Life on the Hudson:

A Shad's-Eye View

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Painting and Drawing

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Thesis

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My artwork interweaves human figures and other earthly beings with their gritty surroundings and psychological interiors. Pigments and oil paint mediums serve to render permutations of the self spreading through the spaces and substances inhabited and absorbed by the self. Not only are we what we eat, but the world is increasingly festooned with what we poop and spew. How does the human figure fit into the contemporary landscape? Is it possible to delineate between the wild, the domestic, and the industrial? How might these three arenas perceive, define, or degrade one another? What does our ego-driven workaday world look like to creatures living in the Hudson River? What happens to the human psyche when immersed in the Hudson River? I explore these questions from the perspective of a painter-swimmer-hiker-vagabond who is awed by migratory fish and birds. As a native of the Potomac and Hudson valleys, I am especially captivated by species that navigate their way from the Atlantic Ocean’s vastness up those big rivers to enjoy the magical intimacy of hillside tributaries. Fish spawning and birds laying eggs strike me as mystical—and even heroic—events. The dynamics of life for struggling species like the American shad and Atlantic sturgeon and the now-extinct passenger pigeon are extremely worthy—indeed urgent—subjects for contemporary painting. These paintings examine life on the Hudson from viewpoints along and below the water’s surface.

The messy entanglement of human bodies, industrial infrastructure, wild terrain, non-human creatures, and domestic spaces presents tangible conceptual challenges. Where does one stop and the other begin? Drawing heavily from Heidegger, Ian Hodder says, “We have seen that things pull together flows and
relations into various configurations... Time, matter, energy, and information are brought together into a heterogeneous bundle. Things assemble and are not isolated”(8). He goes on to establish that humans are also things and, “In the same way that all living things depend on sunlight, air or water, soil or minerals, so too all sentient beings depend on things to bring their sentience into being”(9)... “[T]hings often appear neat and distinct when you look at them from in front, but behind the scenes there are pipes, ducts, cables, refuse bins, coal bunkers, oil tanks hidden away at the back”(11). Heidegger also states that being is a mode of dwelling or of journeying in a landscape which is fluid, with the horizon inviting one to go further, beyond vision, through bodily ingress (Lund and Benediktsson 6). Bodily ingress, including through remembered and imagined bodily ingress, is a key component of how I paint the human animal into the contemporary landscape.

The four canvases chosen for this thesis show were produced and presented according to my own priorities and sensibilities, but I am indebted to other painters and thinkers for showing me various possibilities. I learned from looking at Peter Doig’s work the power of creating a dripping, rich underworld surface as a kind of psycho-spiritual stage on which a painting’s dramatic ingress can unfold. Oil-primed linen is a slick surface for oil paint to slide across and drip down. It comes on seven-foot-tall rolls which are eighteen feet in length. The linen’s wavy, furry edge and its earthy-industrial smell lend it a deliciously feral quality. You can grab it and press your nose into its unprimed side. When beginning a large studio painting, I staple the blank (white) canvas to the studio wall and establish the underpainting/ground, trying not to think about specific images but rather the general
feeling of the concept I’m exploring, smothering the canvas in pigment suspended in a combination of lavender spike oil and refined linseed oil. It is a gestural exercise that snakes upward from the bottom of the canvas in sweeping strokes and drips containing colors I envision popping through to unnerve or amplify the recognizable images that I will paint on the canvas once the non-representational under-painting has thoroughly dried. Despite their large size, these paintings are very manageable because they are not stretched on conventional stretchers. Once the painting process is finished or nearly done, the canvas can be removed from the studio wall, laid out face-up on the studio floor, stapled onto rounded-off one-by-fours, and hung freely from D-rings in the manner of scrolls. Some waviness will occur along the edges and even along the main surfaces of the works, allowing them to breathe naturally in a way that tightly stretched and framed canvases do not. Though I revere the long traditions of oil painting, I am happy to break with convention for the sake of function and convenience. One beauty of my scroll-approach to large canvases is that a nine-by-seven-foot work can be easily transported and hung by anyone with a stationwagon and a ladder. The works can even be hung outside (from a tree or a railing, for example) under conditions that would be unworkable for conventionally stretched canvases.

