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STUDIO VISIT

Jill O'Bryan

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WORDS
CLAYTON PORTER AND
LAUREN TRESP

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Jill O'Bryan, 2017. Photo: Clayton Porter

Jill O’Bryan spends her winters in New York and her summers perched high in the desert on a remote mesa outside of Las Vegas, New Mexico. She has been trekking back and forth, from coastal city grid to off-grid entirely, for twenty years, and for twenty years has sought a personal, physical relationship with the desert, its big skies and elusive waters.

Her artistic career has tracked from beginnings in more traditional landscape painting, to abstracted, internalized landscapes, to conceptual doctoral work in academia, and now, back down to earth and body, to mark making that embeds the landscape into paper rather than describes it. Her work converses in material residues: of breath, body, sky, water, stone, paper. The series of works we discussed during our recent studio visit includes large-scale ink-on-paper drawings made by pooling ink on paper that is cupped by the rock, or by frottage, rubbings made on the earth. We also discussed her small scale “breath drawings,” in which O’Bryan makes a single stroke for every breath she takes, saturating the paper with graphite to the point of textured fraying.

O’Bryan has an upcoming exhibition at Margarete Roeder Gallery in New York, February 27-March 24, 2018, and an exhibition at Texas State Galleries in fall of 2018. A catalogue accompanying her exhibition Mapping Resonance at the Center for Contemporary Arts Santa Fe (January 13-March 12, 2017) will be available at CCA later this month.

Lauren Tresp: How long have you been coming up here?

Jill O'Bryan: Twenty years.

LT: What was it like, from the beginning?

JO'B: I was overwhelmed by the desert. I had always lived on the coast and needed to find a way to connect with the land. Eventually, these frottage drawings came, but I wasn't really intending to make big drawings when I started them. I thought, "Okay, I've got to find a way to connect with this land. I'll just go outside and lie down on it." So I brought some big pieces of paper outside, put them on the ground, and lying down on them, started making these drawings. It was a real attempt to connect. Now I love the desert.



Studio Photo: Clayton Porter

LT: How long did it take to love it?

JO'B: I was out here for a couple of years, feeling pretty uncomfortable. Not quite knowing how to deal with not having water. But [look] in the sky. The water is there. When I first had the idea to go out and lie down on the land, I had been reading [Leonardo] da Vinci's notebooks, and there he alludes to the shape of the air—the [shape of] the sky is revealed to us by the [surfaces of large bodies of] water. So I was thinking about how the sky comes all the way down to the ground, how the air just above the water is also sky. How those two forces are so dynamic when they meet up against one another.

What if I think of the sky as coming all the way down to the ground and trying to somehow be in that place where those two forces meet? What's that like?

I thought, "What if I think of the sky as coming all the way down to the ground and trying to somehow be in that place where those two forces meet? What's that like? Is there something there?" I made the paper conform to the shape of the rocks and began to draw on the paper to reveal the interaction. The frottages are really incisions between the rocks and my body, or ultimately between the rocks and the sky. For me they take the place of water.

Clayton Porter: So that was twenty years ago?

JO'B: No, I was finishing up a doctoral program at NYU, so I spent the first two summers finishing my dissertation. I started the frottages about ten years ago—the first ones are from 2006. I did them for a couple years, then stopped. When I started again, in addition to the graphite frottages, I began an ink series called "on, and just above the ground." These ink drawings are about being out on the rocks, but they're not recordings of them. They're more intuitive renderings of what's out there.

I see them as *animus*, because they've really become figures that I glean from drawing out [on the rock ledge]. I started looking at petroglyphs and rock drawings and reading about the primal nature of that work as not about the surfaces of the rocks or the paintings themselves, but about images gleaned from inside the rock and inside the head, a merging of those two. I love that idea. Looking at the rocks [that I draw on] is almost like standing in front of petroglyphs that aren't there yet: the drawings don't have to be there. It just feels primal. I try to cultivate this relationship I have with the rocks, with the land, as much as I can.



