



Josephine Halvorson:
Mine Ground (Shadows),
2018, gouache on paper,
22 by 24 inches.

All artwork courtesy
Sikkema Jenkins & Co.,
New York

ON THE GROUND

A Project by Josephine Halvorson

Particle

The glint of mica in asphalt distinguishes itself against the bluish-black road, but when approached, it no longer catches the light and disappears from view. A flake of snow, followed from eye level to the ground, dissolves into all the others that have landed before it. Gum spat out on the sidewalk becomes a rubbery disk nearly inseparable from the concrete. Wherever you look, the individual part gets absorbed into the whole, yet the whole remains a sum of parts.

Painting is a practice that constantly negotiates this relationship. Thousands of pigment particles are packed into a tube of paint. Strokes of color accrue to form a painting. Installed together, artworks constitute an exhibition. Bodies of work develop. Time goes by, and once the artist, having made their last mark, is dead and buried, we can finally study the work in relation to itself. Every move—on and off the surface of the painting—defines the oeuvre. The ground an artist covers gets mapped.



View of Halvorson's
exhibition, "As I Went
Walking," 2017, at Sikkema
Jenkins & Co.

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Contributors page.

Ground

Over the last decade, I've developed a practice of making paintings in relation to specific objects and places. Encountering something of interest, I set up my easel and materials, and work from observation over the course of a day. This approach draws on the traditions of plein air painting, documentary photography, Land art, and psychogeography.

Since 2009 I've worked on pre-primed linen stretched over wooden strainers made by John Annesley Company. John, who passed away last October, was more than a fabricator of my supports; he was a friend and mentor who generously shared his knowledge of materials and techniques. I now find myself, as a teacher, saying that what we paint on is as important as what we paint with. Ground matters: it holds and expresses our decisions and feelings.

In February, my former student Dani came to teach my current Boston University MFA students about painting grounds. Measuring and mixing chalks, fillers, binders, and pigment, she shared her secret recipes and methodologies. As she expertly and patiently refined a gritty paste, she reflected on the relationship between artist and painting, "I think of a ground as a trade of traits and behaviors between me and the materials." The transmission of material knowledge between mentor and student is foundational to painting in all its forms.

Surface

When it comes to applying paint, I try to attend to every part of the canvas. I touch the surface through bristle varnish brushes and my dwindling stock of short-handled sables from the now-shuttered New York Central Art Supply.

I've spent countless hours softly dragging sticky mixtures of oil paint across linen. My favorite colors are probably Williamsburg Bohemian Green Earth, Green Gold, and Cobalt Violet Deep. Strokes touch and remodel other strokes: at a certain point, almost imperceptibly, they exceed their own materiality and coalesce into a surface, one that resembles another material altogether—plastic, wood, metal, earth.

Depending on temperature and weather conditions, a skin forms within the average stretch of daylight hours. The surface cures and congeals all kinds of experience—of the subject at hand, of the place and its history, of my own emotions and thoughts, of climate. I've come to think of this approach as a form of casting: a one-shot, wet-into-wet impression of the day.



Top, Halvorson at work in Tecopa, California, 2011. Photo Josephine Halvorson.

Above, Dani Levine leading a painting workshop for Boston University MFA students, 2018. Photo Josephine Halvorson.



Ghost (detail), 2017, oil on linen, 23 by 15 inches.



Broadsheet (Measure), 2017, gouache and silkscreen on paper, 22½ by 24½ inches.

Map

The earth's surface, when represented as a map, gives the sense that you can travel to any spot you put your finger on. Yet it's difficult to imagine what it would take to traverse it all. A similar paradox can be found in painting. The defined area of a canvas might appear manageable when its potential is actually infinite. With every choice I make—color, subject, material, history, etc.—I'm also opting out of every possible alternative. I think of the act of painting as a mapping of decisions. Points of interest are noted while the gaps in between go without mention.

