

Like Water Taught by Thirst



The Tubs, acrylic on stretched canvas. 16" by 20"

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Like Water Taught by Thirst

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Painting at the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island

by

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This book is dedicated to Seth, for always inspiring me and encouraging me to explore and discover. And to Dennis, for giving me a new found love of poetry.

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Acknowledgements

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I love you all.

Abstract

I am interested in the practice of painting as a way to deepen one's relationship with nature and its many ecosystems. To me, art not only illustrates these experiences of entanglement, but also is a realm for a sensorial engagement that surpasses representation. During my time at RISD, I have learned that painting can act as a generative tool, a therapeutic ritual, a release of energy, and a place to bridge connections to other facets of my life. It is through the conception, envelopment, and evolution of materials and their relationship to an anthropocentric society that I continue to investigate instances of self-reflection, the embedment of matter, and the inherent subjectivity that comes along with being a visual storyteller. I am curious about the parallel relationships of artistic practice to the cultivation of soil and domesticity within the modern world, and how working to create a form of sustainability for myself has become an act of resistance. Through observation, self-reflection, and embodied entanglement, this thesis will consist of essays accompanied by poems, diagrams, and journal entries that interweave my painting practice, my interests outside the studio, and the research informing my work, with an emphasis on the process of painting and a look at kaleidoscopic vision.

An Introduction to Observation

If there is magic on the planet it is contained in water.

Loren Eiseley

Born and raised in the southwest corner of Missouri, I grew up playing outside and exploring the many caves, rivers, and lakes found all over the Ozark Mountains. My mother described me as a water child, picking up swimming at a young age like it was second nature. I always knew there was something special about water; an instinctual pull tethered me to it. Reflecting back on my childhood, my intuition has always known that water is the creator of all connections and the foundation of life. My reflexive wish to be near water is rooted in the realization that rivers and streams exist around us and within us, creating complex systems of blood, urine, saliva, sweat, and tears that allow us to move fluidly throughout our days without much thought. I constantly find myself paying homage to water, thanking it for keeping me calm and quenching my thirst; for purifying toxins and raining down when death is on my garden's doorstep. I longed to travel and explore different types of water phenomena, dreaming about the day I would see the ocean for the first time.



Routine Laps, acrylic on canvas, 48" by 60", 2020

While living in Kansas City during my mid 20s, I would spend my lunch breaks between jobs sitting by the Blue River. A tributary to the Missouri River, the Little Blue starts off as the Wolf Creek and Brush Creek, running northeast to eventually merge into the Missouri. The Blue River is situated just outside of the KC metropolitan area, making it a prime space for fishing and canoeing, while also inviting residual waste and toxic runoff as a result of its proximity to the city. It is home to a large range of native fish including catfish, carp, largemouth bass, and green sunfish. The river is often a greenish hue, becoming brown and muddied at deep points, and trickling off to a clear stream in the cracks and crevices of the riverbank. This body of water meanders for 40 miles, at moments becoming thin, looping around corners then widening and deepening into pools of seemingly still water. (Fig. 1)



(Fig. 1) View of the Blue River from atop of the river bank, Minor Park, Kansas City, MO

During these escapes to the river, I began to paint my surroundings in plein air, often working fast to record what I was seeing in one or two sittings. Watercolor and gouache lend themselves to the pace and impromptu nature of that work, while also speaking to the sensibility of the natural surroundings (Fig. 2). My time spent on the Ole Blue became meditative, ritualistic, and self-reflective. It was then that I began to question my role as an artist, a landscape painter, a feminist, an eco-activist, and a Missourian. The moving river's reflection became my focal point, entrancing me with its ever-changing light and form. The shimmer was captivating; I loved how I felt like I could never truly capture what I was looking at. As Claude Monet put it, referring to his own plein air painting practice, "these landscapes of water and reflection are an obsession."¹



(Fig. 2) *Tangled Tire*, gouache on watercolor paper, 10" by 12", 2017

¹ Henri Neuendorf. "9 Brilliant Quotes by Claude Monet on His Birthday." Artnet News. Artnet News, November 14, 2016. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/quotes-claude-monet-birthday-747290>.



Love My New Polarized Prescription Sunglasses!, acrylic on camo canvas, 32" by 44", 2020

Reflection

Water is taught by thirst;

Land, by the oceans passed;

Transport, by throe;

Peace, by its battles told;

Love, by memorial mould;

Birds, by the snow.

