

Spoiled Landscapes

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Abstract

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Painting and Drawing

The Industrial Revolution ushered in a new stage of human history. It brought economic prosperity and dramatic technological advances, while it pushed the Earth into a new geological epoch—the Anthropocene, in which humans are the dominant influence on nature and the environment. The series of paintings *Spoiled Landscapes* illustrate the impact of human activities on the environment, and they focus on petroleum, mining, and trash, all of which imply the exploitation of natural resources and pollution on a scale that is unprecedented. There are two directions in my creative research: environmental issues and landscape painting history. Landscapes witness and chronicle the vicissitudes of history. Landscape painting reveals the relationships between mankind and land, civilization and nature. The medium of my work is landscape painting and it is an attempt to call attention to the scale of abuse from our industrial civilization. Nature does not belong to humans, but humans do belong to nature.

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I Introduction

My work, *Spoiled Landscapes—Resources*, is based on my concern about the abuse of nature by humans. It is also the continuation of the former series *Ruins* (the *Ruin of Industry*, the *Ruins of War*, and the *Ruins of Natural Disasters*) which was inspired by industrialization. I was born and raised in China which used to be called the world's manufacturing center. However, in the new age of manufacturing and urbanization, many old factories were abandoned. The industrial ruins reminded me of the modern history of my country, and allow me to focus on the impacts of industrialization on our societies and the relationship between civilization and nature.

The series of paintings *Spoiled Landscapes—Resources* are about the effects of human activities on the environment. Specifically, my paintings focus on petroleum, mining, and trash, all of which suggest the resources taken from nature and the waste dumped back into the earth and the sea. There is no other activity that has shaped history as much as the plunder and control of petroleum in the past one hundred years. The gas and oil industry represents energy, and mining is the process to extract the basic materials such as metals, which are essential to our society. The impacts of the industrial revolution have been so profound that we have pushed the Earth into a new geological epoch: the Anthropocene (the Epoch of Man), even though we are still the infants of the Holocene, the epoch that created us. Our civilization's addiction to these resources puts it on a collision course with disaster. Resource extraction, carbon emission, trash and waste...will this kind of unsustainable development lead to the fall of industrial civilization like the collapses of past societies? The scale of the series of paintings is 7 by 10 feet. The mural-size helps to invite people to walk inside the landscapes in order to call attention to the scale of abuse from our civilization.

This series is comprised of three paintings. The first one depicts the Gas and Oil Industry. Using documental photography as a reference, I have rearranged the composition (topography, light, and drilling rigs), to make it both reliable and dramatic. Therefore, in the painting, the pump jacks are dispersed over a wide area, like blood-sucking mosquitoes attached to the wounded, infected, rotten, and pale skin of our Mother Nature.

The second painting shows mining. In a similar way, the open-pit mines are depicted going deep into the ground, implying an opening to hell. The mining sites are the man-made sublime, since we are shocked by the scale at which we drag out the natural resources. As a result of mining activities, we have move more sediment than all the rivers combined. We transform the landscape so that seemingly there is nothing natural left.

The third painting is about the ocean pollution. Responding to the former paintings about resource extraction, this one depicts trash dumping. More than 80% of ocean plastic comes from land-based sources. Currents and winds move it throughout the

ocean, sometimes far from its origin. Plastic marine debris does not biodegrade and can last for hundreds of years. Most commodities are the byproduct of petroleum industry such as plastics, which suggests our impact on environment from big industry to daily life. Trash is the excrement of industrial civilization. Almost everyone wants to get away from it. Just like when we drop a plastic bottle or a disposable lunch box into the garbage can, anything else is no longer our business. On the other hand, waste may be resource in the future that we have not learned how to take advantage of economically.

