

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

My
Human Nature

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The road is a worn mix of dirt and gravel with deep, narrow trenches on both sides. My feet scuff and kick at the small stones as I carelessly meander down its path through 'my' forest. I am barely aware of my course as my imagination has quite a hold on me. I am very young, but no novice to the art of daydreaming to which these woods lend well. Through them I can go anywhere. The trees are my guardians as they reach and shelter me overhead. And I can be alone. The earth - the brown, gray, and green does not see me the same way people do. The animals are my distant companions as they scatter and flee from my path. Of all types, there is one I seek in particular. I see them as majesty; bold in dignity and light in grace. Seemingly born from the trees in which they blend, showing themselves only for fleeting moments before disappearing again into the depths of the forest. And on this particular day, on this familiar road, I awake from my drifting thought at the foot of a king. A crown of antlers rises from the crest of his head as if the branches of an old oak; his strong legs and body, the limbs and trunk. We are still, our gaze locked in an unfamiliar and uncertain tension. My thoughts and emotions give way to fearful awe as time slows. I then begin to feel a sense build within me. Initial fear dissolves into unexplainable confidence. I am human. I am ruler. A cocky, little human. Then, without understanding why, I raise my hand to point. My hand is in the shape of a gun and after a moment's pause I playfully fire the 'weapon', releasing a whispery "POW!" from grinning lips. At that moment, the king and all his majesty before me shatters. He rears up and lets out a haunting and strangely familiar scream. Time moves fast. I fall back, lose sight, and the deer is gone. I am now left alone and begin to cry as a new feeling comes over me. I sense something has changed, that something is lost.

- Self -

“See that falcon? Hear those white-throated sparrows? Smell that skunk? Well the falcon takes the sky, the white-throated sparrow takes the low bushes, the skunk takes the earth...I take the woods.”

- Jean Craighead George, “My Side of the Mountain”

As an artist I aspire to explore the true substance of my life. I want a ‘realness’ or authenticity in my work and I want the viewer to feel it. But how do I define art? Why do I make it? Memories like this have helped me in the search for answers. They are mostly from early life and many involve nature of some sort. Some of the details are faded, which leaves me only with how I felt and how I was affected. These thoughts and feelings from childhood, the ones that stick with me, string together to form an inherent sense of self. A personal mythology that pushes and pulls me through life. This sense of self, the inner voice or consciousness we all experience, I call the human spirit. And I believe art is its reflection in the form of expression. My work represents my connection to this spirit and reflects a reawakening to it. Presented through both my physical and intangible relationships with my environment, my work takes the viewer on a personal journey of the self. Investigating what it truly means to be a human as part of, not separate from, the natural world.

A reawakening presumes a period of sleep. A time when I lost sight of who I was and where I wanted to go. For me this began somewhere in the early teens and only recently has a stirring been felt. Beginning my path as an artist may have been the first step back towards recovering my lost sense of self. Immersed in material

and expression, I was faced with understanding my impulses. And for me a big one was nature. Nature was my inspiration and eventually became a material. But why? Memories come back. Memories of getting lost in the forest, of watching my Opa cut down trees, of the day I met the deer. Nature has always been an integral part of what makes me, me. And when my work began to find direction near the end of my first year here in graduate school, I found I was interested in relationships with nature; both physical and spiritual. In asking the question, “why nature?” I started to explore the ways in which we see and acquire the environment. I began to see that the line between humans and nature was quite blurred and understanding the two as separate became increasingly difficult.

Walk. The viewer stands between two projections on the floor. The projectors play coordinated video recordings of the ground below, recorded from cameras on the front and back of my body. I filmed on several days and followed the same path with the intention of highlighting my natural aesthetic proclivity and movements. I found that I was drawn to several sites along my mapped route. Natural phenomena such as light, color, texture, sound, and smell all played apart in evoking feelings and sensations in these specific places. I was performing an acquisition of nature and focused the work’s attention and intention on myself. I wanted to know how I functioned in nature and what I responded to. This piece acted as an investigative process for me and the viewer was invited to tag along. With three-dimensional sound recordings and actual woodland debris in the room, I further played with the viewer’s senses. Though the action involved in the installation is quite physical, the investigative process led me to

questioning less tangible concepts. What calls me into nature? Why does it make me feel the way it does? Where did it all come from? These became resilient queries on my 'walk.'

