streams...
A Chronicle of the Development of Personal Ideas and Artwork
An Honors Thesis/ Creative Project (HONRS 499)

by

Chelsea A. Wait

Thesis Advisor
Barbara Stedman

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana

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During lazy days, in half-wake of a restless afternoon nap, my heart races and I slip into a dark blue chasm of cosmic size—what seems to be a thrilling, overwhelming, and completely desolate (from a human perspective) sphere of powerless omniscience. The daydream makes me feel as if I am looking at my life from the immense iron throne of geologic time. It's quite scary, humbling, and yet refreshing. This chimera started many years ago when I was quite young, wondering about the god upon which my extended family fed, and what would exist if a creator had not. Without rational understanding, at a young age, I knew that the probability of my existence was very slim and that many billions of circumstances had to align for my coming into being. Yet, at that age, I did not question the idea of one god as an all-powerful, human-like being. I was just frightened, and tried to find comfort in religion and my unbelievable luck. What I feared most was the tumultuous nothingness that seemed much more probable than our cluttered planet, and I was struck with an urgent sense of my own transient mortality.

This fear has been a river that flows in streams throughout my life, but one day I found myself in its undertow. During a summer workshop at the College of Architecture and Planning, our class watched a short film, The Powers of Ten, by Charles and Ray Eames. The blunt depiction of our solar system and universe as compared to a human body (not to mention the universe within our bodies) incited the same urgent fear that I had as a child. The Eames' film emphasized the unimaginable vastness of void space as compared to the infinitesimal and diverse existence that we experience. The film set me on a new course of questioning ideas of comfort that humans often clutch while seeking immortality or maintaining normality.

In general, overcoming my fear is about accepting my own mortality and taking advantage of my role, however small, in the river of geologic time. I reached this conclusion while developing artistic ideas to illustrate the symbiosis of permanence and transience. The ideas began with observations, as simple as the nature of the sun, of water, and of air, from a human perception. Each comes and goes: the sun is constantly passing, water continually falls and settles into the same puddles, air is always moving yet always present. I began to relate those ideas to my society. For example, the popular urge to control nature by imposing aesthetic permanence is, at its core, a need for distance, stability, and security from the unknown, unfamiliar, and chaotic natural world. I found myself disagreeing with the mores of my culture; I began to understand that my fear of the vast unknown was perpetuated by those mores. Societies often streamline or homogenize their culture by marginalizing the enlightening people who could inspire others in the culture to experiment and test their knowledge in order to discover more about their own true nature artistically, academically, sexually, and socially. These individuals are submitted to labels like weird, warped, or taboo. These labels often negatively affect the targeted person most, for some unique people, such as my younger self, are not ready to work within society as an outsider. By keeping those who are more in touch with their mortality shrouded in a grey veil of irrelevance, the culture preserves its sense of security, and curbs its need to question life. Society disguises these means of self-improvement, of overcoming fears, as dangerous, sinful, or irrelevant. As I have recognized and questioned these ideas implanted in me by television, magazines, and classmates, I have discovered my way to overcome my fears: make art. Through creation, I leave a trace, I pull at others' thought strings, and I find my role. I become a rock to disturb and divert the current.

In my artwork, I experiment to discover myself and I gradually learn how I can begin to work within society as an enlightened outsider. Therefore, painting is incredibly important to me, because it keeps me inspired and optimistic. I have often painted in order to process intellectual growth, and I had hoped that a painting would be a part of my creative project. Yet, I did not know that my thoughts would be guided to the White River, the main river that flows through East Central Indiana. In the past few years, though, my readings, designs, and thoughts have guided me to see the river, and the water that flows into,
within, and out of it, as an exchange between humans and nature; it is an entity that thrives on transience. In the past semester, as a creative project, I have completed a series of four abstract paintings about the character of a river, with the local White River as a muse and guide to understanding the qualities of a river’s character.

