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NOTES ON VIEWFINDING

BY

ANNA LYNN GRIMES

B.F.A., University of Tennessee, 1977

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts in Art

The University of New Mexico Albuquerque, New Mexico December, 1979

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ANNA LYNN GRIMES

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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NOTES ON VIEWFINDING

Anna Lynn Grimes B.F.A., University of Tennessee, 1977 M.A., Art, University of New Mexico, 1979

My mixed media works on paper are a result of an exploration in the landscape that I call "viewfinding."

This exploration involves looking at the surrounding physical environment from different perspectives, discovering features that are significant to me and producing evidence of these discoveries in my work. To expand my concept of the landscape I explore multiple ways of viewing, i.e. viewing from different positions in the landscape, through window frames and through secondary sources of information such as maps and scientific diagrams. Levels of information are collected and reassembled in my "view" drawings of the landscape. The resulting image contains the discoveries I have made through my explorations and exists as a chronicle of my experiences in a time and place.

I am interested in exploring the surrounding landscape from different points of view, discovering features that I feel are significant and producing evidence of these discoveries through my work. This investigation of the physical environment is a process of "viewfinding" that involves subjective and objective ways of viewing. I am able to expand my mental image of a place when I explore it from different perspectives. Personal discoveries are made when I view from different positions in the landscape; away from a site I examine secondary sources of information that illustrate perspectives I have not experienced first hand. Qualities selected from perceptions made in the landscape and from my research of related maps, books and photographs are recorded first in notebooks, then recombined in a "view" drawing. The resulting "view" of the landscape is not a representational image -- it is a composite image made of fragmented maps, journals and sketches.

The significant qualities of places to which I have been and information acquired through indirect sources are gathered together and filtered through my memory system.

In my memory levels of information such as personal perceptions, readings from books and scientific data, are pooled and seem to be suspended without hierarchy or order. Impressions from different times and places intersect,

overlap, merge and are transformed. Separate events seem to flow together in a loosely woven pattern, creating memories that are overall perceptions of experiences rather than detailed recollections.

My visual memories are amorphous images of colors, textures and lights that seem uncontained. They are impressionistic stains that remain from a past event in the landscape. Certain impressions prevail and resurface in the image of a drawing--traces left from the reflecting surfaces of water, cold dark windows against the bright sky, mountains dissovling into a light filled atmosphere. These elusive memories are given a tangible form in the images of my drawings. My work is a personal system of documenting and reinforcing the memory of an event in the landscape. This system provides a way to chronicle my experiences without imposing rigorous orders or measurements.

The fundamental purpose in making a drawing of the landscape is to translate a significant experience in a time and place. This experience revolves around the physical environment—a vital source of inspiration and exploration. Places and events from my past are recalled by the surrounding quality of the landscape and each place is associated with a different impression of colors, spaces, lights and textures. When I travel to new regions of the country, I become aware of the visual contrasts among places. In particular I am attentive to the transformation of sky, mountain and water elements and identify a

place according to the forms and spaces they inhabit. The shifting surfaces of these landscape elements provide sensations of color and light that are impressed upon my memory and I feel compelled to reinterpret these impressions through painting and drawing materials. The themes of my drawings are dominated by water, sky and mountain images. The qualities of texture, color, contour and atmosphere vary within the image according to my impression of a particular landscape. Each drawing is a specific response to my perception of a landscape and an emblem of my experience in a specific time and place.

I explore the topographies of the surrounding environment from high and distant viewing spots as well as from ones that are near. As a result, a mental image develops around a particular body of water or mountain that is based on multiple views. Each view of the landscape yields a new discovery, a new impression. Visual notations that I have made from each vantage point are recalled in the studio and reassembled in my "view" of the landscape. The drawings are circuitous rather than linear. This presentation of the landscape from multiple perspectives is more appropriate to the way I have experienced it.

