

PAINING THE SUBLIME LANDSCAPE
AND LEARNING TO SEE NATURE ALONG THE WAY

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2005

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Spring term 2008

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ABSTRACT

My thesis is one artist's response to the question of the relevance of landscape painting today, focusing on the communication of the idea of environmental stewardship. The process of studying nature and transferring that vision to canvas promotes greater understanding of the beauty and complexity of elements that comprise ecosystems. The artist possesses a creative impulse finding satisfaction in making artwork that expresses a love of nature as part of a larger worldview. If done well, the persuasive power of such art may be enormous.

Comprised of oil paintings and written work, this thesis establishes a way of approaching both landscape painting and the natural environment. Literature pertaining to the contributions of landscape artist Frederic Church, varying aesthetic theories, nature writings, and selected contemporary artists are discussed. The focus then turns to particular landscape elements, introducing the artwork created for the thesis. The thesis concludes with the artist's purpose statement.

For Kevin,
my best friend and traveling companion,
and Ryan, Andrew, and Griffin.
You have enriched my life beyond my fondest hopes.
The best is yet to come.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My hearty thanks go to those U.C.F. faculty members who gave of their time to participate on my thesis committee. I am grateful to Professor Dwight Kiel for his encouraging words. He is an astute reader and a valued member of my committee.

I am thankful to Dr. Joo Kim for her helpful suggestions and many kind words, spurring me to go on beyond this project.

I appreciate Carla Poindexter's perspective and candor in sharing her experience as an artist with me.

My deepest thanks go to Dr. Kristin Congdon for her guidance and consistent support throughout the entire process of researching, writing, and painting this thesis. Though we had not met when she agreed to chair my committee, she has proven to be an ideal advisor for me throughout the process of producing this thesis.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE THESIS

Learning to see something as valuable begins the process of enlarging one's vantage point to encompass what lies beyond the usual field of vision. It is to focus attention onto an object or collection of objects, and in some sense, bring it into one's personal space. A landscape artist endeavors to draw attention to nature by skillfully depicting natural scenery as beautiful or intriguing. The dynamic landscape paintings of nineteenth-century American artist Frederic Edwin Church reveal his reverence for the land and concern for its wellbeing. As the forces of industrialization threatened to destroy vast tracts of previously pristine wilderness lands, artists like Church helped convey the urgent need to protect these lands for the American public. The need to protect wild spaces is even more acute in our day. Landscape photographer Clyde Butcher has been credited with spurring the movement to restore and preserve the Florida Everglades through his stirring black-and-white photographs (Barnett 182). We have come a long way from the abundance of wildlife described by Aldo Leopold in his *Sand County Almanac*. He expressed an awareness of his need to be connected with wild spaces. I, along with other landscape artists including Butcher, share Leopold's sense of longing, as did Church. My appreciation for the beauty of the landscape finds expression in the environmental focus of my writing and is displayed without words through my artwork.

As human societies grow, demands placed on the land and its resources threaten multiple species comprising the native habitat. A balance needs to be achieved between the needs of human civilization and preservation of the natural environment. Since all forms of life are interconnected, what affects one species will have repercussions on the others. We live on this planet and must consider wisely how we treat our watershed, the air, the land, and its resources. The landscape artist still has a role to play in today's world in the communication of these ideals.

It is not only for the sake of environmental activism that the artist creates, however. The artist needs to create because the creative act is part of human expression. This point is emphasized in the writings of Ellen Dissanayake and Francis Shaeffer. We need visual art, literature, drama, and music to tell others what we believe is important. By choosing to depict nature in landscape painting, both the artist's need for expression and the public's need to be inspired may be achieved. If done well, not only will the artist's own life be enriched, but a fresh appreciation for the special place of nature in the human heart will mean that the pursuit of environmental integrity need not be a hopeless cause.

My thesis is comprised of landscape paintings and written work divided into two main sections: Literature on the Landscape and Elements of the Landscape. Photographs of the thesis paintings appear in the section on Elements. Literature on the Landscape begins by setting a historical context for American landscape painting, focusing on America's most successful (and my favorite) landscape painter, Frederic Church. I write

about his methods of studying and depicting natural scenes, comparing them to my own, and pointing out what I have learned by emulating them. Next, I discuss different views on aesthetic theory. Those selected for discussion include some voices that were new to me prior to my research for this thesis. I will point out the ways in which my views fundamentally diverge from a few of them, yet glean even from them some ideas with which I do agree. I have included in that section a portion of the work of Francis Shaeffer, a twentieth-century philosopher, whose life and extensive writing has impacted my worldview more than any other.¹ Part of my writing is directed to the desire for refuge from the demands of human civilization that is stated so eloquently by writers such as Terry Tempest Williams and Annie Dillard. I too seek solitude among the sights and sounds of nature. As much as I enjoy and cherish individual people, I find that I need regular times of contemplation away from the bustling crowd. My landscapes tend to be serene environments, drawn from memories of time spent in actual spaces. I next turn in the thesis to a brief discussion of several contemporary landscape artists and describe the place I see my work fitting into the current art world. The final section, Elements of the Landscape, takes a more poetic approach, focusing on particular landscape elements that frequent my artwork: moss, water, trees, stones, and sky. I describe the significance of these elements and talk about the thesis paintings that seem to fit best within the categories.

¹His basic belief-- derived from Genesis 1:26, 27 that human beings are created in the image of God and are therefore very important—is also a cornerstone of my thinking. This necessarily affects the way I view nature (as the work of divine creation, not blind chance) and human beings (as inherently valuable, though filled with troubles).

I have created a body of ten landscape paintings, depicting actual sites with an absence of human constructions. The medium of oil on canvas is used for its rich quality and luminescent properties. Attention is directed to the rendering of realistic features as witnessed in situ, yet personalized by my own experience of the scenes. To study a scene in order to paint it is to look ever more deeply into the mysterious intricacies of the natural realm: the elements, rock features, water, sky, and plant life. The process of transferring a vision to canvas involves a continual quest for clarity to understand what my eyes are telling me and insight regarding how to interpret and translate that message. Inspiration for my artwork comes from many sources. The written work addresses some of my more significant and recent influences, from the theoretical to the practical. My views on the importance of environmental stewardship are woven throughout the thesis, as they are inseparable from myself as a person, and thus from the artwork that is an expression from my essential being.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE ON THE LANDSCAPE

The readings my advisor and I have chosen to be the focus of study toward the development of this thesis encompass a wide spectrum of topics. My review of literature pertaining to nineteenth-century landscape painters of the Hudson River School focuses primarily on the work of Frederic Edwin Church and the people and cultural factors that influenced his art. Philosophical discussion involves the writing of Francis Shaeffer, Shih-t'ao, and the aesthetic theories of John Ruskin, Ellen Dissanayake, and art critic Suzi Gablik. Also present are readings on the concept of nature as refuge, especially as touching the personal lives and experiences of such individuals as Terry Tempest Williams, Aldo Leopold, and Annie Dillard. Contemporary landscape artists Mel Chin, Clyde Butcher, and April Gornik are discussed. What ties my thoughts together in this thesis is the significant question of the relevance of landscape painting today. I weave common threads from the various authors into a finished canvas, telling the story of how learning to see the landscape is connected to building an endearing relationship with it.

My commitment to environmental stewardship found hearty resonance with the voices of those who have likewise sought solace in nature and refreshment from the hectic world of people among the wilderness spaces. The landscape does not always pose quietly as a passive subject for painting. It challenges the artist and poet through its

dynamic tendencies and sometimes life-threatening experiences. The forces of nature are often fraught with danger; the wilderness is not to be taken lightly or entered into foolishly. We cannot count on guard rails or rangers to keep us safe, even in national parks and state-managed lands. We must tread the paths carefully, remain watchful, and prepare to pay the price for witnessing such beauty first-hand.

Terry Tempest Williams recalled how a hike into a wilderness area in Utah had caused an injury to her forehead that left her scarred. She wrote, “To enter wilderness is to court risk, and risk favors the senses, enabling one to live well” (Williams 244). We find solace in the landscape, a refuge filled with beauty that keeps drawing us back, in spite of the danger. Theodore Roosevelt was concerned that Americans would lose their rugged qualities, should the wilderness areas be lost. He thought that a once-tough people would become overly civilized and weak if they lost touch with the natural environment (Barnett 189-190). The American frontier became the testing ground for brave adventurers and entrepreneurs, who relished the land’s vastness and seemingly endless natural resources. Many of those resources have been over-allocated, leading to current and predicted future shortages of elements as essential to life as clean water, warned Cynthia Barnett in a forum on “Florida’s Vanishing Water” that took place November 1, 2007, in Orlando, Florida. Her book, *Mirage: Florida and the Vanishing Water of the Eastern U.S.*, is eye-opening and relevant to the discussion of our current ecological situation and the need to protect natural spaces in order to live well.

Opinions differ about how we should go about protecting the environment. The role that artists may play in this endeavor is open to debate. Suzi Gablik recounts interviews she conducted with a number of artists in *Conversations Before the End of Time*, each offering a unique perspective on the issue of making art that is relevant to the cause of environmental activism. Her contention is that artists need to engage in group enterprises, rather than following traditional models and definitions of artistic success (17). I do not share her Postmodern philosophical mindset. Neither do I place myself within the framework of the Modern artist, whose values she rejects. Though my place in time is now, I continue to find inspiration in the works of great landscape artists of the past (pre-modern times) and believe that their art is still pertinent to any discussion of how we see the interaction of people with the land.

My personal experience of the land is tied to my sense of sight; the message I attempt to communicate through painting is how I see the land, water, and sky. I hope that a few viewers of my paintings will find resonance with my interpretation of actual scenes and find encouragement to look more deeply with artist's eyes at the natural world around us. Before I delve into my painting, however, I will first sketch some preliminary drawings. Art is not created in a cultural vacuum. In order to understand the philosophical reference point behind my landscape paintings, we need to travel back to an earlier era, focusing attention on the work of nineteenth-century America's greatest landscape painter, Frederic Church.

Frederic Edwin Church

Frederic Edwin Church (1826-1900) was an individual of rare gifts, whose life and work greatly impacted not only the nineteenth-century art world but also the American landscape that was the subject matter of his paintings. Actively involved in the New York art scene, Church helped establish the Metropolitan Museum of Art and served on its executive committee (Howat 159). He was also instrumental in the drive to protect Niagara Falls from the rampant development threatening the area. His active involvement since 1869 came to fruition in 1885 when the governments of New York, and later Canada, set aside land in a collaborated effort to declare Niagara Falls an international park (173). His famous 1857 depiction of the falls, *Niagara* (42 ½ x 90 ½ inches), enhanced the site's iconic status, which greatly strengthened the move to protect it. During his lifetime, Frederic Church was the most successful landscape painter in American history. His 1859 painting *Heart of the Andes* (66 ½ x 119 ¼ inches) commanded the huge sum of \$10,000 plus earnings of \$3,072.49 from some 12,000 visitors paying \$.25 each to see it during its initial three week showing in New York (85, 89). Though he had gained notoriety for his depictions of South American scenes, Church focused mainly on a new genre of landscape painting during the mid- to late 1850s, called "Wilderness Aesthetic" (63). Thus he championed the cause of wilderness preservation through the inspirational beauty and sublimity of his landscapes. Many of his drawings and a number of his paintings are preserved at his estate, which he fondly called Olana.

During the summer of 2007, I had the pleasant opportunity to travel to Olana², the site of Church's Persian themed home near Hudson, New York, in what amounted to a pilgrimage of sorts. Now protected as a state historic site, Olana sits on top of a hill overlooking the Hudson River. A tour of the house reveals a splendid collection of art and artifacts, gathered from the artist's travels throughout the Middle East, South America, and Mexico. The Olana archive contains hundreds of Church's drawings, sketches, and stencils used in the design of the house, making it another example of his extensive creativity (Howat 161). An Arabic salutation over the entryway greets visitors, who are invited into the parlor, where they are treated to several of Church's smaller paintings and oil sketches. Intricate Persian designs are painted into the walls and ceilings of the house, which is generously furnished and decorated with an abundance of works by other artists, including family portraits and sculptures. Olana provided a marvelous place for Frederic and his gracious wife, Isabel, to raise a family and entertain guests, including some notable figures, such as Edgar Allan Poe (27). Guests were treated to concerts and poetry readings, following a ride by horse carriage along several miles of winding roads with carefully landscaped vistas up the hill to the stately house. Frederic Church planned this living landscape, continuing the art form he dedicated his life to develop with canvas and oils to employ elements of nature itself as living media. The views of the Hudson River are still magnificent, and hint at even greater sights a short distance away at Catskill Clove and Kaaterskill Falls.

² The property at Olana was purchased in 1966 and is today preserved as Olana State Historic Site. <http://www.olana.org/>

Thomas Cole and the Hudson River School

Having recognized his son's talent, Joseph Church asked his friend Daniel Wadsworth to write to Thomas Cole (1801-1848), the most influential landscape artist in America, for the purpose of allowing eighteen year old Frederic to study with him (Howat 7). Thomas Cole accepted Frederic as his pupil, and the young artist moved from Hartford, Connecticut, to Catskill, New York, in 1844 (9). He soon became enamored of the landscape that was to change his life, providing him with inspiration for the paintings that would place him as the most successful artist to emerge from the loose association of landscape painters that came to be known as the Hudson River School. Cole was adept in his ability as a communicator, helping Frederic develop the keen observation skills that taught him to see nature with an understanding of its significance (10). Church traveled and hiked extensively, ready to record what he saw with pencil or brush. Cole's daily work regimen was adopted by Church and other artists that emulated Thomas Cole, establishing the core of the Hudson River School (11). The men used to sketch on site with pencil or ink, annotating their drawings to indicate local colors, textures, and shadings. Both Cole and Church also used to make detailed oil sketches, which were later combined in the studio to create finished landscapes.³

I greatly admire these artists for their strong work ethic and commitment to bettering themselves, their art, and their world. In our day, the digital camera makes it

³ These techniques are currently being employed in the development of a new school for landscape painting, known as the Hudson River School for Landscape. Begun by artist, Jacob Collins, the school's purpose includes the goal of creating work that shares the spiritual values of the original Hudson River painters, while promoting environmental conservation. <http://www.hudsonriverlandscape.com/about.html>

easy and convenient to take many color photographs of a scene without requiring the time to draw and write detailed notes as reminders, as the Hudson River painters did. When using a digital camera, we certainly have an advantage in at least one respect—that of saving time recording visual information, but what have today’s artists lost in the process? I rely on a camera to document my journeys. I capture pictures of places that I may use as models for my paintings. I am very grateful for the technology that has advanced photography far beyond the daguerreotype, allowing me to shoot dozens or hundreds of pictures and upload them onto my computer without having to wait or pay for photo processing. I do wonder what I am missing, however, by taking the easy way to gathering visual data to inform my paintings. I believe that I would do well to practice the old method, as much as practical. I dare not give up the modern conveniences and return to a nineteenth-century way of life, but I may want to move a little closer to it at times. Mechanically produced images can never rival my first-hand experiences and impressions of nature. Some sights are so amazing that they overwhelm the senses. How can I hope to capture the total horizon, incorporate the vast sky, translate the breeze, and record the appearance and song of every bird? I suppose that the Hudson River artists felt the same way about their sketches. While we differ in the means by which we record visual elements of a scene, we share a similar process of transferring information into studio paintings, hoping to offer an adequate glimpse of nature’s beauty.