We humans have a long and valiant history of seeking to impose meaning and order in the world. The modern mind has tended to regard humans as operating according to rules and regulations quite separate from other forces in the world. Hence our profound surprise and adamant denial when faced, for example, with the fact that burning fossil fuels on a massive scale changes the global climate.
We are similarly incredulous to discover that our pollution of rivers and dumping of plastics have combined with rising acidity and overfishing to devastate what we once regarded as unfathomably vast marine populations. I increasingly sense that, in the arts as well as the sciences, it is in the feral passages between our punctured notions of nature and culture that creative genius leaks into consciousness. These paintings serve as campsites in those feral, seeping passages. The landscape, creatures, and infrastructure occupying the surface of the narrative painting collide and mingle with the abstract action beneath the surface. Painting recognizable things and scenes over the drippy under-painting feels very much like consciousness spreading over and colonizing unconscious reality, which pops through the veil in uncanny ways. These paintings are largely about the underwater world as a parallel, hidden reality suffering the blows and indignities cast upon it by us land dwellers. The land is akin to our conscious, ego-driven reality. The underwater world is where our effluents are channeled as a matter of course. Everything eventually ends up in the river, and everything in the river is headed to the sea, and all of it is slowly deteriorating, invisible from the perspective of the workaday world. Our sewage systems and dams and power plants deny the heroic and mystical forces a spot on the collective radar. The underwater world, which for me shares many metaphorical qualities with our deeper, ancient human psyches, is unknown to most of us. Yet the health of the river and its creatures serve as indicators of human health, including human mental health. I know that for me and for many of my friends and family, swimming in a creek or river or the ocean is an extremely therapeutic part of life. The heartbreaking fact is that we are making the
Earth’s water uninhabitable and even unsafe to swim in. The resignation and desperation which comes with accepting this is almost liberating.

The under-paintings beneath the imagery on the surface of these paintings drip with these and other sad sentiments of our Anthropocene geological epoch, this era when the fallout from our industrial civilization radically altered the chemistry of the biosphere. Paleontologists are now in agreement that a paper-thin stratum of the geological record will show that the natural world was, for a time, shaped by cultural (i.e. industrial) forces ultimately subject to natural laws that could not be swayed (Kolbert). Surrendering the cherished concepts of nature and culture is no easy feat, and they do not blend very convincingly (Morton). And yet we don’t have any better concepts to replace them with. A feeling of being adrift in the confusion of this combined flow infuses these four canvases. What does the bridge mean and why does its geometry combine with that of the flying and nesting pigeons in *Man Standing in Rowboat*? The bridge’s geometry flattens and melds with that of the network of pigeons. Together, they occupy the boatman’s lamentation of the Anthropocene, this contemporary era in which human life and indeed all life are caught in the combined flow of what used to be called nature and culture. Culture has been annexed by industrial capitalism. Nature became a quaint, romantic term applied to forces not shaped by human culture (Morton). But now that industrial forces are irrevocably altering ocean levels, plate tectonics, weather patterns, and global temperatures, and we are witnessing massive droughts, floods, hydro-fracturing-induced earthquakes, oceanic dead zones, and mass-extinctions all over the planet, our old conceptual divisions between nature and culture have become
anachronisms. Modern artists tended to be very skeptical and even hostile toward industrial-capitalist notions of human progress. Art was often a vehicle for expressing tremendous fury and partisanship in political and intellectual history. Amidst the rubble of modern promises, the machinery of industrial capitalism churns more powerfully now than ever, but largely out of view. The Hudson Valley, for example, is largely post-industrial, no longer the site of production it was a century ago (Lewis). Much of the old infrastructure remains while the land and its creatures struggle to recover some semblance of their former vitality (Stone).

