORATION

by

Linda L. Neely

Master of Fine Arts in Art

California State University, Chico

Spring 2015


Into the Earth: An Artist’s Cave Exploration is an exhibition of twelve charcoal drawings depicting cave related imagery. The project began with fantastical work originating from automatic drawings. Although not intended to be authentic representations of caves and the creatures inside, the artist was curious about the accuracy of the work compared to reality, not only in the details of the imagery but the moods of the environments. This challenge became the foundation of the project. After research and caving experience, the work expanded to include drawings referencing actual cave environments and life forms. The factual work merged with the imaginary resulting in this cohesive body of work that embraces both, sometimes in the same drawing.
This project was an exploration to find the relationship between fantastical cave-related imagery and the reality of caves. The artist’s vision of caves and the imagery created in the initial pieces in this exhibition portrayed the environments as being an escape into a world that was safe and comfortable, mysterious and intriguing. The works began from automatic drawings, allowing the element of chance to be a basis for imagery. The plausibility of the life-forms and the accuracy of the geological formations became the basis for research and exploration.

This project began with the examination of a body of work created by automatic drawing and resulting in cave related imagery. The resulting questions were addressed through the research and exploration of caves leading to more drawings referencing the newly acquired information and utilizing a different method of beginning the new work. The methods were compared and in some pieces, blended together, again alluding to a metaphor of modes of exploration, the real and imaginary and implying the influence of both science and chance.

The content of this series of drawings is cave related environments, their geological formations and the small and microscopic life within them, magnified. The creatures include some elements of those recently discovered and identified by scientists, and some that are imaginary, symbolizing the vast amount of undiscovered possibility.
The format of this project is charcoal drawings using a subtractive method on varying sizes of Arches paper, square and rectangular shaped. They are mounted on the wall using a system of metal braces and magnets.

Through the evolution of this project some new techniques were developed such as using sharp objects to remove charcoal from the paper in addition to the myriad erasing techniques and leaving some paper uncovered in the initial layer of charcoal. The referencing and interpretation of photographs taken during cave explorations became an important part of the work as did the incorporation of characteristics of actual cave dwelling creatures discovered through research. An awareness of the significance of light and its absence within the cave environments became a new consideration in the work and the limitations upon the imagery was expanded.

A necessary limitation in this work was the exclusion of subterranean environments other than terrestrial ones. Including underwater caves and ice caves would have broadened the scope of this project beyond the current time and travel capabilities.

Project Research

The research for this project began with understanding how caves are formed. The majority of terrestrial caves were formed as underground water dissolved ancient sea beds. The water mixed with acids along the way, dissolving limestone in a path of least resistance creating vertical shafts, tube-shaped passageways and caves of all sizes often connected in vast complex systems. The striking formations that grew inside these passageways, stalactites, stalagmites, cave bacon, soda straws were all formed slowly in the thousands of years following the creation
of the cave systems themselves. ¹ This was critical information not only in creating new drawings intending to convey authentic imagery but also to verify that the initial pieces begun from automatic drawings were quite possible as well. Another type of caves are known as “lava tubes.” These were formed after volcanic eruptions. The outside walls of a flow solidify as they cool while the molten lava inside continues to flow, hollowing out tubes and caves, also pertinent to this body of work as several pieces were created referencing these formations.

Another critical area of research was the life-forms present in caves. A search of academic articles turned up several addressing new discoveries on this topic. The current study of small and microscopic cave-dwelling animals became significant to this project, verifying many of the characteristics already developed in the automatic drawing pieces. ² It is also significant that while scientists are discovering new life daily, less than fifty percent of caves have been discovered (mapped) and only a miniscule amount of the life within has been identified. Of those life forms, an abundance of them have never been seen before. ³ The bizarre descriptions along with the mystery of the unknown give permission for creativity in this area.

Methodology

The drawings in Into the Earth were created with a subtractive method using charcoal on paper. The decision to use only black was the result of experimentation with colored pastels and paper, using various methods of layering and subtraction. Ultimately, the artist agreed with

Immanuel Kant that “. . . the delineation is the essential thing. . . the colors which light up the sketch belong to the charm; they may indeed enliven the object for sensation, but they cannot make it worthy of contemplation and beautiful.” ⁴ The addition of color in some pieces while creating this project diminished their intensity whereas the utter blackness created a condition well suited for discovering imagery, bringing it forth from the darkness. It is also noteworthy that charcoal is a primitive, elemental medium, composed of carbon and animal and plant remains. This allusion suits the primal content of cave imagery. The final decision was to focus on the powerful capabilities of black work.

