Entanglement of Painting, Nature, and Being

by

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I live in Lethbridge, Alberta, which is located on the traditional lands of the Blackfoot Confederacy. I am grateful to call this place home.

To my husband, David: Thank you for your unwavering support and encouragement. May the warblers always sing for you.

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Introduction

My art practice operates in flux between knowledge about the world and understanding of being in/with the world. In Allan deSouza's book, *How Art Can Be Thought: A Handbook for Change*, he states that "art comprises forms of knowledge of being *in/with* the world" (25). He describes science, by contrast, as knowledge *about* the world (25). DeSouza recalls a stunning quote from Aimé Césaire: "Poetic knowledge is born in the great silence of scientific knowledge" (25). What is the "great silence of scientific knowledge?" I interpret the silence as what science cannot speak to–what it means to be embodied, to be *with* the world. I came to the arts with a background in the biological sciences. My artistic practice operates in proximity to biology and science, examining, interpreting, and wondering over the information, theories, and ideas brought forth by these disciplines. Science uses strategies and methods to extract the subjective body from the world. Scientific methodologies reveal truths about the world, ones that are often beyond our bodies ability to sense directly. Meanwhile, there are truths about the world only understood through a sensing body, by being *in/with* the world. Both these ways of knowing have validity and interest me.

Artmaking is the process through which I come to understand things *about* the world and what it means to be *in/with* the world. Through artmaking I think through the information, ideas and theories gleaned through scientific disciplines as I engage with material matter. I strive to explore how scientific and embodied knowledges can function together, in my case, to provide a deeper connection and sense of belonging to the land on which I live and the Earth we all inhabit. My artistic practice is process led—a process in which seeing, thinking, and materialising co-occur. This process yields ways of thinking through the world that cannot be replicated through other means. As an artist I am interested in highlighting the unique way art can produce experiences that provide a pathway for viewers to understand themselves and something about the world. Through my practice, I share my experiences

and understandings of Nature. I allow viewers opportunities to connect with my perspective while they form their own experience and understanding of Nature.

I am a mother of two children, a wife, and a Canadian of settler origins. I have German, Irish, Scottish, Welsh, Hungarian, French and English ancestry, which reveals itself in myriad ways. My skin is white European, my freckles and reddish hair are Irish, my last name Hungarian. I speak English and my family cultural practices are so blended with the surrounding population of generally white urban Albertans that its hard to figure out what stories, rituals, and activities might have belonged more specifically to my ancestors. I long to visit a place where my ancestors came from, to feel a deep connection with the landscape. However, there is no singular place from which I arose that will ease my sense of longing. My ancestry is too spread out, my cultural practices are too distilled and blended to be traced to one area on a map. This recognition has been with me for many years and has led me to embrace the land on which I find myself. I do this through scientific and embodied practices, such as studying the local ecology, walking, identifying flora and fauna, and painting landscapes.

My studio practice revolves around landscape painting. I sculpt feet out of clay, positioning them in relation to each other or paintings. My interest in landscapes is manifold; through landscapes, I express my curiosity about the natural world and the things that inhabit it. Dwelling on landscapes is how I ground myself and ponder what it means to be alive and connected to the world. Painting landscapes and working with clay helps me negotiate my relationship with the natural environment, as they are connected to my experiences and knowledge of the land on which I live. In this way, these artistic processes ground me to a landscape where my ancestry is recent. My scientific, ecological, and biological understanding of the world sits adjacent to my artistic practice. Both science and art function to connect me to the land. This connection is necessary for me to engage with meaningful land stewardship and to combat the environmental degradation that exists locally and globally. More

In chapter 1, I examine my artistic process. After briefly describing the themes of the work I have produced throughout the MFA program, I detail my material process. With the aid of other thinkers, I demonstrate how my painting process creates a unique mode of thinking. I establish why painting is the primary medium I employ to examine Nature. I end with exploring other artists whose artistic works influence my own.

Throughout chapter 2, I demonstrate how my landscapes and clay feet address ideas of Nature. I briefly investigate the history of nature that developed within Western Europe and consider notions of Nature that have emerged more recently. I discuss how my works unpack the complexity of our relationship with Nature. This chapter brings together numerous thinkers to examine how visual representations function ideologically, and I relate this discussion to the ideology inherent within my work.

The final chapter links my work with broader philosophical ideas about the human condition. I focus on the distinction between human animals and non-human animals and the environmental and ethical implications resulting from this distinction. I then examine visual art's role as I navigate new understandings of and relationships with nature. I conclude by exploring how painting can guide us toward a more equitable relationship with nature and fulfill a human desire for novel, vibrant and pleasurable experiences.

Chapter 1 *Artmaking as a Mode of Thinking*

A Brief Description of my MFA Work

The landscapes I construct imagine an entwining, dissolving, eroding, emerging and dynamic Nature. My works imagine the many perceptual fields held by organisms living within the natural environment and the multiple ecological interactions at play.[1] This consideration often leads to no single narrative dominating my paintings.

Figure 1 April Matisz, Devonian Kiss, 2021, acrylic on YUPO, 22 x 40", 56 x 102cm

[1] The term perceptual field refers to that which the organism is capable of perceiving.

The natural environments I construct are at once familiar and strange. Recognizable flora and fauna are rendered with a colour palette of earthy muted tones. Other forms, however, resist a straightforward reading. They may be plant-ish, rock-ish, water-ish enough to call these things to the viewer's mind, but not enough to know with certainty. Often a form is simply a brushstroke, which serves to call attention to the surface of the paper and the illusion of representation. By combining forms with various degrees of certainty, I aim to induce an experience in the viewer of the unfamiliar, the unknown, the uncanny. Through this experience the wonder and oddity of our world becomes present, and our relation to this world becomes more open for questioning and re-evaluation.

In addition to painting, I sculpt ceramic works to augment my artistic research. The clay I use is sourced from my former hometown of Medicine Hat, which lies about 170 km east of my current home in Lethbridge. The Southern Alberta landscape is rich with clay deposits. The rivers that meander this region are lined with a sticky mud that I would shape into animal forms and let bake in the hot prairie sun as a child. Now, I sculpt feet from clay, treating the surface with earthy-coloured oxide washes or bright glazes. I am interested in the clay feet for the way they are derived from and relate to the landscape. Clay is a product of the earth, and feet walk upon the earth. Clay feet recall our biological entanglement with the world.

The feet I sculpt approximate the size of a human foot and are placed either in relation to a specific painting or as a stand-alone formation on the floor. The ceramic feet suggest a body that is absent. The feet are arranged to suggest bodily encounters with each other, their environment, and the audience. Depending on how the feet are arranged, the encounters can be experienced as aggressive or peaceful, playful, or uncertain.

Process/Methodologies

Painting

The paintings I make begin with a muddling of materials. I experiment extensively with acrylic and oil paint on paper, exploring the multiplicity of marks, textures, colours and opacities of these mediums on various paper surfaces. Some of my experimentation has involved using a spray bottle on a wash of acrylic paint to produce fantastic and unexpected textures. The surfaces of my works are made up of various paint marks from brushes, sponges, and aerosol sprays, as well as paint removals through rubbing, sanding, and scratching the surface of the paper.

