Chariots of the Anthropocene

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MFA Thesis: Printmaking

State University of New York at New Paltz

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Introduction

My research focusses on the causes and effects of global warming. Related subjects of inquiry include ecology, pollution and environmental degradation, endangered species, land and water use, mapping, ownership rights, capitalism, colonialism, ecojustice and mankind’s relationship with nature. As we enter further into this uncertain new Anthropocene age these subjects are becoming areas of great concern for many of the planet’s inhabitants. In looking for how to express this concern in a visually compelling way, I became interested in the romantic concept of sublime nature and how it might pertain to global climate destabilization. This led me to revisit the work of Thomas Cole. Cole was a preeminent American landscape painter during the early 19th century, who often depicted the idea of the sublime in his landscape paintings and whose writing, *Essay on American Scenery*, is considered one of the early roots of the environmental movement.

Many phenomena linked to global warming can be experienced directly. Stands of dead pine trees in the western mountains killed by Pine Beetle infestation, mega hurricanes, mega wild fires, drought and flooding, for example, are all readily observable. Raising our awareness of how these and other climate related events are interconnected and caused by global warming, however, requires some further investigation. Effort is needed in order to increase our understanding, not only of the physical science involved (the ‘how’) but of the underlying cultural and historical phenomena that have brought us here (the ‘why’). My own research into these subjects is conducted primarily through reading, and may also include watching films and video, listening to lectures, and visiting museums and exhibits. Another form of research for me involves direct contact with nature. I find inspiration in the landscape through walking, hiking and working outdoors “en plein air.” This inspiration, in turn, provides fresh sustenance for my
studio work. I carry a camera with me on my walks and take photographs of plants, rock
formations and other natural objects and patterns that I find interesting, then use these photos as
resource material. The color sensations that I experience in nature often inform the color palette
that I choose in my work.

This series of prints begins a body of work that addresses the subject of climate change,
including man’s role in accelerating it and exacerbating its effects. I chose the medium of
monotype because it is a painterly printmaking process which allows for a spontaneous method
of working conducive to a more abstract, freer form of expression. Monotype is a printmaking
process in which an image is made from a smooth non-absorbent surface that has been inked.
Because the matrix is smooth, or unarticulated, there is no repeatable image being transferred
therefore each print is unique. Using a large piece of plexiglass as a matrix, my technique
involves printing multiple layers on top of one another. Ideas and associative meanings, signified
by color and mark making, are printed in layers superimposed on top of preceding layers. In this
way an overall composition is formed by combining individual layers. This is suggestive of
multiple natural phenomena interconnecting and combining to form an overall climate. On top of
these multiple layer monotypes I add screen printed elements emphasizing other key concepts.
Screen printing is a process whereby ink is pulled across a stretched mesh over a substrate.
Where the mesh is open ink transfers to the substrate, areas where the mesh is blocked, using a
stencil or some other means, will not receive ink. Here I combine hand rendered passages with
digital images taken from maps to represent man’s engineered changes to the natural world.
These mixed-media prints are a personal visual response to the ideas and evidence that I have
encountered through my research.
Enter the Anthropocene

“...it is clear that human beings are now operating as a major geological agent at the planetary scale, and that their activities have already changed the trajectory of many key Earth processes, some of them irreversibly, and in doing so have imprinted an indelible mark on the planet.” –The Working Group on the Anthropocene: Summary of Evidence and Interim Recommendations

First coined in 2002 by Paul Crutzen, a Nobel Prize-winning atmospheric chemist, the term Anthropocene (from anthropos meaning “human” and cene meaning “new”) has become widely used to describe this current time on the planet in which human activity has caused major changes to the planet’s natural systems. In 2016, the Working Group on the Anthropocene, a committee of geologists, made recommendations to officially add the designation to the geologic time scale to describe the current geologic epoch. Distinctive changes marking this new epoch include increased erosion and soil loss, sea level rise, ocean acidification, increase in extinction rates and increased levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. These global-wide disruptions are occurring on such an immense scale that it is difficult for people to comprehend the scope of the problem. These large-scale changes—major disruptions to the planet’s systems—remain “uncannily abstract,” writes Eva Horn, talking about some of the challenges of raising awareness of climate change in her essay on the work of Justin Guariglia, an artist whose work deals with climate change. “It is hard to observe species loss. It is impossible to sense rising levels of CO₂ or the acidification of the oceans. The uncanny thing about the Anthropocene is that its vastness

and complexity exceeds our ways of experiencing and comprehending.” 2 Other related effects of global warming include rising temperatures, rising sea levels, ocean acidification, ‘super storms,’ ‘mega fires,’ drought, pollution, overdevelopment, resource depletion, environmental destruction, habitat loss, mass extinction of species, food scarcity, increasing political and social instability.

