

Susan Fecho's Exhibition, Barton Art Galleries
Flutterings: Exploration of Nature

2010 Catalogue essay
by Mark Gordon

Elations when the forest blooms; gusty
Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights;
All pleasures and all pains, remembering
The bough of summer and the winter branch.
These are the measure destined for her soul.

And, in the isolation of the sky,
At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

"Sunday Morning" by Wallace Stevens



Crush, Stone Lithograph, 2009

Susan Fecho's wide-ranging art can be categorized by location and through the narrative of visual stories. Across an astonishingly wide range of media, Fecho's work recalls iconic forms of trees, water, rocks, architecture, and the female figure.

The artist's remarkably varied and robust production in monoprint, drawing, painting, and fabric speaks to her intensity as a creative pioneer. The current exhibition in Barton College's Virginia Thompson Graves and Lula E. Rackley Galleries provides ample evidence of her skill in drawing, painting, lithography, relief printing, frottage, collage, assemblage, and bookmaking. Her materials include ink, gouache, fabric, and a diversity of found objects.

Fecho travels widely to find sources in nature and built environments, and to carve out time to work intensively. Having journeyed to Italy, Great Britain, The Netherlands, Canada, China, France, Ireland, and Sierra Leone, she sees travel, simply, as education. These trips, combined with longer sojourns at artists' colonies in Georgia, Newfoundland, Tennessee,

and North Carolina continually replenish her visual source-memory. In her “walkabouts,” Fecho searches out traces of human artifacts within the landscape, preserving and subsequently transforming these visual fragments into her art. She refers to “gathering evidence of exploration based on whatever crosses [her] path.” The themes in Fecho’s artwork have germinated during her travels; she uses an artist’s sketchbook to capture impressions and record written observations, underlying her unique and complex and layered visual images.

Fecho’s work process includes a reconstruction of a region’s narrative, making this connection through stories of human-built environments, such as architecture in all its manifestations, within the natural landscape of woodland, farmland, mountains, and coast.

In a 2006 essay, Fecho explained the value of these sojourns in her art process:

“To embrace the creative process, we are required to focus on discovery of the unfamiliar—noticing new details through sight, smell, hearing, and touch. Without the distraction of television, radio, cell phone, or ipods, I noticed that the so-called silence of Mother Nature was, in its own way, deafening. In the studio, I chose to work in a representational, realistic manner—to celebrate life outdoors, to improve my rendering skills, and to be outside in the fabulous scenery.”

Fecho completed a 2006 art residency at Newfoundland’s Pouch Cove, whose origins date back to 1611, when the site was chosen by renegade seal hunters. Its treacherous harbor dissuaded the Royal Navy, tasked with suppressing settlements, from searching its shores. Her 2010 Newfoundland work was completed during an intensive residency

at The English Harbor Arts Centre, a windswept coastal artists’ haven. These sites provided relative isolation, enabling artists to experience nature through immersion in a rocky terrain melding land, sea, and mist. The recent arts residency provided aspects of the aleatory; each day was an experience of chance circumstance, opportunity, and serendipity. Variable weather conditions combined with happenstance transportation to provide her daily with unexpected landscape drawing subjects. The individual artworks directly respond to the circumstance of its weather and location.



While in Newfoundland, Fecho met and visited with local author Agnes Walsh, whose poems, such as “In the Old Country of My Heart,” feature crisply descriptive verse in regional vernacular. The poet’s linguistic insights embody her locale through a detailed observation of nature; hearing Walsh’s poetry in the writer’s own voice helped Fecho form deeper connections with the region, influencing her observational drawings.

Fecho appreciates the changeability of nature and weather. She notes that nature is essentially ephemeral, where only fleeting moments can be observed. While travel, often she brings no camera to capture a beautiful view, realizing that the viewer perceives more intensely and perhaps more thoughtfully when a panoramic vista cannot be frozen digitally. In a sense, “fluttering” also refers to the artist’s choice to work with outside light, affected by transitory weather conditions, where aesthetic decisions must be immediate, not mediated. The moth studies, combining a hint of movement with poignantly-portrayed insect specimens, can be seen as a sort of memento mori in homage to nature’s cycle of life and death.

