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Ghost Water Exhibition

Michael G. Sharp

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

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ABSTRACT

Ghost Water Exhibition

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The Ghost Water exhibition of artworks by Michael Sharp was comprised of four main works titled: *30 x 60 Minute Grid Series*, *Suspension*, *History/Prehistory*, and *Lake Bonneville Remnants*. The artwork was created as a reaction to the land that once held the prehistoric Lake Bonneville and to its current remnant Great Salt Lake. The work explores the dialogue between absence and presence.

Keywords: Great Salt Lake, Lake Bonneville, Red Rock Pass, Stockton Bar, Old River Bed, Steep Mountain, Long Divide, The Threshold, Utah, the West, Great Basin, Bear River, Weber River, Jordan River, desert, salt, asphalt, water, railroad, glass, book arts, artist books, installation, archive, collection, kallitype, collotype, photography, printmaking, letterpress, ghost, climate change, Geology, time, pigment, Land Art, Erlebenbildkunst, panorama, ink, identity, place, grid, cartography

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I. Introduction

The works presented in my Master of Fine Arts Thesis show, *Ghost Water*, look at the remnants of Lake Bonneville as a fragmented memory upon the land, still active and present despite the wear of geologic slow time. The artworks reference historical collection and combine natural and industrial elements. This presents the push and pull between human and nature, asking what marks we will leave in this short slice of the much bigger geologic time. To create the works, I made pilgrimage to the dry and shrinking relics of Lake Bonneville as well as the site where the natural dam that held the prehistoric waters gave way. It is hard for me to grasp that this vast desert was once immersed in sea.

Ghost Water exhibited at the Brigham Young University Harris Fine Arts Center Gallery 303 from 4 October to 14 October 2016.

II. Gallery Layout

Upon entering the Gallery, the scent of asphalt was discernable before the work could be seen. This aroma was given off by the centrally positioned *30 x 60 Minute Grid Series* pieces composed of asphalt and salt (Figs. 1-6). The scent is a subtle signifier of human pervasiveness on the natural landscape. *30 x 60 Minute Grid Series* references the grid of map making. I used the grid created by the four slabs as a guide to establish placement of the other artworks in the exhibition. The pedestals holding the book works, *Lake Bonneville Remnants* (Figs. 22-27), are squares fit within the grid layout. The tie plates and glass of *History/Prehistory* (Figs. 13-21) are gridded rectangles spaced evenly on the wall. Even the glass bottles for *Suspension* (Figs. 7-12) are adorned with a gridded ribbing.

The spacing between the artworks was even and consistent, not overcrowded (Figs. 1-4 and 28-29). I deliberately used this presentation to reference the open landscape of the West, with room to breathe between the artwork. The varying heights of the artwork from wall pieces to works on pedestals and the gallery floor create the visual shape of a bowled valley. This is the shape of the Great Basin, valleys with mountains on each side — many once filled with water like those that held Lake Bonneville. I left the North and South walls empty as a horizon and space for contemplation. It was important for me to have that open space with nothing to compete with the line and visual direction of *Grid Series* (Figs. 5 and 6). I wanted the viewer to be able to focus on the transition from white to black and black to white, contemplating the overlay and movement within the piece. Absence and presence of layered salt revealing asphalt emphasizes the play between negative and positive space.

The six Artist Books of *Lake Bonneville Remnants* I displayed open, exposing the interior/exterior dialogue. (Figs. 22-27). The full panoramic images fill the inner space like

contents in a vessel. Each book was aligned with the compass. The spines faced North aligning the photographs inside with their orientation as shot in the camera. Each top edge of the book becomes a shoreline of its own inside the landscape of the gallery.

I hung the work *History/Prehistory* on the west wall (Fig. 13). The eight ghost plates present a history of the past. The artifact tie plates bring in the presence of industry, that great agent of change. Facing across the gallery, in front of the east wall the five 3-gallon carboys that compose the piece *Suspension* were hung from the ceiling (Fig. 12). Filled with collected lake and river water, the contents have created their own microenvironments within the gallery.

