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**Returning to Water:
Understanding Place as Cultural Lens**

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Returning to Water: Understanding Place as Cultural Lens

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Abstract

Water is Life. For millennia people have returned to lakes, rivers and oceans for inspiration, exchange and rejuvenation. Waters are repositories of memories, stories and teachings. We navigate by water and it marks for us both direction and time. The personality, presence or absence of water shapes the sense of a place. Numerous great works of art, literature, film and poetry have carried water themes. This paper describes a new body of my artwork inspired by a specific lake, how I have combined visual information from various disciplines, and how the work reflects on human relationships with water.

The Great Lakes collectively hold a fifth of the world's fresh water. Currently our fresh waters and our seas are experiencing mounting threats from aquatic and plant invasive species, chemical pollutants and an ever more demanding human population. As an artist, designer and an educator, I often seek to raise awareness of socio-political, cultural, and environmental issues. Cultural identity is rooted in the sense of 'home'. My own sense of place, my sense of 'home' is the Western Great Lakes and particularly Lake Michigan. This body of work examines our vital connections to water and cultural beliefs of ownership and notions about 'home.'

The work consists of twelve installations and a single-channel video documenting specific locations around Lake Michigan. Multilayered digital prints are the focal points for installation. These utilize photography, cartography and scientific and historical documents to evoke a deeper connection to the Lake and a sense of time. Vials of water, sand, pebbles, rocks—bits of detritus—and a contoured shelf describing the lakeshore at the location, accompanies each print. The series of twelve represents both a physical journey circumnavigating Lake Michigan and a spiritual journey finding my home.

Keywords: Art, design, water, mapping, place, culture, digital, prints, video, environment, nature, lens

Acknowledgments: My thanks to the American Geological Society and Map Collection, Golda Meier library in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA for historic map images.

Introduction

There is a Greek term “hierophany” —from *hieros*, meaning “sacred” and *phainein* meaning “to reveal” or “to bring to light”—that signifies a manifestation of the sacred.

Water is sacred. For millennia humans have returned to lakes, rivers and oceans for inspiration, exchange and rejuvenation. Waters are repositories of memories, stories and teachings. We navigate by water and it marks for us both direction and time. The personality, presence or absence of water shapes the sense of a place. The idiosyncrasies of place, in turn, shape the culture.

A sense of place comes from understanding where you are, the land, its character. Knowing a ‘home’ means connecting to place, finding a center. In his book, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, Mircea Eliade writes, “The manifestation of the sacred ontologically founds the world. In the homogeneous and infinite expanse, in which no point of reference is possible and hence no orientation can be established, the hierophany reveals an absolute fixed point, a center.”¹ In my art I seek to embody this—to reveal what is sacred in our natural world.

In this paper I will outline my investigations into water, place, culture and ownership. More specifically I will describe the methods I used to document place and build my artwork. Along the way I will share some of my influences and inspirations and how I connect the viewer with different interpretations of place and point to the power water has in our lives.

Text

Context

North America’s Great Lakes collectively holds a fifth of the world’s fresh water. These five lakes spanning two countries are experiencing mounting threats. Aquatic and plant invasive species have a stranglehold on the Great Lakes and nearby wetland environments. Quagga and Zebra Mussels have filtered out much of the food for other fish species. Phragmites, Spotted Knapweed and the Canada Thistle, to name just a few of the invasive plants, are crowding out existing species. In his book, *The Great Lakes: The Natural Environment of a Changing Region*, Wayne Grady states, “So many invasive aquatic plant and animal species have moved into the Great Lakes Ecoregion that some biologists argue that it is now a man-made aquaculture system.”² Chemical industrial and agricultural run-offs are causing super surges in nitrogen levels precipitating algae blooms of outrageous proportions and robbing native species of habitat and food.

