

HAND PAPERMAKING



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Meg Black. *Poplar Trees by the Road*, Nainville, France. Pigmented cotton/abaca mix, sizing, pigmented overbeaten abaca, 26" x 34", 1996. Photograph by Barry Kaplan.

Meg Black

I love being outside. I love discovering natural environments, rummaging through fields of wildflowers, tall grasses, and scores of buzzing insects. I feel particularly connected to environments in which the unfolding landscape is replete with light, shadow, color, texture, life, and decay; where patterns and shapes created by flora, moving clouds, or newly plowed rows create patterns full of rhythm and texture. When I first enter such a landscape, I wonder how it changes or looks from different perspectives and what lies in the distance. The desire to explore the view from another angle urges me forward, to journey into the space in order to experience it more fully.

Armed with my camera, I forge ahead through the landscape, looking for the picture that will characterize what excites me about the setting. I use these photographs as sketches, memoirs of my experience, and as prototypes for future paintings. Encountering new environments is kinesthetic and multi-sensory, including sight, sound, smell, and touch.

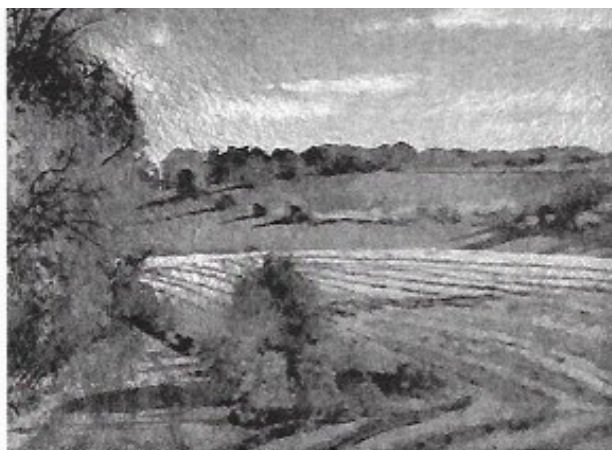
Working with pulp as a visual medium is also multi-sensory. Raw pulp is shapeless and colorless when first beaten, and because it remains immersed in water until needed, it is cold and sometimes sticky to the touch. It is pungent; if it sits in still water too long, it develops a strong odor.

I came upon papermaking by accident. As an undergraduate studying art, I discovered some other students who were making paper using a garbage disposal to grind up matte board and other paper scraps. I was so intrigued with the concept of making one's

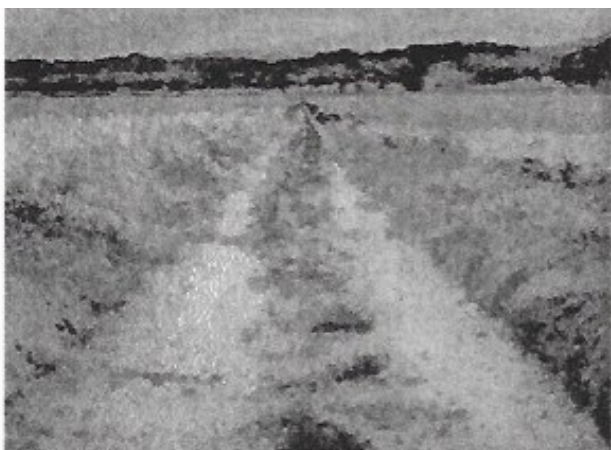
own paper that I soon became a regular in the "pulp room." Soon after, I apprenticed at Women's Studio Workshop, where I was introduced to a more sophisticated approach, using a Hollander beater and commercial dyes. I became aware of pulp as a painting medium through an exhibit of paper paintings by artist Margie Hughto (better known for her ceramic installations). Margie's technique fascinated me and she agreed to take me on as an apprentice in her studio. We have enjoyed a close, professional rapport ever since.

Despite these helpful introductions, I have not been widely exposed to handmade paper as a painting medium, thus I am constantly discovering its potential and am challenged by its capacities. I never know exactly how the creative process will unfold when I begin a painting. Although I cannot determine what the end product will look like, the interaction that goes on between the medium and me is so much a part of the artwork that it mirrors the original experience of being outdoors.

Using pulp as a painting medium is a way for me to take a closer look at, re-enact with, and reflect on the understanding I gained from my original encounters with the landscape. Paper pulp is an especially physical medium because of its weight and texture. Unlike commercially made paper and other graphic materials—whose color, size, weight, and surface characteristics have been predetermined—raw pulp, which I pigment for painting purposes, allows me to re-create the hues, shapes, and textures of the landscape in any size, thickness, and surface texture that I desire.



Meg Black. *The Field after the Harvest*. Pigmented cotton-abaca mix. 26" x 34", 1996. Photograph by Barry Kaplan.



Meg Black. *The Road After the Rains, Nairville, France*. Pigmented cotton abaca mix. 26" x 34", 1996. Photograph by Barry Kaplan.

At the onset of my creative process, I must determine how well the colors, textures, shapes, and thickness of the painting will resemble the elements present in the original environment. I make my palette knowing that the colors must work in harmony with each other to form a visual unity. Once the elements of color, shape, and texture are defined, I begin a series of experiments necessary for the eventual success of the painting. I am always amazed with what the pulp can do and how many ways it will stretch for me.

I have discovered that by varying beating times and using different fibers, I am able to create a variety of textures, such as a rough surface made from pure cotton beaten for just a short period of time. This lends itself perfectly to rocky crevices or the fullness of a tree. I further this illusion of texture and surface by creating a pebbly effect using well-sized pulps of various colors, each immersed separately in a minimal amount of water and a small amount of pns formation aid. When added together, the pulps retain their original colors, creating a pebbled look (this also works well with well-sized overbeaten abaca and pns). Similarly, I can create an illusion of a textured surface when I apply pulp in thick layers to the surface of the painting.

Through experimentation, I have developed methods for creating the illusion of smooth surfaces by using a small amount of well-beaten pulp immersed in a large quantity of water. I apply this to the surface of the painting with a piece of fiberglass window screening, to create a transparent effect. Similarly,

over-beaten abaca lends itself beautifully for painting water (with a small amount of pearlescent pigment), shadows, or tree branches. When using overbeaten abaca, I vary the proportion of formation aid to the amount of pulp, to create a wide range of shadow depth: from soft, barely visible shadows made with just a small amount of abaca immersed in a large quantity of formation aid, to denser shadows made with a larger proportion of abaca to formation aid. To avoid the shrinkage and brittleness inherent in overbeaten abaca, I add a small amount of polyvinyl adhesive. This both makes the pulp more elastic and adheres it to the underlying surface, minimizing shrinkage.

Each of my experiments with this medium allows me to tackle new and increasingly difficult compositions. But new problems or challenges often arise. These challenges are constant and dynamic, always urging me forward to the next area of inquiry.

Exploring landscapes and working with pulp as a visual medium are both multi-sensory, full of examination and rich in discovery. Translating a landscape into a pulp painting deepens my understanding of the original encounter. On completing a painting, I consider its level of success—or degree of harmony—by evaluating how closely it resembles what I had envisioned initially in nature and how closely it recaptures the excitement and emotions I first felt. The visual records I make with this medium keep me alive and engaged, and through my art I am also able to share those experiences and sensations with others.