III. 30 x 60 Minute Grid Series

I centered the four slabs comprising *30 x 60 Minute Grid Series* in the gallery (Figs. 5 and 6). I wanted them to hold the central weight of the exhibition. For me this work is a distillation of many of my thoughts. They are minimalist in structure and formal in presentation. Each slab is an iron frame with a birch ply backing that is filled with packed asphalt. Salt from the Great Salt Lake is applied and brushed in gradient bands across the surfaces. To me the gradient presents a transition and movement rather than a static boundary. This movement represents the flux between land and human interaction.

The United States Geologic Survey has sectioned off every minute of the land in a cartographic interpretation. This is directly where the title for *30 x 60 Minute Grid Series* (Figs. 5 and 6) comes from. The minute is used as a unit for mapping place and establishing coordinates. The minute is also a measurement for time. I use these to reference human, and my own, attempts to understand the earth and this world we live in, as well as a reference to the ephemeral nature of mortality in comparison to slow geologic time.

I wanted to work with asphalt for its materiality. It has distinct physical properties and strong psychological references. While bringing this material into the gallery displaces the typical context for the material, I think it maintains associations for the viewer. I am using these associations as a conceptual element within the work. The main commercial use and context of asphalt is to pave roads and parking lots. It is connected to transportation. We use asphalt to cover the Earth and facilitate crossing the land. The vast highway system, ribbons of asphalt and concrete laid over the land, has facilitated movement and exploration. At the same time these roads have promoted greater infringement on the natural landscape. Asphalt and concrete become a physical barrier between humans and the land. Cities are paved in a self-imposed

separation. *30 x 60 Minute Grid Series* (Fig. 5 and 6) was thought out over months of driving back and forth between the university and home. The patchwork of asphalt beneath me displayed degradation from shifts in the earth and weather working to break it down in opposition to human attempts at control. I wanted to convey the push and pull between two forces.

Working within the dichotomy of negative and positive space, I chose the asphalt for its strong black formal quality. I wanted to use this blackness as a ground to contrast with other elements. I focus on black and white photography because of its attention to texture and gradated tone. Interestingly, I also look at the converse aspect of representing tone in printmaking. In printmaking, tone is created through breaking up a flat solid mass of ink. Lines and dots of varying sizes and densities are used to accomplish the sense of value. In its simplest form, black ink on a white paper is stark and graphic.

The white of the Great Salt Lake salt compliments the black of the asphalt. I had considered using samples of earth from the dry segments of Great Salt Lake and the Great Basin to dust the asphalt. The salt quickly became the better option for this piece for many reasons including its formal quality in presenting the negative/positive concept. The salt is one of Great Salt Lake's defining characteristics. Salt and minerals are mined by humans through diking off sections of the lake into evaporation ponds. Salt is associated with savor and purity. The high concentration of salt in Great Salt Lake is a remnant of Lake Bonneville and its distillation over millennia. It is a key element to the habitat and ecosystem of Great Salt Lake.

Great Salt Lake has reached record low elevations. This is caused in part naturally by drought. However, there is also no question of the human impact. The three rivers that feed the Lake (Bear, Weber, and Jordan) are diverted and syphoned off into agricultural canals and residential irrigation systems. Much of the water never reaches the lake.

IV. Suspension

Suspension is composed from collected natural elements in ready-made bottles. The five 3-gallon glass carboy water bottles are filled with water from Great Salt Lake and its tributary rivers: The Bear, the Weber, and the Jordan (Figs. 7-11). I chose to hang the bottles to create a dialogue of tension psychologically within the viewer. The tension brings an awareness to the viewer of their physical interaction within the space as they move around, over, under, and through the work and gallery space (Fig. 12). I feel a personal psychological or emotional tension as Great Salt Lake dries up. In hanging the bottles, I am asking a question of balance—balance between nature and man. The literal suspension of the bottles reinforces linguistic definitions of the word. There is a suspension of salt and organisms within the water. This extends to the suspension and balance of where Great Salt Lake sits today. It is in the process of drying up. Great Salt Lake is something present in the process of becoming absent.