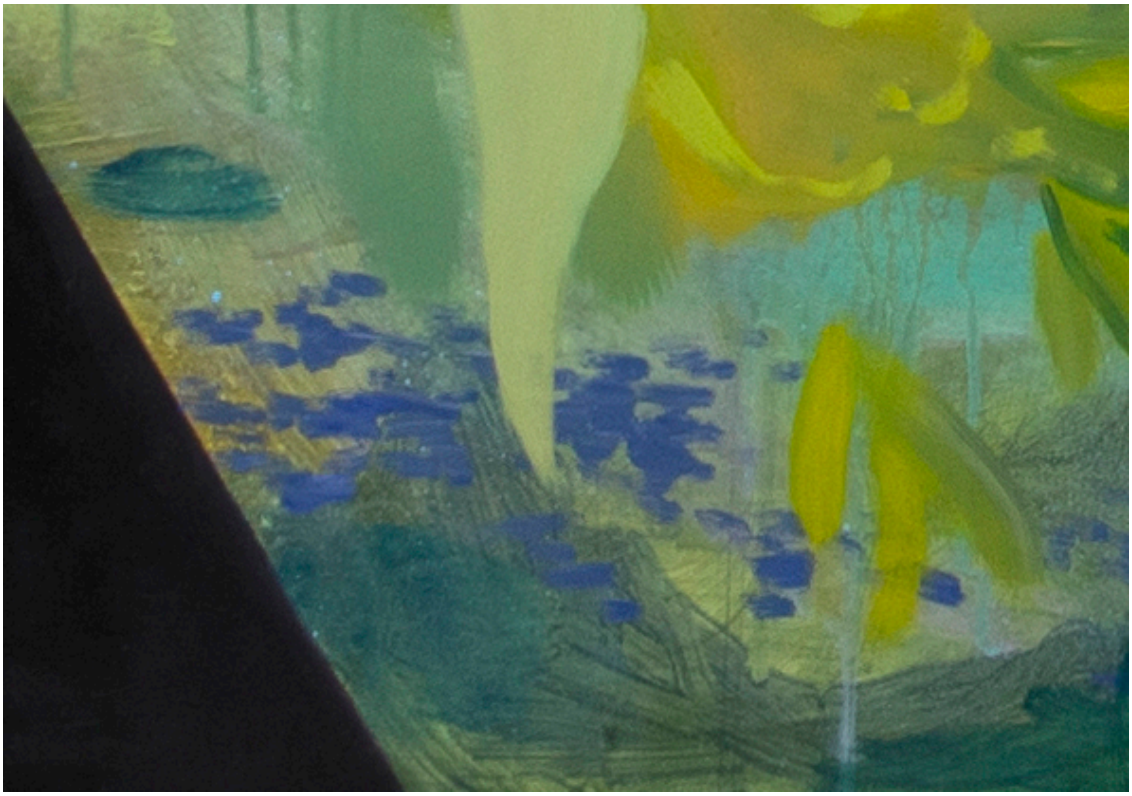

Figure 2 April Matisz, Mountain view, (detail)

The quick-drying time of acrylics allow me to build up layers of marks quickly, while the slow-drying oil paints make them ideal for blending colour. Throughout this process of material manipulation, I develop

imaginary landscapes that are dynamic and complex. These paintings of landscapes result from my knowledge of the land gained through embodied and scientific understandings and through recalling experiences I have had. They are also the result of a process of seeing and thinking through the marks on the paper, and being open to what the marks are and could be. To better understand and explain this process, I turn to the writings of Lark-Erik Hjertström Lappalainen and Richard Wollheim.

Lappalainen is a Swedish philosopher and writer. His text, *Muddling the Void*, describes a painting practice with remarkable affinity to my own. He describes the painter as "muddling with material… a vague aimless thinking and a confusing mixing and bungling with materials" (94). This quote describes a state of indeterminacy: "not-yet-painting and not-yet-thinking" (95). Then comes the "leap" (95), the moment when thoughts, imagery, and ideas emerge from the muddle. Lappalainen draws from the book *What is Philosophy* by Deleuze and Guattari. In it they describe a plane which separates thought from chaos and material. Holes are punched through this plane, which Lappalainen sees as "made by the sensations, images, or ideas themselves, by their 'force'" (Lappalainen 94). Lappalainen refers to the essay *L' épuisé* by Deleuze in which Deleuze describes "an eye that thinks" (Lappalainen 98). When the painter assesses the image, they use this "eye that thinks" and for Lappalainen, the painter is thinking, but "thought here takes the form of seeing" (98). Lappalainen and Deleuze make a distinction between the thoughts that arise from interpreting what you see and those that arise with the act of seeing. When Lappalainen refers to a passive way of seeing, he is referring to this latter form. Passive sight "makes it possible to believe that there is something else out there, something not produced by the mind" (98). An artist engaging in passive sight "receives something that [they have] not produced itself" (98). The painter considers the material in a novel way, as an "'expressive material', a material that thinks,'" according to Deleuze (98). The painter responds to the material, ideas, and sensations with thought and more intelligent and directed muddling. My discussion of this process has

been stepwise, though the process is cyclical and ongoing. This entanglement of material and thought is central to the way I create.

In chapter 1 of his book, *Painting as an Art*, Richard Wollheim describes a phenomenological experience he calls, "seeing-in" (21). The experience of "seeing-in" is familiar to most of us—we look at a stained wall and see faces, creatures, or landscapes within the blemishes.[2] "Seeing-in" is the experience of becoming aware of two things at once: the surface that bears the marks and the image the surface seems to contain.[3] I paint and see in ways that encourage this phenomenon. I consider the colour washes, inconclusive forms, and ambiguous marks I make on a surface, searching for images with open thinking and passive sight. The imagery shifts throughout the process as I continue mark-making and layering, which leads to new imagery seen and ideas generated along the way.

A central component of my painting process is informed by intuition; I start a painting without a predetermined plan. However, what I search for and think about along the way is related to my knowledge of the natural environment and my experience with it. The punching of holes through the plane occurs when the components of a painting (composition, form, colour, etc.) spark something in my thinking. This spark is fleeting and requires intuition to recognize its potential. The intuition is informed by all sorts of world-absorbing and information-gathering activities that take place inside and outside the studio, such as examining other works of art, studying a plant, or reading. However, what I see and think is not always understood or known to me. I embrace the notion of 'not-knowing," as described by philosophy professor Rachel Jones. In her presentation, *On the Value of Not Knowing: Wonder*, *Beginning Again and Letting Be*, Jones explores how "not knowing is amongst other things a condition for knowing". By recognizing what one does not know, one becomes open to all the

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[2] This phenomenon is also known as *pareidolia*

[3] "Seeing-in" relates to the multistable perception described by gestalt theory (see Appendix Fig. 1, Baars and Gage, 65). Depending on where the viewer directs their attention, the image contains either a vase or two faces in profile. Multi-stability involves an "uncertain hierarchy of visual forms," perhaps related to the passive sight Lappalainen describes (Bornowsky, 2023).

possibilities that could be. Knowing something involves a determination about the world, whereas not knowing “renew[s] our capacity to think, and for coming to know the other in his or her otherness” (Jones).

My work builds on some of these ideas. Embracing the condition of ‘not knowing’ is an essential component of my painting practice. The phenomena of “seeing-in” requires a balance between seeing marks and imagining what they might represent. To accept “not knowing” means allowing the marks to remain unfixed in their representation. It provides a looseness in the painting process that produces prolonged material engagement. It allows for more complex and interesting thoughts to arise and be visualised. “Not-knowing" is also related to the non-thinking and passive sight that Deleuze and Lappalainen understand as necessary for painting. In *Muddling the Void*, Lappalainen states: “In order to paint, a certain idiocy and passion, that is non-thinking, something un-thought, and a certain form of passivity, seem to be required” (91). I agree with Deleuze and Lappalainen that a passive, pre-cognitive eye is essential to remain open to all the possibilities that occur within a painting. This way of being -- not knowing or thinking, idiocy and passion -- is a core condition of my studio practice.

Clay

Sculpting clay feet is markedly different from the act of painting, although there are some similarities in the process. I work a lump of clay with an intention to form a foot, although molding the clay produces idiosyncrasies that are the result of intuitional decisions. The curves and bulges of my clay feet are based on anatomy only loosely; more importantly the form of the foot emerges slowly. I create form by pressing and sliding clay, using paint brushes to smooth out the spaces between toes. Forming a foot is a gentle process. In the final stages the foot takes on a personality, and smoothing the clay feels like care-taking. I am tender and attentive to the material, and this is evident in its final form.

Once fired, I treat my ceramic works with either an oxide wash or a coloured glaze. The oxide wash treatment is painterly - I can dip, spray, or brush the liquid onto the foot, and these marks remain visible after a clear glaze is applied. When I choose to glaze a ceramic work with colour I do so with a specific painting in mind. I select a colour that will link a foot with the painting. Additional layers of meaning emerge when the foot and painting are placed in proximity to one another.

Figure 3 images showing ceramic feet

Artists on Process

The book *Studio Talks, Thinking Through Painting* (Bength et al.) documents multiple conversations over five years between philosophers, writers, curators, and painters. Stemming from studio talks, critical reflections to readings, and organic discussions, these written accounts marvellously illustrate how contemporary painters use painting to think through their world. I have discovered a trove of texts articulating painting practices in this book. These writings articulate, support and legitimise my way of working while challenging me to think more deeply about how painting and knowledge production relate to one another. The interviews in this book have allowed me to link my practice with other thinkers. Below I illustrate these linkages and describe how they help me situate my artistic practice within a larger framework.