These paintings were done while I participated in a seminar (named streams...) based on group architectural designs at the Virginia B. Ball Center for Creative Inquiry (VBC). The VBC is a small institution at Ball State University that allows a selected professor and a team of students to take on a meaningful, interdisciplinary project for a single semester. The paintings were a project independent of the group project, done as personal development, because personal development and group projects are symbiotic and give each other meaning and depth. In this document, I chronicle the evolution of my painting projects and ideas that have guided those projects over the past couple years at Ball State, and describe the background and significance of each of the four paintings.

Background: Building on Recent Learning Experiences

In the past few years, I have traveled and learned much, but have had little time to process and analyze in depth. Several experiences have weighed heavily in the evolution of my thoughts on permanence and transience. I will discuss the two most important experiences, which are my Honors Undergraduate Fellowship and my participation in the study abroad program CAPAsia.

In 2004, I was at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, where I saw an installation entitled Kai Lein Respekt (Kai No Respect) by Kai Althoff. There were many drawings, paintings, sculptures, and other works of art that all had a very disheveled and degraded, but well-crafted, look about them. I entered the installation room: there were dirty mattresses, scattered belongings, and food crusted in bowls. It was nothing that resembled “Art,” and my friends were a bit disgusted that it was at such a prestigious venue. I think that few people even tried to grasp the message of the setting created by Althoff, for it comes as a shock to those who lead mainstream, “responsible” lifestyles.

I stood there for a minute, looking about the broken things in the room, taken aback by the ruin and rot, and then it hit me: this is someone’s life. Perhaps it’s mine. If it were, I would be just as comfortable there as I am in my own orderly lifestyle. I understood the superficial perspective from which my friends and I were coming. I have only recently realized that preened, proper composure does not correlate to a higher level of responsibility, much less richness in life. There is a broad prejudice in society against chaos and the unfamiliar. That unfamiliar person or situation is often not so fearsome, not so distant, and not as disgusting as apprehension calculates. Those obscurities also penetrate society, and ignorance can cause many problems. Many people, seen as ultimately irresponsible, are not only at a disadvantage because society sees them as waste, but also because these potentially brilliant, critical thinkers see themselves as irrational, irresponsible, and ineffective within society. As I learned from Althoff’s exhibit, art can serve as inspiration and motivation for people to continue to challenge society to confront the unknown.

At the same time, I began an Honors Undergraduate Fellowship. My purpose was to produce a series of paintings based on my observations of permanence and transience in humanity and nature, under the guidance of Prof. Nina Marshall. I had just returned from study abroad in Switzerland, where I took classes for my French major and traveled to Italy, Austria, and Slovakia, and much within Switzerland. I learned about life in a new society, and my world-view shifted; I found happiness in simple pleasures and value in a process, not just completion. The ideas I developed while walking through European cities and
living in Swiss scenery furthered my thoughts on permanence and transience and formed the backbone of my images. My myriad ideas evolved into two triptychs (a panel comprised of three paintings). The compositions were rather sloppy at first, but an energetic first step toward breaking down my world-view, finding comfort in chaos and change, and understanding the vast unknown, geologic time.

The first triptych (below) in the fellowship project is the transition of permanence and transience between the city and the agrarian landscape. The modern city is enveloped by the human concept of permanence; it is a place where nature and change are increasingly forgotten, or bemoaned, and schedules and stereotypes reign. The first panel (on the left side) shows several scenes of monumental western architecture, which is one of our society's greatest efforts at aesthetic permanence. Glass and steel giants top the painting, embodiments of the modern quest for immortality, perfection, and superiority. Pedestrians pass throughout the panel, never knowing more of each other than the faces they glimpse; strange faces remain constant in memory. Toward the center is a female torso made by classical western hands, representing nature and femininity, symbolizing several ideas: first, that the female figure is rendered faceless and unfamiliar; second, that the standard of female beauty is often set by men; and third, this standard was made to be a permanent paradigm. While painting this triptych, I often thought of Percy Shelley's poem, "Ozymandias," in which Shelley describes a fragment of a monument to a forgotten emperor, made with intent to be permanent and finally disintegrated and lost in a desert. The images of the city lead into the middle panel, the streets extend into the background of color and change, a bridge crosses a river into fluctuating patterns. The middle panel depicts the means of travel and construction – streets, highways, train tracks, and construction cranes. These are the motif of the extension of the built environment into nature – the desire of modern society to subdue nature. The background is that of a violent transition, flames and dying green. The last panel, on the right, depicts leaves blowing in the wind, wild blossoms rising thick, all portraying forces of change in nature. There is a windmill in the top right, implying a healthy partnership between humans and nature. A young woman is embedded in the land, with a pier below, leading her to water, the greatest emblem of transience.