Cole used to say that “to walk with nature as a poet is the necessary condition of a perfect artist,” a saying recorded by his friend and biographer, Louis Legrand Noble (as

quoted by Howat 11). Not only did Thomas Cole enjoy friendships with such literary giants as William Cullen Bryant and Washington Irving, he also expressed himself through poetry and writings such as “Essay on American Scenery” (1836), in which he combined the art of poetry and painting nature as offering a foretaste of a heavenly eternity. In “Essay,” he expressed concern that so few seemed aware of the vastness of God’s beauty in creation. He thought that most were too preoccupied with mundane things to notice the visible majesty of the mountains and glory of heaven in the sky.⁴ Cole was greatly distressed at the threat of deforestation, lamenting the “ravages of the axe” that was claiming an ever greater share of American wilderness (as quoted by Lewis 29).

Thomas Cole, Frederic Church, and other Hudson River painters sought a connection with nature informed by a larger Protestant Christian worldview. Their spiritual outlook permeated the way they saw nature. Believing that nature is the handiwork of a divine Creator, they studied the landscape to understand its beauty and complexity in appreciation to God for such gifts (Veith 32). Hudson River artist Asher B. Durand wrote a series of essays that were printed in the art journal *The Crayon*, affirming that the role of landscape art is to represent the work of God in nature—that which is independent of human action (33). It is this emphasis that characterizes Frederic Church’s depictions of grand landscapes, while the human figure is tiny and subordinate, if present at all. As a Calvinist, Church focused attention on God’s transcendence, minimizing the

⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson also spoke of this in his essay, “Nature,” stating that “few adult persons can see nature.” Aldo Leopold echoed that sentiment in the foreword to *Sand County Almanac*, writing that only a minority of people believe they cannot live without wild things and prefer seeing geese to watching television.

self—not as a repudiation of individuality, but in agreement with the tenet that redemption begins with the individual’s recognition of personal insufficiency (63). The human figure is never placed at the center of attention, as in classical Humanism, but holds a subordinate position to the workings of the Creator (56). By choosing to focus on the natural scenes, uncorrupted by the draining results of civilization, Church achieved in his paintings an awe-inspiring recognition of the majesty of the heavens, while attributing relative insignificance to human-made construction.

During his short lifetime, Thomas Cole accomplished a great deal: he helped to establish the landscape as a worthy subject for painting, and his vision of the noble Eden that was the American frontier became a passion he shared with individuals who would become a driving force behind the movement to maintain its integrity (Sanford 439). Paintings that came out of the Hudson River School contributed to the effort to preserve the wilderness, by depicting the land and its features as beautiful and worthy of preservation (Lewis 33). A sense of pride in the grandeur of native landscape was espoused by writers and artists, who felt a moral and religious sensitivity to nature (Veith 89). A duty to honor and protect the environment was shared in the collaborative effort between the literary and visual arts, as exemplified by the writings of William Cullen Bryant and the artwork of Thomas Cole (Sanford 434). They depicted the wilderness as virtuous and pure, in contrast to the corruption of European civilizations (Veith 91).

The Sublime and the Beautiful

The Hudson River artists extolled the virtues of nature's beauty and serenity, while also recognizing spiritual truths in the sublimity of steep precipices, raging cataracts, storms, and violent volcanic eruptions (Veith 43). The paintings appealed to a fascination with danger, while offering the safety of vicarious experience to their viewers.

In his novel *Emma Moreton*, Thomas Cole wrote:

There are spots on this earth, where the sublime and the beautiful are united-- when the heart of man feels its own nothingness or rises with the most ecstatic emotions-- when the lips are sealed in reverence, but the soul feels unutterably. (as quoted by Veith 72)

The aesthetic of the sublime grew out of the Enlightenment during the eighteenth century, reflecting a philosophical skepticism over the authority of Classical precedence in art (Lewis 28). The focus switched from objective beauty inherent in something to the subjective experience derived from something. Instead of judging a work of art by its qualities of form and external standards as in Classical art, works were valued by their ability to induce an altered psychological state in the person viewing them (28). In his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Edmund Burke wrote that subjective responses could be rationally analyzed. Burke considered the sublime to be the sensation induced by the terror of powerful natural phenomena, since the emotional fear of danger was so intense (Lewis 29). The concept of the sublime affected English painting, moving its practice away from the Neoclassical aesthetic of imitation toward the Romantic ideal of artistic freedom (Sanford 435). The

new aesthetic was well-established by the 1820s when English-born Thomas Cole came to fame (Lewis 29).

American artists and poets were not content to imitate Romantic European culture, which they considered corrupt and from which they had struggled for independence, preferring instead their own interpretations of the sublime (Sanford 435). When William Cullen Bryant lectured in 1825, he concurred with Burke's emotional basis for poetry, while inserting his attachment to nature as seen in the pristine American landscape (435,436). Bryant exulted in the dangers involved in entering nature's inner sanctum, as invocative of both fear and awe (437). Repeated forays into the wilderness were just as necessary for Bryant and his friend Thomas Cole as they had been for their Puritan ancestors seeking religious freedom in the New World. The swiftly rising tide of industrialization was another evil to be fought, having spread from Europe onto the American scene, threatening to ruin the landscape in an ever-widening display of greedy exploitation. Such corrupt values were rejected by Protestant moralists, who distinguished between the "true" sublime of a great moral idea that existed in and behind nature, and the "false" sublime that presented nature as amoral and blind (438, 439).

For Cole and Bryant, the violent aspects of nature represented the chasm between God and man, the struggles of good versus evil, writes Sanford. Cole's use of chiaroscuro signified this moral warfare. Cole became known for his dramatic oppositions of light and dark, following Edmund Burke's recommendation that painters of the sublime employ dramatic value contrasts, using mostly the darker shades. A stormy sky giving

way to a peaceful calm were visual devices Cole used to relate his message of the futility of human civilization and the peace that only comes from the blessing of God. Such a pure blue sky was the highest sublime to Cole, drawing the gaze upward toward the infinite throne of the Almighty (Sanford 440).

John Ruskin and the Protestant Aesthetic

Hudson River painters exemplified their religious value system by rejecting the self-aggrandizement prevalent in Romanticism in favor of art that was both spiritually and morally beneficial to the public (Veith 14). John Ruskin (1819-1900) formulated his system of art criticism, based upon the aesthetic tradition inherited from Protestant reformers, Martin Luther and John Calvin (15). Their influence bore fruit in the Netherlands, as seventeenth-century Dutch artists expressed Reformed Protestant thought on appropriate subject matter through their landscape paintings. Far from iconoclastic, the notable Puritan divine Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) wrote positively of art in his own aesthetic reflections and meditations on nature. American art developed within this spiritually significant historical context, often with the direct involvement of Protestant church leaders (24).

In his book *The Nature of True Virtue*, Jonathan Edwards posited his belief that virtue is a type of beauty (Veith 86). Ruskin extended that idea to say that beauty performs a function of virtue. This ran counter to the Romantic conception of beauty as subjective experience. These nineteenth-century Protestant views of aesthetics echo the

concept St. Thomas Aquinas had expressed in *Summa Theologica* that “the beautiful is the same as the good, and they differ in aspect only” (as quoted by Veith 86). Thomas Cole’s *Essay* repeats this idea: “There is in the human mind an almost inseparable connection between the beautiful and the good, so that if we contemplate the one the other seems present.” Edwards believed that appreciating the beauty of nature is to experience love, provoking gratitude to God. He considered that the individual’s appreciative response to art or music continues this sense of love for the Creator who gives them. For Edwards, an awareness of beauty signified God’s love for his creatures (Veith 87). Ruskin too saw a corollary between art and love, but he also believed that human beings carried the sinful effects of The Fall, so he admonished others to develop good taste by directing pleasure as God intended.⁵

John Ruskin’s appreciation for the beauty of the natural environment led him to conclusions that found resonance with Hudson River painters, including Frederic Church. Ruskin’s book *Modern Painters* (1847) was read and recommended by Church to other landscape artists (Stein 104). Ruskin found nature to be a refuge for those who, like himself, were troubled by the ravaging effects of the Industrial Revolution. One such individual seeking refuge in the woods was Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau read *Modern Painters*, rejecting some of Ruskin’s views but finding common ground in his stance on the moral underpinnings of beauty. He wrote that “the perception of beauty is a moral

⁵ It may come as a surprise to some that the most influential leaders within Reformed Protestant theology (Calvinism) did not oppose pleasure as such. What they warned against was decadent self-indulgence that rejected Biblical revelations of the true character of God.

test” (as quoted by Stein 91). His desire was to study nature through careful observation, while avoiding the pitfalls of a dry scientific approach that omitted any sense of transcendent spirituality. One man would epitomize that very balance in ways that would profoundly impact the world of science. His name was Alexander von Humboldt.

Baron Alexander Von Humboldt

Frederic Church possessed a broad range of interests and was widely read on subjects ranging from religion, history, modern languages, botany, physics, and many other topics (Howat 43). Just as I find myself drawn to individuals conversant on a wide spectrum of ideas, it was natural for him to be attracted to the writings and adventures of another man of vast learning, the Prussian naturalist, Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859). Humboldt’s views dominated the world of science for many years, and his detailed personal accounts of his exploration of South America inspired others to follow in his footsteps. One of these men was Frederic Church. Another was Charles Darwin (44).

Church was strongly influenced by the English edition of *Cosmos: A Sketch of a Physical Description of the Universe* (Howat 45). The five enormous volumes were Humboldt’s attempt to encompass all his knowledge of natural phenomena. In volume 2, Humboldt commented on landscape painting, advocating it both as a means of studying the external world and as an encouragement to people to commune with nature. This advice greatly appealed to Church, who already was a keen disciple of nature and

appreciated its many intricacies (46). Humboldt's methodology offered the opportunity to learn about life's deeper mysteries through close observation of the natural features of rocks and plants. While later scientists would concentrate on specialized professions, Humboldt offered the person with imagination an invitation to gain an understanding of how all things fit together in an orderly universe (Veith 128).

Humboldt wrote that the only means by which an artist can reproduce the character of a place is to take colored sketches of it in situ (Howat 45). He advocated the drawing of large numbers of studies from nature, to understand its variations and individual properties, rather than painting generic tree and foliage effects (46). Church had already been practicing this principle since his earliest days with Thomas Cole. His paintings reveal the great care he took to record scientifically accurate details of plants.

Church planned his first of two trips to South America, and in 1853, he and his traveling companion sailed from New York to Columbia (Howat 46). He was amazed at the flora and fauna and made sketches of everything he saw (47). He also collected seeds in hopes of growing them in a hothouse in New York (51). Once back in his studio, Church completed a large number of canvases from the many drawings he had made in the tropics. They elicited a positive response in the New York art world, where his popularity continued to grow (59).

Summary of Literature on Frederic Church and his Influence on my Painting

I am fascinated by the life and work of Frederic Edwin Church, a person who I find more intriguing the more I learn about him. I do not crave his popularity, nor do I consider fame to be of paramount importance in the life of an artist. Many artists and others revered by current society were spurned in their own day. Church himself fell out of favor as the tastes of Americans changed following the Civil War and their increased exposure to French influences (Howat 186). My success or failure to create worthy art must be judged by something less fickle than current public opinion. While I do care about the message my artwork communicates to others, I do not consider myself fashionable, and that frees me from the need to try to attain social status through appealing to the majority. I must be true to what I believe in and work to the best of my ability to achieve something meaningful and enduring with my painting.

It is so easy to go along with the changing tides of popular opinion, following the route that leads to greatest financial prosperity but losing one's sense of purpose in the process. Landscape photographer Clyde Butcher spoke on the radio program *The Story* about his decision to give up a lucrative career in color photography in order to pursue his inner drive to focus his art making on black and white images. Henry Ward Beecher said that art is bigger than money or political partisanship (Veith 88). He believed that societies need its uplifting and calming influence. What he described is art created by individuals for the good of the whole. Beecher warned against the excesses of a

consumerist mindset.⁶ Such art expresses the convictions of conscience tempered by the artist's recognition of a higher calling in life than merely gaining wealth.

Americans made a strong connection between the nation's wilderness lands and its democratic liberties (Veith 89). It was within this context that the Hudson River artists created their landscapes, which to them symbolized the hand of God on a free nation, contrasting sharply with the degenerate self-preoccupation of elitist Europe. Frederic Church and other American artists direct our gaze toward the infinite expanse of heaven, rather than to the fleeting glories of human achievement. They were not naïve concerning the destructive forces behind industrial expansion and the dangers it posed to the environment. Working alongside poets like William Cullen Bryant, Hudson River artists reminded those who viewed their paintings that people must take responsibility for what we do to God's creation (94). I believe that we do need to recover a high view of art, while also protecting the natural environment. By understanding and appreciating its beauty and meaning, we will better understand ourselves (134).

I share the Hudson River painters' vision for the earth as God's creation and a reflection of divine attributes. I also find myself energized by their desire for integrity, as they set out to remind a nation of the priceless treasures inextricably bound to the land. A strong common sentiment of the value of preserving the natural environment runs deeply throughout the art and literature, connecting the nineteenth century to the twenty-first.

We are dismayed at the thoughtless destruction of forests and watersheds. How can

⁶ This is a surprising point of agreement between nineteenth-century Protestants and Postmodern art critic, Suzi Gablik, who also rejects the practice of making art solely for money or fame (*Reenchantment* 25).

something so horrendous be called *progress*? Several of the writers I've mentioned believed that it is the minority of persons who feel a strong need for communion with nature. When someone loves someone or something so deeply, it is hard to watch as the beloved is spurned and mistreated.

My goal in painting is to convey the way I see nature. While I recognize the dangerous elements present in every ecosystem, my tendency is to focus on the serene. I suppose that is a reflection of my personal quest for a refuge. It is also reminiscent of the primal purity of the Garden of Eden. I seek the comfort of a beautiful garden in which I can meditate on the important things in life, a safe retreat from forces that threaten and harm. The more I see and understand of nature's beautiful aspects, the more I want to see. Frederic Church depicted the sublime, threatening elements of nature in the storm clouds, volcanoes, and precipices. My own artwork includes steep rock grades and cataracts, as well. I also incorporate more dramatic elements, as Church did, through depictions of sunsets and twilit skies.

Developing a body of artwork that tells a story takes time and patience. The process of painting is a way of looking closely at the scene and its parts. Even studying photographs I have taken gives me ever more insights into the features they capture. I do not expect to replicate the experience of actually being present in the natural scene. Nature is not so easily tamed. My paintings are only impressions of those sights, yet they carry their own significance because, as Shaeffer puts it, each individual is created in the image of God, therefore, what an individual creates carries with it some measure of the

divine trait of creativity (Shaeffer 394). I hope that by employing my own measure of this gift, others may be inspired to see and appreciate the beauty inherent in both the grand and minute spaces that surround us all. Now, having completed the preliminary drawings of the written thesis, I will begin to set the tone color⁷ of the canvas before proceeding to the values that will unite areas of the canvas to create an orderly design.

