



IN THE LIGHT

IN THE LIGHT

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by

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ABSTRACT

In the Light is a painted observation of our disconnection with the natural environment and how my own reconnection with nature has helped me sort out life's most difficult questions and challenges.

In developing a visual language to express these ideas, I have called on my previous experience in scenic painting, cinema, philosophy, and other art movements to propel my landscape paintings into what I feel is a current day idiom.

I offer this work as a hope, sharing my vision of a world worth revering, not a dystopian scene of what we have done to the planet, but rather to impart that wonder still exists.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the inspiration, direction and experience shared with me by my mentors and advisors, D.J. Hall, Thadius Taylor, Shane McClatchey, Peter Zokosky and John Brosio who all helped me realize what I was capable of, and gently pushed me to observe life and bring that rich quality in to my paintings.

I would also like to acknowledge Hugo Hernandez whose technical assistance helped take my experimental pieces from slivers of painted panel to finished artwork.

DEDICATION

For my parents, Tina Preston, Brian L. Bradberry (dec.), Don Preston, and Cooper C.

Tomlinson (dec.), whose love, encouragement and inspiration made this dream a reality.

EPIGRAPH

The land is like poetry: it is inexplicably coherent, it is transcendent in its meaning, and it has the power to elevate a consideration of human life.

-Barry Lopez, Arctic Dreams

TABLE OF CONTENTS

IN THE LIGHT	1
DESCRIPTION	1
RESEARCH	8
METHODOLOGY	16
CONCLUSION	22
WORKS CITED	24
APPENDIX	26
ARTIST'S NOTE	40

TABLE OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1	<i>Drishti</i> , Erika Bradberry, 2022	4
FIGURE 2	<i>Canyon Oak</i> , Erika Bradberry, 2021	4
FIGURE 3	<i>Nightwalks</i> , Erika Bradberry, 2022	5
FIGURE 4	<i>Buh'Wheat</i> , Erika Bradberry, 2022	6
FIGURE 5	<i>Images Transposed in Memory</i> , Erika Bradberry, 2023	7
FIGURE 6	<i>Tempelbosweg</i> , John Abeling, 2013	10
FIGURE 7	<i>Sycamore No. 1</i> , Erika Bradberry, 2022	11
FIGURE 8	<i>Painting 1273</i> , Nils Udo, 2020	11
FIGURE 9	<i>Sycamore No. 3</i> , Erika Bradberry, 2022	12
FIGURE 10	<i>Lake Michigan Passed</i> , Erika Bradberry, 2022	13
FIGURE 11	<i>Untitled (Big Sea No. 1)</i> , Vija Celmins, 1969	13
FIGURE 12	<i>Big Bend</i> , Erika Bradberry, 2022	14
FIGURE 13	<i>Spring in the Canyon</i> , William Wendt, 1926	14
FIGURE 14	<i>Where We End and I Begin</i> , Erika Bradberry, 2022	15
FIGURE 15	<i>Kuleshov Effect</i> , Lev Kuleshov	15
FIGURE 16	<i>F-11</i> , James Rosenquist, 1964-65	16
FIGURE 17	<i>Rockpile</i> , Erika Bradberry, 2022	18
FIGURE 18	<i>Water No Get Enemy</i> , Erika Bradberry, 2022	19
FIGURE 19	<i>Photo Reference Example</i> , Erika Bradberry, 2023	20
FIGURE 20	<i>Detail Photo Reference</i> , Erika Bradberry, 2023	20
FIGURE 21	<i>Nopales</i> , Erika Bradberry, 2023	21

FIGURE 22 *Nopales, detail*, Erika Bradberry, 2023

21

TABLE OF PLATES

PLATE 1	<i>Canyon Oak, 2021</i>	26
PLATE 2	<i>Drishhti, 2022</i>	27
PLATE 3	<i>Nightwalks, 2022</i>	28
PLATE 4	<i>Buh'Wheat, 2022</i>	29
PLATE 5	<i>Images Transposed in Memory, 2022-23</i>	30
PLATE 6	<i>Sycamore No. 1, 2022</i>	31
PLATE 7	<i>Sycamore No. 3, 2022</i>	32
PLATE 8	<i>Water No Get Enemy, 2022</i>	33
PLATE 9	<i>Where We End and I Begin, 2022</i>	34
PLATE 10	<i>Lake Michigan Passed, 2023</i>	35
PLATE 11	<i>Big Bend, 2022</i>	36
PLATE 12	<i>Rockpile, 2022</i>	37
PLATE 13	<i>Nopales, 2023</i>	38
PLATE 14	<i>Prayer Wheel, 2023</i>	39

IN THE LIGHT

DESCRIPTION

Stuck in a traffic jam on a December evening in Southwest Michigan, I unexpectedly had a front row seat to the most incredible show of light which I had not thought possible in that climate. Everything around me on the landscape: other cars, road signs, hills, leafless trees, and buildings, became silhouette to orange, yellow and magenta merging with the ice-cold blue sky of a northern latitude winter. In this sublime moment, as I watched the sun slip behind the horizon of man-made box-like structures, I knew what I wanted to express in my paintings. The beautiful and often uncanny experiences of the natural world, that transport me from my hurried, self-involved, materially driven life. This is my muse.

After explaining my observations to a friend during my time in Michigan, I was introduced to the writings of Barry Lopez as a fellow observer of man, nature, and the dangerous loss of relationship we currently have with the land. With our increase in virtual experiences, our subsequent disengagement with nature, and the decimation of our environment, I feel the tangible medium of paint and practice of making art by hand are of greater and greater importance. In Lopez's writing, I found a kindred spirit that has helped me articulate my feelings and begin to create a philosophy to work from. Drawn to escape in contemplative solitude as far back as I can remember, I have returned to nature throughout my life to find peace and answers that have helped me make sense out of the world. But the process of bringing my experiences to canvas has been anything but linear.

