The Collapsible Landscape

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Abstract

This MFA project draws upon imagery of the natural environment, primarily geological, to construct imaginary landscapes. These landscapes resist the depiction of any actual site, and instead flex between constructed spatial binaries as seen to exist in nature, focusing on the division (and connection) between terrestrial and cosmic space. With a phenomenological underpinning, processes of assemblage pertinent to painting and drawing reinterpret the generic landscape formation to encourage a holistic vision of the environment. In turn, this project questions how constructing a landscape image ‘collapses’ its natural referent.

Considering the ‘wilderness’ as a pre- or post-apocalyptic site, landscape without a figurative presence becomes the setting for a re-evaluated sublime experience. Here, potential environmental collapse threatens the terrestrial world (as in Jonathon Bordo’s ‘ecological sublime’), expanding our ‘natural’ position into a cosmic field. From this location, internal and external spaces are seen as interconnected. It is therefore through a geological metaphor or ‘mythologem’ that mountains, crystals and minerals are defined as subjects that create connections between these spatial zones.

From this analysis derives a practice that expands and subsides the generic landscape formation through assemblage processes. This is presented in a series of studio investigations (drawing, photographic, sculptural), which pay particular attention to a separation of landscape elements, framing devises and collage techniques. Consequently, these experiments have encouraged a more open and propositional painting practice. In reference to Gilles Deleuze’s interpretation of the Baroque Fold, the work of Per Kirkeby and Laura Owens (among others) reveal a similarly fragmented approach to image making that conjures a flexible pictorial site or threshold.

In summary, the construction of a landscape image subjectifies the natural world, transforming the tangible environment into a vision. From studio experiments, theoretical engagement and visual analysis, this project considers mechanisms for collapsing the natural referent of a landscape image. The fundamental technique utilised in this ‘collapse’ is assemblage: a fragmentary and connective visual process that enables the natural world to be envisioned as ‘siteless’.
Declaration

This is to certify that

(i) the thesis comprises only my original work towards the masters,

(ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,

(iii) the thesis is 14492 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.

Laura Skerlj
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Pierre-Jean Jouve, Lyrique

\textsuperscript{1} Gaston Bachelard, \textit{The Poetics of Space} (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994): 211.
Introduction: The Constellation

Over the course of this project, the image above has been repeatedly assigned to my computer desktop as a vision for an unplanned meditation. It is an old photograph of a collection of objects from the shelf above my bed. These creatures, artefacts and stones collaborated via a careless placement of things to shelves, until one day I saw them as being connected and began moving them around from time to time—so one object could speak to the next, so ‘no one got bored’.

This photograph envisions a changeable micro-landscape. Here, the items on the shelf come together as a constellation of disparate matter; each singular part is connected to the next, and to the whole, through an arbitrary attraction. In this project, landscape adopts a similar quality—there is no actual site to depict, no scene from which to take instruction. Instead, this project examines how constructing a landscape image collapses its original referent, conjuring a ‘siteless’ vision of the natural world.
Chapter One: The Liminal Landscape explores how the visual construction of landscape subjectifies the natural environment. Through defining the wilderness as a site without human presence, this project engages with a pre- or post-apocalyptic condition that reflects a contemporary threat of ecological disaster. From this context, a renewed sublime experience (Jonathan Bordo’s ‘ecological sublime’) positions terrestrial ‘nature’ within an expanded cosmic space.

Chapter Two: An Earthen Universe analyses how mountains, crystals and minerals have been utilised in art practice to create Utopian or imaginary visions. This chapter examines how, through Romantic, Modernist and contemporary incarnations, geological matter has bridged notions of the animate and inanimate, science and aesthetics, the real and the unreal. Consequently, a metaphorical connection is developed between geological subjects and the unknown space of the cosmos.

Chapter Three: Assembling Nature presents a series of practical experiments for collapsing the natural referent found in landscape images. With an aim to no longer represent a specific scene in the environment, this project has devised new methods and practices for re-assembling landscape. In this chapter, practical hypotheses and examples of work are presented in reference to theoretical concerns. The resultant subject combines disparate geological images into a unified pictorial arrangement or ‘assemblage’, resisting the depiction of a tangible natural site.

Finally, Chapter Four: Foldable Terrain reflects upon the outcome of these processes within contemporary painting practice, proposing that a fragmentary or assembled approach produces images that oscillate between parallel spatial zones. This methodology materialises a ‘threshold’, as seen in the work of Per Kirkeby and Laura Owens (among others). In reference to these artists and a series of practical experiments, a contemporary painting practice engaged specifically with assemblage becomes connected to Gilles Deleuze’s interpretation of the Baroque Fold.

In conclusion, this dissertation assesses how assemblage processes, pertinent to a contemporary painting practice, conjure a ‘siteless’ or un-locatable landscape. Through the abstracting character of collage, and a conscientious attention to the materiality of paint,
the landscape established resists the depiction of an actual site in the environment, and instead combines disparate elements to collapse its natural referent.
Chapter One: The Liminal Landscape

Landscape as a Visual Construction

Nature as a whole is still disturbing, vast and fearful; and lays open the mind to many dangerous thoughts.
But in this wild country, man may enclose a garden.
Kenneth Clark, Landscape into Art

It was mountains that first attracted me to landscape: otherworldly steeples rising from the natural environment. However, a mountain is not the same when you’re actually upon it. From that angle, its ascent disappears; its monumental structure breaking down into an amalgam of smaller, more abstract features. Because of this, I cite pictures, myths and geometry as ways for recognising mountains. I know mountains as triangles, always perceiving them to be akin to each other.

This process of connecting natural elements to basic visual forms imbues this project’s understanding of landscapes in general. Landscapes can be defined as aesthetic constructions that seek to articulate and contain the tangible natural environment. Through this process of articulation, landscapes become imbued with cultural and personal subjectivities. As Simon Schama asserts, “landscapes are culture before they are nature; constructs of the imagination projected on to wood and water and rock.”² Denis Cosgrove confers, “A landscape is a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbolising surroundings.”³

When considering the title of Kenneth Clark’s iconic Landscape into Art (1991), we could ascertain that ‘landscape’ is a pre-condition, and art the final construction. Reflecting on Clark, Malcolm Andrews prefers a two-fold relation between nature and its artistic incarnation. He notes a distinct transformation of land into landscape, and then landscape into art: “in the conversion of land into landscape a perceptual process has already begun

whereby that material is prepared as an appropriate subject for the painter or photographer, or simply for absorption as a gratifying aesthetic experience. This suggests that even the basic act of ‘seeing’ the natural world as a landscape mutates the initial referent. Thus, landscape is a visual construction that “has been aesthetically processed” or “has been arranged by the artistic vision.”

In Western society, nature and culture have commonly been presented as opposing entities: “On the one hand, we have the original, unadulterated conditions of the planet; on the other hand, man’s technological and cultural progress.” However, it is argued that the act of making a landscape transforms the tangible environment into a vision. This process fantasises or subjectifies the ‘original’ space of nature that spawned human existence—religiously or scientifically—and converts it into a cultural manifestation. Merely by defining a natural scene as ‘landscape’, makes it a construction: “A ‘landscape’, cultivated or wild, is already artifice before it has become the subject of a work of art.”

Therefore, the establishment of landscape as an independent subject during the Renaissance consolidated the impossibility of depicting ‘nature’ sans ‘culture’: for landscape, these binaries fundamentally contribute to the other’s definition. W.J.T Mitchell importantly stated, “Landscape is a natural scene mediated by culture. It is both a represented and presented space, both a signifier and a signified, both a frame and what a frame contains, both a real place and its simulacrum, both a package and the commodity inside the package.” Any manner of making an image from the natural environment, one that becomes a landscape, carries with it the cultural template or implications of the artist. As Ernst Gombrich proposed, “The innocent eye is a myth... All thinking is sorting, classifying. All perceiving relates to expectations and therefore to comparisons.”

From these interpretations, this project defines landscape as a visual collaboration of elements from the natural environment, combined through processes of assemblage. In turn, it is hypothesised that this activity of picturing landscape collapses its reference of the

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7 Andrews, Landscape and Western Art, 1.
natural world. As a result, the project conjures a ‘siteless’, holistic landscape where perceived spatial binaries subside.

