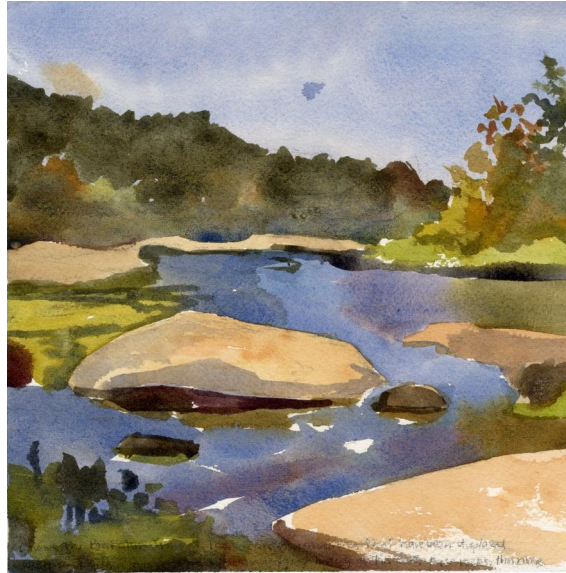


Green Washes: Painting an Energy Culture



The sweeping brushstrokes of fluid green pigment on my canvas may reference verdant landscapes, but the material body of the paint forces the viewer and artist alike to confront the painting's oil-, petroleum-embedded reality. As the artist, I cannot claim my paintings—even though they conceptually engage with environmental issues and use paint from tubes labeled green apatite genuine—are green in the pollution-free, moving-towards-renewable-alternatives sense of the word. That would make the green washes of color feel greenwashed, claiming to be green when material evidence proves otherwise (Miller, 2017). However, the term green feels appropriate if I use it to mean intentionally grappling with the messiness of environmental justice. In painting, I encounter the contradictions, the conflicting meanings of this word and my art energy culture. Stephenson (2010) defines energy culture as “the interaction between cognitive norms, material culture and energy practices” (p. 6125). The energy culture framework contextualizes my artmaking: the norms of decolonizing nature, the material of my oil paints, and the practice of painting at the river. In

conversation with one another, these three components prompt me towards a green citizenship, even as I acknowledge the hazardous waste painting inherently generates. The green washes on my canvas provoke understanding of energy violence and prompt me to research materials that reduce my environmental footprint.

One of the overarching themes and cognitive norms of my art energy culture is green citizenship. Miller (2017) defines green citizenship as an “ecological perspective across political, economic, and cultural life” (p. 181). The interdisciplinary nature of this definition emphasizes that collaborating researchers, organizers, and artists from different fields can share unique worldviews to build a just future. Many artists create interdisciplinary work that promotes green citizenship. Cindy Hooper, for example, poetically documents environmental and social struggles in the Westland’s water district through videos (Westlands, 2011). Latoya Ruby Frazier’s photography project “Flint is Family” illuminates the consequences of the community’s water crisis (Frazier, 2016). Melissa Potter uses hand paper-making as a form of socially-engaged art at her paper cooperative Seeds InService (“Seeds InService,” 2021). By grounding their work in community-based research and participatory practices, these artists tackle interdisciplinary environmental issues. They use the visual experience of art to prompt conversations about injustice. The cognitive norm of green citizenship shapes their artmaking practices and material decisions. I look to such artists as models for energy cultures that promote a resilient future.

With these models of green citizenship, I seek to create art that recognizes the inextricable link between environmental and social justice through decolonizing nature. A 2017 conference in New Mexico defines this framework as recognizing that exploitation of land under capitalism

disproportionately harms marginalized communities. Johnson (2017) notes the connection between violence inflicted on land and people is often difficult for the general public to see; energy companies place natural gas power plants, landfills, and coal mines in communities of color and low socio-economic status that are already experiencing high social vulnerabilities (Finley-Book, n.d.). The somber reality is that climate change will continue to disproportionately affect communities already experiencing high social vulnerability (Voskoboynik, 2019). Yet I feel hopeful when a review of *Decolonizing Nature* summarizes art historian and Center for Creative Ecologies Director T.J. Demos' belief that artists can help dismantle oppressive systems that harm both people and the land through "ecologically-oriented art practices, the global contexts from which they emerge, and their activist contributions to the sites they respond to" (McElroy, 2020). In my practice, I use art to visualize this connection in Richmond when I overlay various maps of redlining, urban heat islands, and school districts in layered compositions. I practice art-activism by collaborating with the Concerned Citizens of Charles City County to spread the word about detrimental effects of extreme energy in their community. The cognitive norms of decolonizing nature and green citizenship challenge me to recognize the various forms of climate and energy violence as part of my art energy culture.

