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Plein Air Painting in an Anthropocentric Era
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Departmental Honors Thesis
The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
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“I learned to notice the ray of sunlight that was then pouring through a chink in the roof, illuminating a column of drifting dust, and to realize that that column of light was indeed a power, influencing the air currents by its warmth, and indeed influencing the whole mood of the room; although I had not consciously seen it before, it had already been structuring my experience.” David Abram, *Spell of the Sensuous*

"The artist must conform to this perfect work of art. Everything comes to us from nature; we exist through it; nothing else is worth remembering." Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Cézanne's Doubt*

Forward

This thesis project was sparked by a slow realization that things that once appeared common in the natural world were actually really strange. I noticed indicators of human manipulation like the amount of trail markers on trees, landscape repair on hiking trails, and trees that were cut down the middle because they obstructed a pathway. It caused me to think about the way that we construct nature around us and how it may contribute to some sort of collective consciousness that is responsible for the Anthropocene. I didn't start noticing these things until I took my first philosophy class based in aesthetics. This class caused me to look at things around me in a much more interrogative way-- rather than just trusting the way constructs appeared to me, I dug into them and tried to figure out why they appeared in that way and what that was doing. I am not a philosophy student nor am I equipped to write a conventional scholarly paper revolving around philosophy, but its teachings began fueling my studio practice and changing my mode of thinking. A studio art practice is interdisciplinary and the formulation of this project evolved in ways I never intended. That's the beauty of an interdisciplinary practice, there are so many factors at work in the process of creating something.

This paper is a mix of anecdotal passages about my experiences as a plein air painter (shown in italics) coupled with research that allows me to unpack and interrogate what this mode of making means during an Anthropocentric era. I think of it as an extension of my work rather than a justification or explanation of it. In it, I talk about the ways our perception of the natural may be telling of why we've exploited the environment in the first place, how painting-- specifically plein air painting--can show us something about these perceptions and be used as tool to reshape them in an era of environmental decline.

I got to Signal Mountain on a cold morning and groaned because they still had the gate closed, which meant I would have to jump it and carry all of my painting supplies through the large parking lot and over to where I was going to set up for the day. I reached my destination overlooking the mountain and for a moment was disappointed because it was foggier than I anticipated, which meant there was not as much obvious, vivid color in the landscape. I caught myself feeling this way and it sparked guilt inside of me in a way I had not felt before. Why did I feel like the landscape owed me something? Why did I act as if it existed only for my own want as a painter to capture it in some particular way? Why did I have a preconceived idea of how it should look, when it is constantly changing and evolving, just like I am?

Painting the landscape has been a part of my studio practice for some time now, but it did not occur to me when I first started doing it that it had political bearing. I realized I cannot make paintings of the landscape without the knowledge that due to the acts of humans we are in a period of unprecedented environmental change that is leading to a new epoch—that of the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene is defined by the negative physical impact humans have had on the environment and by how these impacts will be observable for millions of years into the future.¹ The amount of physical destruction that has occurred due to our exploitation is a significant indicator of this era, but another less obvious one is the creation of modified spaces that challenge the definition of what the natural world really is. Using art to spark conversations about and bring to the surface problems of the Anthropocene is effective in advocating a healthier environment, but we can also look back at modes of representing the landscape that are rooted in a problematic view of the natural world.

¹ Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin, “Defining the Anthropocene,” *Nature* 519 (2015): 171.

The practice of the academic landscape painters (like artists of the Hudson River Valley School) is formulaic and grounded in an objective understanding of the world. In academic plein air painting (translated to ‘open air painting’ or painting directly in the landscape) artists only focus on the outer horizons of their subjects. They follow Cartesian ideologies which suggest that we cannot directly know the world based on innate ideas, the analyzation of those ideas is the only way we can gain knowledge about our surroundings. They do not believe the sensations or inner workings of the natural world were worth pursuing in their paintings. Instead, they pay attention only on the physical matter in front of them. Academic critic René Ménéard writes, “art does not rest in the [craftsman's] tool, but in the thought that directs it” and, “any technical manipulation might work if applied intelligently.”² The academic painters focused heavily on techniques to “master” perspective and color and boil the natural world down to something they could measure. Their restricted use of mathematics and formulas to recreate the natural world ultimately perpetuates an objectified view of the landscape.³

I brought a pencil along. It made me comfortable to have a pencil to measure angles and give myself structure for the initial composition of the painting. I thought it guaranteed my satisfaction of the painting at the end. As I was doing this, I realized I was painting in the way one would in a paint-by-number. I was just filling in blueprints and using the paint as a medium to give the landscape body. I wasn't trusting that the union between the landscape, my eyes, and the paintbrush would do what I wanted it to do.

² Richard Shiff, *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism*, (The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 90.

³ *Ibid.*, pp 88.

Academic landscape painters also used this method of capturing the composition of the landscape before beginning to paint it. They utilized two traditional forms of perspective to make the depth within the landscape 'accurate': linear and aerial. The first thing linear perspective entails is the use of parallel lines that slowly begin to converge to create a sense of depth. This technique is used when there is a path way, a river or any form that recedes into the distance. It also suggests that as things recede into the background, they become smaller. You can see both aspects of linear perspective being used in this painting by Samuel Lancaster Gerry:



Samuel Lancaster Gerry, *Mount Chocorua*, oil on canvas, 1849

Aerial perspective or atmospheric perspective is the other technique used in academic landscape painting. It involves the idea that as things recede into the distance, they become lighter in value and less detailed. It defines the way something in the background is rendered. In

this painting by Thomas Cole, you can tell the mountain in the back is much smaller, less detailed, and lighter in tone than the one pictured in the front:



Thomas Cole, Landscape scene from *The Last of the Mohicans*, 1827, oil on canvas (left- original, right-rendering)