When I began studying art in my youth, landscape painting was not in vogue, and I felt it was no longer relevant to the world I saw, so I rejected it as an artistic genre. I lived in gritty downtown Los Angeles and wanted to illustrate the harshness of the world, the perils

of the underserved, and the angst I felt within. I had thought I was going to be an edgy, cynical, urban painter for the rest of my life, and that was okay with me then. But it was through an undergraduate geography class in my late 30s where I learned about, and then found, the real magic of the earth and its processes. In studying various Southern California landscapes for a field journal, I became fascinated with native California biospheres, but also with how unaware I was of the daily processes of nature that sustain our lives. Moreover, it was through this intense interest in my local environment that I began to focus on the delicate balance of nature, development, and how we coexist side by side.

A hyperawareness of the poetic moments of the ordinary day began to evolve within me. Amid a busy city street, I would find myself watching the sunlight glistening on the leaves of a sooty Ficus tree, or the sunset's orange cast on a Eucalyptus branch while at a stop light. These things gave me hope to keep going when I felt helpless about my life, the pain I saw, and the state of the world. Everyday evidence of the cycle of life going on despite the mass urban sprawl helped ground me. I became aware of these two worlds existing simultaneously—the concrete monolith hustle of the city and the cycle of nature. If I just slowed myself down and watched, I could find the beauty in it all. But how was I going to paint these observations without being trite?

After some years of contemplation, I began by simply painting from the photos I took on that day in Michigan from 2016. I made a series of small acrylic works just to document what I saw, trying to capture the feeling I had in those moments with some success. This unleashed a flood of small paintings where I experimented with various nontraditional ways of painting landscape. From that initial inspiration, I found what I was really drawn to: water,

trees, and scenes like leaves from a higher branch of a tree creating dappled light shapes on the lower part of a trunk.

My daily life practice includes a routine of regular meditation. I found that during difficult times I was merging my trips in nature and meditation, which also stimulated the imagery I wanted to paint. By gazing into a tree's upper reaches, I lose my sense of the material noise around me while observing how the sunlight illuminates the leaves and limbs. Studying the positive and negative shapes created by the branches, I am no longer worried about the trivialities of the day and dive into nature, where the ordinary is extraordinary.

The Japanese refer to this activity as *Shinrin Yoku*, or Forest Bathing, where one immerses in nature to reconnect with self and a sense of wellbeing. I have expanded on this exercise with the practice of meditation, and the tactile component of then painting my experience. I began meditating regularly as an antidote to anxiety after a series of devastating personal losses. Not only was meditation a powerful tool in helping me cope with the events I was going through, but I also found that using a form of *drishti* provided me greater awareness of the subtle magic of my surroundings, and fuel for my creative life.

Drishti is the yogic practice of focused gaze, used as a means of developing concentration. It can help to enhance focus during *asana*, *pranayama* or meditation, and aids in the withdrawal of the senses for a heightened sense of self-awareness. The term *drishti* is Sanskrit for "eyesight" or "vision," and the practice is believed to help cultivate insight and inner wisdom through the third eye. (Yogapedia)

My painting *Drishti* (Fig. 1) was inspired by such an exercise outside of my home while gazing into a tall Canary Island pine. This is just an ordinary neighborhood tree and would be easy to overlook from the street, but I often find myself studying it from my

kitchen window while washing dishes. One late afternoon the colors it caught were like fire, and I went out underneath it to experience its majesty. Looking into the canopy, I begin by using a technique of slow deep breathing then focus my gaze on the trunk



Figure 1. Erika Bradberry, *Drishti*, 2022, Oil on Canvas, 18" x 24".

and bark, relaxing and letting go of the objects in my periphery, reaching a state of *drishti*. In a slowed state of mind, I can transgress the limits of time and space producing a sense of calm assuredness. To translate this experience as a painter, I have chosen to fully render the bark going up the tree, but not the branches and the individual needles, to emphasize my focused gaze and the transcendent state I achieve.

During my first year in the Master of Fine Arts program, I produced a series of nine 10" x 10"



Figure 2. Erika Bradberry, *Canyon Oak*, 2021, Oil on Canvas, 10" x 10" each.

landscape paintings examining the same subject from two different perspectives, such as a

long view and then a subsequent close-up taken from the same image. A paired selection from the series, *Canyon Oak* (Fig. 2), shows sections of an oak tree in Laguna Canyon. In the pair, I examine the part of the scene that inspired me and offer an even closer crop from the

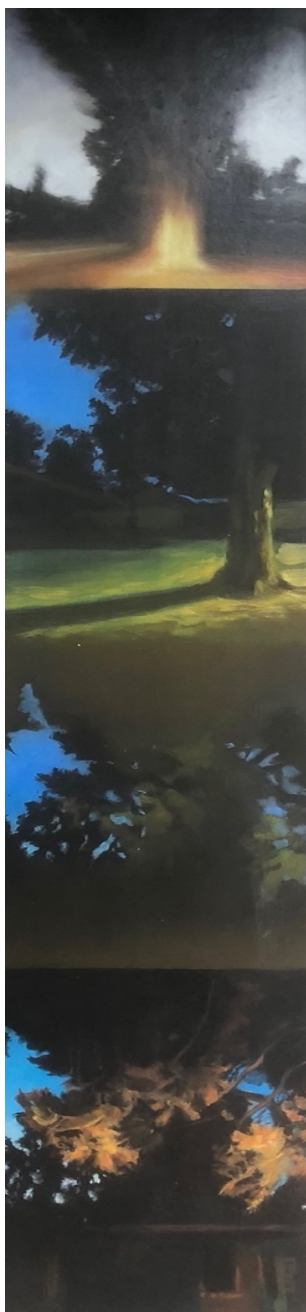


Figure 3. Erika Bradberry, *Night Walks*, 2022, Oil on Panel, 8" x 30".

original image. I wanted to focus the viewer on the part of the landscape I was drawn to (the close-up) but also provide the context (the longer view). I furthered the exercise by arranging the small canvases in various sequences. In each case the paintings had a narrative quality when put together. This excited me, for I could impart different meanings depending on the arrangements I chose at any given time. From here I began exploring multiple image compositions which I found provided me even greater opportunity to create a more deliberate narrative.