Two different approaches were used in these charcoal pieces. Automatic drawing was the basis of the fantastical pieces and planned sketching began the works referencing actual caves or creatures.

The choice of paper size was intentionally random in the automatic drawings, a carelessness attempted in the decision of where to tear the next piece as well as utilizing odd shaped scraps. In the planned pieces, the size of paper was chosen in accordance to how the piece was intended to appear to the viewer, i.e. a small creature drawn in the corner of a smaller piece of paper inviting the viewer to come closer (Figure 7) or a ceiling in a large expanse of a tunnel drawn on a large piece to create a feeling of being surrounded by the environment (Figure 9).

In both modes of drawing, the next step was to cover the paper with charcoal. This was accomplished in two steps. First a layer of powdered charcoal was rubbed into the paper. This created a light base. Next was the time-consuming process of rubbing the compressed charcoal

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into the paper until a dark and even surface was achieved. On two of the drawings part of the paper was left uncovered which appeared as a light source in the finished pieces (Figures 4 and 6).

With a charcoal base to work with, the line work was begun next. This was done with a hard eraser using random linear gestures in the pieces beginning with automatic drawing and sketching in the planned pieces. When this phase was complete a softer eraser or a paint brush was used to bring form and texture into the pieces. The drawing process then consisted of alternating between types of erasers as imagery became clearer to develop details, occasionally using a charcoal pencil in detail work or compressed charcoal to “erase.” In four of the drawings a pushpin was used to scrape deeply through the charcoal into the paper for the brightest white details (Figures 1, 2, 6 and 7). Each drawing was finished with three or more coats of fixative.

The materials used in this body of work were Arches paper, three kinds of charcoal, brushes, erasers and fixative. The charcoal used was powdered and compressed charcoal and charcoal pencils. Three different brushes were used to lightly clear areas of charcoal, a large and a small paint brush and soft wide makeup brush. The artist regularly used about ten different erasers. They included a couple different hard erasers, several types of pencil shaped engineering erasers, kneaded erasers and an electric eraser. A non-toxic, casein based fixative was used on all the drawings.

The presentation of this project was designed to create as little distraction from the work as possible. This was accomplished with the development and fabrication of system of metal brackets and magnets. Each metal bracket, cut from flat stock and bent twice to form a “U”
shape with a short leg on one side of the “U,” was screwed to the wall at the corner of each
drawing. Each bracket provides a metal surface for a magnet which anchors the paper to the
bracket. This system allows each drawing to be displayed floating about an inch and a half from
the wall. The hardware behind each piece has been painted off-white to blend into the gallery
wall while the magnets are black and blend into the charcoal of the drawings.

The process of making these drawings is important. The searching, uncovering and
investigation involved in the subtractive mode of these works is synonymous with exploring and
studying caves, which in turn was crucial in the making of the work. The system that was
developed to exhibit these pieces allows this process to be seen by the viewer.

Historical Overview

The charcoal work in this series can be compared to three art styles when considering
process, imagery and intentions. Elements of surrealism, magical realism, and romanticism are
present in this artwork.

The beginning process of the early drawings in this series is surrealist in the original
definition of the movement. In André Breton’s Manifestoes of Surrealism he defines surrealist
work as “dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from
any aesthetic or moral concern.” ⁵ The surrealist André Masson’s drawings were continuous
linear works similar to what many would equate with that of a young child, with no intention
toward representation. This is how these pieces began, with little consideration other than
keeping the line on (or near) the paper.

⁵ Andre Breton, Manifestoes of Surrealism (USA, The University of Michigan, 1969), 26.
This emphasis on process continues with an exploration of the automatic drawing with various erasers. This stage is reminiscent of Remedios Varo’s *Personages*, pieces begun with layers of decalcomania and a technique of paint blowing, creating abstract, biomorphic grounds which she then assessed and used as a foundation for more conventional brushwork. This facet of Varo’s surrealism is similar these charcoal works.

Dreamlike imagery was important in the surrealist movement. The imagery in this exhibition is dreamlike because of its strangeness, the appearance of beings seeming to float in space or perhaps under water and the feeling that there is something real, familiar about a piece despite it being undefinable.

The finished drawings in “Into the Earth” enter the realm of magical realism with imagery that may not exist in our reality but certainly appear as if they could. The details ground them in something recognizable, a familiar plant, the texture of a sea animal, elements that can be found in nature. This connection to reality separates it from fantasy. According to Franz Roh, the twentieth century German art critic who originated the term, magical realism occurs “where real forms are combined in a way that does not conform to daily reality.”

