FRACTURED ENVIRONMENTS: THE SCARS OF OUR EXISTENCE

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by

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We are living in an age of uncertainty in a damaged world, currently termed the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene (The Age of Humans), is the geological term for describing the massive and overwhelmingly irreversible effects that humans have had on the planet, and the accumulated traces of how we have occupied the past, present, and anticipate threats to our future. This impact has become so forceful that we are now seeing staggering changes in climate, mutations in nature, loss of species, as well as placing humanity in danger of extinction. Factors contributing to this crisis include plastic pollution, transformation of land and deforestation, high levels of nitrogen and phosphates in the water and soil from artificial fertilizers and toxins, along with extensive waste from consumeristic values. As geologists and scientists gather and differ on evidence, one thing is clear: humans have substantially altered the entire earth’s ecosystem. We have moved beyond the interglacial period known as the Holocene, approximately the last 11,500 years, into an unknown future. In our post-industrial society, awareness aims to address the fallout of the effects of materialism, excessive
consumerism, and environmental destruction. With the recognition of the Anthropocene as a new era\(^1\), these issues call for a new perspective on our thinking of the future.

So how can aesthetic platforms address the social and political realities concerning the current environmental and humanitarian threats? Art and aesthetic practice, given the long history of experimentation and imaginative imagery, can play a crucial transformative role in offering new ways to comprehend our relation to the world. Art provides a visual experience used to provoke conversations drawing together artists, scientists, politicians, and activists to address further debate and future actions. My work is an exploration of how contemporary art can help us in critical reflectiveness by revealing truths that raise more questions than answers. The past scars must be examined if we are to see the present more clearly. I believe the role of art today can be diverse and more contemplative by mirroring contemporary society and culture

\(^1\) An International team of researchers, The Working Group on the Anthropocene (WGA), recommended to formally designate the current epoch as the Anthropocene, and presented their documentation to the International Geological Conference in Cape Town during August, 2016. Should the International Commission on Stratigraphy approve the recommendation, it will then need to be ratified by the International Union of Geological Sciences before its formal adoption as a recognized geological time. The WGA pointed to indicators found in rock formation records such as plastic pollution, aluminum and concrete particles, and high levels of phosphates in soil from toxic fertilizers. Most felt the start of this new epoch began in late 1940’s with nuclear bomb testing, and their conclusion was that the term, Anthropocene, should be officially included in the Geological Time Scale, as it is widely agreed that Earth is currently in this state. Notes from *A Stratigraphical Basis for the Anthropocene*.
through a combination of concepts, materials, and methods that defy traditional boundaries and cannot be easily defined; creating a dialogue that may create a strong response or contradict cultural values. By creating work where the beauty and meaning of the images are in conflict, a metaphor for the complexity of our modern society is reflected.

When I entered the graduate program at Kent State, I wanted my art to be reflective of my passionate views on environmental discourse and social responsibility. After receiving my B.F.A. at Cleveland Institute of Art in illustration and design, I worked as a graphic designer for several companies in product and packaging design. During this time, I strongly felt that I needed to find my own voice to address implications of human activity by using aesthetic, creative, and imaginative experience that defines contemporary art practice. Being involved in the graphic design and advertising industry made me feel morally complicit in the consumeristic influences that have created such entangled environmental complexities.

My work began small and experimental with unconventional materials and techniques on boards, creating mixed media using acrylics and found materials. My investigations began with a fascination for information and images revealing industrial pollution
colliding with nature. Referencing research photos and documentation of the Gowanus Canal in New York City; one of the most heavily contaminated and toxic water bodies in the nation, my aim was to create visually approachable images of water mixed with chemicals and toxins, capturing a bizarre and abstract beauty which contradicted the horrific reality of hazardous destruction due to the result of human carelessness and waste. By depicting a seductive beauty in something so devastating made it even more disturbing and complicated. The low relief paintings I created were a juxtaposition of nature and toxic waste. I felt that cooler colors, such as blues and greens, brought into collision the acidic colors of rusted and eroded metals, and decomposing plastic waste, referenced the dissolution inflicted on nature by the human race.

