Recent Works: Exploring Connections with Naturally Derived Materials through the context of Art

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Abstract

Recent Works is a body of art that arrived from my deep connection to the earth and nature. I was born and raised on a lake in upstate N.Y. and my childhood offered me a plethora of stimulation for my senses to receive and appreciate. It is a magical place to discover childhood, to experience as an adult, and one that remains my sanctum sanctorum. Growing up and bearing witness to a fluctuating and fragile ecosystem, where you can experience some of nature’s most triumphant moments and its transitional phases, has revealed itself in a way that has continuously informed my relationship with art making. The way I think and interact with the world around me, and the means by which I find self-expression have all originated from being an inhabitant of a lake. The immersive physicality in that environment and growing from it have allowed a deeper appreciation for the feel of dirt between my hands, walking barefoot on dew-covered grass, or stepping across a pebble laden shoreline on a chilly morning. The smell an open breeze hitting your face offers, the range of temperatures you experience while diving to the lake’s depths as long as your breath will hold; this is a mere taste of that lifestyle.

My work examines a human connection with nature through the use of naturally derived materials and ceramic forms. With the ever present advancement of technology and how it has changed our relationship to the natural world, I am exploring and questioning our relationship with nature through ubiquitous materials in the context of art. World renowned artist Andy Goldsworthy once said, “We often forget that we are nature. Nature is not something separate from us. So when we say we have lost our connection to nature, we’ve lost our connection to ourselves.”

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Introduction

I was born in 1985, in a small cottage atop the waterfront of a wooded lake in Upstate New York. I was an only child, who retrospectively, had an endless world of activity happening just outside my front door. Aside from my family I was surrounded by fresh air, fresh water, and a vast wilderness. Looking back, it is blatant that was the most formative childhood experience I could ever receive.

Like most children growing up in the United States, I had the typical technological accoutrements every household presented: a television, vcr, combination cassette and record player, and a Nintendo. Fast forward to the late 90’s and, for me, the beginning of an era where time immersed in video games, cell phones, the internet, and staring at a screen was suddenly completely normal behavior for everyone around me. I witnessed this technological revolution occur before my eyes, acquiring my first cell phone at 17 and observing the ways in which it has pulled humanity into a new direction. Over the course of 15 years I watched the internet evolve from a part-time activity to a constantly present platform. A 2015 BBC.com article titled Internet Used By 3.2 Billion People in 2015 suggested that give or take 3.2 billion people, over half of earth’s 7.2 billion population, will be online, and about 2 billion of those people will be in the developing world.2

In the past decade it has become increasingly evident that this has had a major impact on upcoming generations. My childhood was spent interacting almost entirely with the outside world and other people. A 2013 article from The Telegraph illustrates some of the trepidation expressed by an older generation witnessing such a vastly different childhood from what they experienced. “The temptation for many parents is to view technology as ruining the ‘essence of childhood’. Research from web security firm

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AVG claims that more small children can play a computer game or use a smartphone application than ride a bike, tie their own shoelaces, or swim unaided.”

The same article expresses serious concerns for how the physiology of our brains is changing because of our constant state of internet immersion. “Of course, providing young children with unlimited access to the internet via tablets and smartphones is not without its dangers. There have been numerous reports suggesting that prolonged exposure could change how children’s brains develop, and some people believe that the internet is damaging children's capacity for originality and for rigorous and reflective thinking.”

Constant contact with technology has obviously altered how we grow up and subsequently is causing concern. We are witnessing the impact, the evolution, and perpetual connectivity to technology in a rapid way, so much so that it has prompted discussion about our human need for nature and how contact with it can and will benefit us.

Journalist Richard Louv writes copiously on our need for nature, now more than ever, in a world run by devices and the World Wide Web. Louv uses the term 'nature-deficit disorder' to explain the phenomenon unfolding before us in our busy, technologically driven lives and its impact on our mental, social, and physical health. An article Louv penned for The Guardian titled Ten Reasons Why We Need More Contact With Nature makes light of the fact we spend much less time in the wilderness than we used to. Some of the topics listed are:

**Humans are hardwired to love – and need – exposure to the natural world**

Researchers have found that regardless of culture people gravitate to images of nature, especially the Savannah. Our inborn affiliation for nature may explain why we prefer to live in houses with particular views of the natural world.

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Nature brings our senses alive
Scientists recently found that humans have the ability to track my scent alone. Some humans rival bats in echolocation or biosonar abilities. Military studies show that some soldiers in war zones see nuances others miss, and can spot hidden bombs; by and large these individuals tend to be rural or inner city soldiers, who grew up more conscious of their surroundings.

Nature heals
Pennsylvania researchers found that patients in rooms with tree views had shorter hospitalisations, less need for pain medications and fewer negative comments in the nurses’ notes, compared to patients with views of brick.

Nature can reduce depression and improve psychological well-being
Researchers in Sweden have found joggers who exercise in natural green settings feel more restored and less anxious, angry, or depressed than people who burn the same amount of calories jogging in a built urban setting.