At the mouth of each tributary river there is a bird refuge or waterfowl management area. These areas are a developed set of dikes designed to create ponds to hold and reserve water for birds. However, once you cross the last dike of these preserves, you come to a dried plain or mud flat rather than a lake body. I am interested in this disconnect of body and source. I link this to history, the archive, and memory. Our histories and memories are only slices of the whole of actual events. The bottled water acts as a preserved specimen.

The pink water from the north arm of Great Salt Lake is caused by red algae, the only thing that can live in the extremely saline water (Figs. 10 and 12). The north arm is saltier than the rest of Great Salt Lake because it has been cut off from the fresh water supply of the lake inlets by a man-made dike. The Lucin cut-off was built to carry the railroad over, rather than around, the Lake. I hoped to capture some of this dynamic by showing both the pink water from

the north arm and the cloudy white saline water from the south. I also knew that the river water would visually contrast in appearance. Crossing through the Jordan Narrows, the Jordan river is very green. The other rivers also take on a dilute green hue quite opposite of the pale red of the sectioned terminus. Merely adding the three river concoctions together would not create the lake water. There is another element at play – time. The salt of Great Salt Lake is a collection and distillation of Lake Bonneville over the past 16,000 or more years.

V. History/Prehistory

The oldest shoreline of Lake Bonneville is the Stansbury, aged at about 23,000 years before present time (B.P.T.). It is smaller than the more prominent Bonneville shoreline aged at about 16,000 B.P.T. *History/Prehistory* presents the eight dominant shorelines ranging from 5020 feet above sea level to the previous historic low of 4191 feet above sea level recorded in 1963 (Figs. 13-21). Great Salt Lake's record low elevation has been broken since completion of this artwork. The ghosted images created by the un-inked and unprinted collotype plates depict this drastic change over time. Time is a key element of photography. I wanted to use a photographic process to emphasize the aspect of time. The collotype process utilizes a bichromated gelatin that hardens when exposed to light. The unexposed gelatin remains hydroscopic, taking on water and causing the gelatin to swell and reticulate. This is similar to the presence of water in the land. The reticulation looks and acts similar to the reticulated surface of water in a lake or to the reticulated earth formed by water washing over and depositing sediments. I am using this as a conceptual connection between process and theme of the artwork, not purely formally and aesthetically.

The faint green of the glass compliments the rust color of the steel railroad tie plate. The glass acts as a slide, photographic or scientific, containing a faint image of the past. The gelatin matrix is sandwiched with a mirror to bring light into and through the glass plates. This creates a sense of looking through, like looking into water or condensation on glass. I wanted the viewer to have to address the work, and search for the graphic images contained in the glass. As the viewer shifts angles of view, the shorelines appear and fade leaving the viewer facing a murky reflection of themselves. There is a subtle confrontation in the glass. It has a fragility, an airiness, and a fleeting or fragile aspect.

The steel tie plate (Figs. 13-21) is a ready-made removed from its use as a buffer between iron rail and wooden tie. This function of buffer is kept as the plate holds the glass in place but separate from the gallery wall. The smaller plate size, 8.5 x 6 inches, most likely came from a mine track. I view the railroad and mining as great agents of human change upon the land, particularly in the West. The steel railroad salvage is an element referencing that change and interaction of humans with the land. The ghost plates present a graphic history of the past while the artifact tie plates bring in the direct presence of industry. They are relics from one of the Industrial Revolution's greatest inventions, the railroad. One connection I have mentioned is the railroad dike across Great Salt Lake and its current interaction with the lake.

VI. Lake Bonneville Remnants

I am interested in the cutting off points of dikes and dams. Dams create an artificial wetness and dryness. The land is covered and exposed, absent and present in very stark ways at these points. As Lake Bonneville receded, it was broken up by natural dams, some built by Lake Bonneville's own actions. For the *Lake Bonneville Remnants* set of Artist Books, I visited a number of these geographic locations. Each of the six books contains a panorama taken from one of these locations (Figs. 22-27). At its peak elevation Lake Bonneville was contained by a natural dam at Red Rock Pass, Idaho. This dam broke catastrophically, sending a flood into the Snake River and out to the Pacific Ocean. As the water receded it eventually was confined once more to the Great Basin. The Stockton Bar and Steep Mountain are large sand deposits that built up and created divides between valleys. At Long Divide the lake washed over the hills joining Cache and Salt Lake Valleys. At the Threshold and Old River Bed the water more slowly settled away as the water evaporated.