While painting for the fellowship, I was observing permanence and transience in three realms (which can coincide quite easily): the human, the spiritual, and the natural. My observations of nature are much less skeptical and lighter than my observations of humankind – for nature combines transience and permanence instead of separating them. For example, I see that nature thrives on constant change and mortality in the chain of life, whereas humans are stubborn; they mourn change and sacrifice to immortality. I often made observations in Christy Woods, which is a small nature preserve on Ball State's campus, currently a deciduous forest with a prairie and two greenhouses. I often walk a stretch of path between the greenhouses, and it is beautiful in any season. On a sunny summer day, I notice the light glowing through green maple leaves. On a rainy spring day, I notice the deep darkness of the tree trunks and the soft, new colors of the buds. I see the squirrels collecting in the musky fall scent of earth and decaying leaves and the harsh winter sun through ghostly trees. I notice that from a human viewpoint, the sun is often changing, but from a planetary perspective, it is the most permanent body our small cosmic community. I see that water comes and goes, and is perhaps the most volatile element in my paintings, yet it always remains in the same contours. In Switzerland, surrounded by Alps, society has
admiration for those snowy peaks, seeing their height as permanence. Yet, it is the sand beneath, the grains that compose the Alps, which will outlast the forms that tower above them.

The triptych illustrating nature (above) is based on contrasting perspectives of human time versus geologic time. The mountains become rocks, rocks become sand, and great dunes grow out of sand, flowing like water. The human, ghostlike for it is most transient, floats amidst the flow of nature. There is a balance, but it is all connected by the movement of light in the sky, the decomposition of rocks on land, and the current of water beneath it all. As humans, it appears to us that the sun is transient, the mountains are great, sand is small, and water is unpredictable. Getting in tune with nature is immersive, and humans can gain in a symbiotic partnership with nature. The first lesson of nature is the transience of life, and the continuity of the elements, especially water.

The fellowship was a release for a lot of my ideas, which helped me to rediscover the main themes, precisely the relationship of humans and nature, and the healthy transience within nature. I soon discovered the inspiration of water in one of its most beautiful forms: the river. Nina, my mentor, encouraged me to go to the White River to study the patterns of movement. On the banks, I watched the sediment, plants, creatures, and rocks twisting together as the surface contours collided. I realized my attraction to the river is the turbulent grace of the current and the caress with which the water envelopes an object. When I swim, it is the plunge that I enjoy; it gives me a thrill of slipping into the vast unknown.

After the fellowship project, in January of 2005, I began another journey, with the College of Architecture and Planning, called CAPAsia. CAPAsia was a three-month-long study abroad trip with Prof. Nihal Perera, in which our group traveled to Thailand, India, Sri Lanka, and Taiwan. During our two-month stay in Ahmedabad, India, I read Siddhartha. I read the book ravenously, grasping revelations of life that Siddhartha revealed. He rediscovered a river that he crossed many times and found something deeper, a great force within itself as opposed to an obstacle or interruption along his path. Siddhartha lived with the river, and listened to it. He was amazed that the river continually flows, ever-changing, and yet it is always present. In Siddhartha, I was struck by clear ideas that paralleled and extended further than my own. I learned that these ideas could be easily explained in words and images. I learned to think of myself as a boat on the river of the present world, absorbing water, and losing parts of myself into the
river, bleeding together with the rest of the world. This was the main idea behind the top painting, in which my simple self-portrait ties and shifts in to the background. A similar metaphor is used in teaching the Hindu concepts of Atman (the self) and Brahman (existence). The boat is barely separate from the body that it flows upon, but this is not to say that the river is homogenous. The river is full of strange and enlightening experiences like colors calmly blending together or colliding violently. The middle image depicts this idea of waters of existence, many streams converging and diverging, and all events work together to form life, the eagle. The bottom painting is about a life of fire, a life of transition and change, continually shifting with the current, rising into the ethereal and falling into the inferno. This series of paintings emerged from this thought, illustrating the sense of underlying connectedness in themes that appear chaotic and transient.

