Movement Through Matter

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Blue of the Morning #645, oil on panel, 30" x 30", 2021

Thank you to the Chicago Women's Caucus for Art for inviting me to speak. Thank you all for taking the time to listen to my talk tonight. I appreciate your presence, and I hope that what I have to say will spark your imagination and open new possibilities for your own creativity.

I named my talk *Movement through Matter* because it applies to my two of my favorite activities, swimming and painting. In both, I use my body to move a substance and to move through a substance. My body that knows how to swim is also my body that creates my paintings of water.

Before I launch into my talk I want to take a few moments to acknowledge how deadly water can be, and how many of our fellow human beings around the world, as well as animals and plants, are endangered by water due to climate change. I want to acknowledge those affected by Hurricane Ida in Louisiana, where I was born, as well as on the East Coast. I want to let you know that our hearts are with you.

Water is necessary for life. Water is a source of pleasure. And it can kill. So I will talk about my own history of painting and swimming, both of them rooted in joy and in my drive to grow as a human being. They are conduits for me to connect with people and with the world.

Towards the end, I will circle back to what I think it signifies for me to create meaning from paintings of water and sky based on my connection to Lake Michigan during this era of intensifying climate change.

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In the early 2010s, photographer Kevin Miyazaki embarked on an 1,800-mile journey around Lake Michigan. He photographed the lake as well as people who live near the lake whose lives are inextricably tied to its water: fisher-people, US Coast Guard members, artists, steelworkers, scientists, birders, surfers, and swimmers, to name a few.

As an artist and open water swimmer in Chicago, I was invited to participate in this project. Miyazaki photographed me, along with several of my swimming friends at Promontory Point.

In 2014, the Haggarty Museum of Art in Milwaukee exhibited Miyazaki's photographs in a show entitled *Perimeter*. They also published a catalogue in which, beneath some of the portraits, Miyazaki included quotes from the person depicted.

One quote stuck in my mind. It is from Andrew Wallus, a surfer from Whitefish Bay, Wisconsin.

"I now sometimes refer to it as "my lake" and I wish more people did, too."

We think of the word "my" as referring to an individual's possession, or a claim to something that very few other people have: my leg, my bicycle, my family. We might say "my city," to someone who is not from that city. "My" as in mine, but not yours.

Wallus's sentence imparts generosity to the word "my." He has a relationship to Lake Michigan that few others have. He is of a rare breed, the Lake Michigan surfer. But his words imply that he wishes, and requests, that we all develop as intimate a relationship to the lake as he has.

Wallus's sentence stuck in my mind so persistently because he gave me permission to claim to Lake Michigan for myself, by which I mean to love it as much as I can so that I can invite others to love it as much as I do.

It is mine, yes, and it is everyone else's too.

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I have very early memories of both painting and swimming. I recall painting in my nursery school class and loving the slippery feel of wet tempera paint on paper. I recall being in a swimming pool with my father and sister. We held onto his hands as he pulled both of us through the water. When I was older, around age 6, I recall holding onto my father's shoulders as he swam far from shore in a lake. He stopped, and encouraged me to let go. He taught me how tread water in the deep.

I started swimming competitively when I was 12. I went to college thinking I would swim all four years on my college team. But I quit swimming after the first semester, for two reasons. The first was that I'd had a stroke on my right side when I was 3 years old. Of course it is highly unusual for a child to have a stroke. I was paralyzed on my right side for several hours. By the next day, I could move as I normally did. No one knew what caused it, and I haven't had a stroke since. But it did leave me with a slight tremor on my right side. I only notice it when I try to do something requiring precision with my right hand. I was born left-handed, so my right side was already my non-dominant side.

After six years of competitive swimming, the limitations that the stroke placed on my body started to show up. My right hand started to curl up during swim practice. It wasn't a cramp; it didn't hurt. The best explanation a doctor could offer was that because of all my swimming, my well-developed muscles in my arms and shoulders were squeezing and impeding my weakened nerves on my right side.

It was incredibly frustrating to try to swim with my right hand curling and cupping and not being able to do anything about it. It seemed that no matter how hard I worked at swimming from that point forward, I wouldn't get faster. My hard work was making my right arm feel numb. Swimming and weight training made that problem worse.

The brain damage inflicted by the stroke did not prevent me from reaching all the regular childhood developmental milestones, but it did stand in the way of me becoming the excellent college swimmer I'd hoped to become.

