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## **Imprints: Art and a Sense of Place**

*Chrissie Orr*

2007 Grantmakers in the Arts Conference:  
*Taos Journey*

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As conference co-chairs, neither of whom has lived in New Mexico, we were told that the story of art in New Mexico is a story of place, that the region – its landscape, its convergence of cultures, its sacred spaces – defines what and how art is made. We turned to a number of New Mexico artists and writers to give us their inside views of this remarkable region. Among them is Chrissie Orr, a transplant from Scotland, who makes work informed and formed by New Mexico's physical environment. Orr takes us on a walk through time and place – the past and present of her career, and a journal of her days.

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## Imprints: Art and a Sense of Place

*Chrissie Orr*

*Find your place on the planet. Dig in, and take responsibility from there.*

– Gary Snyder

*Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth. He ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience; to look at it from as many angles as he can, to wonder upon it, and dwell upon it.*

– N. Scott Momaday

*You know, I think if people stay somewhere long enough – even white people – the spirits will begin to speak to them. It's the power of the spirits coming from the land. The spirits and the old powers aren't lost, they just need people to be around long enough and the spirits will begin to influence them.*

– Crow elder

**May 21, 2007.**

*The pulsing sounds of the river are trying to tell me something. I strive to listen as I hope for answers. I search in vain for my friend's son that has gone on walkabout; he has his hiding places on the river. There was only a dead trout to be found. No clouds for the first time in a week. I planted purple heirloom tomatoes, butternut squash, eggplant, peppers, and think about the differences of gardening here to when I tended the potatoes and turnips in the damp earth of Scotland. I have had to learn anew.*

For the past few days I have been walking with the Santa Fe River. It is only a mile from where I have settled. It is so close I feel its presence through the open doors. I can wander down the hill through the scattered pinon and juniper trees until I reach the sandy arroyo that leads me to the riverbed. This river meanders from its headwaters at Santa Fe Lake above Lake Peak in the Sangre de Cristo range for forty-six miles to its confluence with the wide, brown Rio Grande. For most of the year it is a dry corridor, the rusted skeletons of old cars hold up its eroding banks, its trees struggle to push their roots deeper, searching for lost moisture, and its animals quietly disappear to other, more nourishing habitats. This river, the arid heart of our community, was recently declared the nation's most endangered waterway!

It is the high desert here, water is not apparent in the landscape, we crave it, we constantly talk about it, we dam it, we carry around plastic bottles filled with spring water from other places, yet we are thirsty all the time. We imagine it, we dream it lapping around our feet, between our toes and filling out our dry, wrinkled skin.

This year we were blessed; it snowed and snowed, more snow than we have seen in a hundred years. The town virtually shut down for a day, as no one could get out of their driveways. It was hip deep. I nearly disappeared when taking the compost from the house to the garden. Now the abundant snowmelt and delicious soft spring rains have brought a new vibrant, lush green. Not the usual olive-brown green but a yellow-tinged dancing green. The leaves on the trees are full. Dormant seeds have awoken in places that are usually desolate. We are rejoicing; the reservoir is, for the moment, full. So the city mothers and fathers have declared that, for a few special weeks, the river can run. I wonder since when have humans had the right to determine the life of the river?

Now the permission is given to open the floodgates and allow the river its freedom. So it flows through us carrying its stories, scattering its memories and connecting us again to others farther south.

Yesterday and today it is alive, so I walk with it. I follow its path searching for a clarity of vision, a fresh, true perception that will hopefully guide my use of words.

I am not from here; I am a native from another land, where the idea of a dry river is inconceivable, the color green is different, I laugh in another language, I could be called an invasive species, but the way I carefully choose to place one foot in front of another is the same as it has always been. These walks are my salvation, my rooting to this new and foreign place, my understanding, my contemplation, my sensing of place.