— Emily Dickinson²

My obsession was evident; I was constantly thinking about when my next visit to the river would be. Painting became a record of change, documenting variations in light, weather, movement, and time. Watercolor acted as the essence builder: allowing color to flow and bleed, creating a slippery ground for the painting, simultaneously encapsulating movement, intuition, and form. Gouache was a shift in seeing. Through its opaque qualities it became the world builder, layering color on top of color, mark on top of mark, matter on top of matter. I felt an urgency to not only depict what was around me but to sculpt the landscape through paint. For me, it only made sense to capture *everything* in front of me, understanding the weight of every uprooted rock or fallen twig to the best of my ability. Restricting myself to working exclusively from observation, this hyper focus on details became layered recordings of the ever-changing conditions. The cumulative effect of painting what I saw over numerous sittings began to create permutations within the paintings. Color and light exist in different times simultaneously while matter piles up upon itself. Bodies of water possess a life of their own, evolving in ways that seem contradictory to their depicted surroundings.

² Emily Dickinson and Martha Dickinson Bianchi. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson: with an Introduction*. Little, Brown and Company, 1927. p 63.



A Puddle Next to a Pond, acrylic, sand, and plaster on canvas, 16" by 20", 2021

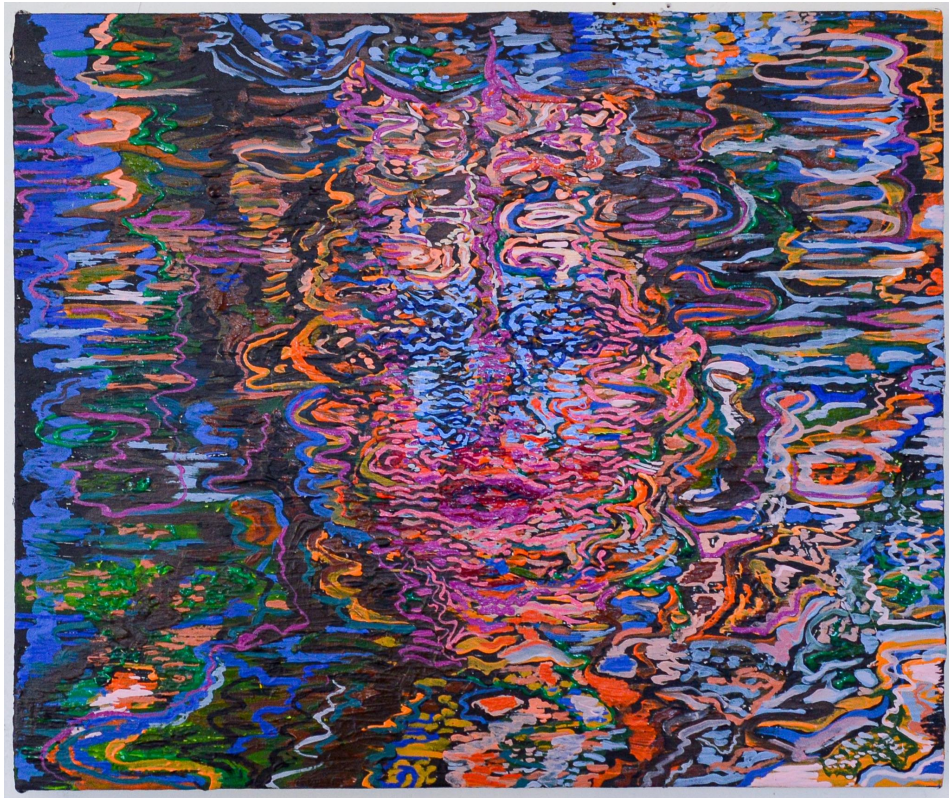
Observation being the foundation to all of my paintings, I became less interested in creating a completed, full landscape, containing all the conventions of ground and scale. Instead, I wanted to focus on the different ecosystems and environments contained in my field of vision. In this desire for time to slow down and to capture everything that I could see, paintings from observation began to envelop themselves, revealing worlds within worlds that have their own rhythms and movement. I began to focus less on looking and more on seeing, less on intellectualizing and more on purely observing, meditating with the experience. Paint became more a (means of) conversing with my environment, leading me from one subject to the next. Although I was observing, space around me began to vibrate, making truth stranger than fiction. While I was inventing through materials, it would always be in service of the truth as I perceived it.