My recent gouache-and-silkscreen drawings point toward an increasingly notational facture, approximating the flow of handwriting. The touch of my brush denotes bits of matter and their shadows, cataloguing the sun's movement and the ground's composition. In *Broadsheet Measure* (2017), I use fluid gouache to describe twigs, mud, and a fragment of a flood marker discovered on the banks of the Rhône. Color soaks into the paper, leaving its indelible trace. The speed of this mark-making matches my eye movement and sensual perception. Working this way, painting moves from verb to noun in the instant of its making.

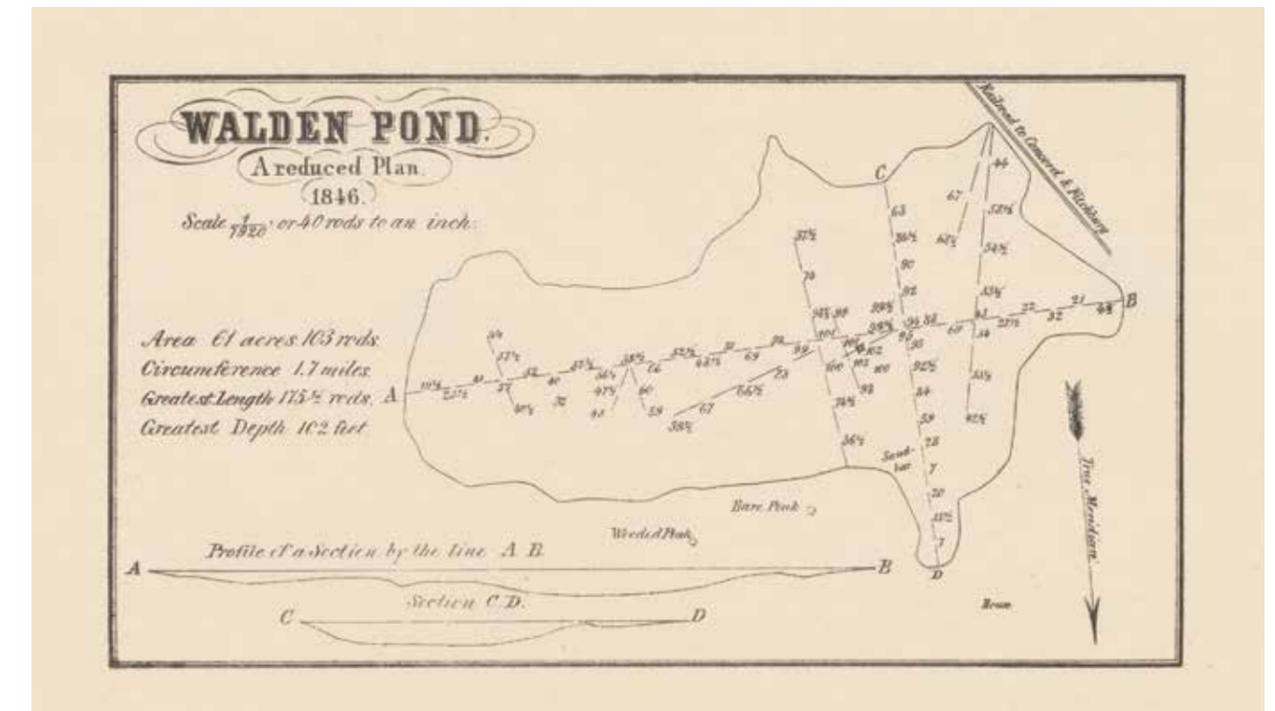
Measurement

In early February I drove to Concord, Massachusetts, with my graduate student Max. After I slipped on the icy path and hit my head on the ground, we sat by the edge of Walden Pond and read aloud “The Pond in Winter,” a chapter from *Walden* in which Thoreau calculates the pond's depth by fathoming it with a fishing line tied to a rock. He then charts his measurements onto a map. To his surprise, he discovers that “the line of greatest length intersected the line of greatest breadth exactly at the point of greatest depth.”¹