**May 23.**

*The clouds have arrived again, more spring rains have soaked the earth. I do not remember a time when we had rains like this. They normally do not arrive until monsoon season in July and August. Last night there was a strong wind that blew through the open window and woke me. The peas are steadily throwing out their slender tendrils and producing pale white flowers. I think about what art means to those living upriver compared to those living downriver.*

I have a need to walk, I always have. I'm a mover. I cannot be still. There is something in the repetitive motion that brings the stillness. I do not remember the exact time and place of my first unsteady steps, but I do remember the sensation of my feet touching the ground, and I can still see the remains of their small imprints that were left in urban Scotland. As a child I walked everywhere. I walked back and forth to school, I walked to the center of town, I walked to the burn to catch sticklebacks, and as I awkwardly grew into my teenage years I walked to the local hangout coffee shops where we would meet boy friends, play billiards, and listen to Dylan. Later, on moving to the big city of Edinburgh, I continued with my walking, from my flat at the bottom of the Royal Mile to my classes at the Art College and from there to the pub and home again.

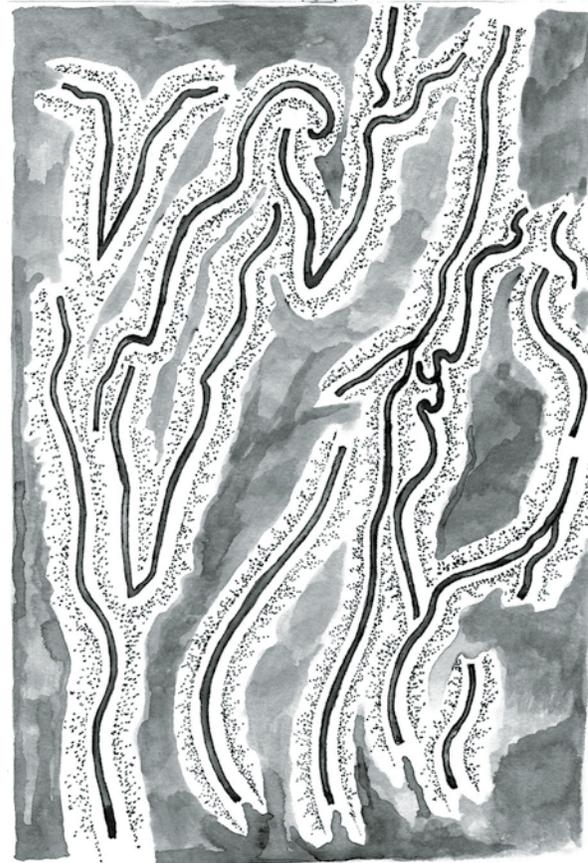
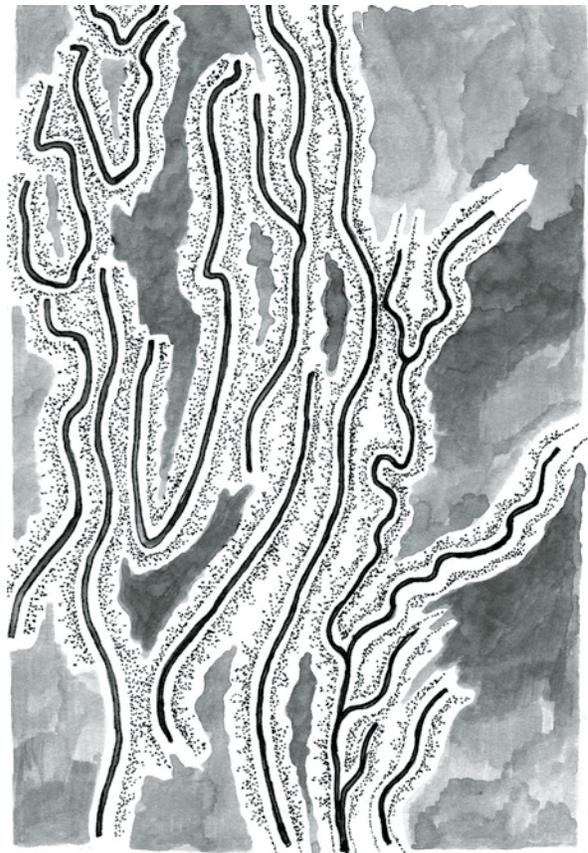
My feet are layered and lined with memories.

