

THESIS

AGENCY OF ECOLOGICAL LANDSCAPES THROUGH PAINTINGS
OF THE AMERICAN WEST

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ABSTRACT

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The lineage of American landscape paintings invokes a hierarchical structure cresting with humankind and the divine. This evokes problematic relational dynamics between humanity and the natural world which is exacerbated by Anthropocentric activity. Traditionally, early western landscape artists illustrated nature as a sublime force displayed as vast expanses of “untamed” wilderness, ethereal mountain peaks, fertile valleys, and steaming brooks. Alongside colonial settlements, paintings effectively lured eager European Americans to claim land through western expansion. To promote mutualistic bonds between humans and nature and contribute towards a new decolonial ecology, my thesis instills agency to natural landscapes by exploring a synthesis between generational historicity to place, non-anthropocentric phenomenology through kinship, and a painting process enriched by the practice of ultra distance trail running. More specifically, my paintings recognize the innate agency of trees, mountains, and glaciers through non-human centric perspectives across time scales, spatial dimensions, and non-observable light wave spectrums. This invites observers to identify a kinship with nature from non-anthropocentric grounding.

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INTRODUCTION

Through the artistic representation of western landscapes, complex social, political, environmental, and economic intention necessitates a perspective based on inter-relational contexts between artists, viewers, and non-human nature. By layering contextual dimensions through painting, my process and visual aesthetic necessitates a critical engagement with the land itself. I engage in ultra distance running as a methodological process to string spatiality, time, and rhythm to form a transmutable expression of landscape. Translating environmental stimuli encountered through moving swiftly in naturalistic spaces regulates the pulse-like pressure of my brush on canvas. Familiarity of environmental features, textures, and temperatures all engage bodily senses, delivering a kinesthetic response to place. The interaction between oil painting, trail running, and the environment coagulates into a concoction that supports authentic interaction between process and naturalistic subject matter. Recognizing the manifestation of innate agency of non-human organisms and landscapes informs my sensibilities of the subject.

My process diverges from the dominant norms of how landscapes in the Western United States have been traditionally represented through paintings. Historical western landscape paintings will always be in conversation with colonial activities initiated by western expansion and resulting in ecological fractures. Those affected by western expansion, both human and non-human inhabitants, bear witness to dramatic alterations of land through industrial mining, railroad, and civic developments, which were hurriedly established in less than a century. The *colonial gaze* exhibited paintings as advertisements and played a role in orchestrating the mass emigration of European settlers from the eastern United States to the western United States based

on a promise of obtaining land and capital.¹ Paintings which display compositional elements associated with the *colonial gaze* are often justified by either their *sublimity* or as historical documentation of the land and its inhabitants. At times, identifying elements associated with the colonial gaze can seem allusive and even coincidental to cynics on the topic. These elements break free from depicting reality and drift away from pure documentation. While the artists created the imagery, it is important to note that examples of the colonial gaze exist on a sliding scale with both positive and negative effects. It was not just painters under the gaze's spotlight, but also the commissioners who called for idyllic and often invented representations of landscape posing as reality. These acted as tinder for western expansion's problematic coupling to Manifest Destiny. Alongside the colonial gaze, western expansion's dominance in the mid-1800s initiated anthropogenic degradation, affecting both human and non-human agents.

Through painting, it is my aim to evoke a greater sense of *agency* to ecological entities and combat the dominant colonial perceptions through decolonial interpretations of landscape painting. Whether reconceptualizing temporal scales of mountain imagery to painting trees, I attempt to re-frame the subjects in a manner that signifies agential realities beyond traditional representation. By exploring emergent scientific phenomena relating to matter, the study of organizational structures varying from molecular to mountain scales challenges conventional material reality. Further, I link the materiality of paint and color choices with the experiential value of landscape to Karen Barad's *agential realism*, where Barad explores the entangled nature

¹ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Landscape and Power* (University of Chicago Press, 1994.), 2.

between materialization, time, and space.² Importantly, this assists the depictions of beyond-human time scales such as geologic epochs, especially pertinent in my mountain paintings.

While acknowledging the historical contexts of the American west, my thesis paintings embrace the experiential process of ultra trail running as a means of interpreting landscape through various scales associated with vertical gain, distance traveled, and surface tactility (e.g., roots, muds, scree). The connectivity of ultra-distance trail running with landscape painting offers a unique relationship that is symbolic and ritualistic in nature. Experiencing the process of painting through extended temporal and spatial functions not only complements landscape as a subject, but also aids phenomenological themes expressed in my work. Tangentially, moving swiftly through the Colorado alpine is a way of connecting my family's history working in the coal and silver mines at the turn of the 19th century. Their empirical stories offer an unmediated perspective paralleling western mythologies and provide a first-hand experience of a brick laying foundation underpinned by early colonial structures. Through decolonial considerations with the help of authors such as Malcom Ferdinand in "Decolonial Ecology," I argue that through my process, I express visual elements speaking to interwoven relationships between humans and ecological landscapes, which include mountains and forests.³

² Karen, Barad. "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," Article, Vol. 28, No. 3, *Gender and Science: New Issues* (Spring 2003), 815

³ Malcom Ferdinand, *Decolonial Ecology: Thinking from the Caribbean World*, Polity Press, 2022.

THE VEIL OF PROGRESS: THE COLONIAL LENS IN WESTERN LANDSCAPE

“Man is so fortunate to dwell in this American Garden of Eden.”⁴

In 1859, Frederick Lander traveled west to the Wyoming Territory alongside the imminently famous Albert Bierstadt, Francis Seth Frost (photographer and painter), and others in what is known as the Lander Expedition.⁵ As Bierstadt traveled, he completed small paintings and sketches, which were later used to produce his master works at his New York City studio.⁶ During this time, the Wyoming Territory was home to complex ecological networks exhibiting a diverse array of flora and fauna. Bierstadt’s reference to the “American Garden of Eden” evokes connotations to Adam and Eve’s incapacity to live without temptation and more importantly, implies a general absence of humanity.⁷ Moreover, Eve is represented as a token figure of sin.⁸ Regarding Eden, Rebecca Solnit presents the embedded layers associated with the garden as a static landscape. “Eden is a place in which nothing is supposed to change, a steady-state ecosystem without history. It is both the place where nothing is lost or absent and the place where the primary loss that launches all stories takes place.”⁹ However, the reality of the west, and more specifically the Wyoming Territory, is that humans have existed there for millennia.¹⁰ The territory explored by Bierstadt was home to complex socio-political relations between the Nunt'zi (Ute), Tsistsistas (Cheyenne), Hinono'eino' (Arapahoe), and Newe (Shoshone) peoples.

⁴ “Laramie Peak”. Buffalo AKG Art Museum, buffaloakg.org/artworks/19763-laramie-peak. 2024.

⁵ Alan Fraser, Houston. Jourdan Moore, “The 1859 Lander Expedition Revisited: Worthy Relics Tell New Tales of a Wind River Wagon Road,” mhs.mt.gov/education/docs/CirGuides/Jackson-Yellowstone-1999.pdf. 2024. 52.

⁶ Albert Bierstadt. “Albert Bierstadt: The Rocky Mountains, Lander’s Peak: American.” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 1 Jan. 1863, www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/10154.