Nature builds community bonds
Levels of neurochemicals and hormones associated with social bonding are elevated during animal-human interactions. Researchers at the University of Rochester report that exposure to the natural environment leads people to nurture close relationships with fellow human beings, value community, and to be more generous with money.

The future is at stake
The natural world’s benefits to our cognition and health will be irrelevant if we continue to destroy the nature around us, but that destruction is assured without a human reconnection to nature.  

Anyone who has spent an inordinate amount of time plugged into the web or their cell phone has experienced a spiked sense of desirability for nature and greener scenery. It is without question that I crave fresh air and contact with natural surroundings after a prolonged session on a laptop or cell phone. This premise is primarily what fueled my aesthetic investigation into natural materials in the context of art. I did not attempt to create a direct translation to fulfill or replace the immersive experience of nature, rather, I wished to create the platform to examine a select few

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materials that are essentials to nature and our subjective relationship with those materials.
Growing up in constant contact with nature, my everyday life was heavily influenced by what was happening outside. I have countless memories of nights spent laying on the dock, intoxicated by and completely lost in the night sky for hours on end. There is something magical about being enveloped by a blanket of stars, sung to sleep by waves hitting the side of the dock. The air is so perfect, crisp, you could stay there all night, senses continually and contently immersed in the elemental symphony. There is something truly humbling about the realization that you are barely a speck in an infinitely vast space. This place, both existentially and hypothetically, developed into a sacred and meditative abode for myself to explore.

One of the most vivid of my formative memories is the time I witnessed the Aurora Borealis. About 5 or 6 years old, my father came into my bedroom at 3:00 a.m., woke me up and brought me outside. We proceeded down the staircase and out the front door, putting me on his shoulders as we stood in the driveway. It was there where we both gazed in awe of what was happening above our silhouetted treeline. At that age
I could not wrap my head around what I was seeing but I could not look away, not even for a second. I was completely enamored by the streaking wisps of blue, green, and violet against the dark star-filled sky. The colors melted into each other in the most ethereal way: it was the first and only time I recall experiencing something so sublime and confounding.

Occurrences such as this were commonplace and highly influential in my childhood and subsequently my artwork. I found true appreciation and connection to nature through this time spent consumed by its essence. At its core I have found that my work is a perpetual attempt at manifesting those occurrences through physical investigation. I am attempting to uncover and preserve that extraordinary place in my mind, a somewhat spiritual recognition, that takes place while in the midst of the simplicity as well as the grandeur nature provides.

In *Recent Works* I use naturally derived materials that exist all around the world I grew up in: soil, cement, wood, and paper. These materials have ubiquitous applications that have contributed to the fabric of human culture. I examine and question my relationship with them by recontextualization as works of art in the hope that the viewer will seek their own subjective meaning outside their original setting as well.
Body of Work

The aim of this body of work is for the viewer to explore their relationship with a select few naturally derived materials. In each work I also incorporated ceramic forms. The forms have the shape like a hive, meant to depict the concept of home. I have purposefully emphasized the opening of each ceramic form, acting as a void to peer into, meant to probe the viewer into thinking about their relationship to ‘home’ in relation to the surrounding material. By re-contextualizing these materials and forms as works of art and presenting them as paintings, I allow for further subjective questioning about our natural world and all its physicality, as well as our relationship and place within it.

![Detail of Untitled I, 2012, mixed media](image)

The first work I created for Recent Works was Untitled I. When I began this investigation, I felt that soil, or dirt, was the most basic and available material that I could use aside from water. It is quite literally beneath us everywhere we go, the foundation on which we stand, build, and exist. It carries a certain pejorative connotation partly due to its abundance but our relationship with soil is an extremely valuable one. It
is a necessary part of our lives because it has served as the platform for growing food and sustaining life for centuries, millenia, for all time. Our historically and biologically innate dependence on dirt carries a transcendent connection which the majority of humanity shares.

The next work I created in the series was *Untitled II*, 2012, 40 x 38 in., cement and ceramic. Spend a minute contemplating cement and its presence around us becomes difficult to ignore. Derived from limestone, cement is a material that we have used to shape our environment from the ground up. We interact with it everyday. Our buildings, parks, and much of the infrastructure of our man-made world include the material. According to a paper presented to the International Conference on Emerging Trends in Engineering, Science and Sustainable Technology, “Concrete is the second
most consumed material in the world after water and it is used most widely in the construction industry due to its high compressive strength and other properties.”

Our constant interaction with cement has certainly shaped our definition of it, even creating a symbiotic relationship with it. Cement has been imbued into our natural surroundings with foundations, erect structures, sidewalks, curbs, and pathways. These are just a few examples of how the fabric of human culture has been designed around it.