This mode of painting does not capture the artist's true perception of what was in front of them. As philosopher Merleau-Ponty points out, perspective varies according to the person and using a predetermined formula for perspective "presuppose[s] that [the painter] recognize[s] the true size of the object, quite different from that which appears to [them] from the point at which [they are] standing."⁴ In reality "objects we see close at hand appear smaller, those far away seem larger than they do in a photograph."⁵ In addition, in some cases some elements that make up the background are lighter in value and less detailed but the appearance changes depending on the time of day and the person perceiving the landscape. Through analysis and conjecture the academic landscape painters depict the landscape in a way that is not true to their own perceptions.⁶ This application of perspective not only suggests there is a way to measure our own true perceptions, it creates a sense of differentiation between elements. Director of Fine Arts and

⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt," *Sense and Nonsense* (Nagel, 1966), 24.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Primacy of Perception," *The Primacy of Perception* edited by James E. Edie (Northwestern University Press, 1964), 14.

author Charles Blanc writes that “all parts of the composition must be rendered intelligibly distinct from one another and ordered hierarchically according to some principle,” that principle being perspective.⁷ This differentiation treats certain elements as more important than others, creating a hierarchy within nature itself. It ultimately reflects the way that the academic landscape painters treat the natural world as a measurable object that they are in charge of assigning value to.

As I mentioned earlier, aerial perspective entails painting elements that recede into the background using a paler tone. This mediation of the colors is a technique that academic landscape painters use throughout their paintings as a whole. Author Richard Shiff writes on painter Couture that he “seem[ed] rigorously scientific on the law of mixing colors.”⁸ The academic painters represent “phenomena [within the painting]...not illusionistically, but almost symbolically, by a space organized into three zones...”⁹ These zones that he talks about are the foreground, middle ground and background. Breaking up the picture plane into zones labels the amount of distance between the painter and subject being represented; the foreground is what would be closer to the viewer and background is furthest away. The foreground is darker and contains mostly browns, the middle ground is a midtone and contains lots of greens and the background (as I talked about in the passage about aerial perspective) is light in value and contains blues. This mode of breaking down the picture plane and using this same formula for all depictions of the landscape denies the nuance of the color and tone that actually takes place in the landscape. The light within nature changes depending on the time, season and location. The

⁷ Shiff, *End of Impressionism*, 83.

⁸ Ibid., pp 81.

⁹ Melanie Giffard, “Style and Technique in Dutch Landscape Painting in the 1620s,” *Historical Painting Techniques, Materials, and Studio Practices* (J. Paul Getty Trust, 1995), 140.

academic landscape painters do not acknowledge that the natural world contains a multitude of tones and colors that vary and are spontaneous and unique to each space.

These methods are not only telling of the painter's tendency to objectify nature and think of it in terms of mathematics, they are also telling of their motivations behind painting. The academic landscape painters "tampered with nature to bring forth its ideal beauty,"¹⁰ this use of specific techniques by the academic landscape painters gave them security that they would create an 'accurate' representation of nature and permission to render the natural world in a way that fits their standards. Theorist Auguste Comte writes that academic landscape paintings are "always an ideal representation of what exists, destined to cultivate our instinct for perfection."¹¹ They used these formulas to paint what they thought nature *should* be rather than how it presented itself to them; because they thought of it as an object, they felt as if they could turn it into whatever they wanted it to be. The process of perceiving the environment as these specific landscape painters were truly seeing it was not important to them, representing their set-in-stone conceptions of an idealized nature was their priority.

An idealization of the natural world can be seen in the way these artists paint light; they used a technique called 'chiaroscuro' which refers to the lightness and darkness or the value within a painting. The academic landscape painters believed light should come from one source to make the ambiance within the landscape more dramatic. They followed the idea that "the picture tableau should present neither two bright areas of equal intensity, nor two dark areas of equal strength ... there should be one principal bright area and one dominant dark area," which creates a stark contrast in value and a strong presence of light. Many times, the academic landscape painters would paint *en plein air* and then take the painting back to the studio to

¹⁰ Shiff, *End of Impressionism*, 90.

¹¹ Ibid., pp 24.

emphasize and manipulate the value in the painting. This allowed their own fantasies of the landscape to govern the completion of the painting. Ultimately, they “made their own light, they did not find it;”¹² they took their knowledge of representing light sources within an enclosed space and applied that to their landscape paintings.



Asher Durand, *An Old Man's Reminiscences*, 1845, oil on canvas

In this painting by Asher Durand, the foreground is incredibly dark, a characteristic of many of the Hudson River Valley painter's depictions of the landscape. This is not what actually happens in the landscape, light bounces off many surfaces is constantly changing. For example, light that hits off of a smooth surface creates more direct beams of light and light that reflects off of a rough surface causes light to scatter in multiple directions. In addition, sometimes what appears closer to the viewer is lighter (contradictory to what aerial perspective suggests). What is shown Durand's painting is a static, unchanging sense of light similar to what is captured in a photograph.

¹² Shiff, *End of Impressionism*, 83.

This idealism of the landscape gave the academic painters permission to see things in whatever way they wanted rather than fully acknowledging the way something actually appeared. Idealizing the subject moves away from engaging in an experience and instead replaces that experience with a manipulated version of it that prioritizes one's desires. In thinking of and painting an idealized representation of the natural world, the actual impact of the exploitation of the environment is overshadowed and certain expectations that the earth cannot meet are created.

Academic painter's depictions of landscape capture their idealized version of it and end up treating nature as something quantifiable. The academic painters took on more calculated methods of making that were not focused on any sort of advocacy for the environment and instead perpetuated an objectified view of the natural world. Many artists working today create conversations about and raise awareness of the negative impact of this manipulation of the environment in alternative constructive ways, though. For example, Jill Pelto uses hard data and measurement to create representations of the landscape based in a type of advocacy for the natural world. She is interested in the effects of climate change; the planet's average surface temperature has risen about 1.62 degrees Fahrenheit (0.9 degrees Celsius), which has caused droughts, the melting of icecaps, forest fires and a number of issues for the environment.¹³ Pelto's paintings are made from the ground up of hard data she has researched about this shift in temperature.