This series of works offers big, dreamy glimpses of the primitive thrill of being alive in an iconic landscape festooned with what swirls in the wake of the Enlightenment’s promises. I trace our cultural predicament back to its Greco-Roman roots, locating some of the nature-culture rub in the remains of Apollo Lykeios, that lupine incarnation of Apollo which stood in the Lyceum in Athens. Past, present, and future are layered in a collage of lament and longing, embracing absence and loss while peering through the murk to other possibilities. In the twelfth grade at Millbrook School, my interest in the tension between nature and culture was initiated when I learned about the Greek fascination with Apollo and Dionysus, brothers who reflect our more controlled and rational natures versus our wilder, less accountable tendencies. *Apollo Lykeios on the Hudson* weaves the theme of “Apollo in the form of a wolf”, as Apollo Lykeios is typically translated, into contemporary concerns. Apollo Lykeios is arguably our most pure and ancient emblem of Enlightenment sentiments and notions. The term refers to a particular incarnation of the Greek god to which the Lyceum in pre-Classical Athens was
dedicated. In this case, the term applies to the series of bronze sculptures produced by the classical master-sculptor Praxiteles. One of these bronzes stood in the Lyceum in Athens during Aristotle’s day, but all of the old bronze Apollo Lykeioses are lost now. This Roman copy, battered and dismembered, is lovingly displayed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, down at the mouth of the Hudson River. It serves as a beautiful and tragic reminder of our culture’s struggle to exist disentangled from nature’s dominance.

Greco-Roman infrastructure has formed the blueprint of our infrastructure on many levels, but most obviously in terms of law, bureaucratic administration and governance, civil engineering, aesthetics, oratory, and spectacle. The Roman Empire is where we see these ideals and infrastructure develop into a dizzyingly precarious behemoth. We still marvel at Roman ruins, and our Washington, D.C.-based empire has been built to resemble the Roman example. The ancient Greeks were the primary source of most Roman values, including their religious, philosophical, and artistic beliefs. I find the Greeks’ bronzes, pottery, and tragedies of the classical and Hellenistic periods especially mesmerizing and even unsurpassed. Certainly classical Athens was home to plenty of ignorance and injustice, but the ancient Greek view of the individual’s relationship to his or her internal psyche and to the landscape and gods strikes me as refreshing and straightforward. The seasons, rivers, and human virtues were personified in the visual and literary arts in an intriguing combination of animism and civic responsibility. Personification and the Greeks’ high regard for the human body seemed to be the glue. The Apollo Lykeios marble sculpture that forms the subject of my painting was uncovered by British
archaeologists in the seventeenth century. It was mistakenly assumed to be a representation of Bacchus. As was the fashion during the eighteenth century, the ancient torso was rehabilitated and outfitted with arms, legs, and a head befitting the god depicted. When the sculpture came into the Metropolitan Museum's collection, scholars determined that the torso was actually of Apollo, and the appendages were removed. It is beautifully battered and serves as a fine monument to our befuddled notions of divinity, nature, and culture.

My investigations into ancient Greek spiritual practices revealed that the ancient Greeks also established shrines next to springs and rivers in order to honor the deities of those bodies of water. The deities were generally personified and anthropomorphized in the form of nubile nymphs or bull-like men. The Swimmers painting began as an exploration of these ancient Greek notions but ended up veering away from a reference to any particular time or culture. The young boy and horse featured in Jockey come from the Jockey of Artemision, a life-sized Hellenistic bronze sculpture from the second century B.C. found by fishermen off the coast of Italy in 1928. The young jockey appears to be from a North African culture, based on his facial features and hairstyle. I am drawn to the very open and engaged pose of the boy and horse. They gallop enthusiastically –perhaps underwater– in an industrial environment inhabited by disintegrating shad and a marble Aphrodite of Syracuse (also derived from a bronze original by Praxiteles).

Disintegration, entanglement, and endurance are themes that recur in these works. In Man Standing in Rowboat, a man’s mind is consumed by a ghostly network of passenger pigeons. A species endemic to North America, the passenger
pigeon population numbered six billion 1800. Clouds of migrating passenger pigeons were ubiquitous all over the United States. Inconceivably, the last wild passenger pigeon was shot dead in 1900. The last captive one, Martha, died at the Cincinnati Zoo in 1914. How does an individual human in 2016 connect to this reality? Are we cogs locked into serving the mechanisms of our culture’s infrastructure? Or do we identify with the earth’s living organisms whose vitality and well-being depend on the healthy functioning of ecosystems? Or are we performing a balancing act on the Anthropocene’s shifting waters, trying (to the extent we have spare time, energy, or resources) to locate our position in a very complex situation? The rowboat, the Hudson’s massive flowing waters (which I routinely witness flowing amazingly upstream), the truss bridge, the constellation of passenger pigeons, and even the flowing air… all represent our interconnectedness in networks and systems that overlap and engage one another. Contemporary culture is increasingly defined by networks. Our elaborate infrastructure is set up to serve the needs of individual human beings, whom I have presented here as naked animals. Lucian Freud presented the human animal in its habitat with ruthless realism. My work is a romantic, fatalistic departure from modernism without the glib irony of postmodernism.