The other compelling reason I quit swimming was that I was a college freshman and I craved new experiences. Competitive swimming is very linear—the lane lines, the laps up and down the pool, the fixation on the clock. I wanted to have long, meandering conversations with the new people I met. I wanted to experiment with ideas. I wanted to read late into the night without having to set my

alarm for 6am practice. I had not planned to be an art major, but my art classes were my favorite courses. The idea of using images to explore great big rambling ideas absolutely thrilled me.

After I quit swimming at age 18, I didn't swim very much for about a decade. I was burnt out.

I graduated with an art degree and spent several years after college working at various jobs—as an assistant nursery school teacher, in bookstores, as a canvasser for the Wisconsin Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign, and as a paralegal. I was also figuring out how to be a working artist.

In 1992, at age 28, I applied to graduate schools in art, and was accepted to Northwestern with a full scholarship.

I was thrilled to be able to immerse myself in my art. I was equally thrilled that Northwestern had a gorgeous pool with an entire wall of floor to ceiling windows facing Lake Michigan. I hadn't had regular access to a pool in several years and I was excited to swim again, on my own. I'd swim in the evening after a full day in the studio.

Halfway through graduate school, I fixated on the lake as subject matter. My motivation wasn't erudite or deep. I was dissatisfied with the way I painted. I wanted more nuance in my paintings. I'd long gravitated towards landscape, and I thought that since I felt an affinity to landscape anyway, and because I saw Lake Michigan almost every day, I'd start to make paintings of the lake. I thought painting water would be a good way to hone my skills, thinking that if I could paint water, which is in constant motion and both transparent and reflective, then I could paint anything. I saw it as a step towards the great works I imagined myself painting, but had yet to conceive.

What began as an exercise became an obsession. Though it took me years to realize it, I was jettisoning the solid forms of landscape for the ever-shifting water and vaporous sky.

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On a blustery fall afternoon in 2011, I was driving with my friend Karen Halverson Schreck. We'd just spent a couple of hours in my studio discussing my recent paintings. I had a one-person show coming up and Karen would write an essay for the catalogue. We talked about my fixation with water and the horizon line, and my depictions of vast spaces in what were then small paintings.

We were driving from my neighborhood, Rogers Park, to downtown Chicago where Karen would catch the train home. The lake frothed as we drove south on Du Sable Lake Shore Drive.

Tell me about your swimming, Karen said.

I spoke about what it's like being immersed in open water where nothing is solid, and about how swimming in open water requires a constant negotiation between your body and the conditions of the lake: the temperature and the waves. I told her about my two kinds of liquid, how my adventures in water translated into working with fluid, if gooey, paint, about how in both painting and swimming I used broad sweeping motions with my shoulders and small movements with my hands.

It was late afternoon. I could see the racing clouds and boisterous waves and the darkening sky to the east as I drove and spoke.

“Brush stroke, swimming stroke,” Karen said.

I said to Karen, “I had a stroke at age 3.” Time stopped at that moment. I was forty-seven years old. I started swimming seriously at age twelve. I started painting in college. I’d been doing both for decades. It seems stupidly obvious now, but I had never once made the connection between swimming strokes and brushstrokes.

Psychologist Dr. Annie G. Rogers writes in her book *The Unsayable*, “Although unconscious life is anything but random, its logic isn’t always clear. In other words, you find its logic only through association and in retrospect.” She also writes, “Whatever is unresolved and unsayable repeats.” “We repeat what we cannot bear.”

I have a vivid visceral memory of having the stroke. I was in nursery school. The entire class was dancing to music. I was having fun. I fell down. I wasn’t hurt. No big deal. Then I realized I couldn’t get up. I couldn’t move my body the way I wanted to. That’s when I screamed.

I had an experience in the hospital when I was in the examination room, separated from my mother. I have no memory of it. The only reason I know it happened is because I told my mother about it immediately afterwards, and she still remembers what I told her. The next day, my mother asked me about what I told her, and I did not remember it. The incident has to do with terror.

The stroke and what happened in the hospital added up to a bewildering, unbearably terrifying interruption of everything I had known up until then. I had no way to understand what had happened. Psychically, it was as if my very young consciousness slammed into a massive concrete wall.

The word *stroke* itself contains contradictions. It can be gentle, as in a caress. It can be violent: strike, hit, blow, jab, punch, slam, whack, thwack, thump. A stroke can kill. But think about the elegance of a swimming stroke, or the range of expression possible in a brushstroke.

At age 12, I started to pour my heart and soul into my swimming stroke. At age 18, I found that path blocked. I went in search of another path, which brought me to pour my heart and soul into my brushstrokes.

It’s all so much bigger and messier than these words convey, but that moment of realization in the car with Karen opened a whole new level of awareness for me. When she said, “Brush stroke, swimming stroke,” it electrified my entire body.