¹³ "Global Climate Change: Evidence," NASA Global Climate Change and Global Warming: Vital Signs of the Planet, March 6, 2019, <http://climate.nasa.gov/evidence/>.



Jill Pelto, *Increasing Forest Fire Activity*, 2015, watercolor

She spent a summer in Washington in 2015, while she never experienced a forest fire, she was overwhelmed by the status of the drought and painted this landscape based on her memory of Washington. Her process involves researching a specific issue (the points and shape of the tree tops are based off of a graph plotting the average global temperature) and she uses that data to represent the landscape, inviting viewers to think about forest fires and climate change in particular. She does not try to suggest that she can truly quantify the impact of this and instead takes the evidence of its occurrence to amplify the tragic reality of it.¹⁴

Rather than painting based on memory, imagination and information as Jill Pelto does, the academic landscape painters painted *en plein air*. David Hockney is a more recent artist that

¹⁴ Jill Pelto, "Increasing Forest Fire Activity," *Jill Pelto*, March, 2019, <http://www.jillpelto.com/increasing-forest-fire-activity>.

also paints in the landscape, but the way he paints is different than that of the academic landscape painters—he does not use strict technique or hard data to create these paintings.



David Hockney, *Winter Tunnel With Snow*, 2006, oil on canvas

There is not some sort of obvious political statement present in Hockney's paintings but that does not mean that they are incapable of shedding light on issues revolving around the Anthropocene. Through the way he handles paint, the colors he uses and the other various decisions made in painting he shows us his own perception of what is in front of him and allows us to conjure ideas about how he may view nature and about his own relationship with the natural world. This is how plein air painting differs from creating representations of landscapes from photos, memory or imagination. It is more telling of the relationship we have with the natural world when we are directly immersed. Plein air painting opens up room to explore the possibilities behind how one's perception of the environment may be perpetuating this state or alternatively advocating a healthier state. It does not require set data to create, but instead engaging in an experience of allowing the outside world to manifest itself in a painting.

Plein air painting can be a phenomenological practice for the way it involves the act of perceiving. Perception is commonly understood as seeing something, or for something to enter one's vision. This idea seems easy enough to understand but the word is often misconstrued. In *The Primacy of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty claims that the sciences assume the perceived world is a sum of objects and that our relation to the world is one "of a thinker to an object of thought."¹⁵ Individuals who think in this way do not meditate on their perceptions, data is taken from their initial observations of the subject to create some sort of quantification of what the thing being perceived is. In this situation, it is forgotten that perception is actually "in action" and takes place as an experience rather than the result of explicitly knowing something.¹⁶ To perceive does not mean to make instantaneous judgements about something, it is acknowledging the essence of one's surroundings. Perception does not have to lead to some 'absolute truth,' it involves investigating the way something appears to us free of any immediate judgements or calculations of that subject. Quickly dismissing the act of perceiving and believing all things must be rooted in intellect would mean that the world "has become an ideal existence and is the same for all of us."¹⁷ This dismissal would suggest that because we make judgements about something those things are inherently real and must define that thing and that all of our experiences are the same, both the various people perceiving the subject and the subject being perceived.

I mentioned earlier that through their use of perspective and formulaic color the academic landscape painters were not true to these perceptions and instead moved immediately to judgement and calculation. Painting does have the ability to get past this scientific mode of

¹⁵ Merleau-Ponty, "The Primacy of Perception," 4.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp 17.

thinking and capture one's perceptions, though: "...art, especially painting, draws upon this fabric of brute meaning which operationalism would prefer to ignore."¹⁸ Painters are capable of looking at things without feeling inclined to give them some sort of definition to understand them.

Instead, painters are able to focus solely on the way the subject reveals itself to them and can capture this in their paintings. They are able to suspend "habits of thought and reveal the base of inhuman nature upon which man has instilled himself."¹⁹ Painters can embrace the connection between mind, paintbrush and body to represent something that lies in front of them and allow it to come into being through time. A unique ability of painting is the way it can capture things that we do not see; Maurice Merleau-Ponty says that painting "evokes nothing, least of all the tactile." What it does is entirely different, almost the inverse; it gives visible existence to what the "profane vision believes to be invisible."²⁰ The power of painting does not lie in its ability to show us something that we already know, but in its ability to capture something that vision alone seems is unassuming--the things that exist in the space between things--the invisible.

While the academic landscape painters were more methodical in their approach towards plein air painting, Paul Cézanne painted in a more phenomenological way. Cézanne's paintings stay true to his perceptions and manage to capture 'the invisible.' He did not want his preconceived notions of beauty to fuel his paintings of landscapes, he wanted to capture "[nature's] true and essential radiance."²¹ To achieve this "true and essential radiance," Cézanne painted with an intentional forgetting or a dismissal of everything he had learned from academic painters. In 1905, Cézanne wrote to Emile Bernard that the natural world

¹⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," *The Continental Aesthetics Reader* edited by Clive Cazeaux (Routledge, 2011), 454.

¹⁹ Carolyn Quinn, *Perception and Painting in Merleau-Ponty's Thought* (Dublin University), 14.

²⁰ Merleau-Ponty: *ibid.*, pp 457.

²¹ Shiff, *End of Impressionism*, 15.

"falls before our eyes [and] gives us the picture ... [we must] give the image of what we see, forgetting all that has existed before us."²² In forgetting everything he knew to be, Cézanne could capture the process of perceiving and relearn about the world around him according to it rather than what he believed he knew of it. His paintings "exemplify the way in which we perceive our environment and pictorially describe or reflect on the way in which we perceive."²³

He recognized how our mind produces strangeness and mystery in the things that enter our vision and furthermore how our brain tries to put this together into something cohesive that we can recognize.

