

Sanctuary

In silence, we not only discover ourselves but each other -- words like these can seem as ephemeral as walking paths carved into the tall brush as the wind whistles behind your back and time collaborates with the earth to reclaim what is theirs. Silence is both an experience and an activity, elusive and charming, yet challenging and equally as ephemeral as that word, sanctuary. Sanctuary is peace, and heel to toe, walking in the land is where my peace was realized.

In my youth my family was a unit, we found solace in walks through the woods, taking in all nature had to offer during this surprisingly laborious activity for small legs. Stepping over rocks, finding footholds, and surveying the steps ahead was a game and a challenge but also an escape into silence and stillness. A questionable stillness of sorts as it was discovered in physical activity and occasional serious effort; searching for worms after rains, venturing to a treehouse, or exploring the deep, narrow spaciousness of a strange new backyard. These moments, while active, gave me the most stillness I found as a child, creating a singular need and ability to focus on the moment at hand. The smells of the trees, the crackle of leaves underfoot, squish of mud as sneakers slid across wet earth, these were spaces to be one with myself, a peace found in the walk itself.

Being in the land became more than a simple act of pleasure, it was an escape, it is release. The symphony of sounds on a spring day, nightfall calling forward an orchestra of creatures, wind whistling through trees, cicadas and frogs harmonizing the chorus -- it was here that I learned to listen. It was that listening that bred stillness which allowed me to understand time in a new way, unrestricted from our schedules. It was nature determining time in seasonal change like measures keeping pace for the sections of this ensemble. Walking allows me to feel underfoot the rising and fall of the land, subtle changes in the ecosystem seen through grasses as they rustle with my movement.

The land finds itself present in my work, large-scale drawings made by dragging, rubbing, pulling paper across the Tallgrass Prairie after prescribed burns. Marks are formed through indentation, bio-char, and particulate that leaves its trace, mark, and scar upon the surface of the substrate. My body is a tool, an extension of the paper while also the device for physical engagement allowing for interaction of subject and content. The drawings explore the cycles of the land, acknowledging the difference in the stratum created by change in climate and condition. They honor nature by working in conjunction with the elements, not fighting but collaborating to discover something that was always waiting to be revealed -- discovery only made possible through walking the land. Burns clear the land of past seasons growth, just as finding room for silence in walking can clear the mind of the rabble that surrounds us daily. There is a psychological space created here, one that provides isolation from the day to day and the weight of the world. This is necessary to working in the land and these drawings, but it also begins to connect them to this act and the space that walking provides. This walking to create requires focus, a focus found through the act of traversing the space, catching the sunlight on my skin, the smell of distant rain; as if by moving backwards and forwards across the landscape

I simultaneously imagine the future but also consider the past. In activity, in walking, there is once again stillness.

The sun in London may be less frequent, but it is the same as the sun on the prairie, and the same as the sun in the Shenandoah mountains. As children we watched the sunset crest behind the hills as day became night and slept under the stars. Summers spent under the canopy of luminous foliage and sounds of water crescending over rocks as they pooled below, this was a space of clarity. The act of communing with nature as the sky passed overhead became an exploration of interconnectedness, focusing on each footfall and sound while the act of listening became a delightful obligation that drew me both into my body and interaction of my surroundings. Walking trails that led through the forested landscape was like a blanket, comforting, safe, and gently leading back to that Big Sky campground that would lull me into wild-eyed dreamland fit for this child who felt one with the woods. It is now the bluestem and Indian grass that brushes against my legs, scratchy and overgrown, unflinching to my approach, rich with memories of those who passed before me. The switch grass of the tallgrass prairie hides the sounds of nesting birds occasionally breaking the silence as if to question my fleeting presence. This body takes up more space, yet still connected to then and now, it seems equally if not increasingly smaller than before. Parting the growth ahead of me, remnants of mortality and frailness seem embedded here, telling the story of this place over time and slowly my own path is hidden and I can only move forward.

In the past, walking was an invitation to my mothers arms, to family, walking always led me out of the chaos and into calm. Walking was comfort when disturbed, and memory of the sounds that surrounded my childhood home after moving to an unfamiliar place. They say, “the journey is the destination”, at a point that became reality. Walking out of that field behind the house I found myself standing in Shenandoah, and walking further I emerge in the prairie, the wind and sun feeling different, yet all so familiar. Walking was a place where I found my inner-self, but also my family, my connection to the larger world around me (each other).

Aldo Leopold said, “there are two spiritual dangers in not owning a farm. One is the danger of supposing that breakfast comes from the grocery, and the other that heat comes from the furnace.” My work is a reminder of the value of the land, falling less into separating myself but achieving a deeper understanding of our dependency upon it. Walking the land offers sanctuary and it is in this sanctuary that I gain understanding -- if only even briefly, like a fireline crossing over the flint hills, within the silence of walking I can always find myself, hear my breath, feel the crisp air enveloping me. I can always find my peace.

Erin Wiersma was born in New Jersey and resides in Manhattan, Kansas. She holds a MFA from the University of Connecticut and is an Associate Professor at Kansas State University. Wiersma is represented by Robischon Gallery in Denver, CO and Galerie Fenna Wehlau in Munich Germany.