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I once heard a painter, Cherith Lundin, describe her struggle as a young artist to find subject matter that would sustain her interest. She knew that she wanted to paint, but wasn’t sure what to paint. She spoke of her journey through various subjects and styles. Eventually, she realized that she was

most excited about painting whenever she painted in ways that her body yearned to move. By trusting what her body wanted to do, she discovered who she was as an artist.

This made sense to me. A painting is a record of the accumulation of marks, and those marks are the result of specific movements made by the painter's body. My body has its own preferences when I paint. I want to work on a smooth, rigid surface and I want my brushstrokes to glide. I have no patience for the bounce of canvas or for the resistance of stiff paint on the weave of canvas. There's nothing wrong with these things—other painters use them to great effect. But I feel a shudder whenever I think of working this way, a visceral aversion that lies beyond reason. My body knows what it likes and doesn't, and I know which movements will entice me into my workday and which will cause me to procrastinate. Listening to Cherith Lundin, I felt a deep thrill hearing her articulate something I've always known but never thought to express in words.

What was I was looking for as a beginning painter? My body had an instinctive reaction to how my brush felt in my hand. The brush was the conduit that connected my hand to the surface I was painting on, and it conveyed a message that bypassed my conscious mind and communicated directly to the rest of my body. My body desired something that my conscious brain had very little access to. My body rejected the idea of resistance and interruption of the flow of its movements.

As I look back at what I wanted as a young painter, I'm compressing that time into a neat package. I was wildly uncertain about my path. I won't narrate my doubt and the circuitous path I took as a painter because all those starts and stops are not relevant to the part of my younger self I want to express here.

I want to connect with the feeling I had back then which is the same feeling I have now, which is: I want to glide across a surface. I was dancing with my nursery school class when I fell down and couldn't get back up. Possibly, in my painting, I'm trying to renegotiate the moment when I had that stroke. I want to find a way of not slamming into a massive concrete wall. I want to glide across a surface without interruption.

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In the early 2000s, when I was in my late 30's, I started to swim in Lake Michigan consistently, about 2 to 4 times a week from May until October. It took time and practice for me to feel at ease. I was a good swimmer, but we humans are land animals. We are not amphibian. I think the human will to live recoils at finding itself in big, wide, deep, open water without anything solid to grab onto.

It took time for me to feel safe in big water. At first, I'd swim with two or three others in a small pod. We'd pause at each buoy, spaced about 100-200 yards apart, to account for each other and decide together whether to continue to the next. Each time we did that, we'd turn our nervousness into reassurance. With each repetition of nervousness transformed into reassurance we built up our confidence. As our confidence grew, we trusted our own and each other's abilities to bring us safely out and back. After a while, our confidence, always tempered by caution, became ingrained.

My swimming friends and I translated each other's support and encouragement into our own internalized sense of safety in the lake.

Not everyone feels safe in the lake or at the lakefront, not only because of their swimming ability, but because of racism. I'd like to talk about how my love of swimming brought me into greater community engagement with swimming.

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This past April, I got involved with a new project having to do with swimming and racial discrimination. Swimming in the United States has a history rooted in the persistent, violent exclusion of Black people from swimming spaces. This project is about contradicting that history by creating a safe space for swimming in Lake Michigan for those who have little or no access to the lakefront or swimming.

This project is new and still in progress. I'll tell you about how it came about.

About 20 years ago, I decided to educate myself about the racist history of the United States, through reading, conversations, and participation in groups. For several years, I participated in an anti-racist group through Grace Episcopal Church in Chicago. I earned my MFA in Nonfiction Writing in 2016. My MFA thesis consisted of essays exploring my white Southern family history as enslavers, and what it means for me as a White woman thinking about race today. I've made it my business to become aware of the ways that living in a White supremacist culture has made claims on my consciousness, and with each new level of understanding, to do what I can to move that tightness and tension through my body and out of my body. It is an ongoing project.

Last spring, I was scrolling through Instagram and saw a post about the Chicago Monuments Project, which is an initiative created to grapple with Chicago's racist history as embodied in our public monuments. For years, I'd been following the work of a friend of mine, Dr. Karen Cox, who is a historian at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte and an expert on Confederate Monuments. So I was intrigued that the city of Chicago was embarking on its own reckoning.