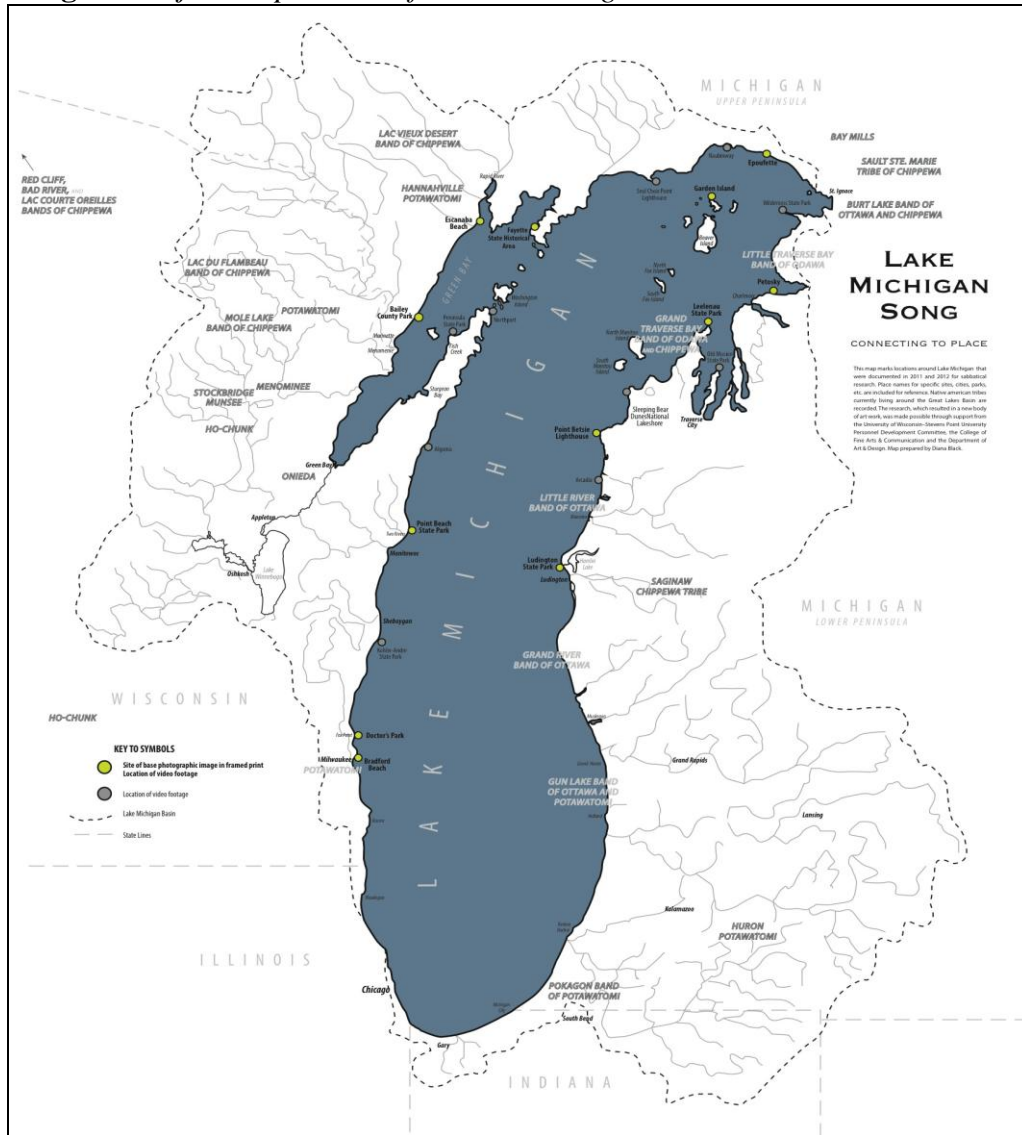
A burgeoning human population, ever more thirsty, and larger scale corporate operations are leading us toward dire problems in the water systems.

Journeys to Water

During 2011 and 2012 I completed a journey around the northern section of Lake Michigan—the second largest of the American Great Lakes and the one closest to my home. Throughout the trip I collected information about the lake, learning how people use it, how they know it, the history and the current dangers facing it.