Over time, reflection quickly led to projection, a desire to manipulate the enchanted waters to reveal a more internal palette and personal narrative. In *If Dorothy Was From Missouri*, I began to fuse the mirroring water I often depicted with scenes from one of my favorite films, *The Wizard Of Oz*³. Thinking back to my landlocked upbringing, I related to Dorothy and her dreams of finding a vibrant, more colorful place (Fig. 3). By using an array of acrylic hues just short of the rainbow, I created a close-up perspective of moving water cropped by the edges of the canvas to indicate no land in sight. Within the waving water, a female figure emerges in the center of the canvas. While she resembles Dorothy when she is wishing to return home at the end of the film, I also imagine the girl as myself, often daydreaming about living on a beach somewhere. I cannot help but find it ironic that I now live in the Ocean state of Rhode Island and am surrounded by water, and the place I long to be the most is back in Missouri (Fig. 4).

³ Victor Fleming, director. *The Wizard of Oz*. MGM/UA, 1938.



(Fig. 3) Wizard of Oz, 1938



(Fig. 4) *If Dorothy Was From Missouri*, acrylic on canvas, 18" by 24", 2020

Entanglement

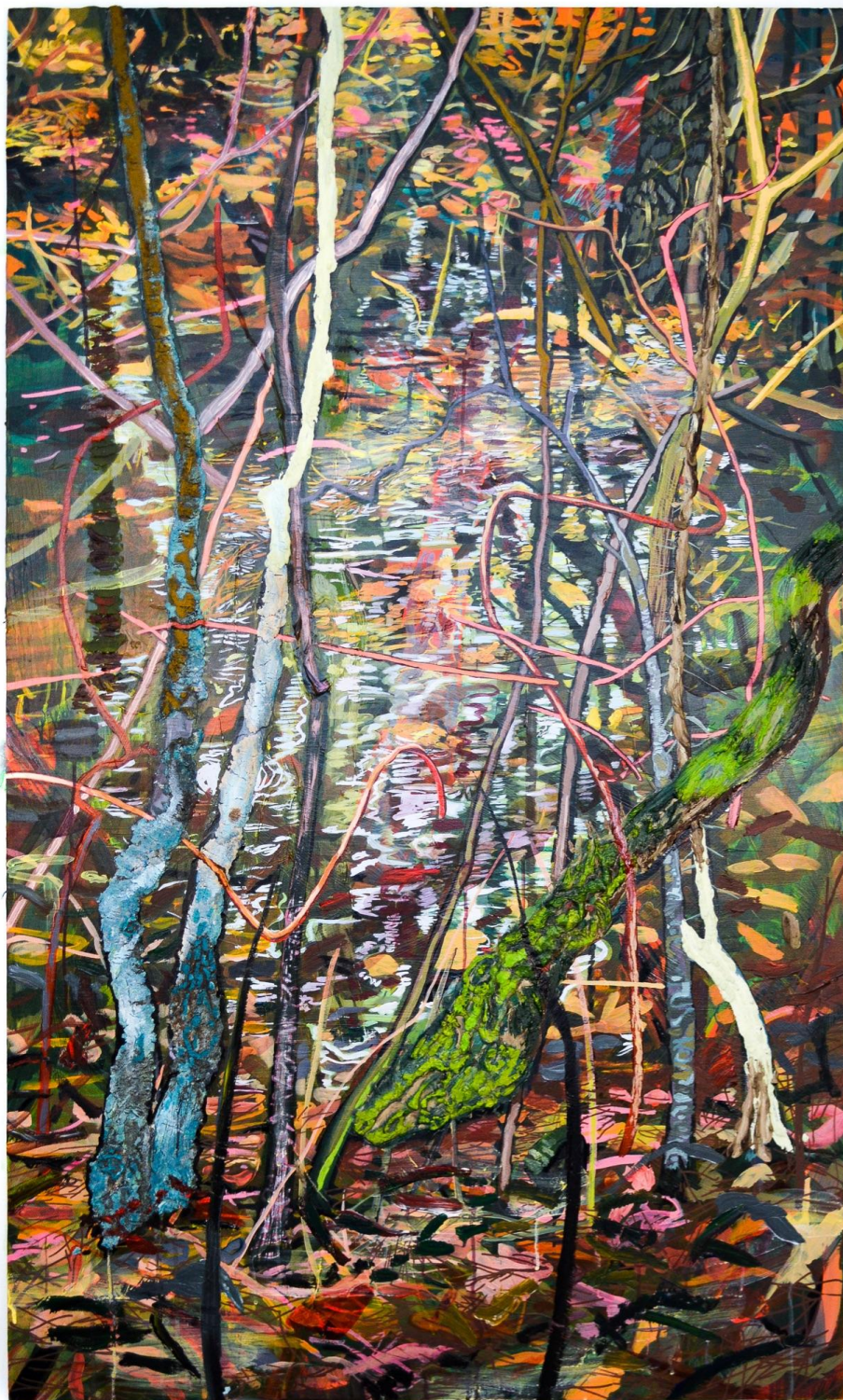
“To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not preexist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating. Which is not to say that emergence happens once and for all, as an event or as a process that takes place according to some external measure of space and of time, but rather that time and space, like matter and meaning, come into existence, are iteratively reconfigured through each intra-action, thereby making it impossible to differentiate in any absolute sense between creation and renewal, beginning and returning, continuity and discontinuity, here and there, past and future.”
— Karen Barad⁴

