

## **Sand Drawings: Only a Moment in Time**

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### **Abstract**

Sand drawings are an ephemeral form of art. This paper compares two different forms of sand art, that of Jim Denevan and the Navajo tribes. Although they use different methods and techniques to create their sand drawings, Denevan and the Navajos are very similar in other aspects of their artworks. These two art forms are similar in the fact that they both use the sand drawings for healing or therapeutic purposes. The Navajos sprinkle sand from the drawing onto the person for healing. Denevan began drawing as a way to cope with his emotional family life. The image and purpose of healing are not the only similarities between these two. The destruction of their sand drawings are just as important as the image that is created in the first place. Whether the sand is thrown back onto the ground (the Navajo) or the ocean washes it away (Jim Denevan), in both cases the images are destroyed, thus creating a never-ending connection to the land. However, their ephemeral existence can still be remembered through photographic reproductions. By looking back on these sand drawings and appreciating them, we can reconnect to the land.

Imagine yourself standing at a beach surrounded by the low rumble and sloshing of the ocean's waves. As you stroll along, the cool wind gusts through your hair as you get pushed along the shores of the beach. Your bare feet slowly wander through the soft, wet cushion of sand. You begin to drag your big toe in a smooth, circular motion, making small shapes and designs in the sand. You seem to forget everything else around you as you become so intrigued with the mesmerizing effect of drawing in the sand (Fig. 1).

Suddenly, the tide comes gushing in and swallows your drawing, right before your very eyes. The tide then slowly drifts back, keeping the only existence of your drawing enveloped within itself.



**Figure 1: Jim Denevan, Ocean Beach, San Francisco, CA, 2006. Courtesy the artist.**

Most people would become upset, maybe even agitated, that their sand drawing was simply destroyed and erased by the incoming tide. Jim Denevan, however, is the exception. As a California surfer, well-renowned chef, and sand artist, he has conducted this process of creating temporary art many times. Land or earth artists, using natural objects such as trees, flowers, rocks, leaves, clay, and sand, can create temporary or ephemeral works of art. The duration of each piece depends on the materials that are used. Why would someone be so motivated to create a piece of artwork that only lasts for a temporary time? Several reasons can be determined and viewed not only in the works by Jim Denevan but also by the Navajos, an Indian tribe in the Colorado Plateau. When carefully examined and compared, they both show many similarities; a connection is established between the artist/shaman and the land and between the viewers. Through process, purpose, and destruction, the Navajos and Jim Denevan reveal how their sand drawings are indeed temporary masterpieces.

A major difference between the sand paintings of the Navajo and Denevan's sand drawings is dictated by the different characteristics of the land--their 'canvas' on which they live and operate. The Navajo tribes live in a region known as the Colorado Plateau, located where the borders of Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Utah intersect. The occupations are farming, raising sheep and goats, and selling crafts (Wyman 14). On

the other hand, Jim Denevan lives in California. He enjoys spending his time surfing, drawing in the sand, and cooking for his dinner events known as *Outstanding in the Field*. To do this, Denevan prepares a meal using a farmer's crop and produce. He then creates an amazing display of tables for the farmer's guests to dine and enjoy his delicious food. As large installations of art themselves, his dinners are all about "understand[ing] the harvest. To feel it." (Kahn 169).

The process of sand drawing also varies significantly between the Navajos and Denevan. The Navajos create their drawings, also known as sand paintings or drypaintings, "by sprinkling, strewing, or otherwise placing dry pigments or other colored material on a horizontal surface—the ground, the floor of a room, or a raised platform—usually on a background of earth, sand, animal skin, cloth, or other material" (Wyman 3). By carefully placing the small grains of sand, the Navajos are able to create complex sand designs in a wide range of colors, shapes, and sizes, resembling a more traditional form of art.

In contrast, Denevan's work is created using a technique that is very familiar to many people. The artist draws in the sand with a wooden branch, just as many people do when walking along the beach. He presses the wooden branch into the sand, carving a composition of shapes and lines.