_Siddhartha_ taught me to learn from the river; afterwards I was inspired to visit the White River more often. I took the ideas that had accumulated over the past few years and focused them on the river. A person sits on the bank, watches the water carry its sediment, its debris, cutting through the land in changing paths, surging and flooding. It is different with each moment – uncontrollably changing, and this is fearsome to society. Yet, the transformation is what gives the river an ultimate order. What is a river but a direction and continual movement? The river is both permanent and transient. It is a model of living with change, finding a different definition of permanence, and releasing the comforts that hold us back from finding our true selves.

streams...: Working with the White River

Shortly after my return, I learned of an opportunity to study at the Virginia B. Ball Center in the spring of 2006 about developing a series of river-centric projects, the idea and undertaking of Prof. Kevin Klinger of the Architecture Department. Kevin had been invited by the Virginia Ball Center, an academic outpost of Ball State in an old mansion in Muncie, Indiana. Each semester, the director of the VBC, Joseph Trimmer, gives one or two professors (and their students) a modest budget and access to the space and equipment owned by the VBC as means to undertake a proposed project that strives to enrich the lives of residents of Indiana or the East Central Indiana region. This seminar, streams..., was aimed at creating small architectural installations along the White River to draw public interest to the river and connect the river to contemporary design. An “architectural installation” is similar to a public sculpture, but the goal of an installation is to create an experience that leads the viewers to an epiphany, a rediscovery of their relationship to the contextual environment using art and design as a catalyst. Although my forte is not digital design software, the opportunity to be with the river for a semester was exciting. I was certain that I would enjoy the opportunity to be outside, study the river, and build for the public. Kevin encouraged our class often to learn from the river, keep a sketchbook, write journal entries, and develop our individual work as a way to process our group design.

As a group, the students in streams... designed installations along the White River, or Wapahani, as the Delaware Tribe called the river. Our four sites
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were in Muncie, Daleville, Anderson (Mounds State Park), and Indianapolis, Indiana. We began our group work before the semester began—during winter break, trying to gain insight in the habitat and seasons of the river. We spent an Arctic day at Mounds State Park, with at least a foot of snow on the ground, low golden sunlight, and long underwear. The river was twisting, sparkling, and chattering. We gathered interesting relics from the banks, mosses, dried tendrils, soggy leaves, old cans, rusty rocks, bark shavings from a beaver’s teeth, berries, ice, snow, and all sorts of natural treasures and packed them into Ball jars to display for inspiration. We wrote journal entries and conceived ideas for our installation in Mounds. It was our first real interaction with the river as a group, and we were all in different mindsets. Most of our group’s conceptual designs about interaction with nature were done at the Virginia Ball Center after we had been to each site to glean inspiration. Our projects also used donated materials from Indiana businesses to develop a connection between the College of Architecture and Planning at Ball State and local materials providers and manufacturers. My classmates and I spent nearly as much time at the woodshop in the architecture building as we spent in lecture, drawing, diagramming, modeling, and organizing the group at the VBC. We put a lot of craft into our projects, especially the project at Mounds.

We began the semester at Daleville, to return to our project at Mounds State Park in a couple weeks. Our seminar began with a two-week charrette, or intense design project, in Daleville, where our projects emphasized the sights, sounds, textures, and layers of experience at the river. For example, one project emulated a tree reaching twelve feet above the bank at the time it was raised, but later, when the river flooded, it was only two feet above the surface of the water. A small project that I completed was to stack some rocks into a small bench facing a bend in the river so that I, or others, could have a nice place to sit, contemplate, and discuss the ideas the White River stirred in me. It was this spot that inspired my painting about decay. Another group made a small loft with a floor of scrap lumber and walls of gathered reeds, so that a person could listen to the river and observe the texture of the reeds.