⁷ Rebecca Solnit, *As Eve Said to the Serpent: On Landscape, Gender, and Art*, University of Georgia Press, 2003.

⁸ The National Gallery, *Adam and Eve. Glossary*, National Gallery, London, www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/glossary/adam-and-eve. 26 Feb. 2024.

⁹ Solnit. *As Eve Said*. 2.

¹⁰ Alan Houston, “The 1859 Lander,” 52.

The Lander Expedition encountered many Indigenous peoples throughout their travels, including people of the Shoshone tribe located in and around the Wind River Range of Wyoming. Francis Seth Frost, a fellow Lander Expedition painter to Bierstadt, depicted roughly eight hundred friendly Shoshones being led by Chief Washakie in the painting *Indian Procession* of 1859.¹¹ Bierstadt's statement regarding the Garden of Eden at the top of this chapter contradicts this image of the Western Frontier and instead denotes an American genesis story, erasing prior Indigenous history and dehumanizing them in the process by suggesting they did not exist in God's image. It is easy to dismiss Bierstadt's statement as insignificant; yet similarly to subverted messaging in his paintings, this statement is wrought with connotations linked to racial hierarchies and divisions between nature and humans. Ultimately, "the American Garden of Eden" predicated large scale injustices on both land and humans on the Western Frontier.

Despite these looming injustices, the romantic mythologies of the west began to proliferate throughout European American settlements. Idyllic scenes composed mythical representations of mountains, streams, and forests, often displaying elements linked to the sublime and exuding characteristics of romanticism. The painting *Lander's Peak* by Albert Bierstadt is a visually stunning piece with immaculate detail (Fig. 1). Yet, this example exposes an aura of fiction often associated with naturalistic realism. Placing the painting side by side with a photographic image of Lander Peak in Wyoming, the exaggerated form and prominence of the mountains exhibited in Bierstadt's painting displays little resemblance to the photographic documentation of the area (Fig. 2). On closer inspection, it is evident Bierstadt used significant artistic license to incorporate additional heightened ridgelines tiering in a crescendo-like effect. Although immaculately rendered, Bierstadt's painting expresses an over-romanticized visual

¹¹ Alan Houston, "The 1859 Lander", 50.

language (e.g., cloud formations, atmospheric perspective, mountain prominence). Based on my opinion, *Lander's Peak* exemplifies precision and control of the brush. It also combines stylistic elements of romanticism grounding its socio-political acceptance and winning over much of its viewership. However, prestigious museums recognize the complicated nature of this painting in the greater historical context. Regarding *Lander's Peak*, the Metropolitan Museum of Art provides a column which states, "Painted in New York after Bierstadt's return from these travels [Lander Expedition], this work advertised the landscape as a frontier destined to be claimed by White settlers, according to the doctrine of Manifest Destiny."¹² This statement replaces the painting's legacy of prestige with queries, offering a stark yet valid assertion considering the repercussions of Manifest Destiny (e.g., loss of life, environmental degradation).

When landscape is used in the form of a verb, *to landscape* denotes alteration of the land to make it more attractive.¹³ Fundamentally, landscape painting is not immune to the act of alteration or to making the land look "more attractive". Several noteworthy paintings, including *Lander's Peak*, *Among the Sierra Nevada*, *In the Sierras*, *Longs Peak*, and more, could be considered a precursor to Jean Baudrillard's concept of the *simulacra*, which states that a subject in reality is replaced with close representations that either simulates or mimics, evoking illusions of reality.¹⁴ Landscapists, including Bierstadt, use staffage figures and/or props to aid a thematic narrative and set a scene, such as the inclusion of fauna in the works by Bierstadt (Fig. 3). In other circumstances, incorporation of dead foliage in the foreground denotes both a need for farmers to tend to the land as well as the symbolic passing of an era.¹⁵

¹²Albert Bierstadt. "Albert Bierstadt: The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak: American." The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1 Jan. 1863, www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/10154.

¹³ WJ. T. Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*, Univ. of Chicago Press, 2009.

¹⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994.

¹⁵ Albert Boime, *The Magisterial Gaze*, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991. 08.

Among the vast array of visual perspective devices, *the godhead* sits at the pinnacle for its influence on visual hierarchies. References to the godhead or divinity are often displayed from above, an onlooking presence watching over God's earthly creations and most importantly, those in his image. For the Protestant American majority, those in God's image represent European settlers, who tended to move west during the second half of the 19th century. It is reasonable to infer that luminous qualities and otherworldly rays of light descending from the heavens act as a surrogate for God's presence. As Biome writes, "The privileged nineteenth-century American's experience of the sublime in the landscape occurred on the heights.... This Olympian bearing metonymically embraced past, present, and future, synchronically plotting the course of empire."¹⁶ Biome's *Magisterial Gaze* analyzes an elevated perspective from the viewer's vantage point, placing him in the position of God. In the case of Albert Bierstadt's *Longs Peak*, the mountain stretches towards the heavens in an unyielding fashion while luminosity radiates on Mount Meeker and Longs Peak (Neníisótoyóú'u: Arapahoe)¹⁷ with an essence of divine intervention gracing the land. Contextually, *Longs Peak* was commissioned by Irish nobility Lord Dunraven to depict his favorite hunting ground. Dunraven was known for commandeering thousands of acres of land around Estes Park in the 1870's, revealing his complex motivations behind the artwork.¹⁸

While the colonial gaze propagates hierarchical structures between human and non-human conceptions, my paintings of "tree portraits" aim to democratize the agency of trees by reversing roles in the traditional hierarchical conceptions of portraiture. My Tree Portraits 1 and

¹⁶ Biome, *The Magisterial Gaze*, 01.

¹⁷ Maris Fessenden. "This Account Is Reclaiming the Indigenous Names for Mountains One Geotag at a Time.", Smithsonian Institution, 22 Feb. 2018, www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/social-media-can-let-people-know-about-mountains-indigenous-names.

¹⁸ "Estes Park, Longs Peak." *Estes Park, Longs Peak*, Denver Art Museum, 1 Jan. 1877, www.denverartmuseum.org/en/object/35. 2008.

2 (Fig. 5 and 6) depict the non-human in a typically human-centered compositional structure. More specifically, each portrait resembles 17th century aesthetic qualities depicted by painters such as Rembrandt, Vermeer, and more. However instead, I substitute trees in the frame. This was executed by isolating the subject using synthetic lighting to illuminate the tree's trunk, which is encapsulated by a dark background. Traditionally perceived as a method to immortalize a person's status in society, the tree's portrait succeeds the position of the human in this case. This concept was seeded by the visual experience of a headlamp passing tree trunks while trail running at night and viewing the Ute Council Tree in Delta, Colorado. This looming cottonwood, which is now truncated, was a gathering place for the Utes up until their expulsion by the U.S. government in 1881.¹⁹

To address the notion of the colonial gaze, I painted *Agent of the Pastoral* (Fig. 7). This piece depicts tree bark fighting the static representation by using an impasto technique, which exhibits thick tree-bark laden over an undercoat of energetic cadmium red. In combination with the physical paint's role in formulating underlying themes, my painting process is informed by connotations of cultural significance and modern scientific understanding in forest ecology. The ability for a tree to act in cooperation with other trees, including interspecies mutualism, gives rise to agential capacity that recalibrates the hierarchical status of ecological networks. Suzanne Simard, a renowned scientist and Professor of Forest Ecology writes, "If the mycorrhizal network is a facsimile of a neural network, the molecules moving among trees were like neurotransmitters. The signals between the trees could be as sharp as the electrochemical

¹⁹ Bruce Caughey, Doug Whitehead. "BEST Celebration of Ute Culture—Council Tree Pow Wow and Cultural Festival (Delta) 191." In *Colorado's Best*. United States: Fulcrum Publishing, 2000.

impulses between neurons, the brain chemistry that allows us to think and communicate.”²⁰

Simard’s findings also postulate suggestive new visual interpretations where subtle abstractions are necessary to convey non-observable activity of trees, particularly that which humans cannot readily see. While the colonial past remains, my paintings of trees contribute alongside Simard’s scientific findings to renew agency to non-human organisms and aid the viewer’s transition from problematic colonial structures to new decolonial agendas.