In the essay *Communicating and Articulating the Painting*, artists Sigrid Sandström and Kristina Bength describe painting as a tool that produces a mode of thinking (Liew 188). Sandström likens it to running, although Bength points out that painting makes a painting and allows for the thoughts produced to be accessed (188).[4] This conversation highlights the uniqueness of painting and the way in which modes of thought become transmitted by the material and translated by the viewer.

I have described my process as involving an informed intuition. Allan deSouza critiques the use of the word, stating that "intuition is artists' convenient go-to answer for virtually any question about their decisions" (186). He describes it as "shorthand for not knowing from where/how the idea developed" (186). I disagree with deSouza's pejorative framing of intuition, as do many other artists. For example, artist Malin Pettersson Öberg leans into this "not-knowing" within his art practice, and it touches on much of what was said above regarding Jones' belief about not-knowing. Öberg states:

[4] I enjoy the way Sandström likens paintings to a tool like running; it reveals the multiplicities of modes of thinking that we experience and reminds us of the vital importance of diverse experiences.

> *What's interesting is to explore and research something I do not really know or understand. Being able to work intuitively and being able to start out with a vague notion of something, an idea, an impulse is really attractive to me…. We know so much intuitively that we cannot pin down* (Öberg 238).

Artist Sigrid Sanstöm reinforces this sentiment when she says, "I have secret ideas in my work that are so secret that I hardly know them" (Jansson 139). This sentiment touches on ideas relating to the unconscious mind, subliminal awareness, and pre-cognition. For Öberg, intuitive thinking involves recognition and discovery. He states: "We don't have a language to describe everything" (Öberg 242). Sandström and Öberg articulate how artmaking involves unknown discoveries that are hard to put into words. My intuitive decision-making process similarly allows for circular trajectories of exploration, like what Öberg describes as, "mapmaking of the world" (Öberg 242). This type of decision-making is based on an intellect that is before language and text. Thus, this mode of working challenges language and text as the sole pathway to knowledge. Jones, Sanstöm, Öberg value the experiences of not-knowing, having secret secrets and not understanding but being compelled by something. I am familiar with these experiences and continue to lean into them in my practice.

Why Painting?

My interest in landscapes and nature came about at an early age. It was fostered by camping trips and hikes with my father, and time spent on my Grandparents ranch in Southern Alberta. I pursued a degree in biology, focussing on classes that provided me with skills to identify the life around me and understand their relationships with each other and their environment.[5] A concurrent passion for art led me to explore these interests through painting. Painting is an ideal medium for me to explore the

[5] I studied invertebrates, insects, spiders, fishes, algae, fungi, and flowering plants alongside concepts of ecology, evolution, and conservation.

concept of Nature. Writer and curator Terry R. Myers describes painting as able to "accommodate multiple modes simultaneously" (18). Painting affords me the ability to communicate both embodied knowledges and ones linked to scientific understanding of the world. Art historian Norman Bryson explores painting's promise in the text *Invisible Body*, highlighting painting's unique ability to "exceed the fixities of representation" (40). A painting can not only represent a thing with ambiguity, lending it a sense of movement, possibility and indeterminateness. A painting can also provide experiences in the viewer that affect ways of thinking and being. As such, painting is well suited to explore, represent, and alter complex and contradictory ideas. As I explore below, Nature is such an idea.

Learning from Others

My painting practice consults the works of other artists who explore subject matter and employ materials similar to my own. I discuss four artists in particular, Michael Armitage, Peter Doig, Amy Sillman, and Kamoor Aram.

The first, Michael Armitage, is a British – Kenyan painter whose works contain a medley of images that emerge from the landscape of East Africa. Armitage skillfully infuses his landscapes with the stories, histories, and politics of the region. In his painting *The Paradise Edict* (figure 4), the viewer

inspects the image closely to tease out the bodies and forms obscured by the twisted tree trunks and

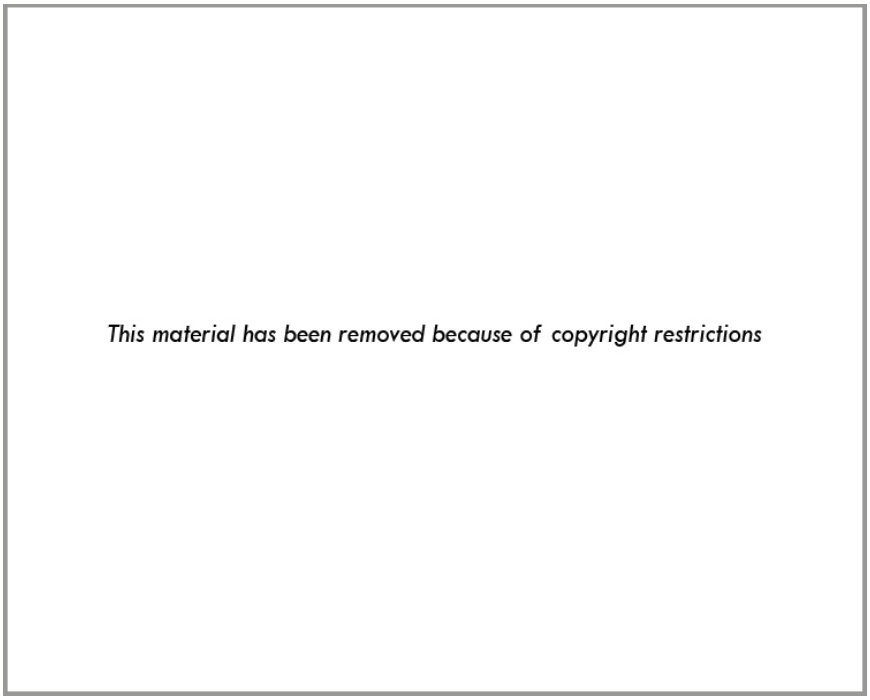

Figure 4: Michael Armitage, The Paradise Edict, 2019. Oil on lubugo bark cloth. 220 x 420.1 cm.

mounds of foliage. In some places the details show bodies rendered incomplete; limbs and torsos appear and disappear into the landscape. In other places humans, animals, and landscapes flow seamlessly into one another. Armitage's painting technique involves entwining, merging, and disrupting imagery in a way that calls viewers to recognize the inherent dynamism of the physical world. The environment is in a constant state of flux, though as humans our experience of time is limited to a particular scale. Through his multilayered historical landscapes, Armitage reminds us of this.

Dark and hidden undercurrents reside in Armitage's paintings. Gentle green and pink trees give way to deep orangey reds that materialise into fists grabbing at the ankles of another body. This juxtaposition alerts the viewer, and certain imagery then jumps to attention: a crocodile with an open mouth, snakes emerging from unexpected places. An underlying violence complicates this landscape.

Armitage's paintings resist a singular interpretation. He paints multiple landscapes within a single painting, juxtaposing bright colours, evocative forms and compelling brushstrokes with violence, darkness, and social transgressions. I admire the boldness of his gestures. Armitage's landscapes contain a mix of embodied and historical knowledges, and the way he uses colour, line and composition to merge them informs my own painting strategies.

The second artist, Peter Doig, paints mysterious and uncanny landscapes. In his painting, *Grande Riviere* (figure 5), a horse, frozen in mid lurch, walks along a bank. It seems out of place, and its head is