When viewing the distant landscape I often climb to a place that affords a panoramic view. I go to a place in Albuquerque where I can see the expansive space that circumscribes the city limits. From such a height, the

visible territory appears like a three dimensional map-a network of relationships between the city and surrounding landforms. My viewing from this perspective is a scan that takes me across the landscape from point to point. To the west is the mesa, a low shelf supporting protrusions of three volcanos. To the east the horizon is blocked by the Sandia and Manzano mountains, formidable masses of granite that continually reflect the movement of the sun. Far away mountains disappear beyond the horizon, dissolving into phantasms of light and atmosphere. I have previously travelled through these distant spaces and I recall the irregularities of shapes and surfaces I viewed from a close perspective. Near and far perspectives are combined in my memory and into my "views" of the landscape. The form that I assign to a landscape element may derive from the distant vista, while the surface of the drawing corresponds to a close examination of topographies.

When investigating a view of the landscape, I am aware of what I am viewing as well as the mode or context through which I am viewing. One such context is to view through physical barriers that stand between an individual and the distant landscape. I look over, under and around the obstructions of telephone poles, billboards and apartment complexes, or through windows, car windshields and camera viewfinders. These various constructs obliterate parts of the view while directing attention to a particular

aspect of it. In the city environment I always see the landscape in relation to these interfering forms, and I interpret it through this network of interference.

When the landscape is seen through a window, a view is isolated from the environment and contained within a rigid frame. The window creates an interval between the space and time of experiences in the landscape and provides a new context for viewing. In my work I make references to frames such as windows. The view of the landscape is contained within a repeated rectangular framework of ruled lines, and fragmented borders—a network of boundaries that surround the image. Through the central opening of the frame a new perspective on the landscape can be gained. In the context of a drawing the landscape is seen through my eyes, my frames, so I am able to direct attention to a particular aspect of the view.

The window view perspective of the landscape is illustrated in the nineteenth century lithographs of western American cities. The manner in which I assemble visual material into a drawing has been affected by my interest in these documents. These detailed accounts of a place and time contain many levels of information. The characteristics of a territory are described through a system of pictorial, verbal and diagrammatic languages. A "birds-eye" view plus detail views of buildings and streets are contained within multiple borders. Map-like labels and markings indicate the city structure, points of interest and surrounding topographies. These features of

the city view are clearly delineated, but the colors are subdued and mysterious—a scheme of muted tans and greys that is suggestive of colors that were perceived. This subjective element is added to objective information and an intersection between points of view results in the image. These images are informative records of a time and place as well as personal chronicles of search and discovery.

In the studio, I translate a past event in the landscape by recombining the different layers and associations of meaning that I have collected. What seems natural to express in my work is the route of exploration, the network connecting these various meanings. My subjective memory of a place is an essential source, but I also make use of sketchbooks and journals, aerial photographs, maps and scientific diagrams. Objective information is incorporated into my personal point of view and a new "view" is created through their interaction. Words, images and diagrams are given equal weight in the image as expressions of various still points of perception. These elements are transformed into a visual language that is a clue to, rather than a description of my experiences in the landscape. Various levels of information are layered, obscured, scraped away, concealed and revealed to trace a path between my past and present discoveries.

Alterations and adjustments are made in my drawings until the form and surface evoke a memory of the landscape.

I mix mediums of paint, pastels, pencils and inks on a paper surface and allow the image to evolve. Throughout this process I am continually adding and subtracting qualities of the image. Washes, stains and marks of various colors are layered then erased, surfaces are built up then destroyed. My materials blend into the surface of the image, and only the tracks of my creative activities remain.

In my "viewfinding" activity, primary importance is placed on the quality of experience in the physical environment and my ability to translate the experience into a documented form. To translate my personal experiences into a public image I "map" the significant qualities to points on the two dimensional surface of paper. Robert Smithson states that "the artist who is physically engulfed tries to give evidence of this experience through a limited (mapped) revision of the original unbounded state. Smithson understood a dialectical relationship between his indoor and outdoor experiences, i.e. abstracting from an event in the physical world and making evidence of it through art. He understood the art making process as an integral part of the relationships between different experiences in the world rather than as an isolated activity. With this perspective in mind I have come to a better understanding of the connection between my experiences

Smithson, Robert. "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects." The Collected Writings of Robert Smithson, p. 82.

in the landscape and my activities within the studio.

