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# **Flesh of the Planet**

## **Integrative Project A&D 499 Thesis**

### **Introduction**

*Flesh of the Planet* is a watercolor painting series that discusses that vulnerability of human by visualizing the overwhelming beauty and terror of extreme natural phenomenon and geographical views. This series is an abstract representation of the near-death experience people feel when encountering the power of the earth. By using impactful composition and color, I want to deliver this sensorial experience of sublime to my audiences.

The goal of this project is to explore an idea that I have held for a long time--human beings are too arrogant when we talk about our relations to this planet we live on. By challenging myself in the field of abstract paintings, I want to illustrate the extreme of natural phenomenon and the absolute power of it. I am manipulating abstract forms and colors to visualize the fear you would feel when entering these “prohibited to enter” areas on this planet due to human being’s physical limits. I consider these natural phenomenon a tip of an iceberg where the earth reveals the frightening power of its flesh to those who could only live on the surface of its skin.

Watercolor is a medium that is usually described as translucent, calming, soft and glowing. Using this medium to recreate those aggressive, earthy, rough and voluminous geological textures is also

a significant part of the concept of sublime. By using unique layering techniques and painting in such a unusual scale, I maximized the breathtaking potential of the medium to achieve the visual impact.

The reason I consider this project meaningful is that it is the opposite to people's fundamental purpose of creating landscape-based artwork. Artists do sketch, paint, or take photos of landscapes we see because they have the instinct to leave a record. I believe the impulsion of recording equals to a desire to conquer, collect and own a visual enjoyment that we cherish while knowing it doesn't belong to us. That is actually very similar to explorer's adventurous spirit of actually surviving severe environments to prove their courage and abilities. There is a brilliant dynamics of conquering the nature while being conquered by the beauty of it. This painting series is unique because my goal is not recording or capturing a view, but to show my respect and worship towards this mysterious power that easily creates such natural phenomenon. I want to remind my audiences to rethink our relation to the earth by leading them through this bizarre visual adventure.

### **Contextual Discussion**

To understand how art critics and historians view landscape paintings as a genre, I read Roger Paden's *Picturesque Landscape Painting and Environmental Aesthetics*. The significant idea of the difference between "natural-based" and "arts-based" landscape paintings is introduced in his writing. What I want to do is the latter. The origin of landscape paintings was the desire to record a view that you

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<sup>1</sup> Paden. "Picturesque Landscape Painting and Environmental Aesthetics." *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 49, no. 2 (2015): 39. doi:10.5406/jaesteduc.49.2.0039.

have witnessed. This is the idea I want to challenge in this project. What I paint are sensorial experiences of explorers being defeated by the power of nature and taste the bitter-sweet result of being overwhelmed by what they might have despised. They are being swollen by the mystery of this planet and given the near-death experience.<sup>2</sup>

To visualize the duality of beauty and terror of nature, I read autobiographies of those explorers who had actually encountered the danger of the extreme natural environments to be further inspired. I believe the identity of an explorer is a combination of curiosity, ambition and responsibility. These complicated emotions drove explorers to overcome their instinct for avoiding dangers. Their adventure of pushing their physical and mental limits is as meaningful as human beings challenging the nature as an ambitious specie. This idea becomes my source of inspiration: visually combining human bodies & landscapes to symbolize their spirit. These inner views of human body structures also represent how their bodies are decomposing. Such imagination is often mentioned when people describing their near-death experiences when their lives are threatened.

I read *My Life as an Explorer* by Sven Hedin. By describing multiple near-death experiences in his journey as a desert explorer, he recalls how vulnerable people are when encountering the deadly power of the nature. When he risked his life to explore deserts, the desire to conquer and the risk of being conquered exist in his mind at the same time. “We had to get over them, and all those beyond the horizon. Impossible! We had not the strength!” At those life-threatening moments, while experiencing pains and fear, the natural phenomenon he witnessed also brought him a bizarre aesthetical enjoyment. “They assumed more and more fantastic shapes...They assumed the shapes of lions in ambush, recumbent dragons, inscrutable sphinxes and sleeping dogs.” This illusion he sees from the shapes of

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<sup>2</sup> Sven Anders Hedin, *My Life as an Explorer* (Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 2003)

sand dunes when he lost direction in a desert is so impressive. The imagery in his writing inspired me a lot when I did sketches for these paintings. His writing delivers a dual experience of despair and infatuation this planet has given him. This idea resonates with artists' desire to visually "conquer" landscapes and record their affections. The power I felt from this depiction made me choose a deadly desert as the first natural environment to paint.

The work of Pat Steir and Georgia O'Keefe provided great reference for me to discover my approach to abstract art. Pat Steir's paintings are a beautiful duality of precisely controlling the strokes while letting the medium perform freely. Georgia O'Keefe's approach to colors, form and dimension creates the ambiguity of human flesh texture that grips my imagination. I also discovered the idea of the contrast of human scale and impactful natural phenomenon by studying Katsushika Hokusai's painting *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*. The overwhelming power of the waves vividly visualized in this painting inspired me to explore how powerful I could make the composition of my paintings look like.