²⁰ Suzanne Simard, *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest*. New York: Knopf, 2021, 228.

EMERGENCE OF A DECOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE

I vividly remember moments my grandfather and I spent in his dark basement pool room. As he firmly gripped his pool cue, his hand exposed hearty turquoise rings and boney knuckles. We played games of pool next to his gun rack with a Bowie knife on the wall: an embodiment of the contemporary western aesthetic. As a third-generation Coloradan, my grandfather's memories would captivate me with mythical stories of the west. His grandfather immigrated to Colorado from Castelletto Ticino, Italy in 1887 and managed a saloon in Central City which was considered cowboy country at the time. I unearthed an article written in the Louisville Times (CO), a story which exposed a side of the west he almost certainly intended to conceal from my young ears. This article presents a story rooted in greed, forced labor of mining operations, ecological degradation, and rebellion, which ultimately progressed to a gunfight in 1914 between coal miners (including my great-grandfather) and the national guard resulting in the death of one miner and multiple wounded.²¹ It was estimated that 18,000 to 20,000 rounds of ammunition were fired for 14 hours between the two sides.²² This was one small theater of the Colorado Coal Wars. In contrast to this reality, romantic conceptions in contemporary western culture often eclipse the arduous circumstances of iniquity and early natural resource conflicts of the western frontier.

Capital investments of the late 19th century enacted a blitzkrieg-like expansion that resulted in the degradation of ecosystems and endangering animal species, while contributing to

²¹ John Franchini, "The (Franchini) Family of Louisville Colorado," Louisville Historical Commission and Society. Issue no. 10. March 1990.

²² Doug Pike, "Driving Tour to Mark 100th Anniversary of Louisville's Hecla Mine Conflict." *Colorado Hometown Weekly*, Colorado Hometown Weekly, 18 Apr. 2014, www.coloradohometownweekly.com/2014/04/18/driving-tour-to-mark-100th-anniversary-of-louisvilles-hecla-mine-conflict/.

the removal of indigenous people in the matter of a century. In *Decolonial Ecology*, Malcom Ferdinand discusses the human, ecological, and non-human (e.g., insects, animals) effects of colonial structures. In his symbolic first chapter *The Modern Tempest*, he writes,

“Swirling winds wrap around the destruction of the Earth’s ecosystems, the enslavement of non-humans, as well as wars, social inequality, racial discrimination, and the domination of women. The sixth mass extinction of species is underway, chemical pollution is percolating into aquifers and umbilical cords, climate change is accelerating, and global justice remains ubiquitous.”²³

The Shakespearian reference assesses the symbolic nature between *The Tempest* and the results of colonial activity in the Americas.²⁴ The parallel symbolism rings eerily true and signals for actionable steps to rewrite what feels like a volatile future. The choice of decolonial rather than post-colonial implies that the structures that enable colonial activity to flourish are disassembled to heal racial and non-human hierarchies.

Ferdinand provides a concept known as the *Double Fracture*, a tiered approach to understanding relational hierarchies. The double fracture consists of both a colonial and environmental fracture. Both models express the subjugation of indigenous peoples, ecosystems, and animals while simultaneously valorizing the white male. Ferdinand presents this intersection to environmentalism in response to popular technocratic panaceas. Similarly, Christian Dorninger’s theory of *Ecological Unequal Exchange* as well as Carl Marx’s *Global Metabolic Rift* mark turning points as colonial (and imperial) powers began prioritizing capital growth over sustainable natural resource management. In the case of the Metabolic Rift, the metabolic rate of cash crop agriculture exceeded the metabolic capacity for ecosystems to replenish themselves.²⁵

²³ Malcom Ferdinand. *Decolonial Ecology: Thinking from the Caribbean World*. Polity Press, 2022. 02.

²⁴ Ferdinand, *Decolonial Ecology*, 26.

²⁵ John Bellamy Foster, “Marx’s Theory of Metabolic Rift: Classical Foundations for Environmental Sociology,” *American Journal of Sociology* 105, no. 2 (1999): 366–405. <https://doi.org/10.1086/210315>.

Tangentially, Ferdinand's double fracture encompasses a visual representation of stratified hierarchies which are essential to employing methods of decolonial solutions for the future.²⁶

The role of painting during colonial expansion is entangled with national identity and pride. Paintings propagating expansionism utilized the colonial gaze as an artifice. In some cases, questioning the ethical nature of early western paintings is perceived as unpatriotic; however, the inequities discussed in Ferdinand's *Double Fracture* reinforce its pertinence. Both the environmental and colonial fractures emanate through the landscape. Personally, I have witnessed unyielding urban sprawl on Colorado's Front Range expanding the domestication of the landscape. In contrast to colonial representations of landscape painting, Kent Monkman offers an edifying decolonial perspective weaving historical and cultural perspectives on colonial power.

Kent Monkman, a tribal member of the Fisher River Cree Nation, exquisitely subverts dominative colonial power through role reversal, as seen in the painting *Trappers of Men* (Fig. 8). A near identical rendition to Albert Bierstadt's *Among the Sierra Nevada*, this work seamlessly integrates indigenous figures in a precisely rendered mimetic approach while also embracing subtle increases in color saturation and intensity. Monkman's gender fluid alter ego Miss Chief Eagle Testickle appears as a revelatory figure in Monkman's re-envisioned depiction of Bierstadt's paintings. In prestigious museums such as the MET, Royal Ontario Museum, and more, his work de-centers the colonizer's historical perspective, as exemplified with the portrayal of Miss Chief as a "shape-shifting, time-travelling supernatural being."²⁷ Figures in the foreground embody various thematic representations, such as the incorporation of a cartographer

²⁶ Christian Dorninger, "Global Patterns of Ecologically Unequal Exchange: Implications for sustainability in the 21st century," *Ecological Economics*, Sept. 2020.

²⁷ "Biography." Kent Monkman, www.kentmonkman.com/biography. 28 Feb. 2024.

mapping the west, bare-chested men with cowboy hats exuding cliché western masculinity, and a painter fainting at the sight of Miss Chief.