White Moths Flutter, lithograph, 2009



The title of the current exhibition refers to movement in nature. Two small prints, “Moths in Moonlight” and “White Moths Flutter” convey a gentle back-and-forth interplay of wind and wing. On a stroll in the Appalachians in a mist of fog, the artist noted a patch of cracked and gnarled asphalt covered with the wings of expired white moths, seeming to

flutter in the breeze. By the next morning, beetles had devoured the remains of these fragile creatures, and a new batch of sacrificial moths again had deposited their quivering wings on the ground, forming a wind-kissed delicate pale carpet on the dusky roadbed.

Fall: Lady Bug, lithograph, 2009



Fecho’s vitreographs “Caution: Fall,” “Fall: Pods/Beach,” and “Fall: Lady Bug” are exhibited in their two manifestations, juxtaposing process and product. The original thick glass lithographic plates, mounted in frames and placed on a pedestal, produce a play between the transparent and the translucent. The resultant ink-on-paper prints are mounted on a nearby wall. Fecho’s strategy of displaying the prints alongside their “parent” plates calls attention to the positive/negative reversal of the printmaking process. Incorporating fragments of an Outer Banks nature study such as thisle, seed pod, leaf, wooly worm, and lady bug, in addition to a metal plate reading “Caution” (from the back of an old oven), these evocative pieces simultaneously celebrate nature and reference civilization.

According to painter and Barton Professor of Art J. Chris Wilson, these lithographs constitute “tabletop landscapes” that bring together a

modified still-life format with plein air observational drawings, altered and combined in the studio.

A 20-foot-long gown in flowing fabric decorated with applied organza leaves, “Cold Mountain” moves from eye-level along the gallery floor. This piece, made by altering and attaching 13 separate dresses, is reminiscent of a garment, perhaps a wedding gown with an exaggerated train, evocative of landscape. The artist incorporates text by Han Shan (who was nicknamed “Cold Mountain”), a Chinese poet and Buddhist monk living around 750 C.E., a mystic hermit who meditated upon mankind’s place within the great outdoors in verse:

This is my resting place;
Now that I know the best retreat.
The breeze blows through the pines,
Sounding better the nearer it is.

Cold Mountain, fabric/video, 2010



In this installation sculpture, Fecho's joined segments create an undulating fabric-based metaphor for landscape. The achromatic dress shapes merge, transitioning from white to gray, summoning an echo of the narrow tonal range found in nature's cooler latitudes, from snow to fog. The flowing shape suggests movement of waters and hills, undulating along the gallery floor.



"Cold Mountain" also provides a structure for a digital picture frame featuring the artist's imagery of wind blowing across meadows. A 2008 collaboration with audio designer Phil Valera, Assistant Professor of Audio Recording Technology at Barton, resulted in sound recordings generated from Fecho's experimental handcrafted-and-invented

instruments in clay, wood, rocks, bamboo, and shells. This audio is incorporated into this multi-media installation as background sound, adding another dimension to the experience of "Cold Mountain."

Over the years, Fecho has made a series of artist's books incorporating text, with words featured with bound drawings. One of her large book-art pieces "A Trunkful: The Illuminated Year" is found in the collections of The Smithsonian Institution's American Art Museum, The Victoria and Albert Museum in London, and the Museum of Women Artists in Washington. She sees her recent books as studies in the poetics of space highlighting gender, "symbolizing a dichotomy between the built landscape as masculine and nature's space as feminine."

On a large pedestal in the Rackley Gallery, the viewer encounters six subtly crafted miniature objects the artist calls "landscapes within books."

These toy-like sculptural books feature painted and meticulously-crafted multiple covers with calligraphic pages with fragments from South African poet Olive Schreiner's 1911 collection "Women's Labor." The books' "containers" are tiny boxes with fanned lids of individual paintings, while the inner book covers incorporate complex fastening devices in leather.

One striking 3.5-centimeter-tall book contains, inset into the exaggerated thickness of its front cover, a dead fly seen through a window of plastic. Inside is found a verse from "Women's Labor":

Always we picture the love
Of the sexes as once a dull, slow, creeping worm
Then a torpid, earthy chrysalis;
At last the full-winged insect
Glorious in the sunshine of the future.

Sculptural Books, mixed media, 2010

Elegantly scribed in ink, the poem runs throughout the painted pages, bringing to mind a metamorphosis of desire. In the context of the book's cover, this transformation becomes an artist's poignant meditation on mortality.