At a certain moment, I was painting and couldn't tell if something on the horizon line was another mountain or the clouds. I continued working, trying not to think too hard about what it was I was painting and just paint what was in front of me. Eventually, the clouds dissipated but it was after I already painted what was there.

When you think of a tree, a certain image comes to mind. Although it may be a different image of a tree that appears in each individual's mind, the people imagining it are still all recognizing it as the same thing—a tree, the word we have defined it by. This set idea of a tree dismisses the actual nuances that exist with specific tree. Each oak tree is unique to the other in its age, form, color, and even rate of growth. In the excerpt above, I experienced a moment of frustration not knowing if I was painting clouds or a mountain, but the uncertainty allowed me to capture the true colors and forms I saw sitting along the horizon. If I had known they were clouds, I probably would have made them fluffier, increased the number of brushstrokes, and used more titanium white paint. I know clouds to be fluffy and white, so not knowing helped me avoid painting my set conception of the cloud rather than my perception of them. Cézanne's way of painting gets past this tendency to think of things as we already know them because he puts

²² Shiff, *End of Impressionism*, 113.

²³ Jonathan Gilmore, *Between Philosophy and Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 293.

aside preconceived notions of what a thing is. In doing this, he is able to capture the natural elements as they truly appear to him through painting.

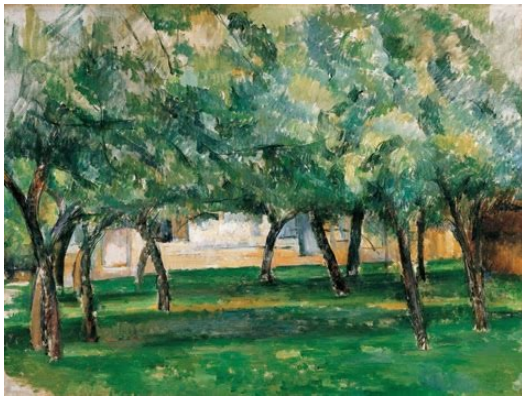
Another thing that makes Cézanne different from academic painters is the way he worked around the entire surface of the painting. As a painter there is sometimes a tendency to block out certain parts of a painting and focus on one area at a time rendering it fully before moving onto the next portion. This tendency causes a hierarchy between elements within the painting, if the painter gets wrapped up in a single portion of the mountain the possibility of neglecting the rest of the mountain increases. It also disregards the way elements within the landscape interact with one another and creates a separation between them. Cézanne paid attention to the entire surface throughout the whole painting session and did not give more attention to one part of the painting without recognizing how it interacted with the elements around it. Because he would place a brushstroke down in one area of the painting and then move onto a different area, he avoided a hierarchical composition that the academic painters valued.²⁴ Everything in Cézanne's painting came into being spontaneously and it was not until the very end that there was a recognizable landscape. Cézanne "portrayed how...the world has already and continues to come into being as a configured space of individuated contours."²⁵ We see things through shapes and forms that come together before we ascribe a name to them, the form of one element informs that of another. Each contour of the form is unique and responsible for giving those things their substance. This act of capturing something come into being slowly coming into being is an aspect of the invisible that painting can reveal.

The way Cézanne placed brushstrokes on the canvas also set him apart from the academic plein-air-painters. His strokes were "constructive strokes," which means intentionally placed

²⁴ Shiff, *End of Impressionism*, 115.

²⁵ Quinn, *Perception and Painting*, 14.

brushstrokes that worked in harmony to capture form. Cézanne placed each stroke on the canvas with purpose rather than tenuously blending colors together to perfectly represent his subject. Bernard writes that “Cézanne sometimes pondered hours at a time before putting down a certain stroke” and that he was concerned with them possessing “the air, the light, the object, the composition, the outline, and the style.”²⁶ These constructive strokes were placed slowly and deliberately, Cézanne thought heavily about where to place each one. This use of the constructive stroke negated the chance of Cézanne getting caught up in the tiny details in the painting; he did not try to make the stroke seem undetectable or manipulate brushstrokes to depict the forms he *wanted* to see as opposed to those he was actually seeing. You can see how his constructive strokes differed from the academic painters in the comparison below:



Cézanne, *Farm in Normandy*, 1882, oil on canvas



Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, *The Toutain Farm*, 1845, oil on canvas.

Cézanne (left) relied on contrasting brushwork rather than dark lines to “define the outlines of objects when their points of contact are tenuous and delicate.”²⁷ The trees in Cézanne’s painting show a cohesive form but there are areas where there is no paint and the

²⁶ Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt,” 24.

²⁷ Kelly Abdou, “Why Post-Impressionist Paul Cézanne is Known as the Father of Modern Art,” *My Modern Met*, May 11, 2018, <https://mymodernmet.com/paul-cézanne-paintings>.

indicators of his brush are still visible. Corot's trees (right) are dark and defined around the edges. They are completely filled in and rendered, the brushstrokes hidden and overlapped.

Cézanne understood the materiality of the paint and allowed it to capture elements within nature that color alone could not.²⁸ He did not use brushwork to control what he was painting, he used it to allow the natural world to come into being from the inside out.

Cézanne's use of color is also different from the formulaic approach of the academic landscape painters. Cézanne used graduated colors, or "a progression of chromatic nuances" that stayed true to the "object's form and to the light it receives."²⁹ He found connections between the colors within the natural world and looked deeply into the intricate colors working together to capture what was around him. Trees were not just green they also had yellows and blues that were found in the water below them. Rather than using color to imply depth in the foreground like the academic painters did, Cézanne captured actual nuances of the different colors within the landscape. In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty talks about how the real quality of color is not based off of the location of something or its iconic associations but instead is ingrained in what that object is, "the real color persists beneath appearances...not as a seen or thought of quality, but through a non- sensory presence."³⁰ When we look at a plant, we understand it to be green because that's the language we have ascribed to it. In reality, that green is made up of an intermingling of innumerable different colors and Cézanne captures these colors within colors, the colors that otherwise seem to be invisible.