The artist and the shaman both use sand in their drawings, but their processes and techniques differ. The Navajos use an additive process, in which they build up their drawing by adding sand on top of the ground. Denevan's technique resembles a subtractive method, meaning that he takes away from the original material. By exerting pressure from his body, through the tip of the branch, he compresses the sand into the ground. The now sunken relief drawing in the sand not only creates a line, but it also gives the drawing some contrast in shade and a small sense of depth.

Despite all these differences, Denevan and the Navajos have very similar rationales for their drawings. They create drypaintings of various sizes during their ceremonies, "in which the gods' help is requested for harvests and healing." (Baxter para. 1). The sand drawings hold a very important part in the healing process of the Navajo ceremonies; the process of creating a drypainting is just as important as the final image that is created.

Jim Denevan also uses drawing in the sand with a sort of therapeutic purpose to heal his emotions. Jim is one of nine children, and life was not always easy for him and his family while he was growing up in San Jose, California. When he was five years old, his father died of a brain tumor. He also had a sibling die from medication complications related to a schizophrenic illness. Today, two of his other siblings also suffer with the same disease at a medical institution. Throughout his childhood, Denevan's mother certainly had her hands full with raising nine children on her own and teaching math at San José State University. In the mid-nineties, she became ill and was diagnosed with

Alzheimer's disease. According to Denevan, his mother was “very sharp” and “very gifted,” and her sickness was difficult for him. He wanted and needed to find a way to cope with all of his thoughts and emotions (Duane 97). He never expected art to be the answer.

The beginning of Jim's drawing days came quite unexpectedly. He described the discovery of his first drawing in these terms:

One night I went down to the beach and wanted to go for a walk. Because of the low tide the sea had retreated quite far and I had the spontaneous impulse to draw a picture in the sand with my finger. I drew a fish of about 20 feet and took a step back to look at it. I liked it and so I drew more fishes everywhere on the beach. Then I walked up the cliffs and looked at the picture from above. It just looked great in the evening light and I said to myself: 'You should do this more often'. (Denevan qtd. in Spies 58) (cfr. Fig.2).

Commenting on why he decided to continue drawing in the sand after that night, Denevan said, “I had always been interested in creativity, but watching my mother deteriorate really pushed me over the edge. I experienced so much stress that I couldn't endure the intensity of the kitchen, so I pretty much drew in the sand for a year,” (Denevan qtd. in Kahn 165). Soothing his emotions, the beach setting was almost an unconscious decision made by Denevan: “The beach is a giant canvas for me. I am a surfer, so I have been attracted to the movements of the tide for quite some time.” (Denevan qtd. in Artean para. 2).

As far as the drawing process is concerned, the Navajo tribes plan their sand drawings in advance. The sand painting serves as an important part of the tribe's ceremony, known as a Holyway chant, which is a very complex system consisting of several individual ceremonies. Those ceremonies include “two main sections: purification and dispelling of evil; and attraction of goodness, strength and power,” where the drawings are created (Parezo 13). Although the sand painting itself is only a small part of a Navajo ceremony, it is one of the most important and most recognizable as well.

A spiritual influence is prominent in the everyday lives of the Navajo people. Navajo sand paintings are not created for art's sake dedicated to tribal members. “They are not 'art' in the western sense of the term for they are not spontaneous creations; rather, the stylized designs created during the ceremonies are strictly prescribed and they are always destroyed at the end of the ritual.” (Parezo 1).