II Anthropocene

My ideas of this series of paintings stem from Anthropocene. Although the term is still an unofficial name or an amorphous notion, it has to be accepted as part of the geological timescale. According to the article *The Human Age* published in *Nature*, the most recent unit of geological time, the Holocene, beginning about 11,700 years ago, would be ended and replaced with the Anthropocene, because from the Industrial Revolution, late eighteenth century, humanity's impact on the Earth is so profound that a new geological epoch needs to be declared. For example, only through mining activities, we have move more sediment than all the rivers combined. Between the Industrial Revolution and the start of the new millennium, the hole in the ozone layer opened over Antarctica, and the amount of methane was doubled as well as the concentration of carbon dioxide was driven up by 30% in the atmosphere.

The Industrial Revolution is like a key to open the door to a new chapter of history. The last time was Agricultural Expansion which undoubtedly was overshadowed by the latter. Technologies and energies play a significant role in this historical transformation. Since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, fossil fuels have been used as the main sources of energy. Coal began to be widely used after 1800 and would continue to be the dominant source of energy into the twentieth century. In 1846, Abraham Gesner invented kerosene making coal and petroleum practical raw materials for lighting fuel. In 1859, Edwin Drake invented the first modern drilling process for deep oil wells, and John Davison Rockefeller founded the Standard Oil Company. Those two events set the stage for the age of oil to come. In 1878, Karl Friedrich Benz developed petrol-powered automobiles implying the invention of the internal combustion engine which was the major influence in the rise in the importance of petroleum. *A Century of War, Anglo-American Oil Politics and the New World Order* sheds light on a history of the oil industry's grip on the world economy including it effects on international policy and conflicts. Our civilization is addicted to petroleum as junkies are addicted to drugs.

The Anthropocene Epoch: Scientists Declare Dawn of Human-influenced Age lists five evidences of the Anthropocene: 1) pushed extinction rates of animals and plants far above the long-term average; 2) increased the level of green house gas with fossil-fuel burning; 3) plastic pollution in waterways and oceans; 4) doubled the

nitrogen and phosphorous in soils with fertilizer use; 5) left a permanent layer (black carbon from fossil-fuel burning) of airborne particulates in sediment and glacial ice. It is called the “great acceleration” of human impacts on the planet, most notably climate change. *Losing Earth: the Decade We Almost Stopped Climate Change* warns that we risk the collapse of our civilization if we don’t act to reduce emissions. Based on current emissions trends, two-degree warming which would result in the long-term disaster is the best-case scenario. Three-degree warming which would bring about the short-term disaster the loss of most coastal cities is the realistic minimum. Four-degree would lead to Europe in permanent drought and southwest of American largely uninhabitable. Five-degree warns of the end of human civilization. Seemingly, we are playing with fire. However, we fail to solve the problem together, because “human beings, whether in global organizations, democracies, industries, political parties or as individuals, are incapable of sacrificing present convenience to forestall a penalty imposed on future generations.”

Collapse, How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed reviews the causes of historical and pre-historical instances of societal collapse. Historically, those instances occurred in the context of relative isolation. However, what would happen in the context of globalization? Every society currently interacts with each other, and we encounter the common issues, such as climate change. It would not likely be just the collapse of an isolated society but our civilization. *Half-Earth, Our Planet’s fight for Life* proposes that half of the Earth’s land should be designated a human-free natural reserve to preserve biodiversity, which not only concerns the ecosystem, but also suggests the relationship between humans, land and other species.

III Landscape Painting

Since the time we have inhabited the earth, the bond between humans and land has been built. The landscape like the container witnesses and documents our past events. So “geography is as much as a history”. *Landscapes and Politics* represents an extremely wide-ranging and cross-disciplinary set of studies of landscape. It describes that landscape on the one hand is “a referral to the eye... is understood as the outcome of a pictorial, representational practice which ideologically stages its referent (nature, land, and estate, etc.) in relation to a viewing subject.” And on the other hand, “there is ‘landscape’ as used in a more general way to describe the socio-cultural molding of the physical environment by collectives and individuals.” Therefore, the definition of landscape is that “a composition of man-made or man-modified spaces to serve as infrastructure or background for our collective existence.” The definition emphasizes the human’s impact on the Earth, and reveals the relationship between human and land, which implies that Anthropocene appears to be an inevitable outcome.