Aesthetics

Having begun with the influences that shaped the thinking and artistic sensibility of Frederic Church, including the impact of John Ruskin and the Protestant Aesthetic, I will next spend some time discussing alternative views of art and aesthetic principles. It is not my intention to leave the Hudson River artists behind altogether, however. The Wilderness Aesthetic they began is still relevant to landscape artists seeking to raise awareness of environmental issues by painting the beauty of wild spaces. Aesthetic values tend to vary from one cultural setting to another and tastes change over time.⁸ That point was dramatically illustrated following the death of Frederic Church in 1900.

Changes came quickly in the late nineteenth-century United States, following the Civil War years (1861-1865) and into the early twentieth century (Veith 130). Scientific

⁷ I began the practice of conditioning my canvases with an overall tone color to avoid white spots and establish a mood for my paintings after reading *Painting Better Landscapes* by Margaret Kessler.

⁸ The diversity Humboldt encouraged in painting the landscape is being promoted in art circles once again, and interest in representational forms is on the rise. *Unity in diversity* was an aesthetic, as well as an ecological principle for both Humboldt and his disciple, Frederic Church (Veith 136). Revisiting some of their insights seems apt today, as we seek to embrace a meaningful art that also stimulates an interest in protecting the environment.

discoveries, the building of railroads and communication lines changed forever the relative isolation that had fostered the American ideal of independence. New religious concepts developed and spread among the former colonies, which, along with the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, would dramatically shift the cultural paradigm away from its foundation in Protestant Christianity and Humboldtian science (129). Tastes developed for the new art in Paris, as Impressionism and then Cubism entered the art scene (Howat 186). Modernist artists employed abstraction and nonrepresentational flat forms, contradicting the aesthetic of the Hudson River painters who had followed John Ruskin's injunction to be "true to nature" (Veith 135). Since modern life taught people to think in terms of written language and abstractions, it is no wonder that Modern art would reflect this through the use of disconnected, non-referential forms (Dissanayake, *What* 183). Modernism's successor, Postmodernism has rejected the concept of *art for art's sake*, emphasizing the need for a cultural context and social responsibility in art (Dissanayake, *Homo* 41). Much questioning of the meaning and place for art leads every new generation of artists to ask what art is really all about.

Ellen Dissanayake

I shall begin with the definition of art given by Ellen Dissanayake⁹ in her 1990 book, *What Is Art For?* Dissanayake takes an ethological approach to the question of art

⁹ Ellen Dissanayake employs an evolutionary ethological (behavioral) approach to the study of philosophical aesthetics. With only an undergraduate education in biology and a Masters degree in art education, she has managed to apply knowledge gained through personal study and experience to promote her theory. She currently serves as an Affiliate Professor at the University of Washington (Crain discusses

and its place within human evolution. She posits that art can be thought of as a biological function and not a cultural phenomenon alone (4). She is interested in the role art played in prehistory and among preliterate peoples (5). Dissanayake describes art as “something people do and feel” (8). She defines art as a “collection of describable activities [...] based on the proclivity to make special” (167). Her 1995 book, *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why*, derives its title from Dissanayake’s wordplay indicating the observation of the distinctive *Homo sapiens* trait of aesthetic behavior (Gablik, *Conversations* 40). Dissanayake states that the role of art in traditional societies could be termed “art for life’s sake,” instead of “art for art’s sake” (41). Dissanayake holds that art or “making special” is an innate human need that is important to all people, not just those specializing in art as a privilege of elitists (41).

Outside of recent Western cultural history, Dissanayake argues, art’s function was to set apart important social behavior, transmitting cultural values by means of some demonstration (Dissanayake, *What* 36). Most pre-industrial societies have enjoyed forms of music and crafts, employing specific criteria to determine their proper scope and judge their quality (Dissanayake, *Homo* 40). In Medieval Europe, visual, musical, and dramatic representations of spiritual truths served as aids to worship, while individual recognition of artists was not considered important. A tendency toward individualism and self-consciousness has been widely acknowledged as a trait of modern Western civilization

her background in “The Artistic Animal”, posted on Dissanayake’s website, <http://ellendissanayake.com/>).

(Dissanayake, *What* 171). Even in the Renaissance, aesthetic guidelines in the imitation of nature were associated with morality and a higher purpose (36).

To distinguish *fine* art or *high* art from ordinary arts, criteria must be posited to judge the merits or skill of one particular artwork or performance (Dissanayake, *What* 39). With a strict code of evaluation, such as “fitness” and “clarity” or “unity in variety” (Dissanayake, *Homo* 40), one can determine good art from bad or fine art from the mundane, everyday variety. In any given culture, aesthetic standards must be established formally or understood tacitly for the “artists” within that culture to know what is acceptable and of high quality (Dissanayake, *What* 165). Dissanayake distinguishes *aesthetic* response to a work of art from a *psychophysiological* response to its properties, which she terms “ecstatic” response (164). The aesthetic response relies on knowledge of the code of accepted or expected manifestations of an art form presented (165). This is apparent in our appreciation of music. Everyone who listens to it may appreciate a musical performance for its basic aural properties, but someone who is a trained musician will listen with an understanding of the composer, the timbre of the instruments, the style employed, technique, and music theory. What Dissanayake calls “serious music” includes unexpected interpretations that add variety and interest to a performance, while staying within certain parameters. By contrast, a ritual is completed in a prescribed manner without surprises in order to be considered effective (165). Thus the standards differ that determine the successful achievement of fine or high art from group ritual practices.

High art is considered by some to be recreation for the wealthy, something without moral context that is enjoyed for its own sake (Dissanayake, *What* 168). The Western view of art places it outside the reach of most people on a daily basis. Some have sought connection with the purity of a simpler way of life, where art is part of everyday living, as seen in the interest in folk arts (169). This speaks of a trade-off between the attractiveness of technology and all the gadgets that make life easier, and the very depersonalization that comes with increased mechanization. As civilization progresses farther along the path away from its traditional past, people find it necessary to adapt to their new environment (169). We are currently witnessing a generation raised on electronic gadgets literally from infancy. If our young are not also introduced to the natural environment and encouraged to develop personal experience with hand-made art, something precious will indeed have been lost to them.¹⁰

Dissanayake also makes an interesting point concerning the experiences of pre-literate peoples. She maintains that literacy is the strongest value or property that distinguishes modern peoples (Dissanayake, *What* 172). Learning to read invites a change of mental state, initiating a person into a new way of thinking (173). As individuals learn to rely on written directions for information, their attention spans may lag in the first-hand observances of nature and live events (176). She talks of the tendency of highly literate people to dismiss concepts or events that can't be put into words and dissected

¹⁰ Child advocate, Richard Louv writes of the problems observed in children who lack exposure to nature in his book, *Last Child in the Woods*. He coined the phrase, "nature-deficit disorder," describing the results of this alienation, including diminished attention spans, possibly causing ADHD (Barnett 189, 191).

(177). This has widespread implications regarding the way we, as literate people, experience both nature and art. As we enter adulthood, we lose much of childhood's early receptivity to multiple stimuli. We learn to narrow our focus, much as shoppers in a mega store must look past tens or hundreds of thousands of items in search of the one or two goods they want to purchase. They may actually never *see* those other items as more than groups of shapes and indistinct colors. If we made no discriminations, we would soon be overwhelmed with sensory data.

Learning to see, recognize, and appreciate the beauty of something may present itself as either a natural impulse or an enculturated result of trained discernment. While I do not believe that we are witless victims of our culture, especially when we avail ourselves of opportunities to learn new things, we must recognize that what we think, the way we think, and what we value have all been affected by the way others have taught us—directly or indirectly—to see the world around us. Perhaps that enculturation only disturbs us because of our predisposition to value freedom of thought and independence from the constraints of tradition. While people in some societies are grateful for the interdependence and sense of identity they enjoy by belonging to their particular group, we in the United States tend to regard no price too dear to protect our Constitutional right to liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

It seems to me that the ability to judge the quality or worth of art in our day has been seriously undermined by the drive for personal autonomy at all costs. We have gone through a period where *no standard* has seemed to be *the standard*. If everything anyone

who calls himself or herself an artist calls “art” is art, then we are left with no real measurable method of determining the quality of art other than the varying opinions of a cadre of individuals who call themselves judges or art critics. Is popularity a reliable way to measure the worth of an artwork? As I stated previously, Frederic Church enjoyed great public support during his lifetime, but the times changed and he fell out of favor as Americans adopted a taste for things French. Even now, there may be artists who are completely unknown whose creations will be considered works of genius a short time from now.

Shih-t’ao

With peace of mind comes a painting. People know about paintings, but do not understand paintings of one-stroke. For the important thing in artwork is contemplation. When one contemplates the One (unity of all things), one sees it and that makes one happy. Then one’s paintings have a mysterious depth which is unfathomable. (Shih-t’ao 72)

Shih-t’ao (c1642-1718) was a Buddhist monk from Kwangsi, China, and a leader in the “individualist” school during the Ch’ing Dynasty (Cooper 65). Influenced by Taoism and Confucianism, Shih-t’ao retains his honor as one of China’s greatest painters. He spoke of the artist’s need to reach beyond the usual practice of emulating the masters by copying their styles, and learn instead from nature itself (Shih-t’ao 68). This breaking with tradition, Cooper says, shares an anti-establishment sentiment that would come later to artists in Europe, who rejected the classical methods of the Academy in favor of their own experiments. Even his painting style reminds some of Van Gogh and Jackson

Pollock (Cooper 65). He favored individuality and novelty in the fashion of the Romantic painters. Rather than repeat methods that had suited older artists, he advised students to follow their own intuitions. He seems to have disregarded the importance of public opinion in favor of artistic freedom (Shih-t'ao 68). He admonished artists to employ their natural gifts, saying that one who receives the gift of painting should strengthen and develop it. To be inspired to paint and not complete the painting is to “shackle oneself” (69).

Shih-t'ao taught that by understanding his “One-stroke method,” an artist’s brush would flow with the rhythms of nature, bringing order out of chaos (66). The one-stroke method is described as a passive act of receiving:

A painting receives the ink, ink receives from the brush, the brush from the artist’s wrist, and the artist’s wrist from his directing mind. This receiving is like the way life is created by heaven and forms are made by the earth. (Shih-t'ao 69)

He wrote eloquent descriptions of the way nature presents its soul to human beings, who have power over it, as they depict its hills and clouds and rivers.

It gives me pleasure to read the *Quotes on Painting* by Shih-t'ao. His advocacy of connection to the universal spirit of the natural realm is probably more romantic and mystical than my own view; nevertheless, I admire his sentiment and the easy flow of his thoughts on painting. His descriptions of the artist’s sensitivity and insight into the workings of nature relate well to Dissanayake’s discussion of the skills of observation often possessed by preliterate people. Though Shih-t'ao was a Buddhist, his aesthetic

philosophy hints of significant features held in common with The Calvinist views of John Ruskin: he advocates understanding nature, regarding the landscape as a subject worthy of painting, and by incorporating techniques that capture the true spirit of nature, even if they don't look exactly like the actual clouds, water, and hills. Even his reference to emulating the action of creation is similar to the view of Francis Shaeffer, who interprets the Biblical concept that human beings were created in God's image to include the characteristic of creativity. I can only hope that my paintings may someday come to have a "mysterious depth" that he describes so beautifully (72).

Francis Shaeffer

It was a great honor for me to attend the last international L'Abri¹¹ conference held at which Francis Shaeffer (1912-1984) was present and spoke, shortly before his death in May of that year. It was early spring of 1984, and I was pregnant with my third son. His middle name is Francis in honor of that great thinker and Christian philosopher, whose extensive writings were a beacon of hope in a world ruled by an increasing sense of hopelessness and desperation. I hungrily read all of his twenty-two books, now contained in a five volume set, *The Complete Works of Francis Shaeffer* (1982). One of the smaller of those books is called *Art and the Bible* (1973). In it, Shaeffer discusses the

¹¹ L'Abri (French for "shelter") Fellowship was founded in 1955 by Francis and Edith Shaeffer in Switzerland as a place where discussions on the deeper meanings of life could take place in a warm and supportive environment. www.labri.org

then current state of art in the Western world and offers his advice to Christian artists trying to live out their faith in all of life.

Shaeffer reasoned that if Christianity is really true, then it must involve the whole person in every area of life (376). Its effects will not be limited to an individual's adherence to a set of religious tenets. If Christianity is true, he said, it will manifest itself in ways that transform the intellect and creative propensity of those seeking to bring their lives into submission to the Lordship of Christ (377).

Shaeffer uses the term *art* to describe more than just the "high art" of painting, sculpture, classical music, and so on. He includes in his discussion art as part of popular culture, and goes on to say that "for the great artist, the most crucial work of art is his life" (Shaeffer 393).

He offers several suggestions to the Christian artist by which to judge art. His first point is that a work of art has value in itself because it emulates the divine act of creation (Shaeffer 394). This is very similar to Shih-t'ao's words, though the Biblical account of origins involves God's active work of creation, rather than the Buddhist's description of passivity. His second point is related to the first; being created in the image of God, human beings are endowed with certain traits that animals do not share, including the capacity for creativity (394). He affirms that art is found in every culture of the world and asserts that all people have some amount of creativity within them, whether it is developed into a skill or not. This is an area of agreement with Ellen Dissanayake, though

she interprets this fact as evidence of human evolution. The data is the same but the conclusions drawn from it are poles apart.

Shaeffer argues that the reason we preserve and display works of art in museums goes beyond the desire to communicate aesthetic values (395). He writes that human-made objects exhibit the nature of humanity--an essential persona that humans across all cultures share. He draws the following parallels:

When I look at the pre-Columbian silver or African masks or ancient Chinese bronzes, not only do I see them as works of art, but I see them as expressions of the nature and character of humanity. As a man, in a certain way they are myself, and I see there the outworking of the creativity that is inherent in the nature of man. (Shaeffer 395)

That humans communicate through artworks such as those mentioned in Shaeffer's example is clear. What may be less obvious is that even those modern artists, who reject the concept of special creation that places human beings in a category distinct from the animal, still display their worldviews through the meaninglessness of their art. Shaeffer describes as "too intellectual" art that lacks cohesiveness, stating that it cannot be great art because it has lost touch with the value of art in light of the nature and essential value of human beings (395). Such art, he contends, evidences the fragmentation of modern life and the estrangement that human beings feel, even from themselves.

Shaeffer rejects the concept of *art for art's sake*, which he describes as the idea that art is "just there," has no message, communicates nothing, and cannot be analyzed

(395). This meaningless art may be manufactured by lesser artists but was foreign to the great masters (395-396). The opposite view is that art is only a message and nothing more. Both Christians and non-Christians have held this utilitarian view of art, which Shaeffer criticizes as misguided since it forfeits the value of art as a human expression of creativity. Shaeffer advocates a third view, which is that an artist should set about to create works of art, and over time, the body of work will show the artist's worldview (396). I agree with his concept and seek to employ it in the creation of my own artwork. In fact, I doubt that it is possible for an artist to conceal his or her worldview. I think that our values do tend to show up in what we create, by our very choices in subject matter and the care (or lack of it) with which they are rendered.