*Figure 2: Jim Denevan, Tunitas Creek, CA, 2006. Courtesy the artist.*

Through lots of preparation and singing, the Navajo Hogan (home) is arranged for the beginning of a sand painting ceremony. Sometimes made at night, the sand painting is done with the patient present, lying on a blanket placed on the sand. The

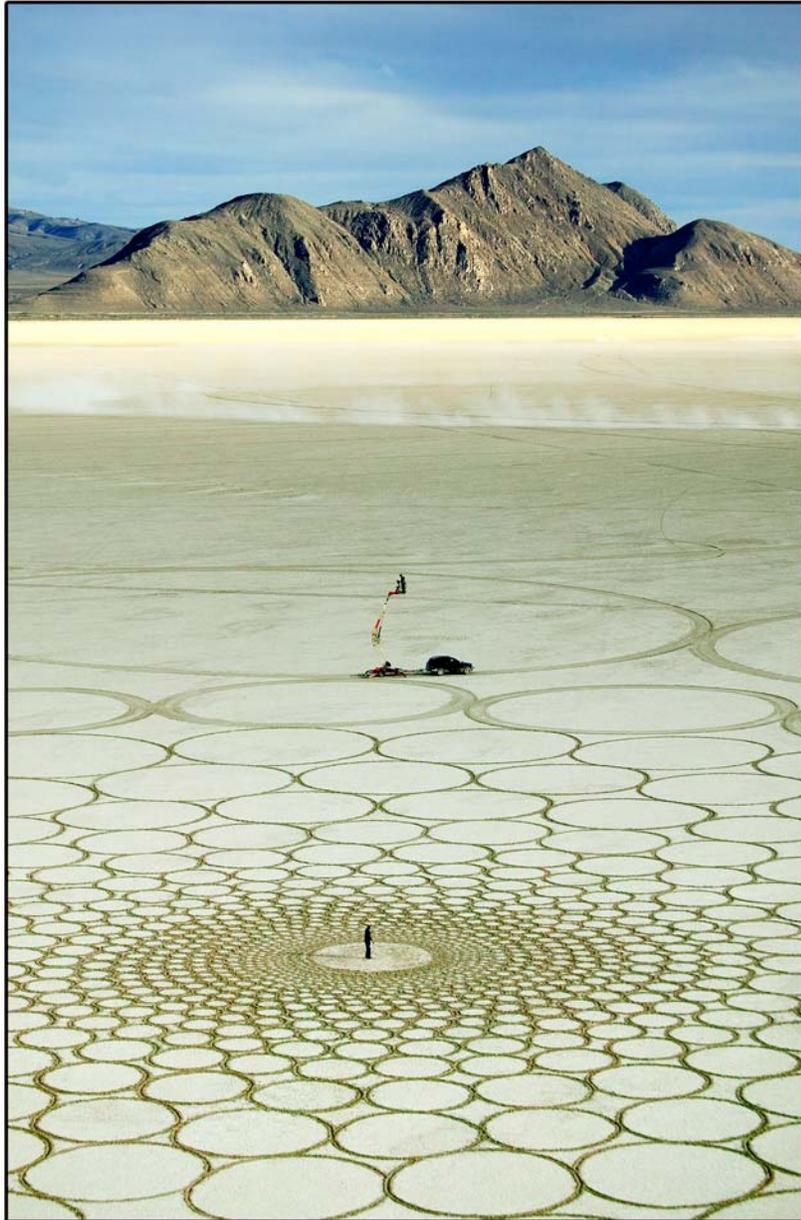
colored sand is put on pieces of bark, in order to keep it in one place. Depending on the size of the drypainting, one to six men are needed to make the elaborate and detailed sand drawing. The following morning, the sand painting is walked upon and the singing shaman applies the sand to many parts of the patient's body for healing purposes. Once a ceremony is completed, the sand painting is sprinkled with pollen and cornmeal, collected onto a blanket, and thrown out (Wyman 31-32). The destruction of the sand drawing is just as significant as the process it took to make it and the final image that was depicted. By erasing and getting rid of the drawing outside, the sand is able to return back to nature, creating a never-ending circle that connects the Navajo tribes to the land.

