

BETWEEN TWO LIGHTS: RE-WORLDING AFTER ABSTRACTION

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B.F.A., The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, 2009

M.F.A., The Hite Institute of Art and Design, University of Louisville, 2026

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DEDICATION

To the Children, and ever-lasting clean water.

Long Live This Mother Earth!

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All of Creation, Alex Fitzgerald, Aila Fitzgerald-Simon, Áine Fitzgerald-Simon, Alli Miller, Amy Clukey, Annabela Cockrell, Benjamin Binstock, Betty Bee, Brennan Cabrera, Brian Galderisi, Caden Ely, Calista White, Casey Dressel, Catherine Yeager, Ché Rhodes, Connor Stephenson, Dawn Livecchi, Destiny Palmer, Devin Kenny, Dharma, Don Cartwright, Dr. Chris Reitz, Dr. Jennifer Sichel, Dr. Tami Harbolt, Drew Scanlon, Duke Riley, Eleanor and Ian Swordy, Enzo DePasquale, Eric N. Mack, Imani White, Jim Fitzgerald, Joey Yates, John Clay, Jutta Koether, Kieran Fitzgerald, Kristin Mirabelle, Leslie Martinez, Maddy Joyce, Manchán Magan, Manley Little Brave, Marcia Holloway-Ross, Mark Priest, Mary Carothers, Dr. Mary Craik, Nahla Joy, Nancy and Steve Simon, Orien McNeill, Patrick Simon, Richard Fitzgerald, Saoirse Fitzgerald-Simon, Sarita Dougherty, Scott Massey, Sebastian Fitzgerald, Sarah-Jane Castellon, Suzanne Joelson, Valerie Van Cleve, and Ying Kit Chan.

Thank you. May you have good things.

ABSTRACT

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Alana Fitzgerald

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Between Two Lights: Re-worlding After Abstraction examines an interdisciplinary artistic studio-ecology where painting, installation and relational aesthetics interact as a generative system. Eco-feminism, speculative futurity, and hybrid materiality are mobilized to create theoretical ecologies and engage with the overlap of biography and the climate crisis. This research presents more questions than conclusions. An exhibition presented at the MFA Gallery of the Hite Art Institute and Kore Gallery includes a full-scale working raft, brutalist concrete pillars and a “domestic jetty”: a spiral assemblage leading to large-scale paintings which operate as a codex for reconstructed inner landscapes. Abstraction is re-framed to comprise a schematic template describing cycles of deconstruction and regeneration. In planetary crises, aesthetic categories are insufficient to generate meaning through formalism alone: materiality becomes subject. What results is the formation of a conceptual language attuned to the ancient but facing the yet-to come, imagining new worlds in simultaneity with collapse.

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PREFACE

Between Two Lights: Re-worlding After Abstraction is the culmination of two decades working in an interdisciplinary manner, within multiple contexts and landscapes. The research that informs this thesis was conducted by collecting materials, constructing alternative living scenarios, and participating in communities that form and disperse. Many of the forms that I use reference elemental forces. This evolved from a practice of ‘pure abstraction’ to experiences with natural phenomena becoming subject matter. Since beginning this writing in 2023, my concerns surrounding the ongoing poly-crises of ecocide, genocide and femicide have intensified. I offer this work as an ethical anchor as global crises accelerate. As the stakes of contemporary life exceed what any one practice can hold, this work proceeds with an understanding of its own limits, responding rather than proposing resolution.

The concept of material intelligence forms a foundation of this work through lived experience. In salvaging materials, I have come to understand ‘things’ as more than passive objects. Materials become vessels for knowledge; their own histories inscribed with meaning and reference. As physical changes accumulate, metaphysical histories are embedded into matter. In my studio, material intelligence is a method: following intuition through attunement to site-specificity and nature awareness.

The organization of this writing and the accompanying exhibition into three realms corresponds to ancient cosmology and the physical installation of Between Two Lights. The Lobby (Earth), the raft, jetty and threshold (Sea), and the interior gallery (Sky) combine to form a trajectory. The Hite MFA gallery has a double in Kore Gallery which extends the exhibition timing and references its name, Two Lights.

Earth is foundational, concerning biography and material practices. The Sea explores the present as shifting ground and discusses relationality. Sky opens into the gallery for exploration of vision and speculation. The sculptural installation, shaped as a spiral in the MFA gallery corresponds to a smaller spiral “portal” within Kore Gallery, extending the timescale of the exhibition. The smaller installation becomes a second ripple of the first, and the work is on display for two weeks longer.