A century after the era of Bierstadt, human-induced climate change looms in the consciousness of both young and old. The irrefutable evidence presented by the *International Panel of Climate Change Report in 2022* substantiates the climate crisis and its existential threats.²⁸ While many changes are being deployed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, small dose reductions have proved ineffective. One common measurement for human-induced climate has been the study of glacier mass, which I address through my thesis painting *Evanescence* (Fig. 9). This work depicts Arapahoe Glacier, which is near to my heart. South Boulder Peak, which overlooks the glacier, is a mountainous zone I have frequented throughout my life, along with previous generations of my family. Arapahoe Glacier has decreased by 52% of its mass since 1900 and about a tenth of a meter each year from 1960 to 2005.²⁹ As noted by Mike MacFerrin, a glaciologist at the University of Colorado Boulder, “the Arapaho Glacier has safely entered permanent ice field status”.³⁰ After taking a photo of the glacier during the summer of 2023 (Fig. 10), I unearthed a photo taken just over a century ago in 1919 (Fig. 11), almost to the day. Arapahoe Glacier noticeably receded even with above average snow totals during the winter of 2022-23. This recession becomes increasingly important when considering that it is a critical watershed source for Boulder County, which serves a population of over 300,000.³¹

²⁸ IPCC, 2022: Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [H.-O. Pörtner, D.C. Roberts, M. Tignor, E.S. Poloczanska, K. Mintenbeck, A. Alegría, M. Craig, S. Langsdorf, S. Löschke, V. Möller, A. Okem, B. Rama (eds.)]. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK and New York, NY, USA, 3056 pp., doi:10.1017/9781009325844.

²⁹ Quentin Septer. “Losing Arapaho.” *Earth Island Journal*, www.earthisland.org/journal/index.php/magazine/entry/losing-arapaho/#. 27 Feb. 2024.

³⁰ Septer. “Losing Arapaho.”

³¹ Sharon Collinge. “Boulder County’s Human Population Has Increased Nearly 600% in the Last 70 Years, with Implications for Watershed Health.” Center for Sustainable Landscapes and Communities, 8 Nov. 2020, cslc.colorado.edu/2020-trends/boulders-human-population-has-increased.

Evanescence (Fig. 9) depicts the widening recession between the glacial ice and the Silver Lake watershed below. The sediment, stones, and debris fill the liminal zone in between called the terminal moraine. Instead of portraying the dissolving body of Arapahoe Glacier, I depict and accentuate the growing gap. The paint on the canvas drips from the ice of the glacier at the top of the canvas, while the glacier melts precipitously into the alpine lake below, similarly to the notion of sand falling through an hourglass. A mixture of cadmium red and reclaimed iron violet (Gamblin) pigment was applied to the ice, representing the reddish pink hues commonly seen on receding glaciers. These hues are in fact algae cells which proliferate on the snow, acting as a sunscreen to protect the glacier from elevated levels of ultraviolet light.³² This symbiotic relationship acts as a survival mechanism for the glacier. Its 10,000-year existence exhibits astonishing adaptive qualities illuminating the collective agential capacities of the neighboring organisms. However, even with this miraculous effort, melting steadily continues. I utilized varied viscosity of paint depending on the segment and subject that I am depicting on the canvas. The glacier melt exhibits low viscosity, whereas the rocks and ice are applied with a cold wax medium to increase viscosity, while also adding textural capacity, volume, and increased opacity of the paint. Further, a green undercoat appears in more transparent layers, alluding to the possible connotation of rotting.

³² Ayesha Rascoe. "Why Snow Is Turning Pink at High Altitudes." NPR, NPR, 18 Dec. 2022, www.npr.org/2022/12/18/1143929924/why-snow-is-turning-pink-at-high-altitudes.

EXPERIENTIAL VALUE IN THE CONCEPTION OF LANDSCAPE

“Movement is the essence of life.”³³

Trail running seeded my conceptions of landscape as early as the age of six. At the time, I ran with my father before school while the sun crested the foothills. The world around us was serenely quiet, except for the metronomic sound of crunching gravel under our shoes. This period initiated my youthful propensity to draw depictions of mountains and trees, while today it fosters kinship with non-human nature. Trail running is central to my artistic process, providing my work with an open intelligibility or, as Heidegger notes, an *unverborgenheit* “unconcealedness” of the world.³⁴

More than two decades later, while 73 miles into my debut 100-mile trail race, I found myself running through high alpine forests being guided by the light of my headlamp. Gradually, the pain and stress induced on my body began to balance with the immense flood of sensory intake of environmental stimuli. Slivers of silver moonlight pulsed between trees while my peripheral gaze blurred, and my conscious thoughts drifted in a meditative trance. An aspen branch grazed my torso like a brush as I ran past, echoing through time as a moment encapsulated in refractions of light stored in the neurons of memory. Consequently, my paintings transmute the run as a holistic aesthetic experience, totalized by sensory, spatial, and temporal expansion. This suggests a subtle but essential sense of surrendering myself to the unknown complexity of landscape as well as the variability of scale within and through it.

³³ Bernd Heinrich, *Why We Run: A Natural History*, Harper Collins, 2009, 36.

³⁴ Martin Heidegger, and Joan Stambaugh, *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein Und Zeit*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996.

While acknowledging the unique bodily and sensory connection from extended running efforts, even shorter high-country pursuits in Colorado weave together signs of the past, observations of the present, and actionabilities in our future. The Arapahoe Glacier and other glaciers in Colorado express the effect of warmer temperatures in non-biased, empirical data with enough contraction to be visualized within a human lifetime. However, the notion of *time* in high mountain environments induces a relational discussion between the perceptual nature of human experience and the literal gravitational forces which bend space-time.³⁵ As humans get closer to a large mass or gain altitude via a prominent mountain, space-time accelerates due to general relativity. The marginal gains or losses of time are so sensitive that only an atomic clock can measure it, as detected by researchers such as Dr. Jun Ye of the University of Colorado Boulder and the JILA Atomic Clocks.³⁶ Even fractionally, this bending of space-time disrupts a Cartesian philosophy of centeredness due to the variability and lack of constants exuded by *natural laws*.³⁷ Time, mass, and scale are all relationally bound, accentuating the agency of mountains. While seemingly static from human perspectives, mountains continually move and evolve, as Stenneken writes,

“A mountain is just a slow wave.”³⁸

South Arapahoe peak crests high on the continental divide, connecting a chain of peaks linked by sawtooth ridge lines to a few alpine passes. The immense natural forces needed to erect South Arapahoe challenges scientific and imaginative capacities. The growth, maturity, and

³⁵ George C. McVittie, *General Relativity and Cosmology*. 2d ed.. University of Illinois Press Urbana, 1965, 2.

³⁶ “Jila Atomic Clocks Measure Einstein’s General Relativity at Millimeter Scale.” NIST, 12 May 2023, www.nist.gov/news-events/news/2022/02/jila-atomic-clocks-measure-einsteins-general-relativity-millimeter-scale.

³⁷ McDivity, *General Relativity*, 3.