The sand paintings created during a Navajo ceremony are only seen by those who attend. This whole idea began when the spirits painted pictures for the Navajos on how to conduct their ceremonies. The spirits did not let the tribes keep the paintings, explaining that they did not want them to be "stolen, soiled, or damaged." The Navajos were told to use sand and to demolish the picture as soon as the ceremony was finished. The members of the Navajo tribe have strongly frowned upon the "photographing or copying" of their sand drawings. However, they have slowly and progressively agreed to the reproduction of some of their work, allowing for a better understanding of their culture (Wyman 43).

For the Navajos, the composition of a drypainting can be created in three different ways. A painting with the symbols lined up "in a row or several rows one above another, and the symbols repeated to increase their power, often standing on a foundation or locality bar," is considered a linear drypainting.<sup>3</sup> A radial drypainting<sup>4</sup> consists of "the main theme symbols cardinally oriented in the form of a Greek cross and with the subsidiary symbols in the quadrants in the form of a Saint Andrew's cross, around a central symbol or place of locality." Finally, an extended-center painting includes "an enlarged symbol or group of symbols occupying most of the design (Wyman 64).<sup>5</sup>

The process of this short-lived art form is truly amazing. Many people are involved and a lot of skill is required to create a very detailed work in a matter of hours. Once it has served its purpose of healing the sick and casting out evil spirits, it is swept outside and never seen again, just as Denevan's drawings are swept away by the ocean's waves.

Despite his precision and skill level, Denevan's way of drawing appears to be a bit more casual and spontaneous than that of the Navajos. By using his imagination, a wooden stick, occasionally a rake, and never a tool for measuring, he draws perfect geometric forms in the sandy shores of California's beaches. In one drawing, he walked up to as many as thirty miles in seven hours, creating marks that appear as an "isolated phenomena" (Jimdenevan.com para. 1).