One energy practice sustaining my commitment to green citizenship, especially as I hold stories of energy violence, is plein air painting. As described in my artist statement (see appendix), I use the earth-friendly mode of walking and biking to transport myself along the James River. At Pony Pasture, I observe nuanced shades of foliage and the many meanings of green Miller (2017) attributes to the color: *serenely* speckled algae clumps, *beneficial* leaf canopies of shade, the *radical* spread of invasive wintercreeper, *corrupted* tree branches, and *conservative* pathways (p. 178). The juxtaposition of these

different adjectives emphasizes the plethora of often contradictory connotations green conveys. On-site observation challenges me to learn from the land, which is one of the practices of decolonizing nature (Demos, 2017). Furthermore, these various connotations of green describe the way I interact with the landscape when painting. I feel *serene* surrounded by the trickling landscape; my health *benefits* from being physically at the river. While I think *radically* about concretely transforming and decolonizing my relationship with the river, I *disturb* the space with my footprints, I *corrupt* the place when a cup of dirty water accidentally spills. I am *conservative* in upkeeping the traditional techniques of plein air painters such as Paul Cezanne and John Singer Sargent. The river points out the contradictions of my green beliefs and actions. The practice of painting outside forces me to interrogate the effect my artmaking practices have on the land.

While green citizenship permeates energy practices such as biking to the river and making sure to keep paint from going down the drain, calling my entire artmaking culture green can feel dishonest--like greenwashing. I talk about right relationships with the environment but the energy practice and material culture of my studio generate hazardous oil painting waste that undermines green citizenship. I initially abstained from this toxic, expensive material culture. But once exposed during a painting class last semester, I found myself as an artist. Regrettably, with oil's rich opacity I could think through painting in ways I had never experienced before. Johnson (2017) uses the phrase "soaked in oil, I am now fully and finally in my body" to describe his experience in a yoga studio (p. 127). Similarly, oil embodies me in the painting studio. No matter how long and hard I scrub, grimy green oil residue remains between my fingernails and the parched skin of my cracked hands. The inky streaks across my clothes advertise an allegiance to oil. Days end in a ritual anointing of hands with oil as I

squeeze paint out of the bristles. Yet painting encourages me to confront inconsistencies in my energy culture, where the cognitive norms and material culture do not align and I fall short of green citizenship.

The especially problematic material evidence that makes my energy culture feel simultaneously green (complex, environmentally-engaged) and greenwashed (projecting an image of greenness while generating jars and jars of combustible, hazardous waste) is the solvent. This petroleum-based substance I use to clean my brushes bears an uncomfortable resemblance to the relationship between BP and the British Science Museum because of its underplayed hazardous properties. Miller (2017) describes how this partnership “positions BP as a benign intermediary between present and future, science and childhood, and truth and innovation, rather than one of the worst polluters in human history” (p. 179). Gamblin Gamsol is my intermediary, the solvent brand mediating my relationship with the canvas surface, the paint, the contemplating of rivers. Like BP, Gamsol celebrates its role in creating cultural artifacts; poetic compositions distract from the material’s violent role in perpetuating climate change. Just as Dominion Energy has entangled itself in Richmond’s art scene, I have allowed my energy culture to be entangled by a problematic material culture (“Dominion,” 2020). Gamsol is less harmful than traditional mediums like turpentine, but this odorless mineral spirit is still corrosive waste. Yes, solvent allows me to connect with the river, grapple with my energy culture through the experience of painting, but I must acknowledge when petroleum distillate mediates my every mark, determines the opacity, shape, and direction of my every thought, it shapes my energy culture and challenges the authenticity of the green citizenship I grapple with when painting.

Rather than lamenting the contradictions of being a green citizen-artist-painter, I will instead devote my energy to improving my practices and material decisions so they do reflect my values. Fortunately, Stevenson's (2017) energy culture model promotes self-efficacy. With green citizenship and decolonizing nature as key cognitive norms of my artmaking, I feel the urgency of continuously reimagining my decisions as an artist: actively explore techniques and processes that reduce the amount of waste I produce so that my individual choices mirror the larger, collective work of creating a more resilient society. This semester, I am experimenting with mokuhanga, or Japanese woodblock printing, and watercolor monotypes. These water-based techniques use pigments in smaller amounts because the focus is on the flow of the water. At the river, I paint with watercolor. These watercolor studies have a consistent energy culture because they are about and made with water. There may still be times when I need to use oil paint to communicate particular ideas, but I can continuously be discerning that these artistic decisions align with the other aspects of my energy culture, specifically the commitment to green citizenship.