As I traveled I documented the lakeshore with photography and video and collected samples of water and shore. For my research I charted the places visited during my circumnavigation around the lake. A map identifying the sites I documented was produced. The map shows the lake’s shoreline, as well as the Basin area associated with it. State borders and place names of major cities are demarcated. The map also identifies the contemporary tribal areas of Native Americans. (See Image 1)

Image 1. Project Map Created for Lake Michigan Research



Methods / Sifting and Constructing

Sifting through the material I collected, I developed and built a body of artwork based on my research. I worked in print and with video.

The print pieces all started with a photograph of a particular site on the lakeshore. A photograph only documents a moment of time at a certain place within a specific cultural context. It was my intention to generate investigation of place through time, and through culture.

I am interested in reframing the idea of scenery or landscape from different perspectives. To this end visual information related to separate areas of specialization or discipline was used to build layers of content. Historical images, scientific data sets, cartographic images, and line drawing diagrams were added digitally to draw viewers' attention away from the photo. Here is an example of the process.

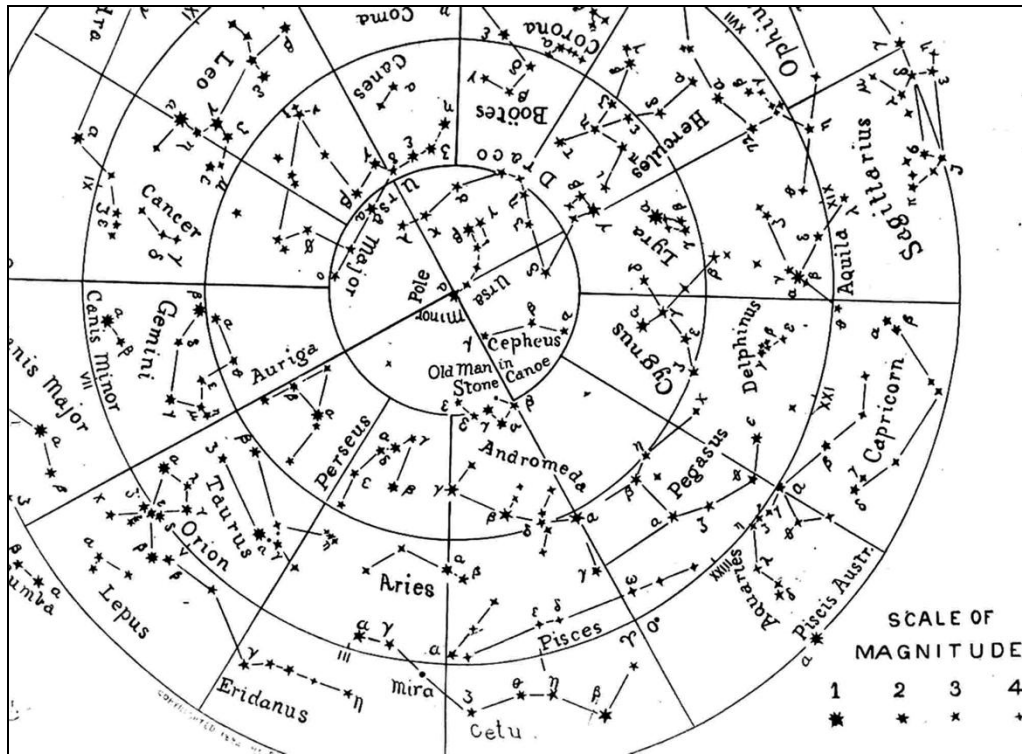
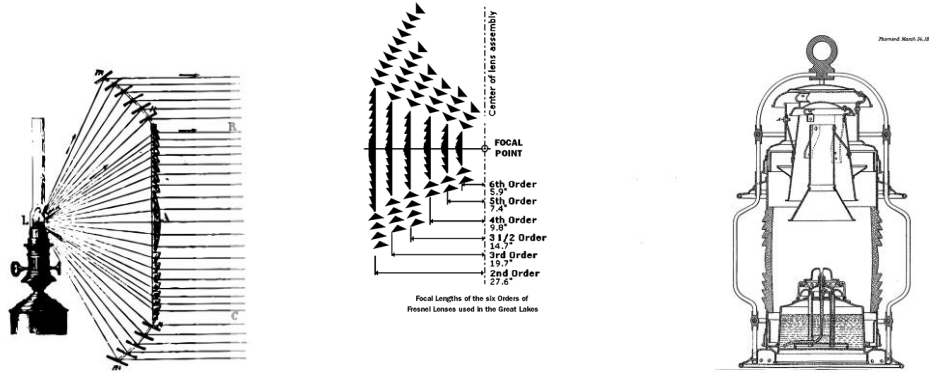
Image 2. *Photograph of Beach Shoreline at Leelenau State Park in Michigan, near its Lighthouse*