³⁸ Judith Stenneken, “A Mountain Is Only a Slow Wave - Photographs (2016-23),” judithstenneken.com/projects/amioasw. Accessed 26 Feb. 2024.

degradation of a mountain spans geologic epochs. *Dilations and Pulses* (Fig. 12) puts forth a visual interpretation of these larger forces. Initially, I was influenced by Per Kirkeby, whose paintings reflect geological forces and exhibit a unique layering process that alludes to the melding of rock and mineral layers over time. “Trained as a geologist, Kirkeby understood the earth to be geologically unstable and continually moving between states of mineral complexity and processes of collapse.”³⁹ This complexity is exhibited in his work, *Geologische Nachrichten* (Geological Messages) from 1999 (Fig 13). *Dilations and Pulses* depicts the saddle of South Arapahoe Peak and utilizes layering in an impasto technique to effectively communicate brush strokes that evoke force through movement and incorporate texture. Through this, I allude to the material intra-actions through heat and compression of rocks.⁴⁰ The overlaying, glazing, and mixing of different pigments are tangential to geomorphic processes that express an amalgamation of elemental rock types into aggregated rock forms.

My exploration of mark making alludes to a stretched sense of temporality, rather than the static representations, as presented in *Dilations and Pulses*. With a generous application of oil paint whipped lightly with multiple colors, I pull or push the paint using a long palette knife creating multiple strands of color in a singular movement. This technique is exhibited most clearly along the ridgeline. The colors applied to the mountain exterior reflect the minerals within, which are often exposed to the surface as mountains shift, break down, and reform over time. In *Dilations and Pulses*, this minerality present in mountains is reflected through the mixture of cobalt, cerulean, and titanium white pigments on the canvas. In relation to the more

³⁹ Per Kirkeby, “Geological Messages: Paintings from 1965-2015” *Michael Werner Gallery*, Exhibition. 22 June through 1 September 2022. www.michaelwerner.com/exhibitions/per-kirkeby.

⁴⁰ Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity," 816.

technically rendered rock and delicately stratified colors in the sky, the ridgeline evokes movement of paint not conventionally seen in the literal representation, but rather a less humanly recognizable movement is exhibited. These stretched waves of color depict a longer temporal reference to convey the geomorphic movement of mountains over epoch scales. Time is most often referenced in relation to human experience. However, it is essential to acknowledge the material history of particles in the universe that distribute energetic matter by breathing life into mountains, trees, non-human animals, humans, and beyond.

While *Dilations and Pulses* exhibited the form of South Arapahoe peak, subtle abstraction is used to evoke a sense of movement accrued layering for textural and material functions. Through this, I intend to reduce the passivity often associated with mountains. When one witnesses a sped-up time lapse of glacial movement, such as the example of the European Space Agency's satellite imagery of Baltoro Glacier⁴¹, the glacier takes on a new capacity of movement in a river-like form, which is not present in a static photo. Similarly, mountains evoke the same aesthetic quality; however, the time scale stretches beyond humanity's current capacity to record, to my knowledge. While used in a different manner, the work *Abstraktes Bild (726)* (Fig. 14) by Gerhard Richter evokes a similar sensation yet is utilized across the whole surface of the canvas. The paint is squeezed and scraped across the surface using a combination of colors, evoking a sense of motion like a blurred image taken photographically from a fast-moving car. This evocation of movement distorts the subject, sometimes to the point where it becomes recognizable. However, it does not deter from the fact that it reflects something that exists.

⁴¹ "Timelapse from Space Reveals Glacier in Motion." ESA, www.esa.int/Applications/Observing_the_Earth/Timelapse_from_space_reveals_glacier_in_motion. Accessed 28 Feb. 2024.

Rather, the relational semiotics' existence is moving faster, or in the case *Dilations and Pulses* is slower than we can perceive on a human scale.

What is interesting is not only when these elemental materials combine in mountains, but also when they remain segregated. Rock veins branch internally throughout mountain structures. Veins are often comprised of more conductive minerals than surrounding aggregate. Heat pulses have been known to travel through veins in extended time frames. Hydrologic flows also pump water and distribute minerals through internal networks in mountains. Even gases release through surface vents in an exhaling manner (Fig. 15). Jane Bennet discusses vital materiality in *Vibrant Matter* as “lively and self-organizing, rather than as passive or mechanical.”⁴² Many may be vexed by the notion that we are made up of many of the same minerals and forms of matter that circulate through mountains, as well as what ends up in the paint on a canvas. In this case, agency attributed to matter is based in scale and ability to self-organize. These properties tug and pull between the relational semiotics attributed to constructivist realism perspective on phenomena versus metaphysics.⁴³

Through the process of my thesis development, I accumulated all the elevation profiles from my marathon distance to ultra marathon distance trail runs over the past decade. Grouping these elevation profiles uniformly enabled observation of the rhythmic nature of running in the mountains. The undulating rise and fall depict elevation changes over a specific duration of distance. This gave way to a melodic-like aesthetic mimicking the rhythmic nature of sheet music. These melodic interpretations seen as waves transcend many aspects of the subject matter I explore. In addition, they inform my practice itself. This is especially true in the comparison between reading a painting and reading music. On a neurological level, music can produce a

⁴² Jane Bennett. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010. vii.

⁴³ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 2.

pleasurable emotional resonance through the release of dopamine in various parts of the brain. Songs evoke predictable patterns and release dopamine through anticipatory emotions.⁴⁴ Whereas combining new sounds, beats, or melodies evokes a form of experiential learning and releases dopamine in another part of the brain.⁴⁵ Through anticipatory emotions and experiential learning, art expression offers a potent medley like music. Relationally, music and visual arts operate similarly with the exception that music evanesces once the performance, even if mechanically reproduced, is complete.

While producing a new painting, I often consider the elements which offer predictability through anticipatory emotions, simultaneously including subtle connotation towards abstraction and evoking experiential learning capacities. In *ReVista of the Diamond* (Fig. 16), I reveal a cornered section of the Diamond rather than the entire one-thousand-foot rock face on the fourteen-thousand-foot mountain, Longs Peak. Historically influential depictions, including Bierstadt's *Longs Peak*, often display the Diamond nestled in the distance, in which the rock face becomes swallowed by the surrounding sublimity. Instead, *ReVista of the Diamond* is framed to highlight a section of the wall that evokes dimension and power while simultaneously relinquishing the summit from the viewer. It is an attempt to recondition our sensibilities and re-conceptualize symbols linked to conquering the summit of any real or metaphorical mountain. Perspective is not based on the human gaze, nor does it imply a divine perspective. Rather, the spatial perspective is intentionally dislocated from the human perspective. Reflecting the strength and movement of the mountain, the ridgeline descends diagonally as vertical lines from the rock, which forcefully thrusts upwards.

⁴⁴ Valorie N. Salimpoor, "Anatomically Distinct Dopamine Release during Anticipation and Experience of Peak Emotion to Music," *Nature neuroscience* 14.2 (2011): 257–262.

⁴⁵ Salimpoor, "Anatomically Distinct," 257.