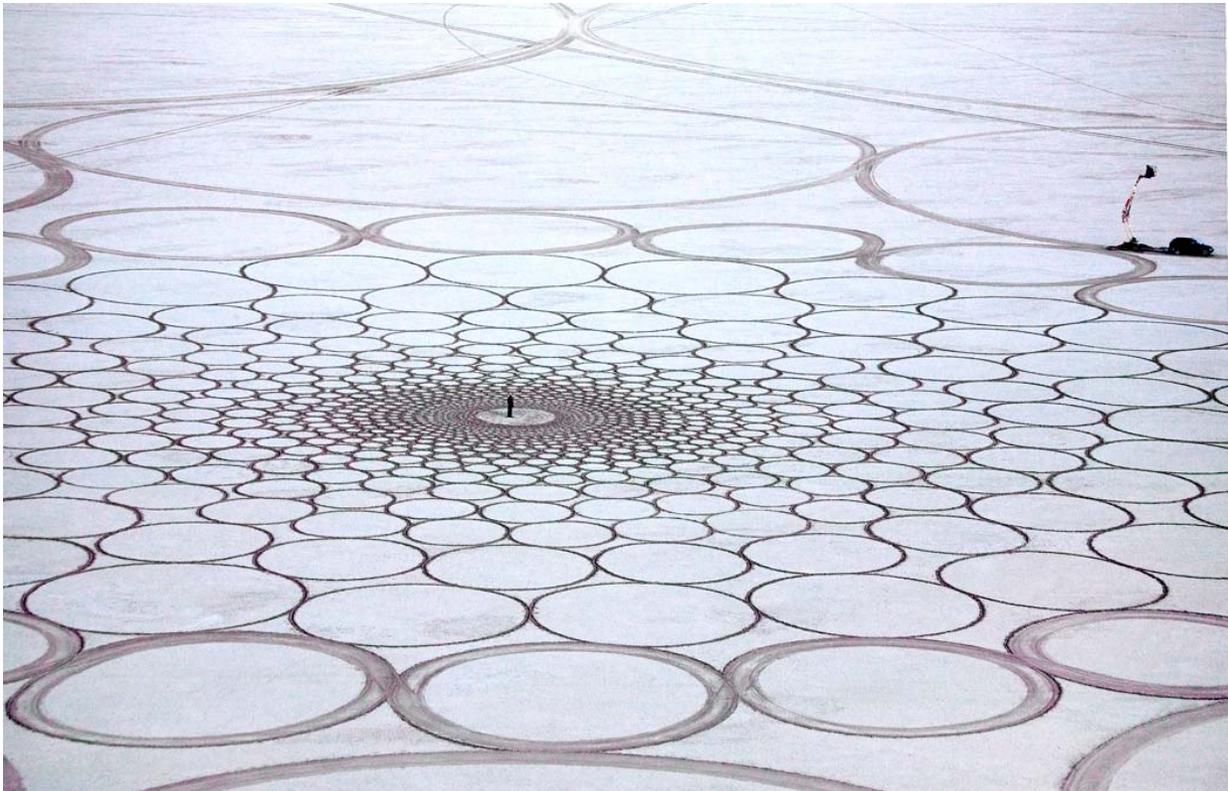


*Figure 3: Jim Denevan, Salt Lake Desert, NV, 2008. Courtesy the artist.*

Although the Navajos have progressively allowed some reproductions of their sand paintings, Jim Denevan takes pictures of his sand drawings when they are completed. However, he does this only for the sake of documenting them and exhibiting them to inspire others. He has no desire to draw in the sand for a profit. He simply draws because he enjoys it. A mere photograph of his drawing cannot begin to explain the extraordinary size and quality of his work. He says, "The drawings live from being looked at in reality. Hanging a two-dimensional reproduction of them on your wall is not the same" (Denevan qtd. in Spies 58).

Even though the titles of Denevan's sand drawings do not describe the image of the drawing itself, they hold a very significant meaning. The drawings are named according to the location and time in which they are drawn. Through this unique identity and naming approach, each drawing is, once again, reconnected to the land on which they were created. Denevan's ability to create perfect forms can be seen in his drawing that looks like growing circles (Fig. 3).

The center begins with a very tiny circle. As the drawing progresses, the circles expand out, growing larger and larger. To the bare eyes, this drawing looks as though each circle is perfectly round. One can easily forget that it has been drawn completely free-handed. It is almost as if Denevan had been directed by a spiritual force, like that of the Navajo tribes, to help guide him in his smooth, geometric paths in the sand. This not only connects him to the land he but also to a higher power beyond that of the physical world (Fig. 4).



**Figure 4: Jim Denevan, Salt Lake Desert, NV, 2008. Courtesy the artist.**

Despite the fact that Denevan uses a natural, organic sand medium for his drawings, he is able to expand this idea even further by using organic shapes to create a textural drawing. His slender ovals (Fig. 5), that resemble a gathering of foliage, displays this exact quality. Depth is created by the dark shade surrounding each individual shape, and an eye-catching texture is produced by the varying size and direction of those shapes.



**Figure 5: Jim Denevan, Salt Lake Desert, NV, 2008. Courtesy the artist.**

Another breath-taking example of Denevan's work is one that resembles a disappearing spiral (Fig. 6). The curves that make up this sand drawing are perfectly smooth and precise, creating a very strong effect and the illusion of oneself slowly spinning down into the depths of the sand.



**Figure 6: Jim Denevan, Ocean Beach, San Francisco, CA, 2005. Courtesy the artist.**

A more linear effect can be seen in Jim's drawing of a three-dimensional box and a large triangle (Fig. 7). His nearly accurate straight lines are very impressive. The long, slender box looks as if it is sitting right there on the beach and disappearing into the distance. The triangle is comprised of very precise angles, creating a perfectly balanced isosceles triangle. Its sharp points create a strong, directional force that leads the eye across the drawing and into space.