Perceiving the landscape in its continuous space and in a constant state of change, I can only present a fragment of the view in my work. The view within the frame is finite, but I suggest the infinite space of the physical environment by presenting multiple points of view.

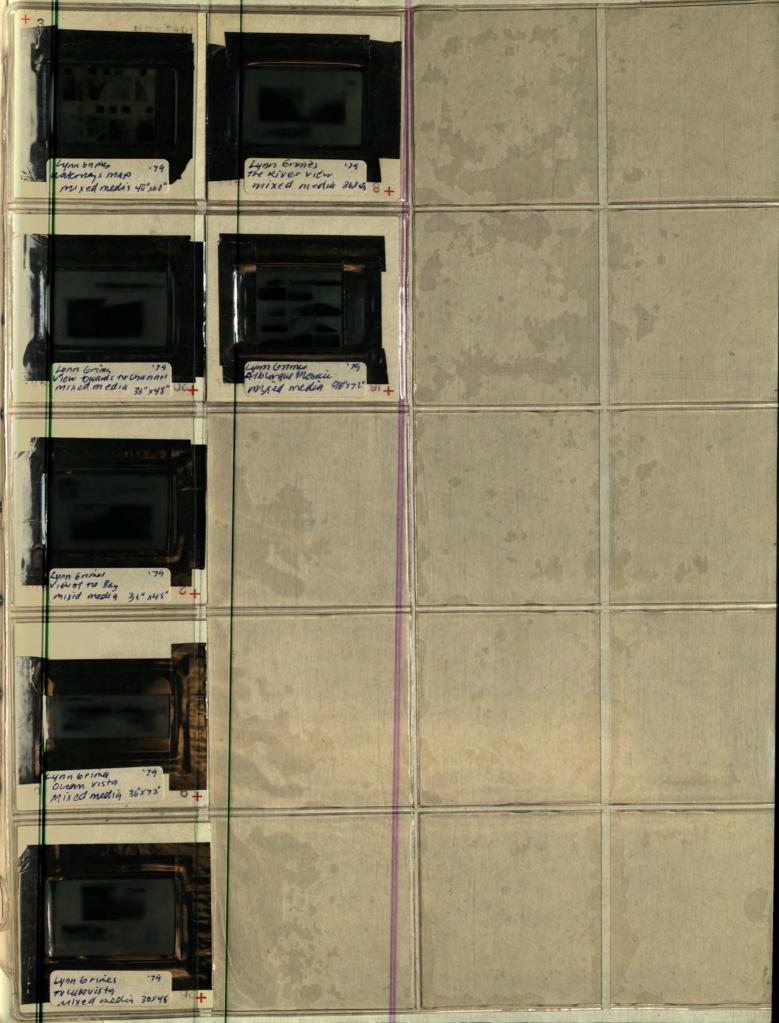
The most recent piece has taken the form of a mosaic image. It is made of a series of drawings that refer to a circular view of the landscape—directions to the north, south, east and west. The images derive from my sketchbook notations and from maps I have outlined. The structure of the mosaic is unified by a grid, while the boundaries are loosely defined to suggest something that cannot be contained. It should be clear that there are many more things to be seen beyond the limitation of the frame—this image is a reference to qualities of my experience in a place, not a representation or illusion of its space. The fragments of the landscape that I present in the image are points on a "map" that trace a continuous path of my experiences.