In addition to spatial perspective and time scales, I use color to evoke a non-anthropocentric grounding, purposely integrating new perceptions on landscape subjects. The pioneering abstract modernist Wassily Kandinsky searched for the sounds of colors. Finding resonances between pitch and tone that similarly reflect the intensity, saturation, or opacity of color, Kandinsky painted an inner world of human emotion through the experience of music.⁴⁶ Similarly, I communicate expression of color through geologic forces in mountains or nutrient movement in the trunk of a tree by low infrared imagery. This offers a scientifically guided approach to my application of color. In geomorphic studies on rock instability, geologists use infrared thermal imaging to determine zones exhibiting compression due to the pressure load forces. High pressure areas exhibited warmer temperatures due to increased frictional movement, whereas cooler areas were more stagnant. Similarly, low infrared photography offers subtle temperature differentiations of warmth that can be seen in a forest.⁴⁷ Warmth also indicates energy. The color pallet used on *ReVista of the Diamond* is loosened based on thermal imagery I encounter from referenced rock face data.⁴⁸

Mining for color combinations that represent something innate about a landscape, I remember holding my pet snake as a child and knowing that she became exceedingly active by the warmth of my skin. For snakes, sensing the world consists of, but is not limited to, feeling vibrations along their skin, using their tongue for smell, and achieving a great sensitivity to ultraviolet light for hunting in the dark.⁴⁹ Many animals and organisms sense the world very

⁴⁶ Renée B. Miller. "Wassily Kandinsky's Symphony of Colors." *Wassily Kandinsky's Symphony of Colors* | *Denver Art Museum*, 19 Mar. 2014, www.denverartmuseum.org/en/blog/wassily-kandinskys-symphony-colors.

⁴⁷ "Why Is That Forest Red and That Cloud Blue?" NASA, NASA, earthobservatory.nasa.gov/features/FalseColor. Accessed 26 Feb. 2024.

⁴⁸ Antoine Guerin, Michel Jaboyedoff, Brian D Collins, Marc-Henri Derron, Greg M Stock, Battista Matasci, Martin Boesiger, Caroline Lefeuvre, and Yury Y Podladchikov. "Detection of Rock Bridges by Infrared Thermal Imaging and Modeling." *Scientific reports* 9, no. 1 (2019): 7.

⁴⁹ Katie Pavid. "Study Sheds Light on Snake Vision." *Natural History Museum*, www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/news/2016/september/study-sheds-light-on-snake-vision.html. Accessed 26 Feb. 2024.

differently from us humans. Similarly, canines process UV light to be able to see in various light conditions, whereas comparatively, humans are unable to process UV light.⁵⁰ We can only postulate the many ways in which other organisms experience the world differently than humans. However, it seems that based on decolonial representation, non-anthropocentric color combinations fruitfully engage a multilateral perspective on color, albeit subtly at times. It is through my paintings *ReVista of the Diamond* and *Agent of the Pastoral* that I reflect color spectrums that are not in the “visible light” region of the electromagnetic wave spectrum, not visible to humans that is.

In the process of painting and experiential value as an artist, it is worth noting that a non-anthropocentric grounding may seem contradictory. The art cannot be separated from the artist. As a human, my artistic license influences and formulates the aesthetic I see on canvas, both consciously and unconsciously, and the aesthetic qualities are an amalgamation of observable and non-observable phenomena by the human eye. Yet the non-observable phenomena depicted in my paintings are based on unbiased scientific evidence such as geomorphic processes and light spectrums from non-human derivatives, as previously discussed. Intentionally diverging from the human perspective illuminates natural phenomena and agency, changing the relational kinship between human nature and non-human nature. As we progress through the 21st Century, ecological concerns necessitate new and diverse perspectives rather than ineffective models of current and historical structures.

⁵⁰ Science Mission Directorate, "Ultraviolet Waves" NASA Science. 2010. National Aeronautics and Space Administration. 2016. http://science.nasa.gov/ems/10_ultravioletwaves

CONCLUSION

“Planting nuts requires a vision for a future that goes beyond one’s mortal reach. If we envision ourselves as participants in the same grand, complex web of interactions as the forest, then planting acorns is like planting part of ourselves. The morality that comes from such a vision of ecosystem-as-life is a common thread that, if taught and encouraged, could unite all of mankind.”⁵¹

While the implications of highly romanticized paintings which proliferated throughout American galleries, museums, and aristocratic households during the era of Manifest Destiny cannot be quantified, the marketable ingredients exhibited in these paintings catered to the establishment of structures that valorize the white male more than all else, as depicted in the *Double Fracture* by Malcom Ferdinand.⁵² This orthodoxy in conjunction with Manifest Destiny, the Indian Removal Act of 1830, Brunot Agreement, and more were instrumental in commandeering land in the west. These implications are directly correlated to the American Genocide of indigenous peoples and the polarization of non-white racial classes. As a painter with multi-generational roots in the American West, it is my obligation to explore contextual significance of early American landscape painting. Whether from indigenous contentions, environmental degradation from rapid expansion, or socioeconomic inequity since the period of agrarian pre-capitalism, formal reflections of the past will affect my sensibilities moving forward in my studio practice. Disregarding this history contribute to the entrapment of the American “Historical Amnesia,”⁵³ which refers to the colonial violence targeting indigenous people during the 19th century and continues to emanate through society to this day.

⁵¹ Bernd Heinrich, *The Trees in My Forest*, Harper Collins, 1997.

⁵² Ferdinand, *Decolonial*, 5.

⁵³ Ferdinand, *Decolonial*, 60.

Contemporary landscape painting has a unique opportunity to engage viewers through a sense of kinship based on the rendering of the image, surface, and materiality of paint. This notion averts from cautionary tales depicting doom-and-gloom of environmental destruction, but rather focuses on relational growth between the subject in landscape. More specifically, fostering kinship through non-human nature complements the attribution of agential capacities. This can inflict a relational engagement altering one's sensibilities to the subject in paintings. Accessing non-human nature depends on the propensity for which urban development barricades humanity from stepping into local ecosystems, thus inhibiting opportunities for engagement and the fostering of kinship. De-constructing cartesian notions relating to the linearization of landscape has invigorated my personal sensibilities and allowed for interwoven connections to *place* in a combined human and ecological history. Objectively, the notion of centering evokes beneficial self-relation. Conversely, de-centering enables the extension from oneself, which in turn allows for *beyond-human* conceptions of the world to flourish. The blend of abstraction, layering, and associative color combinations push for a symbiotic blend between materiality, physical structure, and unseen phenomena.

The transmutable capacity between trail running and landscape painting is that both offer the possibility of being egalitarian in nature.⁵⁴ Both expose rationale that reflects inwardly to the depths of our primordial motivations. The acts of running and painting landscapes allude to a sense of participation in the natural world. Through running in forests and mountains, environmental stimuli continually inform the formulation of compositional elements in my paintings. This process lets me sense the rocks under my feet, temperature of the air, dynamic and spatial axes of perspective, while responding to sounds mediating emotionally driven

⁵⁴ Heinrich, *Why We Run*, 2009.

aesthetic resonances. Through this, I strive to extend the *self* outwardly to perceive and conceptualize non-human realities through kinship, rather than proliferating nature as *othered*. Fostering kinship and reflecting that kinship through experiential paintings builds upon a beautiful reciprocity in the phrases: to love something you must understand it; to understand something you must love it.