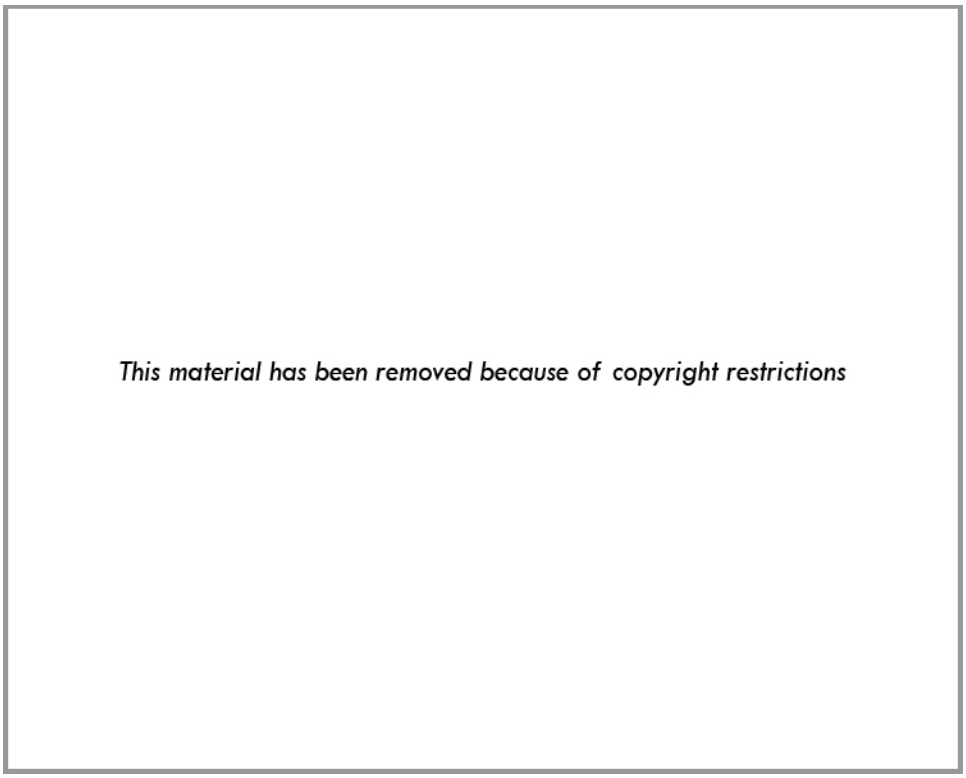

Figure 5 Peter Doig, Grande Riviere, 2001-2002. Oil on canvas. 228.8 x 358.4cm.

obscured in shadow and/or paint. Next to a fishing boat, a strange series of light dots seem to float, approximating the outline of a human figure. In the lower right, the perspective of the painting seems to shift, and viewers float above the shoreline, looking down. The bank defies gravity, and the relationship

between the dark water and sand bank seems to reconstruct itself towards abstraction. Critic Emma Dexter describes his paintings as providing “an entrance to the sublime and unknowable” (Dexter 93). In creating this entrance, Doig produces opportunities for viewers to re-imagine, re-mystify, and re-engage with the landscape.

When studying Doig’s landscapes I am reminded of the importance of not-knowing in my own artistic practice. This condition allows imagery within my paintings to remain unfixed in their representation and open to other possibilities. The unfixed sensibility in Doig’s work also occurs within the forms that make up my landscapes. For instance, in my painting *An Observer* (figure 6) I present the viewer with a dynamic and fanciful landscape. One human figure sits, perhaps birdwatching, while

Figure 6 April Matisz, An Observer, 2021, acrylic on YUPO, 22 x 40”, 56 x 102cm

another watches from behind a pile of rocks. While this landscape lacks the specificity of Armitage's *The Paradise Edict*, it is similar in its multiplicity of narratives, merging and disrupting imagery, and colour palette. *An Observer* contains a mystery: viewers are left to guess at the relationship between the figures, and what their presence in this odd landscape means. The title begs the question, who is observing and why? Is the central figure observing birds, are the birds observing her? Is the girl in the foreground observing the scene in front of her, or are viewers observing the painting? Like Doig's *Grand Riviere*, *An Observer* contains an entrance to the unknown. It is an entry where viewers' eyes and thoughts are carried away by the dotted lines, swirling shapes, and an array of sumptuous plant-like forms. The title *Observer* points to a relationship between a being and something else. That relationship is part of what this painting seeks to investigate.

Artist Amy Sillman's paintings are highly abstracted compared to Armitage's and Doig's, but they possess a common sensibility. Sillman writes about her process where she endlessly alters her forms, "searching rather earnestly for something I don't quite know already, a kind of questioning machine, endlessly discontent" (Sillman 2015). She settles on the word "awkward" to describe the feeling she desires from her forms. "Awkwardness", she states, "is both familiar and unfamiliar" (Sillman). Sillman's notion of awkwardness and its relationship to the unfamiliar is compelling. I see awkwardness in Doig's horse, in Sillman's forms, and in my own work.

Figure 7 Amy Sillman, Someone Else's Dream, 2014, oil on canvas, 190 x 170cm. Used by permission of the artist.

Through the Foliage (figure 8) is a painting that illustrates my interest in the familiar/unfamiliar and the awkward. The landscape is composed of multiple elements that relate to each other in strange ways. An oversized rock sits in a stream with no impact to the stream's flow. A branch-like form emerges from the ground, intersected by a leaf that fails spatial logic. While forms might be recognizable as leaves, a rock, a sun, and a stream, they do not relate to one another in the way a viewer might expect. Each element is imbued with an agency and presence that demands attention but offers no resolution.

Figure 8 April Matisz, Through the Foliage, 2023, oil on paper, 22 x 30"

Armitage, Doig, and Sillman offer experiences of multiplicity of narratives, not-knowing and of unfixed-representations, of the awkward, and of the uncanny. These experiences echo my own artistic goals of questioning and interrogating my relationship to the landscape. and presenting desperately

needed alternative representations of and relationships to Nature in light of the ecological crisis we face.

I first saw Kamrooz Amar's work *Blue Backdrop for Minor Arts* (figure 9) at the 2021 exhibition *Relations - Diaspora and Painting (2021)* at the Esker Gallery in Calgary, Alberta. In this work, two ceramic objects, a vase and ceramic tile, are situated in relation to a painted canvas. Amar's practice explores dramatically different themes from my own.[6] His use of painting with ceramics, however, creates a powerful experience that has stayed with me and sparked an interest in situating painting and ceramics together. In *Blue Backdrop for Minor Arts* the physicality of the objects expands when situated closely to the painting. I sense the objects pulling on the painting, bringing it forward into the viewer's presence. I consider the way that objects exert a similar force in my own practice. Through the inclusion of ceramics, I create an expanded presence and a hint of the body within my landscapes. I allow the relationship between feet and land and the distant presence of a body to exist in the minds of viewers.

[6] Amar explores the hegemonic relationship between Europe and the Middle East; museological and institutional practices; and the categories of art, craft, and decoration (Aima 53).

Figure 9 Kamrooz Aram, Blue Backdrop for Minor Arts, 2018. Panel: oil and pencil on linen; pedestal: oil on MDF, brass terrazzo, ceramic. Panel: 121.9 x 167.6 x 5.1 cm; pedestal: 127.6 x 22.9 x 22.9 cm. Used by permission of the artist.

Chapter 2 Shifting Natures and Strange Landscapes

My understanding of and relationship with nature is constantly adapting. I have selected several compelling texts that explore ideas of nature from philosophical and biological perspectives. What follows is an exploration of these texts, interspersed with images and discussion of my own works. I have selected images that best suit the conversation, though the ideas presented flow through much of the body of work I produced during my MFA program.

The History of Nature

One text I found particularly compelling was *Ideas of Nature* by writer and philosopher Raymond Williams. *Ideas of Nature* provides an informative exploration into the history of Western concepts of nature. In his text, Williams reveals that the word Nature "contains an extraordinary amount of human history" (67). In tracing the definitions and uses of the word, Williams reveals its shifting identity. In its Latin origins, Nature was used to mean the "essential constitution of the world" (68). Describing a wealth of life forms, relationships, and processes as a singular notion was an advancement in abstract thinking, Williams argues, but it also predisposed the term for idealist, spiritual or religious interpretations (69). The prevalence of nature gods or nature spirits in many cultures is thus unsurprising to Williams (69). Once Christianity came to dominate the West, Nature shifted into a single unified entity that was in the service of God (69). This conception of Nature as an extension of the divine posed problems for people wanting to study how the world was positioned and moved throughout the cosmos, or how the earth and its inhabitants came to be. When perceived this way, it was required that Nature be studied in a way that would not infringe upon God's sovereignty (69). Explanations for the workings of the world needed to include the presence of God in some way that would emphasize his guiding hand or a divine purpose. As Western science produced advancements in agriculture and industry, it led to better outcomes for certain members of society (80). This provided motivation to

further separate God from Nature, allowing for more human intervention into the world of Nature. The concept of nature shifted over time, becoming something distinct from God. Nature was understood as a kind of machine that could be dissected, detailed, and determined (73). Nature's complexity was ignored in favour of human intervention, its inherent generative and dynamic capacities repurposed for human goals.[7]

What strikes me about William's text is the familiarity of these various concepts of Nature. Despite hundreds of years of history, I recognize all the ideas about nature within much of contemporary Canadian culture. *Ideas of Nature* reveals to me the human ability to generate a multiplicity of ideas about the physical world, and hold them, personally and collectively, over generations. Nature is a concept that accumulates ideas, with some dominating at a particular point in history.

