

[STUDIO]

Nicole Pietrantoni gave a lecture called “Fractured Landscapes, Fraught Aesthetics” in Lincoln Hall on March 7th, 2017. The following is her interview with the MFA Studio students.

[STUDIO] In your talk, you spoke about the surreal qualities of majestic natural features like waterfalls and glaciers. Can you speak about the importance of illusion in your work?

Beauty and illusion are what seduce us to keep looking, but they are also the very things that artists need to reframe, draw attention to, and subvert. When I photograph a landscape, I can't help but be affected by beauty. This feeling attracts me to the places I photograph, but is also the very thing that makes me uneasy about photographing them. As a responsible image maker, I want the viewer to also experience this tension between enjoying nature and questioning how that experience has been constructed and produced for them.

Ultimately, images are imitations of nature. They're constructed, fixed ideas of the photographic object. As viewers we can easily fall into the trap of believing that a picture speaks the truth about the image, whether it's of a person or a landscape. This, I believe, is what can make it easy to obscure or conceal the history of places and the complexity of environmental problems. Too many images of nature, whether in glossy magazine ads and tourism brochures, or movies and Instagram feeds, herald pristine nature meant for humans' uncomplicated enjoyment.

As your practice moves away from exploring grand vistas to more intimate locations and landscapes in your immediate environment, how do you imagine your practice shifting?

My practice is definitely shifting. Not only is the focus of the work becoming more intimate and local, but the speed at which I investigate and explore these spaces is slowing down. This is a big change for me. For the past several years my work focused on Iceland (where I spent a year on a Fulbright grant) and on landscapes where climate change is most visible. Over time, I've found myself wondering about how beauty and environmental disaster are frequently intertwined, ultimately reducing the ethical efficacy of the image. I realize that in order to move forward in my work, I need to complicate my own understanding of artistic engagement with the environment. I find myself less interested in the grand or the “far away” and more interested in the small and the “nearby.” Climate change and environmental problems aren't just “out there” in the icy poles or exotic locales, but in the places we live and in our actions, practices, and mindsets.

I'm currently on sabbatical this semester and it's been very hard for me to slow down and shift my practice to my region, but I think it's an important, mindful move for my work. I chose not to travel to any residencies and instead “tricked” myself by saying I was having a residency here in eastern Washington, with field trips and readings to accompany it. This orientation towards my sabbatical conflicted with how I was trained (as I believe many artists are) to produce, produce, produce. Especially in the field of printmaking and book arts, being prolific is equated with being successful. I view my art practice in a very different way now, with less focus on manic production and more focus on listening, researching, and investigating. I've lived in Walla Walla for five years now, yet I'm still an outsider to this part of eastern Washington in many ways. I feel I have a lot to learn about the history and evolution of this place.

What have you discovered so far in your investigations closer to home?

This shift towards the local environment has pushed me to better understand the issues and concerns of the region where I live, the interior West. My interest in the local has deepened through interdisciplinary research with colleagues on our campus as well as my own explorations. I've been looking into the narratives and histories of Western landscapes and digging into the uglier side of the West, like the militarized, post-nuclear landscape of Hanford (which is just 45 minutes west

of me), which is the most contaminated nuclear site in the United States. In these explorations, concepts such as “Nature,” “Rural,” and “the West” are challenged and I find it necessary (and stimulating) to make connections between the visual arts, social theory, and environmental studies.

There is so much happening around us if we just slow down and take the time to pay attention. Eastern Washington, which is often thought to be a desert, a wasteland, or no-man's land, has a long and often unknown history at the Hanford site, which is where I'm currently focusing.

You began to make books because you were asked to teach a bookmaking class. Are there other instances where teaching has informed your art making?

Absolutely. My orientation towards the classroom is that it's like a laboratory. This is an experimental space where we (both the students and myself) should be exploring and testing ideas, not just mastering a craft or technique. While I love the materials and processes of printmaking and book arts, I am also very stimulated by creating assignments that intersect with my research interests. For example, one of my favorites is a mapping project in my Artists' Books class. After reading Lucy Lippard, Trevor Paglen, and Rebecca Solnit, we create “maps of the unseen” to represent previously invisible relations in Walla Walla. These maps, which visualize things like the spatial relation between wineries and mobile homes, fast food and green spaces, public art and public housing, push students to situate themselves within a larger economic, historical, and cultural framework. This assignment is at the heart of my work too and a constant reminder that artists can and should be situated within the narratives that manifest in their local communities.

When you take printmaking classes in school students don't often learn about digital technologies as part of printmaking. Can you talk more about how you define printmaking?

