

THE FAULT LINE



EARTHQUAKE SERIES OF 6 OIL PAINTINGS ON MASONITE - 1994

The plates are always shifting out in California where I lived. The 1989 temblor was serious and made me more aware of their potential to change everything. I grew a respect for earthquakes, and harbored something that I'd heard or read, which was something like: *Earthquakes aren't dangerous, but **buildings** are.* Not entirely true, but I was thinking about how nature is in flux, regardless of our interventions.

In 1994 I prepared a series of small masonite panels, made in my brother Brians driveway in the east bay. (He had the tools for his home remodeling business.) These were around 8" x 8" each. Good for a series, so I came up with a small set of earthquake based paintings.

First, some origins. In the early nineties, images of stylized cracks in the ground started emerging in my sketchbooks and paintings, including this big one from 1992:



60" x 84" oil on canvas - 1992

Plus this whimsy, also painted in '92, with the prominent crack in the ground, acting as a divider of sorts. (easily influenced by Robyn Hitchcock, freeing up the muse.)



It's about 36" x 24". (from a very old digital pic, taken sometime in the 90s.)



Fault Line 1 .

Flash forward to '94 ,and I set to work on this small panel painting...First, I made this one. An imaginary landscape with a diffused golden glow. The satellite suggests this temblor occurred remotely, far from civilization, knocking the boulders in half — but when? Looking as if it happened centuries ago. It's absurd to think a satellite made for outer space would be visible from Earth at this scale, yet there it is, taken from the big red alchemical crucible painting of '92.

The clean lightning bolt crack seems graphically unnatural in this semi-surrealist scenario. I liked it, it stands alone quite well I thought, yet with more variations to follow at approximately the same scale.

I was appreciating working smaller, and the new fine sable brush I bought at Flax — perfect for crafting small works like these.



Fault Line 2.

For this next one, with its emerald green stone interior was the second one out of six to be. I had acquired emerald green paint made by Winsor & Newton. It's like a precious mineral compacted in a small tube! A small amount goes a long way, and as seen here, I mingled with light blues, and sparked by opposing warm reds and oranges gives this a psychedelic tinge.

The split stones reveal a precious mineral quality in this, the most fantasized scenario of the series. With San Francisco bay drained (notice the unmistakable Transamerica building in the miniature distance) and a boat landlocked. Atmospherically stylized, and certainly not reality-based.



Fault Line 3.

Next up was this vast landscape, a favorite and rather Earthy. It depicts waves of seismographic — downright rhythmically sonic — evidence in the ground around the graphic "lightning bolt" crack, now a definitive feature of this series. This seems most like an actually visible fault line, which in geologic terms are surface expressions of *faults*, where the movement occurs in Earth's crust.

I like how it's a fantasy earthquake with Earth moved and shifted, with no signs of civilization whatsoever. The rusty colors work well in this piece. I was thinking about lighting and atmospherics, in a delicately balanced composition.

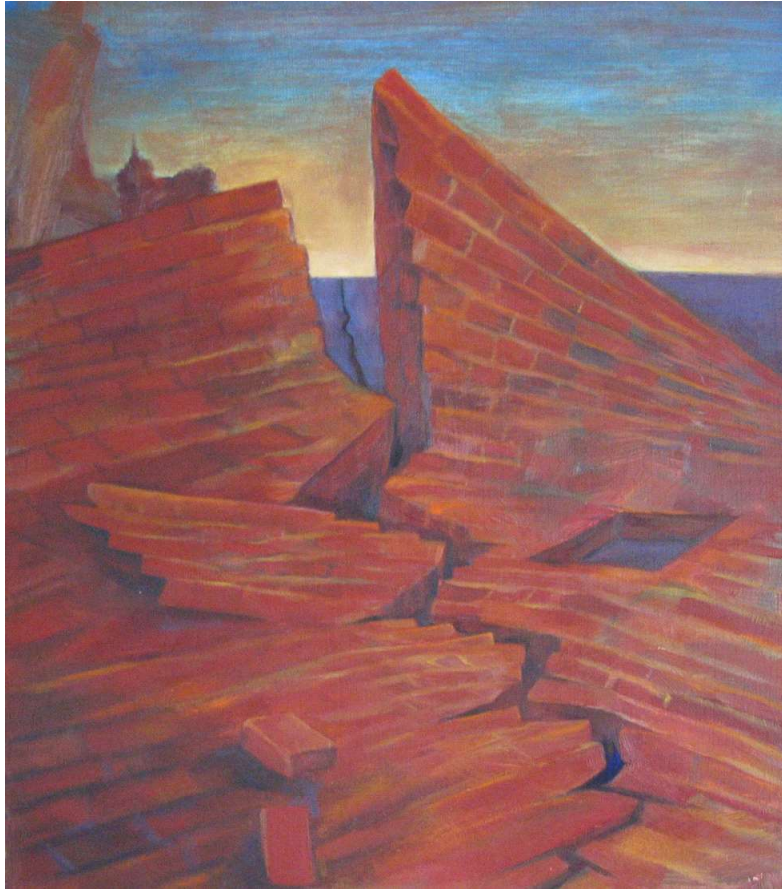


Fault Line 4.

More awkward than the previous, and is probably the least successful. I start to depict man-made structures taken down by earthquakes. This is illustrated awkwardly, the supposed bridge structure does not look to scale. The supposedly bent rebar looks vague. Is it rebar, spaghetti, snakes or protruding rays of ??

The catacomb-like underworld exposed is somewhat interesting, and it has some decent atmosphere and earthy colors. Still it's not convincing, but okay enough to fit in. Gone is the signature crack, but a gaping chasm. I was trying different, experimental approaches, which is healthy to do.

Moving forward to...



Fault Line 5.