## **Methodology**

My process is mainly driven by material exploration, and I also used feedback to iterate my idea for content, composition and color palette choices.

The medium I create this series with is watercolor on paper. An important reason I choose watercolor rather than other painting mediums is that I don't want to gain full control of the material. Watercolor is known for how full of uncertainty the painting process is. You strive to enhance the visual impact using all of your techniques, but even the most experienced painters are sometimes amazed by

the random effect created by the fluidity of water. When painting with watercolor, giving up some control of the material leads to a surprising beautiful result.

To get inspiration about the overall composition and color choices for each painting, I first searched for images of those extreme natural phenomenon that have very recognizable color stories, and studied the visual impression they gave me. For example, after looking at hundreds of images of deserts, I started to realize the natural fear we have of the deserts and canyons come from the unclear sense of direction, which is enhanced by the wavelike surface and the overwhelming warm color of rocks and sand that suggest high heat, the lack of plant and water source.

Using those reference images as inspiration, I started doing tests on small pieces of watercolor paper. I made myself imagine as many color palettes that are related to natural phenomenon as possible. Most of these 5 x 6 watercolor studies have only a simple wash of color on them. After a layer of paint is dried, the texture and transparency of water is still preserved in the lustre of that simple wash of color. This is a medium that is so sensitive to any slight change of wetness, saturation and color mixing. I didn't do any details or paint any specific objects in these samples. If I created a color palette that reminded me of the depiction I read in my research, I did more iterations of it to keep exploring the possibilities of this color combination. I changed the texture by sanding the dried color surface, played with the order and timing of applying paint, and tried to figure out what is the most impactful composition that I can achieve when it becomes a large scale painting. After finishing 50 samples, I received the feedback from David and Laura to pick four that stood out to them. The content of these 4 became the natural phenomenon I painted.

What I did next was doing more iterations of them. To make them visually interesting and mysterious, I played with abstract forms and lines. I looked at other painters, such as Georgia O'keeffe, to gain further inspiration. O'keeffe's paintings usually contains a combination of female organ forms

and flower petals. I studied her work trying to understand the beautiful visual logic hiding behind the hybrid of female organs and flowers in her paintings. I then created more iterations of the five selected samples to see them become further abstracted. These were the samples I decided to develop my large paintings from.

I purchased 4 sheets of watercolor paper in size 40 x 60 inches, which is the largest size of rough watercolor paper I can find in professional art supply stores. It is such a rare scale that the paper had to be handed to me through a special truck delivery service. I believe scale is such an important factor that affects the visual impact of abstract paintings. Having their views filled with strong colors and abstract forms maximize the surreal experience of the audiences.

I spent weeks on my first painting to remember new techniques I learnt from painting watercolor in this scale. When David came to see my progress, he suggested me to avoid the dripping of the paint, which is a consequence of hanging the paper perpendicularly. However, this feedback I received from him reminded me that how I might use this effect created by gravity to improve my paintings. Since gravity is also a power of nature, why don't let it join the process of painting? I started to make use of this linear marks of dripping as a part of the composition. They do successfully enhance a sense of speed, and a feeling of objects being pulled by the gravity. All the abstract forms floating in my images are pulled together by these marks. It also works well as a visual element that strengthens the consistency among the paintings.

Other feedbacks I received from group critiques and visiting artists also encouraged me to further challenge myself in my later paintings. I was again surprised by how subjectively the experience of appreciating abstract paintings could be. I have taken advices about how to enhance dimensions and depth, whether objects are too abstract or not abstract enough, and whether I should let these paintings

look more “watercolor-like” or not. These feedbacks opened up my source of inspiration and allowed me to view my own paintings from other people’s perspective and taste.

### **Creative Work**

By the end of this semester, a total of 4 paintings had been created. The second and third paintings were selected to be exhibited in the BFA art show. Hanging them in a clean and spacious exhibition hall makes them look so different from how they looked like on that wall in my messy IP studio. By observing the audiences’ reactions, I believe my purpose of painting this large was achieved. They repeat coming up to observe details and getting away, moving their heads to get a complete view of these large images. I believe that for a short period of time, they did experience being swollen by the surreal spaces I created.









