Light and Water as Both Subject and Medium in Representations of Maine’s Coast
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Thanks to the Rusack Coastal Studies Fellowship, I was able to spend my summer studying the coast of Maine from an artistic perspective. I took on the ideas of light” and “water” as coastal elements I was most interested in exploring through art, more specifically through the media of cyanotype photography and watercolor. I began my summer by trekking all over the coast taking photographs. I started with places I knew and had a particular affinity to such as South Bristol, Land’s End and Pemaquid Point. I also scouted out places specifically favored by famous artists who pioneered the tradition of painting Maine’s Coast. For example, I went to Prout’s Neck, where Winslow Home worked, the Cape Elizabeth lights, famously portrayed by Edward Hopper, and Monhegan Island, which used to be an artists’ colony and hosted numerous artists from Rockwell Kent to George Bellows. In these travels I sought to capture, in photographs, moments in the coastal landscape that intrigued me. I put particular focus on the various ways light and water framed scenes and interacted with each other in different places and at different times of day.

Once I accumulated a large and varied set of digital photographs, I turned my efforts to the more technical part of the project—mastering the process of cyanotyping. This is an alternative photographic process that uses a chemical solution that reacts specifically to UV light (sunlight) as the photosensitive emulsion. The allowed me to expose my photographs outside in the sun (using digitally created negatives from the photographs I had taken). I then rinsed the exposed pieces in water to develop them, thus light and water became integral elements of the artistic process, in addition to the images themselves.

I put a lot of time into experimenting with this process so that I could really get a handle on it and all of its quirks and intricacies. As one experiment, I tried actually exposing and developing the photos on site where each one was taken. I did not do this for the final pieces, but it was a valuable exercise in making the physical location of each image that much more important.

The final aspect of my project was mixing watercolor with the cyanotype process. I knew this would be part of the project from the beginning because it added both to my premise of using water as subject and medium in the pieces, and it felt like another nod to the long-established tradition of Maine Coastal representations, as watercolor was often the chosen medium. In addition, I felt like watercolor provided me the opportunity to create a more expressive effect than the photographs could on their own. Working out this combination of media was the most challenging part of the project for me, as it took me even further into new territory than any other part of the project did. For the final pieces I ended up applying the watercolor at the same time as I painted on the emulsion, before exposing the photos, allowing the two media to physically blend and bleed into each other producing exciting and often unpredictable effects.

The final pieces are all fairly similar in concept but range from up-close, somewhat abstracted images of light and water to more recognizable landscape compositions each enhanced in a different way by watercolor. They will be on display in the Visual Arts Center from September 2-September 14, 2011.

This summer was an amazing opportunity for me not only to get to know the intricacies of Maine’s Coastal environment but also to experience what it is like to work as an artist, dedicating all my time and energy to my art. I really enjoyed the chance to really throw myself into my project and take my time, allowing the project to stretch in various directions and develop as the summer progressed. I’m grateful to my wonderful advisor Meggan Gould for helping me along the way and the Rusack family for generously supporting this fellowship.

Faculty Mentor: Meggan Gould

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