Reinterpreting Thomas Cole’s *Course of Empire* in the age of global warming

“In this age, when a meager utilitarianism seems ready to absorb every feeling and sentiment, and what is called improvement, in its march, makes us fear that the bright and tender flowers of the imagination will be crushed beneath its iron tramp, it would be well to cultivate the oasis that yet remains to us, and to cherish the impressions that nature is ever ready to give, as an antidote to the sordid tendencies of modern civilization.” – Thomas Cole, *Essay on American Scenery* 3

Thomas Cole, who was born in England in 1801 and emigrated with his family to the United States in 1818, became one of America’s most influential early landscape painters and is considered the founder of the Hudson River School. Not only was Cole trying to cultivate an appreciation of America’s magnificent natural scenery, he was ahead of his time in sounding an alarm warning of its impending destruction at the hands of economic development. He had witnessed first-hand the environmental destruction brought about by the industrial revolution in England and Europe and was greatly distressed when he saw the same kind of destruction taking

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place in this country. In his *Essay on American Scenery*, which he delivered as a lecture to the American Lyceum Society in New York City, in the spring of 1835, Cole noted that the “beauty of such landscapes are quickly passing away—the ravages of the axe are daily increasing—the most noble scenes are made desolate, and oftentimes with a wantonness and barbarism scarcely credible in a civilized nation.”

Thomas Cole’s masterpiece *Course of Empire* series, which depicts the rise and fall of an imaginary civilization, is a fitting commentary for our times. The series consists of five large canvases, each one showing a stage in the rise and fall of an imaginary empire. Cole titled the five stages: *The Savage State, The Arcadian State, Consummation of Empire, Destruction* and *Desolation*. (Figure 1) In a letter to his patron, Luman Reed, Cole described the series as illustrating “…an epitome of Man—showing the natural changes of landscape, and those effected by man in his progress from barbarism to civilization—to luxury—to the vicious state, or state of destruction—and to the state of ruin and desolation.” If Cole were alive today, he would no doubt believe that our empire has indeed reached the vicious state and that its destruction is immanent.

I began by looking at Cole’s famous *Oxbow* painting (Figure 2), in which I saw a metaphor for a continuum, or continuous flowing, depicted as the flow of water—the source of life—with its natural ability to overcome any obstacle. There is also the flow of human “progress” which is cyclic and at times seems to regress rather than proceed. In depicting this element of water, and the idea of continuing, I used images of rivers taken from topographic maps, choosing one major river from each of the five major continents to emphasize the global-

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4 Cole 21.
wide scope of climate change. I decided to base these prints on Cole’s *Course of Empire* series following the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, feeling that it was an apt commentary for our time. Reinterpreting the series in contemporary times of global warming, the first panel represents—not a “savage” state, as Cole called it, but a nature-centric preindustrial age in which humans are living in harmony with nature. The second, no longer “pastoral,” corresponds to the beginning of the industrial age, a time when wanton human-caused environmental destruction increases dramatically. This is what Cole was warning about. Carbon levels in the atmosphere begin rising. The third panel represents the 20th century, in which the empire has reached the zenith of its power. The atomic bomb has been detonated (leaving a distinctive signature of unusual isotopes that could define the beginning of the Anthropocene).6 Scientists begin logging levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide which are rising at alarming rates. In the fourth panel, irreversible anthropogenic changes to the planet’s system have been set in motion, altering climate conditions that have been stable for thousands of years. The last panel represents the unknown future continuation of life on a fundamentally different planet. In Cole’s series, the scene in each of the five paintings takes place at a different time of day beginning with early morning, in the *The Savage State*, and ending with twilight in the last painting, *Desolation*. I shifted this slightly in my series so that the last panel takes place not in the twilight of the present day but in the beginning of a new day to emphasize that life on the planet will continue. I titled these: *Dawn, Morning, High Noon, Twilight* and *New Day*. A repeating “sun” element forms an arc across the span of prints, further illustrating the idea of a continuing cycle. This is also a metaphor of man’s eternal noble quest—a meaning that one might similarly ascribe to the distant mountain that Cole placed in each scene of his *Course of Empire* series.