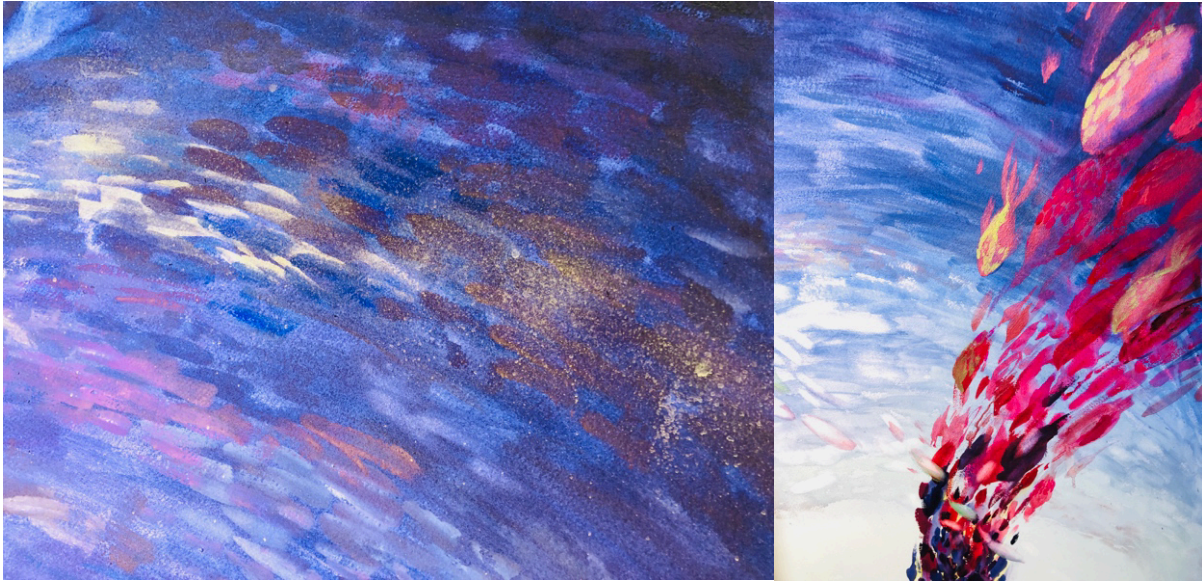
Flesh of the Planet 1-“Accouchement”



*Accouchement* is the painting that I spent most time doing experiments with. Instead of painting with watercolor techniques and rules, I used oil painting techniques to construct the base of this powerful composition and color contrast. The thick layering of the paint and wild strokes successfully imitate the grainy, earthy texture of quick sand and rock caves.



Flesh of the Planet 2-“Conception”



*Conception* brings me a pleasant experience of discovering fluidity, lights and materials. I used several types of mineral iridescent paint to make the surface on brush strokes sparkling and reflective. The unique sheen of the material helps to imitate the beauty of the sun shining on reflective fish scales. The densely packed and layered strokes creates this deep dimension where millions of lives are flowing and merging.

While having each painting representing a different natural phenomenon and an inner structure of human body, I also want paintings to speak with each other. Having paintings within the same series to be paired up to represent both sides of a same topic is a method I always use.

I decided to pair up my first two paintings and have them perform the theme of birth together. Quick sand and the deep sea are the two representations I choose to go with this topic. Both natural landscapes involve the power of swallowing, dragging creatures inside, giving them the fear of sinking. While experiencing the panic, struggling for life while looking at the only light source above becomes the only hope the pray can grasp. Considering how similar the experience of being overwhelmed by

these two natural forces could be though they take place in distinct environments that have opposite color theme, humidity and temperature, I am amazed by the mystery of nature again.

I give these paintings opposite titles: *Accouchment* and *Conception*, have the first painting portraying a baby's struggle in the birth canal when he tries to leave his mother's body and come to this world, and the second one portraying the process of the fertilization.



Flesh of the Planet 3-“Forgotten Treasures”



*Forgotten Treasures* is the one painting that I spent most time and effort trying to alter and perfect. I attempted to go even further abstract with the content. This painting was exploring the topic of memory disorder. Using the glowing ambers to represent precious moments in ones' memory, which is also something that time could add beauty and meanings to it, I am trying to depict the difficulties someone with memory disorder keeps experiencing. The natural landscape that inspired me was the extremely dangerous highland and mountain range. The foggy background and the unbalance composition all serves the goal to create this atmosphere of insecurity and danger.



Flesh of the Planet 3-“Buried under the Frozen Tundra”



I followed a strong desire to paint something geometrical to create this fourth painting. Since frozen earth and crystalized ice is the major visual element in this painting, I decided to leave the layer of washes extremely simple and light to preserve that transparency of the paint. Since the last painting explored memory disorder, I decided to focus on the theme of Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, a physical disease that limits the mobility of the patient's muscle to a extreme. The idea of someone's paralyzed body creates this imagery in my mind-a fresh and alive stem of a plant being buried under layers of frozen ice.

### **Conclusion**

This long term project is undoubtedly the most unique project I have done in the past four years I spent in the Stamps School of Art and Design. The process is packed with abundant experience of polishing my idea, doing research to get inspiration sources, using material studies to guide my creative process, and taking feedbacks to guide myself when I was stuck with techniques or aesthetic preferences.

The third painting, *Forgotten Treasures*, had already been selected to be exhibited in a joint exhibition in Paris at the end of 2019. It will be reproduced with oil painting in the same scale.

I am very satisfied with the theme and style I worked with, and I am very sure that I will make more paintings within the series. I have so many more subject matters to explore under this great theme. My goal is to create more than 10 paintings and have them filled a whole gallery space. As my audiences walk around and visit the most bizarre geographical locations on earth, they are also traveling inside an enormous human body, being thrilled by the beauty of the flesh of this planet.

## Bibliography

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