While brief, this exploration of the history of nature underscores the immense complexity of the concept. Williams focuses on dominant conceptions of nature throughout his discussion, but of course within any culture multiple ideas of nature operate simultaneously. My home province of Alberta is full of people and institutions with complex and often contradictory relationships with nature. From the Cypress Hills to oil fields to the largest Indigenous reservation in Canada, Alberta is host to many contested Nature narratives; Nature is an Eden to be preserved, a source of wealth to be extracted, landscapes to be managed, or a home to deeply rooted cultures.

The plurality and complexity of the concept of Nature surfaces within my landscapes. In *Mountain Lore* (figure 10), two figures gaze at a mountain peak with transcendental longing. The title

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[7] Challenges to this inert conception of nature did exist and are evidenced by the writings of German naturalist and explorer, Alexander von Humboldt. Humboldt's writings and ideas from the 1800's are explored by Andrea Wulf in her book *The Invention of Nature*. Wulf reveals how Humboldt depicted the world ecologically, describing the relationships existing between organisms and their environment. Wulf undercovers Humboldt's observations and lamentations of the impacts of human-induced environmental destruction, and his warnings of the consequences of such activity appeared throughout his writings.

suggests a collective belief about the mountains, a determined way that they are understood. In the painting a road is visible, a leading people from a city-like formation on the right to a parking lot. Large seed pods on either side of the composition suggest a basis for agriculture or industry, while a hand on the left invites inspection from a grazing horse. Within this strange landscape, multiple narratives and ideas of Nature are present. Through dynamic mark making and a pastiche of imagery this painting undermines a static and singular conception of Nature. The atypical scale used throughout this painting suggests a worldview that contains subjective values and incoherency.

Figure 10 April Matisz, Mountain Lore, 2021, acrylic on YUPO, 22 x 40", 56 x 102cm

Contemporary Nature

Within Western-centered worldviews, the question of what Nature is and how humans relate to it seems a perpetual dilemma. My thinking and studio practice is deeply connected to this puzzle. The varied history of the concept of Nature is part of this confusion, as are the unfixed ways in which Nature is presently understood. Philosopher Kate Soper writes extensively about this subject. In her book, *What is Nature*, Soper states that it is: "a general concept through which we are asked to re-think our current use of resources, our relationship to other forms of life, and our place within, and responsibilities towards the eco-system" (2). I appreciate this contemporary definition as it provides space to consider our ethical obligations to Nature. By endorsing this definition, I situate my artistic practice within the realm of environmental ethics. As my artistic practice examines personal connections to the land, it also questions the kind of relationships and connections I think we should build moving forwards.

My painting *Holding On* (figure 11) opens up questions about how we relate to Nature. A pair of hands attempt to hold a swirling mass of earth, though the mass of forms is too large to be held. Perhaps we are witnessing the scooping up of Nature, or maybe the release of it. The ambiguity and tension here suggest the difficulty of a task. Nature is both something that cannot be contained or fully conceived of but the attempt to contain and to try to know and represent is still being made. There is a gentleness to the holding gesture and an inquisitiveness to a dark face in the upper left that peeks out from behind foliage. Audiences are privy to an engagement with Nature based not on domination, but on curious reverence.

Figure 11 April Matisz, Holding On..., 2021, acrylic on YUPO, 22 x 40", 56 x 102cm

As I have shown, part of the ongoing puzzle of Nature is how it is conceived in a multitude of ways. I have come to understand Nature through the lens of the sciences and the humanities. These disciplines hold various ideas about Nature, and within each discipline extreme positions have been formulated. Within the sciences is a belief that Nature exists independently of human thought, while within the humanities a position holds that Nature is socially, historically and geographically constituted.[8] In her article *The Politics of Nature; Reflections of Hedonism*, *Progress and Ecology*, Kate Soper explores these different perspectives on Nature, finding a middle ground. I appreciate her balanced approach as she examines both disciplines, providing opportunities for interdisciplinary conversations. Theoretical physicist and writer Karen Barad also thinks deeply about the connections between science and the humanities and the different ways these disciplines conceive of our material world. Throughout chapter one of her book, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Barad explores opposing ideas about reality and objectivity, and offers a novel perspective on how to understand the knowledge science provides. She sees the theorizing that occurs within the sciences as deeply engaged in the material world, challenging arguments that saw this activity as socially constructed (55). She addresses the past ways in which science and humanity scholars have spoken past one another and seeks to bridge an understanding between these two seemingly different ways of navigating the world. (Barad)[9] Like Soper and Barad, I believe both the sciences and humanities have methodologies that provide different and valuable knowledges. Embracing an interdisciplinary attitude aligns with my aforementioned desire to use both scientific knowledge alongside embodied knowledge to explore Nature and my relationship to it.

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[8] In her article *The Politics of Nature; Reflections of Hedonism*, *Progress and Ecology*, Soper labels adherents of these positions as “nature-endorsers” or “nature-skeptics”, respectively (48).

[9] Also in this chapter is a fascinating discussion of how theory and material are intwinedexploration of the relationship between theory and material practice representation and I came to Barad’s writings late in my MFA program

Alien Landscapes

As the concept of Nature continues to be explored, it should be noted that historical Western-developed ideas about Nature persist. They echo throughout the cultural institutions and social structures that have been set up across the country. Many people in Canada still see a distinction between the human world and the natural world, with the former given an authority to dominate the latter, either through divine right or intellectual prowess. Inherent in this conceived distinction between the human and natural world is an alienation from the world of which we are indeed a part.

The way Canadian culture relates to Nature is deeply troubled. It is dominated by Western-based conceptions, propelled by capitalist thinking, and fueled by consumerist ways of being. In his book *Invisible Nature*, Worthy explores how modern global consumerist culture continues to dissociate us from our natural environment. He states that the "objects in our lives come from such obscure origins and embody such complex functioning that they're like aliens in our midst" (57). "The economy," he goes on, "distributes far and wide all our effects on the natural world," and our dissociated knowledge of the things in our lives means that "the consequences in nature of our individual actions…is almost completely absent and impossible to reconstruct" (59). The negative effects of our consumerist culture are felt disproportionately in places we never see, and thus we are also dissociated from the consequences of our (in)actions. How can we relate to something from which we are dissociated?

My imagined landscapes seek to counter this dissociation by reacquainting audiences with a wealth of ecological relationships. I remind viewers of Nature's omnipresence and encourage viewers to experiences a sense of bonding with the land. In *Tower* (figure 12), a patchwork of organic forms cling to each other, growing into a vertical structure that sits against a grey background. In this mash of shapes and colours, some recognizable features emerge: a leaf shades a patch of bark, a fruiting structure rises from a dark mossy bed. The strength of *Tower* is provided by its multiplicity, its flourishing is a result of

its diversity. This painting, however, is not a naïve display of ecological harmony. Like many of my paintings, the imagery in this work alternates between representation and abstraction, familiarity and strangeness. The vitality of its organic forms and seductive nature of its colour and texture combine to entrance the viewer, while solvent-heavy drips, chunky lines and awkward shapes seek to disrupt perception. Meanwhile, the neutral grey background serves to transform the tower-like landscape into an object. This opens a conversation about where a landscape ends and what lies beyond it. Through works like these I seek to confront the viewer with questions, to pull them into imaginal space and to push them back into the physical world we share. Ideally, my paintings provide experiences which provoke questions, conversations, and ideas about our natural world. I aim to re-establish a sense of connection and belonging to Nature.