I tried various techniques to capture the intense colors and viscosity of the petroleum tainted water, including using layers of oils and Liquin, enamels, acrylic paints and inks, yet couldn’t attain the depth and intensity I was working toward. Also, the smaller supports made the paintings appear too precious and weren’t resolved in my opinion. Opting for a larger support, my advisor suggested using a hollow pine door, in which more successful results were achieved. The larger format was more effective in evoking an emotional response, the imposing size seemed more threatening, and the scale metaphorically referenced the human body. I began an experimental style that combined the expressive physicality of gestural abstraction with conceptual materiality,
in an aim to create a dialogue between the viewer and the work of art as it originates from material experience in all its manifestations. During this process, I experimented with a non-toxic polymer resin, at first using it as a finish over the painted surface. This effect resulted in a clarity and depth that was vibrant and striking, greatly enhancing the colors. I then began a process of layering acrylic inks mixed with resin and detritus, building up the surface by accumulation. This process also contextualized the sense of time and history representing an industrial progressive world, and the sense that the plastic accumulation would become techno fossils of the future. (Figure 1. Detailed close-up of *Metamorphosis*).
Learning how to carefully work with and transform the properties of the resin were intriguing and complicated, but I felt that this was leading my work into a new direction.

The resin created a finish that was rich, glossy, and seductive, as decorative materials are meant to create desire by the consumers: this element interjected a social reality to the work, signifying the dynamics of consumption, wealth, and cultural surplus. It also implied a transition from beauty to ugliness, life to death. The combination of the organic and decayed materials interlaced with the plasticity of the resin created a tension between the temporal and the permanent, and the complexity of our values with the environmental issues facing our future. The colors and materials were chosen to attract and seduce visually to represent the influences of consumeristic values that have left scars in our wake.

The next series of paintings were done with a Plexiglas substrate to enhance the transparent properties of the resin. Alcohol and grease dissolving solvents were added to the mixtures creating a natural breakdown of the products with some interesting effects. These techniques were successful in my attempts to recreate a watery, translucent image as my base, and then I began the layering of accumulated found objects, applied in a gestural all over effect, reminiscent of Pollock.
The large works leading up to my Candidacy were optically engaging and clear in their subject matter. They were strong visual images of human-altered landscapes, but I felt that perhaps they were too literal. I wanted to push further and challenge the boundaries of painting, and my own preexisting ideas about dimensionality. Combining painting and sculpture were especially appealing to me, the painting grounded the artwork while the added found elements added dimension and depth, and so the next pursuit was to eliminate the traditional rectangular format, which led to my current thesis work.

In a contemporary context, materiality is particularly important as an artist’s process of investigation leads to reframe meaning through aesthetic juxtapositions, and in how the materials are interpreted and understood. With this in mind and applying a more minimal approach, I eliminated the rectangular support, and used the properties of the resin to create a sculptural low-relief painting using only charred wood fragments and pigmented cheesecloth in *Dystopia* (Figure 3). Soaking the cheesecloth in ink and resin created a filament similar to algae, then this was manipulated around the wood pieces tightly and hung vertically in various positions as it dried. This resulted in a referenced, classical S curve form with a tense or ominous mood. My thoughts in creating this piece was that the charred wood represented fractured humanity and nature as one, reflecting the fragility of both, while being overtaken by our own progressive needs.
With its scars and imperfection, wood is a strong symbol of the vitality of nature and history, one exalted in past cultures; today its value is diminished and symbolizes an awareness of the risk of loss and extinction. The wood also imparts a sense of time to the object’s past history and identity, complicating the connection to both past and present in the relentless change in the meaning and form of everything over time. The piece invokes thoughts of future ramifications.

The resin is also more than a choice of material, it also reflects a metaphor that increases its meaning. Resin is the blood of trees. Trees produce an organic resin in response to injury or incisions, its nature’s way of creating a bandage to protect it. Through industrial chemical processes, polymer resins were created and used to protect our possessions, creating a protective barrier from the effects of nature, and lasts permanently in our environment, thus entangling humanity in dangerous debris. The plastics and accumulated toxins in our man-altered environment, evident for example, in the explosive growth of cyanobacteria algae blooms in Lake Erie and other fresh water supplies, are threatening our existence. Exploration into this research was the inspiration for Dystopia.
Another piece that I feel strongly represents my execution of concept and process is *Future and Echo* (Figure 4), which is included in my thesis exhibition. In this piece, I developed a new process with techniques that I pushed further, combined with new materials. Combining resin and pigments, I poured these into handmade molds and created layers of fragmented sheets. Once hardened, I stacked these individual sheets together to create a fractured, terraced, irregular shaped support. Some areas of these sheets were transparent, and embedded with found materials and detritus in the layering process. Using inflated balloons, I coated them with acrylic medium, resin, iridescent pigments, charcoal and inks. Once hardened, the balloons were then punctured and the deflated remnants shriveled into decomposing shapes and acrylic skins. I applied these, with found plastic toy parts and other debris, including "left-overs" from recycled earlier works that I broke down and reinvented into a new set of relations for future pieces. The final work became a 60” x 24” x 6” three-dimensional wall relief, referencing landscape but the verticality implied the body.