In these examples we can see how Cézanne is seen phenomenologically, but they also reveal a perception of the environment that differs from how the academic landscape painters

²⁸ Abdou, "Post-Impressionist Paul Cézanne."

²⁹ Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt," 18.

³⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York and London: Routledge, 1945).

viewed nature; he treated the natural world as an animated, spontaneous thing that he could to learn from only after allowing it to reveal itself to him. He put aside any preconceived notion he had of the natural world and painted it as it appeared to him, “he realize[d] them as he [saw] them, by the same stroke of the brush”³¹ and stayed true to his perceptions. Cézanne’s use of color “appeared expressive, spontaneous” which ultimately represents the way color truly appears within nature. Cézanne avoided creating a sense of hierarchy in the landscape and through his method of working around the whole surface of the painting references the symbiosis that occurs between everything in his surroundings. Cézanne recognizes the innerworkings and harmony within the natural world and ultimately shows us that he believed the natural world to have life within it that is often ignored through his paintings. His paintings show us his seemingly distorted but honest perceptions of the natural world—in embracing these perceptions, he did not objectify or idealize the landscape. His way of painting exemplifies a new perspective of the natural world in which the human no longer has dominance over the natural and nature is no longer treated as an object.

Perception is “in action,” but further contemplation of these perceptions can help to reorient our relation to things around us. Merleau-Ponty writes that “without reflection life would probably dissipate itself in ignorance or itself in chaos.”³² The act of reflecting on a perception does not have to involve a level of intellect based in hard fact or in search of some explicit, absolute knowledge of the thing perceived. Instead, these reflections can help us understand our relations with other things and understand how we have created set conceptions of things in the first place. Cézanne was reflective in this way. He never wished to “paint like a savage,” he had gone through rigorous academic painting and knew of all of the techniques that the academic

³¹ Shiff, *End of Impressionism*, 123.

³² Merleau-Ponty, “The Primacy of Perception,” 35.

painters employed, but he would dismiss all habits of thought and then “through the sciences recapture the structure of the landscape as an emerging organism”³³

The way Cézanne embraced the act of perceiving and reflected on his perceptions shows his ties to ecophenomenology, an alternative view of the environmental decline interested in using perception to put us back in touch with the natural world. Becoming aware of and reflecting on our own perceptions of the world can be a useful tool in understanding the destruction we have caused the earth (and prevent further destruction) because “issues of the environment are unified through a crisis of perception.”³⁴ Ecophenomenology acknowledges the urgency we have to define issues of the environment and is more concerned with meditating on why they became issues in the first place. As I mentioned earlier, the sciences have a tendency to move past an experience to get to an end result. In *Eye and Mind*, Merleau-Ponty says that “science manipulates things and gives up living in them.”³⁵ Rooted in phenomenology, ecophenomenology is a step away from the scientific issues of the environment (climate change, pollution, exploitation of resources) and instead looks at the fundamental questions surrounding it. Ecophenomenology is a multi-layered discipline that I will only scratch the surface of in this paper, but ecophenomenology “concern[s] the being of nature, the being of humanity, and the relation between them.”³⁶ Through focusing on our perceptions we may be able to deepen our connection to the natural world to avoid exploiting it any further. This school of thought is not concerned with the physical issues that are impacting our environment negatively (that is not to say that scientific thinking is irrelevant or lacking constructive intent) because there is a deeper problem integrated into the fabric of society that needs to change. Naturalist John Livingston

³³ Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt,” 20.

³⁴ Fritjof. *The Web of Life* (Anchor, 1996), 4.

³⁵ Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 453.

³⁶ Ted Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature* (Evanston, 2009), 4.

compares these different types of issues to an iceberg to explain this. He writes that the scientific questions are a “visible portion of a much larger entity” and the submerged mass beneath is made of the “problems... that legitimate... the behavior which precipitates the state of affairs we designated as the environmental crisis.”³⁷ Ecophenomenology is deeply rooted in the way we perceive the natural world and encourages the idea that in returning to and exercising our perceptions of it we can find a way to better relate to it.

One thing frozen within the submerged mass is the assumption that nature is a set of objects that as humans we have a type of agency over--a predisposition that ultimately condones exploitation. Author Ted Toadvine describes ecophenomenology as the “pursuit of the relationalities of worldly engagement, both human and those of other creatures.”³⁸ This relationality is overshadowed when thinking of nature as only scientific and quantifiable because it involves thinking of the earth as an object rather than something that is unpredictable. In dismissing the natural world’s unpredictability the idea that it “mean[s] nothing to us and [is] predestined for our ingenious schemes”³⁹ is created. Issues of the environment that scientists are preoccupied are based in perception and ultimately come after a lived perception of the natural world. Meditating on the initial act of perceiving is considered unimportant; scientists are blind to their own perceptions of the natural world even though they depend on them to attain information in the first place.⁴⁰ Ecophenomenology is focused on “reveal[ing] this blind spot and offer[ing] an account of the perceived world on its own terms,”⁴¹ terms not dictated by us. It is focused on challenging the idea that nature is an object and returning to our initial perceptions of the earth to gain a deeper understanding of what it is separate from our set conceptions.

³⁷ Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 4.

³⁸ Ibid., 3.

³⁹ Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 454.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp 51.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Toadvine's use of "relationality" may be the key to breaking down the subject-object orientation we have towards nature. In understanding that there is an exchange between us and the natural, that the natural also possesses energy that affects us and has the agency to act independently despite our existence, more agency is given to the natural world—agency that is lost when we think of it as a quantifiable object. Many artists speak about the way that their subjects stare back into them as they paint. Klee, in particular, talked about the way the forest is always staring back into him. He writes that "some days, I felt that the trees were looking at me, were speaking to me..."⁴² this statement suggests a type of interaction between the artist and nature. Klee did not look at the forest and believe it to be inanimate, he anthropomorphizes the trees as if they are looking at him while he is painting them. He was aware of this "relationality" that ecophenomenology is concerned with. In recognizing the symbiosis that happens between the human and non-human we can move past the dominance we exert over the natural world, return agency to it and allow it to exist on its own terms.