Our next project, at Mounds State Park (right), was the longest, most enlightening, and most artistic of our projects throughout the semester. It was also our only permanent installation. We spent a long time on the design of this project, and many of the ideas were discarded, although most were worthy of being built. Initially, there were supposed to be two different projects, one being a pavilion for grade-schoolers, the other to replace a small bridge that was often washed away by the river. Unfortunately, time and materials permitted us to complete only one of the projects, the pavilion. Our design started overly ambitious; we wanted to create a long architectural procession to our main feature on an outlook above the river. We had to simplify the project drastically, eliminating extra features until our design was just a small pavilion. It was designed to emulate an ear canal, to isolate and amplify the river’s sound for people who sat inside.

Due to time constraints, half of the group worked on the next project, a pair of installations, one in Muncie at Minnetrista, and the other at the Indianapolis Arts Center in Broad Ripple, near Indianapolis. The students in the other team went to New York City to develop the design with SHoP architects, one of the leading design firms in the country. They also went to Kansas City, Missouri, to meet with Zahner, Inc. This company, a sheet metal manufacturer, works closely with Frank Gehry and is an industrial leader in modern digital design. We stitched the metal sheets into the riparian landscape as a demonstration of symbiosis between the built and the natural. Plants grew through the perforation holes and engulfed the sheet metal. Rain rusted ferrous sheets of metal and gave it a natural texture. This project was done hastily, but there was something to learn from its interaction with nature, as in all the projects. Yet, it was at Mounds that we most strongly developed a relationship with the White River, and the seminar concluded with a main exhibit at the Minnetrista
Cultural Center, where we would display our group projects and our individual work that had been influenced by the river.

**Personal Development: Exhibiting the White River**

We were given great opportunities to build along the White River, at important sites, such as Minnetrista and Mounds State Park. We felt that our designs must be extremely sensitive and executed with great care for the environment and understanding of the river's ecosystem. Lectures from river experts in Muncie helped to increase our awareness and scientific understanding of the river. We indulged our curiosity in the banks of the river to develop our sensitivity. We photographed, sketched, and experimented with the materials that nature provided us. It was this personal development that built our relationship to the river. It was our personal experiences in nature that steered our designs. I painted to express that natural sensitivity in my artwork.

On my own, aside from the group work, I developed four paintings, all using water-based media. I have not taken a college course with water-based painting, and so much of my work was experimentation, just as we did with the materials that the river ecosystem provided us. At the White River's banks, we used the reeds as markers to mark fluctuation in the water's level and the river's boundary. We stitched pods together to make winding sculptures. We tied branches with dried grasses to create and arm extending out over the current. I experimented with watercolor and acrylics in new ways because my sense of innovation had been refreshed by my time on the river.

Water-based media interests me greatly. It is exciting how pigments and different media react when my brush hits the water. Some flow freely with it, some sink to the bottom, some pigments spread over the surface of the water, clinging to the edges and drying in lace-like patterns. The metallic paints spread lightly and rapidly along the tension of the water's surface. The dark colors, crimson and navy, sink to the bottom creases of the paper, lying in wells and creating depth. Viscous paints dry slowly in a scaly texture and start to peel like old paint on a bridge. If I hold my brush at a shallow height, the drops of paint fall in neat circles; drops from several feet high splatter and spit with sloppy edges. My use of iridescent paints gives a two-dimensional work a holographic look, changing from different angles. I am most interested in different textures, materials with a lot of layers or intricacy.

Similarly, the streams... showcase at Minnetrista was full of variety in textures, media, and complexity. The main exhibit displayed both our group and individual work. Our group experimented in many media: creative writing, photography, painting, sculpture, video, and, of course, architecture. As the organizer of the exhibit, I wanted to emphasize the relationship that we had made with the river through our individual creative work. The relationship with the White River was important to each of us in developing sensitivity in design and understanding what would emphasize the characteristics of the site and elucidate an awakening in the visitor to the environment. In my relationship with the river, I analyzed different traits of the White River, and these paintings displayed that to the audience at Minnetrista.