Leelenau State Park in Michigan is a significant place for a number of reasons. For the native cultures this important place lies close to a protected region where numerous sources for good medicine grow. For the European settler cultures this place boasted one of the first high-powered lighthouse beacons in the area. They used a Fresnel lens to send light further into the darkness.

The diagrams I superimposed on the photo are of a Star chart and several schematic diagrams depicting the lamp and lenses and actions of this device. Specifically the images are of a Fresnel lantern and light refraction patterns, Fresnel lens Orders, and a patent drawing that includes a dome enclosure. (See Images 3-6.)

Images 3-6. (from top left). *Diagram Showing Pattern of Refraction of Light with Fresnel Lens; Diagram Showing Orders of Fresnel Lenses; Patent Drawing for Fresnel Lantern; Star Chart Showing Constellations*



Starlight and the constellations worked well as navigational tool for the ancient explorers away from shore. The lighthouse with its modernized methods of warning guided sailors safely around hazardous rocky shoals. Layered together the piece possesses more visual depth and intellectual points of entry for deciphering meaning. (See Image 7.) By using multiple layers of information i am signaling the dynamic nature of place, through time, and through disparate cultures.

Image 7. *Detail Area of Completed Digital Print Documenting Leelenau State Park in Michigan*



Another example of my work showing the information layering is the print representing Fayette State Park, a Historical Place in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. (See Image 8.)

Once this was the site of a noted iron-smelting operation. After the American Civil War, nearly 500 residents lived here servicing the furnaces to make pig iron. It operated for 24 years producing a total of nearly 230,000 tons of iron.³

The outline map used on this print shows the 1978 locations of various types of mines in the Michigan. (See Image 7) Mining is a hot topic in my state as a 7-mile long open-pit iron ore mine is proposed for land in the northern part of Wisconsin. One of the chief concerns is that the watershed that nourishes the wild rice beds in the Ojibway territories there will be poisoned which would irreversibly alter the native culture for generations to come.

Additional diagrams used here are of the geological strata and the positioning of iron in the strata. (See Images 9-11)

Creating art about these issues is my way of drawing attention to the increasing concerns for the water.

Image 8. *Photograph of Fayette State Park in Michigan, Site of a Large Historic Mining Operation*