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Chariots of “progress”

“It is not to deny the seriousness of our ecological predicament, nor to dismiss the urgency with which it needs repair and redress, to wonder whether, in fact, a new set of myths are what the doctor should order as a cure for our ills.” –Simon Schama Landscape and Memory

In Cole’s third painting of the series, Consummation of Empire, the “summit of human glory” has been attained. The empire is based upon the Greek and Roman empires, as evidenced by the architecture of the buildings and other structures. Thus, the idea of the chariot comes to mind as a metaphor for both man’s agency in the world and natural cycles. Helios was the Greek sun god who rode is golden chariot across the sky each day, repeating a cycle of rising and setting. He is a male deity, made in man’s image. Chariots are horse-powered machines, instruments of agency riding on wheels and axels, driven by men. But even more than mechanical devices, the real agency manifests from belief systems that separate man from nature and exalt wealth and power. Mankind’s disregard for nature, in his constant pursuit of wealth, power and conquest is what has brought us to where we are now, at the threshold of climate catastrophe.

8 Schuyler 28.
Conclusion

“Ultimately, to stay grounded in a world that is out of whack, we must deepen our connections—to the natural world, to other people, and to the sacred, however we define that.” –Betsy Taylor

*Sustainable Planet: Solutions for the Twenty-first Century*  
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Researching the causes and effects of global warming, along with concern for the environment, has informed my practice of making art. As a result, my choice of materials and processes are more in dialog with these issues I’m interested in. I address issues of pollution, water use, and consumer waste by using repurposed or recycled materials when possible, and/or employing environmentally friendlier techniques. I’ve greatly reduced the use of mineral spirits and turpentine from my studio practice, preferring to use environmentally safer alternatives. The works in this exhibit combine printmaking techniques that do not require the use of very toxic solvents or acids. Equipment used in printing the monotype layers which were printed with oil-based inks was cleaned and degreased with a mixture of vegetable oil and soap, and non-toxic biodegradable cleaner instead of mineral spirits. The silkscreen layers were printed using water-soluble inks.

My aim is to make work that engages people visually. I want to make something that people find beautiful and interesting to look at, that will hold their attention, as they begin deciphering its meaning. The intended audience for this installation includes those who are already aware of the issues of global warming as well as those who are beginning to become aware. My wish is to raise awareness of the issues associated with global warming and offer tribute to remember those who have suffered—and will suffer—the consequences.

Illustrations

Fig. 1 Thomas Cole, *The Course of Empire: Destruction*, 1836, oil on canvas, 33 ¼ x 63 ¼ inches. New-York Historical Society

Fig. 2 Thomas Cole, *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow*, 1836, oil on canvas, 51 ½ x 76 inches. Metropolitan Museum of Art
Installation view of *Chariots of the Anthropocene*
Installation view of Chariots of the Anthropocene

Installation view of Chariots of the Anthropocene
Chariots of the Anthropocene: I. (Dawn), 2019
Monotype with silkscreen on Arches paper
42 x 36 inches
Chariots of the Anthropocene: II. (Morning), 2019
Monotype with silkscreen on Arches paper
42 x 36 inches
Chariots of the Anthropocene: III. (High Noon), 2019
Monotype with silkscreen on Arches paper
42 x 36 inches
Chariots of the Anthropocene: IV. (Twilight), 2019
Monotype with silkscreen on Arches paper
42 x 36 inches
Chariots of the Anthropocene: V. (New Day), 2019
Monotype with silkscreen on Arches paper
42 x 36 inches
Installation view of Chariots of the Anthropocene
MFA Thesis I Exhibit
Chandler Gallery
Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art
State University of New York at New Paltz
Bibliography


CHARIOTS OF THE ANTHROPOCENE

David Munford
MFA Thesis Exhibition

Opening Reception:
Friday, May 10, 2019
5pm to 7pm

Exhibition Dates/Hours:
May 10—13, 2019
11am to 5pm

Chandler Gallery
Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art
State University of New York at New Paltz
1 Hawk Drive, New Paltz, NY 12561
www.newpaltz.edu/dorskymuseum
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