Continuing with civilization wrecked by natural seismic activity, brick buildings are a hazard in earthquake country. This is a better piece compared with the previous. The structure is more convincing. These are undeniably bricks making up this crumbling structure, in reds. The return of the fault line crack cutting through seems natural.

Ah! But what is in the distance? It looks like it could be ocean, but with a crack in the water? An ambiguous detail, and small — remember, these are only 8" x 8" and less.

(this is about 8" x 7.5" , slightly narrower than a square.)



Fault Line 6.

The sixth piece shows concrete cracked into inhospitable shards. Suggesting a freeway overpass in ruins. Thinking of the doomed Cypress freeway that collapsed in Oakland. Tragedy that I didn't want to explore here. I didn't try painting people in these, meant to be purely imagined landscapes. This one's chalky and stark, as the material it intends to represent. A well rounded series of six, little landscapes that might hold up on their own, yet belong together as stronger.

I did manage to make a seventh variation, but it's abstract quality didn't fit this series. Six pieces work better than seven. It needs to be found and scanned eventually. I tried to paint the energy of an earthquake in active motion. It doesn't work with the series, but must have some value or I would have readily painted over it years ago.

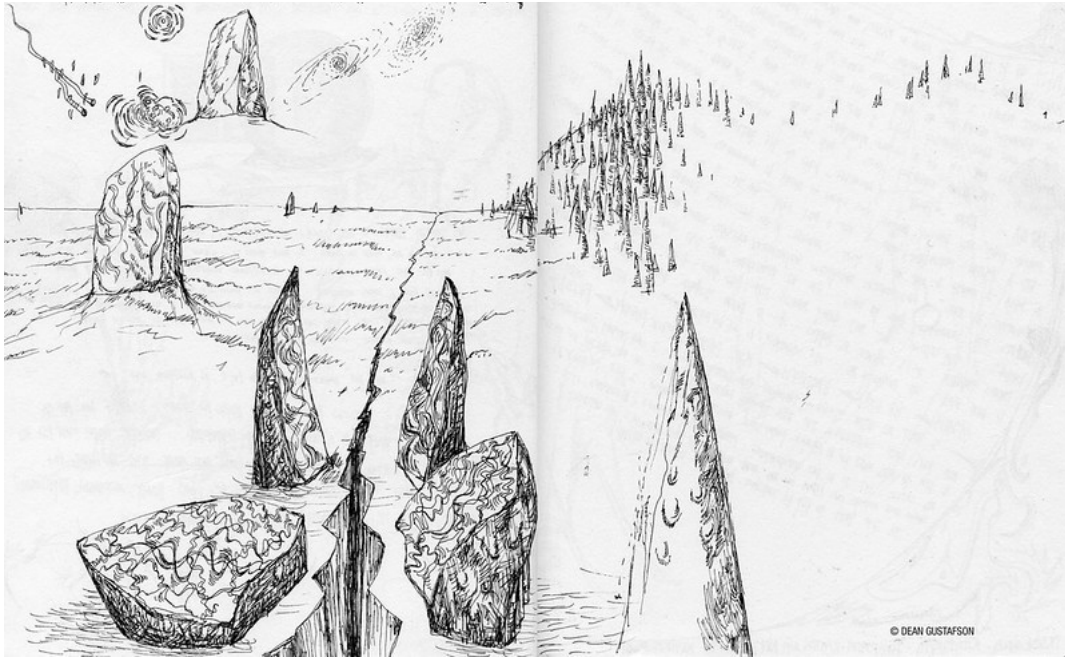
These were enjoyable to paint in my old Mission district room. For years I'd been accustomed to painting large. This was zooming way down to intricate scale, more like drawing.

Afterwards, it was refreshing to tote them all in my backpack, bicycling to the galleries they were shown at, instead of seeking ride help.

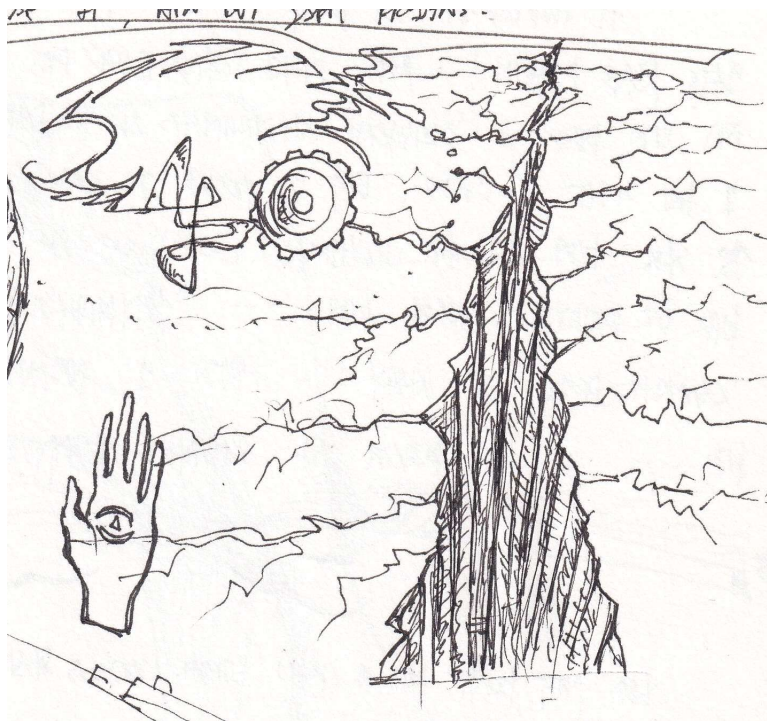
This series is owned by Kevin and Tara Evans, who have a wide variety of artworks in their hallowed collection.

- Dean Gustafson, June 2025





from the sketchbook, early '94



a sketchbook fragment, February '94