Romanticism accurately describes the attitude and intention of this work. The sensitivity that the artist is the most critical tool in art making and that to make the best work possible an artist must follow one’s intuition and inspiration is emblematic of the romantic movement. The notion of “creation from nothingness” and the desire to “bring things to life” also fits into romanticism and drives this work. Other indications of romanticism such as striving for beauty, the allusion to nature, an emotional aspect and a feeling of power are present in the work. Victor

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Hugo’s *The Broken Bridge* and Casper David Friedrich’s *The Abbey in the Oakwood*, the first a monochromatic drawing (charcoal, soot, sepia and/or coffee grounds), the latter mostly shades of grey and brown, demonstrate how effectively intense drama and emotion can be created with a limited, monochromatic palette.

Results

The culminating exhibition is composed of twelve drawings ranging in size from 60” x 80” to 24” x 24”. Of this selected group seven were initiated with the automatic drawing process, three as carefully planned referential drawings and two were combinations of the two methods. Even though these pieces differ in their starting points, they form a cohesive body of work. The style of drawing remains consistent throughout with imagery rendered with the same curvilinear quality, detailed texturing and both subtle and dramatic value scales. There is also consistency because the details present in the factual caves and animals are similar to those in the imaginary, making it difficult to distinguish one from another.

One drawing, *Home* (Figure 12), has been exhibited outside the main gallery by itself. This is due to the artists’ determination that it is both the beginning and ending piece of this project and as such is meant to be the first and last piece the viewer sees.

Summary

To summarize, this body of work is the result of an investigation comparing the visual and expressive outcome of drawings created through a mode of automatism resulting in cave

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environments to the actual existence and appearance of caves. This project studied the plausibility of these fantastical works through academic research, consultation with speleologists (experts in the scientific study and exploration of caves) and the artist’s own investigation of five caves in California both alone and in groups. The resulting wealth of information was applied to and informed the creation of new pieces beginning with a process of intentional sketching with the goal of particular imagery.

Conclusions

The outcome of this project was an unexpected validation of imagery that was achieved through a method largely consisting of chance. Through the study of actual caves, the imaginary drawings were found to have some credibility, the factual drawings included an element of fantasy and the two were easily blended.

Regarding the life-forms in the imaginary drawings, research opened up a vast area of small and microscopic animals thriving in caves. In two ways their discovery connected with those in drawings already made. For one thing, many of the features of the bizarre creatures living in caves are similar to those developed from the automatic drawings. The overall body shapes, apparent textures and bodily openings and projections in the drawings correlate with these animals. Allusions to symbiotic relationships are relevant as well. In the real organisms discovered, the features are a strange combination of botanical, insect-like and aquatic life-forms, again connecting with the drawings originating from automatism. Further, less than fifty percent of caves have been discovered (mapped) and much of the life found within is
unidentifiable, has never been seen before. This element of the unknown opens up the field of possibility, increasing the likelihood of the imagery.

Comparing the actual geological formations in caves with those of the imagery in the drawings proved the drawings to be less fantastic than reality. In the caves researched there was much more diversity in the geological growths. The terrain and structures found varied from massive bulbous shapes to enormous rippling sheets and delicate tiny projections. Again, research opened up the limitations of the drawings.

Further development of the project involved more drawings using the same materials and the new information. These drawings continued to communicate the wonder and magnificence of caves blending seamlessly with the automatic drawing pieces. This successful merging of the imaginary and the scientific is the conclusion presented in this exhibit.

Recommendations

The very beginnings of this project had its roots in the artist’s concern for global and societal issues. Her graduate work followed an unpredictable path and led into the surprising subject of caves. Intrigued, she followed, researching and exploring. In a way this subject matter was the oldest one possible, an escape in many ways. But as the work continued there were signs that this was another cause for concern. The caverns that were accessible for study due to dynamiting, the ones that were destroyed to make way for gift shops and the motivation for

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scientific research (caves as future living environments or life-forms valuable ingredients for drugs) brought this fanciful project full circle.

By the end of the project, the “culmination” began to appear as a beginning. Through the process of her research, the artist befriended world renowned cave specialist Ronal Kerbo. Discussions lead to the agreement that any attention drawn to caves did not bode well. As he wrote in *Caves: Exploring Hidden Realms*:

> I thought back to the beginnings of my own caving career, to our time in China, and to some of the controversies that brewed in the caving community over the dangers of publicity in films and books – fears that cavers who share their secrets with the world might ultimately bring harm to the places they most want to protect.⁹

Consequently this project presents a fresh problem with its completion. What use is this work to the subject it venerates? This is not a rhetorical question but the artist’s current inquiry and discussion.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


http://www.public.asu.edu/~aarios/resourcebank/definitions/


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UNIVERSITY GALLERY, TRINITY HALL

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