Landscape painting is the one of the most traditional art forms to convey these kinds of relationships (emotion, attitude, experience, memory, and identity, etc.) between

mankind and land, civilization and nature. As Anselm Kiefer said “the land is the site of history...making and looking at painting with its complex traditions is one place where we engage with the land”, and Vija Celmins wrote “landscape painters do not create real spaces as architects do, and they stage an experience of space that invites the viewers to enact”, landscape painting bonds that connection. Therefore, the medium of my work is landscape painting and it is named *Spoiled Landscapes*.

In my research, first of all, I focus on seventeenth century Dutch landscape painting, because it flourished as an independent genre, as well as occupied a unique place in the history of landscape painting. For aesthetic quality, the paintings exhibit a strong interest in the depiction of lighting effect, and shifted the traditionally high horizon down below the horizontal picture axis. On the other hand, they were not only works of art, but also documentation of Holland’s eventful history, for example, independence against Spain, economic upswing and religious and political freedom, preeminence as a sea and trading power. The urbanization of European society especially in the province of Holland where as much as 70 percent of the population lived in cities and towns was the most fundamental factor that gave rise to secular subjects in art. Patrons and middle classes developed an interest in works of art that reflected their daily lives and values. The genre of landscape represents human’s response to land implying a sort of self-identity.

Second, Victorian landscape is regarded as a major British contribution to the arts. The Victorian period is also the time that the industrial revolution occurred. Under the effect of geology and meteorology and the taste for popular science, artists took on scientific overtones in their paintings. Photography was applied in the process of painting, though it was emphatically not art in the context of criticism of the traditional arts. The countryside was changing with agriculture growing more mechanized and industrialization encroaching on the land. However, most paintings that depicted the rural English suggested change and modernization were avoided. And though they were often beautiful, they lack of the force of truth and reality. On the other hand, it suggests that the painters tended to create the images of “a timeless and idyllic rural English”, which also reveals a kind of attitude about the civilization and nature.

Third, the nineteenth century American landscape painting forged and expressed American national and cultural identity—the sublime in the new world and territorial expansion. Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran were given the opportunity to explore new territory for their subject matter when the American government sent expeditions to the Far West to survey the vast territories. Bierstadt mainly travelled through the Rocky Mountains areas, and Moran went to the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone and Colorado. To some extent, their paintings played a role in the historical events advertising for the exploration and development of the west. For example, Moran’s painting was bought by the Congress as the evidence to debate the formation of the first National Park at Yellowstone. Also the paintings were a part of an advertising

campaign by the railroad companies for building links across the continent.

Thomas Cole's landscape paintings show the epic of transformation: the wildness was no longer completely untouched implying a confrontation between mankind and the environment. *The Oxbow* reveals the paradoxes of landscape painting the celebration of the beauty of the wildness at the time of its historical transformation—land reclamation. The five large historical landscape paintings *The Course of Empire* represent the rise and fall of a civilization. From the savage state, cultivated country, gorgeous city, to war and ruins, all those scenes are to have the same location. The land witnesses the vicissitude of our history. Interestingly, the former one suggests the modification of human, while the latter implies the reclamation of nature.

IV Methodology

This series of paintings is the continuation of the former one *Ruins* inspired by industrial remains. In the *Ruins* series, industrialization represents construction and the progress of technology. Ironically, the two World Wars were enabled by the technological advances of the industrial revolution. Our world was rebuilt from the war ruins, but the wars never ceased to exist. In addition, industrialization brings about severe environmental disruption, including climate change, declining biodiversity, and pollution. Hence, industrialization is the beginning that resulted in the change. This series intends to specify the change based on resources: petroleum and mining.