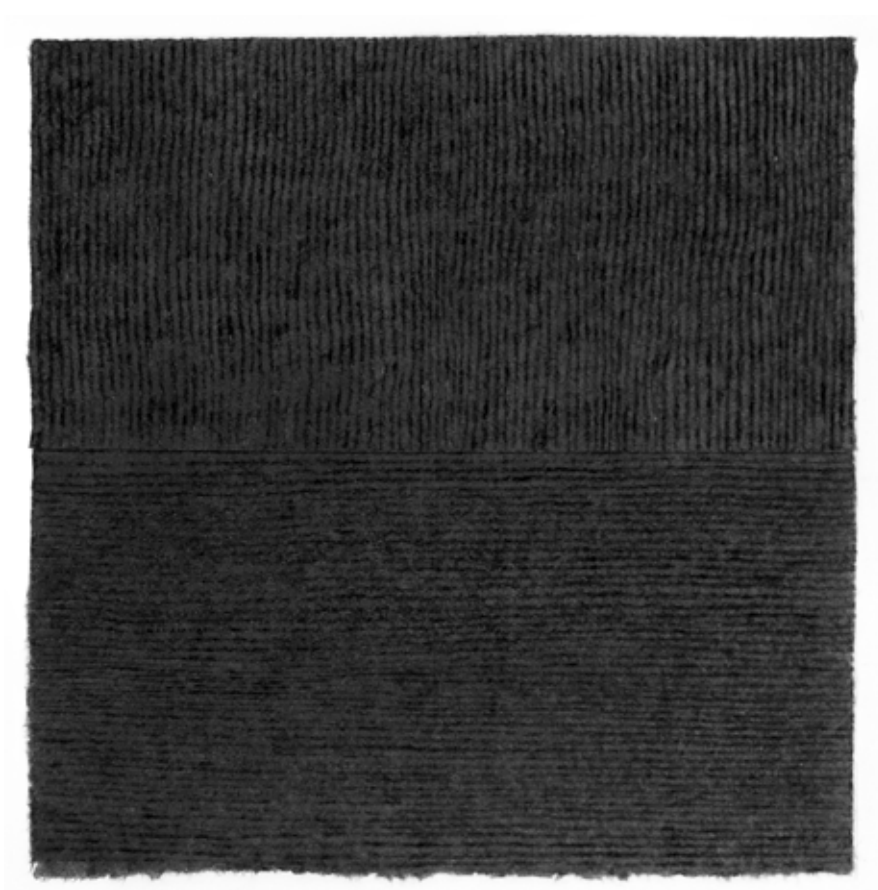
Jill O'Bryan, nm.12.16, India ink and coal on paper, 120 x 72 in.

LT: What was your graduate work dealing with?

JO'B: My path to art making has been a bit jagged, but in hindsight I see a clear progression from looking outside to looking inside. I made landscapes and portraits when I was an undergrad. I spent a year at the Marchutz School of Painting in southern France. There I learned to see; I learned about color and line. I learned to draw. And it is there also that I learned that looking "at" something to paint meant seeing it from the inside. Landscapes are not just about landscape, they are about seeing light and getting it down in a kind of perfect, prickly, magical way very difficult to do. Getting my MFA, I wanted to focus internally, and to "push paint," and really learn about making paintings. For the most part, these were very organic abstract paintings in blacks and earth tones that referred to internal, cave-like spaces.

When I decided to go to NYU, I was searching for a conceptual backbone for that work. I was really lucky to have access to all of the creative thinking going on at NYU at that time. I ended up writing about feminist performance art and the relationship of the body to individual identity.

Back in New Mexico, I returned to the studio, and didn't really know what to do. I started making marks on sheets of paper, left to right, top to bottom. I realized that each mark I was making correlated to a breath, and that's how the breath drawings started. Those were the first things that came out of that work.



Jill O'Bryan, 13,280 Breaths between August 12 and September 30, 2012, graphite on rice paper, 16 x 16 in.



Jill O'Bryan, nm.7.16, graphite on paper, 72 x 120 in.

LT: So that came organically, because it seems like it must be so disciplined. But it doesn't sound that way.

JO'B: It actually came organically, yes. And I was so pleased: it was a huge breakthrough for me. Ironically, the breath concept came out of the body and not out of the mind, which is, of course, how it works. Concepts imposed from the outside have never worked for me. It took five years to make the first breath drawing and they have changed significantly over the years—and are still changing.

LT: Maybe it's a New Mexico sensibility, because people tend to live more in their bodies here—as opposed to living in a city full time. Here, I think there are different considerations.

JO'B: That's a great observation. It's true. Compatible with being out here and feeling the land is a more acute awareness of being in the body, for sure. I feel like I have a really intense awareness of having a body. These breath drawings have also become the backbone of my studio practice. I always have one going so that I can walk into my studio and begin working at any point in time. It's very important to me. They keep me focused.

CP: It's intriguing that the body work came from that sense of tension that was happening. Do you find that working in the studio throughout your career, there has been that struggle? It sounds like these bodies of work came from that birthplace.

JO'B: It happens throughout my practice. I'm going through one of those times of tension right now. I'm trying to push what I'm doing a little further.

CP: So you feel like you got to that spot?