I visited the Chicago Monuments Project website several times. In April, an event caught my eye. It was a Zoom presentation by two groups, CRR19 and Firebird Community Arts. CRR19 stands for the Chicago Race Riot of 1919, and it is a nonprofit created to educate people about the history of the 1919 Chicago race riot. Firebird Community Arts is a nonprofit arts organization that runs a program, Project Fire, to teach youth who have been impacted by gun violence to create art with glassblowing and ceramics. CRR19 and Project Fire have partnered to create glass markers to memorialize those killed during the 1919 race riots.

I was intrigued by their collaboration because the 1919 race riots were sparked by a swimming incident. On July 27, 1919 a Black teenager, 17-year-old Eugene Williams, was floating on a homemade raft in Lake Michigan when he inadvertently floated into a "White" swimming area. Several White men became enraged and started throwing rocks at him. Eugene Williams fell off the raft and drowned. There were countless witnesses to his murder, including police officers who refused to make arrests. These events sparked outrage between Black and White people in Chicago, and exploded into a riot that lasted for a week. Thirty-eight people were killed and hundreds were injured. Most of those killed or hurt were Black people.

My overriding thought was: It started with swimming.

I signed up for the Zoom presentation. The next day, I emailed the people at CRR19 and Firebird Community Arts who spoke during the presentation. I asked them, “Would you be interested in organizing a swim event to commemorate the incident that sparked the riot? If so, what might that look like?”

I had no idea what would happen. Within a couple of hours, I got several enthusiastic responses. I invited my friend Qing Li, who is an accomplished marathon swimmer, and friends of mine on the Swedish Fish Masters swim team to join in the conversation, because I knew they would add useful thinking, expertise, and connections.

Over several conversations, we created a commemoration in the form of a beach party on Friday, August 13 for the youth participants of Project Fire. Qing Li did an outstanding job of leadership and fundraising. Karen Reyes of Firebird Community Arts did a fantastic job organizing logistics. The Swedish Fish Masters swim team donated money, and members showed up to help with the event: Terrie Albano, Aliza Becker, and Jane Montes.

We plan to make it an annual event. We foresee it growing and evolving over time. But I think our vision will stay the same—to center joy around swimming in the lake, especially for people who have had little or no access to swimming.

Through my involvement with CRR19 and Firebird, I began to coach open water swimming. Dr. Franklin Cosey-Gay, one of the two founders of CRR19, introduced Qing and me to Bernard Lyles, a coach who has been instrumental in getting hundreds of athletes of color to participate in the sport of triathlon. In 1992, Bernard started Tri-Masters, a program to coach both youth and adults.

Bernard told Qing and me that he could use some open water swim coaches this summer to coach his adult triathletes. He invited us to coach with him at 57th Street Beach on Tuesday and Thursday mornings. We said yes.

I swear, I’ve had more fun coaching open water swimming than I’ve had in a very long time. I set my alarm at 5am twice a week to work with these awesome, delightful, and determined swimmers. They range from beginning swimmers to experienced swimmers who’ve competed in Ironman triathlons. Our coaching ranges from teaching swimmers how to relax and float in the water to taking swimmers out into deep open water to work on stroke technique.

As anyone who teaches knows, you learn a lot about your subject matter when you teach. You get to revisit the fundamentals you take for granted. I learned a ton about swimming this past summer. My biggest revelation was about the importance of breath.

I realized that a swimmer’s survival in the water depends less on how strong a swimmer they are, and much more on how relaxed they are in the water.

A swimmer's relaxation in the water depends on how confident they are that they will be able to get as much air as they need, whenever they need it. The breath going in and out of lungs, slow and steady, is what keeps a swimmer on top of the water.

We work with swimmers who can swim perfectly well in shallow water in the lake. But when some swimmers go into deep water, they tense up. Their muscles get tight and they close their mouths. Their breathing becomes shallower. This makes them less buoyant, which makes it harder to keep their head above water, which can lead to fear, which can spiral into panic.

In a group, with coaches and other swimmers, we encourage anyone who starts to get tense to keep breathing. We reassure them that we're right there and won't let them go under. The moment a swimmer figures out how to keep breathing when they feel tense, and then settles into deep breathing, is the moment that danger gets transformed into safety.

With any activity that has the potential to kill us, a crucial part of the practice involves learning to manage our body's reactions. Another crucial part of the practice is to push ourselves past our boundaries of feeling safe, then create the experience of coming through it safely. Through repetition and practice, we internalize the experience of being safe. This is how we learn how to do things that once terrified us.

Of course, we always need to respect Lake Michigan's power. Even the most experienced swimmer can drown if they become overwhelmed. It's our responsibility, every time we go into the lake, to make sure we have the resources to meet the demands the lake makes on our bodies.