The investigation of *Walk* led me to reflect more on how I view our relationships with nature beyond the individual. *Manifest Destiny*, a sculptural painting made at the same time, was a response to this reflection. I copied an old Albert Bierstadt landscape painting and ripped into the canvas as I saw our hand as a whole affecting and drying up the American West. But to be critical shouldn't one be able stand on solid ground? Do I? When looking at my personal actions towards nature, I found an incredible amount of apathy looming over the deep connections I often describe. I found myself wondering how I could feel so deeply about something yet do so little to change how I impact it. The stalling effect this internal struggle can have on the creative process can be a difficult one to surmount, but by humbly and honestly placing it into my work, I have forced myself, and the viewer, to face the issue head on. In the search for authenticity, questions became directed inward and an investigation into my personal relationships with nature was necessary. Three video pieces titled, *Land/Body*, *Love/Hate*, and *The Fall* represent this introspection.

Land/Body consists of three, single-shot films with simple gestures played out in each. In the first, an intimate shot of a tree trunk is centered. I circle the tree with just a finger suspiciously dragging across the bark. I dub the sound of a roaring chainsaw,

cutting through a large tree, over the video. As the tree in the sound clip tears, cracks, and finally falls, I move my course away from the filmed tree's trunk while intentionally dragging a hand across its face. The second, depicts a shot of lush grasses and flowers from ground level. Depicted first as just a disturbance in the blurry and distant background, my figure gradually encroaches as I stomp down the grass. As I incrementally approach the camera, the sound of crowds marching is synchronized to my footsteps. And finally, in the third and final clip, I am depicted kneeling in the middle of a creek bed. In my hands I hold a small boulder which I proceed to lift above my head and smash into the rocks below. Over and over, I repeat this simple gesture while the sound of mine blasting matches the moment of contact.

The sounds of the chainsaw, marching, and blasting were meant to both call attention too and place responsibility on the figure. I use my own image in many of my videos because I intend on conveying a sense of ownership in the work, as to disarm the viewer rather than guilt or accuse. My work is intended to move the viewer towards an understanding and awareness not drive them further into entrenched opinions. These are simple, straight forward sound/gesture combinations meant to call attention to activities we are all already aware of and are often not opposed to. It is instead the contrast between the simple gestures and the violent sounds where I intend for the work to speak. It reminds the viewer that we are all small as individuals but none of us exist completely as such. Seeing us as part of destructive systems much larger than ourselves and the facing of this reality is necessary for any beneficial response to occur.

- Spirit -

“We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes - something known only to her and the mountain. I was young then and full of trigger-itch: I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunter’s paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view.”

-Aldo Leopold, “ A Sand County Almanac ”

My aforementioned childhood memory with the deer was a version of Leopold’s “fierce green fire” moment for me. I know in many ways it seems much less profound. I did not actually harm the deer, and if I had, it would not have been the first time at the hands of a human. What stuck with me was the intimacy of the moment. The closeness of the gaze we shared. And also how I responded to this closeness. Looking back on it, I feel in a way, this buck meeting me on the road was not an accident. Could this have been nature as an entity confronting me as a being? It was as if the buck was asking me the questions: What are you? Who are You? Are you the other? In my response, I assumed the role of man. When I raised my hand as a pistol I believed myself to be this other, to be different or above nature. Similarly to Aldo Leopold, what I felt after the moment passed proved to me how wrong that belief was.

There are moments in *Land/Body*, such as in the dragging of my hand longingly across the face of the tree I just ‘cut down’, that reflect an awareness of nature as an entity, In *Love/Hate*, the investigation into my relationships with nature take a more

intimate and spiritual turn. In this durational short, the scene fades from black to my figure kneeling on the forest floor. I am wearing jeans, a work shirt, and a brimmed hat which covers my face. Stretching my hands out and leaning forward, I immediately begin to perform a slow and repetitive movement against the ground below me. Back and forth, clawing my fingers into the earth and ripping at the earth. Back and forth. I pull the ground up and onto my thighs as I expand my movement and pick up the pace. A sensuality to the movement begins to gain aggression. Back and forth. Roots are in my path as my body moves the dirt below me. I rip at them and pry up stones so I can continue to build intensity and dig deeper into the soil. Back and forth. The gentle caressing touch from the start has spiraled into forceful collisions with the ground. Fists and palms smashing away more matter, more of the earth below me. Until I collapse. Finally exhausted I curl forward and hold my head. I sink into the depression left by my impulsive and selfish action. The ground cradles me as I catch my wind and rest. At this moment, my figure is covered up by my hands gliding over the earth. The video transitions back into the beginning in a continuous loop. An apathetic cycle.