The photographs show places empty of water, an absence and negative space. I used the panorama to suggest being surrounded or seeing in full circle. For me, the circle connects to time and references the outward perspective of being on a lake surrounded by shoreline. It also references the compass, which I used to direct the camera. The panoramas consist of twelve 4 x 5 inch silver gelatin negatives taken at 30 degree intervals. The negatives are contact printed using the Kallitype process. This photo process allowed me to use my choice of paper, Arches Text Laid (I use the chain lines as a reference to the grid), a paper with a good wet strength that holds the emulsion, folds well, and also takes ink well. I chose the Kallitype process because it is an iron process – again connecting to iron and industry. I wanted to use a historic process as a reference to the early expeditions that explored and photographed the West. This body of my

artwork involved my own discovery and pilgrimage as an attempt to understand place and my connection to it.

I have been able to watch Great Salt Lake recede over a relatively short period of time. I grew up with the remnant marks of Lake Bonneville ever present in the landscape. It has only been since beginning this project that I have come to recognize those marks and what they are record of. I am drawn to the book format because of its references to history and the archive. For centuries the technology of the book has been a repository for information. Books are a connection to the past, a form of memory. This works well with the references I am making to geologic memory and slowness of geologic time as I look at the marks left by prehistoric Lake Bonneville.

The outside imagery of the books repeats the graphic depiction of each major shoreline, showing the declination of Lake Bonneville and Great Salt Lake. The lakes and shorelines are printed in a subtle gray ink (Figs. 22-27). The gray ink is made from Great Salt Lake earth taken from the exposed lake bed at Rosel Point. I made all of my ink for the books. This is important to me so that I can control the pigment and use the pigment as a symbolic element with meaning rather than purely for its aesthetic color choice. I dried, ground and sifted the earth to create a workable particle size. The pigment is mixed with a varnish of burnt plate oil, colophony and local beeswax. This way I was able to again bring sense of place into the work and gallery. The use of earth pigments is as old as painting. However, I think it is something unique to utilize a pigment because it came from a certain place, and to view it as embedding that place into the work. Color rendition typically determines the pigment used. Land Art emphasizes the use of natural and raw materials. For *Lake Bonneville Remnants* I wanted to bring elements from or related to a specific place into the gallery.

The black ink used for the cover text is made with a black iron oxide pigment (Figs. 22, 23, 24, 27). For the red of the coordinate marks I used a red iron oxide transfer paper to make what I call letterpress transfers (Figs. 22-27). This prints a simple raw pigment rather than ink with its constituent parts. I have used the iron to symbolize a connection with the industrial. It plays that role in contrast to the organic earth pigment. I also used iron for the coordinates as a reference to magnetism and its control of the compass. Magnetism is an unseen force that presents itself in the action of the compass. The compass is a tool used in connection with maps to determine location and direction. This becomes important in a sense that I am looking for an understanding of place, presence, and location.

VII. Contextualization/Conclusion

My work looks at the land and landscape, drawing from the tradition of Erdlebenbildkunst and Land Art. Erlebenbildkunst is a term created by Carl Gustav Carus in the early to mid 1800s to describe a style of landscape painting that depicts the history of the earth rather than the history of man. This style looks at geologic elements that present the slow time of nature instead of the impermanent time of man. I have integrated my interest in slow time verses the fleeting moment into this body of work, bringing the concepts of Erdlebenbildkunst into a contemporary context.

The photographs in *Lake Bonneville Remnants* emphasize this perspective. I drew from the methodology of Bernd and Hilde Becher in capturing these images, giving each location an equal treatment as I sought to bring in a comparative aspect to each panorama and unite the remaining evidence of prehistoric Lake Bonneville.