The final two wall-hanging pieces I created for my investigation are Untitled III and Untitled VI. The former is made with resin bonded wood shavings, the latter is resin bonded paper. I put these two together for the reason of paper being derived from wood, but the separate functions they have in our lives are distinct, and can be found nearly everywhere. Wood as a material acts in a somewhat fluid manner and regulates

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many areas of humanity. We use it to build our homes and protect us from the elements, and support our bodies with the furniture we create from it. We fashion tools and technology from it. We use it as a fuel source to create heat and cook food. When considered as paper, it is one of, if not the most, important pieces of human technology. Paper is tied to human culture from early scrolls to contemporary notebooks. We use this naturally derived material to record our thoughts and transfer information. In my opinion, paper could and should be considered the most critical material for transferring our thoughts and actualizing them as reality. It is the agent that has contributed most to the transcendence of our culture.
Following are a portion of purely subjective thoughts, questions, and concerns that occurred to me before, during, and after the conception of this body of work that I feel are integral to both the work and the thesis:

How can it be that we take these materials for granted? How does our view and relationship of the material change if we place it in the context of art? What happens to the work when it is placed on a wall? What happens when we insist upon forcing institutional context onto the work in question? Or not? Is it raised to a higher value? How is it perceived differently? Why is it perceived differently? Is this an illusion systemically ingrained in us by the institutional powers that be? We are now supposed to value this object of art because it has been placed on a wall of a gallery or museum, but why? Is it the wall or is it the institution? As human beings do we need this in order to validate the idea and existence of art? How can we trust our perception? Furthermore, how does this context change our perception of a material like soil? Or cement? Or wood shavings? Or paper as an object? Do we truly perceive these materials differently? Do we become more aware of the role these materials play in our
everyday lives? Does it forever change how we feel about these natural ubiquitous materials or are they too firmly rooted in the context in which we experience them regularly? Could someone ever fully grasp these materials as having the same sort of aesthetic value as a painting (*Painting* being an idea we have built upon for centuries now)? How are the two even comparable? Furthermore, how do we imbue value into a work of art, namely a painting, in the first place? I realize this questioning and thought pattern quickly devolves into philosophical digression yet, ultimately an agent that empowers the artwork. It is absolutely pertinent to the development of the work and growth as an artist.
Evolution

Following this series, my artwork has evolved in a direction apart from using the physically derived material from the earth that I so blatantly incorporated into my thesis. Recent Works was the foundation from which my work could grow. I am still investigating my relationship with nature, but attempting to encapsulate on canvas some of the particular formations and moments that my experiences with nature have garnered, in a more abstract way. At its heart, my art making is still very grounded in my relationship with the natural world. My studio processes revolve around my practice of pulling from my experiences and memories to introduce a moment I have captured on canvas. I employ various materials, exercise reflection, patience, and allow for dialogue between the work and myself to fully develop.

My most recent paintings are an exploration of natural design, wilderness, and landscape, but are represented as abstracted earthly mementos. I believe there is a sacred recognition that occurs during exposure to these environments. I strive to embody that in the work. Using wax, paint, dye, and various chemicals to form geological-like canvases, my process involves several layered iterations over time to achieve my desired aesthetic. All of this has been built upon from the work I created for my thesis.

These works employ aspects of Formalism and serve as relics to the terra. They are meditative and stoic, generating admiration for geology, evolutions of life, and decomposition which have been internalized by me.
Splash, 2017, 50x55x2in., mixed media

Waters Edge and Sky, 2017, 36x72x2.5in., mixed media

Lichen Impasse, 2017, 55x55x2in., mixed media

Pool, 2017, 48x37.5x2in., mixed media
Conclusion

One day while perusing the collection at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, I came across a very intriguing sculpture. A plank was perched with one end on the floor, another against the wall, painted a fleshy pink, slick with lacquer. The piece connected the floor to the wall as elegantly as a straight plank ever could. The work was by John McCracken, titled “The Absolutely Naked Fragrance” 1967. The gallery label read:

McCracken began producing his vibrant monochrome “planks” in 1966. While the polished resin surface captures the aesthetic of surfing and car culture unique to Southern California in the 1960s, the title was drawn from advertising slogans in fashion magazines. The work’s interaction with both the floor and wall is meant to call attention to the space occupied in the gallery by both viewer and object. “I see the plank as existing between two worlds,” McCracken has said, “the floor representing the physical world of standing objects, trees, cars, buildings, human bodies, and everything, and the wall representing the world of the imagination, illusionistic painting space, human mental space, and all that.”

What I found most intriguing was McCracken’s complicated concept, and, in the most simplistic way, how he actualized our natural world with the world onto which we project our minds. He inextricably bridged the physical world of “standing objects, trees, cars, buildings, human bodies, and everything,” with “the world of the imagination, illusionistic painting space, human mental space, and all that.” McCracken’s work invites an exposition of these two worlds, ever present to humanity, and forces us to acknowledge both, separately and together. This plank object intimately connects the very ground we stand on to the wall space we project our subjective truths upon. The simplicity of McCracken’s painted plank is the clearest and most illustrative example of an artwork revealing the link between our natural world and the one we have built on the earth and around ourselves.

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The artwork I created for this thesis is an investigation into natural materials placed in the context of art. My hope is to heighten the awareness of the viewer to the validity of these materials while allowing an examination of their own subjective interpretations and in hopes they find valuable meaning. The work seeks to provide a recognition and appreciation of nature, keeping in mind that these materials play an essential role in the fabric of human culture and society. I believe it is imperative that we make the effort to explore our natural world through the context of art in order to more fully understand ourselves and our place on this planet.
Bibliography