When making correlations with the world around him, Thoreau frequently employs a tool—a measuring line, a hoe, a pen. After all, he and his brother had hoped to make pencils for a living. Thoreau always homes in on coincidence. In describing one phenomenon he's actually alluding to another. “What I have observed of the pond is no less true in ethics,” he concludes. “It is the law of average. Such a rule of the two diameters not only guides us toward the sun in the system and the heart in man, but draws lines through the length and breadth of the aggregate of a man's particular daily behaviors and waves of life into his coves and inlets, and where they intersect will be the height or depth of his character.”²

Similarly, I translate dimensionality into flatness, mapping the transformation of the real into the realm of metaphor. For me, looking is not enough, nor is description. It's through the correspondence between the presence of a thing and its representation that my own perception is realized.

1. Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. Jeffrey S. Cramer, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2004, p. 280.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 281.



Henry David Thoreau: *Walden Pond. A reduced plan*, 1846, pencil on paper, 7 by 9¾ inches. Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, New York Public Library Digital Collections.

Boundary

The plein air tradition involves traveling around and schlepping. It's allied to tourism, taking place in spaces both public and private. For as long as I've been working this way, I've grappled with the ethics of trespass, property ownership, and civic space. I wonder what happens when the genius loci, embodied in a painting, later travels elsewhere. I like to think that the paintings create new vectors, extending and twisting boundary lines wherever and whenever they're displayed.

Last fall at Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York, I presented a new group of paintings of boundary markers made in western Massachusetts, where I now live. The exhibition, which evoked the measurement of land, also marked time: it was the tenth year of showing my work. When I look back, I see how my interests have always moved toward edges, margins, and boundaries: the front plane of the canvas doubled in trompe l'oeil; the rectangle of the painting commensurate with the edges of the object; my gravitation toward discarded, cast aside, and peripheral subjects.

For this exhibition, I straddled invisible, legal boundaries with my body and equipment, painting signs of ownership—"no trespassing" posters, flagging tape, and metal stakes. Wherever my eyes landed, there were traces of neighbors, dead and alive. The ground is littered with inscriptions of its own history of possession. I thought about belonging. Now that I own a piece of the rock, do the trees that grow there belong to me? At what point does one become *of* a place?

Former Corner Marker, 2017, oil on linen, 19 by 22 inches.



Left, *Mine Ground (Fossil)*, 2018, gouache on paper, 22 by 24 inches.

Below, debris at a mine site in Tecopa, Calif., 2018. Photo Josephine Halvorson.

Bottom, view from a mine site in Tecopa, Calif., 2018. Photo Josephine Halvorson.

Traction

Earlier this year, I revisited an area of the California desert, near the Nevada border, where I made work seven years ago. The sun had risen and set each day in my absence, and yet it was as if no time had passed. The ground was just as I'd left it. When studying the ground before me through my own transcriptive painting practice, I realized that the wind, human intervention, and tectonic shifts in the earth's shape had been the only agents of change. Rusted tin cans from miners who worked there as late as the 1960s, beer bottle shards, gravel, and sand grains didn't appear to have budged.

As I mixed colors and held my brush close to the surface of my painting, a fierce wind shook my easel and arm, and etched the skin of my face. It crossed my mind that this place had been lying in wait for my return. It existed, intact, while I was elsewhere: a year in Rome, the semesters spent teaching, the monthly countdown to infertility, the day I got married.

I started 2018 in a place from my past. I looked down at my feet, the surrounding objects apparently undisturbed. The ground provided the motif for new work. My practice had at last caught up to this site.

I came to the desert with my grad student Liz, who also makes work outside, not expecting to feel the powerful fellowship with, in, and enabled by plein air painting. Sharing that place, experience, and methodology allowed me to inhabit the tradition with deeper respect. I could see my own course as an artist with greater clarity and begin to gain traction for the road ahead. I recently received some advice to move toward the things that move me. It's a truth I've always known in painting, but it now seems applicable to teaching, too. To move, there must be ground against which to push. ○

This essay is adapted from a lecture delivered on February 8, 2018, at Paint School, a series of master classes organized by the New York nonprofit Shandanken Projects.