Shaeffer recommends four standards for judging art: technical excellence, validity, intellectual content (worldview that comes through), and integration of content and the vehicle employed to transmit it. He suggests that technical excellence in painting could include such features such as the use of color, form, textures, line, balance, composition, and unity (399). We may appreciate an artist's skill in the use of the medium without necessarily agreeing with the artist's conception of reality.

The standard Shaeffer offers to judge validity is that of the artist's integrity in the motivation for the painting (399). Artists use the term "sell-out" to describe someone who makes art he or she does not believe in, just to make money or to gain notoriety. A commercial artist would not be considered a sell-out because the nature of commercial art is that it is done for a client and is not intended to reflect the artist's own sentiments.

Even there, however, a clever graphic artist can find ways to employ creativity in the accomplishment of projects that bring a sense of satisfaction in the quality of design, while simultaneously meeting the needs of the client.

Shaeffer speaks of content as the message communicated by the artist, relating a particular concept of reality (400). He emphasizes that technically excellent art is a powerful conveyor of ideas, so that if the artist sets forth a destructive paradigm, the resultant consequences will be far more devastating than if the art were constructed poorly (401). Here Shaeffer sounds like the advocate of morally uplifting art, as was considered desirable in America through the mid-nineteenth century then soundly dismissed as naïve. Certainly, poor quality writing is less likely to inspire people toward revolutionary change than is well-written literature. Political history reveals cases in which charismatic speakers were able to craft speech in such a way as to motivate people to do things they would not otherwise have considered.

The successful integration of the message an artist wishes to convey into a vehicle appropriate to transmit it is Shaeffer's final criterion for judging art. Many large-scale cinematic productions of our day demonstrate continual innovations in technical excellence, creating special effects designed to saturate the senses of audiences. This convincing method of presentation can exert a tremendous influence on the moods and thoughts of viewers. Some motion pictures employ sophisticated means to convey positive social values, such as the universal hero motif that frequents traditions of storytelling. Others seem to point impressionable young minds in the opposite direction.

Whatever we write, say publicly, or create artistically has some power to persuade. When done well, that persuasive potential may be enormous.

Suzi Gablik

In her book *The Reenchantment of Art* (1991), Suzi Gablik bemoans the lack of moral and spiritual sensitivity within society (3). Hers is a voice that, like the Hudson River painters and Francis Shaeffer before her, calls out for morally responsible art. She differs from her predecessors in her assessment of the problem and its solution, however. Their framework was the Christian view that meaning is derived from the human's relationship to the Creator-God and the world He has made. Gablik takes a Postmodern approach, advocating a new cultural paradigm in which artists shift current standards of "self-directed professionalism" defining success (2), toward a socially engaged community-based form of art, especially relating to environmental activism (4). She criticizes Modernism's goal of a completely autonomous art (5), which is a point she shares with Shaeffer. Gablik advocates a shift in the dominant cultural paradigm (2) that moves the emphasis away from the individual and toward the community in an interactive approach to solving practical problems (6). The overall tone of her writing leaves me feeling that she has little hope of saving the planet or of the redemption of modern humanity from its disconnectedness (Gablik, *Conversations* 54).

Gablik recorded interviews she conducted with a number of artists over several years in the book *Conversations Before the End of Time* (1995). Even the title suggests

her sense of hopelessness that anything will actually save the earth from environmental destruction. The first interview records a conversation between Suzi Gablik and Ellen Dissanayake in 1992. Dissanayake makes the observation that modern artists can often be so distracted by time pressures that they fail to properly connect with, reflect on, and care about their own artwork, thus it never becomes for them something special (Gablik, *Conversations* 44). I agree with her sentiment here and seek to remind myself to take time to really think about, become emotionally involved in, and enjoy the process of painting without becoming concerned about meeting deadlines. Dissanayake makes another good point that our society's consumer orientation can lead us to substitute buying art for making it (46), though I disagree that doing so negates the experience of the artwork as special. Many of us have acquired things that we value greatly and which provoke deep contemplation though they were made by others.

Gablik criticizes the solitary way in which art is created today and its use as a retreat from the world (Gablik, *Conversations* 47). She advocates a method of art that invites dialogue as an antidote to the artist's and writer's preoccupation with self-expression (49). Here I disagree with Gablik. It seems to me that she is focusing so much on the evidence of social fragmentation seen in Modernist and deconstructive Postmodernist art (which I agree is a serious issue), that she fails to appreciate the benefits of art created by individuals outside of her prescribed framework. It is as if Gablik is telling artists that what they are doing is only worthwhile if it meets her definition of socially responsible art, that is, art created by a community for the sake of

saving the planet. That effectively omits traditional high arts, such as painting, sculpture, classical music, ballet, and so on, that fail to carry a green political message or directly help the environment. I believe that these arts are immensely valuable as human expressions of creativity linking us to our cultural roots and that they are worthy of the time, effort, and resources it takes to produce and preserve them.

Furthermore, I think that solitude can be a very healthy thing and that it often promotes greater creativity. I also value self-expression, as long as its intent is not destructive. Times of social isolation for the purpose of reconnecting with nature or composing one's thoughts can be very fruitful and need not be linked to an anarchical view of society. Perhaps what Gablik opposes is the idea of the artist claiming complete autonomy. If that is what she opposes as unhealthy solitude and self-expression, then I will take my stand next to her in opposition to it. My sense is that she is advocating a whole new approach to art-making, one that gets the artist out of the studio, away from the painted canvas to be shown in an art museum or gallery, and puts the artist into a group environmental project. Collaborative projects have their place, of course, but they still rely on the abilities of the individuals that oversee them. Someone has to direct and finally edit the accumulation of material into something useful and cohesive. I do appreciate her emulation of Mindell's "deep democracy" in as much she seeks to listen to opposing views and respect those with diverse opinions (Gablik, *Conversations* 52).

My priorities diverge from Gablik's concerning the value I place on the works of great master artists, including art made by "the hegemonic, masculine" figures of

“Western European culture and its institutions” (Gablik, *Reenchantment* 17).¹² I am delighted that these objects are so cherished and guarded as national treasures in museums around the world and want them to remain so. While I agree with some of Gablik’s sentiments concerning the negative results of Enlightenment thinking that cast aside regard for the spirit in the desire for total objectivity (11), I find her proposed solutions to that problem lacking. In *The Reenchantment of Art*, she writes:

Increasingly, as artists begin to question their responsibility and perceive that “success” in capitalist, patriarchal terms may not be the enlightened path to the future, which of these views they hold definitely affects how they see their role: as demystifier or as cultural healer. Healing is the most powerful aspect of reconstructive postmodernism, whereas for the deconstructivist, it would seem that art can only deconstruct. There is no future beyond deconstruction. (25)

In the preceding quote, Gablik employs value-laden terminology that complicates and distracts from her desire to emphasize her positive solution, “Healing.” She sets the responsible, enlightened artist in opposition to capitalism (which implies a contrasting economic view based on a political agenda, such as socialism), instead of restricting her language to a condemnation of greed, which is recognized as a vice across multiple ideologies. The term “patriarchal” here is a slap against traditional social and religious institutions that place value in male leadership. In her interview with Thomas Moore, a

¹² I find such terminology and the bias it represents offensive. I consider it unfairly pejorative to classify Western European culture in this way, as though the whole series of cultures and ethnicities comprising European societies throughout history were a monolithic oppressor in a world of innocent victims. None of the world’s great societies can escape charges of collective guilt, such as is heaped upon Western Europe. The same could certainly be said of Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa, and even pre-Columbian America. Many atrocities have been committed by people inhabiting each of these areas of the world, yet the reality of the ugly does not negate the presence of the beauty human beings are also capable of. All people have reason to celebrate their respective cultural heritages and the artwork produced within their cultural frameworks.

psychotherapist and former Catholic monk, Gablik asked if he felt that “the modern world view has been an overweeningly masculine framework” to which he replied:

No, and I don't think we have yet discovered at all what wonderful things patriarchy can be. To blame patriarchy for all these things that are wrong I think is an awful simplification [...] there's no way all of that talk about patriarchy won't bleed into talk of men versus women¹³ and therefore increase the divisions [...] The divisiveness of the genders is so difficult at the present moment.” (Gablik, *Conversations*, 399)

I would add that a healthy view of masculinity includes the idea that good men use their strength to protect others (especially their wives and children) from evil men who use their physical strength to abuse and destroy.

In his interview with Suzi Gablik, Thomas Moore, author of *Care of the Soul* (1992), expressed his disagreement with Ellen Dissanayake's view of the human race as a dysfunctional species, destroying many other species along with itself. He thinks theologically about the nature of original sin and the imperfections present within all living things (Gablik, *Conversations* 404). He says that we need to accept the flaws and painful experiences that are part of living in relationship, which he likens to an artist's canvas or musical staff (405). He believes that relationship is an essential component of a “soulful life” (406). Moore speaks of the benefits of having a family as a way of setting a historical context to life, offering a sense of eternity that the soul requires.

¹³ I am not troubled by the lack of equal representation of male and female artists in art museums. Most women throughout the world marry and devote themselves to raising their children. In times past, they often did not outlive their child-rearing years. It was a remarkable woman indeed who could manage a large household, caring for the needs of many others, and still find time to develop into a highly skilled artist, winning her the recognition of her male counterparts. I think about such qualities when I view the artwork of those rare and special women who accomplished so much, far exceeding the limited expectations of tradition.

Moore also states that art grabs our attention, seeming to halt time for several minutes, which is not the case with art geared toward political propaganda (Gablik, *Conversations* 407). He does see art, then, as providing a valuable refuge, a vacation for the soul, providing a vehicle by which the soul can empty itself and find rest (406). He gives the example of a Bach partita as fulfilling that role, but advocates any art form that calls us to contemplation (407). Moore believes that art can provide a valuable service by giving us images that aid in the contemplation of the mysterious (409).

I am in hearty agreement with Moore's advocacy of art that aids in the contemplation of mystery. That gives me hope for my own artwork and its meditative tendencies. I also agree with Gablik in her preference for the superior role of cultural healer over that of the destructive deconstructivist. Yet, her focal point of unifying artists in the common cause of saving the planet stands or falls on the basis of the presence or absence of real hope that an individual can affect change (Gablik, *Reenchantment* 24, 25). I don't believe Gablik has real hope that the planet will be saved. If the main motivation in creating art is based on the efficacious preservation of the environment and that is a futile cause, then there is no basis either for art or ecology.

I agree with Gablik and the other thinkers I have discussed that art should benefit society, but would contend the notion that working alone in a studio is indicative of a rejection of community involvement. Certainly, some artists have exhibited anti-social traits. Emily Dickenson is famous for her agoraphobia. I am grateful that she liked to write, however. It is my belief that what we create as artists and poets is of value because

it speaks to the nature of human beings. Some of us find it more productive to work alone, most of the time. Sometimes, solitary contemplation yields wonderful creativity that can then be shared with others, a point also made by Thomas Moore. I do not believe that great literature can be written by committee or that a normal canvas has room for multiple painters. Certainly, the collective efforts of artists to build and adorn the great cathedrals of Europe exemplify a type of community-based art, but they also were works requiring great individual skill in the fine arts. They demonstrate a common belief structure that found value in representing a mystical realm in order to contemplate it, transcending both a narcissistic preoccupation with self and pessimism over the dismal state of earthly affairs.

Furthermore, I believe in the value of high art. As much as I enjoy folk arts from around the world in both visual and musical forms, I do not believe that multiculturalism ought to be emphasized to the exclusion of art derived from Western European influences. I belong to an orchestra. Most of the musical pieces we perform were composed by Europeans during the previous two centuries in Classical and Romantic styles. Some of our repertoire features compositions by Modern and contemporary composers from The United States, Brazil, and Poland. We have also performed works by Chinese, Czech, Russian, and Hungarian writers. Each member of an orchestra must develop skill on a particular instrument and knowledge of musical forms. When we come together, our conductor helps us to function as a unit, working interdependently to create a symphonic blend of sound. Performing music involves both the left and right sides of

the brain—the intellectual and the emotionally expressive—in an equally important balance in order to make beautiful music that is enriching to both audience and performers. Perhaps, that is representative of the type of cooperative effort Gablik is trying to initiate when she speaks of community-based art. High art does not directly take action—political or otherwise—to protect the environment, however. I must stress that artists are not wasting their time by spending years developing their skills to master particular genres of art, as the practitioners of classical art forms must do. Those who devote themselves to mastery of musical abilities, classical dance, or painting and sculpture have much to offer to every society. I believe that high art can make us, in some sense at least, better individuals and that fact will have repercussions on the world we inhabit.

Refuge

In the preceding section, I stated my disagreement with Suzi Gablik over her denigration of the practice of making art as a refuge from society. The time I spend painting is generally time alone, away from the distractions of daily routines. It was encouraging for me to read Thomas Moore's comments offering legitimacy to that need. While not escapist, I find that I need to retreat into nature in relative solitude, from time to time, in order to think more clearly. The artwork I create, however, does not communicate the idea of a desire on my part for complete autonomy or estrangement from the world. On the contrary, it is an invitation to join me in contemplation of the

beauty in nature. That is probably a motivation that would be respected by every person I have written about to this point. What we all have in common is our love for nature and our desire to make meaningful art that reflects it.

As I consider what others have written about finding refuge in nature, it strikes me that their language often waxes poetical. Perhaps it is the authors' recognition of their inability to encapsulate all the wonders they've witnessed in the wild and articulate them that evokes their use of the most sensitive wording possible on nature's behalf. While it is best to learn of nature by experiencing it first hand, the writers in this section can help inspire us to foray into the wilderness on our own. Their words fuel the imagination and warm the heart. We are those who, as Aldo Leopold describes, cannot live without the wild spaces.

While not working directly in the field of visual art, each writer presented next gives us insight into the mysterious aspects of nature with a poet's astute powers of observation. Such insight broadens artistic perspective and provides deeper understanding of the effect interaction with nature has on the human soul. The section focuses on the concept of nature as a refuge from the multiple pressures of civilization. For some of us, spending time away from the hectic demands of an urban lifestyle marks the difference between real living and mere existence.

Terry Tempest Williams

The title for this portion of my thesis is borrowed from Terry Tempest Williams' book entitled *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (1991). I had not been aware of the ecological importance of Salt Lake and its surrounding marshland to the many species of birds that find sanctuary there, prior to reading this book. Williams' correlation of her mother's struggle with cancer and the changes occurring near the Lake is quite a work of poetry. The fact that nature has a way to inspire comes as no surprise to anyone who has taken a few moments to stop and watch a stunning sunset or enjoyed the thrill of spying a pair of painted buntings nearby. The marshland too is a treasure trove of life.