Creature of conflict. An accurate description for myself I believe, and *Love/Hate* is meant to depict this. To love something whole heartedly and still play an active role in its demise. When I begin the movements and my hands intimately touch and caress the land below me, I am alluding to the nurturing and sustaining effects the natural spirit has on myself. In this way, I can imagine the earth as a mother, as Gaia. Pulling the

dirt up my legs and on to my body, represents my interconnection to her. I came from her, and eventually to her I will return. But this is not exactly how I live my life is it? With a loving and impassioned awareness of this natural spirit? I am human. I am ruler. I am a consumer. I drive my car, heat my house, and watch TV. I am part of the same unsustainable system as everyone else and I know the price nature pays. I can see the accumulating waste and irreversible effects of modern society, but I keep living in it. Love/Hate reflects an awareness of this internal conflicts and presents it in an apathetic cycle.

...Gaian Naturalism represents a skeptical stance toward any supernaturalistic metaphysics. Its claims are more likely to be restricted to the scientific mainstream as a basis for understanding and promoting a holistic metaphysics. Yet, its proponents express awe and wonder when faced with the complexity and mysteries of life and the universe, relying on religious language and metaphors of the sacred, albeit not always self-consciously, when confessing feelings of belonging and connection to the energy and life systems in which they participate, live, and study.

- Brahm Taylor, "Dark Green Religion" 2010

Somewhere between an old friend and nemesis. Depression, unlike happiness, is always there. Varying in degree; sometimes almost hiding, but always there. Dependable. I have dealt with depression most of my life, becoming aware of it at an unusually young age. Religion became a place I turned growing up. An explanation for why things were the way they were and an assurance in their purpose was admittedly comforting. As a human I am of course aware of my own

expiration. I know that all the ups and downs are leading towards an inevitable end. Maybe this understanding is where my depression began? As a child this realization would understandably elicit fear. But as I age, I understand this depression as a deeper sensitivity to things that allows me to feel more completely. And still there is a pulling. A weight this depression puts on my spirit, from which I need respite. I no longer seek comfort in the chapels of men but when I find myself in the expansive cathedral of the forest I am able to find it.

The Fall represents the delicate state in which I tend to live my life. A place between happiness and pain, love and hate, conflict and peace. Between the holding on and the fall. This looping video piece starts with my single figure depicted on the right side of the screen holding on to an upright tree. There is a strange force pulling on my torso, head, and limbs to the left. The viewer sees and hears a struggle in my movements and expressions before I release and am pulled into the darkness away from the tree. A split second passes before my figure reemerges and collides on the left side. I am shown writhing in pain and the viewer becomes aware that I've collided with the ground and that the entire video is shown on its side. Once again my figure fades back onto the tree as I disappear from the ground. And once again, I struggle to hold on before inevitably falling to the ground.

There is a brutality I want the viewer to feel as they watch my body succumb to gravity; my head and back paying the price. Because when you feel the absolute calming and reassuring peace that nature can inflict on the human spirit, parting with

it can feel quite brutal. Life pulls on the soul and the weight of our responsibilities can be immense. When in nature, there is a sense of overwhelming insignificance that is absolutely euphoric. The problems in school, work, with money or relationships can momentarily lift away and disappear. You might feel as if you are apart of something incomprehensibly large, and that you are infinitely small; but still very much apart of it. In *The Fall*, this is why I hold on for this feeling of connectedness. I know I am not strong enough to hold on and continuously get pulled into the black void in between the screens; only to violently collide with the ground again and again. However, a deeper sense of devotion or purpose is conveyed in the resilient return to the tree and the intimate struggle of the hold.

- The Other -

A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.

- United States Wilderness Act

Creature of conflict. I once again find myself between two beliefs. On one hand, I understand myself to be no different than any other living thing and inherently and part of nature, though there is a eerie sense of separation that I cannot deny. I use the term nature to define what I find to be a part of the natural world or environment and often exclude human involvement. The human world vs. nature. A conflict as old as our time on this earth and one I have fought myself. I slather on bug spray and crank up the A/C during the summer. When I walk through forests I do not long to coexist with the large predators such as bear, wolf, or lion in which we had a hand in diminishing. And I am not phased that most of the wilderness I encounter here in America was, at one point, razed by the hands of men. What we consider wilderness might be far more remote and scattered than we imagine.

So what is all this around me? These forests and fields, all with impacts from humans. Are they not nature? Wilderness? I wanted to know where the separation, if any, started and stopped. How does the world of humans differ from that of nature? Beginning with my investigation in *Walk*, I began thinking about this sense of separation. The feeling of being very small in the sheer enormity of nature is not

limited to the physical. A sense of the continuous time scale of nature is easily acquired when immersed in wild landscapes. One can become enthralled in the vastness of natural time when witnessing monolithic rock formations, the carving of a valley by a river, or by simply investigating the knots and scars on an old tree's skin. An individual's marks on these landscapes can seem fleeting and lose significance in this context, but are very important to our continuing perception of place. For example, if you were to stumble upon an old glass bottle in the forest you might have a sense of connection to the individual who first abandoned it there. You might wonder why they dropped it, or who they might have been. This connection between individuals that will never meet exists in the very real sense of place.

