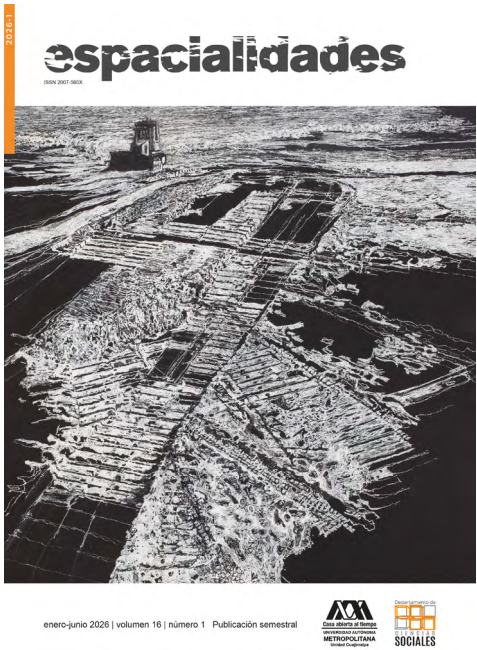




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Leveling: The Grounds of Power

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Leveling: The Grounds of Power

Emparejando: los cimientos del poder

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The ground we encounter in our everyday lives, whether grass, asphalt, dirt, or sand, is often taken for granted. In this essay and the accompanying drawings, I examine what lies beneath us as the grounds of power—both a material condition and a location where power relations intersect. I challenge the apparent neutrality of the urban and coastal grounds I discuss here by examining them in the context of struggles at the boundary of human and non-human relations. Two California locations serve as the basis of my investigation: People’s Park in Berkeley and Twin Lakes State Beach in Santa Cruz.

I completed extensive documentation of both sites in August of 2022 during the twilight of the COVID19 pandemic. The resulting images are part of an ongoing project that investigates the uprooting, clearing, flattening, and grooming of planetary terrain. I document how routine forms of spatial reordering produce otherworldly human and non-human conditions. Each of the images takes the form of a diptych in which side-by-side juxtapositions create new meanings. They are, following Jonathan Crary, “techniques of the observer” that construct rather than describe what is depicted (Crary 1990). In each pair of images, the presumed stability of the ground is crosscut by processes of force and fragility, as represented through the social aesthetics of unearthing, scraping, extraction, and other forms of violent alteration.