I mentioned earlier that nature is not tame. We may pay a high price to enjoy it up close. This was evident in Terry Tempest Williams' life when she suffered a severe facial injury from a fall while hiking, leaving her scarred (Williams 242, 243). She realized the danger that was ever present in the desert. Writing that she was aware of the "will" of the Great Salt Lake, which kept her from totally relaxing there or letting down her guard, she says:

The understanding that I could die on the salt flats is no great epiphany. I could die anywhere. It's just that in the forsaken corners of Great Salt Lake there is no illusion of being safe. You stand in the throbbing silence of the great Basin, exposed and alone. [...] And it is here I find grace. (Williams 148)

Williams continues this train of thought in *Refuge*, "If the desert is holy, it is because it is a forgotten place that allows us to remember the sacred" (148), which helps to explain why she kept venturing out, despite the threat from the harsh elements.

Williams' willingness to risk injury in order to connect with the landscape resonates with my attraction to natural scenes. We could all try to play it safe and stay home, watching others take risks on nature specials and dramatizations on television. Perhaps if we knew which instances would result in severe injury or death, we would decide not to go out at those times, but we don't know if or when our journeys into the wild will result in disaster. I intend to continue to hike along trails near waterfalls, bicycle outdoors, and so on. I want to exercise due caution but I still have to be out in the elements in order to appreciate my full humanity.

Williams writes that her trips into the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge helped her to find comfort during the trying times of dealing with cancer in the family (3, 4). Watching the encroachment of human activity into the area of what should have offered the birds a safe haven enraged her. She writes, "Restraint is the steel partition between a rational mind and a violent one" (12). One of the more difficult things the nature lover has to deal with is how to communicate with those who haven't the foggiest idea what she is talking about, while trying to explain why things like wildlife sanctuaries are important or why littering is so harmful. Restraint, as Williams states, can mean the difference between making a cogent argument and finding a hearing, and losing all opportunity for rational discourse because of losing control of one's emotions. Even

when people are engaged in a righteous cause, they must exercise caution in their choice of words. We must normally maintain a respectful attitude toward others with whom we contend, or we will not accomplish anything for environmental preservation.

Williams' Mormon ancestors had established themselves in Utah in the 1850s (Williams 13). Her extended family and Mormon traditions had conveyed to her a strong sense of connection to the land (14). She was raised to believe that all living creatures were designed with a purpose and possessed a spiritual aspect. Williams considered that times in the wilderness were special because they enabled her to worship God on sacred ground (14). Her mother had spoken to her of her desire for solitude that never reached its limit (15). Her grandmother used to take her bird watching at Bear River. So the memories were developed that would drive her back to that place for solace years later.

The Bear River Refuge had been established to protect the birds affected by the decline of the natural marshes through the diversion of river water for irrigation and other reasons (Williams 19). This is a recurring theme around the country, as the needs of growing metropolises infringe on the flow of fresh water to the wetlands required by wildlife. Cynthia Barnett has much to say about this problem and offers positive suggestions to help balance the needs of both the human and wildlife populations. At her talk in Orlando, Florida, on November 1, 2007, she spoke about the need for people in different communities to work together to find solutions to water shortages. She admonished those involved not to fight water wars, but to cooperate in practical ways that do not overburden any one segment of the population, while still meeting the needs of

wildlife. This is a sentiment that would be applauded by Suzi Gablik, as well. Barnett also wants the opportunity to take her children out into pristine waters and connect with nature. Just as Terry Tempest Williams' life was impacted by her introduction to the marsh as a child, so Barnett and countless other parents want their children to experience the wonder of natural spaces. We need to preserve nature, in part, so that they can find a refuge there, a place of solace and reflection, where the next generation can develop as whole people in touch with their environment.

Aldo Leopold

A Sand County Almanac (1949) describes an ecosystem surrounding a body of water in Wisconsin. Aldo Leopold (1887-1948) pens eloquent descriptions of the wildlife he witnessed near his weekend home. A review by the *San Francisco Chronicle* likened this book to the writings of such environmentalists as John Muir and Henry David Thoreau. It has become a classic manual on the need for environmental stewardship. In the foreword, Leopold writes:

Like winds and sunsets, wild things were taken for granted until progress began to do away with them. Now we face the question whether a still higher 'standard of living' is worth its cost in things natural, wild, and free. (Leopold xvii)

He concedes that preserving the wilderness does not become a priority for people until they have their basic needs met. It is the unbridled gallop in the name of progress and profit that spurs growth that overwhelms ecosystems and threatens the health of the whole environmental structure that supports life, including human life. Leopold and his

family lived in a humble house on a sand farm as their “week-end refuge from too much modernity” (Leopold xviii). Here Leopold acknowledges the price we pay for so many conveniences. Like others seeking a place of refuge, he yearned for a space absent the sounds of the city, turning his ear away from the tooting of car horns, and toward the honking of migrating geese.

Leopold writes that land is abused because it is seen as a commodity (xviii), something we own and have the right to use in whatever way we choose. He warns that the only hope of preserving the land from the onslaught of mechanization is to develop a love and respect for it (xix). We as a society must exercise self-control in the exploitation of nature’s resources. We need to determine when enough is enough. Aldo Leopold shared the assessments of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Thomas Cole that the majority of people are too caught up in mundane pursuits to appreciate the beauty of nature. In his *Essay on American Scenery*, Cole wrote:

From the indifference with which the multitude regard the beauties of nature, it might be inferred that she has been unnecessarily lavish in adorning this world for beings who take no pleasure in its adornment. Who in grovelling pursuits forget their glorious heritage. Why was the earth made so beautiful, or the sun so clad in glory at his rising and setting, when *all* might be unrobed of beauty without affecting the insensate multitude, so they can be "lighted to their purposes?" (Cole)

Leopold advocates a shift in the common value structure, calling for a reappraisal of the society’s addiction to growth and accumulation of material goods at the expense of the land. He diagnoses the social ill as placing economic health above physical and

emotional health. He chides the world for being “so greedy for more bathtubs that it has lost the stability necessary [...] to turn off the tap” (Leopold xix).

In the section of *Almanac* called *Marshland Elegy*, Leopold writes that

Our ability to perceive quality in nature begins, as in art, with the pretty. It expands through successive stages of the beautiful to values as yet uncaptured by language. The quality of cranes lies, I think, in this higher gamut, as yet beyond the reach of words. (102)

There are several interesting corollaries in this statement to others we have considered in previous sections. First, his comment that compares the perception of quality in nature to that of art hints at what the Hudson River painters intuitively knew, as they looked to nature to inspire their artwork, developing a Wilderness Aesthetic. He goes on to mention that this perception starts with “the pretty.” The concept of the sublime and the beautiful in nature and in art conveys the attraction of more than just overt, obvious beauty; we desire something a bit deeper. His reference to that kind of beauty’s inexpressibility by language harkens back to Ellen Dissanayake’s observations of preliterate people and their sensitivity to stimuli that may be deficient in literate Westerners. Perhaps the visual arts, like painting, can help us connect with nature in ways that language alone cannot. His main point is that our perception of the beauty or worth of something in nature is a developmental process. As we understand more of the ecosystem, we can come to appreciate elements of it that we may have previously disdained. He writes, “a plain exterior often conceals hidden riches” (Leopold 180). The

crane may lack the type of elegance found in a swan, but it possesses its own form of beauty.

Annie Dillard

Annie Dillard wrote *Pilgrim At Tinker Creek* (1974) about her wanderings and observations of nature. She seems to take on a masculine persona, as she describes in gory details the results of her tom cat's hunting expeditions and recounts many gruesome scientific facts she has read. Her use of Biblical imagery helps to portray nature in philosophical and spiritual terms. These are woven throughout the book, along with other sources of inspiration and a multitude of personal reflections. Dillard uses this descriptive language:

Our life is a faint tracing on the surface of mystery [...] We must somehow take a wider view, look at the whole landscape, really see it, and describe what's going on here.[...] After the one extravagant gesture of creation in the first place, the universe has continued to deal exclusively in extravagances. (9)

She invokes the grandeur of original creation, prodding us to focus with understanding on this world of wonder in which we live. If we can get beyond our mundane existence to see the big picture, we will be able to understand clearly our place within it. She sees beauty in the complexity of the world's design and nature's creatures:

This is the truth of the pervading intricacy of the world's detail: the creation is not a study, a roughed-in sketch; it is supremely, meticulously created, created abundantly, extravagantly, and in fine. (134)

Dillard continues to talk about the art of seeing, saying that it is connected (unlike in childhood) with her ability to verbalize and call attention to an experience.¹⁴ She cites Ruskin as saying that if she fails to direct herself to pay attention, objects before her eyes will go, “not merely unnoticed, but in the full, clear sense of the word, unseen” (as quoted by Dillard 30).

Dillard calls self-consciousness “the curse of the city and all that sophistication implies” (81). She says that when she becomes aware of herself, she ceases to be able to lose herself in the wonders of a setting sun streaming like fire in a cedar tree (80). In moments like that, words are insufficient to capture the spirit of the visual experience. “Experiencing the present purely is being emptied and hollow; you catch grace as a man fills his cup under a waterfall” (80-81). She continues:

The present is the object of vision, and what I see before me at any given second is a full field of color-patches scattered just so. The configuration will never be repeated. Living is moving; time is a live creek bearing changing lights. (82)

The preceding line is a beautiful example of her ability to see forms and colors without having to interpret them as what they are. Dillard is able to use a particular sight as a metaphor for a general principle, in this case the unhalting progression of time. This is one way in which she sees a specific scene and draws meaning from it that applies to a universal way of seeing. It is helpful for me as an artist to approach a scene, sometimes setting aside what I know to be true about the facts of its operation, and just let my eyes

¹⁴ This seems to put her at odds with Ellen Dissanayake but may actually support Dissanayake’s theory about the advantage preliterate people have in experiencing nature.

tell me what they see: colors, indistinct shapes, and patterns of light, moving, changing. The ripples of a flowing stream traveling over stones alive with moss, reflecting the trees and clouds overhead are every moment new. Dillard says that, “Live water heals memories” (100). It helps wash away the past in the promises of a better future. No wonder we are drawn to the water for comfort in this world. It provides us a respite, a safe place of contemplation where we are no longer judged by what we have done. The slate is wiped clean. All is forgiven.

Dillard avers that beauty is wrapped up in the complexity of design. The world contains an inexhaustible supply of complex textures and patterns to behold in a constantly changing landscape. She finds it speaking to her in ways she had not anticipated (139). She sees generosity in the variety of the landscape, combining the elements to make a beautiful whole (161). Not everything in the world is so beautiful, however. Death is a part of it. Dillard refers to death as the price every living creature must pay for its chance to live (181). Death is the flip side of the beautiful and serene we seek in nature. It is the putting down of the individual that we hold dear. She contrasts our love of individuals with nature’s ambivalence toward them (176). Dillard acknowledges that it is our human concern over right and wrong that makes nature’s cruelty and waste so disturbing. We are moral beings and want things to be right. She warns us against wasting our time focusing on the painful, frustrating aspects of life, instead of exulting in the grace we have been given. She describes the world as wild, dangerous, and bitter, but also extravagantly bright (268).

I find Annie Dillard's use of Biblical imagery insightful in some respects, but sometimes out of place. She does not quote Scripture within its proper context, as an exegetical sermon would do. Rather, she borrows its lively imagery to read into nature a spirituality that may not actually be there. Perhaps the beauty we see in nature is more a reflection of our inner dreams than it is an accurate interpretation of the raw facts. Then again, even the cold scientific approach (which Dillard takes from time to time) contains within it an assumption of a particular outlook on life. We do tend to see what we are looking for and are adept at ignoring truths that don't fit our comfortable paradigm. This is as true for the Darwinist as it is for the Creationist. I want to see the beauty and serene in nature, and turn my face from the bloody scenes of cruelty and waste. I think that Thomas Cole and Frederic Church were better at depicting the dark side of nature, than I am. It isn't that I don't know it's there; I believe we live in a fallen world. Rather, my attention is drawn to the beauty, more than the terror-invoking aspect of the sublime landscape.

Contemporary Landscape Artists

I have taken a rather methodical approach in forming a foundation on which to build my case for the relevance of landscape painting today. My thesis began with setting a historical context by looking at Frederic Church and the basis for the Wilderness Aesthetic, forming the preliminary drawings which would guide me throughout the process of depicting a scene. Then I set an overall tone color by delving further into some

differing theories of aesthetics. From there, I established the values that will unite the final composition by looking at the desire for refuge in nature, which has the power to inspire poet and painter, musician, and sculptor. I will now fill in those values with colors and shapes by looking at three landscape artists working today. At the end of this chapter, I will speak to the question of where I see my place within contemporary landscape art.

Mel Chin

Mel Chin received his formal training in art at Peabody College in Nashville, Tennessee (Krug). He incorporated his skills as a sculptor into a larger environmental ethic, wanting to make a difference for ecology. In 1990, he worked alongside a scientist, Rufus Chaney,¹⁵ to create *Revival Field*, a land reclamation project that he considers to be a living sculpture. Their aim was to detoxify 60 square feet of a Minnesota landfill, using six varieties of plants, known as *hyperaccumulators*--including datura, sweet corn, and bladder campion--to take up heavy metals from the soil. The process is called, “green remediation” (Krug).

In an interview on *Art 21*, Mel Chin spoke of his inspiration for the project:

We live in a world of pollution with heavy metals saturating the soil. [...] If that could be carved away, and life could return to that soil, [...] then that is a wonderful sculpture. I think there is a profound aesthetic in there and it’s really simple. (Chin, *Art In the Twenty-first Century*)

¹⁵ Rufus L. Chaney is a senior research scientist at the United States Department of Agriculture.

The replicated field is an environment outside the laboratory where the experiment could be tested to see if the idea will work on a larger scale. Chin went on to say, "the art can mutate into a science project" in order to provide the results and prove whether the idea was worthwhile or not. He considers the whole process an evolutionary concept, not a static idea but a changing physical reality. Even if the project's results do not prove positive, he will at least enjoy the satisfaction of having generated an idea of the earth living again.

In order to ensure that the project would be self-sustaining, Chin and Chaney planned to harvest the plants, ash them, then sell the concentrated minerals. Chin describes *hyperaccumulation* as the process in which plants absorb heavy metals from the soil to the extent that, when harvested and ashed, the plant matter is twenty to forty percent heavy metal. Their plan is to sell that ore to pay for the costs of replicating the process, thus establishing an economic incentive to keep the program going indefinitely. Mel Chin hopes that the cost of healing toxic landfills might eventually be recovered from the recycled materials, using this green remediation process. Plantings have been scheduled to continue at *Revival Field* until the entire site is detoxified (Krug).