My time on the Blue River was not only an investigation of water, but also a study of the condition(s) surrounding it. On my ventures, I picked up trash as I walked, leading me to heavily polluted areas of the watershed. It was important for me to record exactly what I saw in my gouache and watercolor plein air. I loved its ugly beauty, revealing matter upon matter, embedded plastics and metals woven into the sprawling root systems webbing together the riverbed. I spent hours watching resilient insects and small wildlife foraging for the resources around them, inventively incorporating garbage and waste into their everyday nests and shelters. I also observed great drama and catastrophe in the woods: aftermaths from summer floods that left the surrounding waterbeds ripped apart, or tarps tangled in trees 20 feet above the ground. The environment was forever changing. No element was left unaltered.

However damaging the water's wrath may have been, life continues onward, flowing and growing, vines and limbs crawling towards the sunlight. In Adrienne Brown's *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, she states, “matter doesn't disappear, it transforms. Energy is the same way. The Earth is layer upon layer of all that has existed, remembered by the dirt.”⁵

⁴ Barad, Karen Michelle. *Meeting the Universe Halfway Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Duke University Press, 2007. Preface and Acknowledgments p. 1.

⁵ Brown, Adrienne Maree. *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. AK Press, 2017. p. 49.



Between Two Roads, acrylic, sand, and plaster on panel. 2021

It was from the time I spent on the Blue River that I began to understand myself as an active participant in its ecosystem. Whether through removing trash, contributing to noise and light pollution, or affecting native wildlife with my presence, I became a part of the watershed, both when I was physically there and when I was not. This concept of entanglement, elaborated on from Karen Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*⁶, is how I have begun to understand my art-making practice, my perception of the matter around me, and my role as a human on this planet. Barad's concept of creation and renewal and how it is impossible to differentiate the creation of something from its returning, my journey with painting follows the same rhythmic cycle that has neither a beginning nor an end but a continuous loop connecting stillness, observation, contemplation, and gesture to then come back again. Although there may be different lengths of time and pauses between each act, every measure is integral to the process. In Donna Haraway's book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, she remarks, "Our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent responses to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places."⁷ I believe in these acts of involvement. I intend to respond to the world around me as I see it, however troubled and terrifying that may be. I aim to contribute to the preservation of quiet places without having the need to claim space.

⁶ Karen Barad. *Meeting the Universe Halfway Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Duke University Press, 2007, p 1.

⁷ Donna Haraway. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016. p 1.



Drainhole, acrylic, plaster, and salt on panel, 14" by 18", 2021

The subject of composting has recently become a complex theme in my work, reflecting my desire to dissolve anthropocentric ideas, reestablish interdependence with other life forms and organisms, and acknowledge the role feminism plays in the decolonization of society today. These underpinnings move me back and forth in time, thinking about the origins of agriculture, my personal desire for autonomy from patriarchal structures, and the realization that I will never be fully removed from capitalism no matter how much I grow my own vegetables or filter my water. This reconciliation of my desires with reality has begun to define the way I move through the studio and through the paintings. Paint scraps, peels, and pours work their way into highly rendered landscapes as ways of creating “reality checks” for myself, as a reminder for me to check my perspective, my level of engagement, and my privilege to work in the way that I do.