The knowledge that gathered on my soles is of cobblestones, gray granite, dark moist earth, heather, moss and bracken, the salt seas, all penetrated into my being. These embedded patterns have been carried with me to the northern New Mexico desert, where I walk today along the living river. The old patterns merge with the new, that of water-engraved mud and rock, prickles, and wind-blown hard red earth.

It is through the soles of my feet that I gain my sense of place and it is through my intuitive sensibility to place that my creativity emerges.

As a young artist in Scotland the lines I drew with overly sharp pencils were Scottish, they dipped and flowed with the contours of the land, their smudges turning into soft shadows. My chosen colors merged with that of the gray luminescent skies, my subjects were informed by the urban grime, pub life, and poverty. My professors held me to technique, life drawing in the vacuous sculpture court, and cynical critiques over pints of still, dark Guinness.

The poetry of my drawings, however beautiful and poignant, was not enough; they would work in the studio or in my sketchbook, but they made no sense out of the context in which they were conceived. I would work for hours in the paint-encrusted studio creating what I believed to be inspired works of genius, and then I would leave the art building to walk home on the wet, slippery cobbled streets of the Grassmarket. I would pass the clusters of ragged homeless that gathered every evening to wait in the damp dark for the soup kitchen to open. Suddenly the precious works that were neatly packaged under my arm were not so wondrous. They had no connection. My feet connected, as they had always done, I connected, but my passionate creative endeavors were lost to another place. Why did they not work out of the confines of the studio? What was I missing? It was on those walks home that I began to question for whom I was making the work, where



*Chrissie Orr, River Marks, 2007*  
*India and walnut ink on watercolor paper*

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should it be displayed, and where should it be made? I wanted desperately to make my work matter. I wanted it to be out in the other world. I wanted to push aside those large wooden art school doors to breathe the air.

This was not an easy task; this way of thinking was unheard of in the realms of the college. I was being tailored either for the object-orientated art market or to become another Edinburgh College of Art professor. It was too tight a fit, it was uncomfortable. I needed to adjust the seams but was not sure how.

I was working as a barmaid in the evenings, and in our slow times when waiting for the foam to settle on the lined-up pints of Guinness, I would discuss my art confusion with my coworker. By some act of magic

he pointed me in the direction of a group of artists that was working out of a building around the corner from the pub. It was here that I began to unravel the mysteries, attentively forging new footsteps to map the connection of place with my creative work.

The Workshop was home to musicians, performers, acrobats, writers – basically creative souls who also wanted to make a difference in the world around them. I found my fit.

“The context is half the work” was the mantra I soon learned, a term coined by John Letham of the Artists Placement Group. APG had been created in 1965 to place artists in non-art situations and institutions to make art out of the experience. It was a new role for artists, and the process and the context became key elements in the subsequent practice. The awareness of site and place were an essential element in this work, the immediate context. The process of designing the work was as important as the completed work. The design emerged and was informed by the context and not superimposed on it.

We worked collectively, seeking out neglected or nontraditional art sites in and around the city. There was never much funding; this was fairly new territory and funders were skeptical. It was difficult to write proposals and have them accepted when we could not declare the outcome. We learned ways to navigate the rapids. We would question, investigate, seek out the local keepers of the stories. We would sit at the site at different times of the day, walk the site to learn how it felt, feel the direction of the winds, watch how the site was used by the local kids or adults, feel the sun set, note how the rain formed puddles, and

reflect on the shadows. We learned how to listen and to see between the cracks. We knew the importance of questioning what was hidden and determining what should be revealed.

Slowly concepts would emerge.

These ideas would gradually be translated into drawings and schematics, which would be presented at local gathering spots. Sometimes we would seek out a community organizer that would in turn pull the community

to these gatherings, or we would just turn up at the local hangout spots and present our ideas. The drawing and concepts would shift and shape throughout the organic process. We would attempt to articulate the needs and the

unfulfilled dreams, to give voice to the voiceless.

This was long, time-consuming, and at times extremely frustrating. The democratic process was difficult, especially when it came to aesthetics. None of us had been taught negotiation skills. We had our own specific disciplines and aesthetic values, which we encouraged each other to expand within the context of each given situation. Our creative values as individual artists were vital in the mix. Our job was to set the right scenario in order to facilitate the articulation of the participant’s expressions.

We learned on our feet and quickly.

It was impossible to please everyone; many ideas would be thrown at us and our concepts torn apart. What tended to hold it all together was the essence that we gained from the site. If we held tight, eventually a moment of clarity would present itself and all the torn-apart pieces would come together in a new and poetic manner. A delicate balance would be reached at which the artists’ collective aesthetic, the poetry, the patterned language of the site, the needs of the community, and the shared experiences would merge. The community was involved at all levels of the project, from the detailed shaping of the concepts to the actual implementation and final celebration of the work. There was never a question about ownership – the work was owned by all. There was never a question about where the work should go, as it was already situated.

The lines blurred between artist and community.

This made sense.

My art began to matter, it had a place. The doors had blown wide open. This was the alchemy I had been striving to find on those walks down the Royal Mile. At last my work began to make the deeper, more penetrating connection.

### May 24.

*Another rainstorm last night that brought in the cold air. A crow flew into the city's main transformer and blew out the power for a few hours. I worried about the crow. I headed up-river about three miles where the riverbed is narrow and passes through dense groves of cottonwoods. I wanted to check on the beavers. They had disappeared from the area and only come back a few years ago. They are doing so well that they have successfully dammed an area and created a new pond. From the soaked ground huge white daisies have surfaced. It sounds different here; it's the habitat of the red-winged black-birds, which tend to stay upstream. Its time to water the garden – no rains today. The butternut squash are struggling; they have not yet adapted to their new environment. That always takes time.*

As I write these words in my studio many miles from my homeland, I reflect on those times and influences in the country of my birth. I feel my feet on the concrete floor, see the junipers and pinons sway in the spring winds but hear the sounds of seagulls. I live in a land that is not home.

Like the river, there have been many twists and turns in my life. At times it has been dry and dormant and at other moments it has flowed with renewed energies and insights.

That significant moment of time in Scotland while working in some of the most depressed communities in Europe was one of those blessed turning points.

The first time I came to the Southwest was thirty years ago, just after the birth of my redheaded daughter. She was born by the water to the sound of bagpipes and the ships on the Clyde. Her father was an American I met in Edinburgh on one of those long walks. He had followed me up the worn stone steps on the Mound. Being a native from the Southwest he had contacts here in New Mexico, and after a year of back-and-forth letter-writing and negotiations we were invited to Window Rock, the main town on the "rez," the local term for the Navajo reservation. The Navajo Nation, Diné Bikéyah, extends into the states of Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico. It covers 27,000 square

miles – about the same size as Scotland – with a population of 250,000 compared to the 5 million of my homeland! For every five people in the Navajo nation, there are one hundred in Scotland. This was a totally foreign experience for me, a shock to my Scottish system. The openness and vast terrain made me uncomfortable, and the red-brown, dry earth hurt my feet. This was to be my first encounter with a dry riverbed; it was inconceivable. How could there be a river without water? I would wait for it to appear.

I could not comprehend.

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This was not part of my vocabulary. I was a product of the compacted, urban, British environment, my experiences informed by narrow streets, crowds, tight spaces, and short vistas. This rural, expansive land was in complete contrast to my inher-

ited patterns. The air felt different on my skin, the colors somehow too bright, the jagged touch of the earth cracked my skin. The sky was like I had never seen before, a new sort of bluish blue.

I placed my feet cautiously in front of one another and walked to learn about the openness.