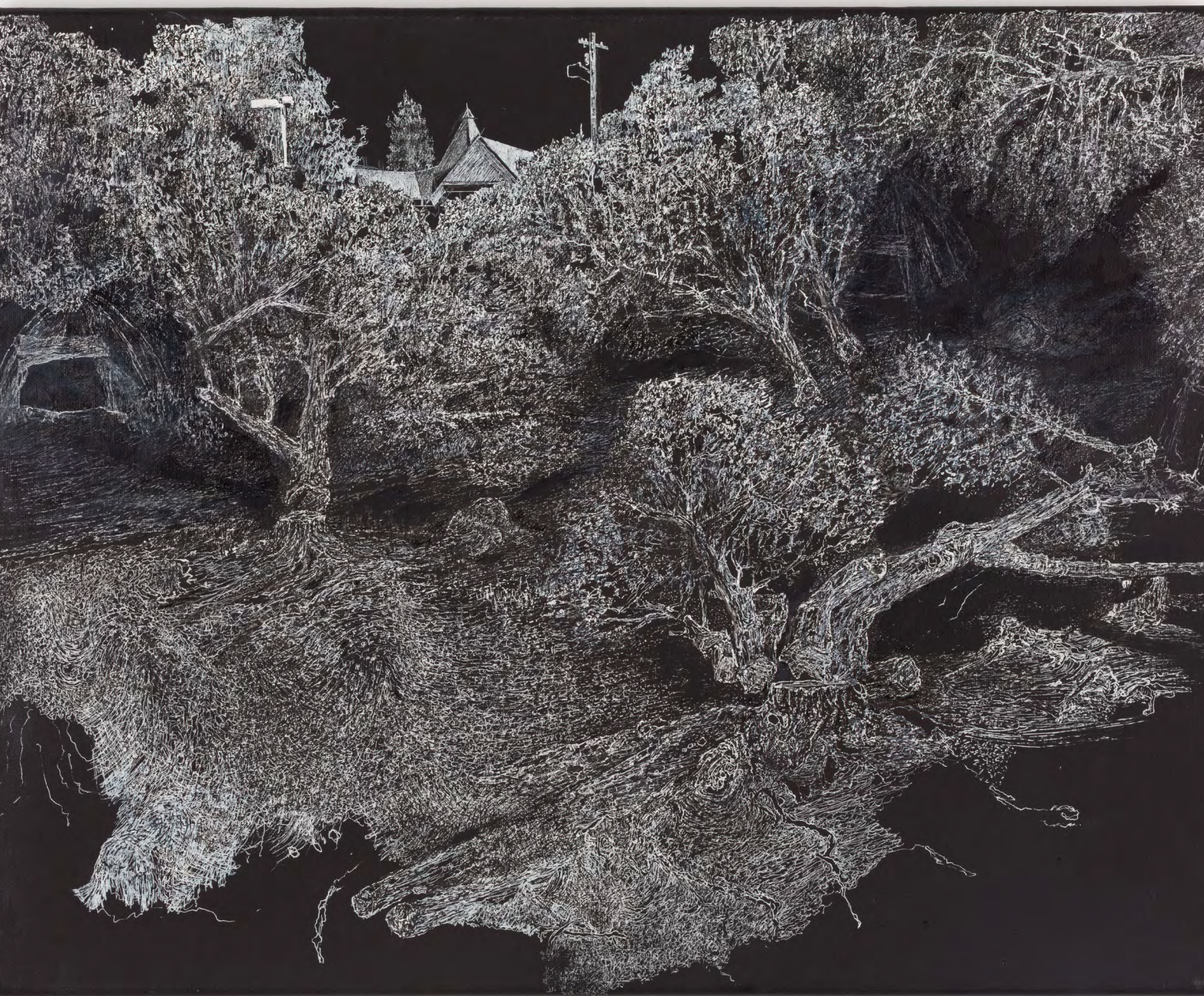
The diptychs represent events in temporal suspension: they are sections through time. The surfaces of 16”X20” black canvases are refigured as scaleless, unbounded voids in which single moments become visible and crystallize. Each pointillist drawing is composed of myriads of small marks that accumulate to suggest metaphorical worlds of melting ice—and its double entendre, ICE (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement)—, the blinding light of a radioactive flash, megawatts of surveillance, and the momentary brilliance of a news photographer’s flash. The

ambiguous and vibrating scales of the drawings intentionally suggest the territorial edges of oceanic coastlines and close-ups of organic debris. They constitute what Brian Russell Roberts calls “archipelagic knowledge,” or thought templates that enable movement between the macro and the micro in a transnational context (Roberts 2021, 21). My drawings are tentative first steps in constructing a non-dichotomous, open-ended, and contingent way of thinking about bodies and environments together, as interdependent categories.

Each image attempts to represent the turbulent grounds of power buried out of sight/site by the normative leveling practices of everyday life. These strategies comprise part of my larger interest in queer epistemologies, which are also anti-normative, embodied, and grounded in socially specific relations of space and power.

PEOPLE’S PARK

For those reading this essay who have no prior knowledge of People’s Park, some preliminary details are necessary to understand the recent events these drawings recount. The 2.8-acre parcel of land that became the People’s Park site was purchased by UC Berkeley in 1967. The University demolished the working-class urban housing on the site to make way for a playing field, but ran out of funds, after which the site stood empty for two years. The urban void space was enclosed with fencing and used as an informal dump. Its abandonment drew the attention of local housing, environmental, and civil rights activists, who coalesced around reclaiming the land for a community-designed and managed park and urban farming. The citizen occupation lasted until May of 1969, when the state government, in collaboration with the University and the City of Berkeley, mobilized law enforcement to regain control. The ground was cleared and surrounded by another security fence. The closure



Diptych 1_Figure1A



Diptych 1_Figure1B



Figure 1A



Figure 1B



Diptych 2_Figure 2A

resulted in large-scale protests that blocked the streets in downtown Berkeley for a week. Two people died during the uprising. In an unprecedented move, Governor Ronald Reagan ordered the National Guard to impose police order and end the demonstrations (Dalzell et al. 1969).