JO'B: It's a feeling that it's time to be in that really uncomfortable place again and push forward with something else. What that is, I don't know yet.

CP: Now, you have work hanging in the studio. You make the drawings outside and bring them in. Is it for you to contemplate the trajectory?

JO'B: No, but I have to live with them, you know? And sometimes they die on the wall.

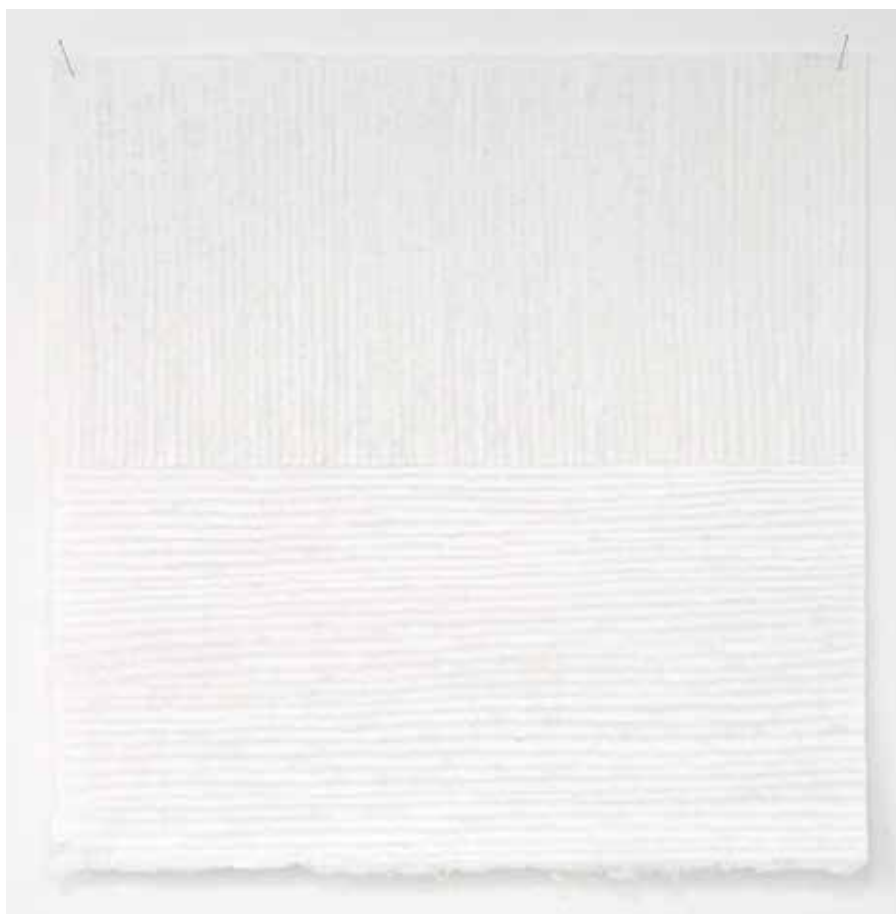
CP: Do they?

JO'B: They do. And then I burn them. I just did a breath drawing in white, which I've never done before, and I like it. I like that it pushes the formality of the process. There's this grinding in. There's also an allusion to a residue that's a different shape.

CP: Do you focus on the breath work in New York?

JO'B: I do those drawings and a lot of experimentation there.

CP: Do you still have a sensibility to connect philosophical thought patterns with your work?



Jill O'Bryan, 13,290 breaths between June 13 and September 15, 2017

JO'B: Yes, but at this point philosophical sensibility comes through more in the process of making the breath drawings. I would call my work performative, of the body, intuitive. I am reaching for something primal but also of the intellect.

This summer I'm reading John Cage's letters [The Selected Letters of John Cage]. His struggles and his inner thinking really access the tension between creativity and intellectual thinking. He rides that line in perfect synchronicity. I experience a drive to merge the intuitive with the intellectual. To a certain degree my work always comes out of this desire. So while I really rely on my own body's relationship to being on the ground, surrounded by air, my experience of this is totally enriched by research about Buddhism, the history of eastern philosophical thought, and an amalgamation of everything else I've accumulated over the years. Of the intuitive and the intellectual, one directs the other, but it's my experience that leads me to where to begin. I know where to go to dig.



Studio photo, 2017, Clayton Porter

CLAYTON PORTER

Clayton Porter is an artist living and working in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

LAUREN TRESP

Lauren Tresp is the editor and publisher of THE Magazine. She has a Master of Arts in Humanities from the University of Chicago, where she studied Medieval and Renaissance Art History, and a Bachelor of Arts in Art History and History from UCLA.

Edited for brevity by Jill O'Bryan.