Working in acrylic paint has created a tumultuous relationship between the surface and subject. Its fast-drying abilities allow me to move through a train of thought rapidly, allowing me to create layers quickly in an effort to objectify the surface in service of diligent observation and representation. The embedding of found objects and natural materials is another way in which I reuse, in an attempt to complicate the homogenizing nature of acrylic paint. Textures of rice, sand, twigs, and plastics create a contrast to the representation depicted within the paintings. I question why I desire to paint trash versus having the real thing in front of me. I am interested in both, and the conversation that they have with each other as a way of relating to human’s desire to rearticulate, restage, and redefine their role on this planet. In *Hot Compost* (Fig. 5), the layering of thick, chunky paint, spilled action lines, palette scrapings, and direct application of dried plants and found plastics are embedded together, creating a material metaphor that relates to all the components, however contradictory, that come together to establish my identity as an artist. Like the animals at the Blue River repurposing these found materials, I recycle paint peels, paper scraps, and found plastics, whether it be for their color, texture, resemblance, and juxtaposition to the depicted world within the painting.



(Fig. 5) *Hot Compost*, acrylic, and paper on unstretched canvas, 96" by 112", 2021

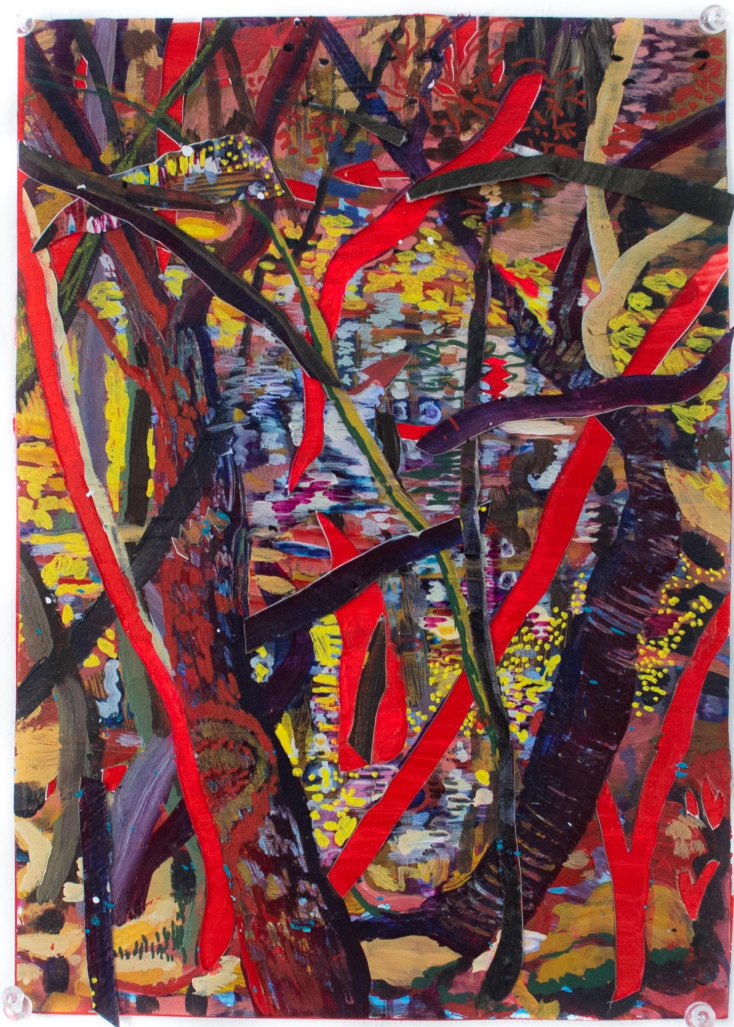


Seth's Scraps, acrylic on paper, 9" by 11", 2021



Wellness Pile, acrylic on canvas, 16" by 20", 2021

In other works, the reading of a metaphor does not come quite as literal, but invites speculation and discovery through the direct and indirect emphasis on the act of looking. Focusing on the woven foliage restricted to the outskirts of civilization, I investigate the ramifications of societal waste and the construction of the idea of *wilderness*. Working within shifting vernaculars, I use many different sources of native plant information from both the midwest and the northeast to create hybridized landscapes, containing qualities of all different types of bark, leaves, native plants and wildlife. These trees become tangled together within the picture plane, complicating space, snaking together the foreground, middle-ground, and background. Space collapses while tree limbs slip and slide around, moving the viewer's eye from one corner of the painting to the next.