Working with the photograph, I am aware of the aspect of the archive and the play between archival and ephemeral. This is strongly referenced in my choice of process and materials. In conjunction with photography, I work with printmaking and the book arts. Printing has been called the Art preservative of all Arts. The book carries its own connotations in regard to the archive and memory. The book arts can be used to create interactive tactile experiences that go beyond the purely visual.

The Land Art movement emphasizes the use of land within artwork, a shift from merely representing land as in traditional landscape painting. Early artists in this movement are Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, and Walter De Maria. Smithson is best known for his work *Spiral Jetty*. I have visited *Spiral Jetty* a number of times throughout my life. Over the past few years I have seen more people coming to the Jetty. It was once a place of great solitude for me. The road

has been improved and it is now rare for me to be the only person there. I have observed other people and their interactions with the Jetty. Inevitably at some point visitors walk off the Jetty and out past, to the lake. The Lake draws them in, in the same way I think it drew Smithson in. I admit my visits to Rosel Point have become less about the Jetty and more and more about the lake. When the water was higher, filling up around the Jetty, the jetty was a way of accessing the lake and points within the lake, a way to surround oneself with the lake. As the lake has dried this access has been lost. The Jetty has lost its interaction with the water of Great Salt Lake.

Smithson was interested in ideas of entropy. The current drying of the lake and exposure of the Jetty fit with this theory. The spiral of the Jetty has filled with sand as the water washed into it. The structure is eroded and eroding into what may one day become desert playa. Smithson explored entropy in his works where he poured materials down a hill. Smithson chose materials that would set or harden as they flowed. Smithson used concrete, glue, and asphalt. I draw from Smithson's choice of and use of materials. I use asphalt, although not as a display of entropy. For me asphalt is a symbol and formal element. I also use it as a reference to printmaking and photography through their connection with bitumen. *30 x 60 Minute Grid Series* doubly references Smithson with the use of white salt covering black, as has occurred at stages in time as *Spiral Jetty* has interacted with Great Salt Lake. I am looking at Great Salt Lake and how it has been acted upon by humans. I also look at Great Salt Lake as a remnant of something greater, lost over time—Lake Bonneville. I am interested in how that greater lake shaped the land and created a place that is now inhabited by millions of people. What things did it leave that define our human interactions with the land. What does it mean to be living on an ancient lake bed, a place once filled with water that has become empty, a desert, a void.

Michael Heizer seems to have mastered the theory of the void, and possibly even authored its use within contemporary art. For *Double Negative*, Heizer dug a massive rectangular void into the earth. Dirt and debris have over time fallen in from the exposed earthen walls leaving *Double Negative* not as pristinely chiseled as it once was. The creation of form through negative space and the void has become one of his signatures. Heizer has explored this basic principle of art – Negative/Positive Space – in depth. I have been working with a similar duality within my work. I focused on the idea of water or absence and presence of water. I looked at the remnant geologic marks of Lake Bonneville, a once present lake that has shaped and left a void or absence within the now desert landscape. The definition of desert is an absence of water.

While the artists of the Land Art movement often created artwork outside of the gallery in the land, they also created works for the gallery. These artists used earth elements to create works, bringing materials such as dirt into the Gallery. Walter de Maria filled a gallery with soil for his work *Earth Room*. Smithson used gravel and sand in his gallery pieces, or non-sites as he called them. Many other Land Artists have also brought these materials into the gallery. I wanted to utilize this methodology, bringing elements of a specific place into the gallery. For *Suspension* I brought lake and river water into the gallery. I also brought in salt from the shore of Great Salt Lake. I used earth from the lake bed as a pigment made into ink.

For the glass bottles and tie plates, I followed more of a Duchampian method using found or sourced objects. This brings in an element of collection, that also references Mark Dion. His works often involve collections and elements of scientific research or investigation. I also think of the works by Hannah Hoch and Gerhard Richter involving image collections. *Ghost Water* is my own collection and curation as I look to understand the connection between self and place as it pertains to conceptual and physical themes of Great Salt Lake. I am still

working with these issues as a conceptual ground for my work and will continue to investigate this set of materials. I have not yet exhausted its possibilities or concluded my investigation of the topics addressed in the *Ghost Water* Exhibition.