The contrast between the human and natural time scales became the focus of a piece titled, *Claimed Place*. Following the more investigative experiment of *Walk*, I had a better understanding of what drew me to these specific, natural spaces. Sometimes it was simply aesthetics of the moment, such as sunlight or other weather conditions. Others, had to do with evidence of a disturbance from either humans or animals. If I consciously strayed off the main trail, I found myself quickly and subconsciously following one made by deer. I became aware of my tendencies and allowed myself to follow my aesthetic instincts when searching for the site of Claimed Place. Rather than follow a set of guidelines or requirements, I relied on the underlying feelings and senses I felt in certain spaces. Where does the sun playfully dance over the land? Where do these greens, grays, and browns mix to create a sense of beauty? Where do I feel an invitation to sit and stay? Once my location was found, I set up a single camera and

mounted it directly above the site in a birds-eye view. I would leave this camera for entire days in order to capture the subtleties in light, color, and weather conditions that naturally occur. The simple act of visiting this space, sometimes 3-4 times a day, reinforced my sense of place there. Now something has happened there, something human and therefore easier for me to be aware of. I then removed a central square of earth from this space and reinstalled it in the gallery. Surrounding this removed or “claimed” square, I placed a border of equally sized square panels. A sped up and transient video loop of the recorded time lapse of the natural space was projected from above and onto these panels. By contrasting the very real and removed piece of land with the artificial representations, I focused the viewer’s attention on the differentiation between timescales. Is this square of brown, gray, and green still part of the same place? The rock is broken from the same in the video and the wood is cut from the middle of a log laying across the frames. The separation between the two, the cut square and the video, reinforce the sense that it is not. That as a result of my acquisition, both the plot of land and the square removed from it have been changed: one bearing a scar from a fleeting visitor, the other exhumed and changed beyond recognition.

- Us -

Detachment from the past, which we characterized as the main feature of the post - Christian era, culminates in one way or another with detachment from the earth - "this earth....these oaks," to recall Vico's words about giants who established the first human dwellings. For reasons that remain altogether obscure, Western civilization has decided to promote intuitions of dislocation in every dimension of social and cultural existence.

- Robert Harrison, Forests: The Shadow of Civilization

Our perception of a place often relies heavily on our separating it from the flow of time. Mentally, we pull it from the fluidity of life and hold on to how we see it in the now. A large tree, one that might call on my spirit to visit time and time again, was not always a large tree and will soon not be one once again. The piece of ground over which it so boldly reigns will one day grow up and drastically transform. Will it still be the same place? Will it evoke the same feelings and emotions as it does now? Through my understanding of place, I believe it would not. This understanding sees place as a construct of our creation, though one that is strongly influenced by the natural world. In ***ClaimedPlace*** there is this sense of separation in the artificial construct. Periodically played sounds from the piece of ground's removal pull the viewer out of the mesmerizing beauty of the projected video. The light moving across the ground and the color changing as the day fades to night are all part of the timescale of nature. I wanted to stress the somewhat violent and sudden way in which we apprehend our natural world and often perceive it with a naive short-sightedness.

Progressing from personal investigations into relationships with nature, the question has become, “What now?” In the beginning of my introspection my ideas were primarily focused on relationships with nature through my own personal perspective. They intended to take responsibility and convey an awareness of apathy. This has allowed me to find footing on solid ground in which to continue with my work. I am now interested in directing these ideas towards a more collective understanding of our society as a whole. To look at the relationships between one another and between our species and the world. A piece that begins to touch on these ties is *The Ambience of Man*. This work consists of a wide, panoramic image, mapped and projected onto handmade paper surfaces. The image depicts the valley in which Alfred University is located, taken high up on the hill at the edge of the forest. In the original, it becomes apparent how intertwined we are with the natural world we inhabit. Trees blend with buildings and roads disappear behind hillsides. I chose to “black out” or essentially remove the man-made or artificial elements in the image. Cars, houses, sidewalks, church steeples, and the schools all transformed into black voids. Nature appears to wrap around, through, and is sometimes isolated by these voids. But in the sounds played in the installation, I chose to fill them. The peril of many natural escapists, such as myself, is the difficulty eluding the many sounds of civilization. It seems that no matter how far into the ‘wild’ one goes there is always the distant moan of humankind. I chose to record and embrace these sounds for this piece to emphasize how I often interpret it. Without seeing the sources of the sounds they begin to blend together and create a somewhat organic or animal like effect. The