These four paintings exemplify different attributes of the White River: vibrancy, transformation, layers, and decay. Unlike the paintings from my fellowship or CAPAsia, the imagery here is abstract and ethereal; they lack common symbols and the content could be interpreted myriad ways. Yet, these paintings get closer to the character of transience through their simplicity. The four attributes could also be called means of change or variety, and I'll use these traits to address each painting as a title. In the order listed above, I will discuss the technique of each painting and how it was inspired by my ideas about the river, why it relates to the White River, and what it taught me about finding comfort in change.
**Vibrancy:** watercolor, acrylic paints on watercolor paper 28"x40"

This was the first experiment I did with watercolors and acrylics, which were media that I had not used or used stiffly in the past. I began by taking a sheet of watercolor paper and crumpling it up into a large ball. When I flattened the paper again, there was depth to it. The water and pigments would fall in low creases and dry at the peaks of the folds as it would in a landscape. I laid down a flat, thin layer of orange to contrast the dark blues that I wanted to use. I mixed various shades and tints of blue by the bowful, and began pouring, slashing, and dripping different colors with a thick brush. The energy formed the shapes: pours made slow curves, slashes created rushing currents, drips made playful edges. I left the painting to dry; it took more than a day. It was fascinating to come back to the painting and see how the drying process changed and pulled at the paints. With water-based media, I enjoy finding the small intriguing circumstances in which the dripping, the mixing of colors, or the drying formed an exquisite pattern.

This painting was done at the beginning of the seminar, when my observations about the river were very basic. I sat along the banks of the White River in Muncie, listened, and saw many levels of energy in the water. The deepest parts of the river carried the most force. The shallow rocky areas were where the river laughed its gurgling chuckle like the small playful drops. The river is all about movement and exchange. This painting also relied heavily on those forces, the pigments exchanging with each other and colliding, and above all the movement of the water in all directions, with varying levels of energy, guiding them and the exchange of water into the paint and then into the atmosphere as the drying process further manipulates the painting. As most rivers speak like this, in motley voices, it was at the banks of the White River that I became familiar with the vibrancy and various levels of energy in the river.

From this painting, I learned that the river is not homogenous. The water that laps at the shallow bank has a different character than the water in the broad, deep force. There is liveliness about the river in the variety of its energy. Simultaneously, it runs smooth, it ripples, it Flow deep and powerful, it gurgles, it whirlpools, and it lazes about at times. Interpreting this dynamic into my own life, I feel comfort in variety. I feel that I do not need a straight path in life, nor do I need to be happy and outgoing all the time, but sometimes. It is natural for my life to have a variety of energy.
Transformation: chipboard, house paint, glue, acrylics, hemp string 32”x48”

During the longest project of our semester, the project at Mounds State Park, we spent a lot of time in the CAP woodshop. I found an old piece of chipboard in the waste pile, covered with glue, house paint, and many winding cuts from years of model-making. I laid down a solid blue layer, like a sheet of frozen ice, but the blue retreated from the cuts in the board and gathered around the spots of glue like patterns in frost. Next, I ran lively navy and orange flowing patterns across the sheet of frozen blue with thicker, darker acrylics. Finally, I used a dry brush to give depth with a gaseous white acrylic mist and a looming deep purple fog. Each layer characterizes a physical state of water: solid, liquid, gas. During the spring semester, we were often at the river when all three states of matter were present. The river is constantly changing, and does not exist just as one current of water. There are many creeks and streams trickling into the river. Groundwater absorbs from the river and squeezes water back in to the flow. Rain, snow, and ice cause the mass of the river to multiply. Water is the quintessential transformer. It is never fully in one state of matter any time of year.