In 1992, Barbara Matilsky wrote in *Museum News* that

"artists like Mel Chin are expanding the definition of art and forging a new identity for themselves. Traditionally, the process of creating art has been an individual pursuit. By contrast, ecological art is dependent upon an institution--museum, college, gallery, or states arts organization--and is a cooperative effort with the community." (as quoted by Krug)

This concept sounds very much like the kind of collaborative art advocated by Suzi Gablik. When Matilsky uses the term “traditionally,” she is accurate in reference to devotees of Modernism. It would not be a correct assertion if meant to include works made throughout the Gothic, Renaissance, or Baroque traditions of European art history in which cooperative efforts were organized to adorn chapels and monasteries. Even individual-exalting Romantic art forms were created with the notion of communicating some kind of message. It is in the realm of Modernist art that discontinuity became the norm and art was deliberately estranged from the world. The anti-art movements that resulted from the disembodiment of the human soul from creativity are stark evidence of an identity crisis (or series of them) within the art “community.” Perhaps the move toward community-based environmental art is a natural reaction to the unsustainable position of radically autonomous “art.” Such eco-friendly projects are intended to heal the earth, while fostering a sense of belonging to a group of like-minded people working toward a common cause.

Clyde Butcher

Clyde Butcher was interviewed August 8, 2007, on *The Story*, a broadcast of North Carolina Public Radio. He told about his decision in 1986 to depart from color photography and create exclusively black and white art images, following the death of his son. Butcher’s stunning photographs of the Everglades have been credited with helping to

raise awareness of its special qualities, invigorating the effort to restore and preserve Florida's wetlands.

Another guest on the radio show that day was Cynthia Barnett, author of *Mirage: Florida and the Vanishing Water of the Eastern U.S.* She had met Butcher while doing research for her book. Following her reports of the disturbing magnitude of growing water shortages across the country, Barnett wanted to offer some hope for redemption, so she referred to Butcher's influential photographs as proof that changes can still be made. She thinks people will finally do the right thing for the environment. In the final chapter of her book, she writes that during the 1870s, Thomas Moran's paintings of landscapes at Yellowstone provided the impetus needed to set the land aside as a national park. Ansel Adams published a book of his wilderness photographs, called *Sierra Nevada: The John Muir Trail* (1938), which persuaded the Roosevelt administration to ensure that the national parks protected the wilderness areas, rather than cater to resort interests (Barnett 182). Barnett then draws the link between these earlier artists' influence on national environmental policy and Clyde Butcher's work:

Butcher became a champion of Everglades restoration, a particularly effective one because he could show someone who would never step foot in the Glades why they were worth saving. His ancient-looking forests, rivers, and prairies helped change the way Americans saw the Everglades. The photos were too beautiful to reveal the destruction of the ecosystem [...] they made people fall in love with a swamp that previous generations had disdained and destroyed. (182,183)

April Gornik

April Gornik paints huge unfocused vistas of clouds, land elements, and water devoid of human figures. An essay posted on her website conveys some of her ideas about her work, as she shared them in a talk for the New York Art Teachers Association. Gornik begins the essay with the statement that ours is the “most visually rich society” ever to have existed, yet at the same time, it is mostly “visually illiterate” (Gornik, *An Artist’s Perspective on Visual Literacy*). She laments the fact that our image-saturation tends to grab viewers’ attention with flat media formats, lacking the texture and depth of hand-created forms of art. Gornik would often receive intended praise from viewers of her work who asked if they were photographs. Her response was one of dismay that anyone would confuse a hand-made object with a flat imitation. She believes that an object’s physical properties and scale are part of the effect it has on a viewer, an essential component of the message she wants to convey as an artist. This does not mean that she necessarily sets out to stimulate a particular response, as a person observes her paintings in relation to body scale, but that such a response will occur. People can relate to the space-time reality of artwork and learn something of the artist in the process.

Gornik says that while children are educated to learn the difference between advertisements and great literature, the ability to discern their distinctive traits is often lacking in the way visual art is taught today. She finds it sad that art students find little to encourage a growing sensitivity to what should be basic to them. She says:

A painting in the flesh is, and should be, a somatic experience for the viewer. An image painted by hand, rather than reproduced in a magazine, has the feel of its painted surface, and the manner in which that paint is applied, be it realistic or abstract. (Gornik, *An Artist's Perspective on Visual Literacy*)

Gornik is not opposed to the use of computers and digital imagery; she incorporates both, but insists that they are not substitutes for art that is made by hand. She proposes that children need to be taught to appreciate the physicality of hand-made art and to discern between art and advertisement. She also wants them to appreciate the difference between an actual work of art and a photo of it in a book. At the close of her essay, Gornik states:

The real power of the visual arts in their capacity as virtual reality is the physicality of the experience, the somatic connection that remains between the work of art, the artist who made it, and the person looking at it. That connection is an essential part of the human experience, a verification of humanity, history, and our connectedness itself. (Gornik)

So, to April Gornik, the physical properties of an artwork have psychological and relational ramifications. Her statement is reminiscent of Francis Shaeffer's description of the human connection he experienced when viewing artwork that spanned continents, cultures, and centuries. I agree that the tangible nature of art helps us to understand the message of the artist who created it and further helps us to relate to one another more fully and thoughtfully as human beings.

My Place and Purpose in Painting Today

The place I would carve out for myself in today's art scene ideally gains a bit larger audience for my paintings, but not so great that I forfeit my treasured privacy. That is a comfortable niche for me, though one of relative obscurity. My purpose in painting is to create meaningful landscapes that communicate a love for nature and an increased awareness of the often unnoticed and unseen beauty all around us. Environmental activism is not the primary reason I paint, however. I paint landscapes because I love to do so. I believe that the desire to create beautiful art is a good thing and should be encouraged. Visual art, like poetry and music, expresses a deeper level of thinking about and sensing the world around us. Painting thus brings me enormous satisfaction as a creative human being, even if its results are not quantifiable.

I don't see myself participating in collaborative, community-based eco-art, like Mel Chin's *Revival Field*, as an art production. I do not consider that a work of sculpture as Chin does, though he describes it in conceptual terms as carving away; nevertheless, I do think it is a wonderful ecology project. I could participate in something like that on such a basis. Art should benefit society in some way. To me, that does not mean that art must be made by the whole society in a series of group efforts, though that is suitable in some situations. I don't believe that we should set aside all of our drives as unique human creators in order to pursue a rescue of the environment, as noble as that cause may be. That goal is worthy of some sacrifice, to be sure, but not of something so dear as art, music, and literature! I do not think our lives need to stop in order to save the planet and

stand in opposition to any cause that would denigrate human life, as though the earth should be saved while human beings perish. Instead of supporting a paradigm shift that transforms artists into environmental activists, I prefer to encourage sensitive individuals to think and reflect on what is really important in life. I believe each of us must strive to live in harmony with nature and with one another in every aspect of our lives, not just those specifically related to art.

I value the roles of individual artists, working skillfully to create meaningful works of art that enrich the lives of others. This makes me very grateful for the presence of art museums that preserve so much evidence of our humanity. I oppose the notion that art ought to reject societal norms and just be provocative, as the heirs of Modernism insist. That practice is irresponsible and strikes me as immature. “Art” that is designed to be offensive is the ultimate expression of rebellious adolescent-like angst in the guise of boldly Bohemian subversion. I don’t believe that “art” is whatever anyone who calls himself or herself an artist says it is. We need not shy away from setting some kind of standards by which to judge artwork, such as those proposed by Shaeffer. I also concur with April Gornik that art must be understood as distinct from advertisement. I fear that artwork geared solely to the purpose of environmental activism is essentially message-oriented political art. Political art, as pointed out by Thomas Moore, does not speak to our deepest needs as human beings (Gablik, *Conversations* 407).

I believe in the value of individuals employing traditional techniques in the creation of art that is both meaningful and beautiful. The Hudson River painters

concluded with Ruskin's Protestant aesthetic that bound beauty and morality inextricably together. I would like to see a return to such art. It is my hope to be able to paint with the clarity and skill of Frederic Church, whose use of color and mastery of atmospheric techniques still astounds me. My vantage point will be somewhat different, of course. I am an individual living in the twenty-first century and have a vision that, while compatible with Church's, is still my own.

Summary of the Literature and Implications: How They See/ How I See

Frederic Church was a true student of nature. Possessing a sharp eye, he developed an extraordinary ability to translate his observations into magnificent works of art. An unbridled curiosity led Church to read widely in multiple subject areas, which helped to inform his painting, making him not only a better artist but a more interesting person as well. This background also gave him a fuller understanding and appreciation of the natural world, which he was able to communicate through his art. Church combined knowledge gained by experience outdoors and from his broad travels to expand on his base of painting American landscape scenes. He did not need to go into the wilderness in search of something to believe in. Church was the beneficiary of a strong Protestant belief system that provided a foundation of morally uplifting aesthetic principles. His keen mind was never idle. He was always learning, continually working on some creative project, ever acting out his set of values in every area of life.

Frederic Church followed Thomas Cole's example of going for long walks, pencil and paper in hand, to record his observations of nature in every detail. Such habits of looking closely at his surroundings must have led to a familiarity that gave him the gratifying feeling of being in the company of an old friend, but also fed his curiosity for what lay over the next hill. He wanted to see it all, and since he could afford to travel, he was able to indulge his passion to explore the scenes that Humboldt had written about so persuasively.

Church's final acts of creativity were centered in the building of a studio as an addition to his Olana home (Howat 184). When his hand was no longer steady enough for painting large canvases, he still maintained a positive attitude and continued to make his visions a reality on a smaller scale. His memory lives on at his Olana estate, where a new generation of landscape artists and supporters continue to be inspired, as I am, by his life and work.

Frederic Church learned to combine the art of seeing with that of drawing what he saw. I would like to spend more time emulating that practice. My use of a digital camera to record scenes to paint has both advantages and limitations, compared to Church's method. I can spend an hour or a day in one location, taking many photographs without the need to write notes to indicate colors and lighting. I am able to enjoy the moments on the site, though necessarily limit my scope to the view through my camera's lens. I am less self-conscious taking photographs than I would be sketching in front of curious

onlookers. Digital photography need not replace the practice of drawing by hand. It can be used as a helpful supplement to it.

The way I see nature leads me to place a higher value on the land than on any human construction on it. I would rather “own” acreage than a mansion. One is permanent; the other will eventually crumble. That said, I think that Church chose the best of both worlds. His estate includes large areas of land, both wooded and farmed, and the house itself provided much more than basic shelter. It was a place of beauty and hospitality and still serves as a safe haven for artwork. As Shaeffer reminds us, there is an element of our humanity tied into the art objects we create, and that makes them valuable.

I have said that we all bring our preconceived ideas into nature, and that influences our interpretations of what we see there. To me, the land with trees, water, and open sky above is beautiful beyond compare. Its inhabitants, when spotted, usually add to that awareness. Terry Tempest Williams’ grandmother asked her once:

How do you place a value on inspiration? How do you quantify the wildness of birds, when for the most part, they lead secret and anonymous lives? (Williams 265)

I see so much just by walking out into my own back yard. I have to remember that there is always more going on there than I ever witness. There is also a tremendous world beyond my narrow vision with sights worth seeing, and many more that need not be seen by me to be believed in and treasured.

I also seek solitude and a place of reflection in the natural places and familiar landscapes. This concept of nature as refuge is aptly stated by Terry Tempest Williams:

The landscapes we know and return to become places of solace. We are drawn to them because of the stories they tell, because of the memories they hold, or simply because of the sheer beauty that calls us back again and again. (244)

Like Frederic Church, I love to travel and see new vistas, enjoying both the moments of actually being present with them and the anticipation of the time I will spend getting to know them further through painting those scenes. Church's skill in rendering what he saw inspires me to keep learning and experimenting to develop better techniques to inform my paintings. Church was intrigued by the minute details of plants, moving water, and rocks, as am I. His gaze was also drawn upward and outward to the vast expanse of sky, revealing his desire to move beyond the small things of life to focus on the transcendent. Perhaps the most important thing I have gleaned from Church is the strengthening of my belief that the time and effort required by landscape painting is worthwhile. Learning to see nature and create art will be for me a lifelong pursuit.

My landscapes do not cleanse the earth from toxic chemicals, nor do I claim that they demonstrate democratically held, community values. They are just my paintings. They are special to me and perhaps to no one else. I put something of myself into each of them. Maybe that's reason enough for their existence. I'd love to have an influence that resulted in increased appreciation for environmental integrity, but I can't base my artwork on that hope alone. The landscape is a part of me. I must paint it.

CHAPTER THREE: ELEMENTS OF THE LANDSCAPE AND MY PAINTINGS

In this section of my thesis, I reflect on the completion of the metaphorical painting that started as a set of preliminary drawings, inspired by insights gained from studying Frederic Church and the cultural setting that informed his vision. From there I set the overall tone of the canvas by evaluating the contributions to aesthetic theory made by such diverse thinkers as Ellen Dissanayake, Shih-t'ao, Suzi Gablik, and Francis Shaeffer. After that, I establish the picture's value relationships by considering the desire for a refuge in nature that I share with writers such as Aldo Leopold, Annie Dillard, and Terry Tempest Williams. From there, I discuss the work of a handful of contemporary landscape artists, establishing color and shape relationships with the help of April Gornik, Clyde Butcher, and Mel Chin. The canvas is now ready for the most rewarding and final stage of the process—depicting the details to arrive at a finished landscape painting.

With this brief introduction, I now embark on the most personal step in the development of my thesis. Each chapter begins with an eye focused on a particular landscape element, including as much information on its ecological importance as deemed appropriate. Every chapter then continues with a discussion of one or more of my thesis paintings. I will talk about my inspiration for each painting, describing the settings in which I first came across the scenes and what the pictures mean to me now. Looking at

these oil paintings brings back memories of my visits to the actual spaces depicted in them, arousing in me a desire to once again return and experience anew the beauty and sublimity of nature first hand.

My artwork serves as a vehicle of communication about my views on nature and ecology, but it is much more. It is the result of the creative urges pent up inside me that can only be released through this means of expression. I agree with Francis Shaeffer that an artist's worldview will tend to speak through the body of her work (396). So I believe that my values and priorities are reflected on the canvases coming out of my studio. Everything can be a part of the process of learning to see and understand nature, the interconnectedness of the world around us, and the close relationship that human beings can have with their environment.

Moss: The Beginning

My fascination with moss began in childhood. One day, I scraped up a handful of moss from the side of a school building and carried it home. I was attracted to it because of its velvety soft texture and deep green color. I had no idea then of the impact *Phylum bryophyta* would have on my life. Years later, I brought a rock covered in moss as an example of a gametophyte to a college biology class. My professor placed a minute slice of it under a field microscope for a closer look. When I focused on that magnified image, I was astonished to see a miniature forest with swaying fronds and water droplets. That

sight helped me to realize what wonders live beneath our feet, comprising innumerable systems of living things that remain largely unseen and unappreciated.

It strikes me that the ecological goal of promoting awareness of the interconnectedness of all living creatures can only benefit by revelations of the beauty inherent in the often neglected spaces. Moss is a primary plant, possessing the capacity to energize the transformation of barren rock into habitat by providing a foundation upon which other plant species can anchor themselves and grow. Thus moss is the beginning in a biological cycle, an integral starting point in the discussion of environmental relationships that help sustain life on our planet. Moss is also a recurring theme in my artwork, not only because it often appears in moist, uncultivated spaces that are the usual subjects for my paintings, but also because I am still attracted to its simple beauty and gentle nature.