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Works List:

Lake Bonneville Remnants

Series of six Artist Books

Kallitype Prints, Paper, Iron Oxide, Great Salt Lake Earth

5 1/16 x 4 1/16 x 3/8 in. Closed

Approx. 15 in. Diameter Open

Red Rock Pass

Long Divide

The Threshold

Old River Bed

Stockton Bar

Steep Mountain

History/Prehistory

Iron, Glass, Gelatin

Eight 8 1/2 x 6 in. Panels

Stansbury ~ 23,000 B.P.T.

Bonneville ~ 16,000 B.P.T.

Provo ~ 13,000 B.P.T.

Gilbert ~ 10,000 B.P.T.

Late Prehistoric High ~ 1700 A.D.

Historic High – 1873

Historic Average - 1851

Historic Low - 1963

Works list Continued:

Suspension

Glass, Lake & River Water
Five 16 1/2 x 9 in. Jars

GSL - North Arm
GSL - South Arm
Jordan River
Weber River
Bear River

30 x 60 Minute Grid Series

Asphalt, Iron Frame, Great Salt Lake Salt
Four 30 x 60 in. Slabs



Figure 1: *Ghost Water Exhibition*
Overview of gallery installation showing:
Lake Bonneville Remnants, 30 x 60 Minute Grid Series, and Suspension.



Figure 2: *Ghost Water Exhibition*
Overview of gallery installation showing:
Lake Bonneville Remnants, 30 x 60 Minute Grid Series, and History/Prehistory.



Figure 3: *Ghost Water Exhibition*
Overview of gallery installation showing:
Lake Bonneville Remnants, 30 x 60 Minute Grid Series, and Suspension.



Figure 4: *Ghost Water Exhibition*
Overview of gallery installation showing:
Lake Bonneville Remnants, 30 x 60 Minute Grid Series, and History/Prehistory.



Figure 5: *30 x 60 Minute Grid Series*
Installation view with four panels.



Figure 6: *30 x 60 Minute Grid Series*
Installation view with four panels.



Figure 7: *Suspension*
Bear River



Figure 8: *Suspension*
Weber River



Figure 9: *Suspension*
Jordan River



Figure 10: *Suspension*
GSL North Arm



Figure 11: *Suspension*
GSL Main Body



Figure 12: *Suspension*
Installation view with all five bottles. Great Salt Lake North Arm is in the forefront.



Figure 13: *History/Prehistory*
Installation view of all eight panels.



Figure 14: *History/Prehistory*
Stansbury ~ 23,000 B.P.T.



Figure 15: *History/Prehistory*
Bonneville ~ 16,000 B.P.T.



Figure 16: *History/Prehistory*
Provo ~ 13,000 B.P.T.



Figure 17: *History/Prehistory*
Gilbert ~ 10,000 B.P.T.



Figure 18: *History/Prehistory*
Late Prehistoric High ~
1700 A.D.



Figure 19: *History/Prehistory*
Historic High - 1873



Figure 20: *History/Prehistory*
Historic Average - 1851



Figure 21: *History/Prehistory*
Historic Low - 1963



Figure 22: *Lake Bonneville Remnants*
Stockton Bar



Figure 23: *Lake Bonneville Remnants*
The Threshold



Figure 24: *Lake Bonneville Remnants*
Old River Bed



Figure 25: *Lake Bonneville Remnants*
Red Rock Pass



Figure 26: *Lake Bonneville Remnants*
Steep Mountain



Figure 27: *Lake Bonneville Remnants*
Long Divide



Figure 28: *Ghost Water Exhibition*
Overview of gallery installation showing:
Lake Bonneville Remnants, 30 x 60 Minute Grid Series, and Suspension.



Figure 29: *Ghost Water Exhibition*
Overview of gallery installation showing:
Lake Bonneville Remnants, 30 x 60 Minute Grid Series, and History/Prehistory.