To expand on these terms, “elements” can be defined as individual aspects from the natural environment: for example, mountains, bodies of water, trees, rocks or sky. An element is seen as an independent piece of the landscape image. This project focuses on geological elements, such as mountains, crystals and minerals. “Collaboration” is analogous to composition. However, as this project is not concerned with the representation of an actual site, it lacks the intrinsic instruction found in illustrating a real place in nature. Instead, elements ‘collaborate’ through creative decision-making: parts coming together to form abstract relationships. This collaboration, or connecting of parts, happens through assemblage processes. “Assemblage” refers to art-making processes such as collage that combine images and/or materials to form re-assembled subjects. This enables disparate elements to be connected in improbable formations. Finally, through this process of making landscape, the original referent becomes obsolete or is collapsed. “Collapse” is therefore the morphing of the natural subject into the landscape image: through picturing, the tangible environment is overcome by subjective fantasy.
Wilderness and the Ecological Sublime

What are we doin'? We’re sittin’ on a ruin...
Cat Power, Ruin

For Slavoj Žižek, the wellbeing of the natural environment is a type of Post-modern mysticism in which “the only firm ethical option... is admitting to the ecologically catastrophic in all its meaningless contingency, accepting responsibility groundlessly.”¹⁰ He states that without developing an imagination of this catastrophe, we instead cultivate an ideology of deferral and virtuality: our disconnection from the tangible natural world turns into a societal denial of environmental decay.¹¹

According to psychologist Dr David Stokols, the media’s increased reporting on environmental disaster during the past decade has affected the mental wellbeing of the public.¹² He sees this rush of information as alienating and overwhelming, suggesting a constructive environmental approach would require individuals understanding that issues such as climate change are not only a result of “atmospheric chemistry but also by-products of individual motivation and behavior.”¹³ He goes on to explain that the separation of nature and culture as opposing frequencies is patently destructive.¹⁴

From this context of global environmental decay, our terrestrial home is seen to be under threat. Therefore, this project considers a type of natural world that exists without humans. The reason why this landscape is unpopulated remains uncertain. Perhaps, everyone left the earth for another planet. Maybe the human race is now extinct. Alternatively, the people of this unknown place could just be sleeping and this ‘nature’ is one from their dreams. As my paintings deny any figurative presence, it is apt that the environment discussed reflects this notion of a ‘lonely planet’.

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¹¹ Žižek, Looking Awry, 35-39.
‘Wilderness’ can be seen as an original environment that existed before human occupation on the earth, or potentially, an environment that survives afterwards (post-apocalyptic). Henry David Thoreau’s essay “Ktaadn” describes an excursion in which he leaves his forest abode in Massachusetts (the one made famous in his iconic text on natural habitation, Walden (1854)) to climb Mount Katahdin\(^\text{15}\). This experience becomes a significant traversal of the untouched natural environment, as in comparison he has previously failed to find a true experience of nature. From this essay, cultural theorist Jonathan Bordo has extracted four propositions for defining ‘wilderness’—the landscape without a human witness.

### Summary of the four propositions Bordo extracted from Thoreau’s “Ktaadn”\(^\text{16}\)

1. The wilderness is a quality of the physical world that is pristine, has not yet been domesticated, and is not disturbed by human ways. In other words, its character is ur-nature (pre-nature).

2. The wilderness is a state or condition that threatens human beings and undermines them as a life form, which in turn, is difficult (and treacherous) for us to consider as it poses an existential threat (ie. a time when humans did not exist, or will not exist.) In other words, wilderness is an abhuman condition.

3. The wilderness is archaic in character. This complex notion suggests that the wilderness carries a special temporality that positions it before human occupation (ie. before the European advent of the New World, and before indigenous occupation), yet (as it can be found in the present) acts simultaneously as a palimpsest for this time, therefore carrying with it the memory of previous occupations. It is therefore simultaneously full and empty, as it can exist in the present yet always recalls the past.

4. The wilderness is a commons shared by all beings on or near the earth’s surface. In this case, humans become fused to nature in an almost telepathic ‘contact’ or connection.

\(^{15}\) Thoreau spelt “Ktaadn” incorrectly when he wrote his essay. It is actually spelt “Katahdin”.

From these propositions, Bordo concludes that the theme of the wilderness is always ‘refuge’, as our existence in civilisation is merely a sojourn from our true home in nature. He explicates a cultural shift in the condition of the wilderness in the past 150 years: one that compares to a 4000-year old history of the wilderness as a refuge for humans from their existential realities.

This shift is not in the condition of the wilderness or in its theme as refuge. The shift is with the subjects seeking such refuge. Wilderness becomes the refuge for a dwindling and ravaged nature from the predations of human beings. What was a refuge for human beings has become a refuge from human beings.\(^{17}\)

From this environmental context, a revised version of the sublime can be found in nature. In 1757, Edmund Burke wrote his canonical psychological analysis of the effects of the sublime experience, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. He located the sublime experience in terror, explicitly distant terror, explaining that when “danger or pain presses too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful”\(^{18}\). For Burke, when the human subject encountered sublime nature, it was the soul that reached both astonishment and horror.\(^{19}\) From this analysis, experiencing the sublime creates an awareness of both pleasure and pain: the self may delight in sublime terror as long as actual danger is kept at bay.

\(^{17}\) Bordo, “The Wilderness as Symbolic Form”, 168


As Casper David Friedrich’s *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818) might be seen to illustrate Burke’s terrifying nature, a contemporary equivalent can be witnessed in Olafur Eliasson’s *Green River* project (1998-2001). This work involved the artist secretly placing dye in river systems around the world (Tokyo, Stockholm, Los Angeles...), which produced toxic-looking effects. The Project conjured a threatened environment through the use of safe processes, shocking local residents when their river turned neon green. Comparatively, Edward Burtynsky’s documentation of the devastating oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010 creates an almost identical effect. Both of these images share a stark visual relationship: the lurid water suggests encroaching ecological disaster. That Eliasson’s fictional work predates Burtynsky’s documentary image is a frightening reminder that our fantasies of environmental ‘apocalypse’ may be imminent. However, both images (by their very nature) defer the threat of this potential disaster to stimulate an illustration of the sublime experience.
Figure 3 Olafur Eliasson, *Green River, The Northern Fjallabak Route*, Iceland, 1998.
I argue that these contemporary images encapsulate Bordo’s notion of an ‘ecological sublime’. This is not the threat of a place in our terrestrial environment, like an awe-inspiring alpine setting. Instead, it is the overarching threat of complete ecological failure: a slow threat of the natural world’s demise.\(^{20}\) He categorises ecological terror as a “threat to standing”: a threat to the individual that is based on a threat to the collective or larger group’s survival.\(^{21}\) This multi-dimensional danger has an “ontological and transcendental quality, putting at risk the very existence of living entities as wholes.”\(^{22}\) From Bordo’s theory, contemporary images of the natural world (landscape) could necessarily depict a ‘pre-apocalyptic’ environment.

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\(^{21}\) Ibid, 167.  
\(^{22}\) Ibid, 167.
Traversing the Subjective Site

The landscape thinks itself in me and I am its consciousness.
Paul Cezanne, Cezanne’s Doubt

From Bordo’s interpretations, nature becomes more complex than just a set of tangible, organic features: “nature is neither a thing outside us, nor something we produce inside a cultural consciousness, but an embodied relation to a preexisting world.”23 Thus, the distinctions between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ become abstract. French sociologist, Bruno Latour’s definition of nature as “factish” is appropriate: a hybrid entity of fact and fetish, that declares it “phenomena that are at once constructed and real, processual and independent entities.”24

Phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, described Paul Cezanne’s landscapes as “a fusion of self and nature in which the visible world is re-constructed in its process of appearing to visual sensation as coloured, solid, weighty and monumental.”25 He refers here to the artist’s objective to conjure the truth of ‘nature’: intent in opposition to the Impressionists’ preoccupation with refracted light. In his many paintings of Mont Sainte-Victoire in Southern France, Cezanne used varied marks and haptic colouration to conjure the site. His mountains, as recalled by American artist Robert Morris, were attempts to not represent, but recall the environment: “It is as though such marks and such a surface were generating a space that was moving into a different, yet-to-be-named space, one that hovers at the edge of resemblance.”26

Morris, who was mesmerised by the artist’s mark making, described his technique as producing a “hallucinated compression of the proximal and the distal”. This effect is created by the paintings’ flex between a real and imagined site, as well as between the “codes” of representation and abstraction. Here, Morris notices how landscape elements such as the sky, mountains and ground “exchange forces with another”, relieving the artist and viewer of a mere description of place, and instead encouraging them to engage with a phenomenal experience of nature as articulated through paint.

In order to conjure his ‘truth’, Cezanne refuted a delineating outline, extended his palette from the Impressionists’ seven to eighteen colours, and reject perspectival arrangement. In turn, he abandoned himself to the “chaos of sensation, which would upset the objects and constantly suggest illusions”. The mountain, for which he spent years painting repetitively, became something less specific. It became a subjective and phenomenological articulation of agency and vibration: “I want to make them [art and nature] the same. Art is a personal apperception, which I embody in sensations and which I ask the understanding to organise into a painting.”

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27 Morris, “Cezanne’s Mountains”, 819.
28 Ibid, 816.
30 Ibid, 63.
Contemporarily, our phenomenological experience of ‘nature’ can be seen as multi-faceted. It involves actual experiences in the environment, in combination with a second-hand infiltration of stimuli from other media. From this perspective, this project considers three ways of knowing ‘nature’: personal, physical experiences of the natural world (hiking, travelling, being); passed-on experiences from other people (discussion, photographs, postcards); and a vicarious technologically enabled experience (the Internet, books, documentaries).

As Chris Tilley explains, landscapes are a valid platform for recalling this composite experience. They are subjective constructions that manifest depending upon cultural and historical influences. He defines the Western history of thinking about landscape as involved primarily with “disinterested analytical observation, a particular way of seeing exemplified in the linear techniques of perspective developed in landscape painting since the Renaissance to create a realistic image.” However, Tilley encourages a holistic perspective that “links bodies, movement and places together into a whole”, qualifying the use of the term landscape (as opposed to a more neutral one) as the preferable platform for this connection.