Wetlands, acrylic and collaged paper on paper, 9" by 11", 2021

In *If Spring Will Ever Come*, architecture and domestic space add to the intricacy of the painting, introducing reflection on glass, shadows, and artificial light sources to the already expansive vista (Fig. 6). The gloss of the acrylic sits in contrast to a matte Flashe vinyl paint, creating an instance where the plasticity of the material cannot be ignored. In contrast, matte paint mixed with salt and plaster is used within the contained windows to compose a wooded landscape covered in snow, absorbing the sun's warm light to expose the frozen blue conditions of the forest floor. It is in this relationship between warm and cool, light and dark, hard and soft, that my use of acrylic paint entangles the viewer in a space of *in-betweenness*.



(Fig. 6) *If Spring Will Ever Come*, acrylic and spackle on panel, 36" by 48", 2021

The Kaleidoscopic Landscape

“To describe an event or phenomenon as kaleidoscopic evoked a sense of perpetual transformation, in contrast to the spectator stasis and visual mastery suggested by contemporary popular sensation such as the panorama.” – Helen Groth⁸

The kaleidoscope, a popular children's toy invented in the early 19th century by Sir David Brewster, is a revolutionary object that is thought to have brought about a new experience of seeing the world. This toy is often a small tube that when looked through and rotated in either direction, glass beads at the other end of the tunnel distort what is being seen to create radiated patterns of the atmosphere around the viewer. In *Kaleidoscopic Vision and Literary Invention in an “Age of Things”*, Helen Groth argues that the kaleidoscope generated different cultural sensations, revealing the existential flux of modern society. Similarly, I remember feeling existentially challenged when first experiencing this phenomenon as a child. I would lie in the grass, looking upwards with my focus, using the Kaleidoscope to turn the leaves above me into mesmerizing fractals with every verdant shade imagined.

⁸ Helen Groth. "Kaleidoscopic Vision and Literary Invention in an "Age of Things": David Brewster, Don Juan, and "A Lady's Kaleidoscope"." *ELH* 74, no. 1 (2007): p. 217.



Judgemental Swan, acrylic on stretched canvas, 33" by 33", 2020

I recall this memory a few years back, as I was enjoying a spring afternoon with a few friends in Kansas City's Loose Park. We had just eaten some psilocybin mushrooms an hour or so earlier, so we wanted to define a starting point for our trip. I waited anxiously for a shift to take place in my consciousness. I quickly became distracted from conversation, looking down at the layered grass and finding bugs to observe. Before I knew it, my mind was trailing off to other planets, imagining myself as a tiny nymph exploring the vast terrain of the untamed grass. It all became too much; a feeling of heaviness came with the existential questions that were surfacing in my mind. I laid back to rest my body, when suddenly everything was moving above me. I felt unstable and secure all at the same time while clouds seemed to swirl as if they were driven by my breath instead of wind. Birds zipped and swooped in synchronous motions, and the trees were vibrating with colorful fractals.

I made many drawings that day, mostly unintelligible and half articulated, but what they had in common was this need to record my experience of the microscopic that was contained in these macro observations of trees, grass, and water. I wanted to have both at the same time, for one not to undermine the other, and for the indexical mark to capture the movement of time within the stacking and layering of elements. Much like looking through a kaleidoscope, my hand and eyes were working together in a way I had never experienced before. While looking outward into the world around me, my state of seeing was being altered from inside my body, it was dreamlike, unnerving, and engrossing all at the same time. My drawings revealed a blurring of boundaries taking place in my consciousness, allowing me to make connections and overlapped associations through observation that I had never been vulnerable enough to do before. This experience was paramount to a shift in my observational process by giving myself permission to wonder, play with the materials, and begin to allow color to define form through bleeding and puddling together.