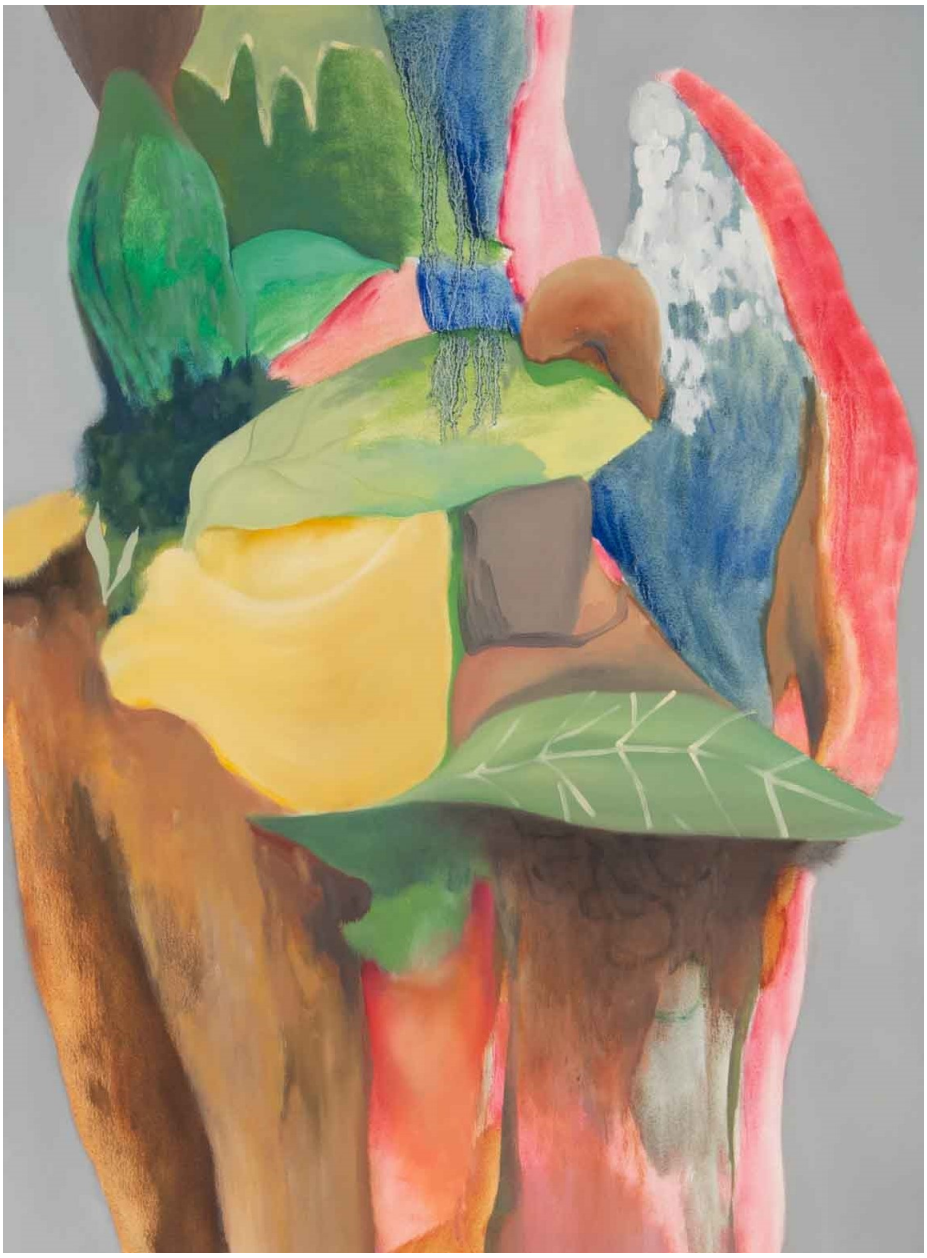

Figure 12 April Matisz, Tower, 2023, oil on paper, 30 x 22"

Ancient Landscapes

As I have shown, Worthy's *Invisible Nature* highlights how globalisation and the accompanying cultural shift has impacted the way people relate to Nature. Most humans live in urban centers, which are vastly different from past landscapes that humans inhabited. This disconnect has caused serious

problems. The human bodies that inhabit the contemporary world have been sculpted by millions of years of evolution. How we think and feel, what we imagine and desire: these impulses are, in part, directed and informed by past environments that may of us no longer find ourselves living in. Human psychology can be ill-suited for those of us residing in cities and engaging with virtual spaces.[10]

Hominid evolution and evolutionary psychology are fields that have long fascinated me.[11] These disciplines illuminate the deep entanglement humans have with the environment. The ceramic feet I sculpt are linked to these interests. Clay is a material gathered from digging into the earth and digging into the earth is a common strategy of scientists who study our world and reveal the past. Forming clay into feet serves as a metaphor for my desire to uncover the secrets of the past.

When positioned in relation to one another, my clay feet recall movements: walking, dancing, or migrating. Depending on how they are arranged they may recall organised structures of ancient human societies or point to human conflict. They are playful and theatrical, but hint at something more serious. A reading of the feet as ancient is supported by their predominantly earthy colourations, worn edges and markings. The lone foot or pair of feet implies a body, which is absent. This absent body exists as an ancestral ghost that echoes within us. Our bodies, behaviours, and desires have been shaped by ancestors who lived long ago. This absent body haunts us, a reminder of our mortality. This haunting need not be detrimental; it provides opportunities to understand how Nature has shaped us and why. It reminds us of where we came from and where we might be headed.

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[10] For more on this, see Buss, D.M. (2019). *Evolutionary Psychology: The New Science of the Mind* (6th ed.). Routledge.

[11] White studying biology I took courses relating to archaeology, hominid evolution, stone age societies, and the first peopling of new territories.

Figure 13 April Matisz, Moving Landscape, 2023, ceramics, vegetation, size variable

When positioned with my paintings (see appendix for thesis documentation), the clay feet perform several functions. They bring the idea of traversing a landscape more forcefully into being. Situating ceramic feet in relation to the painting activates the painting, the feet and the space between them; it enlivens the works and their relationships to each other. The absence of a body suggests a distant presence that is felt by the viewers. Additionally, like Aram's *Blue Backdrop for Minor Art*, the ceramic feet serve to untether the painting from the wall.

Chapter 3 *Relating to Nature*

Representing nature in painting

Much has been written about how the concept of Nature has been shaped by its representation in painting. The landscapes I paint present a particular idea of Nature that has been shaped by my background in the biological sciences. The diversity and complexity of our world is enormous and fascinating and my landscapes like *Rabbit for Dante* and *Grasslands* (figures 14 and 15) burst with an ecological vibrancy that demands to be considered as well. The ecologically rich worlds are part fact and part fiction, weaving realistic and species-specific organisms together with imaginary and fanciful imagery. These depictions allow audiences to dwell on the world's ecology and the possibilities it holds. As with the work of Michael Armitage, I interrupt and complicate my landscapes with layers of mark-making, jarring the viewer from a complacent reading. I use sensuous colours and ambiguous forms like Peter Doig to add mystery and sublime sensibility to my worlds. I employ awkward shapes, compositions and colour combinations to instil viewers with the experience of the uncanny and unfamiliar, like Amy Sillman. In representing Nature thusly, I articulate relationships *with* Nature that are similarly jarring, mysterious and unfamiliar. Such a relationship with Nature is necessary, as it forces the viewer to recognize and consider what they do not know. Recall that according to Rachel Jones, not knowing "renew[s] our capacity to think". Our capacity to think *must* be renewed if we are to combat the ecological crisis facing our world.

Figure 14 April Matisz, Rabbit for Dante, 2021, acrylic on YUPO, 22 x 40", 56 x 102cm

Figure 15 April Matisz, Grasslands, 2023, acrylic on YUPO, 30 x 42", 76 x 107cm

A Puzzle of Being Human

When I dwell on personal and collective relationships with nature, a question persists: why do we struggle so much to find our place in Nature? Above, I referred to the philosophical, religious and scientific ideas within Western societies that contributed to this struggle. In my practice I explore another idea that explains, in part, this schism between human and nature: the distinction between human and non-human animals.

The distinction between humans and animals is based on the former's capacity to “respond to or use a system of significant symbols” (Faules and Alexander, 5). This behaviour has a strong biological and evolutionary basis. The archaeological record is peppered with evidence of symbolic behaviour carried out by *Homo sapiens*: carvings, paintings and burial practices suggest that symbolic behaviour emerged first in Africa, and then in other parts of the world (Gibbons). Some archaeologists argue that Neanderthals had the capacity for symbolic thought, as evidenced by bone carvings discovered in Northern Germany (Leder et al.) While convincing, German philosopher Heidegger conceptualised another way in which humans differ from non-human animals. Giorgio Agamben examines Heidegger’s ideas in his book, *The Open: Man and Animal*. Agamben points out that distinctions between humans and non-humans have traditionally been based on humans’ likeness to God, their capacity for language, or their supreme intellectual and reasoning abilities. But Heidegger rejected these explanations (50). Instead, Heidegger proposed a distinguishing human feature rooted in the way a human relates to their environment.