Landscapes have massive ontological import from the moment we conceptualise them as being lived through, mediated, worked on and altered, replete with meaning and symbolism and not just something looked at or thought about, objects for contemplation, depiction, representation and aestheticisation. From such a perspective landscapes can be most parsimoniously defined as perceived and embodied sets of relationships between places, a structure of human feeling, emotion, dwelling, movement and practical activity within a geographical region which may or may not possess precise topographic boundaries or limits.

Therefore, the landscape image becomes a carrier of a phenomenological experience that seeks to present both ‘fact’ (as in venturing into the environment) and ‘fetish’ (exploring the environment as an idea or vision via other people or technology). Tilley’s suggestion that a precision of boundaries is unimportant, recalls this project’s allegiance with picturing an unlocatable site that can flex between terrestrial and cosmic spaces.

33 Ibid, 25.
This composite understanding is not necessarily contemporary: humans have long fanticised the natural world, gathering their impressions from stories, images and mythologies. For example, Schama’s encyclopedic Landscape and Memory (1995) provides a comprehensive treatise of humans building landscapes through cultural mythology.  

Therefore, the long-standing human compulsion to fantasise nature, especially through the medium of landscape, can be seen as conducive to an optimistic and vitalistic approach to the environment in general. A new materialist ontology shows “how the mind is always already material (the mind is an idea of the body), how matter is necessarily something of the mind (the mind has the body as its object), and how nature and culture are always already “naturecultures””.  

This reasoning gives both animate and inanimate beings agency, contrary to “our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption.”

From this perspective, political theorist Jane Bennett refutes the distinction between ‘dull matter’ (it, things) and ‘vibrant matter’ (us, beings). Instead, she is interested in Latour’s notion of the “actant”: a source of action, either human or non-human, which “has efficacy, can do things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events.” In Bennett’s text Vibrant Matter (2010), a dead rat, a plastic cap, and a spool of thread found in the rubbish, each have their own agency. Coming to recognise this, transforms the suspended notion of “landfill” into “lively streams of chemicals and volatile winds of methane.”

To appreciate the significance of this ontology it becomes important to ‘imagine’ nature. As Andreas Roepstorff and Nils Bubandt suggest, the “emphasis on the dual perspective of practices and processes of imagining arises from a concern to capture how nature is simultaneously real and really imagined.” In this way, nature is neither just fiction or innate fact, opening up thinking processes (imagining) to “highlight how ‘nature’ is at the same

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34 Schama, Landscape and Memory.
35 Rick Dolphijn, and Iris van der Tuin, “Matter feels, converses, suffers, desires, yearns and remembers,” Interview with Karan Barad, New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies, University of Michigan Library, http://quod.lib.umich.edu/o/chp/11515701.0001.001/1:4.3/–new-materialism-interviews-cartographies?rgn=div2;view=fulltext
37 Ibid, ix.
38 Ibid, viii.
39 Ibid, ix.
40 Ibid, 9.
time real and constructed, simultaneously independent and full of human agency.”\textsuperscript{41} Thus, imagination helps us experience places we might not be able to visit (mountains; the cosmos). It also enables us to consider a time when our sojourn on the planet comes to an end. As Cosgrove suggests, an increased consciousness of our brief existence on Earth—and a planet whose own time may also be limited—“intensifies rather than abolishes the ethical question of how human existence should be conducted. As humans, we remain quartered... between earth and heavens, gods and mortals.”\textsuperscript{42}

Here and There: Impossible Spaces in Nature

One is an atmosphere of calm in a narrow space... But outside, everything is immeasurable.
Rainer Maria Rilke, The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge

Reflecting on Bordo’s notion of the ecological sublime, we become aware of our position within an expanded ‘nature’—Earth is seen as a vulnerable entity amidst the cosmos. Two separate locales come into consideration: our planet as a terrestrial home, and the external spatial realm. Therefore, it becomes important to consider how these binary spaces are imagined.

Inside space is enclosed, and most usually wrapped in architectural features, for example, a room inside a house. 43 For Martin Heidegger, this is a location or region where “actions and entities have their place as defined within the referential totality of significance.”44 In other words, the features of internal space exist for ‘internal’ purposes: the window to let light in, the door to create an entrance. These features receive meaning from the necessities of the region itself, “which is a place for sleeping or preparing food or something of that sort.”45 Similarly for Edward S. Casey, inside space is assembled according to human specifications, evident in its scale and geometry: “Built places are extensions of our body.”46 The internal is therefore a ‘made space’ that becomes synonymous with organisation, domestic activity, and comfort.47

Conversely, external space is defined through its lack of clear limits. In contrast to the confines of architecture, external space might only be bound by the horizon or the sky. However, the “sky and the horizon do not stand at defined distances; rather they are the backdrop for everything else.”48 There is no true way to tether this zone. As we move towards these boundaries, they continue to shift, leaving us with a potential for freedom but more realistically, a feeling of anxiety.

43 J. Keeping and Jeannette Hicks “Between the inside and the outside”, Philosophy Today 55,1, February (2011): 75.
44 Ibid, 75.
46 Ibid, 76.
47 Ibid, 76.
48 Ibid, 77.
However, this project imagines these spaces as running in parallel. For Merleau-Ponty, a version of space separate from the one we inhabit is inconceivable, as external space can only exist alongside internal space to become an extension of it: these concurrent realms are just not fully “knitted in”.  

Or similarly, these spaces may share and transfer their very ‘characters’. As Gaston Bachelard explains, the intimacy of the inside and the hostility of the exterior are always ready to be reversed: “The centre of “being-there” wavers and trembles. Intimate space loses its clarity, while exterior space loses its void.” This project defines internal space as terrestrial or ‘Earthen’, and external space as cosmic. This is not to maintain their separation, but to use visual processes to combine their properties, conjuring a landscape from an expanded ‘nature’.

An example of a site possessing both internal and external characteristics is the wilderness: it is simultaneously ‘of us’ (as in, an original space from which human existence is seen to derive) and outside of us (impossible to reach). Bennett described the wilderness as “a not-quite-human force that added and altered human and other bodies. It named an irreducibly strange dimension of matter, an out-side.” However, in Bordo’s analysis of Thoreau’s “Ktaadn” essay, it is inferred that the wilderness is in intimate, “telepathic” connection to all beings that live on earth. In turn, this original space is an intermediary zone containing the agency of human existence in its very conception: an unattainable and impossible ‘home’.

In a creative sense, this interconnectedness was evident in the practice of cosmography: a pre-Renaissance tradition that sought to map both terrestrial and cosmic spaces with the aim to envisage the material world as a ‘cosmos’. In Alexander von Humboldt’s *Cosmos: A Sketch of the Physical Description of the Universe* (1845-1862), ‘cosmos’ is derived from the Greek word ‘ornament’ and defined as “the assemblage of all things in heaven and earth, the universality of created things constituting the perceptible world.” This cosmographical connection—that unites human bodies to the two homes of cosmos and the earth—is timeless. In the final section of Plato’s *Timaeus*, cosmic form and spirit are mapped into our material bodies. Aristotle extended this in his *Metaphysics (Lambda)* and *DeAnima* by stating “humans while sojourning on Earth have our origins elsewhere in the cosmos.”

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49 Keeping and Hicks, “Between the inside and outside”, 77.
50 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 218.
51 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, ix.
52 Cosgrove, *Geography and Vision*, 36.
53 Ibid, 39.
54 Ibid, 39.
Therefore, with a contemporary eco-politics invested in recognising the vibrant agency of entities large and small, this project takes on a cosmographical ethical dimension that envisions a landscape that is holistic and interconnected.
Chapter Two: An Earthen Universe

Dream Mountains

Mountains are the beginning and end of all scenery.
John Ruskin, Modern Painters

Mountains are changeable ancient bodies that metamorphose into new structures with weather and time. In their rockiness, these relics from the past recall natural histories: the tremor of plates, the life of sea creatures. Cultural stories are inscribed on them; are incited by them. At certain times of day, mountains are illuminated into spectacular colours, and in these moments, they become both science and fiction.

In Schama’s analysis of ‘rock-based’ landscapes, mountains are seen as monuments for the imagination. He commented on how Leonardo da Vinci exaggerated depictions of the Alps, despite having the skill to document their likeness: “Beyond the foreground hills, as if layered in his imagination, lie successively improbable landscapes... [that] serve to lift the whole composition entirely out of the realm of the terrestrial world.”55 In the scope of natural scenery, it is the mountain that presses into the all-encompassing container of the cosmos. It could be argued that cosmic qualities are also inscribed upon this smaller entity: the ancientness, size and elevation of mountains making them a similarly unreachable marker of space and time. In an example, the five sacred pinnacles of Taoist culture, seen as axial pillars that connected “the celestial with the terrestrial and infernal realms,” became places to survey the immaterial essence of the world’s spirit.56 Incarnations of these mountainous landscapes materialise in the home as intricately carved incense burners called “boshanlu” (“magic” or “universal mountain”) or single standing organic rocks for the garden. These tiny hoodoos become bridges to spatial immensity.