If you intend to become an open water swimmer it means getting to know the body of water in which you swim. It means loving and respecting that body of water. Your life depends upon it.

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The reason I am passionate about coaching open water swimming and teaching people to feel safe in the water is because I want people to love and embrace the natural world we have right here at the edge of our city. It is our own urban wilderness. We the people who live at its edges are stewards of this natural treasure.

The lake at our doorstep contains countless metaphors, especially as we enter a new time of climate change.

Swimming safely in Lake Michigan depends upon the collaboration of two bodies—the swimmer's body and the body of the lake. Staying on the surface depends on what's happening inside the swimmer's body.

When we relax as swimmers, we convert the lake from something that can kill us into something that will support us. When we do this, we are not changing the lake. We are changing our relationship to the lake. This transformation of self means the difference between life and death.

I think about air and breathing. In 2021, we're still in the throes of Covid which attacks the lungs. There are wildfires sending smoke and dangerous particulates into the air. We have increased flooding, which drowns people, animals, and plants. We have Eric Garner's tragic last words "I can't breathe" haunting our US culture.

What a luxury it is to breathe. And how utterly basic it is to life.

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I think about contradictions. We are in a critical place with climate change. We may have already set into motion changes that we are powerless to stop. That's terrifying.

The pandemic lockdown was hard. It was even harder witnessing the spread of the virus and the death it caused. What if those of us who are able to do it simply breathe deeply for all those who struggle to breathe? What if that is what the planet is asking for us to do right now?

What if the solution isn't more technology and human invention? What if the solution is to slow down and breathe? Simply breathing seems counterintuitive to our survival.

I am not a scientist or a policy expert. I would hate to be in charge of actual real-world decisions that have life or death consequences. But I am an artist, writer, thinker, visionary. I am a swimmer. What if we need, first and foremost, a different way of seeing the world and being in the world? That's something I can bring my talents to.

There's a phrase in swimming: "You have to swim slow to swim fast." It means that paying close attention to our body's movements through the water and making adjustments is key to swimming more efficiently. When we slow down we are better able to feel the movements we make that cause resistance in the water. When we slow down, we're better able to feel the movements that help us glide through the water. When we glide, we slip through the water with greater ease and speed.

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From coaching open water swimming during summer 2021, I've been thinking about air more than I ever have.

I've long thought about my paintings as depicting water and sky. The words sky and air have significant overlap. But we think of sky as a thing that contains other things. Sky has a color, or many colors. Sky contains weather: rain, fog, clouds, tornados, hurricanes. Sky contains the sun. Moon and stars.

But air? Air is invisible. How would one paint air? How would one paint something that is invisible? Painters actually do it all the time. Think of the times you've looked at a painting and gasped, or looked at a painting and cried. When that happens, your eyes are the conduit for something else to occur in your body, and that something else transcends the visible.

More than I ever have before, I'm trying to paint air, I'm trying to use the visible to convey the invisible.

My painting has become an expression of my love of swimming. My swimming is a delicate navigation of the physical and psychic wounds my body carries, and my swimming is a way to try to heal. My painting is a way to try to express that wound and that healing. Because no one can tell from looking at me that I had a stroke, my painting is a coded way to try to make that invisible wound visible. I became a writer, in part, to uncover what my painting was to try to make it explicit.

But I'm also aware of the slipperiness of words. We can make true statements. We can tell stories that resonate. But words can never contain the enormity of experience. Words can only represent fragments of it.

But words and images can navigate paths to greater clarity and insight.

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I am reading a fabulous book of essays entitled *All We Can Save: Truth, Courage, and Solutions for the Climate Crisis*.

One of the essayists, Abigail Dillen, writes, "We underestimate the power of contribution—of acting within our own sphere of influence to tackle the piece of the problem that is right in front of us."

The one thing I can do, grounded where I am, in Chicago, and having the skills and passions that I have, is to entice people to love Lake Michigan as much as I do. Will that save us? Will that stop the inexorable motion of climate change? Not by itself it won't. But if my actions get added to the actions of everyone else who is in love with some part of the natural world, teaching others to love what they love, it could possibly, hopefully, be enough for a cultural shift that could make a difference.

And even if we are doomed, it seems that the best we can make of our time on the planet is to love where we are and do our best to care for it.

I want to get as many hearts and souls and brains and bodies as I can of the people of Chicago, "my city," to love Lake Michigan as much as I do, to become as comfortable as I am in the lake, and to know it as well or better than I do.

I want us to care. The more us who care, the more knowledge we create; the more fun we have, the more creative we can be.

My lake. Our lake. Body of water. Our body. One body.