The park was fenced in again on June 20th and remained enclosed until 1972, when protesters against the war in Vietnam dismantled the fence. The University recaptured the land, using the same tactics deployed in 1969. A series of back-and-forth battles over the next three decades followed. The successive struggles took on broader meaning with the decades-long process of defunding and privatization of the welfare

state. A growing crisis of affordable housing led to a significant and continuing rise in homelessness. By 2021, when the University once again began the development process, the park had been transformed into a symbol of the unjust forces shaping its use, marked by dispossession of the unhoused and growing inequality within and beyond the University. The fence surrounding the park was torn down again by protesters and reinstalled by the University in 2021. (Markovitch 2021) The final process of clearance began in the middle of the night in August of 2022 and was followed by more than a year of displacement, subcontracted surveillance, and fortification (Kwon and Fong 2024; Berkeley Copwatch 2022).



Diptych 2_Figure 2B

TREES

The drawings presented here are based on the final stage of leveling operations that began on August 3, 2022. Diptychs 1 and 2 document these events. In the depths of the night, police were deployed to remove the site's unhoused people, and activists opposed to the University's plans. A fencing subcontractor had already erected security fencing around the perimeter. Floodlights lit the park, and a white stretch limousine for coordinators of the police action was stationed outside the First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley, where an outdoor command center

was located. In preparation for the raid, the ground was partly leveled: numerous mature trees were felled, cut into pieces, and fed through mobile wood chipping machines. The chips were disgorged onto the ground in linear mounds and large circular piles. (Shah 2023; Graff & Medina 2024; Hubler 2024). Though police withdrew from the removal operation, the incursion set the stage for a more aggressive 2 assault in 2023, when UC Berkeley took the unprecedented step of lining the perimeter of the park with two stories of shipping containers to secure the site (Yelimeli 2024). After lawsuits filed by residents opposing the site's redevelopment failed at the California Supreme Court, construction began on a 12 story, 800-room

student dormitory, a commemorative park and a separate facility for supportive housing (Fonseca, 2024; Ionescu 2024). As I write, the structure and cladding of the complex is underway.¹

Diptych 1 (Figures 1A and 1B) shows the park's large trees, now toppled, sheltering their human counterparts on the ground. After the trees were chopped down, their leaves remained green for weeks, surviving on the remaining nutrients in their trunks and branches. Their wilting presence and the protective embrace they offered glows with non-human agency in decline. (Figure 1A) The unhoused continued to occupy the site amidst piles of woodchips. The mask-like gaze of their tents returned the stares of onlookers and enforcers (Figure 1B). The wood chips also marked a decolonial moment: the hulking mounds became unintended specters of the more than 425 indigenous shell mounds—burial grounds and waste heaps—that are now hidden under the Bay Area's property demarcations (ANHP n.d.; Luby et al. 2006).

The double reading of the groundscape's scale suggests both its literal correlate—shredded piles of tree trunks and branches—and that of coastal territories as seen from above. The oceanic seas of blackness between islands of struggle suggest their archipelagic status while also connecting both parts of the diptych together. The boundaryless voids also imply that more islands of conflict and transformation exist beyond the frame of the drawings. A multi-story residence hall, built in the 1960s, forms a symbolic backdrop for the park's torn landscape. It stands as a reminder of the public university's modernist expansion in postwar years, its long-abandoned commitment to access through free tuition, and the precarious condition of students who accumulate debt to be housed, or lack any form of housing at all, and survive by

combining coach-surfing with sleeping in their cars, living at home, or in housing sometime hours from the campus (Jiang-Brittann 2025).

The night drawings in Diptych 2 depict police gathering to clear the site. Their security lights cast the late-night maneuver as a choreography of overexposed surveillance. The icy white light of policing saturates trees, buildings, people, and the ground. Uniforms turn from black to grey, and the policing bodies glint with stun guns, gas cannisters, headgear, batons, visors, and miniaturized communication devices. In both Figures 2A and 2B, the spectacle is rendered incomplete at its edges. The uniformed police dissolve into space, suggesting that their domain of power is temporary and assailable.