My earlier collegiate background was in cinema, and I gravitate to the multiple-image language of film. Early 20th century Russian film director and father of montage editing Lev Kuleshov discovered that cutting together unrelated pieces of stock footage in random sequences created a storyline, even if the pieces of film were originally unrelated. Remarkably, viewers assigned their own meaning to the clips. Now known as the Kuleshov Effect, it is “a mental phenomenon where the audience derives more meaning from the interaction of two back-to-back shots than one shot in isolation” (Cooper). I call on this theory when arranging my multi-image compositions.

Night Walks (Fig. 3) is a vertical arrangement of frames depicting four nocturnal views from a suburban walk. Two of these frames are of the same tree, somewhat abstracted, both in different light. This painting was inspired by my personal experience of regularly taking walks at night, sometimes at dangerous hours, to avoid an even more potentially dangerous situation at home. It is not important to me that the viewer knows the details of my situation, but they get the feeling that something explosive is looming. The two frames of the same object in different light reflect the process of *drishti* that I use to calm myself.

Buh 'Wheat (Fig. 4) is another montage painting where I have used a different method of combining images. Three scenes flow into one another with no hard line of separation as in *Night Walks*, giving the work a surreal quality. Depending on how I want the story in the painting to flow, I can use either method or both.

These explorations have been stimulating and have freed me from the sometimes-imprisoning seriousness of contemplating a single-subject painting. I have found that composing and combining images allows me to create a more dynamic painting using landscape imagery.

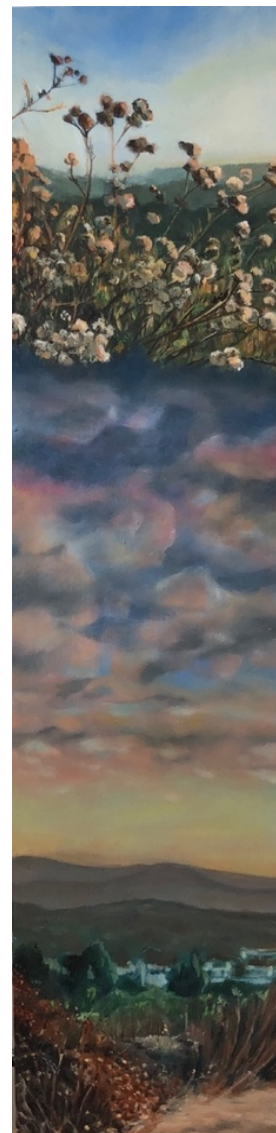


Figure 4. Erika Bradberry, *Buh 'Wheat*. 2022. Oil on Panel, 6" x 24".

My painting *Images Transposed in Memory* (Fig. 5), is an evolving concept work of different panels which can be rearranged, added to, or removed. This work examines the nonlinear phases of grief, memory, and how our brains can recall an experience touched off by a seemingly unrelated encounter. Similar to how a scent can spark a memory of a childhood experience, an ordinary shadow on a tree trunk can transport us to a place in the past, shoot us to a fantasy state in the future, or hold us solidly in the present without recognizable provocation. In this painting none of the pieces are attached to a backing in a



Figure 5. Erika Bradberry, *Images Transposed in Memory*, 2023, Oil on Aluminum Panel, various panels 30" x 8".

traditional way but are installed directly to the wall for exhibition using removable adhesive. They are framed by thin metal trim pieces at the top and bottom of the paintings. The full work is designed to remain malleable. It can grow, retreat, and change order, incorporating the concept of impermanence which is inherent in the process of human experiences.

Using natural world imagery as a story telling device provides me with a unique challenge and an opportunity to create narrative without the parameters of race, gender and class distinctions that using figures often does. With nature as my subject, I have the facility to celebrate the resplendent beauty of something larger than man.

RESEARCH

There is nothing new in finding inspiration for art from nature. Many have done so before me and hopefully will after, but I feel it is a critical time in our human history to reexamine what is tangible in our lives, reconnect with this dwindling resource, and reinvigorate landscape as a relevant genre.

Some attribute the disconnect with material experiences and the increase in virtual experiences to Covid 19 shutdowns and isolation, but this disconnection with nature in our society started long ago. One could claim it began during the industrial revolution with the waves of immigrating peoples to urban areas, creating the need for rapid cheap development to house them. Very visible neighborhood class distinctions emerged, and greenspace was usually not considered. In the inner cities, the disparity between green (money and chlorophyll) and asphalt grows wider with each decade. As I became more aware of these conditions, I also found evidence that others were becoming as concerned as I. There have been recent cries for greater greenspace in East Los Angeles city planning, for example. Studies have found stunted cognitive development in urban children and a reduction in the overall mental wellbeing of city dwellers (Asta, Barger). These have become even more frequent topics on local radio shows and news journals, supporting my feeling that spending time in communion with nature should not be a luxury, but is a necessary part of our lives and wellbeing.