In David Abrams' book *Spell of the Sensuous*, he calls on ecophenomenology to express the importance of an equal relationship with the natural world. He talks about how we used to ascribe life-like traits to and live in conjunction with the earth, but as technology and society advanced we began to think of the natural world as inanimate and something that we can exploit and use to our advantage. Being a sleight-of-hand magician practicing under Shamans, he uses the example of the Shaman of a mediator between the human and non-human world:

It is not by sending his awareness out beyond the natural world that the shaman makes contact with the purveyors of life and health, nor by journeying into his personal psyche; rather, it is by propelling his awareness laterally outward into the depths of the landscape at once both sensuous and psychological...⁴³

⁴² Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," 458.

⁴³ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (Vintage Books, 1996), 10.

The shamans focused on discovering the mystery in and having respect for “the earthly web of relationships”⁴⁴ as a way to find the cures for sickness within their village. They believed that if they did not maintain an equal, symbiotic relationship with the land the sickness that formed in one person would just manifest itself in another. In listening to the land and giving back to it just as much as they take from it in the form of prayers, propitiations and praise, they could find the deeper cause for the disease and cure it.⁴⁵ The Shamans did not think of the land as a place or set object, but as a living entity that we have must have an equal relationship with. It is not a “determinate object,” but “an ambiguous realm that responds to emotions and calls forth feelings in return.”⁴⁶ It acts upon and responds to us on a physical and psychological level.

The idea that the natural world--something that we believe to lack a conscious mind--is able to respond and act upon us is hard to understand, but being aware of the role of the body in this exchange can make it easier to grasp. In talking about phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty is unique for his emphasis on the role of the body in perception. He writes, “the body is not a transparent object and is not presented to us in virtue of the law of its constitution...it is an expressive unity which we can learn to know only by actively taking it up, [and] this structure will be passed on to the sensible world.”⁴⁷ Through the body, we are able to get in touch with something in the world using our senses; “it can literally be said that our senses question things and that things reply to them.”⁴⁸ In presenting ourselves to the world and acknowledging our sensations, the world replies through acting upon our bodies. Those sensations we feel are the world affecting us and this dialogue between the body and nature is “the event of their

⁴⁴ Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 23.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp 7.

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp 33.

⁴⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 239.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp 372.

correlation, their entanglement in an ongoing process of expression.”⁴⁹ There is a tendency to believe something that we cannot have a direct exchange with is an object, but through various forms of attunement the body can sense this invisible exchange and acknowledge the way the natural world acts upon it.

I could hear birds chirping, the river flowing, and the wind in the leaves. I didn't realize it before, but everything was working in conjunction with one another. Everything acted upon another and depended on something else in the ecosystem. The birds depended on the berries and bugs in the ground, the river depended on the ground that carried it, and the trees depended on the sunlight and water.

David Abram says that he trained his body to tune into specific elements working within nature and meditate on the sensations he received from them. He viewed this as a way to fully understand and engage in not only the exchange that was happening between him and nature, but also the exchange happening between different elements of nature. He writes that, “it was from [spiders spinning webs] that my senses first learned of the countless worlds within worlds that spin in the depths of this world that we commonly inhabit, and from them that I learned that my body could, with practice, enter sensorially into these dimensions.”⁵⁰ He talks about how after he had this realization, he could tune into innerworkings and presences in nature. His ears began to “attend to the songs of birds-no longer just a melodic background to human speech, but meaningful speech in its own right, responding to and commenting on events in the surrounding earth.”⁵¹ Everything was in dialogue with each other, the natural world was acting upon his body and his body registered that there were also complex connections within the natural world itself. He was able to see a type

⁴⁹ Toadvine, *Philosophy of Nature*, 51.

⁵⁰ Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 19.

⁵¹ Ibid., 20.

of exchange happening between himself and the things surrounding him through taking notice of his sensations.

I realized I had forgotten my gloves. It was a bitter morning and it only took a few moments for me to begin to lose feeling in my fingers. I tried to get the paint out on my palette fast, because I knew the stiffer my fingers got the less I would want to unscrew the cap on my paints to squeeze out more. The colder my fingers got, the more I realized I couldn't fully control how I was using the brush. The result was looser, less refined paintings. While painting I have a tendency to sometimes get fussy and go over an area multiple times before I am happy with it, but it was just too cold to do this.

I wrote earlier that painting can capture the act of perceiving, and part of this is because the body plays a significant role in the act of painting. Merleau-Ponty writes about how painting is a creative action that is able to operate among other beings and situations in the world without having to fully acknowledge that it is doing this⁵² because painters can be very intuitive (while still being intentional) in the way they create. The surroundings of the painters act upon them, and the painter is able to allow those sensations to enter a painting. The painter allows the body to be a vehicle to allow the act of perceiving to manifest itself in a painting rather forcing into existence their idea of what lies in front of them. The body as the vehicle is going to react to those sensations unexpectedly so the result of the received sensations from the natural world can appear within a painting. Painting can help bring into existence the non-visible aspects of vision itself—from the cool breeze to the intermingling of colors on a surface. These invisible elements are ultimately what stitch the fabric of the world together.

⁵² Quinn, *Perception and Painting*, 11.

The excerpt I provided earlier was a moment when I could tell the natural elements were acting upon my body and further manifesting themselves into my painting. The left picture below was when my fingers first began getting cold, it was only 20 minutes in. The right painting is the last one I did in that session:



On the left, towards the bottom of the mountain and in the sky you can see how many different kind of strokes and colors were used. In contrast, the right painting is more simplistic. I used colors from the first painting for the second (since I was avoiding putting more paint on my palette) and quickly created it. I didn't realize it at first, but the temperature--a working of nature--was directly affecting my body which was then changing the way I painted. It was acting upon me and is evident through the simplicity of the brushstrokes. I did not have time to second-guess what I was painting and blend things into the surface, I reacted to what I saw in front of me.