Ultimately, my paintings have undergone a metamorphosis resisting imposed hierarchical structures between human and non-human nature. Aesthetic qualities in my work oscillate between the familiar and abstraction. This fulfills qualities of recognizable forms with emergent scientific representations, from mycorrhizal networks to universal space-time dilations. Informed through multi-lateral approaches, I alter my sensibilities to subjects by investigating geologic, ecologic, and historical dimensions of landscape. These sensibilities are enriched by the accrued experiences of ultra trail running, fostering a complex bond with the landscape. To continually evolve, I reflect on the transmutability of Physicist G.C. McVittie who notes that while emerging theories in science often appear as revolutions, it is the “scientist’s philosophical prejudices,” not the discovery, that is being revolutionized.⁵⁵ The prospect of softening these prejudices should enliven new aesthetic perspectives in both the arts and sciences. In this regard, changing perspectives on decolonial structures, non-human agency, and kinship with nature are exhibited through my paintings, aided by a harmonizing process at the spatial-temporal interface between ultra trail running and landscape ecology.

⁵⁵ McVittie, *General Relativity and Cosmology*, 2



Figure 1. *Lander's Peak*, Albert Bierstadt, 73.5 x 120 in., 1863.



Figure 2. *Lander's Peak*, Wyoming.



Figure 3. *Among the Sierra Nevada, California*, Albert Bierstadt, Oil on Canvas, 72 x 120 in., 1868.



Figure 4. *The Oxbow*, Thomas Cole, 51.5 x 76 in., 1836.

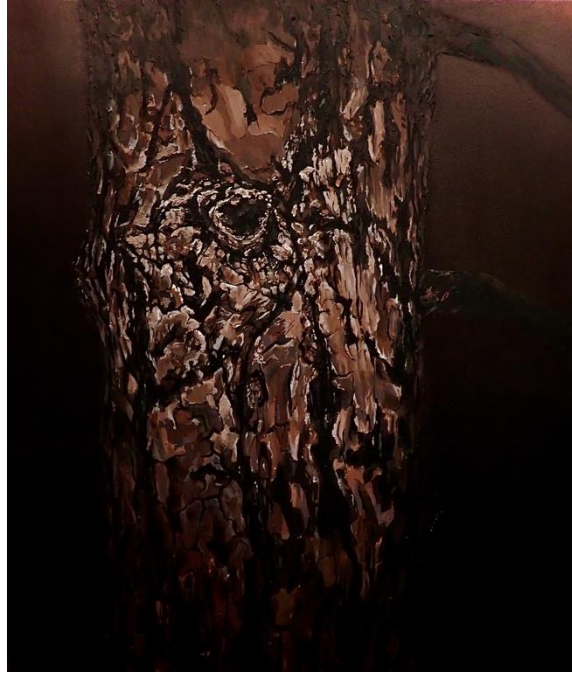


Figure. 5. *Tree Portrait #1*, Oil on Canvas, 30 x 32 in., 2022.



Figure 6. *Tree Portrait #2*, Oil on Canvas, 30 x 32 in., 2022.



Figure 7. *Agent of the Pastoral*, Oil on Canvas, 56 x 32 in., 2023.



Figure 8. *Trappers of Men*, Kent Monkman, Acrylic on Canvas, 262 x 415 cm, 2006.



Figure 9. *Evanescence (Arapahoe Glacier)*, Oil on Canvas, 78 x 68 in., 2024.

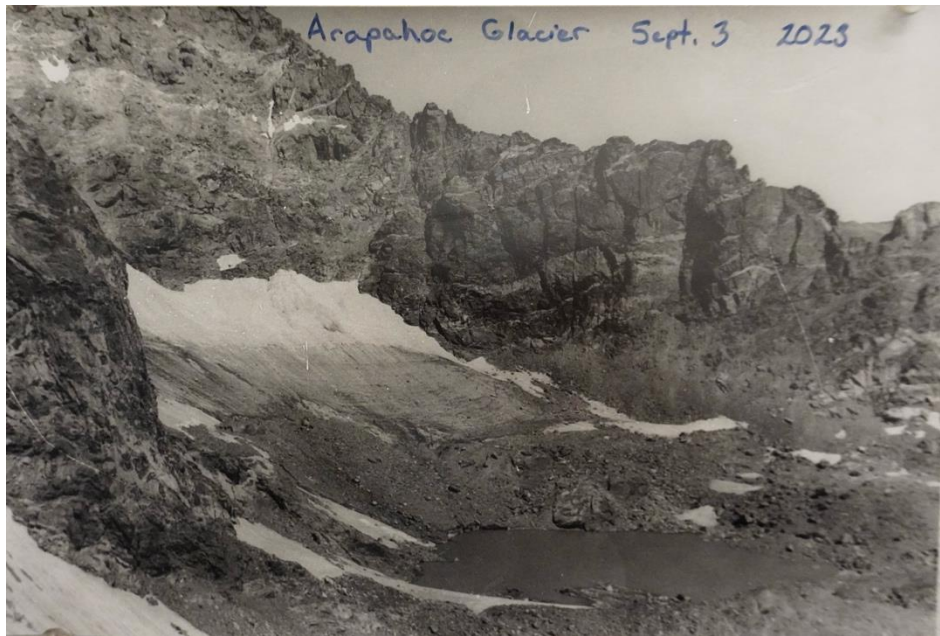


Figure 10. Arapahoe Glacier, Black and White 35mm film, Adam Hinkelman, Sept. 3, 2023.



Figure 11. Arapahoe Glacier, Photograph, Ernest Greenman, Aug. 31, 1919.



Figure 12. *Dilations and Pulses* (South Arapahoe Peak), Oil on Canvas, 66 x 68 in., 2024.