The intricate overlapping and transparent luminosity of the colors invite a closer inspection that reveals the detailed implications of the piece, characteristic of the heavy influence of the aesthetics of the sublime. Jean-Francois Lyotard, French philosopher, was notable for focusing on the physiological effects of the sublime, in particular the
dual emotional quality of fear and attraction, believing in the experience of plasurable anxiety when confronted by threatening sights. In the sublime lies the conjunction of two opposing feelings, which make it harder for us to see a solution to it. The materiality of my work relates to contemporary culture based on the connection between science, mass culture, and art. The left-overs are part objects in time, suggesting a fractured rather than continued time line. Trying to create a careful balance of form and content, and leave certain aspects to chance, became my learned process. During this process of layering and drying time needed, I reflected on the original purpose of all of the objects, the original intention, and how it has transformed into a new meaning and relationship.

The materials I chose referenced childhood innocence and dreams, such as balloons, dolls, and happy meal toys. The meaning and significance of the plastic metamorphosizes into something dangerous and destructive. The different stages of decomposition reflect movement and dispersing of waste and toxins throughout the environment, and our responsibility toward contaminating poorer countries. These plastics, once a source of happiness, become an instrument of capitalism, and are accumulated as waste in our throwaway culture. The plastic doesn’t biodegrade, it

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accumulates for a projected 100,000 years, and has the ability to leach toxins into surrounding environments as it breaks down, but will never go away. These chemicals are having untold effects on our bodies and ecologies, various plasticizers have been correlated with infertility, recurrent miscarriages, reduced brain development, cancer and neurological disorders, and this is only the list of possible effects on the human body. The toxicity grows as it is mistaken for food by marine life, and bioaccumulates up the food chain. The bright shiny colors not only entice humans, marine life is also attracted to it, especially latex balloons, causing death and suffering from the enormous amount of waste floating in the ocean. Issues also relate to floating debris estimated at nearly 300,000 tons currently in the oceans, most accumulated on shores of Third World countries, where non-biodegradable materials rot and create dangerous methane gas, in addition to other threatening health issues. My aim in creating this particular piece was to raise questions as to our choices and responsibility as consumers and living beings; the shiny seductive colors lure us into a suggested world of prosperity and happiness, but in reality, lure us into dangerous unknown futures.

Working on my thesis exhibition has strengthened my belief in how contemporary art can be used as a vehicle of aethesis to communicate and create dialogues, especially in environmental discourse. Art allows the viewer to visualize complex and abstract issues beyond just scientific reasoning, and possibly stir viewers to respond by using imagination, emotion, and intellect. I believe an important role of the contemporary artist is to become actively involved in a consciousness that looks beyond the limited materialistic view of the world by our culture. My aim is that by seeing everyday objects, in accumulation and decomposition, the viewer will rethink their prior conception of the object and its role in connection to larger consumer patterns. Moral questions can be raised, along with an awareness of these issues, in relation to the implications of the Anthropocene. Inspiration comes from the late President Kennedy in a powerful speech given as a eulogy for the poet, Robert Frost:

The artist, however faithful to his personal vision of reality, becomes the last champion of the individual mind and sensibility against an intrusive society and an officious state. The great artist is thus a solitary figure...In pursuing his perceptions of reality, he must often sail against the currents of his time. This is not a popular role...Yet in retrospect, we see how the artist’s fidelity has strengthened the fiber of our national life. If sometimes our great artists have been the most critical of our society it is because their sensibility and their concern for justice, which must motivate any true artist, makes him aware that our Nation fails short of its highest potential. I see little of more importance to the future of our country and our civilization than full recognition of the place of the artist. We must never forget that art is not a form of propaganda; it is a form of truth.5

5 Transcript NEA- National Endowment for the Arts. President John F. Kennedy: Remarks at Amherst College.
If our society is to recognize the issues facing us, and find solidarity and evolution toward the future, I believe the arts can play a central role. My work continues to evolve in visual expression and materiality; the freedom to experiment has been thoroughly rewarding and transformative for me. I anticipate further artistic explorations as my graduate program has opened my mind to so many alternate ways of creative expression.
REFERENCES


Figure 2
Metamorphosis, 2015. Wood panel, mixed media, resin, acrylic, detritus
60” x 36” x 8”
Figure 3
*Dystopia*, 2016. Wood, cheesecloth, acrylic, resin, pigment, detritus
36” x 18” x 6”
Figure 4
_Future and Echo_, 2017. Resin, acrylic, latex, detritus
55” x 28” x 8”