

FIA PITRE

- Painting and Drawing -

by Kai Newquist



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What does your thesis work investigate?

Witnessing human-made environmental damage and shifts inform my painting practice, and I seek to investigate; how can art be a tool for documenting and healing human-made climate impacts?

How has your thesis project evolved since its inception?

Through developing my thesis and practice, I have become so much more specific in the iconography, materials, and ideas I am trying to depict. I think when I first started painting, I viewed my works as needing to stand on their own, but as the idea developed, I began creating environments with my art, where elements emerge from the canvas and join the viewer in the room. This feeling of encompassing environment is so essential to my work. Instead of the paintings feeling like windows into a landscape, the landscapes feel like they are emerging into the gallery spaces they occupy. Using specific materials from the landscapes I am depicting, and creating elements of my works, like small sculptural mice, that feel like they are occupying the exhibition spaces, has allowed my work to evolve towards the meticulous installations that I hope to one day create.



(T) Paradise Lost, 2019, oil on canvas, 40" x 48"
(B) Cathedral of the Woods, 2020, Acrylic & Oil on Canvas, 60" x 96"

In your practice, is there a question you are trying to answer?

Things that I am constantly thinking about while making art about the environment are:

can I sustainably make fine art?

The short answer is no... my use of materials like oil paint, wood, canvas, and binders will always outweigh any reasonable offset I can contribute to my community. But does that mean I should not make art about the environment?

If I am striving for the collective and cultural knowledge of climate events and good environmental practices, does that help offset my physical impact of making art on this planet? Does my small impact of making paintings even matter in the grand scheme of things, when I know that 100 companies are responsible for 71% of global emissions?

These are the questions I'm constantly battling with while making my artwork.

How do you approach atmosphere and color?

Creating atmosphere and a feeling of light and air in the pieces I make is something I am constantly trying to understand and push. Nature does such amazing things with atmosphere and color like the way mist rises off a forest making it look like it's breathing and rising into the soft light that radiates through the vapor touching every tiny water particle in the air and making the



Bathed in Red, 2021, Oil & mineral pigment on canvas, 30" x 36"

clouds look like they are glowing from within. I'm so fascinated by that other-worldly movement and glow that happens under the perfect conditions in nature. A lot of my work talks about those imperfect but still beautiful areas where humans interact with wild places, and the effect we have on plants, animals, and landscapes there. I will often travel and hike into National Parks land, or follow forestry roads and camp in areas that are more isolated. In these places, you can see the way roads or power lines cut across the landscape like scars, and the ways animals and plants have so powerfully adapted to our dominating force on their landscape. I spend time looking at and interacting with the environments there. Noting the animals that wander through campsites, or follow burn scars up mountains. Documenting and researching these environments I am in is very important to my work, and when I translate these environments into a painting, I work to emphasize the colors, plants, and emotions specific to the areas that I experienced. My recent piece, *Bathed in Red*, is inspired by the apocalyptic red skies that blanketed Northern California in September 2020, due to record-breaking wildfires. I spent that entire day driving through Golden Gate Park and around San Francisco taking photos and sketching the way the red-orange light seemed to make every green tree and plant appear almost black, and how the thick smoke in the air mixed with the fog, creating an orange-brown haze you could feel on your skin. In creating *Bathed in Red* I wanted



Crimson Premonition, 2019, oil on canvas,
24" x 48"

to capture that otherworldly, dangerous, and yet beautiful feeling and the colors produced by smoke and fog blanketing the area. Color and atmosphere are so mesmerizing and powerful to me, and in my work, I'm often inspired by a color or feeling that I use to evoke an initial reaction to the piece and lure the viewers into a deeper reading of my work.

What or who are your major influences?

I am substantially inspired by the Romantic era of landscape painting, the Hudson River School, Jules Tavernier, and the Hawaii Volcano School, the moody atmospheres, and images of adventure these artists created. Yet, these eras of landscape painting were funded by colonization, environmental degradation, and paths of bloodshed that cannot be forgotten or hidden behind picturesque depictions of Yosemite valley (despite the artists' best efforts). I'm inspired by the ways artists like Kara Walker and Beth Cavener use anthropomorphic characters, playful narratives, and past iconography to subvert history and trauma within their artwork. I am most inspired by nature, and the moments of the sublime found in the raw wilderness that artists have been trying to capture for centuries. The sheer beauty and slight fear you feel one standing in front of a 300-foot waterfall, being bombarded by mist. Or the crack of thunder in the distance, and the smell of rain as a storm rolls in the distance, and you are still miles from warmth and safety. Through



Deepwater Horizons, 2019, oil on canvas, 30"x36"

my artwork, I want to evoke these places where nature makes you feel small, where trees loom overhead and creatures scurry just out of sight, where you're safe but alert to everything around.

What is in the future for you?

I will be remaining in the Bay Area post-graduation to pursue some opportunities here. I have dreams of getting access to a space that would allow me to create an immersive installation of my existing pieces and new artworks. My senior exhibition is a small sample of this installation which features my paintings and sculptures, with many small felted mice I have created which are attempting to destroy the exhibit in various ways such as covering paintings with small bricks or setting sculptures on fire. This show is titled "The best laid plans" in reference to the Robert Burns quote. I will be applying to many spaces and proposing this project to hopefully be installed and exhibited sometime in the next year or two.



Deepwater Horizons, 2019, oil on canvas, 30"x36"

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I pound rocks and burnt bones to make my handmade pigments. Originally from Honolulu, Hawaii much of my work is inspired by the lush beauty of the islands, and the fragility of a landscape confronted by the onslaught of climate change. Through my landscape painting, I couple research-driven imagery with a cinematic and colorful visual language to highlight the tensions that exist within our planet's future.