In both of the excerpts above, being aware of my body and my senses allowed me to tune into the connections between things in the natural world and myself, but this requires patience and exercising of awareness (and in my case an extreme condition) to release control and allow

the surroundings to enter a painting. The experience I had with this happened without my effort, the temperature was so intense that it was impossible to ignore, it took further reflection to really understand the gravity of what was happening.

This awareness of the way my body responded to my surroundings allowed me to realize the way the natural elements truly did take on their own life and affect me, but it began to complicate the way I painted in certain spaces. I mentioned earlier that a component of the Anthropocene is the creation of modified spaces of the natural world and I first realized these on a trip to Signal Mountain.

I went to paint and came across a sign lodged in the ground that read “landscape repair.” What was being repaired? And why was it being repaired? The word repair is strange in the first place, as if a tree or plant was a car that needed to be fixed in order to function correctly.

It is hard to tell the level of human manipulation within natural spaces. This sign that read “landscape repair” was within a hiking trail that was decently remote that day and it didn’t occur to me at first that there was landscaping done on hiking trails. After this experience, I started thinking even deeper into this strangeness of the natural and the way everywhere is mediated or manipulated by humans in one way or another. When Cézanne and the academic landscape painters painted, nature was not as elusive as it is today. They did not have the opportunity to pay twenty dollars for entrance into a cave with an underground waterfall, concession stand and live band playing. They painted in places that had human-made objects within them, but there is no telling exactly how they were thinking about them in relationship to the natural world. Below you can see that Cézanne (right) treated buildings in the same way as the natural elements, as did Frederic Church (one of the Hudson River Valley painters, left):



Church, Frederic. *Chimborazo Volcano*. 1884. Oil on Millboard.



Cézanne, Paul. *Riverbanks*. 1905. Oil on Canvas.

Raymond Williams writes that nature is “all that was not touched by man, spoilt by man: nature as the lonely places, the wilderness.”⁵³ When both Cézanne and the academic landscape painters were working the idea of wilderness was more believable, though there is still a tendency think of all of nature as wilderness. The Wilderness Act of 1964, an act made to monitor and create boundaries for environmental preservation, defined wilderness as “in contrast with areas where [humans] and [their] own work dominate the landscape” and a place that is “untrammeled by [humans].”⁵⁴ Wilderness has been seen as something mysterious and ultimately something we needed to tame, and through time we have acted upon taming it.

I bought my ticket to go into Rock City to paint and tried to figure out where to set up. I wanted to change locations every once and awhile to paint different spots, but there were a lot of people and I needed room (not to mention I didn't want to get in the way). Everyone was really loud, I found it hard to isolate the sensations I was receiving from the natural world in front of me. There were so many noises around me and weird smells in the air. I was constantly

⁵³ Raymond Williams, *Ideas of Nature*, (Verso, 1980).

⁵⁴ The Wilderness Act of 1964, 16 U.S.C § 1131-1136 (1964).

distracted. When I was deep within a forest on Lookout Mountain, I could hear the river flowing and it smelled like fresh air. Here I have to try really hard to tune into those things.

Rock City was established in 1924 by Garnet and Freida Carter in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Freida Carter had the vision of transforming the 700 acres into a “rock garden to end all rock gardens.”⁵⁵ Garnet had been preoccupied with a mini-golf business and when it began failing he decided to jump on board with his wife to develop what would later be known as “Rock City.” More than half a million people visit this tourist destination a year; in the mission statement it explicitly says that it is “a unique geological and botanical wonder” and a “natural attraction.”⁵⁶ I have always thought of it as the epitome of a commercialized nature because there is a copious amounts of landscape repair being done, artificial lighting, random kitschy objects, and advertisements everywhere. This is one of the modified, elusive spaces that seemed to entirely contradict any idea of wilderness. As I mentioned earlier even hiking trails fit into this idea of a modified natural space, but tourist destination like Rock City, Ruby Falls, and Niagara Falls (just to name a few) are also more obvious examples of them.

A less suspecting example of the impossibility of wilderness is the Białowieża forest on the border of Poland and Belarus. It is Europe’s oldest remaining “original” forest in the sense that there is no human regulation, no new species are introduced, and no new trees are planted, but it was seized by German troops in 1817 and again in 1840 where it existed as a site for settlements. The biodiversity of it today is rich, and it is still unregulated (while still protected) but there is an extensive history infused within the land that rejects this idea of wilderness.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ “Our History,” *See Rock City*, accessed March 7, 2019, <https://www.seerockcity.com/about/our-history/>.

⁵⁶ “About,” *See Rock City*, accessed March 7, 2019, <https://www.seerockcity.com/about/about/>.

⁵⁷ “A Look Back: Białowieża National Park,” *DW Made for Minds*, <https://www.dw.com/en/a-look-back-bialowieza-national-park/a-16293701-1>.

Roderick Nash also questions the idea of wilderness in his book *Wilderness and the American Mind*. For Nash, wilderness is not actually a specific destination, it is a human construct defined only by our own conception of what it is:

The definition of wilderness is complex and partly contradictory...when it becomes necessary to apply the term wilderness to a specific area, the difficulties are compounded. There is the problem of how wild a region must be to qualify as wilderness, or, conversely, how much of the influence of civilization can be admitted. To insist on absolute purity could conceivably result in wilderness being only that land which the foot of man has never trod. But for many persons minimal contact with man and his works does not destroy wilderness characteristics. The question is one of degree. Does the presence of Indians or range cattle disqualify an area? Does an empty beer can? How about airplanes overhead?⁵⁸

Just because there is a beer can laying around, does that rid it of the chance of being wilderness? This ultimately began to make me question if the idea of wilderness is problematic in the first place—it is definitely problematic in that it gives us the power of defining it further objectifyinf it, but are the areas in which a human presence is more obvious contributing to a convoluted idea of nature that distances us from the actuality of the power within it? Should we restore the more ‘pure’ areas and rid the world of the heavily manipulated areas like Rock City? These questions are still important to me, but I couldn’t shake my own urge to define a natural area fit based on my own conception of what wilderness is—I was still perpetuating the dominance I felt over it. Trying to define wilderness contradicts what ecophenomenology encourages: allowing the natural elements to reveal themselves to us rather than instantaneously ascribing meaning to them. If I try and answer questions that revolve around quantifying how ‘wild’ a natural area is, I am jumping to conclusions and skipping the first step of allowing myself to return to the original act of perceiving. I decided to go paint in these modified spaces to try and make sense of everything.