The installation works as both an aesthetic environment and an obscure proposition. It includes an ecosystem of paintings, sculptural anti-monuments, and uncanny architectures that invite viewers into layered timelines. My goal is to offer space to experience grief while contemplating hope. As a map of thinking, it may provide possibilities for personal and planetary repair. The writing is built from collected fragments, reflecting the installation, and remembering what brought it about. This organization demonstrates that artistic practice is a microcosm of life. My thinking is inspired by contemporary forms of eco-feminism and discourse around painting and conceptual art, combining biography and research with vision.

CHAPTER 1: EARTH- BIOGRAPHY, PHILOSOPHY AND MATERIAL ORIENTATION

Introduction

Contemporary art is produced amidst overlapping types of instability. Across many existential strata, we bear witness to cascades of collapse. Jean Baudrillard's *simulation*¹ is in full force: we humans build infrastructure for artificial worlds while the real one crumbles. Guy Debord's predictions about the *spectacle*² absorbing the avant-garde have materialized. Familiar artistic media such as painterly abstraction have long been at risk of being emptied of meaning or absorbed into consumer culture under such pressures.

This thesis proposes ways to shield artistic practice within precarious conditions, searching for how it might continue to resist the forces of late-stage capitalism within ongoing poly-crises. It moves nonlinearly across time. It engages personal history and art history through the lens of the present moment. It asks how contemporary abstraction might reconnect to its philosophical potential. Abstraction functions in my theory and practice as a starting point and transdisciplinary agent: it moves between worlds, responds to existential questions, and may be reimagined to encode experience and

¹ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994)

² Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995)

identity. How might artists metabolize instability, retaining ethics and imagination without claiming to resolve the conditions they inhabit? This research has generated more questions than fixed conclusions.

This thesis introduces original concepts such as *Ancient Futurisms*, *the Backwards Readymade*, and *Re-worlding After Abstraction*, which are utilized throughout the project and its backstory. Chapter 3 establishes *Ancient Futurisms* as a method; Chapter 4 develops *the Backwards Readymade* as a diagnostic framework; and later chapters explore ways in which these concepts are activated through material practice and connected relational systems.

Instead of making claims to definitive authorship, this work takes up “*Ancient Futurisms*” as a way of defining patterns that emerge within contemporary practices engaging in nonlinear time and ecological thinking. The idea is a diagnosis of logics within artistic methodologies that re-aura postmodern pictorial and material strategies through sincerity and world-building. It draws on postmodern use of temporal fragmentation and reference, departing from irony by reactivating these approaches as generative instead of purely critical or aesthetic. Allegory³ has a function. I acknowledge that avant garde aesthetics are not reliable alone, as they are inevitably subsumed into the visual culture of consumerism. The fusion of different temporalities resonates with Elizabeth Freeman’s concept of *Temporal Drag*⁴. This mode of thinking allows for work that reaches beyond its own frame, opening a pathway to a version of abstraction that

³ Buchloh, Benjamin H. D. "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art," *Artforum* 21, no. 1 (September 1982): 46.

⁴ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010)

may become a schematic map of chaos and nonlinearity. It may also be compositionally aligned with concepts borrowed from nature such as the rhizome, the fractal, and the golden ratio.

In my work, the studio is considered an imperfect ecology rather than a place for making discrete objects. Intersectional eco-feminism informs this work, embracing hybridity and rejecting bioessentialism. Rather than drawing solely from western traditions that dislocate from nature, this work proceeds from the understanding that everything on earth is of earth. Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature*⁵ exposed structural parallels between the subjugation of women and exploitation of land. Unconsciously, early eco-feminist frameworks repeated the binaries they sought to critique. These binaries paradoxically reproduce themselves by considering nature as hierarchically lower and pathologizing relational connections to it. Silvia Federici connects this subjugation to the rise of capitalism, as it was realized by enclosing the commons (collective lands) and by regulating and medicalizing reproductive bodies⁶. Federici explains that this paradigm shift was achieved through the placing of land, bodies and reproductive knowledge under institutional control, displacing communal practices and eroding women's agency. In contrast, Indigenous epistemologies, and

5 Merchant, Carolyn. *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980

6 Federici, Silvia. *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*. New York: Autonomedia, 2004.

contemporary feminist ecological thinkers such as Donna J. Haraway⁷, Anna Tsing⁸, and Robin Wall Kimmerer⁹ identify that wisdom and knowledge reside in lands and bodies. This extends to practices of reciprocity and stewardship. In such practices, menstruation, caregiving, and environmental awareness are not seen to be areas of shame or subjugation. These areas can be sources of power and metaphysical insight. The stresses of capitalism and patriarchy upon feminized bodies are what engender subjugation; they are not inherently lesser.