There are two directions in my text research: 1) Anthropocene and climate change, 2) the history of landscape painting. The relationships between human and land bridge these two directions. In the research of artists, I focus on Ruisdael, Constable, Turner, Corot, Courbet, Moran, Bierstadt, Cole, Auerbach, and Burtynsky. Ruisdael, Constable, and Turner's works illustrate luminosity and chiaroscuro in landscape painting. Corot, Courbet, and Auerbach's works are more about brush stroke and mark making. American landscape paintings show me "aesthetic of the sublime" and depiction of details. Water color landscape sketches and composition and color studies help me to translate the ideas from text research to images. Although the studies are not necessary similar to the final drafts, it is the process to shift the conceptual information into the visual language.

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Illustrations

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#2 the color study of Spoiled Landscapes--Petroleum (watercolor on paper)



#3 the final draft of Spoiled Landscapes--Petroleum (oil on canvas)



#4 the composition study of Spoiled Landscapes--Mining (ink on paper)



#5 the composition study of Spoiled Landscapes--Mining (ink on paper)



#6 the composition study of Spoiled Landscapes--Mining (ink on paper)



#7 the composition study of Spoiled Landscapes--Mining (ink on paper)



#8 the composition study of Spoiled Landscapes--Mining (ink on paper)



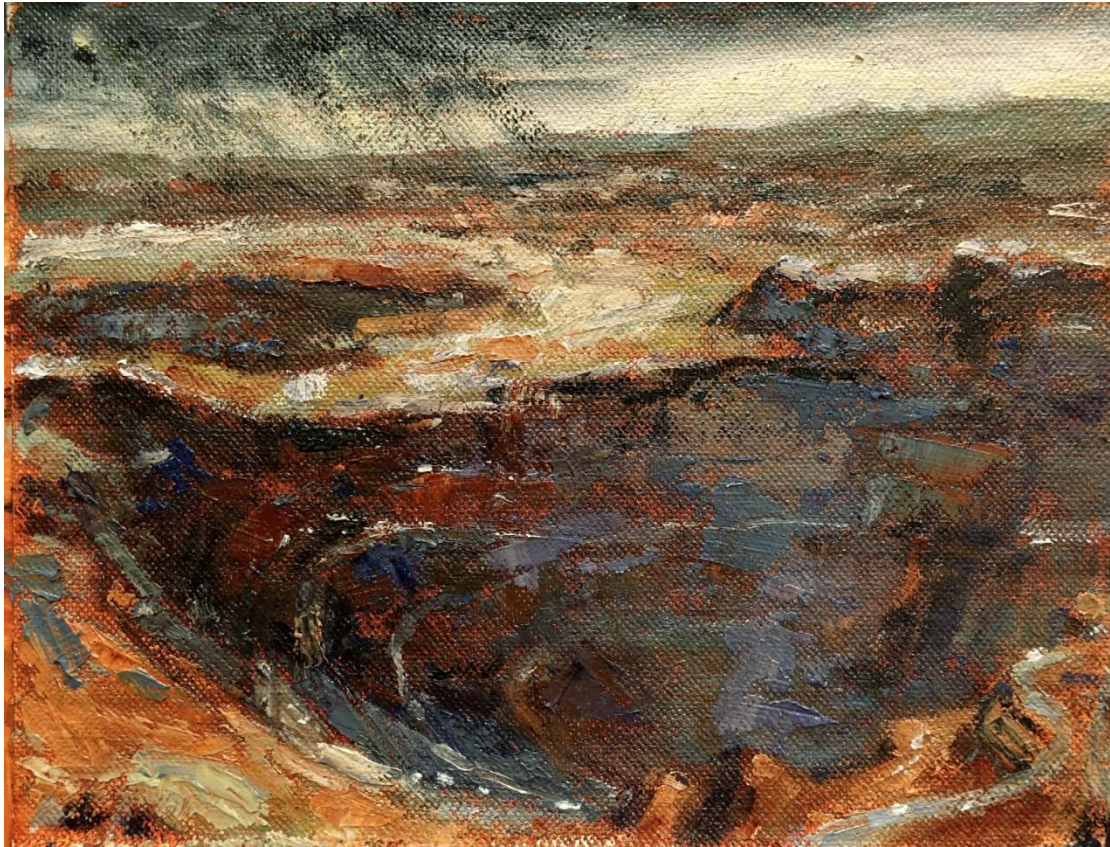
#9 the composition study of Spoiled Landscapes--Mining (ink on paper)