The left side of the diptych (Figure 2A) shows the police gathering at a coordination point in front of the historic 1920 Church of Christian Science, designed by Bernard Maybeck. The pergola for the church entrance faces the park in the middle ground, its flowering vines turned brilliant white by high-powered lighting. The officer in the foreground looks over his shoulder with disdain at the approach of an unwanted outsider. The others stand casually in the middle ground around a large tree stump, a silent reminder of the park's leveling. The lighting casts long shadows that cross over the cleared ground and join this image to the next. As they await their orders, the men are unified by boredom, camaraderie, or temporary indirection: a void space produced in the gap between waiting and enforcement (Mitchell 2003; 2017; Tom 2018).

The right half of the second diptych (Figure 2B) shows three hulking men forming a barrier around a young woman who has been thrown to the ground and restrained with zip ties. While her entrapment magnifies the excess of brute force on display, it is also a contradictory manifestation of power. She

and her aggressors both inhabit a world defined by the ambient threat of COVID19. Despite their displays of military strength, the uniforms are also hot, cumbersome, and stretched to the limit by muscled and corpulent bodies. They are at once "frailty wrapped in fatigues" and specters of violence (Snyder 2026). Their actions transcend this incident and refer to all those people, mainly black and brown, who continue to be thrown to the ground and given the knee, whether at protests, while standing on a sidewalk, or after being pulled from a car by police.

SAND

The final pair of images recounts a different kind of violence operating in the gap between humans and non-humans. The small pocket beach south of Santa Cruz's boardwalk is heavily used for various forms of recreation. Not far from the stretch of beach these drawings document, coastline houses sit atop what initially appears to be a sandy bluff, with large houses peaking over the edge. At close range, the bluffs turn out to be made of sculpted concrete painted to match the adjacent sand. Rising sea levels have made these barriers essential to preserving the value of coastal real estate, for the short term at least. Their efforts also distract attention from the groundwater being pushed up by rising sea levels as the result of seawater flowing deep underneath interior aquifers and underground streams (OPC 2024, 38-52; Hill et al. 2023). The beach itself requires continuous modification as sand disappears with the encroaching waves. As Hannah Freed-Thall notes, the beach "is intrinsically unstable because it is a marine terrestrial interface, or ecotone - a space of transition between biomes, replete with tough and delicate forms of life." (Freed-Thall, 2023)

The third diptych documents the beach on September 4, 2023, just before the Labor Day holiday weekend. Over the course of several hours, a small bulldozer entered the

water, lowered its shovel, and pushed sand up to the top of the beach, leaving behind an intricate pattern of movement made by its industrial tracks. Warning beeps enhanced the mechanical rhythm of the bulldozer as it reversed and spun along, enlarging paths from water to land and back again. (Figure 3A) The objective, as two police officers watching explained, was to make the sand "nice for the holiday". When sufficient sand was redistributed, the bulldozer returned to achieve a consistent level of flatness.

After the bulldozer departed, tiny fragments of shells crushed by its movements could be found in the space where waves and beach overlap. These fragments were the remainders of the famous terrestrial crustaceans known colloquially as "roly polys" who inhabit the beaches of Southern California. They live in both water and land, turning kelp and other organic matter into edible nutrients that other non-human visitors to the beach eat. They are "roly" because they roll into balls when they face danger. They also perform a cleansing function by filtering toxins in the water. Though almost invisible in the brightness of the sand, the holes they have created to access their below-grade retreats are ubiquitous.

Bulldozing for smoothness compressed the iridescent white sand into a scaleless industrial geometry. The perspective of Diptych Image 3A, though drawn from a position close to the sand, initially appears as an aerial view high above the ground. The impressions in the sand made by human feet, animal paws, and the bulldozer's rolling tracks bring machines, humans, and creatures together in a complex process of mutual ecological destruction. The second drawing is a close-up of the Roly Poly's crushed terrain. Like the mounds of wood chips at People's Park, the image shifts between granular detail and territorial description. Moving closer reveals that what initially may seem like canyons in a desert are minutely detailed graveyards

¹ The installation of the security wall, construction and subsequent occupation of the new buildings will be documented in the next stage of this project.



Diptych 3_Figure 3A



Diptych 3_Figure 3B

of tiny crustaceans. Their remains are scattered everywhere, alongside the beak of a bird, within the sandy imprints of human feet and shoes, and at the border between land and water.