I envision my art practice as an extension of the types of world-maintenance that keep integrity with respect to material accountability, rather than symbolic critique alone. The goal is to create self-generating systems that build conditions for making-with. If such alignment with nature is possible within the studio, it suggests ways to reconfigure other systems and infrastructures. Through ‘rewilding’ and permaculture design principles, I was led to re-draw the boundaries between studio and land-based practice. My subsequent ‘official’ return to art and academia was not a retreat from those queries, but a way to re-engage art with altered stakes. Those stakes became widely understood in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, when I chose to earnestly make my return to a critical art practice. My trajectory was transformational, and generated an unending question: What does it mean to combine one’s artistic practice into “daily life” as an

7 Haraway, Donna J. “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century.” *In Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, 149–181. New York: Routledge, 1991. Haraway, Donna J. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016.

8 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015)

⁹ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2013)

ethical, ecological lifestyle? In what ways can composting serve as a model for transformation, where rupture becomes the material for regeneration?

The responses to these questions live in the movement of material and the recycling of forms into systems of ecological logic. This work reflects the world back to itself and forges alternate timelines alongside it. Drawing evidence from my own studio practice, land-based work, and connection to contemporary artists, this thesis argues that abstraction can function as a way for re-imagining how worlds and systems are made and sustained from the wreckage of that which falls apart. This work holds contradictions and hybrid realities, treating itself as an active participant. It exists within wider systems and disciplines, as one node in a web. Engaging with collaborators bridges the gap in world-making that might otherwise become solipsistic. In this way, I offer components that connect to relational aesthetics through collective ritual and experimental lifeways.



Figure 1. Alana Fitzgerald, Ice Fishing, 2024. Oil on Canvas. Image Courtesy of Alana Fitzgerald.

Artist Statement

My work is a constellation: a reflexive, multidisciplinary system. I approach making as a way to think and navigate between disciplines. Abstraction has long been a starting point and a method of organizing and mapping phenomenology. Although the work utilizes formal strategies of abstraction and is often described in that way, it includes many references to the real world. Working intuitively, this project is a conversation between what is and what isn't, captured in traces. The partially veiled content of the work is informed by lived experiences both ecstatic and traumatic. My aim is not to offer a singular narrative, but to construct schematic environments that invite interpretation and meaning making alongside my own. In de-centering figuration, I protest against hierarchies that place human beings above other beings. The human presence is the artist and the viewers, as the work becomes a model stage for living and speculative quasi-theatre.

Although each is its own microcosm, the disciplines I work in collaborate as modular components of a self-generating system. Drawings are descriptive of forms that appear in paintings or become structural motifs in installations. Paintings contain expansions of sculptural logic. Installations pull the logic of painting and drawing into the 3-D, constructing immersive "architectures". Sometimes these architectures are brought into public parks or forested places, questioning the edges of civilization and assumptions about the continuity of the world. I re-process installations through photography, collage,

and reintroduction into sculpture. Art is relocated from object to process. The various objects produced are meant to register as artifacts of the process.

By gathering marks and working with density and "air", I cultivate a sense of weather and gravity. This way of working forms a series of uncanny environments constructed from memories, speculative futurity, nature, and art historical references. The constructed atmospheres reference the turbulence of wind and pressure of weather, the movement of water, and the accumulation of geological strata. At times, I make mind-maps as drawings, incorporating text to find ideas in formations of storm clouds. Ecology is not only a subject matter but also a method. Reclaimed materials and trash function as agents within a collapsed hierarchy of things. These materials comprise a "parliament of things"¹⁰, borrowing the concept from Bruno Latour. The impossibility of salvage is a symptom of the scale of our trash crisis. From within conditions of late-stage capitalism, I attempt to create models that integrate troubling issues such as the crises of fabric waste and microplastics in our waterways and bloodstreams.

Through layering and disruption, I engage with affect as a tool of perception and recording specific information. Drawing accumulates ideas into maps of internal and external conditions colliding within the frame. I depict and collect materials that form the foundation of physical reality, as well as the basics of semiotic meaning. Through a dialog between touch and material, the work forms vocabulary. I work to build a hybrid language of abstraction and ecology, and from that create conditions to re-encode knowledge.

¹⁰ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 142-145

Ruptured Timelines, Lived Conditions

Lateral, constellation-based and rhizomatic thought patterns are informed by my biography. Lifelong collisions with gender-based violence, combined with displacement during a natural disaster shape some of the hidden content in the work. To pivot from rupture into re-making is embodied alchemy. The resulting perceptual orientation, enhanced by instability, is the basis of a nonlinear and neurodivergent mode that I use to approach composition and installation. At the same time, an interest in early abstraction and a feminist reclamation of its forms led me to address the compositional strategies of abstraction in pre and postwar modernism. I seek to expose those strategies for borrowing from the complex and entangled reality of nature that modernism sought to distance itself from. Years of experience and travel allowed me to see land as more than a “site” or resource but as a living library.