We were hired to develop a project at the local elementary school with the students and their families. We utilized the same investigative practice that we had carefully conceived in Scotland and hoped that we could find the right connections to create some magic. Still muttering the mantra "the context is half the work," we slowly opened ourselves to the new contextual landscape. We listened and talked with the local Navajo community and were eventually invited to walk their lands from summer camp to winter camp, where we ate mutton tacos on earthen floors and helped move the herds of sheep. Slowly and carefully we were introduced to some of the ancient traditions. We talked of clans and kilts, and Peter MacDonald, who was the tribal chief at that time, and in turn realized our differences and our similarities. We watched the shearing and dying of the wool, with plants producing colors only possible there at that time and in that place. The land began to show me its wonders.

I broke open.

Slowly the community's concerns and expressions emerged. The concerns were so different from those that we had been dealing with back in Scotland. These could have only come from that momentary situation. I began

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to grasp the concept that the ancient qualities of the native landscape had shaped the culture, the language, and the aesthetics. It was so evident there on the rez. Did it matter that I came from another place? I did not know the land but I could feel it and learn about it. It was not inherently rooted in my being, but I could sense it and attempt to interpret its essence. I was from another culture but, as we had discovered, there were extraordinary overlaps.

It was during this time that I began to comprehend that the practice we developed in Scotland could be used in other settings. It could be used in the urban setting or the rural, with huge numbers of people or small numbers, it did not matter; at the core was the importance of the completed work resonating and integrating with its environment and hence the culture and community. If the work was designed for and with the site rather than placed on top of it, it became part of the landscape and the community, and therefore it had integrity.

We eventually implemented the project, which had formed into a four-paneled mural depicting contemporary images of the Navajo four seasons on the exterior walls of the school. It remained there for many years, a memory, a sense of ownership, and a powerful shared experience for the community.

### May 25.

*The gray-blue dense clouds are back, moisture is again in the air, it feels more like Scotland than New Mexico. I think I am dreaming, not sure where I am. I write about here and there but wonder where I will land. I feel lost. It snowed in Taos two days ago. The river's current is stronger and has in places burst its banks. I found what looked like wild peas growing near the water's edge. A tornado warning has been issued for the rest of the early evening. The mysterious times continue.*

I have been living in the Southwest now for twenty years. It was that time on the rez that enticed me back here, its powerful essence remaining with me as I traveled and worked in Europe. After Window Rock we returned to Scotland where I continued my love for moving around: a long-term community arts project on the Isle of Arran, travel and street performance in Turkey, murals in Isfahan, notoriety in Germany for creating wonders out of cardboard boxes, and five years on the island of Corsica. It was not enough. I missed those vast horizons.

I moved to be in a place that opened me to new possibilities. I knew I would miss the familiarity of the Scottish mists, the sound of seagulls, and the voices and laughter of my people, but the pull back here was too strong.

I tried to settle in Albuquerque. The big urban city with a population composed of many diverse communities

that can make a place vital and alive. Here I felt I would have more opportunities for work, more art possibilities. I found it hard. The wide streets and sprawl too much of a culture shock. It did not feel comfortable to walk from neighborhood to neighborhood, the distances were too vast. The openness of the city made me feel vulnerable. I only stayed there three years before I migrated north.

It was an important move; I have grown. I have widened my own internal horizons, expanded my vision and continued to learn. The openness has opened me and in turn has cracked open my visual understandings.

During these last twenty years I have continued to develop my work through the lessons of the landscape. I still have roots back to all I learned and struggled through in my younger years just after leaving the confines of Art College. These new communities and landscapes have taught me and shaped me in ways I would never have imagined.

Here I live on the land, I see the mountains, the juniper and pinons surround me. They are my neighbors. I know where the sun rises and sets at different times of the year. I hear and feel the winds. I have the doors open most of the year to bring the inside out and the outside in.

I live with the land.

One cannot ignore the landscape here – you become part of it. My skin is a darker color, my feet are coarse and hardened and formed to their new patterns. I still cannot say that I am from here; I am not sure when one can say they belong to a place. What does it take to feel that sense of belonging?

I only feel I belong when my feet touch the ground.

As the red earth and the dust have penetrated and informed my being, so my work has gradually transformed. I worry about the earth as I have contact with it every day. I have become more concerned with the type of materials I use and the long-term impact that they might create. I have altered my direction from working with people and buildings to working with people and the land.