In 2006, I had the pleasure of traveling to Iceland. I saw abundant evidence of the island's volcanic origins in extensive lava beds and many thermally heated mineral springs and geysers. Much of the lava is covered with mosses, which fill in the contours of the rock, creating mounds of gray-green pillows on the earth's surface. The sharp edges of volcanic rock are softened by cushions of bryophyte colonies adhering to them. In many areas, lupines and grasses have continued the transition begun by the mosses, making the ground hospitable to grazing sheep and horses. Iceland is also a land of glaciers and magnificent waterfalls. I took many photographs on that trip, some of which have served as models for paintings.



Oil on Canvas, 24 x 36 inches (2007)

Figure 1: *Icelandic Cove*

One site near the ocean called out to me to be photographed and then painted. It was a cove, perhaps a tidal pool for tiny marine creatures. There a pair of geese swam, creating a ripple in the otherwise still water. It was late at night but had the appearance of twilight. Iceland's proximity to the North Pole means that there is very little darkness in the summer night sky, and the summer solstice was only a day or two away. The subtle lighting reflected in the water, along with the sculpted lava hills. I was impressed with the mounds of moss-covered lava toward the foreground, interspersed with grasses.

As I painted *Icelandic Cove* (Figure 1) in the comfort of my home, I felt connected once again to the landscape as I had witnessed it in person. I studied the photograph intently in order to render the details of the scene's features as accurately as possible. In the upper right area of the canvas is a structure that appears to be the ruins of a human-made construction. Whether it is actually the remnant of a building or a natural occurrence in the rocks, it provides a bit of vertical interest in the rocky skyline.

As is true of my other paintings, *Icelandic Cove* is site-specific. I sought to depict recognizable features by faithfully following natural cues in the scene. At the same time, I realize that nature is in a state of constant flux. The geese are swimming. The ripples in the water spread out and change shape. The wisps of clouds move with alternating air currents, affecting the quality of light admitted to the scene. My painting represents one moment in the linear progression of time, while also striving to capture that moment long enough to meditate on its significance. Thus it becomes for me something special, as defined by Ellen Dissanayake, and an object inspiring contemplation, as advocated by Thomas Moore.

Moss is the beginning of a cycle of life taking hold on the land formed by volcanic deposits. Its gentle physical structure camouflages the ruggedness of the miniscule plant, which is capable of softening the sharp edges of broken lava to receive the seeds of other plants. Just as the live moss viewed under the field microscope moved to adjust to the light source, so these mosses covering the lava chunks appear still from a

distance while closer inspection reveals the truth that they are actually teeming with activity. They are the benevolent tamers of the wild rock.

During the defense of my undergraduate thesis, the botanist on my committee, Dr. Rani Vajravelu, commented that moss is benign; it causes no harm. That statement is a beautiful summary of what attracts me to this humble plant. Moss paves the way for other species beginning to emerge from the inferno, offering hospitality in the place of cruelty. It demands little but gives everything. Moss is thus a symbol of love, hope, and regeneration.

Water: Movement

Water is an essential component of life. It is key to the survival of every plant and animal species on our planet. The same water circulates through our world ecologic system in continual cycles, suggesting a harmonic balance between all living things. Perhaps this is why water often appears as a theme in art. Eliciting a response from our basic impulses, we see water as beautiful and are attracted to it, even as we are afraid of its potential to harm us. In her book *Mirage: Florida and the Vanishing Water of the Eastern U.S.*, Cynthia Barnett recalls the words of naturalist Charles Torrey Simpson, who in 1923 asked: “What natural beauty will we have left for another generation? What right have we to waste and destroy everything nature has lavishly bestowed on the earth?” (as quoted by Barnett 21). It is the very abundance of fresh water that has often led to its trivialization. When something is common, easily accessible, and inexpensive,

as water has historically been in North America, it will often be subject to waste and corruption. Economic forces have tended to promote growth without factoring in the costs that extraction or pollution of natural resources affect on the whole. Although such lessons are often learned the hard way, many in the United States are turning toward a more responsible stewardship of the land and water, its most precious resource.¹⁶

Alexis de Tocqueville thought that Europeans longed for nature because they no longer had it, while he saw Americans trying to tame the wild by draining the swamps of Florida (Barnett 15). The way we treat our environment says much about our values and priorities. For some, the great American wilderness meant an unlimited supply of natural resources to be exploited for financial gain. When one area was devastated by clear-cutting or strip mining, or the water polluted beyond usefulness, companies could move on to the next place and repeat the destructive cycle. Such were the threats of Industrialization that so alarmed early environmentalists, artists, and poets, such as Charles Simpson, Thomas Cole, and William Cullen Bryant. For them, the wild spaces needed to be appreciated and protected. We realize now more than ever that our supply of clean drinking water is not unlimited or easily replaceable.

¹⁶ Interest in the topic of the wise stewardship of water was clearly evident at the November 1, 2007, seminar in Orlando entitled, *Florida's Vanishing Water*. Barnett, the keynote speaker, expressed concern over the over-allocation of water supplies. It is much easier to preserve precious resources than to engage in complex and expensive procedures to purify contaminated water or desalinate sea water in order to meet demand. I was personally frustrated to hear that current efforts by individuals to conserve water are usually offset by more water being allocated to development, though it was encouraging to hear discussion about seeking solutions to that problem.

The value of clean water extends beyond its importance to households or its commercial usefulness. Where clean water is abundant, vegetation, insects, and aquatic life are plentiful, offering ample nourishment to breeding populations of migratory birds and native wildlife. Wetlands not only provide habitat to countless species of birds, animals, and fish, but the very presence of marsh and swamplands changes weather patterns, drawing more rain and tempering climate extremes. Dr. Roger Pielke¹⁷ suspects that deforestation, wetlands drainage, and urbanization pose greater threats to the environment than do the effects of greenhouse gases linked to global climate change (Barnett 62). Human beings need wetlands to control flooding, protect against drought, and filter toxic elements through their specialized plant life (67). The failure to recognize the benefits of natural ocean barriers, such as those once provided by Louisiana's mangrove swamps destroyed to make room for housing and deeper shipping channels, was brought to national attention during the devastating aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (68).

Moving water performs a special function in the landscape. To seventeenth-century Chinese artist Shih-t'ao, hills and streams together represented the inner law of the universe as life and movement (Shih-t'ao 71). The movement of water makes it seem alive, even as its transportation makes it available to many forms of life. This connection

¹⁷ Dr. Pielke is Senior Research Scientist, Cooperative Institute for Research in Environmental Sciences (CIRES) at the University of Colorado in Boulder, Emeritus Professor of the Department of Atmospheric Science at Colorado State University, and State Climatologist.

impressed nineteenth-century artists, as well. In his “Essay on American Scenery,”

Thomas Cole wrote:

I will now speak of another component of scenery, without which every landscape is defective--it is water. Like the eye in the human countenance, it is a most expressive feature: in the unrippled lake, which mirrors all surrounding objects, we have the expression of tranquillity and peace--in the rapid stream, the headlong cataract, that of turbulence and impetuosity. (Cole)

Frederic Church also expressed a fascination with living waters through his renditions of waterfalls in his South American scenes, and especially in his famous painting *Niagara* (1857). Experiencing the grandeur of a magnificent waterfall first-hand is to be caught up in the fullness of its sound, power, the pull of gravity, and the raw beauty of this simple, essential, primal force. The sublime quality inspiring awe reminds the viewer of the smallness of human beings in the face of such hydrologic display. We covet its energy, yet our attempts to harness and control it are easily overwhelmed by catastrophic events. We cannot divert the waters without a price. We are helpless to stop the hurricane.

I am drawn to the water. Most of my life, I have lived near the ocean. I take pleasure in the small pond and humble waterfall I constructed at my family’s home. Encountering huge natural waterfalls in Iceland during the summer of 2006 was exhilarating beyond words. When we pulled into the parking lot outside of a quaint restaurant, not yet open for the day’s business, I thought, “where is the waterfall?” As I walked closer to the edge of the hill, all at once I heard it, saw it, felt the mists rising from *Gullfoss*. The waterfall is one of the destinations mapped out for tourists in the

Golden Circle Tour, all within a short distance from Reykjavik, Iceland. We'd tried to sleep in the car for a couple of hours to save money on a hotel. It wasn't a good idea. The tiny compact car offered little protection from the howling winds and temperatures not far above freezing. The cold air did not faze the horses grazing nearby. We gave up on our foolishness and drove to the *Geyser* and to *Gullfoss*. The air was chilly.



Oil on Canvas, 24 x 36 inches (2007)

Figure 2: *Icelandic Waterfall, Gullfoss*

The wind whipped up my hair, finally brushed but still stiff from the mineral deposits in the *Blue Lagoon* hot springs, where we had spent a luxurious few hours the evening before. Rain fell on and off, but I managed to take several photos as we descended the walkway to come alongside the falls. When I look at the painting I composed from those photographs (Figure 2), I remember my attraction to the falls, the unpredictable weather, and the comforting bowl of hot lamb soup and fresh bread we ate in the little restaurant for lunch afterward.

My next Icelandic waterfall painting (Figure 3) is a depiction of one of the tall cascades we saw while driving the scenic highway to Vik and on to Hjørleifshöfði. A friendly Icelandic tour guide we met at the restaurant shop told us there were nesting puffins there, and that even if we didn't see any, the views on the way out were worth the trip. He was right about that. The views were stunning and we were very glad that we had made the effort. Seeing puffins was much more of a challenge, however. Once we arrived at the bleak rock of Hjørleifshöfði, the gale force winds pelting us with sand, we tried walking toward the raging sea at the end of the rock where we figured the puffins were and realized that we were not dressed or equipped for such an adventure and turned back.

In *Icelandic Waterfall en route to Vik*, I placed some lupines in the lower left hand corner of the canvas. The scene depicted is a close-up of the larger area captured by my camera, which included lupines in the foreground. I turned the canvas vertically to emphasize the dynamic flow of the waterfall itself. I used cerulean blue in the water to indicate its icy cold temperature.



Oil on Canvas, 24 x 36 inches (2007)

Figure 3: *Icelandic Waterfall en route to Vik*

I was intrigued with the many shades of deep green mosses on the rocks, especially at the base of the falls, where the steep rock face makes contact with the earth

and merges into a gentle valley by the sea. I used thalo green, which I normally incorporate very sparingly because of its intensity, to highlight the moss on the moist banks of the water streaming from the foot of the waterfall. This gives my painting the vibrancy I want to convey my impressions of the glowing bright green that I found so striking during my initial observation of the scene.

The cataract plummets from a dizzying height over the steep precipice in a dramatic display of the power of gravity. The movement of water symbolizes its relationship to living creatures by mimicking one of the properties of living entities. This simple harmony exemplifies a profound truth of the common bond between all created things and provokes contemplation of the deeper mysteries of life. The hydrologic cycle describes the repeated movement of the same water within the confines of earth and its atmosphere, quenching thirst and providing habitat for the innumerable species that inhabit our planet. As I point out in my discussion of her view of nature as refuge, Annie Dillard says that, “Live water heals memories” (100). The movement of water illustrates the progression of time, washing away the past and propelling us to a new moment and place. It is not surprising that sensitive souls are drawn to the water, looking for comfort from the accusations of insufficiency bombarding them in daily life. Water provides the weary individual with a ritual cleansing of past sins. While polluted water is the epitome of death and disease, fresh, clear, pure water is a visible token of hope and the promise of a new and better life to come.

Tree: Structure

I have great respect for trees. The relationship between human beings and trees could be characterized as one of conqueror and conquered but ought to be understood as one of nurtured and nurturer. Trees breathe out what we breathe in. This cycle of exchanging oxygen for carbon dioxide establishes the basis for a mutually beneficial arrangement. The leaves of trees function to cool the environment in their immediate vicinity. They also cull pollutants, purifying the air we breathe from harmful toxins in the process. Many varieties of trees provide fruit and pollen, feeding countless species of animals, birds, and insects. Even after they die, their hollow trunks and fallen limbs provide valuable habitat. Trees have provided the human race with food, fuel, and shelter throughout our history on this planet. We need them. We should be good to them.

The image of the tree provides a marvelous metaphor for a structure that endures: its roots go deep, providing a secure hold and a basis upon which to stand firm. Its branches reach out and up to the sky, reminding us to look to the heavens while giving shelter from the elements. They often live longer than we do. We should think thoroughly and consider our options carefully before we cut a tree down. Seeing a great old oak fall is a very sad occasion. Watching a tree go from tiny seedling to a living entity many stories high is a very satisfying undertaking. I have had the pleasure of planting many trees from seed, as well as from purchased saplings. It is true that trees are a renewable resource. I believe that human beings still need to harvest trees and that logging can be

done responsibly. It would be hypocritical of me to print out my thesis on paper made from wood pulp, sit at a wooden desk in a house built with a roof based on wooden trusses and declare that no harvesting of wood should be permitted. On the other hand, I reject the senseless destruction of trees, bull-dozed rather than accommodated in housing developments, and my neighbors' often paranoid removal of perfectly healthy pine trees that they fear might fall on their houses during violent storms. When their air conditioning bills go up dramatically and shade-loving understory plantings shrivel up due to their exposure to the hot sun, when the hurricane-force winds blow and there is no wind block to soften the impact on their houses, maybe they will reconsider their decisions to remove the trees. But then it will be too late. The problem of deforestation is not limited to the rain forests of South America. The problem of deforestation begins in our own back yards.

Trees stir the emotions of both artist and poet. Thomas Cole had a special fondness for trees, which is reflected in his writings and artwork. He considered that they each possessed characteristics that set them apart and took great pains in his artwork to depict their individual traits (Sanford 441). Trees came to symbolize all that was harmful from industrialization, having been the main victims of the drive to conquer the wilderness in the name of civilization and progress. Cole loved the natural woodlands, deploring the ugly devastation that destroyed their beauty. He feared that something precious was being stolen from human imagination when the forests were ruthlessly harvested.

Such imagination was not lacking in a fictitious but very meaningful little book by Dr. Seuss called *The Lorax*. This insightful story warns of the unintended consequences of unrestrained economic expansion. The very natural feature that attracts people to an area may be lost as that feature—like the unique species of tree in the story—is exploited for financial gain, resulting in serious harm to the delicate ecological balance. Dr. Seuss’ fictional story illustrates the environmental harm of exploitative logging, but is no more dramatic than actual cases from real life. Stately trees like the cypress, once found in abundance throughout Florida and in poorly drained areas of the temperate southeastern United States, have been over-harvested for their durable properties for decades.

On Monday, October 1, 2007, *The Orlando Sentinel* newspaper ran an article entitled “From Icon Into Mulch” by Adrian G. Uribarri. The article discusses the fate of Florida’s diminishing cypress trees, many of which are cut down to make landscape mulch. Uribarri says that the number of cypress trees in the state has gone from 808 million in 1987 to 487 million in 2005. The article points out that the trees can be cut without being killed, but that it takes decades for them to grow back into harvestable size. It takes about 50 years of growth to produce one 2-cubic foot bag of cypress mulch. The trees have inhabited Florida for perhaps 6,500 years. The largest cypress tree in Florida is named *The Senator* and is growing in Sanford. The tree is estimated to be 115 – 130 feet tall and is approximately 3,500 years old. As was the case for the ancient redwoods in

coastal northern California, it is time for the southeastern states like Florida to realize that we have a national treasure growing in our midst.