Developing the *Art & Alchemy: Nature Scene Gallery* residency at *Soulfire Sanctuary* in 2019 helped me position ritual as relational aesthetics. For participants in Swannanoa, North Carolina, it created a bridge between contemporary art and the forest. Motherhood and caregiving during times of instability helped to focus my awareness of the planet’s urgent state. Holding many contradictions at once, I found Julia Kristeva’s concept of *Women’s Time*¹¹ as a useful way of coping with uncertainty. She positions the

¹¹ Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time," trans. Alice Jardine and Harry Blake, *Signs* 7, no. 1 (Autumn 1981): 13–35. Julia Kristeva, “Stabat Mater,” in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 160–186.

maternal body as a bridge between nature and culture. Again, in a new type of nonlinearity, I coped by focusing on patterns instead of isolated events. My habit of creating worlds instead of separate objects comes from these histories.

At Cooper Union in 2006, Jutta Koether's¹² influence was also critically important. Her approach to painting as performative, materially expanded, and engaged with theory showed that the gestural and critical could coexist. In her work, painting itself is in a dialogue with things outside its frame. The art opening moved closer to the punk show in its vitality. In the wake of Claire Bishop's *Participation*¹³, and Nicholas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*¹⁴, a doorway appeared to me where there was not one before. This caused me to envision painting as a medium with a new future.



Figure 2. Jutta Koether, *Installation*. Image reproduced from *Artforum*, "Peripheral Vision: The Art of Jutta Koether," by Isabelle Graw, March 2006.

¹² Isabelle Graw, "Peripheral Vision: The Art of Jutta Koether," *Artforum* 44, no. 7 (March 2006): 258–263, <https://www.artforum.com/features/peripheral-vision-the-art-of-jutta-koether-17360>

¹³ Claire Bishop, ed., *Participation* (London: Whitechapel; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

¹⁴ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002)

From 2003-2009, I participated in a network of underground subcultures. Punk and DIY spaces intertwined with performance-driven art communities. These scenes presented new-folk pedagogies and collectivism existing beyond institutional approval. I was longing to bridge contemporary art with these worlds.

The Yale Norfolk summer school in 2008 opened my mind to expanding these efforts beyond the urban environment. Upon arrival in the mountains, a major storm during the first night surprised us: a massive tree struck by lightning became an initiation and re-awakening. Seeing the giant web of roots exposed called me into the forest, re-igniting a fascination with land and elemental forces. Time spent in the woods opened my ears to the intelligence of the nonhuman world. My interest in ecology and environmental grief first cohered into an artistic direction here where previously it had felt irreconcilable. I had left art school once before, to travel the world doing conservation work. My art began to cohere as a mutant patchwork of abstraction, feminist practice, earth-based inquiry and DIY collectivism in a post-conceptual lineage. I brought my paintings into the woods, wondering what it could mean.

My early artistic formation was defined by contradictory lineages. At Cooper Union, I was encouraged to be a generalist; making paintings, soft felt sculptures, strange performance art presentations and music. Living in communal houses and organizing house shows was important in my early to mid 20s; there is a kernel of that lifestyle in everything I have done since. Oriented toward artists who make worlds rather than objects, I am interested in that which questions reality and assigns people more agency over what we do. In this way, art is an escape vessel.

In those formative years I was lucky to be exposed to many forms of abstraction that refused to claim purity. Major retrospectives of Robert Rauschenberg, Elizabeth Murray and Philip Guston were held in the early 2000s, as well as the materially oriented surrealism of Max Ernst, and they formed some of the methods and aesthetic vocabulary I synthesized into my early practice. Jack Whitten's cosmic building processes, as well as Amy Sillman's idiosyncratic containers for affect and thinking. I became aware of Judy Pfaff and Sarah Sze and metabolized their heterogeneity and world-building. Abstraction could be more than a vehicle for style; it could become a language for describing entirely alien realities.