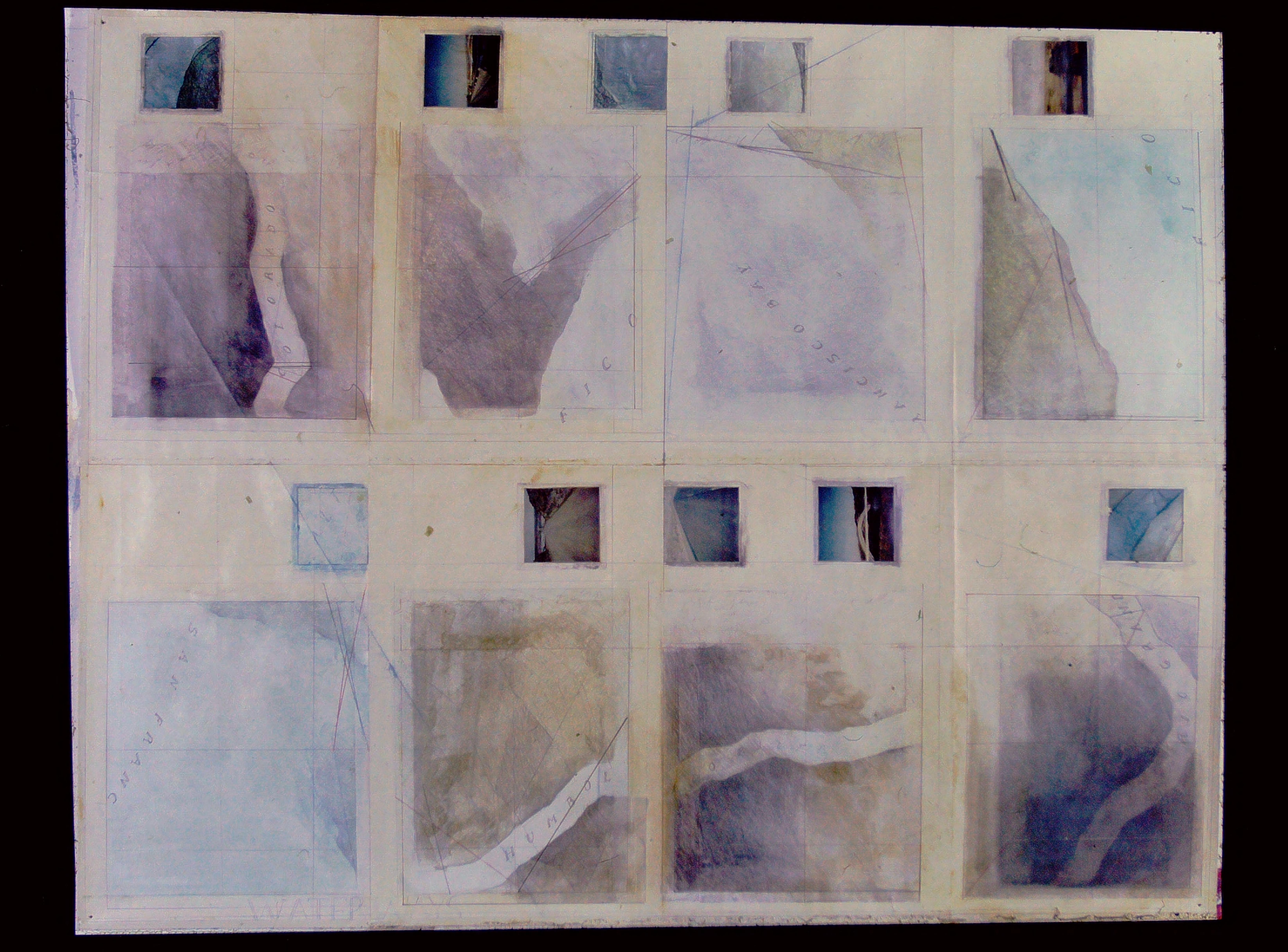
"Viewfinding" is an ongoing and open-ended activity that is open to new perspectives, discoveries and interpretations. The image I present as a result of this activity is made of clues to my experience in the landscape-references and inferences to as well as souvenirs from the moments spent in a time and place. My purpose in making these images is to provide a new context for viewing the