I view printmaking as set of ideas, not just a set of techniques. To be an artist working with printmaking today is to have a particular orientation towards replication, distribution, and representation. Within the field of printmaking, I see myself aligned with artists who choose the print for its conceptual richness. I am trained in both traditional techniques as well as emerging technologies. For example, I make (and teach) woodcuts and screenprints while at the same time engaging the world of installation and digital printing technologies (e.g., inkjet, laser cutters, and CNC routers). All of these tools can be used to make prints, but I am more than a technician or craftsman, and this is how I train my students to think as well. We are contemporary artists who choose printmaking as the most fitting language for our work.

As printed matter is an increasingly ubiquitous part of visual culture, printmaking as a fine art continues to expand and encompass a broadening definition. Prints are all around us. We make prints at the office photocopier. We make prints each time the texture of our shoe presses into soft earth. We take for granted the technology and history

of printmaking when we read newspapers and magazines. The academic field of printmaking has always taken the means of production and turned them into modes for expression, critique, and dissent.

Whose work are you looking at?

There are some artists I return to again and again. Some of those are Olafur Eliasson, Tacita Dean, and Gerhard Richter, as well as a lot of earthworks and Romantic paintings. In the last few years I've been increasingly interested in minimalist works and had the opportunity to see Agnes Martin's retrospective at both LACMA and the Guggenheim. It was stunning.

Along with looking, I'm always reading, which is also an influence. Creative non-fiction, classics like Annie Dillard's Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, Lucy Lippard's The Lure of the Local, and Rebecca Solnit's River of Shadows. Right now I'm reading T.J. Demos's Decolonizing Nature and Plutopia, by Kate Brown, which chronicles the Hanford nuclear site.

Tell us more about being in a long-term collaborative artistic partnership. How do you determine what projects will be approached collaboratively?

Collaboration has been an essential aspect of my artistic practice. It's pushed me to be more critical of my own work and to take risks I might not have otherwise. I've been working with my collaborator Devon Wootten for over 10 years now. Devon is a poet and also my husband, so we've developed a really wonderful working relationship over all that time. We approach collaboration rather organically – sometimes he'll have a poetic project that he thinks needs a visual component, which is where I can assist and we workshop through ideas. At other times, I'll have a vision for some crazy book forms that I'll show him models of and then he has suggestions for how text could be integrated. We dive into projects, make decisions together, and are very honest with each other about what's working and what needs to be cut or altered. It's like having your best friend in your studio – we want to help one another realize our artistic visions and that's an exciting thing.

See entire lecture on [vimeo.com](https://vimeo.com/154444444). Search PSU MFA Studio Art.

Editor: Carlin Brown
Lecture Series Director: Lisa Jarrett
Copy Editor: Carlin Brown & Eddie Garland
Art Editor: Melanie Flood
Contributors: Kayley Berezney, Carlin Brown, Jordan Clark, Shawn Creeden, Melanie Flood, Eddie Garland, Megan Hanley, & Sam Sanderson
Production Manager: Megan Hanley
Design: Shannon Dunlop
Design Supervisor: Briar Levit

Nicole Pietrantoni's artwork explores the complex relationship between human beings and nature through installations, artists' books, and works on paper. She is the recipient of numerous awards and residencies including a Fulbright to Iceland, a Leifur Eiriksson Foundation Grant, an Artist Trust Fellowship, the Manifest Prize, and the Graves Award for excellence in humanities teaching and research.

Nicole Pietrantoni received her MFA and MA in Printmaking from the University of Iowa and her BS in Human and Organizational Development and Art History from Vanderbilt University. She is currently the President of the Board of SGC International, North America's largest professional organization dedicated to education and scholarship in the field of printmaking.

Pietrantoni regards both her professional practice and pedagogy as powerful sites for intellectual, artistic, and ethical transformation. She is committed to arts education and has been a visiting artist at colleges around the country to give workshops and speak about her work. Since 2012, Nicole has been an Assistant Professor of Art at Whitman College where she teaches printmaking and book arts.

NEXT EDITION OF [STUDIO]: Laylah Ali - April 27, 2017

Nicole Pietrantoni

March 7th, 2017

BLICK
art materials



Portland State University MFA Studio Visiting Artist
Lecture Series is sponsored in part by Blick-Utrecht Art Supplies and MFA Happy Hour, and the PSU School of Art + Design. The series brings together artists, curators, and critics from a variety of disciplines to explore the subjects of their own work before a live audience.

PSU'S MFA IN CONTEMPORARY ART PRACTICE/
STUDIO degree program is dedicated to interdisciplinary experimentation and the exploration of ideas through the experience of making. Students are supported in a range of research and production, from the traditional to the emerging, as they consider the multiple ways art can live in and beyond the studio.



Nicole Pietrantonì



Precipitous, 2014
14 ft x 6 ft
Inkjet on Awagami Inbe Thick,
folded and bound into 5 accordion books (each 22 pages)
that expand to create a panoramic image.