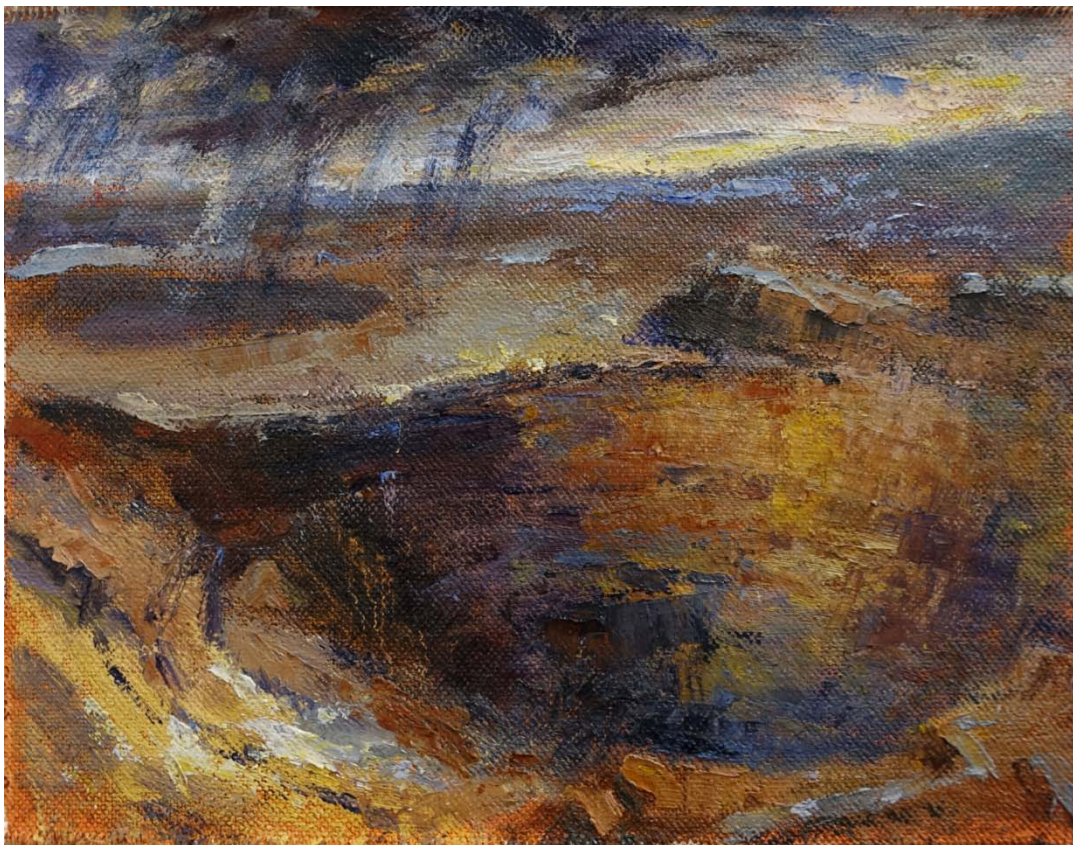
#10 the color study of Spoiled Landscapes--Mining (oil on canvas)



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#12 the color study of Spoiled Landscapes--Mining (oil on canvas)



#13 the final draft of Spoiled Landscapes--Mining (oil on canvas)



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#15 the composition study of Spoiled Landscapes--Ocean (ink on paper)



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