Heidegger was interested in the ideas of German zoologist Jakob von Uexkull, who argued that each organism has its own perceptual world. The objective space we collectively inhabit thus contains an “infinite variety of perceptual worlds” that are “all equally perfect and linked together” (Agamben 40). Uexkull’s investigations involved a “radical dehumanization of the image of nature” (39). His ideas were instrumental in the development of ecology, and they resonate within my paintings.

The ecological complexity in my works is informed by the reality that each organism has a unique perceptual world. Each creature is limited to its own perceptual world, and that which is outside its scale or perceptual boundaries is disregarded, overlooked, or not comprehended. The incomprehensible is a void, an ambiguous form, an indeterminate brushstroke. In *Thinking Around the Voids (figure 15)*, I depict a head-like form which attempts to think through the unknown. Perhaps they

Figure 16 April Matisz, Thinking Through Voids, 2022, acrylic spray paint and pastel on paper, 22.5 x 22.5", 57 x 57 cm

speculate what exists beyond their perceptual field. This form of reflection strikes me as an essential element of the human condition.

Uexkull described the environment specific to a given organism as containing a broad array of features that held a kind of significance for that organism. Termed "carriers of significance", these

features were the only things of interest to the organism. A flower is a carrier of significance for a bee, a hiding place a carrier of significance for a rabbit. An organisms' perceptual world would contain many carriers, related to its need to seek safety, find food, select a mate, and so forth.

Heidegger uses the term "captivated" to describe that way animals related to the things in their environment that are carriers of significance (53). Non-human animals are not aware of their captivity; they are 'closed' to it and the possibilities that exist outside their perceptual world (Agamben 53). In contrast, a human animal has a special awareness of the carriers of significance that exist in her perceptual world. She too is captivated by them, but she is aware of her captivation. The awareness of captivation leads to a kind of "opening" of the possibilities of perception that exist elsewhere but are not available for her. Agamben states, "The awakening of the living being to its own being-captivated, this anxious and resolute opening to a not open, is the human" (70).

Our human predicament is one in which we are aware of our own captivation. In addition, we are aware of an essential distinction between human animals and non-human animals: our capacity for abstract and symbolic representation of thought, and what Soper described as an "urge for cultural transcendence" (Politics of Nature 61). "[T]here is no escaping conceptual anthropocentricity," Soper writes, but she continues that there is also "nothing deplorable about being caught within it" (The Politics of Nature 60).

The work *Together We Are Moons* touches on this predicament. Two strange figures find themselves together in a world and their glowing yellow heads seem to turn towards each other. They hold flipper-like hands while large and awkward feet offer tentative support. The title suggests that these humanoid creatures are seeking to work together as they navigate through the environment. This work suggests a philosophical quest in which clumsy-footed humans navigate their place in the world.

Figure 17 April Matisz, Together We Are Moons, 2022, acrylic spray paint, pastel, pencil and gouache on paper, 27.25 x 22.5", 69 x 57 cm

"Carrier of significance" is a term that resonates with me. Visual elements in my work carry significance: the black voids, the brushstrokes, the organic shapes. These visual elements function together to produce an image that generates an experience in the viewer. The meaning and quality of that experience depends on the carriers of significance within the work. As an artist (and human), I continually seek out, contemplate, and produce carriers of significance. The artists' signs are related not to the human need to find food, shelter or a mate, but rather to the human need to have meaning in a world where we are haunted by our own captivation.

The distinction between humans and non-human animals does not imply human exceptionalism, but rather human difference.[12] Kate Soper makes the point that we must, "be aware of the limits of our understanding; our very empathy with [non-human animals] requires us … to respect their difference from us…" (Politics of Nature 59). Like Soper, I believe that authentic engagement with the natural world requires us to recognize our humanness and respect the difference between humans and animals.

My work itself is a visible sign of my humanness, where I ponder what it means to be aware and immersed in the natural world. I seek to investigate the gap between human and Nature. Part of the gap can be attributed to Western ways of being that lead to what Williams and Worthy describe as alienation and dissociation, while another contributor to this gap is our humanness itself, as per Agamben and Heidegger. Understanding this gap in terms of its ecological and political significance is essential if we are to advance a cultural shift in how we engage with the environment.

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[12] Kate Soper has written about a trend in which countering human exceptionalism has meant denying the distinction between human animals and non-human animals (The Politics of Nature 58). Soper rejects the idea that we must put ourselves exclusively in the animal category to engage in "ecological good practice" (58). Soper is firm that this does not need to imply human exceptionalism. Rather it requires us to be, "as open as possible to the implications for non-human nature of the human forms of sensibility with which we are bound to approach it" (59). Otherwise, we risk mapping "back onto the animal…humanly elaborated needs…" (59).

Conclusion: *Painting and Enacting a Way Forwards*

Alternative Hedonism

Building an ecologically and socially just world requires re-evaluating personal and collective relationships to nature. For many of us, this demands addressing our relationship to global capitalism and consumerist culture. Soper states that the necessary changes involve "restrict[ing] the current sources of gratification and self-realization" that cause ecological damage and social injustice (Politics of Nature 66). Importantly, Soper argues that "adjustment of this kind is not so much the eradication of 'false' needs but the exploration of new pleasures" (Politics of Nature 66). Soper uses the term "alternative hedonism" to describe this mindset she believes is worth adopting (Politics of Nature 66). The notion of alternative hedonism reveals the human need for ongoing novel, unexpected and diverse experiences. In *The Politics of Nature*, Soper points out the degree to which consumerist culture has been allowed to fulfill the role of providing those vital experiences, a sentiment echoed throughout Worthy's book *Invisible Nature* (66). In representing the world in novel ways, the arts help audiences relate to the world in a similarly unexpected manner. My artworks provide viewers with an unfamiliar and unknown experience to landscapes representations, which help viewers enact new relationships to the world.

A 'choreography between entities'

There is still another sense in which the arts may help build a new world. In his essay, "Painting With the Flow of the World," Barry Schwabsky recalls Bruno Latour when he states,

> *[Latour's] lesson is that we can have a more equitable relationship with nature once we realize we are neither "one" with it nor entirely separate from it"* (25)

Latour then describes this relationship as a "choreography between entities" which mirrors the concept of "ecological thinking" that is prevalent in the writings of ecological thinkers like Timothy Morton and Donna Haraway.[13] Artist Kristina Bength recalls an analogy that reflects the choreography Latour describes: "[r]iding a horse" Bength states, "is about two bodies balancing each other and aiming to become one body" (Jansson 140). She continues:

> *If you translate this idea into painting, you might say that my body together with the tools and materials of painting create a common body, on one hand by producing a single common movement, and on the other by breaking with this movement by maintaining an external gaze and reflecting over the result* (140).

Painting can be an enactment of an attitude of equitable relationships. Artist Kristina Jansson sees her paintings "as another creature, an individual that I can poke at, mess about with and try to transform. But just as someone can only change my personality a little, I can only follow the painting's own spirit" (Jansson 142).

This "choreography between entities" is what Schwabsky sees when examining the artist's engagement with her materials (24). Within painting exists a potential to enter a dialogue with nature through materials. The painter and her paintings are "agents acting in concert" (24), and the result is something both "much more familiar and much stranger than anything we thought before" (24). Painting of this sort enacts an essential attitude that is desperately needed. Schwabsky states: "[t]hat's why painting can have a significant role to play in embodying the kind of shift in attitude toward our relation to the world around us that may be necessary to our survival" (25).

When I make art, I muddle through the materials and allow ideas to be generated. The muddling is a reciprocal activity in which I respond to the material and the material responds to my actions.

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[13] See *Staying with the Trouble* by Donna Haraway and *The Ecological Thought* by Timothy Morton.

Through intuition and observation ideas develop. They emerge wonderfully unfamiliar, gifted to me from the material, an open mind and passive sight is necessary for me to receive these gifts. This attitude of being open to receive gifts from the material world is one required by both the artist when making work and the viewer when experiencing it. Through my practice, I learn this receptive attitude, enact it, and produce works that provide the same opportunity for the viewer. In this way, my artworks function to advocate for new relationships to Nature.