### May 27.

*The flowing current of the river pulls me. I have a need to be by the moving water. When I woke this morning it was still dark and there was one lone bird singing. I went to the river. Its banks are wet and muddy, it must have raged through this narrow space the other night, bringing its power from the mountains. The main stream is much deeper; it has burst through its banks to form new side streams. The retreating water leaving its magic repeating patterns on the damp earth, my footsteps merge with them. The first orange-yellow monarch butterfly hovers*

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*near me. I feel the delicateness of its wings. There has been a drought in Scotland, my mother said. She has been hand-watering the garden. I do not have this as a memory.*

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I am composing these words just days after having completed a visual arts project with youth in treatment. These kids were struggling to combat the effects of major drug and alcohol abuse, gang warfare, lack of love, and too many numerous atrocities of our declining social system to mention. As part of the project process I taught them to take photographs as a means to document their surroundings, individual experiences, and feelings as they related or did not relate to Peace.

A tricky endeavor.

It was intriguing to me that the most profound connection they had to this process was when I took them out of their usual setting in the treatment center and up into the mountains or to walk the river. Some did not want to go too far, the wildness of nature being a little too overwhelming after the confines of the center, but after they took even just a few steps, their attitude changed and they became alive. It was the first time I had seen one girl smile. They realized that their place of peace was with nature and that for most of their lives they had almost forgotten this important relationship. From one of the participants:

I've never had peace before, so, I don't know. To me, it's like drawing, though. When I'll be sitting down, when I just draw...something like that. Mountains, rivers...something like that. Nice and quiet. It's a great view. Horseback riding, when I am somewhere by myself, like through the canyons.

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There is a new syndrome called "nature deficit disorder" that is beginning to be found in children and communities. The journalist Richard Louv states in his book *The Last Child in the Wilderness* that we are becoming more and more alienated from the natural world and this alienation is causing symptoms such as increased feelings of stress, trouble paying attention, and feelings of not being rooted in the world. It is even found in kids that live in more rural areas.

We should never forget our intrinsic relationship with the earth and our natural instincts to feel its presence. As the world spins more and more out of control we will have to work harder to continue this relationship. We will have to remind each other to put our fingers in the earth and our feet in the rivers.

At this moment and place in time I feel this is my charge, to remind those that have forgotten. How I will continue to do this I am not sure, but somehow I have the notion that if I keep walking and flowing with the pulse of the river, keep learning from the natural patterns that surround me, keep my feet connected and my eyes open, then there is a chance.

As the river reshapes itself to the ever-changing conditions of nature, so must our creative ideas shift and flow. This Santa Fe River has a huge story to share. It is up to us to listen.

**May 28.**

*I followed the Rio Grande north to Taos. The river is full and running wild, at times flowing back over itself as it twists and swirls southward. I imagine the moment when it meets with the calmer Santa Fe River that I am getting to know so well. I walked through the tall grasses crisscrossing the acequias in Ranchitos. I found more wild peas, milkweed, and dusky pink honeysuckle. Such a different microclimate, huge cottonwoods providing shade and shelter from the intense sun. It's softer, gentle, the birds are singing another song. It took me nine blows on the dandelion to disperse the seeds.*

*Every morning I wake torn between the desire to save the world and an inclination savor it. This makes it difficult to plan the day.*

– E. B. White

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*Chrissie Orr is an artist, activist, and animateur. She received a MFA from Edinburgh College and then was a circus performer throughout Europe, a muralist in Corsica, and the creator of community-based projects in Australia, Iran, Turkey, Europe, Mexico, and America. As founder of the nationally acclaimed Teen Project in Santa Fe, New Mexico, her vision and skills have been recognized by both the US Congress and the NEA. She has lectured internationally on her work and process, and especially on the Bridge Project, which addressed issues on the border between El Paso, Texas, and Juarez, Mexico. She presently is teaching a course on land arts and activism at the Ecoversity in Santa Fe and is also completing an installation project with youth for the World Peace Conference.*