There is much to be discouraged by, but there are also many people and organizations that are making rivers like the Hudson safe for human and fish families to enjoy safely together. Riverkeeper and its allies have been invaluable to me in my investigations of infrastructural projects like the Tappan Zee Bridge replacement and Indian Point Nuclear Power Plant. Jon Bowermaster’s films expose
the dynamics of contemporary river life and how our industrial projects are
devastating fish populations, with particularly grave results for shad and sturgeon.
Pete Seeger’s life and songs are so instructive regarding consciousness-raising and
direct action. The Cary Institute in Millbrook has conducted and consolidated
valuable studies on water quality, notably the impact of pharmaceuticals,
agriculture, urban-industrial run-off, and dams on the Hudson River’s water quality.
They also study forest health from various angles (Stone). The National Geographic
has records concerning water quality, temperature, and the myriad contents and
problems of the world’s oceans. In my travels in India, Indonesia, and Thailand, I
was impressed by how people’s daily routines and mental health incorporated
regular, intimate contact with the landscape and a concern for the well-being of its
spirits. In particular, I admired local shrines to rivergods and spirits found under
bridges and at the bases of large riparian trees. I infuse that fascination into my
treatment of life in and along the Hudson River.

The Hudson River valley and its oil painters were a leading reflection and
source of environmental consciousness in the nineteenth century. Today we tend to
regard their transcendentalist attitude as precisely Romantic and even as part and
parcel of the paradigm that allowed for the industrial-scale ravishing of the planet’s
resources that has defined the last century and a half. Today, thinkers like Naomi
Klein, Elizabeth Kolbert, Jared Diamond, Jedediah Purdy, and Timothy Morton are
unpacking and re-defining terms like nature and the environment. The idealized,
Anglo-Saxon view of the landscape rendered by Thomas Cole, Frederick Edwin
Church, and Jasper Cropsey is being eclipsed these days by Alexis Rockman and
Rackstraw Downes. George Bellows made bold strides toward a grittier rendition of river life a hundred years earlier. My work certainly fits into this unfolding tradition and conversation. I would add to the above influences that of Courbet and Manet, whose innovations and approaches have been enduring inspirations for me.

Oil painting is an art form that I have always found compelling. Having oil paintings and their reproductions on my walls is fundamental to my sense of well-being. They provide a portal into a painter’s vision. Paintings are projections of the artist’s internal light and landscape. The richness, versatility, and durability of oil painting have made it my favorite medium, but I also love to draw and make watercolors and even oil sketches on paper. I am struck by how the history of oil painting parallels that of industrial capitalism, both rising as they did in northwest Europe in the late fifteenth century. The series of paintings in this thesis show part of my lamentation and celebration of *wildness enduring* in a world where oil painters are the watchful companions and coy beneficiaries of industrial capitalism’s rapacious, endlessly resourceful tyranny. I agree with what Nora Griffin wrote in response to “The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World” show at the MOMA last year: “...[T]his language seems too reductive and denies the embodied experience of looking at and making a painting... Painting begins with a specific subjectivity, that of its maker, and I come to a painting to have a communion with that subjectivity.” Referring to the exhibition catalog’s essay, she goes on, “I think this is the first essay I’ve read where Zombies and Cannibals are celebrated instead of feared. Where’s the human in all this? There was a pervasive ‘betterment through technology’ refrain to Hoptman’s text that was troubling...
Painting has a ton of longing in it, the medium is a form of longing, and the burden (and joy) of history is not lightened by its digital accessibility." I have certainly engaged digital sources for imagery, contemporary data, and historical threads in my longing to make my paintings' subjectivity more immersive. My paintings celebrate a primitivist immersion in local landscape, resisting the dehumanizing negation of intimacy that increasingly defines contemporary painting in New York.