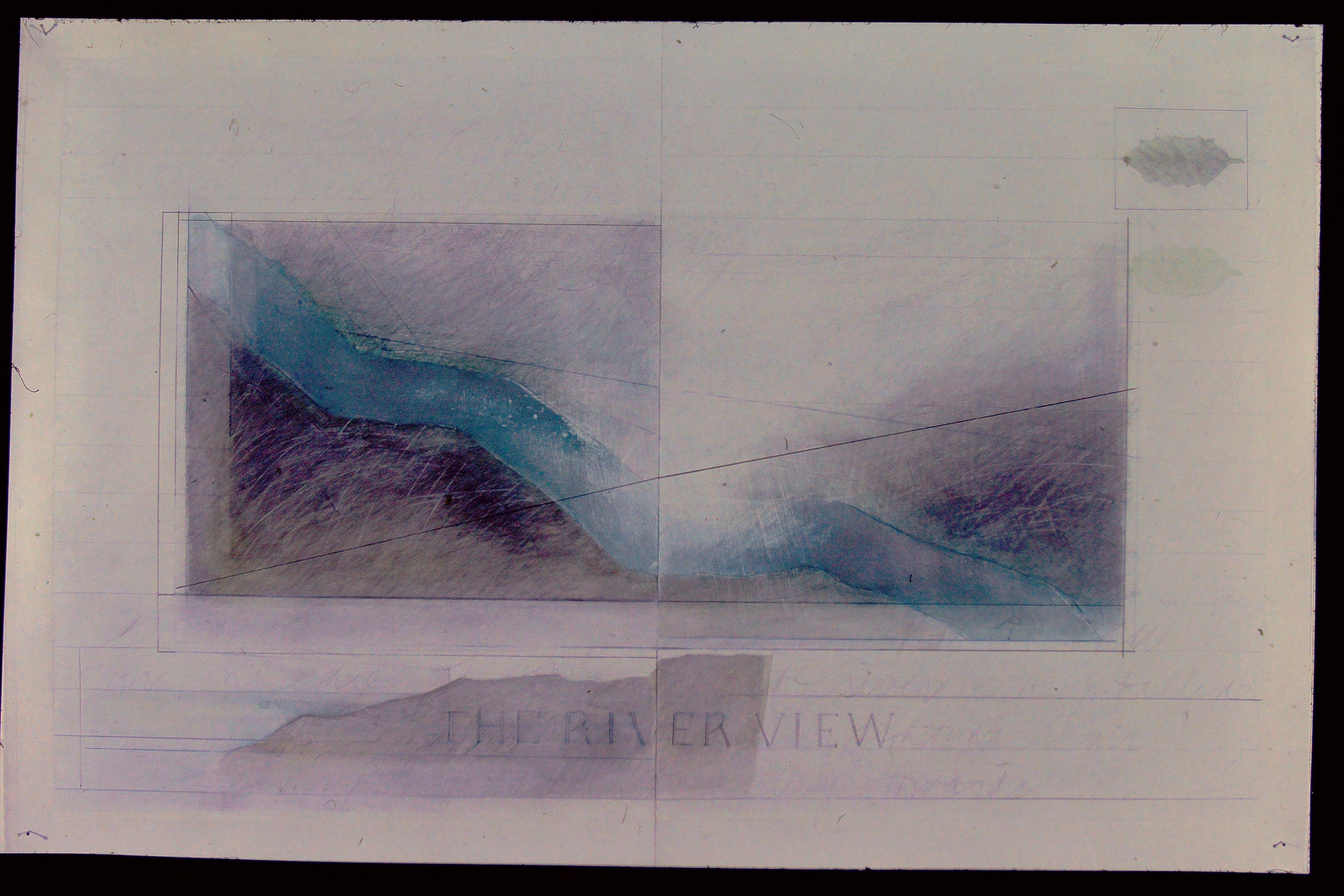
landscape we see everyday. The "view" is seen through my frames, my inventions and contrivances. This inquiry into the landscape has inspired me to make images that share my perceptions with others. My experience has been fragmented, reassembled and reinvented into a new context for the viewer to consider according to his own similar experiences.

References

The Writings of Robert Smithson (edited by Nancy Holt)
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