Diptych 3 experiments with the rotation of perspective and the magnification of the sand to bring the fate of the Roly Polys into focus. (Figure 3B and Details 3A and 3B) It also represents part of a pocket beach as an archipelagic island within a transnational coastline. In this case, the beaches of Southern California form a contact zone of dense human interaction that has led to the localized extinction of the Roly Polys, breaking a crucial link in coastal ecology (Barboza 2013; Hubbard

et al. 2014; Leachman 2013).

The icy whiteness of the scene recalls the groundscape of at People's Park, but humans are situated in very different relations to their non-human counterparts. Except for the driver of the bulldozer, humans are present through their absence at the beach, leaving behind a trail of impressions that reveal how the banal operations of maintenance and beach culture produce a landscape of extinction. (Russell et al. 2014) The groundscape of the beach is ephemeral: it is made and remade by human-influenced climactic processes such as the rise and fall of the tide, the wind and rain, and the impact of intense heat. The drawings are, like those at People's Park, temporal cuts within a

gradually escalating crisis, but one which is—for now—slow-moving and difficult to see or feel. The drawings stop time to allow the detailed perceptions of crisis to sink in.

TEMPORAL SECTIONS

The conditions represented in all three diptychs are intentionally drawn to register different meanings depending on the viewer's distance from the canvas. Here, the viewer is encouraged to move outward and inward, where the separation between viewer and viewed stops a few inches rather than several feet from the image. At close range, individual markings are fully

distinguishable. What appears as a white mound of indeterminate material at one scale turns out to be individual pieces of bark or fragments of crustaceans at another. A closer and more sustained examination also reveals distorted images of human skulls and faces that hide in the wood chips and settle in the sand. (Details 1A and 1B) I think of these strange and difficult to discern portraits not as anthropomorphized nature shouting back at us, but rather, as fractured mirrors that reveal the collective fear, turmoil, and anger produced by a planetary crisis we humans have created but cannot control.

These images also register time and my own embodied relation to drawing in a

way that digital images are unable to do. The pointillist accumulation of white markings and the time involved to make them is an example of the “slow scholarship” that Shiloh Krupar and I have written about elsewhere in relation to our long-running collaboration on exaction (Crysler and Krupar 2018). The focus of that project is different, but the methods overlap, where slowness resists normative standards of productivity and the creative process becomes the end result.

The practice of inhabiting questions over a long period of time is similar to Donna Haraway’s arguments about “staying with the trouble” in relation to the conditions of climate collapse (Haraway 2016). Taking months to produce a single analog image requires a sustained intensity of concentration that resists the flickering digital economy of attention and the rapid-fire distractions it produces. The processes of representation are slowed down, and the scene of the creative transaction is returned to again and again through localizing techniques such as photography, in situ drawings, and note-taking.

Redrawing instantaneous and quickly forgotten photographic images, whether by me or others, is another part of the corpus of techniques I have used here. The drawings are not copies of the original sources; all have been significantly altered by what I refer to as synthetic realism, where the construction of the real is commented upon and transformed by interventions in the visual rhetoric of representation. The drawings disrupt the normative tropes of black and white photographic reproduction through redrawing, distortion, and accentuation. The choreography of events in both locations has long since been forgotten except perhaps by those who were directly affected. The physical changes that have taken place at both sites over time further erase the evidence of past events. As temporal cuts, these drawings preserve now vanished evidence of moments of crisis, allowing meaning to continue to gather through recollection and selective alteration. The

drawn images will never be finished in the conventional sense. They form a series of questions using interrogative methods to unpack violence, contingency, pathos, and empathy. They attempt to represent the contradictions and uncertainty of locations without claims to objectivity or the status of a final statement.

The *Leveling Series* is a first step in an ongoing experiment that questions assumptions about productivity and time under conditions of environmental and social crisis. The cross-sectional practices employed here are both situated and planetary, large-scale and verging on the microscopic. The viewer, representer, and represented are all regarded as impure, incomplete, and subject to continuous and sometimes disastrous change. This condition of representation offers the possibility of experiencing the world outside conventional norms and assumptions about the stability, security, and infinity of life, opening a space of speculation whose hopeful potential is yet to be fully understood.

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