Oil on Canvas, 24 x 36 inches (2007)

Figure 4: *Stream to Kaaterskill*

My appreciation of trees leads me to relish contact with them. From the tender sapling to the gnarled branches of an ancient giant, trees are frequent subjects of my landscape paintings. One such painting (Figure 4) resulted from my journey along the

Hudson River Art School Trail, a series of sights that were favorite painting spots for Frederic Church and other painters associated with Thomas Cole.

A number of features in the scene attracted me to want to paint it. The waters moving toward Kaaterskill Falls in upstate New York formed numerous smaller cascades on their way to the two-level main falls. The bright June sun peered through pockets in the dappled shade of bright, green-yellow foliage of a young maple spanning the water with its long, gentle branches. The reaching branches provide a structure to the painting, connecting the two sides of the stream without overwhelming the scene. My greatest challenge in painting the picture was in creating the light effects in the tree's leaves. They stood out from the background hues of conifers and other deciduous trees to form clusters of bright, clean foliage that glistened with reflected sunlight. The rocks and the water itself accentuated the sense of movement by the interplay of light and shadow upon them. In the foreground, most notably on the right side of the painting, light and color collaborate in a spectacle that takes on almost abstract qualities.

Stone: Balance

Stone may be the most challenging of the natural elements for me to evaluate in this thesis. In ecological terms, it is easy to speak of water, plant-life, and air, but who talks of saving the stone? Rock features are frequent elements of my paintings. I may be focusing on the mosses growing on the rocks or the water splashing over them, but each of the diverse elements must be understood in balance with one another to create a

unified picture. Bedrock and stone form the skeletal framework supporting the ground minerals that comprise the soils beneath our feet. These in turn anchor all terrestrial plants, providing food for many forms of life. This rock-based surface makes up the crust of the earth, insulating us from the molten layers covering the planet's core.

I do not believe the earth is itself a living entity, though without its hospitality, all life inhabiting it would soon perish. I do not refer to our planet as "Mother Earth," for I do not wish to be mistaken for one who worships a goddess. When I speak of the earth, I am referring to the planetary body, composed of minerals bound together with that mysterious force called "gravity." It is home to us but I do not think of it as maternal. I do not believe it possesses a conscious soul. The planet is a material entity, not a personal one in my estimation.

When people speak of "saving the planet," what they really have in mind is the biosphere present only on a thin layer of the earth's surface. Nothing we mere mortals can do is capable of destroying this planet. Yet, the rhetoric of environmental political battles employs that all-encompassing language. My identification with the conservation movement is rooted in the concept of environmental stewardship. I do not see earth's resources as commodities to be plundered carelessly. I believe they may be used but should be used wisely. Since I do not personify and love the earth as though it were a living being, my motivation favors protecting earth's inhabitants, rather than saving the planet itself. My concerns are apolitical. I despise manipulation of facts by anyone in the name of furthering a cause. Media sensationalizing and political rhetoric over the

currently hot issue of global climate change leaves me skeptical. I want to know what the facts are and the evidence and reasoning behind them.¹⁸ I believe that any drive to preserve the environment must be balanced by the genuine needs of human beings.

Human beings are carbon-based life forms, and have an essential connection to the earth, as is described so eloquently in the Book of Beginnings:

the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. (Genesis 2:7, 8)

It is no wonder that we look for solace in the garden. The passage quoted above describes Eden as the earliest home for human habitation. We desire peace within the beauty of uncorrupted nature. I do not seek something to believe in through my observations of nature or my expressions of art, though I am eager to learn from them both. Rather, I proceed in both the observation of nature and the making of my artwork on the foundational superstructure of a core set of beliefs, beginning with creation, and more fully realized in a faith shared with the Hudson River painters that sees human beings as part of a greater whole. The artwork these men produced flowed from a solid belief structure, which balanced their observations of the external world of nature with the social concerns and aesthetic sensibilities of nineteenth-century American culture.

Edward Veith writes:

¹⁸ An excellent debate on climate change can be read at www.pbs.org/wbgh/warming/debate (Palfreman).

The Hudson River School painters' external landscapes were informed by the spiritual landscape that was just as much a part of their environment and their experience as their land and society. Their worldview and that of their audiences gave their art a particular meaning and social significance, reminding us of a time when art was considered to have moral authority and when aesthetic perception was seen as an insight into the meaning of life. (17)

Francis Shaeffer contended that it is worth our while to create works upon the basis of God's creation because Christianity is concerned with the total person in the real world. Human beings have value, therefore, "Christian art should deal with the individual" (441). Not only the universal, but also the particular elements of the land and its inhabitants are worthy of artistic representation. Francis Shaeffer extends the idea that Christian art is not always religious art:

God's creation—the mountains, the trees, the birds and the bird's songs—are also nonreligious art. Think about that. If God made the flowers, they are worth painting and writing about. If God made the birds, they are worth painting. If God made the sky, the sky is worth painting. If God made the ocean, indeed it's worth writing poetry about. (Shaeffer 411)

My painting of *Kaaterskill Falls* (Figure 5) features many stones, exposed and worn from years of weathering. The power of the water loosens and washes away all but the most resilient of plants daring to take hold against its surging force. Yet, the trees along the water's banks manage to send their roots into minute crevices in the rocks, eventually breaking them into powder. Even the tiny mosses find safe haven behind the falls and peek out among the rocks, providing a footing on which other plants can find suitable habitat, bathed in the constantly moist environment.



Oil on canvas, 24 x 36 inches (2007)

Figure 5: *Kaaterskill Falls*

Looking at my painting of Kaaterskill Falls brings back memories of hiking on the trail alongside the two-tiered falls and the streams descending from them. Mosses thrive on the fallen trees and rock outcroppings in the moist environment. I was thrilled to see such rich shades of green. The way is well traveled but requires caution, as visitors must cross a busy highway in order to reach the marked trail. Rocks along the trail were sometimes wet and slippery. It is essential to maintain one's balance upon the rocks, some of which are not firmly anchored themselves. I realized that ascending the slope of

the mountain was potentially as dangerous as peering down from the crest of the falls. I am uncomfortable with heights and stayed well away from the edge of the steep precipice. I had to remain mindful of the trail to avoid becoming so enveloped in the beauty surrounding me that I forget the danger inherent in it. Visiting the waterfall and hiking the path alongside it was the most memorable part of my trip to upstate New York. It connected me that much more with Frederic Church and the other Hudson River School artists that used to frequent the area and had painted it long before I was born.

Sky: Heavenly Light

In German, the one word *Himmel* refers to both “sky” and “heaven.” The same is true with the Dutch word *Hemel*. When we think of a place called “heaven,” it is natural for us to look up to the sky. The infinite beauty and majesty of God is suggested by the immensity and vastness of the sky. It is written: “He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man’s heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end” (Ecclesiastes 3:11). The limitless expanse of heaven reminds us that there is meaning beyond the mundane and earthly. We have a conception of something greater, time without limit, a promise of even greater beauty, the hope of future grace. As Thomas Cole describes it:

He who looks on nature with a "loving eye," cannot move from his dwelling without the salutation of beauty; even in the city the deep blue sky and the drifting clouds appeal to him. And if to escape its turmoil--if only to obtain a free horizon, land and water in the play of light and shadow yields delight--let him be transported to those favored regions, where the features of the earth are more

varied, or yet add the sunset, that wreath of glory daily bound around the world, and he, indeed, drinks from pleasure's purest cup. The delight such a man experiences is not merely sensual, or selfish, that passes with the occasion leaving no trace behind; but in gazing on the pure creations of the Almighty, he feels a calm religious tone steal through his mind, and when he has turned to mingle with his fellow men, the chords which have been struck in that sweet communion cease not to vibrate. (Cole, *Essay*)

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that “the heavens change every moment and reflect their glory or gloom” (8). While the movement of water is generally predictable, the sky is continually changing. As the earth’s rotation keeps altering our reception of sunlight, the seasons emerge, one after the other in a continual progression of time. Our perception at any given moment is bound to be different in the next. Clouds move across the sky, either reflecting the sun’s light or blocking its rays, transforming the early morning or evening sky into a radiant display, or else covering the ground in a foreboding mood of despondency. As Emerson put it:

The leafless trees become spires of flame in the sunset, with the blue east for their background, and the stars of the dead calices of flowers, and every withered stem and stubble rimed with frost, contribute something to the mute music. (8)

Thoreau writes that he relished the times sitting on his porch during torrential rainstorms. The long evening begun in twilight offered him time to think (99). Such solitude allowed his creative impulses to flow freely, unhindered by chores and societal distractions.

Thoreau speaks of the natural cycle of water, reviving the pond: “A field of water betrays the spirit that is in the air. It is continually receiving new life and motion from

above. It is intermediate in its nature between land and sky” (143). The hydrologic cycle that transports the same water from ocean to cloud to land, then back to the sea is truly amazing. From an artist’s viewpoint, bodies of water, moving waters, and clouds are all attractive subjects for landscape painting. One scientist, Graeme Stephens,¹⁹ not only studies clouds as a researcher, but also features them in magnificent oil paintings, which adorn the walls of Colorado State University’s Cooperative Institute for Research in the Atmosphere. Australian-born Stephens has spent decades conducting research on clouds, which are considered to be one of the most significant and dynamic climate phenomena affecting our planet. Stephens also finds them to be “a source of pure wonder” (Miller). Graeme Stephens speaks to the importance of clouds in the study of global climate change:

As you perturb the climate system by adding greenhouse gases, for example, or aerosols, the system is forced into a state of change [...] The response comes back through the water cycle and clouds in particular, and that response is widely considered by the scientific community as the largest uncertainty associated with climate change prediction. Models are still fairly crude in the way they represent the water cycle. Compounding the challenge is the fact that observations have to be done globally, because what changes locally in Colorado doesn't necessarily represent a change in the whole system. Drought in one area may be occurring at the same time another area has excessive precipitation. (as quoted by Miller)

In an article published in a 2003 edition of *American Scientist* magazine, Stephens discusses the way in which the scientific study of clouds has intersected with art and

¹⁹ Graeme Stephens is a distinguished Professor at Colorado State University, and works with NASA on the *CloudSat* program (Miller).

culture historically, and reasons that cloud research may be well served by that same connection in the future. Stephens cited Rene Descartes as saying of clouds:

Since one must turn his eyes toward heaven to look at them, we think of them...as the throne of God....That makes me hope that if I can explain their nature...one will easily believe that it is possible in some manner to find the causes of everything wonderful about Earth. (as quoted by Miller)

Ralph Waldo Emerson writes that the beauty of Nature is only part of the picture. He links its appearance with the presence of the spiritual. In a statement comparable to those of the Christian aesthetic writings of Jonathan Edwards and Thomas Aquinas, Emerson declares, “Beauty is the mark God sets upon virtue” (9). He says that

The shows of day, the dewy morning, the rainbow, mountains, orchards in blossom, stars, moonlight, shadows in still water, and the like, if too eagerly hunted, become shows merely, and mock us with their unreality. (9)

Emerson posits that the virtuous beauty of nature belongs to each individual. If we are rational enough to realize how precious it is, we will always be wealthy.

During the autumn of 2007, I was privileged to witness a spectacular sunset in rural Georgia. The enormous sky above was continually changing from one glorious scene to another, treating me to a visual feast of colors and lights. The breath-taking transition from sunset to twilight was every bit as wondrous and inspirational to me as those witnessed by Frederic Church and depicted by him in oil. Though I took dozens of photographs, I felt helpless to fully capture the whole panorama. I am very grateful for the photographs that would serve as models and reminders for my paintings of sky.



Oil on canvas, 24 x 36 inches (2007)

Figure 6: *Georgia Sky*

The first of the paintings that resulted from those sights is called simply, *Georgia Sky* (Figure 6). The sky is ablaze in the sun's final attempt to control the day, aflame in white gold and deep reds whose hues bounce off the clouds overhead in such a way as the imagination could scarcely contrive. The pine trees provide a strong contrast, silhouetted against the brilliant sky. This view of the setting sun gave me the opportunity to employ darker values from my palette, creating a scene that tends toward the sublime aspect of the landscape. A scraggly pine in the right foreground curves toward the center, like an

old figure distorted by the ravages of time. It serves as a *memento mori*, a reminder of the temporal nature of life and the inevitability of death.

Watching the sun set that evening impressed upon my mind once again the transitory role of life on this earth. We are as helpless to stop death as I was to halt the setting sun. Time moves on. The sky illustrated that brilliantly and with overwhelming force. During his interview on *The Story*, broadcast August 8, 2007, on WMFE, Orlando, Clyde Butcher said that he follows the light, letting nature dictate what he photographs. I tried to follow the light that October evening but could not keep up with it.

The next painting is a closer look at the scene several moments later. It is by far the most dramatic of the series, employing strong chiaroscuro, emphasizing the transition from day to night in a blaze of red and black. I have given this painting the title *Georgia Twilight* (Figure 7). The mysterious mood engendered by the scene is one of foreboding and caution against such a powerful portent of mortality.



Oil on canvas 24 x 36 inches (2007)

Figure 7: *Georgia Twilight*

Day is vanquished by night in this scene, through a tumultuous display of blood-red sunlight overcome with a blanket of black clouds. Trees and vegetation accept their nightly fast from the rich food of photosynthetic processes, and rest awaiting the settling dew and the next day's cycle of growth. I stood transfixed by the sights I felt privileged to witness, reveling in my newfound wealth, while others inside watched television and prepared for dinner. The hue-saturated skyline closes with the final curtain of atmospheric embellishment for the evening's featured presentation of heavenly light.

A pure blue sky was considered by Thomas Cole to be the highest sublime (Sanford 440), and so it is for me as I conclude my thesis with a triptych of three paintings that I have titled *Florida Sky* (Figure 8). The set of paintings extend the horizontal to invoke a sense of vastness. The dark foreground elements are relegated to occupy minimal space, while offering a sense of site context and scale to the picture.



Oil on canvas 30 x 24, 30 x 40, and 30 x 24 inches (2008)

Figure 8: *Florida Sky*

Both the triptych and my memory of the scene that inspired it recall to my mind these words, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork” (Psalm 19:1). Cole was right. That is the highest sublime.

CHAPTER FOUR: ARTIST'S PURPOSE

I create oil paintings to express my love of nature and appreciation for contemplative settings.

It is my hope that those who view my artwork will sense the gratitude that I have for the beauty inherent in minute things all around us.

I derive inspiration from the humble moss and the noble cypress.

I find meaning in the love of family, and pleasure in those things in everyday life that are so easily overlooked.

It is my belief that each human being is created in the image of God and therefore precious.

Life must not be taken for granted, for it can be taken away very quickly.

For me, the time I have on this earth is my opportunity to reflect upon what is really important, my chance to show love while I can, and to be a good steward of the gifts and resources entrusted to me.

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