55 Schama, Landscape and Memory, 426.
56 Ibid, 407.
Due to their immensity and majesty, representations of geological subjects have often slipped into abstraction. In the 18th century, British painter and draughtsman, John Robert Cozens, painted mountains, rock faces, and individual geological specimens that overwhelmed the picture plane. As Schama described, Cozens’ mountain images flatten out their elements, “stretched as if in a dream where the processes of nature have been unaccountably decelerated.”57 The decelerated content draws pieces of the earth’s oldest matter into a singular picture frame from a deep and unknowable sense of time, creating a “scrambling of perception”.58 We are distracted from the specific site and towards abstraction and sensation. This encourages the eye to circle amongst the matter so that the quite ordinary illustrations of mountains reform. They invert and fold into caves and then back out into mountains: as the Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley recalled, mountains are “visions of caves turned inside out.”59

57 Schama, Landscape and Memory, 473.
58 Ibid, 474.
59 Ibid, 475.
In the same manner, 19th century geologist and writer Louis Ramond de Carbonnieres, argued that mountains robbed you of a “conventional grip on time.” His revolutionary style of ‘mountain writing’—an unofficial phenomenon of the time that included trekking books and mountaineering manuals—presented scientific observation with a visionary interest in poetics: “The result is an extraordinary mélange of optical effects and sensuous responses: vertiginous empiricism.” Schama describes de Carbonnieres fascination of the monumental and the minute: “subtle alterations of color produced by mica... [to] the impression that the valleys are multiplying themselves beneath the cloud layers.” Here, the mountain scribe links stratum of rock containing shells and fossils to the passing by of epochs and millennia in a form of time travel: “At a particular fault line, one world ends; another begins, governed by the laws of a wholly other existence.”

At a similar time, John Ruskin wrote *Modern Painters* (1843-60): a five-part treatise on the superiority of the picturesque tradition of painting to those landscapes of the previous Old

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60 Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, 488.
61 Ibid, 488.
62 Ibid, 488.
63 Ibid, 488.

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Masters. His asserted that artists should seek to depict the “truth” of the environment. Clearly inspired by Humboldt’s *Cosmos* (“Everywhere, in every separate portion of the earth, nature is indeed only a reflex of the whole”) Ruskin developed a philosophy of landscape painting that encouraged a sense of unity among natural forms.

> To see in all mountains nothing but similar heaps of earth; in all rocks nothing but similar concretions of solid matter; in all trees nothing but similar accumulations of leaves, is no sign of high feeling or extended thought. The more we know, and the more we feel, the more we separate; we separate to obtain a more perfect unity.  

And while Humboldt favored botanical forms, Ruskin admired the geological, calculating the beauty of a natural element as steadily proportionate to it appearing “of mountainous character”. He outlined that the “truth” of mountain art should convey “the essence of the thing: the beautiful whateveritwas that drew men to the mountain in the first place.” This phenomenal approach influenced his drawings of geological aspects such as aiguilles, central peaks, lateral ranges, crests and crystals, popularising “the notion of the vitality and temporality of geological forms, termed ‘vital truth’, in which an image of the earth conveyed a dynamic energy of its present state, its evolving history, and its future potential.”

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65 Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, 508.
66 Ibid, 506.
67 Lubowski-Jahn “A Comparative Analysis”, 325.
The lithe diagrams in *Modern Painters* become disassociated from the natural elements seen by Ruskin. This is because they exist as separate features, cut away from their setting. For example, *The Aiguille Charmoz* (1856) could be an alpine, subaqueous, or cosmic representation.

*The simplest mountain cliff is full of exquisite details, all seemingly decisive and clear; but when [the artist] tries to arrest one of them [visually], he cannot see it—cannot find where it begins or ends—and presently it runs into another... There is nothing for him but despair, or some sort of abstraction and shorthand for cliff.*68

In documenting geological landscapes, Cozens, de Carbonnieres and Ruskin all slipped into a semi-abstract visual language: through their processes, the initial, natural referent they sought to evoke was lost. As Wilhelm Worrringer professed, "Just as the desire for empathy as the basis for aesthetic experience finds satisfaction in organic beauty, so the desire for abstraction finds its beauty in the life-renouncing inorganic, in the crystalline, in a word, in all abstract regularity and necessity."69

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Contemporary Danish painter Per Kirkeby’s geological landscapes abstract the referent from his real-life explorations. Sketches similar to Ruskin’s appear in his work, articulating his own documentation of the natural world “as culture and memory as well as geology.”

Like Ruskin, Kirkeby also trained as a geologist and travelled extensively throughout Central America and Greenland: his paintings are phenomenological responses to the environment, described as “a build-up, a sedimentation of memories and motifs.” For example, in *Vermisst die Welt* (1997) cliffs, ledges and rocks are overdrawn upon visceral background layers. In other works like *Plank-Rock* (2000), geological strata of various magnifications and abstractions appear to stand-in for entire compositional grounds within the image.

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71 Ibid, 245.
Figure 11 Per Kirkeby, Plank-Rock (Brett-Felsen), 2000.

Although Kirkeby addresses the ‘presence’ of a particular place in his paintings, he is equally involved with the incoherent experience of the world.

*People believe most observations take place in clear and logical contexts. I believe this is an illusion, a kind of glue we use to keep our lives together. To a great extent, art’s function is to call attention to this illusion. Showing how incoherent reality really is.*

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This incoherence is evident in Kirkeby’s “stratum-by-stratum” approach, where a depiction of a (potentially) real site is overlaid with its own features to create a reflexive pull within the picture plane. The image generates ‘sensation’: your eye rests on a rock, spins into a fluid motion of mark making, before finding calm again on another landscape element. In other words, the parts are incessantly collapsing into the whole and then returning to individual form.

As art critic Richard Shiff described, in Kirkeby’s work, “sensation is entropic”. For Deleuze, painting aims to release “presences beneath representation, beyond representation.” Thus, sensation in painting occurs through a folding of the object and subject into a “pure vision of a non-human eye, a haptic-eye whose vision constructs matter at the same time as perceiving it”. The same could be argued for Kirkeby’s work, as the perpetual flux of elements into one another form a landscape that oscillates between collapse and recollection.

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73 Gohr Siegfried, On Per Kirkeby, (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2008), 51.
74 Shiff in Achim Borchart-Hume, Per Kirkeby, 31.
In Kirkeby’s *Atlas* series (1981-2) landscape slips further into abstraction. Titles such as *Night World (Crystal), World Picture*, and *Grapolite 6* reflect the loneliness of the earth, cosmic space, and minerals. Unlike an atlas, whose function is to orientate people through an environment, “Kirkeby’s pictures show us dark and mysterious, romantic and subjective spaces.”77 Thus, the representation in these works moves away from geological subject matter and towards a holistic perspective similar to the essence of von Humboldt’s *Cosmos*: “the interrelationship between everything and everything else, in the creation of a network.... Kirkeby consulted this thinking at a moment when he took on the task of developing a new cosmos or atlas of painting.”78

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77 Siegfried, *On Per Kirkeby*, 51.
78 Ibid, 56.
The Crystal Metaphor

The process of crystallisation was more advanced. The fences along the road were so heavily encrusted that they formed a continuous palisade, a white frost at least six inches thick on either side of the palings. The few houses between the trees glistened like wedding cakes, their white roofs and chimneys transformed into exotic minarets and baroque domes. On a lawn of green grass spurs a child’s tricycle glittering like a Faberge gem, the wheels stared into brilliant jasper crowns.

J.G. Ballard, The Crystal World

In Robert Smithson’s essay, “The Crystal Land”, the artist recalls the manner in which the New Jersey landscape was crystallised through its natural connection to minerals, but also its synthetic reflection of consumer culture: “In fact, the entire landscape has a mineral presence. From the shiny chrome diners to glass windows of shopping centers, a sense of the crystalline prevails.”79 Wandering the terrain with his wife and two friends, the artist fossicked for quartz specimens, while simultaneously, housing estates became “man-made geological networks of concrete.”80 This essay conjures a phenomenal materialisation of all things into a particular (crystalline) form of supra-natural character.

Having examined mountains as ‘macro’ geological matter, crystals—their ‘micro’ or hand-held counterpart—also occupy a zone between the real and the imaginary. The crystalline aesthetic is one of clarity, reflection, light, inorganic procreation and faceting. For Rosemarie Haag Bletter, the geological metaphor is a “mythologem” or recurrent mythological pattern. She notes the first fascination as an “architectonic” concept found in Solomonic legends, Moslem architecture, Grail legends and Gothic cathedrals. The second preoccupation occurs in Romantic and Symbolist movements, where the focus has moved away from an architectural concern, toward an image of self-transformation. Here, the crystal is more intimately connected to the soul and the brain. In its final stage, the Expressionist crystal metaphor of the early 20th century becomes less introspective and more involved with “a search for social identity and community.”81

80 Ibid, 8.
This modernist incarnation highlighted the crystal as an important trope: “The crystal, an object in which mathematics and mysticism meet, has a long history in human culture and a special place in modernity.” In art, it is seen in Paul Cezanne’s faceted cliff faces, Pablo Picasso’s cubist planes, and Donald Judd’s plexiglass sculptures. Specifically in German architecture, practitioners like Bruno Taut were faced with a post-war economy that could no longer support their professional endeavours. In turn, they drafted visions of architectures free of the limitations of finance or construction: an “architecture ascribed to a kind of artistic self-indulgence”. These fantasies were shared in letters (a “Utopian correspondence”) between a group known as The Crystal Chain, and featured in publications such as *Alpine Architecture* (1917). The rainbow colours and whimsical forms in Taut’s drawings illustrate fictitious structures for an imaginary world. In a pre-emptive ‘psychedelic’ aesthetic, the structures seem mercurial and slippery, connoting a state of flux that recalls the growth inherent in crystal structure.