In applying the energy culture framework to my artmaking, I addressed the conversations between materials, ways of working and techniques, and concepts. When these components of my art energy culture are in conversation with one another, they challenge me to examine how everything I do, whether in the studio, collaborating with Charles City County, or at the James River shapes the energy culture of my life as an artist. However, though Stephenson (2017) notes that the framework can be applied on a wide range of scales from household to nation, applying the energy culture to the singular unit of myself had some shortcomings. Grappling with the consequences of oil paint sometimes distracted me from focusing on the larger questions of how not just me, but *we* can use art

to collectively mobilize against energy violence that directly affects the most vulnerable in our communities. At times, the individual material culture of my practice may be a less consequential side effect of the work's potential to mobilize a shared, transformative vision towards environmental justice. The framework's inclusion of external influences reminds me that I do not create work in a vacuum; rather, my situation shapes my energy decisions and my energy decisions shape the world around me. This push-and-pull between external influences and personal actions reinforces my aspiration to be a green citizen-artist, continuously developing an ecological, interdisciplinary perspective that promotes a just society. Leaning into the messiness of this work can have reverberating effects that illuminates climate violence in our communities, calls for a more responsible relationship with nature, and shapes an energy culture of green citizenship. With the energy culture framework informing my art practice, I can continuously work to make the green washes on my canvas genuinely green.

Works Cited

Decolonizing nature (2017). Retrieved February 21, 2021, from <https://decolonizingnature.unm.edu/>

Demos, T. J. (2016). *Decolonizing nature: Contemporary art and the politics of ecology*.

Dorow, S. (2017). Community. In Szeman, I., Wenzel, J., & Yaeger, P. (Eds). *Fueling Culture: 101*

Words for Energy and Environment. New York: Fordham University Press.

Finley-Brook and Metts (forthcoming). Dedication, Introduction, Ch 1.

Flint is family (2016). LaToya Ruby Frazier. Retrieved February 19, 2021, from

<http://www.latoyarubyfrazier.com/work/flint-is-family/>

Johnson, B. (2017). Embodiment. In Szeman, I., Wenzel, J., & Yaeger, P. (Eds). *Fueling Culture: 101*

Words for Energy and Environment. New York: Fordham University Press.

McElroy, N. H. (2019, July 10). *T.J. Demos's decolonizing nature: Contemporary art and the politics of ecology*. Retrieved from

<https://bombmagazine.org/articles/t-j-demoss-decolonizing-nature-contemporary-art-and-the-politics-of-ecology/>.

Miller, T. (2017). Green. In Szeman, I., Wenzel, J., & Yaeger, P. (Eds). *Fueling Culture: 101 Words for*

Energy and Environment. New York: Fordham University Press.

Nixon, R. (2017). Anthropocene 2. In Szeman, I., Wenzel, J., & Yaeger, P. (Eds). *Fueling Culture: 101*

Words for Energy and Environment. New York: Fordham University Press.

Seeds inservice. (2021). Seeds InService. Retrieved February 19, 2021, from

<http://www.seedsinservice.com>

Stephenson, J., Barton, B., Carrington, G., Gnoth, D., Lawson, R., & Thorsnes, P. (2010). Energy cultures: A framework for understanding energy behaviours. *Energy policy*, 38(10), 6120-6129.

Westlands—Cynthia Hooper—Videos. (2016). Retrieved February 19, 2021, from <http://cynthiahopper.com/video12.html>

Voskoboynik, D. (2019, February 19). [A guide to climate violence](#). [Medium](#).

Appendix

Artist Statement

Current Realities: Life with the James River Watershed

'Aba Makav is the true name of our people, given to us by our Creator who loosed the river from the earth and built it, into our living bodies.

Translated into English, *'Aba Makav* means *the river runs through the middle of our body, the same way it runs through the middle of our land*.

--Natalie Diaz, "The First Water is the Body" (2020) from Post-Colonial Love Poem

When I walk alongside the river, I notice decaying piles of invasive wintercreeper vines and amur honeysuckle, little spongy mushrooms peaking through scatterings of gravel pebbles, and speckled

moths that pause on top of these bumpy mounds for a break. With each step, I wonder about the footprints—ones impermanently impressed upon the sandy path, but also ones that have faded into the earth, but nonetheless touched this ground. And footprints that will leave a mark after me. I ponder my relation to this place, this community, its history. Painting at the river connects me to neighbors who may live in the same watershed but not have the same easy access to this flow.

As I bike back to the studio, the loud woosh of cars speeding past challenges my slow meanderings. Breathing in the exhaust alerts me to the power lines, pipelines, aggressively embedded but only subtly demarcated, flowing in paths parallel to the water. Furthermore, invisible but influential red lines outline places with higher temperatures, less concrete, fewer trees correspond with places. These lines of power separate the river from neighboring people whose water comes from the same source.

Stories of thirsting and drought are part of this watershed but so is resilience. I create layered oil paintings that allow these stories to shape my understanding of the river's interconnected geographies. First-hand accounts, maps, and archived images bring new understanding to the messy overlapping currents of the river's history and relationship to the surrounding area.