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Appendix

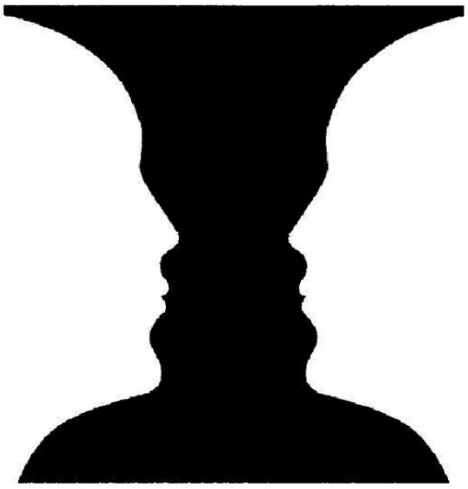

Figure 1: Rubin's Vase

Final Reflections

The Program

The overwhelm of the world and its complexity has always been difficult for me to navigate in my practice. Initially, I wanted to include everything in my paintings – all the ideas and imagery that related to my questions about humanness and our relationship to the world. During the program, I came to realize the flaw in this way of going about painting. That way of working focuses primarily on paintings' ability to represent our world rather than allowing painting to be a means to navigate the world. This is a significant shift I am still coming to understand. There is always a degree of representation that occurs in my paintings, but the way in which I arrive at it is shifting. Representations can emerge throughout a process. This process involves working with materials and thinking. In this way, the painting holds a great deal of complexity, though much of it is not visible to the audience. What is visible is a kind of resolution of material and thinking.

Throughout the program, I developed a stronger trust in painting's communicative abilities. Reading the experiences of other artists who had a painting practice was especially fruitful in this regard. They projected a strong sense of assurance in the way visual forms can convey experiences, emotions, and ideas that the audience can read. The more I came to understand this, the more skilled I became with clarifying my compositions. I no longer felt to the need to keep complicating the painting with lines, forms, fields of colour, etc. because it detracted from the experiences, emotions, and ideas the painting and I were developing. I am still coming to understand this improved way in which I am composing paintings and will likely still be battling the urge to complicate.

The Exhibition

Selecting works for the thesis exhibition was a balancing act. I needed to consider the space I had been allotted, with its sight lines, wall height and architecture, alongside my desire to showcase many of my works. I had not been able to see the way my ceramic feet worked in relation to my paintings and decided to move them about the space throughout the exhibit. This contributed to a sense of playfulness, and I had positive feedback from people working at Emily Carr who witnessed this ongoing movement. While the ceramics did not pull the paintings into the expanded field to the extent I wanted, I do think they added something interesting to the discussion about the human relationship to Nature. The ceramic feet recalled a deep connection to the land that predates any representation of Nature. Their sense of playfulness and child-like size contributes to a sense of wonder and curiosity about the world. The audience is left asking questions about what the feet are doing, where they might be going, and what that could mean.

The Defence

The defence was a difficult experience, as I was nervous and had a hard time discussing paintings that were not in front of me. Nonetheless, there were excellent questions posed. I have thought about these questions more deeply over the past few weeks.

One such question was posed by my external supervisor Monica Tap. She asked how I understood the terms landscape and Nature, which I used frequently in my thesis and during my defence. I used these terms interchangeably, though I had not considered the implication. Upon reflection, using the terms interchangeably grafts ideas from one term onto another. The term “Nature” picks up Landscape’s notion of a representation. Nature is certainly one of those abstract concepts that

is being represented continually in various cultures. The term “Landscape” is gifted Nature’s dynamism, and consideration is given to the processes that occur in the natural world. Monica Tap suggested I may be re-positioning Western Landscape painting as “Nature-painting,” and I think she is correct. She asked in a follow up message what such a shift might mean. I believe this shift speaks to a recognition that Nature contains a non-human centered agency. This is distinct from many historical representations of landscapes that served to idealize the landscape from a human-centered perspective. In historical landscape paintings, Nature was represented as gentle, picturesque, or romanticized. It was constructed as wild, unruly, terrifying, awaiting adventure and taming. Nature was projected as a place void of other humans or organisms that might think otherwise. Nature-painting, in contrast, seeks to consider the non-human. Nature-painting reveals the ways in which the concept of Nature has been shaped according to human desires. Nature-painting makes evident the abiotic and biotic processes that shape our world. Nature-painting does not exclude the human but strives to explore the relationship between humans and their natural environment.

There is an odd duality involved in “Nature-painting”. When painting aspects of Nature, I may strive to paint a non-human centric Nature, but through the act of painting I engage very deeply in my humanness. I do not believe this makes the task of “Nature-painting” futile if I am aware of this difficulty and allow myself to be challenged by it. By recognizing and questioning my human perspective, I can proceed in ways that imagine other ways of beings. While I cannot escape my humanness, I can escape human-centric thinking and imagine the needs and lives of other creatures. While this imagining only guesses how another organism exists in the world, it is still a step towards thinking about other organisms and our relationships towards them. For me, part of the spirit of “nature-painting” involves establishing a way of thinking that promotes a more equitable relationship with our natural world.

Another question posed by Monica Tapp had to do with the way I described the tenderness in which I sculpted my clay feet. I was shocked at how immediately I felt the word and became too

emotional to address the question properly. Over the following few days, I thought about why sculpting clay feet felt like such a tender and sensitive act. I realized that taking Earth and shaping it into a foot is a kind of gesture. By molding Earth into something I can understand, I become more capable of addressing it. I conceptualize these feet more as children's feet, which are the feet that I attend to in my life: trimming nails, washing, painting toes, bandaging, moisturizing. The fact that it is difficult to connect to a pile of dirt and easier to connect to a pile of dirt shaped like a child's foot is just one of those human things. Rationally I understand dirt as so vital to the health of our plant. But emotionally, the human foot, and all the memories and experiences it contains, is the thing that moves me and has meaning. The ceramic object suggests this sense of care. Given that the object is made of clay, this sense of care transposes itself from the idea of a child's foot into the Earth. It allows me to think about caring for the Earth with a similar sense of duty and love.

My internal reviewer, Rebecca Brewer, posed some questions that I had difficulty understanding during my defence. I was frustrated by my inability to understand her questions, and my lack of confidence to ask for clarification. Several weeks after the defence, however, I revisited notes made during her questions and came to some ideas about what she might have been suggesting about my practice.

Rebecca questioned how I understood my work as containing "secrets". She mentioned surrealism and automatism as movements that sought to "summon things up from the depth of the unconscious mind." I believe she thought my painting practice operated in a similar way, in which I tried to access secrets from the unconscious. I could see how the use of the work "intuition" in my thesis document could lead someone to think this is how I understood my practice. However, I do not see my paintings or my painting practice as engaging with meta-physical experiences. Rather, I see them grounded in a material reality. I think that when I paint a shape of blue, for example, my brain is going through these very material-based processes of trying to figure out what this blue form is or could be.

When I paint a textured line adjacent, my brain continues to sort out what these objects are, on their own and in relation to one another. I think about the way the brain stores information and learns- it's an awful lot of categorizations and associations. When shapes, lines, colours all come together, its like my brain is flipping through its many categories of what these things are and how they might be associated with one another. This makes the painting process fascinating. Why with a red circle do my thoughts go off in this direction? When paired with a figure, why do I start dwelling on this other idea? It comes down to the various ways my brain has learned to categorized and associate phenomena. This is the kind of a secret that my paintings hold. They reveal the cognitive architecture and learning-strategies of the mind.

One of the things Rebecca revealed to me was the importance of specificity. My urge to represent too many ideas and experiences within a single work created a general and ambiguous conversation. Focussing on more singular and specific ideas provided audiences with a more powerful experience. The painting “Worm bumps into Seed Pod” was an example of the kind of specific idea that Rebecca urged me to continue developing in my work.

Next Steps

In completing the program, I gained a much deeper understanding of my artistic practice. I have a greater confidence in my process and knowledge of paintings’ communicative abilities. Prior to this program, my art projects seemed disparate from one another, a jumble of unrelated disciplines and ideas. Connecting with other thinkers and artists, however, has helped me recognize larger themes that existed in my practice. I see my interest in evolutionary history, archaeology, and ecology within a larger framework of seeking to address human relations with Nature and existentialist concerns. Now that I understand what I’ve been doing, it is easier to see where I am going.

Moving forwards, I am excited to continue a painting practice that dives more deeply and confidently into muddling with materials. I want to merge ceramics and painting in a more direct way, combining the materials on a single support. I am working to expand and complicate my brushwork techniques, looking specifically at the paintings of Cecily Brown and Joan Mitchell. As I paint, I aim to consider consequences of reframing landscapes as Nature-paintings. I am interested in learning more about cognitive processes, such as how the brain learns and forms associations. I look forward to merging such knowledge gleaned from sciences with that of lived experiences through my painting practice.