More recently, Denevan has had a strong desire to create even larger-scale drawings, but the beaches of California are limiting. He has resorted to drawing in the dry lakebeds of Nevada. Even with the change of location, the desert appears to have had only a few minor changes on the overall experience of his drawing. He is still able to “. . .turn up on the sand and start to create an image off the top of. . .[his] head.” (Jim Denevan's Sand para. 10). Without the incoming tide, the artist is able to come back to the drawings and work on them after a few hours or even days. Even so, the sand drawings are still temporary, because each one “fades in about three weeks and completely disappears in about three or four months.” (Jim Denevan. Dumbo 73).



**Figure 7: Jim Denevan, Tunitas Creek, Ca, 2006. Courtesy the artist**

Like the Navajo drypaintings, many hours are required for each of Denevan's masterpieces. When working with nature, only time will tell how long the drawing will actually last. In a matter of minutes, the tide can quickly wash away all that was drawn, leaving no trace of its existence. Denevan once stated that “[p]eople always ask how it feels to have them wash away...but who would want it not to wash away?” (Jim Denevan, Greenmuseum.org para. 3).

Jim Denevan is a very unique artist. He draws solely for the sake of drawing. He is able to appreciate and enjoy his work in the sand. The washing away of his drawings almost resembles a stress reliever. Figuratively speaking, the stress inside of him slowly drifts away and stays trapped inside the ocean's water forever.

According to Denevan, “[t]he water works as a giant eraser and forces me to rely on immediacy and the appreciation of impermanence.” (Denevan qtd. in Artein para. 2). This is the importance of temporary artwork. One has to learn to appreciate the ephemeral beauty that lasts in the sand for only a short time. Once it is washed away, one can look back on the memory of the image and remember the feelings and emotions one had when viewing the original drawing.

Both forms of sand drawing are ephemeral, yet time-consuming pieces of art. Even so, they are destroyed in a smaller amount of time than it takes to create them. It takes a lot of appreciation and determination of the artist to create something so miraculous and beautiful that can simply disappear in the blink of an eye.

In today's world, creating a temporary piece of artwork to merely destroy it in the end may seem pointless and a waste of time to some people, but it is important to remember that its destruction is just as important as its creation. Ephemeral art is appreciated because it is so temporary and brings awe because of the incredible skills that are used to create it, knowing that it will soon be destroyed.

These two examples, Jim Denevan and the Navajos, exhibit the importance of connecting with the land. They may have different methods of doing so, but they both use sand to create an ephemeral image that serves a healing and therapeutic purpose. Each one is able to experience the land and what nature has to offer. Nature is a beautiful thing, and one has to learn to appreciate it while it is around. The drawing's disappearance may be disheartening at first, but in order to have significance it must be demolished. In exchange, the contents of their art are able to return back to the land. By being short-lived and able to be returned to nature, sand drawings create a never-ending connection between the artist, the land, and the rest of mankind.

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## Notes:

- <sup>1</sup> Jenna Sogn is an Honors Sophomore student at SDSU. This paper, which combines an acute formal analysis with a complex point-by-point comparison between two different artistic expressions through content-based analysis forms (biography, iconology, psychoanalysis), represents her outstanding research contribution to the ARTH 100 Art Appreciation course.
- <sup>2</sup> We wish to express our sincere gratitude to the artist Jim Denevan and his personal assistant, Mali Mrozinski, for having graciously contributed the illustrations to complete this essay, as well as for having made available some bibliographical materials that are very difficult to find. Without their help, it would not have been possible to successfully complete this project.
- <sup>3</sup> “*Ye’i with Sunflower, Big Godway*” is illustrated in Wyman: Fig. 22, pg. 64.
- <sup>4</sup> “*People of the Myth, Mountainway*” is illustrated in Wyman: Fig. 9, pg. 47.
- <sup>5</sup> “*Four Stars on Black Big Star, Big Starway*” is illustrated in Wyman: Fig. 24, pg. 65.

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