

A body is that which crumples
Marina Kassianidou

Looking at Rachel Bacon's works, I think of charred Earth, tree bark, dried, aged, or wounded skin, a material that appears to be falling apart. The placement of some of these works on the floor reinforces that sense of falling apart—the works are literally fallen, their uneven edges further suggesting that they were part of something bigger, something that fell apart.

While making these works, Rachel researched anthracite mines in Pennsylvania, USA, a landscape she describes as collapsing—soil subsiding due to mining.¹ She describes the marks left on Earth due to human activity and resource extraction as ecological trauma, trauma that is not only inflicted on the land but that returns to haunt us—we are also marked by what we do to the land. In that sense, the works' resemblance to both damaged land and damaged skin acquires greater import.

Through closer looking, the works gradually transform into their constituent parts: black paper, creases, graphite—they reveal themselves as drawings. These drawings all follow a similar mode of making: crumpling paper and then drawing with graphite within the facets created by the crumpling. The mark making itself varies—the greater the pressure applied during the back-and-forth motion of drawing, the smoother and shinier the graphite deposited on the surface becomes.

The artist's drawn marks arise as a response to the texture of the crumpled surface—a mode of marking I have described elsewhere as responsive marking.² The marks, thus, no longer distinguish themselves from the surface, as signs of the artist, but rather emphasize the paper's creases, becoming traces of the encounter between artist and materials, artist and world, self and other. It is a mode of marking that advocates for attentiveness and care rather than imposition. The artist's marks are not more important nor more meaningful than the surface. Rather, both marks and surface work together, co-existing and co-creating. Considering Rachel's anthracite mine research and the effect humans have on the land—how humans mark the land—this mark-surface co-creation in her works begins to suggest non-hierarchical and potentially less harmful ways of co-existing with the environment, with the non-human. Thus, embedded within Rachel's process of making is a desire for a more equitable relationship between the human and the non-human.³

As luck would have it, I myself have been making drawings with crumpled paper since 2010. In trying to think through that work, I turned to recent applied physics research on crumpled paper.⁴ According to that research, the creases formed on crumpled paper allow the material to relieve the stress caused by the action of crumpling. In a way, the creases act as a protection mechanism—they protect the material from further damage while allowing it to adjust to the modified space it now occupies, following the crumpling.

Rachel thinks of her works with crumpled paper as bodies. She asks, if the drawing is a body, then what kind of body is it?⁵ I found myself asking the same question when first encountering her works. Are these the remnants of a human body? A non-human body? A post-human body? A body belonging to a

¹ Rachel Bacon, in conversation with author, November 14, 2022.

² Marina Kassianidou, "Works on/in/with Paper: Approaching Drawing as Responsive Marking," in *A Companion to Contemporary Drawing*, ed. Kelly Chorpene and Rebecca Fortnum (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2021), 239–255.

³ Rachel Bacon, email communication with author, December 20, 2022.

⁴ Jovana Andrejevic, Lisa M. Lee, Shmuel M. Rubinstein, and Chris H. Rycroft, "A Model for the Fragmentation Kinetics of Crumpled Thin Sheets," *Nature Communications* 12 (March 2021).

⁵ Rachel Bacon, in conversation with author, November 14, 2022.

timeless, ancient creature? A landscape-as-body? A human-land assemblage that points to the impossibility of separating ourselves from the land we live on/in/with? The more I have spent time with the works, however, the more I think that it is not only a question of pinning down the body as a what or whose, of defining and cementing. Perhaps it is more about considering the potential of a body. What does a body do or what can it do? A body ages, changes, disintegrates, crumples. And it also carries within it the potential for renewal, regeneration, hope. The creases formed through crumpling are, after all, a coping mechanism, a way to keep existing.⁶

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⁶ The title of this essay is a paraphrase from Erin Manning's *The Minor Gesture*: "The body is that which folds." Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 109.