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Whereas this Expressionist fascination materialised a purist vision of stability during uncertain times, the contemporary interest questions nature in the face of technology, evoking our “natural anxieties.” Mark A. Cheetham described contemporary work engaged with this metaphor, as “more than a symptom of our nostalgia for a benevolent nature or our fears about the destruction of the environment, it is a sign of confusion about where nature is.” It is a symbol that exists between the animate and the inanimate; a perfect form that appears lifeless, while suggesting life through an ability to grow and move: “Even as “corpses” they function as physical reminders of life.” This relates to our disjointed experience of the natural environment as found in screens and technology. In addition,

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85 Ibid, 252.
86 Ibid, 251.
curator Allan Smith also notes that the contemporary adoption of this metaphor “make the phantasmal real but also...that diffraction can be the most appealing form of distraction. When the crystal makes the eternal visible, or the universal concrete, it also makes the real virtual and the visible an illusion.”

Contemporary Australian painter Kate Shaw creates landscapes that are mercurial and psychedelic. Her work recalls the fantasy of J. G. Ballard’s *The Crystal World* (1966) or Wenzel Hablik’s *Crystal Castles in the Sea* (1914), where the environment is usurped by a crystalline energy. However, for Shaw, landscape engages with the digital.

> *I am trying to depict an ambivalent relationship to the natural world so on one hand I use colour that will create an intense or sublime moment. But I also want it to be teetering on the verge of something toxic, psychedelic and artificial. A major influence has been digital colour in that it can only approximate the gradations that occur in natural light so that its colour is much more intense and saturated.*

This technological filter that distorts our perception of nature, collapses these discussed distinctions between the organic and inorganic. Alongside her use of colour, Shaw’s process

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of cutting and assembling the skins of paint spills to form landscapes creates a ‘stop-start’ composition. The affect is disjointed, like the containment of information within a pixel, yet the mercurial patterning of the spills encourages flow: the image becoming an agitated yearning for an unreachable ‘nature’.
**Cosmic Matter**

Scottish artist Katie Paterson first connected herself to a more vast ecosystem when standing on the edge of a volcano in Iceland: “When I got there, there was just a complete sense of being on the planet that I’d never really experienced before. I’m sure that impacts on my work in a way.... From a geyser exploding to hot lava, the weather changing every two minutes, it was just the sudden and immediate awareness of being a part of this big ecosystem.”

In her work, *Campo del Cielo, Field of the Sky* (2013), a large, 4.5 billion year-old meteorite was cast, melted and then recast into a new version of itself. According to Paterson, the new form is imbued with its cosmic history.

> The iron, small rocks, metal and dust inside becomes reformed, and the layers of its cosmic lifespan—the warping of space and time, the billions of years pressure and change, formation and erosion—become collapsed, transformed and renewed.90

As Brian Dillion suggests, “the movement of metaphor [in Paterson’s work] is also a movement of return: physical or astrophysical fact becomes wondrously estranged but is brought succinctly down to earth.”91 From this suggestion, this kind of matter becomes part of our planet’s geological make-up and history. For example, gold is a precious metal that came to Earth from the cosmos. During the formation of the planet, molten iron sank to its core taking with it precious metals such as gold and platinum. However, scientists have detected that a further 20 billion, billion tones of asteroid material hit Earth 3.9 billion years ago, bringing gold to Earth’s veneer.92 Like mountains and crystals, this ‘cosmic matter’ is both science and fiction: through enculturation, gold is a legitimate value system connected to commerce and romantic sentiment.

In turn, I suggest that geological subject matter forms a metaphorical bridge between terrestrial and cosmic binaries. As curator Jean Clair stated of geographic exploration in the 19th century, “an entire legendary topography pushed back the borders of the unknown,

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without, however, changing the utopic mission of finding the sources of life in somewhere akin to the Garden of Eden.” Thus, the sublime quest has always engaged new frontiers as spaces that are immense or unknown as we search for the place in which we have come, or the place that might cause our demise—the wilderness. Consequently, a connection is made, as undiscovered mountains of the past hold a similar fascination to the (still) undiscovered space of the cosmos.

![Figure 19 Laura Skerlj, Mystic Terrain, 2013.](image)

A series of photographs titled *Mystic Terrain* (2013) visualise this connection. In these works, geological specimens were documented at the Melbourne Museum. As these minerals were displayed on glass shelves they appeared to float in gravity-less space when viewed from above: from this angle, many photographs were taken, and extraneous visual information was blanked out. What remained in these images were spaces full of floating earthen ‘planets’: terrestrial elements caught in a cosmic view.

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Chapter Three: Assembling Nature

Elements

Architect, Francois Blanciak’s *Siteless: 1001 Building Forms* (2008), is a drawing compendium of geometric structures based on the physical notion of a building. Within the book, chapters recall the names of cities (Hong Kong, New York, Copenhagen...), not because the buildings were designed for those specific locations, but because this is where the ideas for these imaginary structures were *conceived*. In other words, forms become attributed to ‘place’ through an imaginative process in the same way landscapes become attached—mythically, mnemonically—to a specific site. With a similar Utopianism to the Crystal Chain’s fictional architecture, or in striking resemblance of 18th century engravings of crystal formations, these plans for unmade buildings are visions or imaginings. I argue that these shapes become cultural elements (architectures) to be placed within an unknown site; functioning like the natural elements (terrain, a rock, tree, crystal or cave) that collate to form a landscape.

Figure 20 Artist unknown, engravings of Barite and Quartz crystals, 18th century.
Figure 21 Francois Blanciak, Siteless: 1001 Building Forms, 2008.
Figure 22 Francois Blanciak, Siteless: 1001 Building Forms, 2008.
Inspired by Blanciak’s book, and an antique copy of John Child’s *Australian Rocks and Minerals* (1964), digital compendiums of the natural elements were constructed. These elements are cuttings of images of geological matter. Individually, they seem to have their own agency, yet require formation to be truly activated. As Jane Bennett described, the lone components of an assemblage “probably never cause anything.”

The images in these compendiums come from a variety of sources, including magazines (National Geographic), books, the Internet, but most usually, my own photographs. These photographs were taken on excursions to the highlands of India (January 2013), the geological section of the Melbourne Museum, and a shop/collection of crystals in Cranbourne, Victoria. Combining documentary, kitsch, New Age, travel and scientific references in a unified image, encourages the emergence of unexpected landscapes.

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94 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 33.
These compendiums are attributed to un-locatable places (‘Here’ and ‘There’) that represent imaginary internal and external zones. Deciding on the origin of an element is an intuitive and arbitrary process. Selections are based upon where I feel an element belongs or originates: in other words, an exercise in fictitious categorisation. In combination with these visual compendiums are text-based lists of attributes associated with the spaces. Like the images, the attributes are esoteric and poetic. In conclusion, these categorical experiments become sources for collages, as well as documents that recall processes of imagining spatial constructs.
Figure 25 Laura Skerlj, ‘Here’ Compendium, 2013.
Figure 26 Laura Skerlj, ‘There’ Compendium, 2013.
Here
=

Hands
Currency
Mountains
Reason
Cul-de-sacs
Finger Diamonds
Talking
Documentary
Understandable pace
Ochre
Providence
Caves
Enclosure
Meager pinnacles
RIP: Strata of our culture (clothes, plastics, bones)
Blood
Unfathomable crystals
Paper letters
End-able materials
Knife to the chest: Tangible death
Short sightedness
Control small movements, all day, each day
Dome
Compassion

Figure 27 Laura Skerlj, Things I found (Here), 2013.
There =

Glitter
Speed, with nowhere to go
Followed by: Slowness
Violet
Abstraction
Endless dark highways
Effervescence
Highness/ Lowness
Singing
Invisible doorways for new rooms
Infinituum
Gold
Portals
Elation
Mercurial liquids
Sound
Echo chamber
(However, those walls are the backs of other walls)
False sense of security
Thinking; Intangible death
Implosions (space that consumes)
Loss of control
Too potent for dreams
Eternal Intersection
Frames

In The Truth of Painting (1987), philosopher Jacques Derrida examines the conundrum of the frame, considering the relationship of the ‘internal’ and ‘external’ forces of an image. Through this analysis, he “takes a set of binary opposites in which one term is privileged as that in terms of which the other is to be explained, and shows their interdependence.” This relationship of binaries stems from his concept of ‘différance’: that grounding the meaning of something in the experience of being ‘present’ is dependent on the ‘gap’, ‘space’ or absence between the concepts. With this in mind, it is the notion of the ‘parergon’—defined through painting as ‘the frame’—which is important to this study.

parergon: neither work (ergon) nor outside the work [hors d’oeuvre], neither inside or outside, neither above nor below, it disconcerts any opposition but does not remain indeterminate and it gives rise to the work.

Thus, the frame of the image—as in the border where it begins and ends—becomes an entirely fundamental part of the (landscape) image’s existence. It is this structure that, in painting, is seen to have a “thickness, a surface which separates them not only... from the integral inside, from the body proper of the ergon, but also from the outside, from the wall on which the painting in hung.” This calls the image (or landscape) into being: In Derrida’s words, it “gives rise to the work”.

96 Marriner, A Companion to Art Theory, 352.
98 Ibid, 60-1.
Therefore, as landscape seeks to contain an image of the natural environment, usually of a specific site or setting, the frame is what allows it to exist. The frame summons the arrival or presence of the scene, but then also defines its absence when the landscape image leaves the picture plane. Andrews commented on this function in landscape painting as a form of portal between interior and exterior space.

*One framed landscape replaces another, the simulacrum substitutes for the real, while both may make us aware of the degree to which we feel we have becomes distanced from ‘nature’. In our domestic interiors we become increasingly conscious of ‘outside’ and ‘inside’, of separate worlds.*

In a proliferating manner, frames within frames are commonplace in the landscape image. They exist in a variety of visual constructions: such as, windows for scenery, internal ‘paintings’ hanging on pictorial walls, and archways or features that bracket the image (‘repousoir’). A good example can be found in Antonello da Messina’s *St Jerome in his Study* (1474). This painting presents a multiplicity of apertures and frames depicted as a series of windows looking onto pastoral scenes and sky from an architectural interior. The complication exists in a foregrounded window structure that leads into the painting. Looking

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through this embedded frame, the viewer approaches this interior space from the outside: from the same ‘natural’ space that mimics the one being seen through the other windows. Thus, the internal space connotes a thinking hub (a mind) separated from external ‘nature’ that becomes the source of control within the two realms.\footnote{Andrews, Landscape and Western Art, 108.} However, I argue that nature too, when translated as landscape, represents the cultured articulation of ‘wildness’ from inside the confines of the ‘manmade’ world. Without a frame, landscape would have no definition: it would not be a construction, but a fluid and unending procession of natural attributes or elements that, in combination, are inherently uncontainable.

Figure 30 Sean Bailey, Moss, 2010.
Contemporary Australian artist Sean Bailey paints frames over found images of the natural environment. These are opaque, naïve-looking obliterations, usually in the form of geometric windows: their raw application evoking a ‘mystical’ connection to sacred geometry that rebuts or punctuates the photographic quality of the internal image. In *Moss* (2010) a black window surrounds an abstract painterly gesture reminiscent of a mountain. This mountain-shape overrides the photographic landscape underneath. The three components—the black frame, the organic green painting, and the photographic version of nature—create a tension between abstraction and representation that, I argue, collapses the natural referent found in the photographic image.

From a series of studio experiments, I devised four hypotheses for punctuating or disrupting the landscape image using framing devices: to crinkle; make a hole; section an image; and punctuate with a constellation. These ‘experiments in collapse’ were conducted over the course of the project using drawing, collage, photographic and sculptural processes. In the following section, a series of visual examples of each instructional hypothesis is provided.
**Collapse #1: CRINKLE**

Scrunch substrates into sculptural versions of ‘terrain’. Images of landscape, plain paper, cellophane, fabric and plastic were trialed. When photographed as an allover surface, a detail of a simulated landscape (similar to actual Fold Mountains in the environment) is created. This extends the terrain beyond a horizon, abstracting the image and pushing with equal tension against the frame or boundary of the image. The generic structure of landscape is lost. This process resulted in referents, and paintings, that appeared like topographical studies of terrain.

![Image of crinkled substrate](image-url)

*Figure 31 Laura Skerlj, from Gold Crinkle series, 2012.*
Figure 32 Laura Skerlj, *Mount Gold-Crinkle*, 2012.
Figure 33 Laura Skerlj, *Little Gemmy (Amber) and Little Gemmy (Rose)*, 2013.

Figure 34 Laura Skerlj, *Fool’s Gold (Crinkle Constellation)*, 2013.
Figure 35 Laura Skerlj, installation view of Fool’s Gold Crinkle Wall, 2013.
Collapse #2: HOLE/PORTAL

Cut a holey overlay in organic shapes. Trials include using the remainder of a cutout ‘element’ as a mechanism for containing visual information. What remains from the element is its previous ‘space’ or gap. This is used as an organically shaped frame that appears more ‘natural’ than its hard-edged ‘architectural’ counterpart. When placed over a landscape image, the hole forms a portal into the imaginary site.

Figure 36 Laura Skerlj, hole template, 2012.

Figure 37 Laura Skerlj, from Holey experiments, 2012.
Figure 38 Laura Skerlj, from Holey experiments, 2012.
Collapse #3: SECTIONING

Dissect the picture plane into sections and insist that the subject matter change when encountering a boundary. This could be the image changing colour, scale or position. Alternatively, each plane could capture a new subject all together. By imposing this shift, spatial zones that are actually invisible or non-existent (like the boundary between terrestrial and cosmic space) can be visualised. Experiments were conducted with simple quartering, but also with more complex, architectural structures. In the latter, particular interest was the intersection or ‘corner’: in corners, planes collect in order to end. Conversely, they also disperse outwards. As a result, these structures formed perplexing boundaries for this experiment.

Figure 39 Laura Skerlj, Mountain Collapse, 2013.
Figure 40 Laura Skerlj, from Cosmic House series, 2012.

Figure 41 Laura Skerlj, from Cosmic House series, 2012.
Collapse #4: CONSTELLATION

Punctuate a landscape image with a series of overlaid fragments of geological imagery. The pattern in which these elements are arranged mimics a constellation formation. Depending upon how these fragments are depicted, they can appear to float above the picture plane, conjuring foreign matter. Alternatively, they can be seen as inlaid within the ‘background’. These fragments have the ability to create friction with the underlying image, and also, push against the external parameters of the image.

Figure 42 Laura Skerlj, Himalayan Constellation/ Collapse, 2013.
Figure 43 Laura Skerlj, *Mountain-Shard Constellation*, 2013.

Figure 44 Laura Skerlj, *Gold Crinkle Constellation*, 2013.
Assemblage

Having considered the individual elements of the image, and their limit and potentiality within the frame, we now consider these parts in ‘collaboration’. As previously referred to through the analogy of a constellation, this project combines elements through an arbitrary attraction. For Bennett, assemblages are “ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts.”101 Culturally, these groupings were witnessed at the end of the 20th century when globalisation turned the earth into “a space of events.”102 As the world shrank, people and places became “intimately interconnected and highly conflictual.”103

Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within. They have uneven topographies, because some of the points at which the various affects and bodies cross paths are more heavily trafficked than others, and so power is not distributed equally across its surface.104

This cultural phenomenon translates to a visual formation whose ‘shi’, or congregational agency, is vibratory.105 The effect is individual elements in collaboration, which has “the mood or style of an open whole in which both the membership changes over time and the members themselves undergo internal alteration.”106 Interestingly, this notion of subjects in flux relates to the elements used in this project: disparate features assembled in an “ad hoc” manner.

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101 Bennett, Vibrant Matter, 23.  
102 Ibid, 23.  
103 Ibid, 23.  
105 Ibid, 34.  
106 Ibid, 35.
Figure 45 Sergei Sviatchenko, from series *For Light and Memory*, 2012.
Practically, it is through collage processes that these parts come together. Dating back to Cubism, collage enabled artists to destroy the illusion of (apparent) three-dimensional space in an image by deconstructing pictorial ‘objects’ into shapes that could be seen from various vantage points. As art publisher Silke Krohn explains, this multi-dimensional perspective parallels the manner in which we currently attain and process information.

*With just a few clicks, images from the seemingly limitless cornucopia of the Internet are copied, cropped and reassembled. The ability to recombine the preexisting to create something very much one’s own accounts for the special appeal of collage and is also surely why so many artists employ it.*

In Sergei Sviatchenko’s *For Light and Memory* (2012) series, one monochromatic landscape is punctuated with another through the process of collage. In these ‘dual-environments’, the conventionally (horizontally) formatted landscape encounters interference by an alternative scene—one from a different time of day or magnification. Their interaction pushes the original scene into a surreal space that implies flux between parallel landscapes.

As in Sviatchenko’s landscapes, collage became a fundamental process in pushing my own practice away from a generic landscape formation, and toward a dynamic composition of natural matter. Both digital and hand-made techniques were utilised: the first offered absolute control, while the second provided valuable limitations that could produce unexpected effects. For the most part, digital collage became the most useful means of combining elements at different magnifications, as computer programs allowed for effective re-scaling.

With no tangible site to illustrate, the reasoning behind the combining of elements was purely an organic connecting of ‘intensities’. These intensities are defined as pictorial representations of density, movement or magnification that can express different moods or energies. Connecting these energies to one another was a subjective and intuitive process that relied upon multiple experiments combining individual elements into a unified image. With respect to painting, these intensities translate as marks or textures created through the

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material. How can a specific area within a painting appear calm, violent, intense or sparse? Some examples may include: restrained and repetitious marks, applied slowly and in one direction, to convey distant mountain terrain; thick, loose paint with an abstracting quality could convey close-up depictions of translucent crystal sections; deep colour applied in a downward motion could convey gravity. The visualisation of particular intensities for particular sections within an overall image became an important consideration when using painting as assemblage: it became apparent that separate elements needed to contain their own frequency in order for the whole image to appear fragmented.

The following collage experiments provide insight into these processes. In Cosmic Cutting (Peach and Ash) (2013), elements from the two compendiums are combined. This image maintains a ‘landscape’ formation through its attention to horizontal planes. Shape Diagram (Peach and Ash) (2013), is a further reduction of the collage into spaces, shown through shape and colour. By simplifying the original, this drawing focuses on abstract qualities within the referent. Lastly, Intensity Diagram (Peach and Ash) (2013) conveys linear notes for representing the described intensities available from the individual elements. These marks are referred to when articulating these collages as paintings.
Figure 46 Laura Skerlj, *Cosmic Cutting (Peach and Ash)*, 2013.
Figure 47 Laura Skerlj, *Shape Diagram (Peach and Ash)*, 2013.

Figure 48 Laura Skerlj, *Intensity Diagram (Peach and Ash)*, 2013.
Chapter Four: Foldable Terrain

The Threshold as a Zone

Between two pieces of tape that serve to partition Vija Celmins’ photograph of the ocean from Venice Pier in L.A, she captures a rhythm of nature. It is the repetition of waves, but it could be the peaking terrain of a mountain. Without a horizon, a shore, a landmark, the water is abstracted into a meditative in-between zone. As Susan C. Larsen commented on images like these from the late 1960’s, Celmins had discovered “a unique and very subtle spatial construct within her own environment”\(^\text{109}\). By imposing this through collage, she “was able to register a sense of depth and planarity, of far and near, of the specific and the inspecific, in a single image.”\(^\text{110}\)

Figure 49 Vija Celmins, Photograph from Venice Pier, LA, 1969.


This image represents a threshold—the zone of the “seemingly incidental feature”\textsuperscript{111}—that becomes a space for the abstract landscape to inhabit. It is a zone that allows subjects in and out fluidly; it summons or borrows from binaries; it exists and, conversely, is impossible. The \textit{real water} pictured in Celmins photograph exists only because of other elements we cannot see: it does not just float, like it seems to here, in nothingness. It is being pushed down by the moon, and carpeted by the sandy ground. Its abstracted conception relies upon the artist’s pictorial decisions: two pieces of tape and no visible horizon.

In an exploration of specular devices that have allowed us to envisage the liminal world (mirrors, windows and frames), theorist George Teysott concludes that architecture—as a bridge between nature and the domestic world—has sought to define the existence of the threshold. He argues that contemporary habitation is possibly “not so much to become exteriorised, or nomadic, as to find the home no longer neither simply an interior nor an exterior. “Living” is somehow to now occupy the space between the two, inhabiting the threshold.”\textsuperscript{112} I argue, this is to feel a gentle pull between our home on Earth and the space outside.

To conjure this way of living, this project’s ‘landscape’ combines disparate features in the one picture plane to conjure a threshold. In an assemblage of the monumental (for example, mountains) and the minute (crystals) the envisioned site becomes imaginary and potentially ‘cosmic’. I compare this to Bachelard’s “half-open being”: “As a half-open being it participates in the temptation of doors, and beckons to us with the promise of revealing fruitful insights into the experience of inside and outside spaces, even as it blurs and conflates them.”\textsuperscript{113}

\textsuperscript{111} Marriner, “Derrida and the Parergon”, 351.
\textsuperscript{112} Georges Teysott, “A Topology of Thresholds”, \textit{Home Cultures} 2,1(2005): 106.
\textsuperscript{113} Keeping and Hicks, “Between the inside and the outside,” 75.
In Karin Mamma Andersson’s *In the Waiting Room* (2003), an odd ‘force’ erases the boundaries between the interior of a domestic space and the natural world outside. This presence appears as an ashy dark film on the windows or walls that obstructs the view of the landscape, and simultaneously, an eraser that reveals to the viewer what lies outside. What is external might be a real landscape, or a figment-space imagined by the people in the waiting room. I argue, this painting reveals interior and exterior worlds backing onto one another: the reverse of one space is the face of somewhere else. The artist articulates this transparency through her use of paint. The impermeability of the architectural features is bleached away by this unnamable force, riding the picture plane from top to bottom: it becomes a connecting tissue between the realms that both erases and reveals, allowing two spaces to fold into one another.

This visualisation links to a Deleuzian reading of Gottfried Leibniz’s ‘Baroque Fold’. Leibniz was a physicist who, alongside Isaac Newton, invented infinitesimal calculus: a study that
overrode the divine interpretation of the cosmos, with notions of a “restless, dangerous cosmos, populated by multifarious accidental entities and events.” He defined monads as the indivisible components that all things of the natural world, animate and inanimate, are made, describing them as the true atoms of nature or “the elements of things.”

Based on these parts, which became coiled into a fold-like structure, Leibniz developed “a metaphysics of infinity”.

[The] universe, an infinitely wondrous artefact, is infinite, and each of its parts, down to the infinitely small, is infinitely structured within itself... The facts of the created world, the, are folds infolded in folds, precisely ordered by God, himself the central monad of the universe. The significance of the Leibnizian fold is to allow that the individual monad’s microcosm mirrors the macrocosm of all the other monads by the infinite infolding into itself.

As there have been many ‘folds’ throughout history (from the Oriental, Greek, Roman, Romanesque, Gothic, and Classical derivatives), Deleuze explains the structure in question is specifically the Baroque Fold. This particular fold twists and turns, fold upon fold, in a labyrinthine manner, all the way to infinity. However, this infinity has two parts or storeys: “And from the beginning it differentiates them along two lines, according to two infinities, as if the infinite had two levels: the coils of matter, and the folds of the soul.” In other words, in this imagining, the Cartesian separation of mind and body finds a way in which to weave “matter and its parts” towards and between “liberty in the soul and its predicates.”

To picture the two-tiered apparatus, envision the lower level of matter as pierced by windows. The upper level is sealed, with no inlets to peer into, yet is resonant “like a sounding box” with the ability to transform the visible elements from below into audible echoes. Art historian Heinrich Wolfflin defined this reverberation as a characteristic of the

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115 Ibid, 152.
116 Ibid, 152.
117 Ibid, 152.
119 Ibid, 227.
120 Ibid, 228
121 Ibid, 228.
(general) Baroque, where there was “the tendency of matter of overflow space, to be reconciled with fluidity, at the same time that the waters themselves divide into masses.” 122

For Deleuze, the universe takes on these similar characteristics. It is curved, spongy and cavernous; thus, space becomes porous, elastic and non-linear123. It does not end, as it would on a Cartesian map, but instead promotes flux between matters and elements. The universe, therefore, becomes a continuous fabric, a flexible body, made not of parts that separate, but instead elements that “divide infinitely into smaller and smaller folds that always retain a certain cohesion.”124 This becomes synonymous with this project’s notion of landscape: the flexible body described to look like “a piece of fabric or a sheet of paper”, that can divide into a minutiae of folds yet from a more removed view, appears as curved movements, much like mountain terrain. The elements—that make up all animate and inanimate natural objects—are linked together. They reverberate off one another, responding to their magnifications and differences. Yet they come together in a cohesive, unending and responsive structure, much like the composition of a landscape.

123 Ibid, 230.
124 Ibid, 231.
Contemporary Painting: Fragment and Flex

The manner in which a collaged aesthetic borrows images (and therefore ideas) from disparate sources, recalls this notion of ‘the Fold’. Artist Atsuhide Ito argues that these processes are seen in the poetic and expressive works of contemporary painters who assume a fragmentary approach. For example, in Neo Rauch’s Das Plateau (2008) figurative and landscape forces collide and control one another. A tree grows from the chest of a dreamer. Abyssal dentures in the ground pull subject matter downwards. Interestingly, an artist contains the ‘nature’ around him in a picture. I argue that the artist combines these separate pictorial aspects conjure a flexible site or event: a hallucination of both catastrophe and creation.

For Ito, work like this is “symptomatically fictive and figurative”, creating the sense of folding and unfolding discussed by Deleuze. As these painters do not seek to represent a reality, their imaginary style presents a “complex set of folds, [which] conceals and reveals a secret
message... a tableau to listen to, instead of an image-surface for visual pleasure.”  

From this Ito considers a relationship between the ‘poetic’ and the ‘aesthetic’ in painting.

*Painting as an object demands the beholder’s sensual, intellectual and spatial response to it, that is to say it generates an aesthetic experience instead of a poetic one. Poiesis is a good brother of a troubled aisthesis, another name for affect, or perception. Bifurcated brothers, aisthesis and poiesis, as brothers do, compete and fight as if to illustrate the difference between totality and fragments, real and imaginary.*

During the Baroque period, this poetic quality discussed was achieved through allegory, revealing a “crossing of the borders of a different mode”.  

In addition, Ito refers to Angela Ndalianis’ description of the Baroque as characterised by its lack of respect for the limits of the frame: “Closed forms are replaced by open structures that favour a dynamic and expanding polycentrism.”  

This rejection of boundaries, and preference for an oscillation between zones, confers with the Deleuzian postulation of Baroque strategy: a thinking that “generates multiple visual fields simultaneously and folds them in on each other.”