photograph is taken from my perspective at the edge of nature, using the forest as a way of stepping back and viewing our society as a whole. Rather than direct the viewer's opinions towards the sometimes destructive and overreaching marks of our impacts, I chose to allow the beauty, color, and expanse of the natural panorama to take the lead. The voids are left to the viewer's interpretation. Some may find that the blank spaces represent a disease, eating away at and spreading through the landscape. Others might see it as a puzzle with missing pieces, one where we become essential in its completion.

The piece titled, Reclaim, represents this idea with a realistic landscape hand-made from paper: this approximately 8' x 15' installation intends to command the grand and forest like sorting room of the old post office in Hornell, NY. With 25'+ ceilings and existing tree-like columns, this room immediately evoked a cathedral sense similar to what I feel in old growth forests. This scene will be constructed as if the viewer were continuing down a forest path. Blending into the dilapidated concrete floor below, the path seems to be eroding into the worn human dwelling. I invite them to once again follow me. A mounted projector above breathes life back into the scene as it displays a layer of color and texture, projected and mapped onto the physical paper objects. Is this nature? Is it wilderness? The surreal landscape is meant to elicit feelings similar to those found outdoors by representing many of nature's aesthetic highlights. Leaf litter, moss, rocks, branches, and logs are all constructed from paper and 'painted' by the projector. Man-made nature. And if a participant chooses to do so, they could step onto the cut stump. By taking the perspective of the once great tree that

ruled this place they would look up and see what that tree was apart of. Triggered by a pressure switch in the stump, hidden speakers above fill the echoing space with the sounds of forest trees blowing and bird songs. Titled Reclaim, this piece is about our involvement in nature going forward. How do we fit into a world where the old definition of wilderness is becoming more scarce? How do we find a way to become a healing element as well? This piece is about seeing the state of the natural world as a reflection of our own. With it, I want to set a tone of symbiosis and interdependency for the viewer.

- Home -

The urge to give visual form to personal sentiments, communal purport, economic conditions, spiritual beliefs, aesthetic values, and institutionalized agendas originated approximately forty thousand years ago. Humans have been creating art ever since, inventing countless devices to manifest their cultures' identity. The impulses are being expressed with a mixture of exuberance and vengeance by today's eco artists.

Linda Weintraub, To Life: Eco Art in Pursuit of a Sustainable Planet

Superman. I must have dressed as him a dozen halloweens growing up. Up! Up! And Away! Superman. I was obsessed. I wore the cape my mother made me relentlessly. It protected me and gave me power. I was a small kid. I started out quite sick and thus behind physically. And School can be rough on the little guy so I turned to my imagination. I cannot blame the bullies of my past, we were kids and what I didn't realize then was those experiences instilled in me a motivation. An inner mythology. Superman. To grow bigger and smarter. To be on the side of good in the dichotomy of life. Is this where my motivation to be an artist comes from? To use my expression as influence? We are in trouble. Our home is in trouble. We are growing too fast, and our world cannot grow with us. Unsustainable. Save humanity and the world? Sounds like a perfect gig for Superman.

Of course I do not believe I can save the world. I'm not sure it is salvageable or if it was ever meant to be. What I do know, and what I see, is a highly

interconnected society of people, all over the world, who are in dire need of a shift in perspective. War, hunger, and disease can all be products of the clashing of the human and natural environments. Our environment can not continue to exist only as a resource, but once again as home. The piece *Flow* is a simple straight forward attempt at eliciting that feeling. I set up a go pro out in nature with a single, mature tree centered. The camera was reset continuously to capture a natural cycle or 'flow' in weather, light, and visitors. This transient video loop was then projected and mapped into the corner of a room, but only between wall joists and window frames. Thus giving the illusion that the projected scene is right beyond the 'window of the wall.' A sense of belonging is established by mixing the natural with the architecture of the space. And though I was captured on camera many times in the process, I chose to only leave a small clip of me and my dog leaving at dusk. I want the visitor to leave this piece with a sense that nature is our home, but we as individuals are only visitors. I have a goal for all of my work to simply be a small part of this shift in perspective; another voice in the chorus I'm beginning to hear more loudly and clearly everyday. Presented through both my physical and intangible relationships with my environment, my work takes the viewer on a personal journey of the self. Investigating what it truly means to be a human as part of, not separate from, the natural world.

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