Image 9. *Map of Mining Operations in Michigan in 1978*

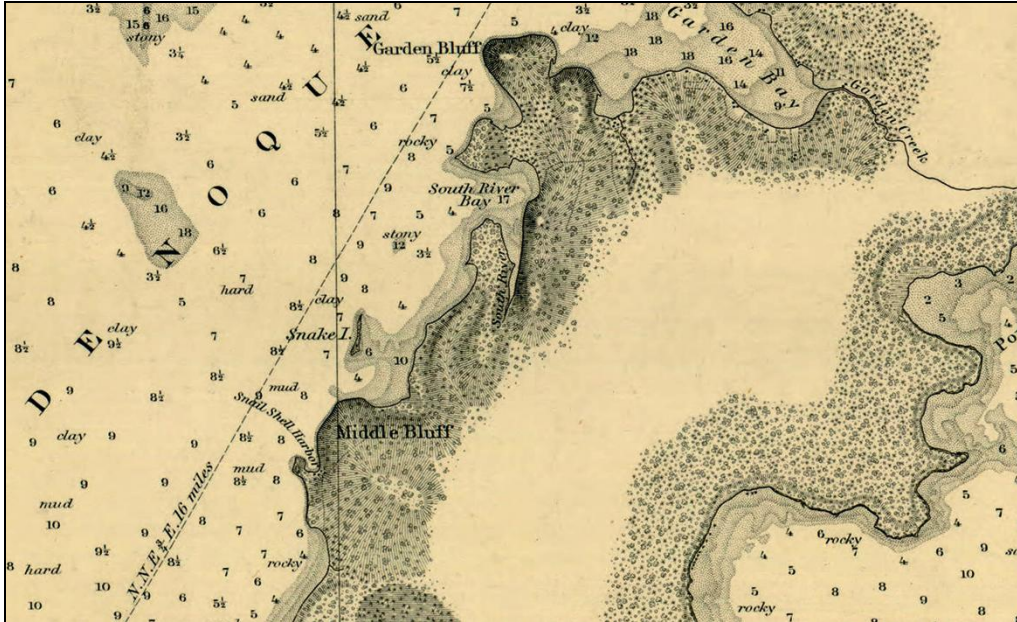
Image 10. *Diagram of Layers of Substrate and Relative Positions of Iron Formations*



Figure 1 - Michigan Mineral Operations - 1978

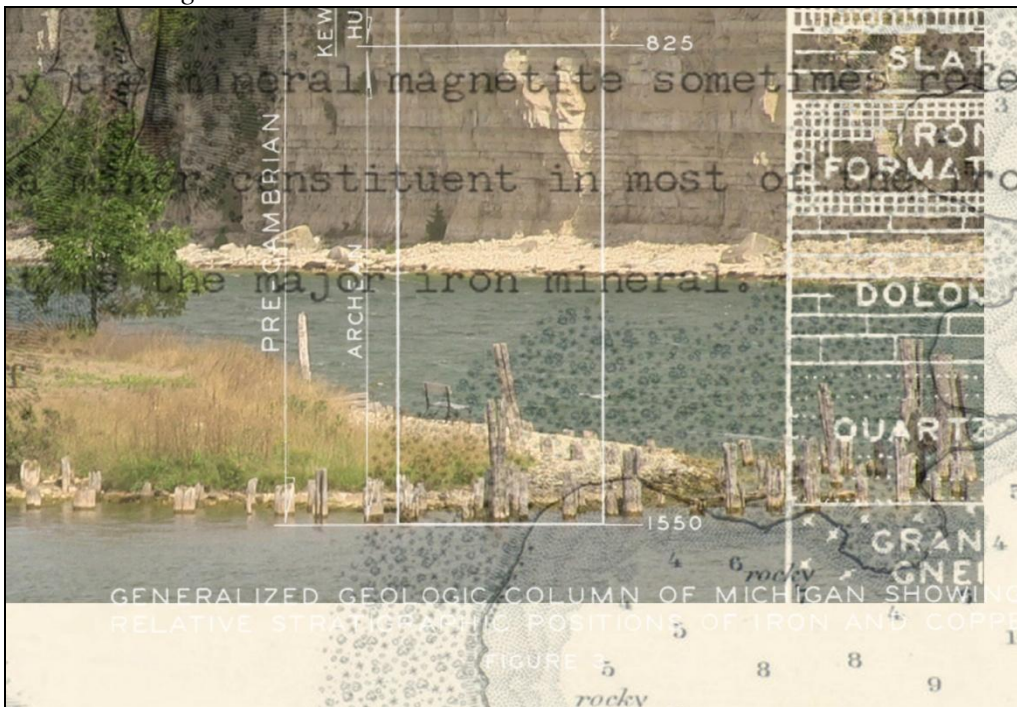


Images 11. Shown is a Section of an Historic map with Bathymetry and Nautical Depths near Fayette in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. circa 1878. Image Provided Courtesy of the American Geological Society Map Collection in the Golda Meier Library in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA



The final digital print melds the photographic image with the map and line art and text. (See Image 12.)