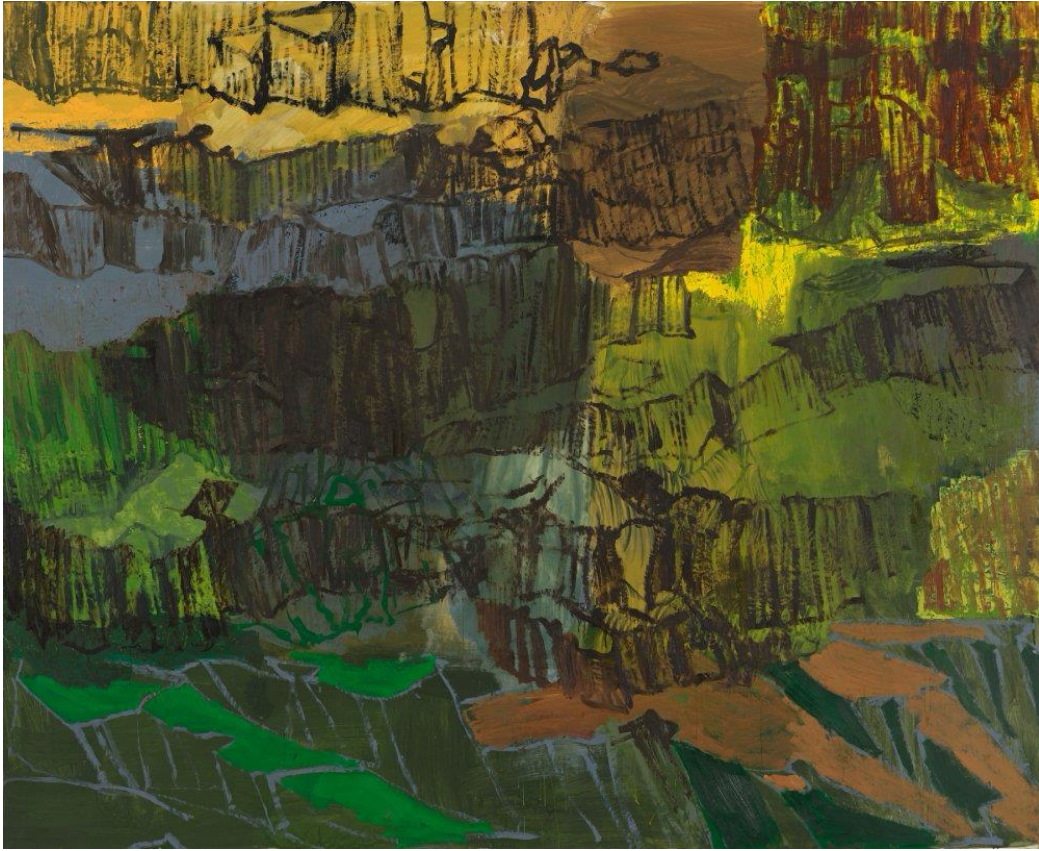


Figure 13. *Geologische Nachrichten (Geological Messages)*, Per Kirkeby, Oil on Canvas, 78 3/4 x 96 1/2 in., 1999.

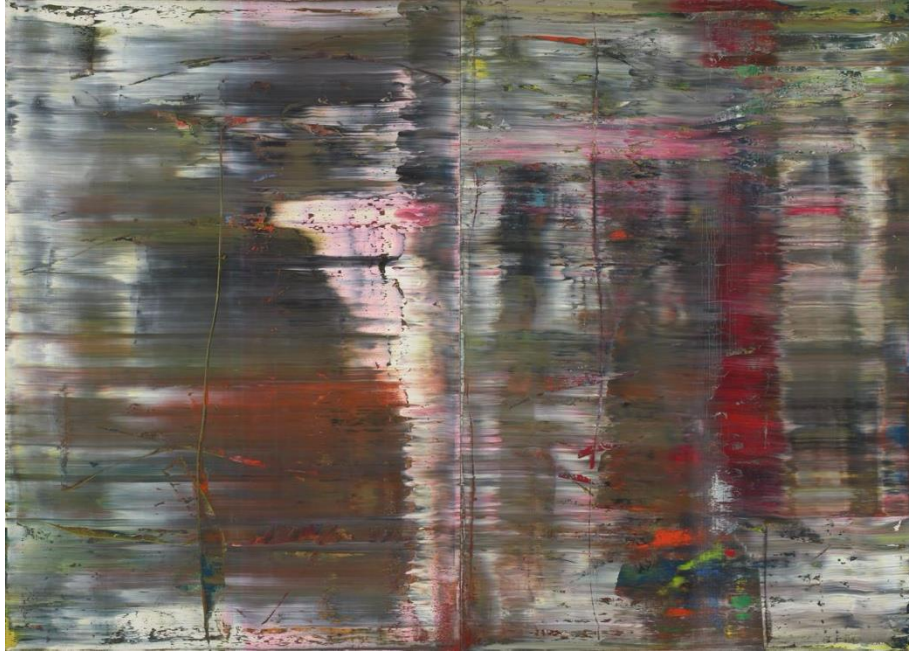


Figure 14. *Abstraktes Bild (726)*, Gerhard Richter, Oil on Canvas, 251 × 351 cm, 1991.

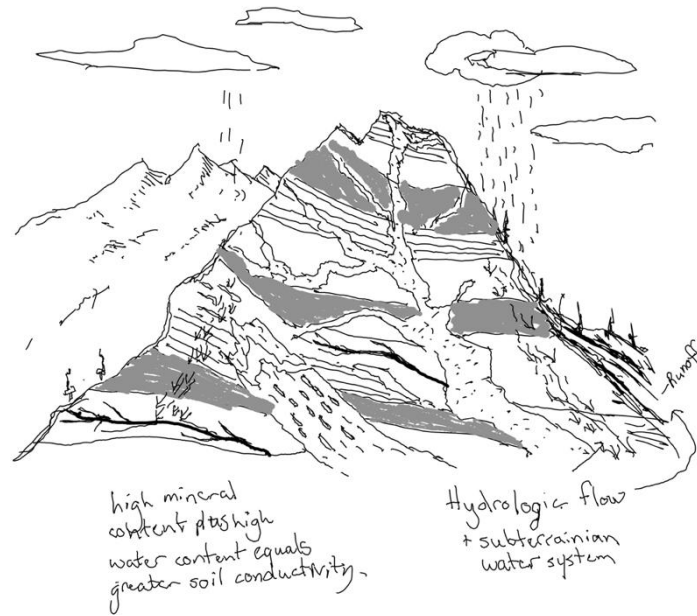


Figure 15. *Inter-workings of Mountains*, Adam Hinkelman, Digital sketch, 2022.

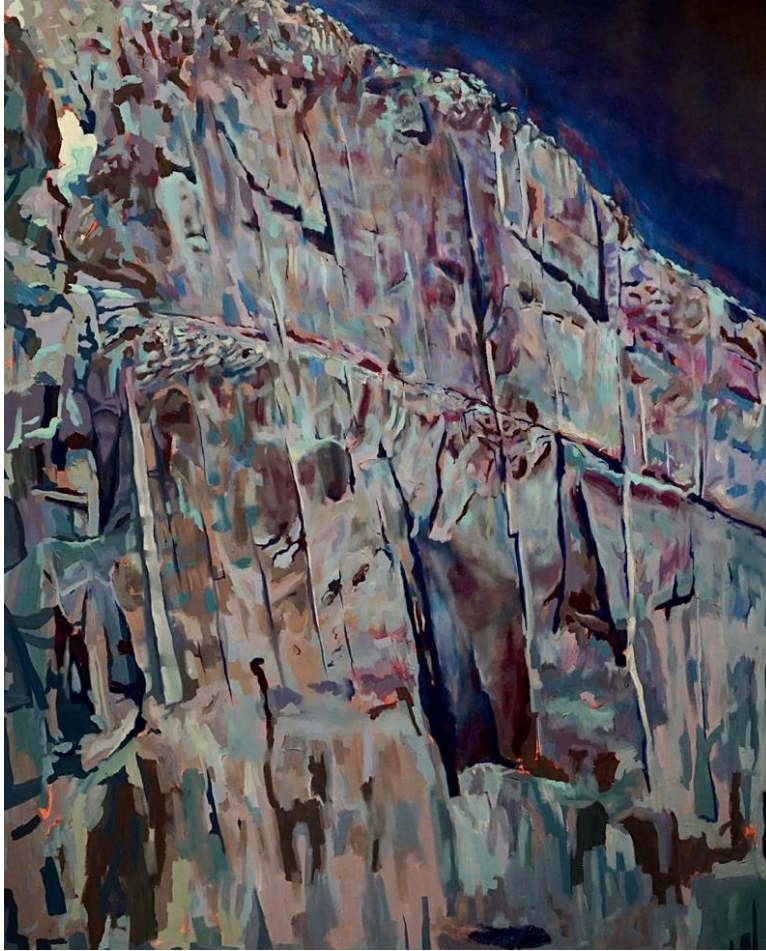


Figure 16. *ReVista of the Diamond* (Longs Peak Diamond), Oil on Canvas, 78 x 66 in., 2023.

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