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92° East, Thursday, 6:50 am, 2017

Who can wait quietly while the mud settles?

Who can remain still until the moment of action?

Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching: Fifteen*

Other interpretations of this text ask, “Do you have the patience to wait until your mud settles and your water runs clear?” In traveling to Montello, this was my primary question. How long a time and how far from home is far enough from the cacophony of urban life to gain the quiet needed to hear the still, soft voice of my mind? Arriving at Montello, my first realization was that I had brought the spinning energy of the city with me.

The first days were spent simply in arriving mentally to the presence of the land and the quiet. Settling into the house, exploring the earth and sky around me, observing the sun, measuring points of the compass, and gauging the weather then became the swirling activity of my mind. I had to reckon with the experience of isolation, until then completely unfamiliar. I had to give myself permission to be unreachable by my children. Cultivating familiarity with my surroundings and the simple acts of self-care were both an act of survival and a discipline of being still. I learned to accept quiet and being alone as a normal condition. I had to make friends with the fear of being alone, and become comfortable relying completely on my own resources.

90° East, Wednesday, 6:30 am, 2017



Later, at home, I would describe to friends the setting around the house by detailing the great expanse of land to the distant hills and say something like “there’s nothing else there.” But, I realized that what I really meant is that there’s nothing else human there. The place is entirely full of all the things that live there - the sagebrush and juniper, sedums and cactus, animals, rocks and mountains. The realization was a reminder that our anthropocentrism blinds us to what is and what is not. The earth may not be full of things useful to and made by man, but it is completely whole, with our without our presence.

I found that my “job” there was simply to be the conscious presence marking that time and place on earth - those particular sunsets and moonrises, those storms and clear skies, that rabbit, that coyote. In Rilke’s “Ninth Duino Elegy,” he writes,

*But because truly being here is so much; because everything here
apparently needs us, this fleeting world, which in some strange way
keeps calling to us. Us, the most fleeting of all.*

Rilke indicates that the world is served by us simply being present and alive to it, naming it, marking its beauty, praising, writing, and painting.

So, it was in this spirit of marking conscious presence, honoring the sacredness of the earth, and cultivating mindfulness that I came up with the theme of creating artwork based on the Book of Hours, a medieval illustrated prayer book. In that era, an “hour” was a non-specific period of time dedicated to work or religious practice. In Montello, I created eight works mirroring the eight traditional canonical hours. Each “hour” marked a different time of day and different direction of the compass in around the house. During the week, I worked on 2 or 3 pieces at various times during each day. The final set comprises 8 watercolors in a cycle that begins with “Before Sunrise” and ends with “Last Light”. The watercolors were planned before, and finished after, but executed in large part at the time of day corresponding with the canonical hour. Fragments of text that were inspiring over the course of the week, or specifically to the individual work, are incorporated in the legend on each one.