⁵⁸ Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (Yale University Press, 2011), 4.

I could feel people breathing down my neck as I painted. I don't know why I expected to have silence and space up here on a Saturday morning; the people cycled out quickly but were always replaced by others. They would stay for a few minutes, take a picture on a cliff, then be replaced by another person taking the same picture on the same cliff. As I painted, I felt that I was far more aware of those people than I was of the natural world. I was constantly distracted.

I mentioned earlier that the way my body was affected by my surroundings complicated the way I painted in certain spaces. This excerpt is from a session I did on Sunset Rock; it's one of the most-visited sites of nature in Chattanooga, listed on Yelp and published in magazines as a "must-see destination." There were a lot of people there and it was very distracting because everyone was talking and coming up to me constantly to see what I was doing. I didn't mind this, I appreciated that they were interested in what I was doing, but it also made me fixated on the end result. I kept beginning to make paintings then placing them on the ground before they were done because I felt they were turning out bad:



I found that the people around me were not only making it hard to concentrate on the landscape in front of me, they were giving me anxiety. I feared that I would create a painting that they would judge, and as a painter did not want my pride to be ruined. I kept going over the river again and again, changing its location rather than keeping it in the place I put it originally. To

one degree this is a personal issue, but it also is the truth of what happened—I mentioned earlier that being in tune with the sensations I was receiving complicated painting *en plein air* for me and it happened here as well as in Rock City. My body reacted to the people around me— anxiety was traveling through my body and my relationship to and interaction with the natural world was compromised due to the presence of people. Not only was I getting anxious both here and in Rock City, I was constantly getting distracted by the chatter of the people around me.

I still have not fully grasped what these things mean; understanding the truth of these areas is going to be a far bigger project than I anticipated. One result of these spaces was the realization that I needed to continue to strengthen my ability to tune into the exchange between me and the natural world, but that would require dismissing other things in my surroundings— things that I should also ascribe equal value to. My instant reaction to the way I painted in these spaces is to say that they are problematic cornerstones of the Anthropocene, but we are too far along to rid ourselves of these modified spaces entirely. Cronan says, “if nature dies because we enter it, then the only way to save nature is to kill ourselves.”⁵⁹ This cannot be the solution (I would like to stay on this planet just as much as the next person), so we have to learn how to mediate these modified areas and try and understand the relationship between their properties and the natural elements. We need to tune into the relationship between the human-made stone wall, the sound of pictures being snapped and the cool breeze in Rock City. At Sunset Rock, the chatter of the families, the wandering eyes and the sound of the river. I am unsure of what will come from continuing to paint at strange places like Rock City and Sunset Rock, but this project has shown me the transformative power of painting *en plein air* and I believe that things hidden

⁵⁹ William Cronon, *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (Norton, 1996), 83.

within the realm of the invisible will be revealed through continuing to paint in these modified spaces.

Ending Notes

I was told about an experiment that was given in which someone sat with their back towards another person and were deprived of certain senses- sound and sight. In each experiment, there was a person sitting behind them was told to look at the back of their head in instances and look away in others. 55-60 percent of the time, the person with their back facing the other could tell when the other person was looking at them. They say this has something to do with frequencies, specifically frequencies in thought—when one person stared at the other, their frequencies were transmitted to the one with their back facing them. That person could pick up on those frequencies and a sensation was produced that indicated someone was staring at them.⁶⁰

What if elements in nature contain these same frequencies and we just don't notice them? They are invisible, made only of energy. Did Klee pick up on these when he spoke about the trees staring back at him, and can engaging directly in the experience of painting the natural world be a way to pick up on these frequencies? Do the frequencies literally manifest themselves in the painting? Maybe they are produced by the natural elements and further transmitted into the painting (of course, assuming the painter is not forcing their painting to depict a version of nature they want to see). Maybe this is why we are able to receive certain emotions from paintings through the materiality of the paint and the color and plein air painting may provide a vehicle for the frequencies to travel by.

Furthermore, maybe the reason I struggle receiving such a strong sense of the presence of nature in areas that are less remote (Rock City and Sunset Rock) is because the frequencies

⁶⁰ Rupert Sheldrake originally took on this experiment, this is a condensed version of it.

produced by constructed objects and people add noise to the frequencies that are produced by the natural. Continuing to paint in more remote areas may strengthen my ability to tune into the natural world's frequencies, making it easier to understand the harmony between those frequencies and the other noise made by humans and human modified elements.

It is going to take drastic measures to avoid the further destruction of the environment—measures that involve more than just making sure to recycle plastics and turn the lights off (though this is important as well). It's going to take a change in perspective. We need to believe in the actual life force behind the natural and listen to it—treat it as an equal and give back to it as we take from it. The earth is not an object that we should idealize and exploit, it is a living organism that we would not exist without. It is evolving in ways we haven't figured out how to keep up with because we don't take the time to listen to it and when done in a certain way, plein-air-painting provides me with a way of listening to the innerworkings of the relationship between the earth and myself. Plein air painting helps me to catch myself when I am objectifying or idealizing it and it helps me to take steps towards living my life as an equal to the natural world. I believe painting *en plein air* possesses transformative powers that we need now more than ever.

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