We began our time studying the White River in the winter, when the river seemed like the only life in the landscape. We found strange ice formations hanging from debris in the river like tentacles. Springs and small creeks in Mounds State Park solidified like frozen fountains. Snow covered the rotting tree trunks, old leaves, and strange bark. As the cold receded, we found the creeks coming back to life; the low winter sun gleamed and sparkled in the pure waters. Red berries had been the only color in the woods, and then suddenly, the green buds sprouted and bloomed. It amazes me that a soft green leaf emerges from brittle bark. There is such a drastic transformation between new growth and the dormant earth. Energies push and pull, flow into each other and leave traces on the forest floor, which awaken one day to become strong and stout and will soon decay into dormancy again.

From this painting, I learned that several states of being exist at once. Nothing is clear and defined, nor does it need to be. Often, one state of being will prevail. States can be compared to interests, emotions, or passions. I can feel comfort not knowing what exactly I will do with my life, but knowing that I have many interests which I can combine and pursue. Life is constant transformation, in our bodies, in our emotions, in our environment. My true self is not my consistency, not a favorite color or favorite song, but what I want to learn, become, and teach. If I am not ready or comfortable with change, life could devastate me.
Layers: watercolor, acrylics on watercolor paper 32”x54”

I began this painting in three parts. I chose a slender format to emulate a section-cut diagram of the river. On each separate scroll, I let my wrist loose, creating full, flabby strokes like oxbows. I used dark paints in the two outer scrolls to contrast with the bright paper, for a look almost like calligraphic strokes. With my brush, I pulled small rivulets like fingers out of the large pools that the broad strokes made. I poured different colors into the stream. I used the same manner in the middle scroll, but all the strokes were broad to create a solid mass. In the large mass, the drying process manipulated the paint most. Light strokes left tiny bubbles that dried like white rocks in shallow water. Fringed borders formed and heavy paints settled in the lowlands of the paper, having dried in stages leaving ripples. The colors that I mixed separated and dried in layers, making deltas on the page. A thick drop of blue from my brush crawled and bit into a pool of light green like a dark venom. The drying process, the application of varying strokes, and the relationships of colors in these paintings portray the interaction of the layers of the river.

Together, the scrolls represent the whole river. The painting reveals two lively sides flanking a full-bodied force. The two sides represent the lively banks, where change is greatest – the fingers of the river reach out, grab, and pull at debris as they enclose the deep current of the river in the middle. The side scrolls also represent the top and the bottom of the river. As I was standing in the shallow bank of the White River, I could only see the lively, expressive surface and the creatures and colorful rocks on the bed. The water that flows beneath the surface and above the bed is transparent. The top and bottom layers have visual vibrancy: the top undulates and sparkles and the bottom is scattered with color and motion. The middle layer is sometimes swept with clots of sediment, portrayed by the metallic paints. The three scrolls each represent a basic layer of the water, depending on how the observer interprets them – the surface, body, and bed or two twisting banks flanking the heavy force of the current.

This triptych focuses on the layers of the river. While watching the water flow by at the bridge on Priestford Road, near Daleville, I saw a plastic grocery bag waving in the current a few feet below the surface of the White River. The bag had algae growing in its wrinkles and it was as graceful as a wispy cloud seen from a mountaintop, flowing free and fast, as close as a breath. The glittering surface above occasionally interrupted my view of the bag. I gauged its movement by the relative stillness of the riverbed. The plastic bag gave life to the middle of the river, catching the full force of the massive movement. It attuned me to the force and direction of the current. The White River has more layers than visual layers, and its visual layers outnumber those that I have described, but the painting portrays the simple characteristic. Layers reveal beauty and a vague order to what seems like chaos.