The example of Sharon Butler’s “New Casualist” mode of painting abstractly has given me confidence to be fluid but un-slick in my handling of representational and non-representational components in my work. I am gaining traction in my effort to move from being outside the picture’s realm looking in. Immersing my viewpoint in the Hudson’s waters has enabled me to employ abstract elements to locate the viewpoint inside the picture looking out. I also concur with the New Casualist finger in the eye of formal conventions and even canvas stretching. Greg Lindquist writes a lot about nature and what the word means. He is a leader in the movement to make art that addresses our current crisis and which raises consciousness without being shrill, dreamy-eyed, or precious. He doesn't have much time for the spiritual or therapeutic aspects of the great outdoors, and he’s doing a fine job of squeezing Romanticism out of contemporary art, for better or for worse. Alexi Worth is very insightful and knowledgeable regarding art history and contemporary artists. He deeply values painting, including figurative painting, as an expression of our current cultural condition. He also appreciates the same mountains and rivers that I love. Eric Fischl places contemporary Americans in sunny and stormy waters, handling the paint beautifully, fascinated by the current
state of our culture, and delving into his own psychology and that of couples in very compelling ways. Lucian Freud’s portraits of Leigh Bowery and of Raymond Jones (and his rat) are so beautifully rendered and show the human animal in its constructed habitat. Kaye Donachie’s muted, monochromatic palette and psychologically charged canvases riffing on the poetics of simple sentiments inspire me to paint, from the heart, what surrounds me. As Van Gogh said, “Sooner or later, feeling and love for nature always find a response in people interested in art. The painter’s duty is to immerse himself wholly in nature and to use all his intelligence for putting his feelings into his work, so that it becomes intelligible to others... the sympathy they earn sooner or later arriving as a result of their sincerity” (Van Gogh 183).

The four canvases in the thesis exhibition interweave my notions of river life and human consciousness. They demonstrate a love for oil painting and the history of art while calling into question aesthetic conventions and conceptual assumptions regarding the divisions between nature and culture. I employ images of the Beacon Bridge, a rowboat, ancient Greco-Roman sculpture, river deities, swimming human forms, shad, sturgeon, and pigeons. Brought together, they carry the viewer from the river’s bottom (where sturgeon dwell), up the bridge’s piling, pier, and trussing. Transitions between the fish realm underwater and human realm on land are fluid. History, memory, fantasy, and projections of the future comingle in a mash-up of ancient, archetypal obsessions and urgent contemporary concerns.
BIBLIOGRAPHY AND WORKS CITED


Images:

1. *Jockey (7’ x 4.5’)* Oil on linen, 2016
2. *Apollo Leikos on the Hudson (5’ x 7’)* Oil on linen, 2016
3. *Swimmers (4.5’ x 7’)* Oil on linen, 2016
4. *Man Standing in Rowboat (9’ x 7’)* Oil on linen, 2016
5. *Green Bathers* (54" x 54") Oil on linen, 2015
6. *Injured Bather* (60" x 40") Oil on linen, 2015
7. *Blue Beacon* (4' x 6') Oil and digital transfer on linen, 2015
8. *Red Beacon* (40” x 72”) Oil and digital transfer on linen, 2015.

9. *Bridge Dasher* (30” x 24”) Acrylic, graphite, and oil on paper, 2014

10. *October 29 Dash* (48” x 36”) Oil and digital transfer on linen, 2015
11. *Twinkletoes* (24" x 30") Oil on linen, 2015

12. *Falls Climber* (6' x 4') Oil and digital transfer on linen, 2015

13. *Fishy Details* (12" x 9") Inkjet print on paper, 2015
14. *Interloper* (40” x 60”) Oil and digital transfer on linen, 2015

15. *Studio Ascender* (36 x 48) Oil on linen, 2015
17. *River Nymphs with Shad* (48” x 36”) Oil on linen, 2016
18. *Digital Study for Man Standing in Rowboat* (12” x 9”) Inkjet on paper, 2016
19. *Mid-Hudson Oak* (14” x 11”) Oil and digital transfer on linen, 2015

20. *Digitized Drawing of Trout and Shad* (12” x 9”) Inkjet on paper, 2015
21. *Digitized Drawing of GW Bridge Fragment* (9” x 12”) Inkjet on paper, 2015