Image 12. Detail Area of Completed Digital Print Documenting Fayette State Park in Michigan



Results / Initial Exhibition

The initial gallery installation of this body of work was called, *Lake Michigan Song: Connecting to Place*, mounted in the Edna Carlsten Art Gallery at University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point in the spring of 2013.

Image 13. *Photograph of Exhibition Poster Created for the Initial Research Results Displayed in the Carlsten Art Gallery, University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point*



Consisting of installations, a single-channel video and a series of maps, the exhibition was meant to stimulate the viewer's nostalgia or longing for water and also probe into beliefs of place and culture. Video footage taken at the lake provided a subtle, yet engaging water soundtrack for the gallery.

Twelve digital prints documenting specific locations at the lake were stationed around the perimeter of the gallery. At each site documented, I collected samples of water, sand, pebbles, rocks and bits of detritus from the area. The water was contained in repurposed glass-stoppered chemistry vials. A shelf describing the lakeshore contours at the location supported each of these.

The sense of place and the sense of the sacred were purposefully elicited in the display of my work. In the gallery the video played in an isolated area with only sounds of the wind, waves, birds and boats to evoke the shore. the print installations were intentionally spaced to allow for reflection on the individual place, much like the Stations of the Cross.

Reflections on Water

Water defines place. It marks for us both direction and time. We locate ourselves in relation to significant bodies of water no matter where we are. In this way we navigate using water and, of course, we also use it as a mode of transportation. Waterways have enabled the spread of ideas and culture throughout human history.

In his essay, 'The River of the Mother of God,' noted naturalist and author, Aldo Leopold frames the idea of seeking to go beyond the familiar place of home and travel is often via water. He writes, "Ever since Paleolithic man became conscious that his own home hunting ground was only a part of a greater world, Unknown Places have been a seemingly fixed fact in human environment, and usually a major influence in human lives. Sumerian tribes venturing the unknown places, found the valley of the Euphrates and an imperial destiny. Phoenician sailors, venturing the unknown seas, found Carthage and Cornwall and established commerce upon the Earth. Hanno, Ulysses, Eric, Columbus—history is but a succession of adventures into the Unknown."⁴

Water sustains life. We—all beings—need it for survival and also renewal, regeneration and rejuvenation. We migrate to the places where there is water. Over the centuries, artists have interpreted water in a multitude of ways, portraying the reflective mirror of calm lakes, the rhythmic meander old rivers, the exuberant energy of waterfalls, and the spectacular power of the world's oceans. Lakes, rivers and oceans are also repositories of memories, stories and teachings. All cultures carry legends of water events and great floods.

Conclusion

Our cultural identities are rooted in the knowledge of 'home.' Home is the place where you belong, a place you are attached to. Through adventure, exploration, into unknown places we can and do expand our idea of culture and understanding of home.

Celebrated geographer and author, Yi-Fu Tuan, has written about the 'sense of place' and the human dimensions of understanding place. In one of his best-known books, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes and Values*, he explores themes of human ecology and our understanding of nature.

On the environment and topophilia he says, "People pay attention to those aspects of the environment that command awe, or promise support and fulfillment in the context of their lives purposes. The images change as people acquire new interests and power, but they are still taken from the environment: facets of the environment previously neglected are now seen in full clarity." He continues referring to early Greece, "the sea had beauty and use...(it was often described as a highway)...but it was also a dark and threatening force..." capable of swallowing ships and sailors.⁵

Water returns to itself. It shapes the rocks and the land and is in turn directed by it. The Great water cycle remains constant, though the cycles

adhered to depend on the environmental norms of each particular place. Like a great Ouroboros it is constantly moving traveling, changing—one moment serene and another treacherous. Water is powerfully symbolic in this fashion, transforming again and again without end, transforming us.

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