Seed Pods, mixed media, 2010



The installation “Seed Pods” claims an entire gallery wall with its 314 individual pieces, multi-hued rectangles arranged in a rhythmically repeating pattern of checkerboard rows. These small geometric units were cut from discarded prints, painted individually, combined with dried seed pods, and covered with hazy organza gauze. Some

of these book-like modular design units contain voids stamped out with the pattern of a missing “ghost” leaf. The artist relates that her use of the seed pod motif began as the result of encountering seed pods as a resonant and readily-available shape, useful as a varied mark-making and printmaking device. With its synthesis of the organic and implied geometric repetition, “Seed Pod” calls to mind an imagined merging of the work of sculptors Donald Judd and Ana Mendieta. In this installation, the cards represent land, the pea pods stand for individuals in nature, and the translucent fabric suggests the changing weather.



“Ocracoke,” a mixed media work on paper, includes four panels of richly collaged paper and fabric. Small drawings of spiraling seashells are inserted into a complex coastal landscape, an exquisite example of visual layering.

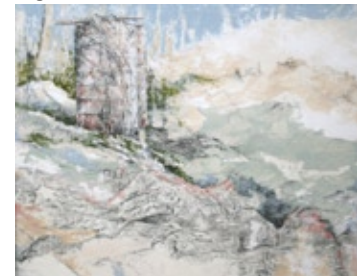
Ocracoke, mixed media, 2010

Fecho’s subtle resonance of place memory was noted by Jane Kessler, independent curator, writer and founder of the Curator’ Forum of Charlotte:

“Not only is memory a theme of these works, viewing them stimulates the memory-making process whereby discontinuous times and places become interactive. In the use of collage, textural layering, muted values, the images convey Fecho’s sense that two-dimensional work, like poetry...deals in meanings conditioned by emotion.”

A series of seven underprinted wallpaper-like compositions, “Underground” will eventually form background patterning for the artist’s children’s book illustrations. In the “scatter stencil” method, a form of printmaking without a press, Fecho vaporizes layers of india ink mixed with gesso, producing fleeting sprayed layers. For these soft monochromatic underlayered pieces, the repeating print motif is derived from individual leaves of the various domesticated plants and trees.

Rabun County, Georgia, was created in 1819 from lands ceded by the Cherokee, and the Hambidge Center is nestled on a 660-acre preserve. During her 2006 art residency at Hambidge, Fecho created a series of works incorporating bits of drawn and collaged imagery into dreamlike visual stories. “Abandoned Silo” illustrates Fecho’s use of informal grid-like pattern overlays combined with nature studies and textiles; these multilayered compositions explore the concept of urban architectures superimposed on the natural landscape. In order to



Abandoned Silo, mixed media, 2006

physically engage with the site, Fecho made charcoal/pencil rubbings from the worn pathway, roots, and stones of the area.

John Watts, a landscape architect who studied printmaking and graphic design with Fecho, observes that her “assemblage of material mirrors her narrative style: a collection of memories, thoughts, and statements.”

Fecho sees her altered dresses as domestic portraits of women, without the individual’s actual presence. The accompanying fragments of text serve as a narrative, representing the absent subject’s life story—a

woman looking back upon the stages of her life. “A Shadow in the Corner” consists of three printed and dyed shift dresses, suspended from and intersected by rectangular wooden drawers from a treadle sewing machine. These drawers are displayed as boxes, surfaced with printed imagery of leaves and trees, which are combined with found metal photographic intaglio plates depicting unknown women.

Two of the full-scale garments have miniature dresses sewn into their bodies, suggesting a child-to-adult transition. This piece may be a reference to family, with maternal and sibling connections subtly illustrated. As the viewer contemplates this corner-installed assemblage, the question “What is the shadow?” lingers in the mind.

“Inner Workings” incorporates an antique carved headboard suspending paired dress forms. With its elegant engraved architectonic patterns and subtle bilateral symmetry, this rustic wooden structure may be seen as a sort of “parent” to the “children” below. Upon closer contemplation, visually flipping

Inner Workings, mixed media, 2010



one dress unifies the two sides into one whole, front to back. It is then evident that the two dresses in fact constitute one dress—two sides of the same coin. The artist is an identical twin, and the surface decoration of printed pea pods is a reference to “alike as two peas in a pod.” The two diminutive dresses embedded in the full-sized garments are linked by the sleeve, as if holding hands. Perhaps they are small children sharing the mysteries of twin-hood.

“Bird’s Nest” is a larger-than-life dress in silk, suspended in the center of the Graves gallery. This 8-foot-tall fabric sculpture includes underlying patterning of biomorphic forms, with flower petals suggesting wings floating above an inner slip with drawn nests. The artist addresses the concept of “fluttering” from a different perspective from the print work “Moths Fluttering”; this subtly kinetic piece—a mobile, actually—features a gentle breeze-derived movement caused by the gallery’s airflow currents.

“Waves Crashing,” a large-scale horizontal triptych in India ink, fabric, and acrylic on canvas, brings the viewer into the presence of a window-like vista of a churning sea in turmoil. The tripartite division of the landscape composition helps lead the viewer through the swirls and slashes of painting’s turbulent colors to elicit not only the visual impression of violent Atlantic waves in action, but also a feeling of dynamic movement of the painter’s brush.

The processes of fabric cutting and stitchwork are used in “Frozen River,” “Foggy Land,” and “Landscape in Fall,” which incorporate abstract patterns to conjure



Bird's Nest, silk, organza, fabric paint, ink, 2010

A Shadow in the Corner, mixed media, 2010

expressionistic landscapes. These collaged mixed-media works bring to mind a merging of imagery from painter Richard Diebenkorn and the weavings of Lenore Hawley.



English Harbour Shed,
mixed media, 2010

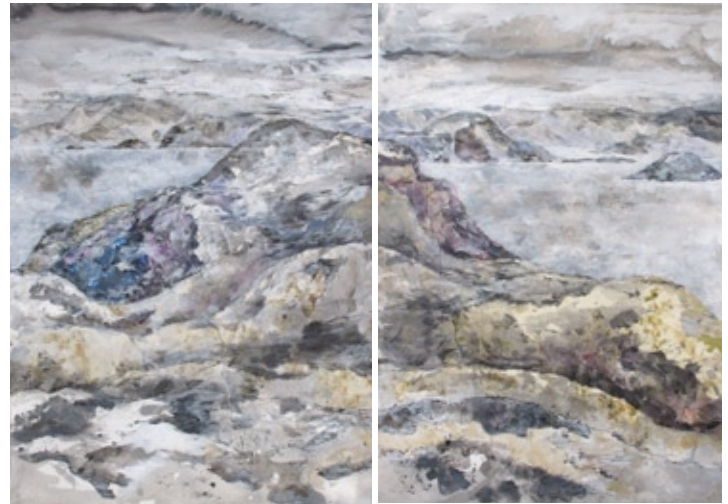
An observation by Meade B. Horne, past director of the Blount Bridgers Museum in Tarboro, sheds light on the artist's semi-representational work:

"Poetic and lyrical, there is a hint of apparition in her work. The body is gone, but here is a residue, memory; something stays behind that keeps these images from being sterile representation of spaces."

The still life drawings "Collection Study," "Floral Study," and "Crush" feature shadows, stark yet textured, in which directional light becomes a tangible component of the composition. Like scatter-stencils or photograms, these carefully rendered objects are placed into non-repeating patterns, in a way creating each other's context.

In *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, Betty Edwards posits that an artist must learn component perceptual skills (depicting edges, spaces, light and shadow, and proportional relationships) in order to capture the essence of a perceived object—something you can see out there. Edwards was influenced by neuroscientist Roger Sperry's groundbreaking 1960's work on the human brain's corpus callosum and its role in creative thinking. Fecho has drawn insect specimens and done medical illustration, which inform the detailed "mini-landscapes" of her still-life compositions. Her facility in this area represents more than mere hand-to-eye-to-hand coordination or eye-to-brain-to-hand-to-eye feedback loop: the artist's drawings result from a cultivated skill in seeing.

The diptych "Foggy Point," in which pale blue-gray tonalities evoke fog and mist, illustrates a specific rocky Newfoundland coastal terrain. Underlying the painted surface, the artist has collaged linen, representing echoes of a hidden human presence in the landscape. At the chilly juncture of land and sea, Fecho's trailing gestural lines imply a meager plant presence growing under challenging conditions; these India ink tracers serve to lead the viewer's eye through the composition.



Foggy Point, mixed media, 2010