Dr. Qing Li, MD, PhD, author of *Forest Bathing: How Trees Can Help You Find Health and Happiness*, is one scholar on the forefront of forest medicine and immunology. He professes that simply being in nature, connecting with it through all our senses brings about renewed well-being, that not only sustains us but helps us heal from illness. Dr. Li

theorizes and supports my personal observation that “As a society we suffer from nature deficit disorder, but studies have shown that spending mindful, intentional time around trees—what the Japanese call *Shinrin Yoku*, or forest bathing—can promote health and happiness.” While Dr. Li’s theory makes a therapeutic link between spending time in nature and positive well-being, I have added the modality of art to this practice, bringing my personal experience to the canvas. *Shinrin Yoku* inspires my paintings and fits with my life’s philosophy for healing and greater well-being. My thesis body of work starts by observing, immersing myself in, and bathing in nature.

But the theoretical and political concepts that drive my work are most mirrored and influenced by the writer and conservationist Barry Lopez. A seminal humanitarian, explorer, and environmental champion who published numerous books and articles on these subjects, Lopez speaks about geography and science with excitement and reverence for the land, paying artist-like homage to the color, form, and light of the natural world. His mission statement and the work of the foundation he created before his passing in 2020 are now mainly centered around climate change and engaging in a collective consciousness-raising solution. The foundation uses art to educate, celebrate and inspire change, but his earlier writings are based on his observations on our relationship with the land.

On a macro level, Lopez’s passion for the planet and the life lessons he gained while exploring it encouraged me to consider my own feelings about our disconnection with nature, and man’s lasting effect on it. I felt I had found a kindred spirit when reading his work which pushed me to articulate my philosophies. Correspondingly, my thesis paintings are rooted in how nature has brought me peace and healing during the most difficult times, while also

paying attention to the universal human condition that is perhaps more widely relatable to viewers.

My painting *Buh'Wheat* (Fig. 4), was the first experimental culmination of these ideas. This painting shows multiple images of time and landscape merging. There is a long view of encroaching development on the open landscape, typical of where most of us now live, and a serene micro view of a California buckwheat plant, displaying its simple beauty in the late afternoon sun. The title is a reference to the racist exploitation of the character Buckwheat in the 1920s serial *The Little Rascals*, and the way we currently exploit the land. The complex dance of nature and development is what I wanted to explore in this painting. Lopez theorizes that the over-developed land is where we now live, and accepting this fact is part of finding peace with it (Horizon). I show images of development in my work along with meditative nature to illustrate that there is still solace to be found, even within our chaotic environment.

As I researched other artists and formulated how I was going to express my ideas about nature with painting, I discovered landscape artist Johan Abeling. His work really



Figure 6. Johan Abeling, *Tempelbosweg*, 2013, Oil on Panel, 52" x 73.5". Collection of the Artist. www.johanabeling.nl/jaren10/02.html.

spoke to me and opened the door to a contemporary way of painting trees that I had rarely seen. Most of his paintings are of mysterious landscapes and trees set against a misty sfumato atmosphere with haunting, obscure compositions. After seeing his paintings, I felt I had license to paint only one tree in a composition. I didn't have to paint the entire

landscape where I felt my eye got lost. I could crop the tree where I wanted. Abeling is adept at making a compelling composition out of just a tree trunk as a form, without figures or a traditional narrative scene, as in *Tempelbosweg* (Fig. 6). Many of his paintings are of leafless



Figure 7. Erika Bradberry, *Sycamore No. 1*, 2022, Oil on Canvas, 18" x 24".

branches where 85 percent of the canvas is background, giving the subject vast space to breathe. The quiet stillness of his paintings is like that in my painting *Sycamore No. 1* (Fig. 7). Before discovering his work, I would not have felt *Sycamore No. 1* to be a complete enough compositional statement. His work has helped me focus on what interested me in this landscape, such as the simplicity of light bathing this tree.

It is hard to be awake and not be concerned with the current environmental crisis we are facing. I feel it would be a disservice as an artist to paint landscape and not address it in some way. In this vein, I began searching for artists engaged in work that was not only beautiful but had a message. I discovered many environmental artists who do site-specific earthworks with natural materials in situ. Nils Udo stood

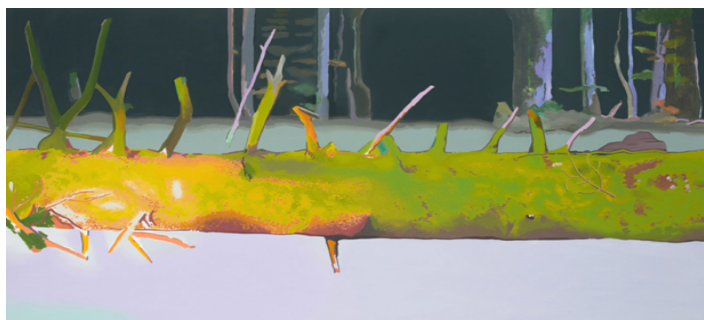


Figure 8. Nils Udo, *Painting 1273*, 2020, Oil on Canvas, 96 cm x 120 cm. Collection of the Artist. www.nils-udo.com/art-in-nature/?lang=en.

out to me because he is also an accomplished painter. He has an impressive body of oil

paintings from the 1970s to the present day of landscapes painted in a unique graphic style. Nils Udo's unusual use of color and emphasis on select objects in the landscape are key to his compositional proficiency. These are the qualities that attract me to his work. I do not get

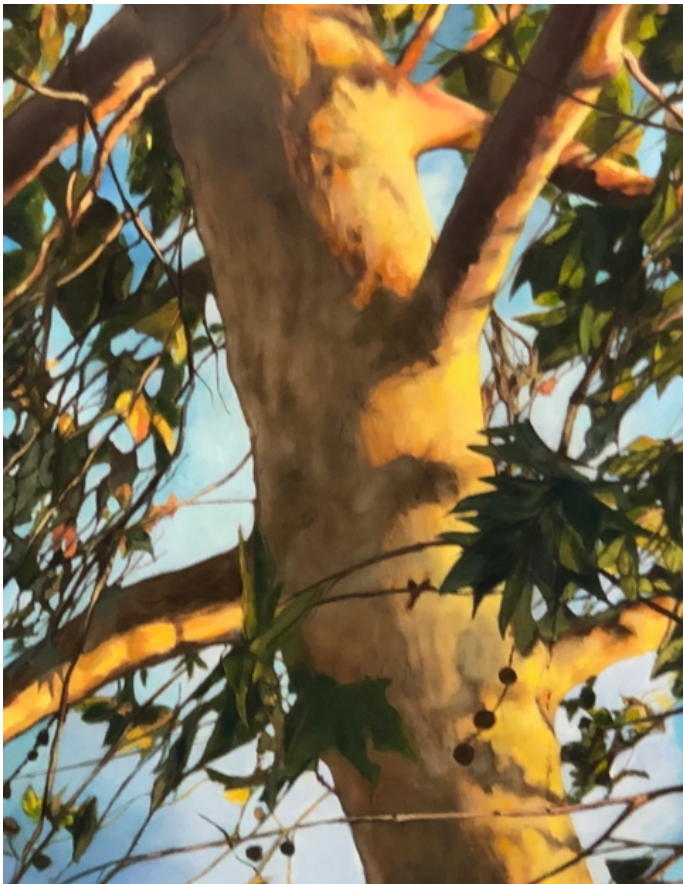


Figure 9. Erika Bradberry, *Sycamore No. 3*, 2022, Oil on Aluminum Panel, 18" x 24".

lost in his paintings. I know where he wants me to look. For example, his *Painting 1273* (Fig. 8) shows a tree trunk that is rendered more intentionally than the other elements in the painting, convincing me to spend time there. My painting *Sycamore No. 3* (Fig. 9) was influenced by Nils Udo's way of truncating the subject and creating visual hierarchy by doing so. I don't paint like him, yet his captivating way of showcasing the beauty of the most basic parts of our world is

something I strive to bring into my work. Udo, with his dynamic use of scale and expressive color palette, has a bolder language than Abeling that I appreciate as well. The emotive stillness of Udo's work also celebrates the life of the forest without humans or animals, and thus I grasp by viewing his work that life goes on without us there.

Vija Celmins is a contemporary artist well known for her paintings of water, spider



Figure 10. Erika Bradberry, *Lake Michigan Passed*, 2022, Oil on Aluminum Panel 8" x 30".

webs, and other solitary objects. Her paintings have a meditative quality that resonates with me. They have influenced my work stylistically, as I have wrestled with



Figure 11. Vija Celmins, *Untitled (Big Sea #1)*, 1969, Graphite on Acrylic Ground Paper, 34 1/8" x 45 1/4, Private Collection, Image from Scottish National Galleries website.

painting water in a non-formulaic way. Her renderings of water are not colorful, joyful sunsets, but rather highly detailed areas of choppy seas in monotone palettes, giving a sense of melancholy to the scene. A section of my larger work *Images Transposed in Memory* (Fig. 5), which I refer to as *Lake Michigan Passed* (Fig. 10), is in part an homage to Celmins' *Untitled (Big Seas #1)* (Fig. 11). I designed this section of my painting to illustrate a memory of Lake Michigan and a person passed. I chose the palette to reflect the essence of despondency—the feeling I experienced with the memory.

As excited as I was to find contemporary artists painting landscape and talking about our dwindling connection with the land, I have also found it important to reinvestigate the artists of the past who were concerned with the changing landscape such as William Wendt.



Figure 12. Erika Bradberry, *Big Bend*, 2022, Oil on Aluminum Panel, 8” x 30”.

A Christian landscape painter of the early 20th Century, he painted what he termed “God’s temple”.

Wendt’s work is a reference point for my paintings for two reasons. First, he espoused that evidence of God’s work was in the outdoors, and it could be seen by spending time in nature. Though I am not proliferating any organized religious dogma in my paintings as Wendt did, my work reflects my spiritual connection with nature. In this way, we are kindred spirits. I



Figure 13. William Wendt, *Spring in the Canyon*, 1926, Oil on Canvas, 25” x 30”. Laguna Art Museum. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. W. A. Griffin.

pay special attention to and share his color choices in painting the unique Southern California landscape. Working over 100 years ago, he was a member of an earlier generation of artists painting in Laguna Canyon. Given I am currently painting in the same region, his work presents a noteworthy geographical

reference and comparison for me. It is enthralling to see how the Laguna Canyon area has touched us both. The palette and theme choices we share are evidenced in my painting *Big Bend* (Fig 12) and Wendt's painting *Spring in the Canyon* (Fig. 13).

My first multi-image explorations in the MFA program, such as *Nightwalks*

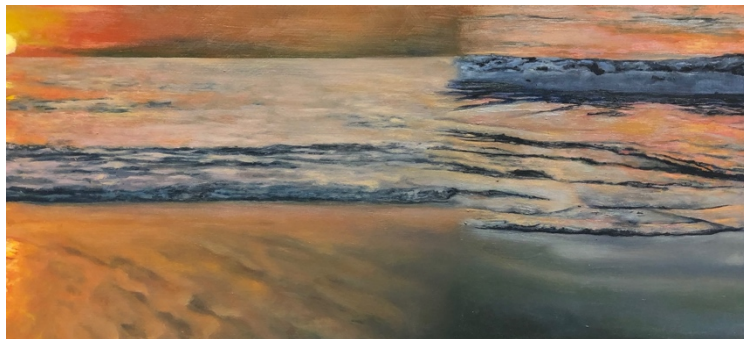


Figure 14. Erika Bradberry, *Where We End, I Begin*, 2022, Oil on Panel, 9" x 20".

(Fig. 3) and *Where We End and I Begin* (Fig. 14), tell stories by merging imagery. They are related to the visual language of film editing I learned while a cinema student.

The 19th Century Soviet film director Lev Kuleshov harnessed the power of montage editing by splicing different bits of unrelated stock footage together. When showing this now famous clip to various audiences (Fig. 15), where frames are spliced back and forth between a face, an unrelated image, back to the face, then another unrelated image, and another back-

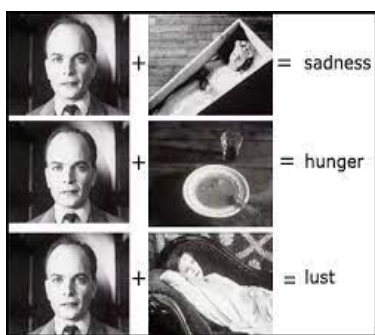


Figure 15. Lev Kuleshov, still photo illustration of theory.

and-forth cycle, he found that people assign meaning to combined imagery, whether the images are related or not. I am using this technique to design my multi-image paintings. Our memories are most often stored in images and can trigger emotions when re-viewed. I have experienced this in my own life and express this affect in my artwork.

The aesthetic lingo of my multi-image paintings is influenced by the contemporary art I was exposed to as a child. I saw contemporary art before I saw classic works by old masters. Growing up in an arts family in the 1970s, my earliest influences were living artists.

Some were known artists that were friends of the family, others were on view in museums. I took lots of school field trips to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and one of the most impressive painters to me as a child was James Rosenquist.

Rosenquist's painting *F-111* (Fig. 16) struck me the first time I saw it. It filled a room, was bold and colorful, and used multiple images on the same plane to tell a story. The individual subject matter may seem unrelated to my work at first: a blonde girl under a 1950s hair dryer, a panel of spaghetti noodles, a giant tire tread, and an atomic bomb blast, all backdropped by the F-111 aircraft, yet all were composed meticulously for narrative effect. The James Rosenquist Studio explains that this painting was done during the Vietnam/cold war era and is a comment on the numbing of American society with consumerism, the military industrial complex, economic questions, and impending atomic holocaust. Other than the political slant which I learned about later in life, I was awe struck by Rosenquist's large paintings, his bold handling of paint, and how he connected multiple images together. *F-111* uses a static visual language to tell a story like in the comic or film strips of my generational vernacular.



Figure 16. James Rosenquist, *F-111*, 1964-65, Oil on Aluminum, 10' x 86'. MOMA, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Alex L. Hillman and Lillie Pl Bliss Bequest.

METHODOLOGY

I came to MFA to develop myself technically as a painter, but also to channel the ideas I had about the importance of reconnecting with the land and relating universal experiences within a metaphorical framework of landscape imagery. Finding the visual and

philosophical references for my work was validating, but then my job was to paint these ideas and bring my own style to the fore.

When I began painting landscape imagery, I picked up acrylic paint because it was what I used in my career as a scenic artist. I am comfortable with this medium and skilled in manipulating its properties. But after a few years of these explorations, I knew there were effects and qualities I wanted in my work that I could not get with acrylic, and that oil paint, my first love as a painter, was what I needed to revisit.

Admittedly, some material fumbling and frustration occurred as I detached from the quick and dirty techniques I used professionally to this slower, thicker medium that also has a beautiful butter like quality that I love, with rich colors, transparency capability, and a lustrous glow that I feel gives the work timeless credibility. The other hurdle I have had to clear was letting go of the notion of photographic reproduction in my paintings. I needed to take control of the photo as a reference, not recreating it literally. I wanted to keep the photo in its place as a source and reference material, but not give it the power to dictate my work. Instead, I have reconnected with what drew me to being an artist as a child, my imagination and intuition, which give me the liberty to edit and combine imagery as I see fit.

I have learned to call on direct observation, ethos, invention, and photographic reference in its place, to bring my vision to canvas. I am often inspired by something random and fleeting and will pull out my phone to shoot a picture. This is where the photo reference is key and convenient but has pitfalls. Because the phone camera does not accurately reflect lighting and shadows, it can lead to a condensed, flat, generalized painting that is ironically about something living. To avoid this, I was directed during my MFA tenure to study from life and began plein air painting while in the program.

Painting from life was difficult for me at first, but I grew to love it. The practice allows me to consider form, light, and shadows, and it involves spending time in nature and meditating on one's surroundings. My painting *Rockpile* (Fig. 17) is exemplary of my foray



into plein air painting, while also exploring nontraditional ways to represent the landscape using a tall and narrow aspect ratio. In *Rockpile* the substrate shape supports the vertical features of the rocks, and it became a study for future paintings in my body of work. Plein air study continues to inform my technique and understanding of natural-world forms and is a practice I will continue through my lifetime.

A large part of my process is in the selection of imagery. When faced with a specific compositional challenge, I approach the solution as I would any other design problem. After settling on an idea, I find the reference I need (either by creating it or searching for an outside source) and prepare scale drawings, transfers, and color studies. I used this process to design my painting

Figure 17. Erika Bradberry, *Rockpile*, 2022, Oil on Board, 5" x 12".

Water No Get Enemy (Fig. 18). This painting is still centered on natural world imagery, but the floating trash and an oil slick illustrate our literal trashing of the land, amid a beautiful sunset. This painting pays homage to the 1975 song of the same title by musician Fela Kuti, about government control of natural resources, poverty, and how those things are in opposition to living in harmony with nature.

To paint *Where We End, and I Begin* (Fig. 14), I used different method for selecting images. I wanted to do a painting about loss and beginning anew, and I knew I wanted to paint water. As I searched for inspiration in my photo library, I happened upon images from a beach photo shoot a year prior. The lighting and tonal quality of these photos transported me to an evocative place where I began thinking about the past few years of painful loss and turmoil in my life, compared to where I am today—in a space of hopeful continuation. To illustrate my idea, I painted two images on one panel, merging them in some places and abruptly ending shapes and lines in other areas. Each section represents the *We* and the *I*,



Figure 18. Erika Bradberry, *Water No Get Enemy*, 2022, Oil on Canvas Board, 18" x 22".

with the left representing “we in the past,” and the right “me in the present.” I use an off-center line of scrimmage to intentionally represent the lengths of time of both experiences, longer in partnership and less time solo. The same color palette is used in both images to

suggest unity, but the light source is purposely opposite in each frame. I came to this choice while making the painting to suit my narrative about the passing of a life partner. We don’t know if the sun is coming up or going down, we just know that time has passed.

When following my intuition, I select images spontaneously from the in-the-moment photos I take. I look through the references to see what strikes me. But I don't just randomly select them. I use specific criteria. What is the light/color quality of the image? Are the



Figure 19. Erika Bradberry, Photo reference.

shapes interesting? Does this image help the narrative or feeling I want to convey? And finally, is there enough meat on the bone to keep me interested enough to finish the painting? After I have selected an image, I will often manipulate the format to see how it will lay out either amongst other images in a combined or composited

composition like *Buh'Wheat* or as a stand-alone work. I take

full camera aspect ratio shots but will crop and zoom in on the subject I want to paint later. Figure 19 is one such photo that has the interesting light and shadow quality that I am after but does not fully engage me as a painting as it is. Figure 20 is an example of how I experiment with cropping the shots in various ways to decide if I will paint it. I believe in the intuitive process and don't spend too much energy analyzing the shot. I want to recreate the excitement I had in the moment of the actual experience, for me as I paint and for the viewer seeing the finished work. If the photo is worthy, it will still resonate even on the computer screen later.



Figure 20. Photo reference, detail.

I enjoy painting on canvas, but the bulk of my thesis paintings are on Aluminum Composite Material (ACM). I chose ACM panel for my narrow rectangular paintings because it is easy to cut into any shape I desire, without the need for stretcher bars. This

freedom has allowed me to experiment in lots of interesting ways. I can easily slice paintings into pieces using a table saw. *Images Transposed in Memory* (Fig. 5) would not have been created with the same fluidity had I made it on 21 individual stretched canvases or one

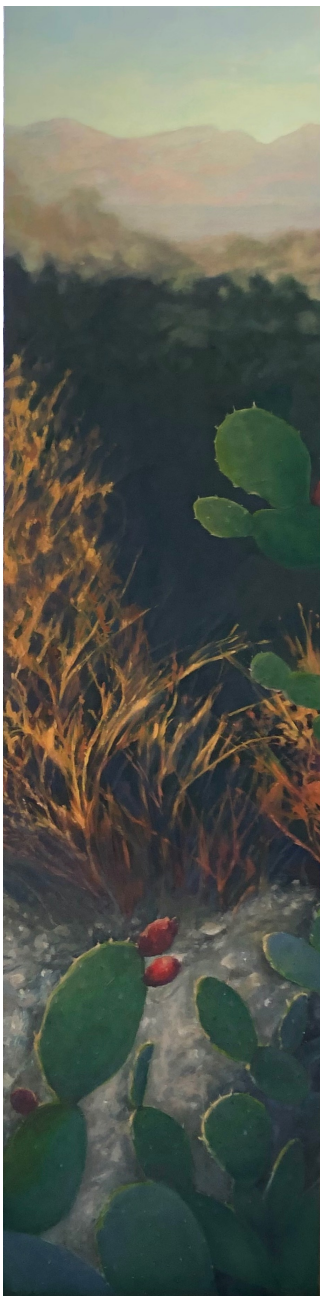


Figure 21. Erika Bradberry, *Nopales*, work in progress, 2023, Oil on Aluminum Panel, 12" x 48".

continual piece of material. The subtext of this painting is impermanence and the fluctuation of life events. Using various sliced up pieces of paintings supports that idea on a material level.

In years prior, I had experimented with tiling small square paintings together on the wall but had not deliberately selected the individual images with compositing them in mind. I just thought it was an interesting way to show and sell multiples of smaller works. Instead, *Images Transposed in Memory* was composed intentionally. In this work I have created an evocative narrative using random imagery and illustrate how feelings can be conjured, sometimes unconsciously. Memories fluctuate and their length of prominence can change over time. With the variation of image repetition and width of sliver, I can suggest how long I want the viewer to take in certain aspects



Figure 22. *Nopales*, process detail.

of the painting, just like a snippet of memory. Also, this creates a rhythm in the composition that is aesthetically interesting for me.

As I have rekindled my relationship with oil paint over the last two years, my painting process has quickly evolved. My painting in progress *Nopales* (Fig. 21), is a narrow-formatted landscape painting based on the smaller *Buh' Wheat*. However, in this painting, I use a direct technique and palette knives to apply paint in large surface areas. Afterward, I use brushes to soften select areas to pull focus and create visual hierarchy within the painting. These and other methods, such as using thinned paint as color washes, sponges, and rags to create texture, are exemplary of where I want to take my work in the future, as I search for methods and materials that can produce more organic and random shapes than a paint brush can, ever expanding my technique toolbox.

I have only begun to scratch the surface of exploring new techniques, as in Plate 14, and plan to continue digging deeper into color contrast, texture, and more dynamic ways to present the natural world in paint.

CONCLUSION

This scholastic expedition in the development of myself, my philosophies and my paintings have come to a close, but the completion of this MFA project is not an ending, but rather a culmination of freshly tilled soil and sewn seeds that will flourish long past the graduation ceremony.

In deciding to give this gift of time and discovery to myself, I knew I would emerge a better artist but did not fully anticipate that I would also become a better person as a result. I came to this program in a later chapter of life than many, and as such was forced to see the similarities in my cohort—the things that unite us—and not focus on the differences as means of setting us apart. Through this I have learned to think less of me and more about us.

Albert Einstein iterated that, “our task must be to free ourselves by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature and its beauty” (Popova). I hope that my work embodies some of that spirit which Einstein speaks of, as I go forward.

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APPENDIX



Plate 1. *Canyon Oak*, 2021, Oil on Canvas, 10" x 10" each.



Plate 2. *Drishti*, 2022, Oil on Canvas, 18" x 24".



Plate 3. *Nightwalks*, 2022.
Oil on Panel, 8" x 30".

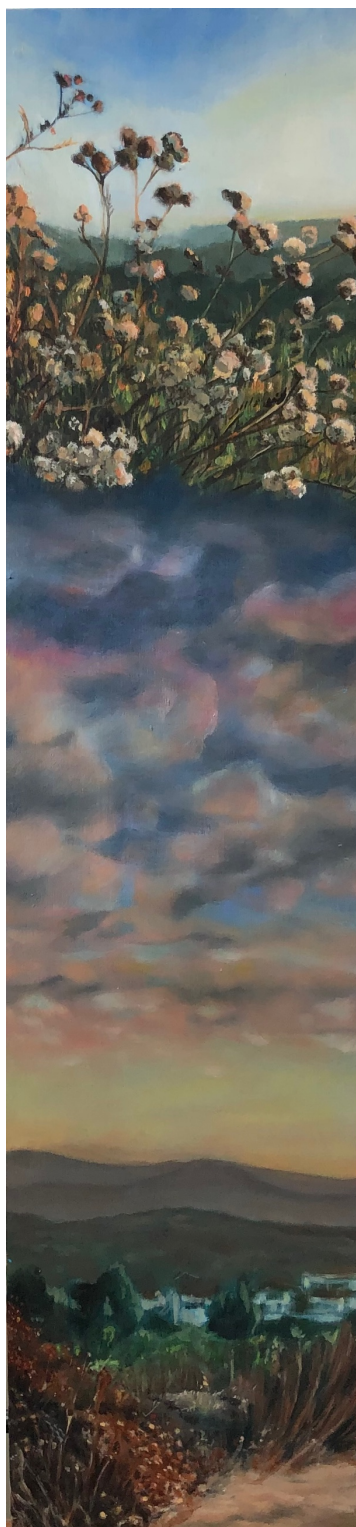


Plate 4. *Buh 'Wheat*, 2022, Oil on Panel, 6" x 24".



Plate 5. *Images Transposed in Memory*, 2022-23, Oil on Aluminum Panels, individual 8" x 30", span 7'7" x 30".



Plate 6. *Sycamore No. 1*, 2022, Oil on Canvas, 18" x 24", 2022.



Plate 7. *Sycamore No. 3*, 2022, Oil on Aluminum Panel, 18" x 24".



Plate 8. *Water No Get Enemy*, 2022, Oil on Canvas Board, 18" x 24".

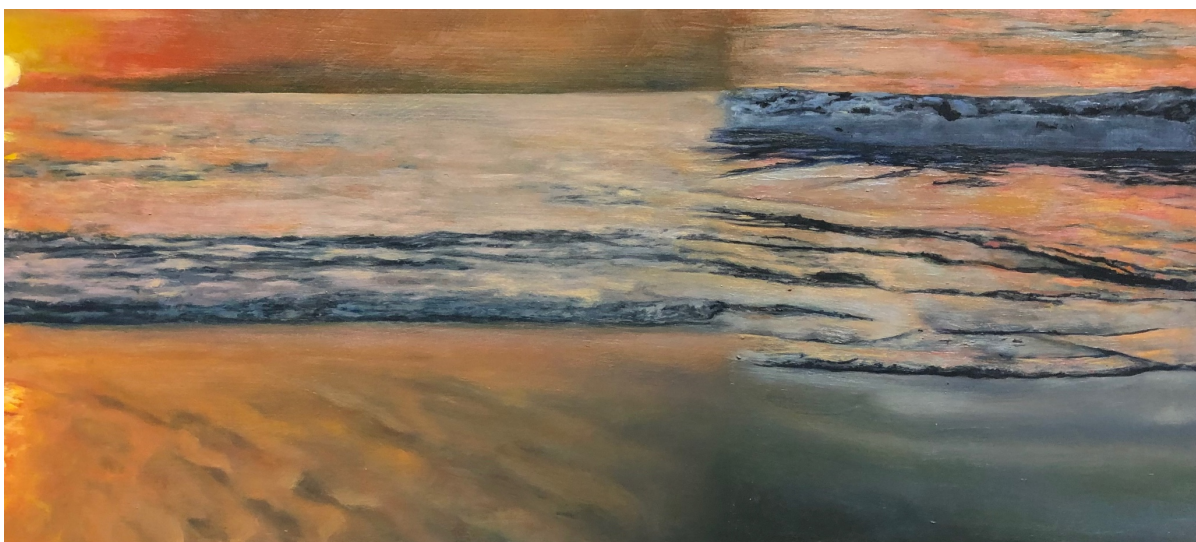


Plate 9. *Where We End and I Begin*, 2022, Oil on Panel, 9" x 20".



Plate 10. *Lake Michigan Passed*,
2023, Oil on Aluminum Panel, 8" x
30".



Plate 11. *Big Bend*, 2022, Oil on Aluminum Panel, 8"x 30".



Plate 12. *Rockpile*, 2022, 5" x 12". Oil on Board.



Plate 13. *Nopales*, work in progress, 2023, Oil on Aluminum Panel, 12" x 48".



Plate 14. *Prayer Wheel*, work in progress, 2023, Oil on Aluminum Panel, 30" x 32".

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