India Point Park, acrylic on panel, 20" by 26", 2021

Life took a huge shift for me in the late summer of 2019. I packed up my belongings and said goodbye to my loved ones as I embarked on a cross country move to attend the Rhode Island School of Design's graduate painting program. Beginning in Kansas City, I led a two-car caravan with three of my closest friends, stopping in Cincinnati along the way. During this two-day voyage, I witnessed the landscape transform in real time. The hilly Missouri countryside slowly turned into Illinois' flat cornfields, which eventually gave way to the overgrown creeks of southern Ohio, and so on. By the time we left Virginia's rolling hills and entered the smoky mountains, we were fully in awe of the spectacle we were witnessing. A subtle change in the air from a dry and dusty to a salty sweet overcame my senses once we entered the Northeast, reminding me that my whole vernacular was about to change.

Not only did the conditions around me change, I could feel my senses becoming attuned to the differences I was experiencing. Transformation was happening, both around me and within me. My memories of this drive are vibrant and pronounced, yet hazy and dream-like. I recall feeling at a loss of words, focusing on the new vegetation and landscape whizzing by the car window as a grounding tool for the chaos I was experiencing. During this time, I began to reimagine the landscape as I knew it while questioning the traditional conventions of landscape painting. All around me, nature was being framed by the car windows, my sunglasses, phone camera, in between arches and bridges, and on postcards at local gas stations along the way. I observed the condensing of the landscapes around me, time and movement becoming the gestural marks holding the different experiences together in my mind. Although I did not actively paint during this driving trip from 2019, these memories continue to persist in my studio today as generative source material and new ways of seeing.



Thickets and Briars, acrylic, millet, sawdust, and sand on curved panel, 37" by 68"

Whether through child's play, psychedelically-altered experiences, or raw and sober perceptions, I have been encountering kaleidoscopic sensations my whole life. Time, enveloping while also lateralizing, begins to overlap, changing through the unpacking of memories, helping manifest needs and desires for the future. During my time here at RISD, my art has begun to fold in on itself, not only representing nature's abundance but also creating a process that simulates the act of layering, growth, and decay. By using both reflection and entanglement, my paintings reminisce on past memories, recall their sensorial affects, and synthesize a space of layered complexities that I observe in everyday life.

Developing on the condensation of time and space, I began to use recycled materials such as hair, paint peels, sawdust, and coffee grounds to submerge in paint, creating diverse surface areas that bring into question the history of representation and the objectivity of painting. These ready-made materials bring into question both positive and negative relationships painting has with nature, pointing out a playfulness and experimentation while heightening the unnatural qualities of acrylic paint. These contradictions of tenderness, sweetness, labor, and irreverent undoing point to my main conceptual underpinnings of uncertainty, adaptation, and the strive for change in this world without a necessary, concrete solution.



Looking for Tadpoles, acrylic, millet, rice, coffee grounds, hair, egg, and plaster, 12" by 16",
2021

Notes on Color- Extended Observation

The study and application of color has become a primary means for distortion and manipulation within my work, acting as a way to digest and regurgitate memories. Whether it be an altered-state or a cross-country new experience, my hyper-vigilance towards color has spear-headed my intuitive mark making, creating instances of optical mixing. For a long time, my color choice felt like it was purely a result of observation, but over the years of painting en plein air, the vibrancy of color related much more to the intensity of the experience overtime opposed to the color I was actually seeing. At times, my work tends to reveal a type of internal palette, often represented through the tension and vibrancy centered around the compliments of red and green, red symbolizing the internal self, flesh and blood, and my emotional projections. In contrast, green refers to my external self, everything that goes in me and through me, containing all forms of vegetation.

In the studio, color begins to intensify through the material processes of sculpturally building up the picture plane, adding and subtracting through modes of carving, pouring, scraping, and peeling. The lack of control in such visceral approaches remove a sense of control, allowing the color of the materials to build relationships with one another. In works such as *First Crop* (Fig. 7), the plein air practice merges with medium experimentation by fusing aspects of representation with the scale of the materials. Embedded grass, rice, sawdust, and mud are planted within the painting while shades of blue, pink, and yellow weave the textures together while creating an illusion of a reflected silhouette where water meets land. Color is a means of making the painting sensational, stimulating a desire to reexamine and investigate the original source of where the observing took place. It is through these relationships of applied color and tonal color that create a kind of reflected embodiment, moving the viewer through time and space, inside and outside, through observation and touch, that entangle together to create these kaleidoscopic landscapes.



(Fig. 7) *First Crop*, acrylic, sawdust, and joint compound on stretched canvas, 16" by 22", 2020

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