In observing layers in the White River and creating layers in my paintings, I began to notice that everything has layers that surround an essential truth: a lesson about life. At the river, that lesson was that there is a vague order to what seems chaotic. Perhaps there is even a concise, highly complex order to the flow of the White River, but only omniscience could reveal it. Layers in painting create a sense of intrigue, a sense of history or progression, and depth. It takes investigation to discern layers in paintings, in the river, and in life, but it also takes persistence. The fact that there is a vague organization to what seems chaotic is a comfort in understanding change and stepping into unknown realms; the task is to recognize the order.
**Decay:** watercolor, acrylic, paper towels, hemp string 72”x36”

When I paint with watercolor, I use little to no paper towel for cleaning my brush, but I often spill off the edge of the paper. Paper towels, bunched together and blotted on the paper, create interesting patterns in drying. After the other paintings, I gathered all of my used paper towels and sewed them together like a quilt, the quilt scattered with crusty paint and filth-like stains because I'd used them to wipe the floor. I then bunched the quilt together and poured more pigments and some iridescent paints onto the mass. After a day or two, it was mostly dry. I stretched it out again, and painted a pattern of currents sprouting from the lower center of the painting, using a half acrylic iridescent gold and half watercolor blue. The acrylic gold stayed where I laid the brush, but the blue spread underneath it through the paper. I was inspired by the persistence of the river despite the abuse and pollution. The small stream pattern crawled and spluttered across the landscape of waste – symbolized by the stained and torn paper towel quilt.

This painting represents a dystopian river – the suffering of polluted banks, chemical leaks, and the decay of toxicity. The painting also represents a solution to the problem: put waste to use, take it out of the cycle of pollution and decay, and set waste into a new cycle of using waste as energy. Often, this very quality of paper is washed into the river, for if the floodgates cannot hold the water from a storm surge, the wastewater treatment plant is allowed to release it into the river. Most any storm will wash copious amounts of raw sewage into the White River because the street drains are not separate from the sewers. During our seminar at the VBC, we invited John Craddock, the former head of the Bureau of Water Quality, who is renowned for revitalizing the White River and teaching other communities how to have a healthier relationship with their waterways. Before I heard his lecture, I was under the impression that the White River was presently in the worst condition it had ever been in, due to the sewage problem and some recent chemical spills. However, in his presentation, Mr. Craddock showed us the work that the bureau has done over the last thirty years, and the White River has improved greatly. Wildlife has returned to the river and the ecosystem has been returned to a more natural state with trees and riparian plants.

The cycle of decay mesmerizes me. The process of falling apart is a way of dealing with change and chaos, and often one is left with the core – the essential truth of one's own being. As a river dies, it struggles to carry out its true nature, the flow of life through many branches. As it struggles, branches die, and eventually only the most essential branch is left. When the river dies, one realizes that the last surviving branch was very vital. The cycle of decay sets the stage for new beginnings. The decay in the White River and at its banks, from a stray beer can to the particles of raw sewage, are traces of in our society's unhealthy relationship with the river. As the cycle of decay waxes and wanes, the river will continue to flow with its essential characteristics: force, motion, direction, and persistence.
Synthesis:

The paintings that I have created in the past few years have developed my world-view, the framework with which I perceive my life and environment. Each painting in the last project analyzes an aspect of the White River that I observed while studying and designing alongside that river. These are also aspects of my world-view, for I compare life closely to my interaction with the river. In all my paintings, I characterized the river, gave new order to what I had considered mystical, fearsome chaos. I brought permanence, which I have referred to as order, together with transience, which I have called the river, the unknown, chaos. Together, the two create a flow, a current with vibrancy, layers, transformation, and the cycle of decay and rejuvenation. In the techniques of painting that I used, I observed and experimented with the flow of water, just as I did at the White River.

The paintings I had done before grew progressively abstract, and with these projects, I got closer to depicting the way that I see existence. I understand that my world-view will change, but I am comfortable with evolution. These four paintings strike close to the essential truth that has been driving my artwork for the past few years, and it is that essential truth that will continue to inspire and reveal life to me in new ways.

The trail of thought that guided these paintings led to an enjoyment of small circumstances, an enjoyment of mortality and vitality, and a commitment to taking opportunities. Life is a flow of which I am a drop in a current, and I can simultaneously be irrational yet responsible, vibrant yet observant, and critical yet understanding. It takes a lot of understanding and reflection to persist in life.

My art is contradictory in a way, for it is a release of mind to create a little permanence; the paper or canvas is an escape from the chaotic synapses and churning changing ideas inside my head. It is a power with which I fight the fear of entropy, death, and the unknown.
Inspirational Sources:


