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PEREGRINATIONS

Travels through Syria, Israel and Egypt

Sallie Clinton Poet

A selected project submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Joseph Ostraff

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ABSTRACT

Peregrinations

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Master of Fine Art

This project report explains my MFA show of landscapes presented at the Woodbury Museum in Orem, Utah. Referencing source material from my 2008 trip to the Middle East, Bible narratives and contemporary scholars, I created mixed media paintings around the themes of traveling and migrations (peregrinations) and some significant stopping places in Syria, Jordan and Israel. More importantly, this report also speaks to my personal peregrinations as an artist and relates my painting methods to my subject matter.

Keywords: painting, landscapes

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Brigham Young University

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Date

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PEREGRINATIONS

Travels through Syria, Egypt and Israel

Introduction

A *peregrination* is a trip—especially on foot. It implies wandering and focuses more on the journey than the destination. This title has a two-fold meaning for this project report because it speaks to the travels of the many peoples of Syria, Egypt and Israel as well as my personal progression and wanderings as an artist. My art is a subjective interpretation of the complex terrain of the Middle East. It references discreet places and migrations, which reflect the complicated social and political fabric of the area. My art also speaks to the many levels of meaning housed in the historical and religious narratives around those places and journeys. My approach to paint is an outward manifestation of those many layers of meaning and my journey as an artist made salient.

My personal journey formally began as we arrived in Jordan in the spring of 2008. I could feel the heat rising off the land. A small oasis of newly planted deep green palm trees rimmed the tall hotels and tented porches that awaited us, but just beyond I could see a stretch of empty, pale-tinted low hills and dunes that stretched back and back and finally blended into the horizon and the sky. From that first day in the Middle East, I knew I was in a land like no other. Decades earlier I had read the histories of so many of the place names—Damascus, Petra, Cairo, Shechem, Bethlehem, and although I realized that I was just one of the millions to pass through this region and marvel, I reveled in seeing the ancient locations first hand. My readings of these places had shaped my worldview and my spirit, but as my feet walked the soil, and as I came to

see more of the fields, cities, mountains, wadis and valleys, I knew that part of my personal journey meant I had to paint my impressions of the land.

Personal Passage

Some of my personal wanderings as an artist are evidenced in the **content** of the pieces in this exhibition. The *peoples* of this historic land where so many nations have traveled have long been the theme of my art. Applying for graduate school, and during my first year at BYU, I sought to paint the people of these lands, but I had never thought to do paintings of the land itself. Pondering how to represent the people and events of the Holy Lands, I went from attempts at the figurative to attempts at literal interpretations to iterative copying. Then halfway through my graduate studies, after wandering along—with firm encouragement from my committee, I began to explore abstract landscapes. I found it was an exciting theme for me because it allowed me to reference those places and peoples that had made such a profound impression on me, and yet allowed me the freedom of expression in design and technique.

Of course the *land* shown in my paintings is sacrosanct. Indeed as historian David Belt states: “Half the people on Earth—its Muslims, Christians, and Jews—are viscerally, irrevocably connected to the Holy Land” (Belt 4). Some of the venues I have chosen to paint are the sites of famous battles, sacrifices or stopping points for Jews, Arabs and Christians and so many others that have coursed this Mediterranean corridor as warriors, mothers, scholars, slaves, prophets and believers. As I painted, I thought about the caravans that crawled along the great trade routes, the vast Negev and the shores of the Mediterranean. Some paintings depict farmlands that have yielded fruits from the furrowed fields for centuries. I have painted the vistas of the vast Negev and flood plains of waterways like the Euphrates and the Dead Sea. Every small piece of the

terrain of the Middle East is freighted with history and passion and I could not tell every story. Instead, I tried to capture the colors of the coral earth, the checkered browns and golds and greens of the farmlands, and the many hues of the deserts.

The **form**, the paint quality, of the art in this show is somewhat a metaphor for my personal art journey as well. Having the opportunity to come to BYU as an older adult, I come with a deeper history, with layers of experiences. My paintings too are layered-- suggesting the wear and tear and wanderings of a life's journey. Like layers of under paint, past experiences color the actions of today. Old scars and marks on my psyche surface from time to time. Like the pentimenti lines in my landscapes, mistakes point to a better way to go. The paintings in this exhibit show the additive and subtractive process that has become my style. In a broad way this style reflects the learning and insights I have gathered as I have taken art classes and interacted with peers and teachers. The *putting on of paint* and the *taking off of paint* is similar to my recent experience of taking in new ideas and new stimuli-- like being exposed to new artists and new art forms. It also speaks to shedding old ideas and to mulling over new ideas while under it all, an old foundation of texture and color filter through. Much like the way experience is the best teacher—painting and more painting these last three years has brought me to a richer surface and a final product replete with under tones and textures that enrich. My art is an outward manifestation of inner feelings and experiences.

Creative Influences

South African artist William Kentridge has been an influence on me. His drawings and film of the landscapes of South Africa go far beyond the representational and somehow because

of the lack of specificity, his message seems to be more about the universal. In his drawings he uses erasures, over drawings, and palimpsestic methods to suggest the ever changing, re-hurting and re-healing of the terrain of South Africa (Endwezor 38). I have appropriated his idea that methods can be a metamessage in rendering the true nature of landscape. The additive and subtractive methods of my painting—scratches, scribbles and random calligraphic gesticulations on the paint surface reflect the erratic nature of the land as well as the social, political and religious upheaval of the Middle East. In an interview with C. Christov-Bakargiev, William Kentridge speaks to how his charcoal drawings reference the uncertainties of South African politics, “in the indeterminacy of my drawing, the contingent way that images arrive in my work, lies some kind of model of how we live our lives.” He further states, “Very early on in the drawing there is a sense of the passage of time.... The ethical or moral questions...seem to rise to the surface as a result of this process.” He speaks often of uncertainty and the “visual memory of recent past” as seen in his erasures, pentimenti and redraws. Like political uncertainties, Kentridge says, “It’s important that my endings are less coherent” (C.Christov-Bakargiev 412, 418). His medium augments his message as I hope mine does.

The land and its stories and histories are freighted with layers of millennia of competing and contentious ownership, wars, alliances and ethnic identities. For example, even the naming of the places in the land is complex. The current term “*Palestinian*” seems to have come from the term *Philistine*, which meant *enemy*. Today Jews do not want to call disputed parts of Israel by the name *Palestine* because it gives credence that the Palestinians were earlier indigenous peoples, and thus the pejorative term becomes a bonus to the Palestinians proving they are rightful heirs to the areas. This small example demonstrates that both the physical and political landscapes are complex; in the Middle East it is never smooth, orderly or crisp. Accordingly, I

seek to make my paintings complex by being multilayered, erased, redrawn, and scumbled with sgraffito. In my art, the painting surface as palimpsest, the buildups and scratches, underglazes and overglazes, the pentimentos, are all metaphors for the layers of life, the stacks of history that reveal older, and deeper influences—an ontological *tell*, so to speak. Without a doubt, every history has its bias. In every account of history there is always a mediated layer of subjectivity and spin, and the Bible is no exception. As I create my works, like Kentridge, I need to represent the layered narratives behind the locations that I paint and the locations and people behind the quasi-historical narratives.

Another influence on me has been Richard Diebenkorn. The master of breaking up space, Diebenkorn opened the way for generations of painters to abstract the landscape (Fine, Livingston 97). The painting expression “the break up of space” could also aptly apply to the current condition of the land of Israel. Thousands of pages and countless hours of human energy have gone into considering the divisions of space in the Middle East. To me, the flattened landscape promulgated by Diebenkorn suggests a birdseye view, an objective outside eye to the happenings, a fresh uncluttered look, a metaphor for a flattened response to the fury over boundaries, walls and lines. Thus, in taking on some of Diebenkorn’s flatness and his map perspective, while yet retaining some elements of perspective, I create a personal interpretation of the terrain. I don’t want a realistic photographic take on the land—instead my paintings combine more of the old formalistic oil techniques (glazing and scumbling) with a more contemporary feel of space and shape. This too echoes the bifurcated spirit of the Middle East: at once very modern and yet shrouded by the traditional. Thus I am always thinking of these things: narrative, a sense of space, surface and stratum, working materials, history and propaganda, the old and the new-- roots, routes, people and their peregrinations.

Paintings

Paintings—The David Series

The pieces in this section come from the life of David as recorded in 1st and 2nd Samuel. David's name appears over 1,000 times in the Hebrew Bible, and David looms large as the archetypal national hero. My painting, *Valley of Elah (#1)* is named after the fertile area lined with pistachio trees (*elah*) along the foothills that spill into the fertile fields and farms of the valley. I lugged home a sprig of the grains from the fields there and 5 smooth stones for my children. The stones are to remember the famous fight of David and Goliath which occurred there. I also carried away a sense of the commonness of the fields. My painting shows the fertile dark soil, and the quilt patches of ground sewn with seed. Layers of red and raw canvas show though depicting the quietness and productivity of the land today, yet referencing the bloodshed and history changing event that took place there anciently as David picked up 5 smooth stones from a trickling stream in that very field and vicariously fought the battle to become king. The red is a vertical that links the strong horizontals and it also connotes blood which links the event both politically and religiously to today. The painting reflects both the layers of time and yet the eponymous pertinence of that event even today. This is the place where David, called by God both “a man of blood” and “a man after God's own heart,” began his journeys. It shows the two sides of the land, of history, of mankind —and even the very nature of God.

Also in this series are several small 12x12 paintings of places where David lived or hid. According to the Bible, shortly after being taken into Saul's court, Saul became jealous of David and tried to kill him 19 times. David wandered and hid in the more central regions close to what is today the disputed Golan area and also more inland where the foothills seem to flatten out and

the land becomes chalkier. In the painting called *Chez Achish*(#2), I used grays and whites to depict the chalky soil and scumbling to show the bareness of the wilderness where he lived as he gathered around him a rag-tag army of murderers, tax evaders and iconoclasts that hid in the hilly wilderness with him. This army of the disenfranchised loved David and protected him as he fled from Saul and wandered for years across that land; and where, in desperation, he lied to priests, allied himself with the enemy Philistines, slaughtered Israel's enemies, protected the innocent, received revelations, wrote psalms, and wed. It was the wilderness that prepared him to be a king. These small paintings, *Caves of Adullah*, *Near Nob*, *Keileh*(betrayers), and *Near Mount Tabor*(#3-6) depict these wilderness places which were surrounded by the costal plains, the Negev, Sinai, and the rocky foothills of Judah . Bruce Feiler, in his celebrated book *Where God Was Born*, calls it “the biblical equivalent of the Wild West” (Feiler 27). Each of these small hideouts has a grand exploit or escape attached to it. The 12 by 12 inch format suggests that each is just one of the small, unknown places of David's peregrinations that readers skip over in reading religious narratives. From a standpoint of technique, the small scale and the boards' hard surfaces invited experimentation and made me feel free to try new bold things. I was not afraid to wipe on and off, scratch scribble. Glaze—because the small scale was forgiving and easy to change. That freedom, combined with the layers of effort make the painting richer. Playing with technique on the smaller panels opened new pathways for me to explore.

Paintings—The Desert Series

Leaving the wadis for the desert was always an act of faith for travelers. Abraham, Sarah and Lot all went down to Egypt as did Joseph and all his brothers and father Israel. Egypt becomes a metaphor for the world and coming back out of it one must cross the vast desert flatlands. For

the Muslim, journeys to Mecca often meant danger in the night desert. The analogy of coming from bondage or the world and making the archetypal journey through the ominous wilderness to arrive in a new place, or arrive back home as a new person is the classic hero's journey. These motifs are seen repeatedly in Middle Eastern literature and in the Bible narratives with so many of the patriarchs and even with Christ. My desert landscapes show the vastness of the desert expanse. *Ur of the Chaldees*, *Travel to Sechem*, and *Haran to Padan Aram*(#9-11) all have sweeping brushstrokes that suggest the shifting dunes and undulations of the desert. The far receding land implies that it certainly takes faith to set out on that desert with no visible arrival point on the horizon. The paintings show the arcane beauty of the desert—with unusual arching dome shapes, rock formations and colors. *Nightfall on the Negev*, *Near Kadesh-Barnea*, *Ascent to Egypt* (in Eastern lore one went *up* to Egypt, whereas Westerners would think of going *down* to Egypt) (#12-14) were all done with the colors of the deserts. The great drifts and divots that I painted imply the dangers, breadth and mystery and broad beauty of the grand waterless landscapes. On a personal level, the journey with no exact landing spot again reflects my art process. Like the archetypal hero, I had to wander in my art in order to find both new content and new form.

Paintings—The Water Series

There is one element more precious than gold in the Middle East—water. Middle Eastern travel lore and history is replete with references to wells, staying in wadis, the vast flood plains of the Euphrates, the Nile and Tigris, the Spring of Gihon bubbling under Jerusalem, etc. Historians tell about the building of the aqueducts by the Romans, and the effects of the water ecosystems when the Ottomans cut down the trees to build highways from Syria to facilitate their

travels. From the many colors and products of the Dead Sea, to the costal waters of the Mediterranean and the gulfs of Aqaba and Suez, water is the lifeblood to today's Egypt, Syria, and Israel (Galbraith, Ogden, Skinner 18).

My painting *Padan Aram* (#18) portrays the great flood plains of northern Syria where the early Mesopotamian civilizations thrived and migrated around the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers. Abraham stopped there with his brother and father in Haran, some of Sarah's family came from there. As the rivers rose and flooded the area, agriculture flourished, and the people were fed. The depth of the land—receding deeply on the picture plane is a metaphor for the deep psychological space of the land, the protracted history of the area and the people and the deep roots of Abraham—father of three faiths.

My painting, *Mt Hermon* (#19) is of the only mountain in Israel that retains snow. I painted the snow opaque and the land more translucent because I wanted to suggest the importance of the snowpack as a source of water. The painting *Wadi El Arish* (#20) named after the historical border between Egypt and Israel, shows the site of many peregrinations. It was a traveling stopping point for those headed to Egypt and was associated with one of the main trade routes and the mining industry of Timna mentioned in reference to Solomon. My goal was to use cool colors to portray the shadow feeling of the wadi --pointing to the coolness, a place down away from the hot dry desert sun. Psalm 36:7 reads, "How excellent *is* thy loving kindness, O God! therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of thy wings" (Psalms36:7 King James Version). The deep wadis were and still are clearly places of covering and refuge for wanderers. *Wadi Oman* (#21) was done with cool red and blue under colors, and then I came back with other slightly warmer earth tones for the brown rocks on top. These wadi paintings with cool grays, greens and blues imply shade, safety, protection by rock, and a source of water

for the wanderers. *Near Lisan* (#22) depicts the areas near the Dead Sea that are replete with minerals. These chemicals as well as the sea salt and briny vegetation brought a rainbow of colors to the soil. The water systems from the height of the mountains to the lowest point on the earth in the Dead Sea, from the deltas and plains to the waters of the gulfs and the Mediterranean shaped the travels of the migrants on hegira, on missions or escape.

As an artist I struggled to find colors that reflected the many variations of water, landforms and the mineral elements that were unique to the water areas. With counsel from my committee members, I let go of my old palette (mostly warm) and tried to capture the feel of the colorful water landscapes. I ventured into teals, aquamarine tones and flesh tones. I tried many techniques to suggest the ebb and flow of water without being literal. Finally I discovered that layering one cool upon another created dither and spoke to the waters' flow. Discovering new color combinations—especially by laying either a dark or a light over an established tone was an exciting color discovery for me, as seen in *Near the Dead Sea* and *East of EnGedi* (#23,24 as well as others). New grounds, new color combinations, new techniques all came from experimenting with the new format of landscape. My personal journey brought many new techniques to my artistic arsenal in order to capture the ancient vistas.

Conclusion

The landscapes in my final MFA show are highly subjective, but it seems in the disputed lands of the Middle East that most sentiments and representations *are* subjective. The land itself becomes an idol to be worshipped; it is bloodied—yet it seems to remain sacred (Mitchell 196). The demarcations between the sacred and the profane, the Jew, the Muslim and the Christian are unclear and again—personal, subjective. This exhibition is evidence of my very personal journey through graduate school--the culmination of three years at BYU. I have stumbled onto new techniques, at times I have had to trace and retrace my path in my learning. I have rethought content and improved in method and form. God willing, my peregrinations as an artist are not yet finished.

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Woodbury Show Image List

David Series

1	Valley of Elah	mixed media on canvas 48 x 48
2	Chez Achish	mixed media on panel 12x12
3	Caves of Adullah	mixed media on panel 12x12
4	Near Nob	mixed media on panel 12x12
5	Keileh (betrayers)	mixed media on panel 12x12
6	Near Mt. Tabor	mixed media on panel 12x12
7	Jordan Valley Fields	mixed media on canvas 36x36
8	Fields from Carmel	mixed media on canvas 36x36

Desert Series

9	Ur of the Chaldees	mixed media on canvas 36x36
10	Travel to Shechem	mixed media on canvas 36x36
11	Haran to Padan Aram	mixed media on panel 24x24
12	Nightfall on the Negev	mixed media on canvas 36x36
13	Near Kadesh-Basnea	mixed media on canvas 24x36
14	Ascent to Egypt	mixed media on canvas 24x36
15	Sandscape	mixed media on board 24x24
16	Wilderness of Maon	mixed media on board 24x24
17	Leaving Sechem	mixed media on board 24x24

Water Series

18	Padam Aram	mixed media on canvas 24x36
19	Mt. Hermon	mixed media on canvas 48x 60
20	Wadi El Arish	mixed media on canvas 60x 48
21	Wadi Oman	mixed media on canvas 48 x 48
22	Near Lisan	mixed media on canvas 36x60
23	Near the Dead Sea	mixed media on panel 24x36
24	East of En-Gedi	mixed media on panel 19 x19
25	Flood Plains	mixed media on panel 19 x19
26	Sodom Salt	mixed media on panel 24x24

Comprehensive Images

David Series



1. Valley of Elah 48 x 48



2. Chez Achish 12 x 12



3. Caves of Adullah 12 x 12



4. Near Nob 12 x 12



5. Keileh (Betrayers) 12 x 12



6. Near Mt. Tabor 12 x 12



7. Jordan Valley Fields 36 x 36



8. Fields from Carmel 36 x 36

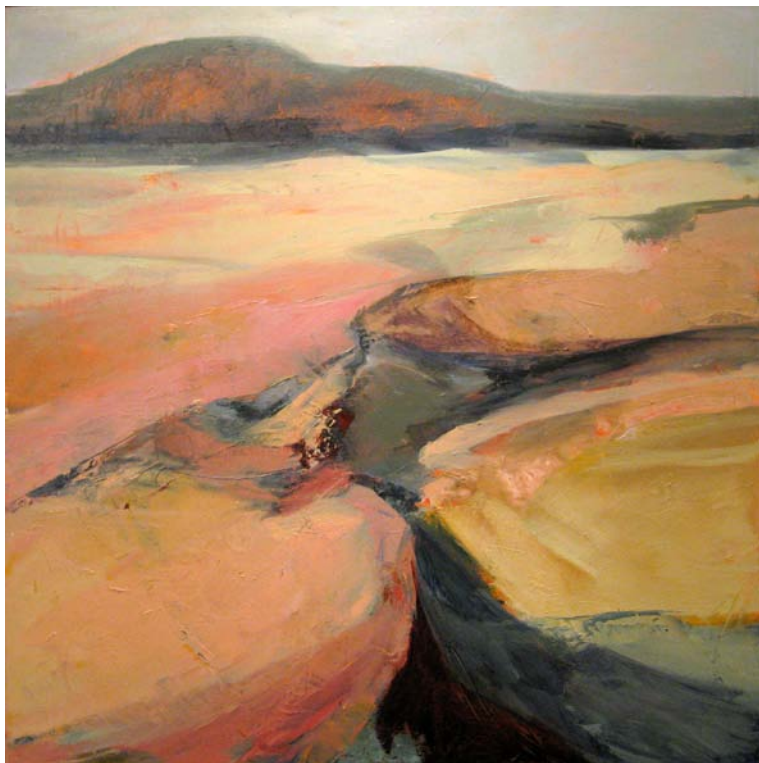
Desert Series



9. Ur of the Chaldees 36 x 36



10. Travel to Shechem 24 x 24



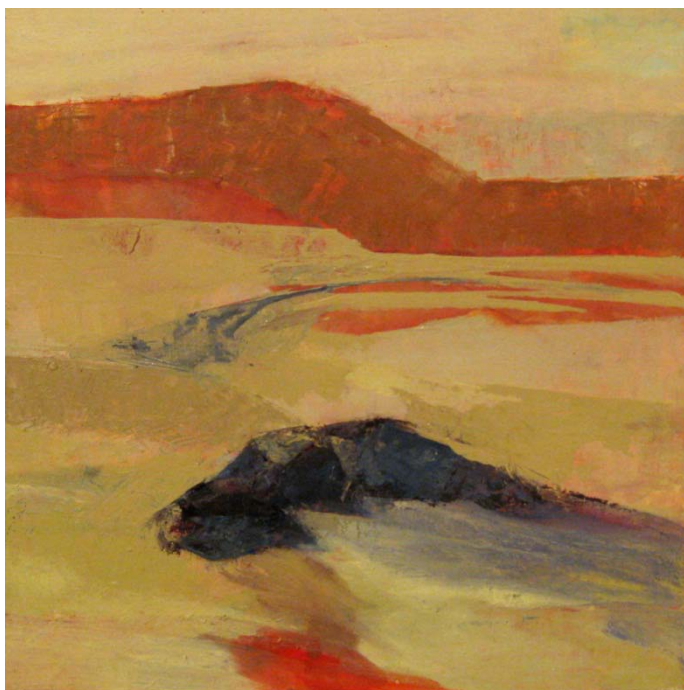
11. Haran to Padan Aram 36 x 36



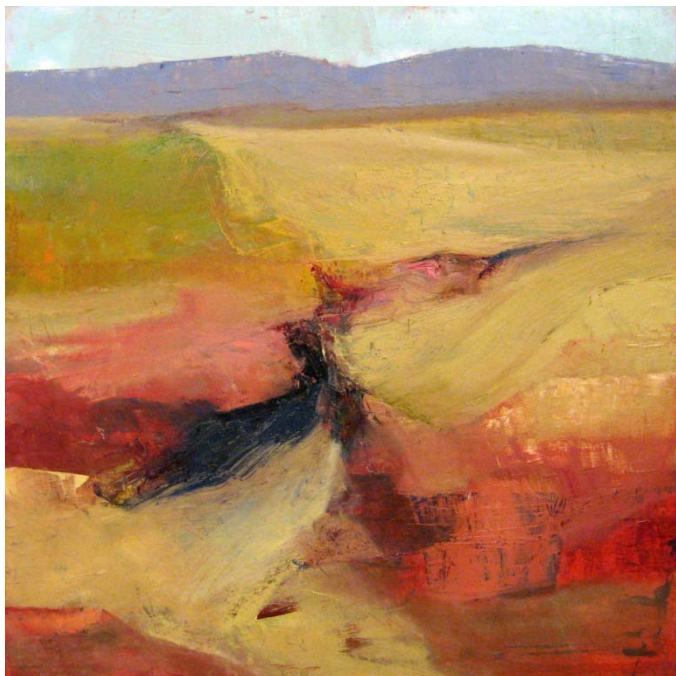
12. Nightfall on the Negev 30 x 40



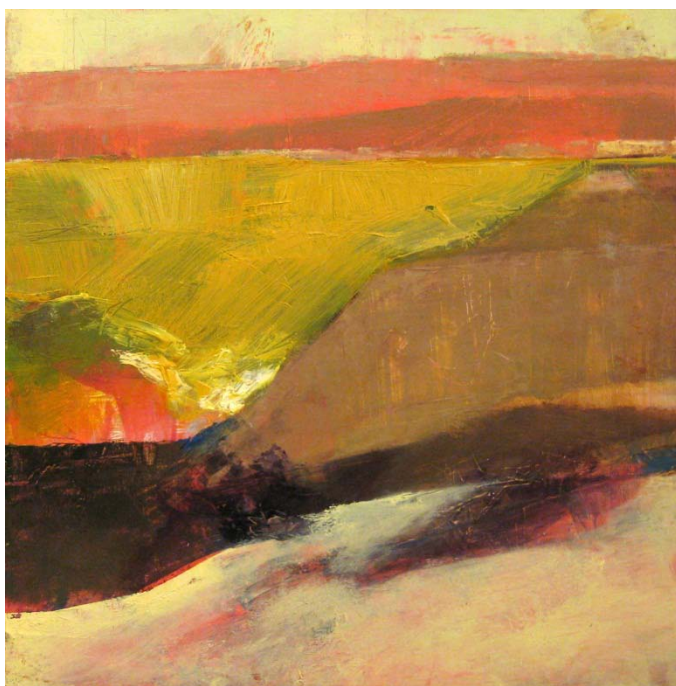
13. Near Kadesh Barnea 36 x 36



14. Ascent to Egypt 24 x 24



15. Sandscape 24 x 24



16. Wilderness of Maon 24 x 24



17. Leaving the Sechem 24 x 24

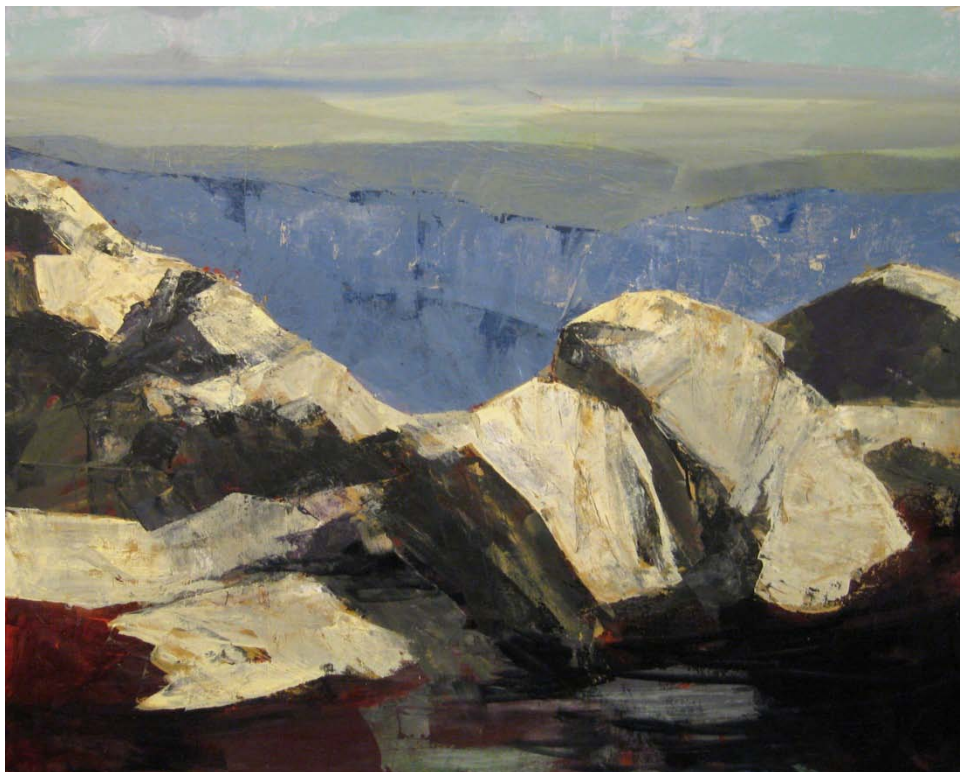
Water Series



18. Padan Aram 24 x 36



19. Mt. Hermon 48 x 60



20. Wadi El Arish 60 x 48



21. Wadi Oman 48 x 48



22. Near Lisan 36 x 60



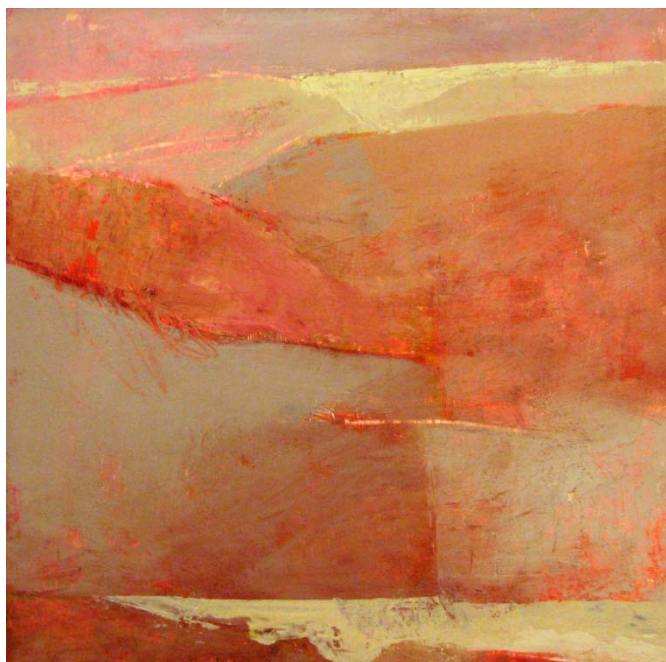
23. Near the Dead Sea 24 x 36



24. East of En-Gedi 19 x 19



25. Flood Plains 30 x 40



26. Sodom Salt 24 x 24