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126 Ibid, 68.
127 Ibid, 68.
128 Ibid, 69.
In the work of Laura Owens, haphazard combinations of subject matter present a saccharine representation of nature: what initially appears as ‘sweet’ is overridden by a scrupulous consideration of the application of paint. As Frieze writer, Benjamin Weissman suggests of Untitled (1997), Owens has created “a comic mind-fuck of a landscape”: its spatial affect, unnerving. On this particular oversized canvas, two bird-shapes and a hovering dot are the only markers on an empty sky. The sky itself is flat, and overshadows the horizon or any inclination of land, through its unharmonious over-proportion. In contrast to this level plane, the three air-borne subjects are absurdly dimensional: applied using a sculptural impasto medium, they look as though they may peel off or ‘fly away’. Comparatively, their shadows are merely airbrushed whispers. In combination, these three different applications of paint (sky, birds, shadows) conjure an assemblage, where specific consistencies of paint are chosen to visualise specific things. Each feature, or element, becomes an individual piece in her overall dream-of-landscape.
This attention is inherent across Owens’ oeuvre. In Untitled (2000), a background of clouds and a moon-shaped sun is tonal and graphic: it separates into shapes. Mountains from the middle are simple, individually coloured ‘humps’ lining the lake: the lake itself is really just negative-space. In contrast, the branch of an unseen tree is painted with considerable attention to its bark and minor features: this detail pushing it forward in separation from the pastel haze behind. However, like the birds in her previous work, a spattering of thick, visceral leaves punctuate the entirety of the picture plane. No pains have been met to illustrate them naturalistically, but in their definite viscosity, they press into the ‘real’ space of the viewer.
In a final example, this manner of assembling individual elements and their intensities is furthered in *Untitled* (2002). Here, a greater range of applications are used, but in the same separated manner. Tree trunks contain organic creases and textures, appearing to be ‘pulled back’ (sanded, perhaps) to seem naturalistic. However, from only just behind, a bear is a caricature of itself. In other words, there is perpetual crisis in defining what is natural from what is not. The ‘daytime’ of puffy clouds gives way to a pocket of night. A rabbit is just an illustration; the moon reverberates; the same leaves from the previous work are similarly perched upon the painting’s surface.

In Owens’ ‘assembled’ paintings, the medium is manipulated to conjure different spatial relationships. These are not ordinary relationships found when observing a site in nature, but intuitive ones as decided by the artist. In turn, as Ito reveals, the fragmentation in the work of contemporary ‘poetic’ painters allows the new image (the painting) to slip away from its real origin or referent: “As one repeats, the original loses its authority and ... the truth hides itself in between the folds and becomes un-locatable.”129

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129 Ito, “The promise of painting”, 69.
Conclusion: Sitelessness

All that the eye’s versatility disperses must be reunited.  
Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Cezanne’s Doubt

Is it always an advantage to replace an indistinct picture by a sharp one? Isn’t the indistinct one often exactly what we need?  
Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations

Figure 55 William Henry Jackson, Teapot Rock, Near Green River Station, Wyoming, 1869.
This photograph of Teapot Rock in Wyoming was taken by documentary photographer William Henry Jackson on a geological expedition to record the ‘Wild West’ of America. However, when first finding this image, I was unaware of its context: the location seemed flexible. This could be Australia. It could have been a small rock on the beach, or a node sticking up from a larger geological mass. Its cloudless sky could have located the landscape on another planet. In other words, I did not see Wyoming. All I discovered was ‘sitelessness’—not a negation of presence, but a positive landscape attribute: the absence of a particular location.

This theoretical and practical research has determined a landscape that is ‘siteless’. The term, inspired by Blanckiewicz’s book of drawings, can be defined as a spatial construction with no place to conjure: a landscape without a referent. Through the same arbitrary attraction that connected the objects on the bedroom shelf at the beginning of this dissertation, the images created for this project connect disparate elements through aesthetic, or energetic, motivation to conjure ‘sitelessness’.

Figure 56 Robert Smithson, Non-site (Essen soil and mirrors), 1969.
Here, landscape is not a symbol for somewhere found. This is in contrast to Robert Smithson’s ‘Non-sites’ of the 1970s, where sections of the actual environment were brought into the gallery and installed in mediated formations: for example, a selection of rocks placed inside a geometric mirrored box. For Smithson, the actual site represented the world itself with all its complexities, whereas these ‘Non-Sites’ represented a more focused version: he stated that “It is by three-dimensional metaphor that one site can represent another site which does not resemble it—thus The Non-Site.” Alternatively, the landscape envisioned in this project does not symbolise a real environment, but conjures the non-site itself in order to become siteless. It is neither the home nor the universe, but somewhere in-between, affected and stimulated by the two opposing binaries.

As discussed, there are no impermeable bounds separating ‘Here’ from ‘There’: like landscape, these two zones are constructs. We define the first (home; Earth; terrestrial space) as concrete, and the second (external, cosmic space) as vast. For Bachelard, a lack of imagination makes this a reality, as when these spaces convene, an asymmetry that opposes usual geometric comparison appears.

In any case, inside and outside, as experienced by the imagination, can no longer be taken in their simple reciprocity....[By] choosing more concrete, more phenomenologically exact inceptions, we shall come to realise that the dialectics of inside and outside multiply with countless diversified nuances.

Consequently, geological subject matter is ‘let in’ to the described pictorial threshold to form a liminal landscape. It is true that environments consisting of crystal spears, mountain-fragments and ‘cosmic minerals’ do exist: these singular elements appear prominently in places like the deserts of Utah, the gypsum caves of Chihuahua, or the underbelly of Coober Pedy. However, it is through assemblage—or more specifically collage—that this project has exaggerated their potency or prevalence in a unified ‘landscape’. As Godfrey has explained of Kirkeby’s work, “it is about using the picture form to reactivate a thinking based on fragments, openness, and contradiction, not the utopia of a comprehensive or systematic

130 Smithson, The Writings of Robert Smithson, xvii.
131 Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, 216.
order.” Through this process, the landscape takes an uncanny turn away from what is known, and towards a siteless ‘elsewhere’.

What has developed as a consequence of this research project is a propositional practice that has expanded to incorporate other working methods (primarily collage). References are now considerably more abstract and spatially fixated, but most importantly, these processes have encouraged a reassessment of painting as a mechanism of assemblage: pictorial structures and material applications now engage a fragmented sensibility. As Kirkeby’s structures “continue to sediment and collapse... in a manner that is both abstract and inevitably suggestive of landscape”\(^\text{133}\); or Owens’ gravity-less ‘natures’ are conscientiously attentive to their varied applications of paint; it is a practice that incorporates a greater awareness of the flexibility of the medium. This has been discussed through notions of intensity, the separation of elements, the use of pictorial framing

\(^{132}\) Ito, “The promise of painting”, 66.
\(^{133}\) Godfrey, Painting Today, 245.
devices, and the ‘crystalline’ aesthetic of collage. In the future, these images may contain no distinguishable landscape features at all—in an ode to Celmins: just two pieces of tape, dividing up a plane of vibratory colour and form. However, as I reflect on notes from my journals, “abstraction is difficult to become comfortable with”\(^\text{134}\).

In hindsight, it was this assembled aesthetic that made *Teapot Rock* fascinating. Through Jackson’s subjective visualisation, this photograph of a real place in nature separated into pictorial features. The mesmerising shadow cut a hole in the horizontal plane. A reveal of cross-sectional patterning on the (rock itself), was seen as a stripy drawing of agate. The cloudless sky materialised into a white piece of paper, cut out and pasted on as negative space. In other words, the tangible features turned into pictorial elements, adopting a sense of sitelessness. This refers back to my original definition: the image is a collaboration of geological elements, combined to form an un-locatable landscape.

In conclusion, landscape is a subjective imagining. There is nothing to limit the possible ways a complex and indefinable space (‘nature’) can be envisioned. When Cezanne painted Mont Saint Victoire repeatedly, he “extended our sense of possibility by allowing us to inhabit the complex otherness of a space that is anything but a picture of mountains.”\(^\text{135}\) Similarly, this project has examined how a natural referent is transformed through the visualisation of a landscape image. I argue that all landscapes collapse the tangible reality they sought to illustrate. This renewed vision of landscape imagines a vaster, extended ‘nature’: one that oscillates seamlessly between ‘Here’ and ‘There’ to become siteless.

\(^{134}\) Laura Skerlj, journal note, 2013.
\(^{135}\) Morris, “Cezanne’s mountains”, 829.
Bibliography


<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/31623/31623-h/31623-h.htm> (accessed 26 October, 2013)


Appendix: Documentation of Exhibited Work

All images of *The Collapsible Landscape* exhibition, VCA Masters Graduate Exhibition, Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne, December 2013.

All works by Laura Skerlj.

Image credit: Danica Chappell.

03. Laura Skerlj, *The Collapsible Landscape* exhibition, installation view, 2013.
04. Laura Skerlj, *Flux Geology (mountains become mountains)*, acrylic and oil on linen, 168 x 193 cm, 2013
05. Laura Skerlj, *Sleep Mountain (gently does it)*, acrylic and oil on linen, 168 x 193 cm, 2013
06. Laura Skerlj, *Hyper-matter (pinnacles and envelopes)*, acrylic and oil on linen, 168 x 193 cm, 2013
07. Laura Skerlj, *Handheld Cosmos (get together)*, acrylic and oil on board, 35 x 40 cm, 2013.
09. Laura Skerlj, *Earthen Universe (climb onward, climb upward)*, acrylic and oil on board, 35 x 40 cm, 2013.
10. Laura Skerlj, *Crystal Constellations (implosions, explosions)*, acrylic and oil on board, 35 x 40 cm, 2013.
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Skerlj, Laura

Title:
The collapsible landscape

Date:
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