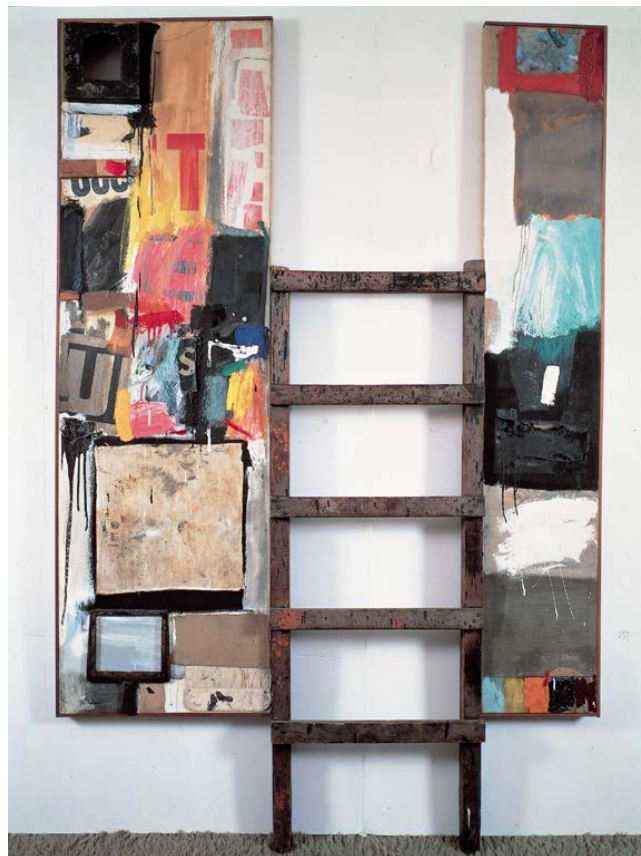


Figure 3. Robert Rauschenberg, Winter Pool, 1959. Mixed Media Assemblage. Image courtesy of the Rauschenberg Foundation.



Figure 4. Philip Guston, Ancient Wall, 1976. Oil on Canvas. Image courtesy of WikiArt.org



Figure 5. Jack Whitten, *Black Monolith X, Birth of Muhammad Ali*, 2016. Acrylic on Canvas. Image reproduced from *The Paris Review*. "Quantum Wall: An Interview with Jack Whitten". 2017.



Figure 6. Judy Pfaff, Picking up the Pieces, Installation View. Mixed Media. Image courtesy of the Sarasota Art Museum.

Alongside painterly lineages, I was influenced by fellow artists working in modes of assemblage and world-building: Swoon's floating art rafts and the adventures of Swimming Cities and Orien McNeill. After undergrad I visited the Bay Area and was inspired by the ways that the artists I met there created personal-aesthetic micro-subcultures. I encountered the transgressive interventions of Duke Riley. These artists are engaged with art processes at the edge of social norms; connected to exploring nature, myth, and community foremost, and quite often there were costumes. They existed at the periphery of dominant culture: working collectively with a sense of necessity. Their

practices found provisional routes to freedom. Being amongst these practices, bolstered by texts such as Hakim Bey's *Temporary Autonomous Zone*¹⁵, I was supplied with the first seeds of imagining ancient futures. It was a recognition that artists were already building beside the canonized art-historical narrative, and that the future would not depend on aesthetics alone. The *modus operandi* was to salvage from the ruins of capitalism as though the city was a forest to forage in. I wanted to resist being consumed by the spectacle and spit back out.

Even before events of 2012 redefined my life's trajectory, the early writings on 'the ancient future' were already done. Working with ancient futurisms began as an act of self-protection from art historical teleology and the failures of capitalism in 2008. To me, it was obvious that the systems governing contemporary art were misaligned with the lifestyles of the artists I knew. Occupy Wall Street was going on downtown and spreading across America; the empire had no clothes.

A series of disruptive events rippled through my life, in what seemed to be an algorithmic pattern. Memories of Hurricane Sandy and its precarity collided in me long after it was over, as demands of caregiving arose within collapsing social infrastructures. Urgency intensified in the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. The worldview I had been developing partially in theory became a way for me to make sense of disaster. It foresaw collapse and included the hope of reconstruction, offering maps for both. Like *the Aleph* of Borges¹⁶, juxtaposing ancient with future opens a point in the theoretical

¹⁵ Hakim Bey, *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 1991)

¹⁶ Jorge Luis Borges, "The Aleph," in *The Aleph and Other Stories, 1933-1969*, ed. and trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni (New York: Bantam Books, 1971)

universe that contains all other points. At this stage, the plural '*Ancient Futurisms*' feels less prescriptive than one 'ism', allowing the concept to remain connected to lived conditions and contextual specificity.



Figure 7. Swoon, *Swimming Cities of Serenissima*, 2009. Image courtesy of Tod Seelie and Grist.org.

Constellations and Ancient Futurisms

Ancient Futurisms originated as a ground-up method of making meaning within my practice. It was descriptive language utilized as a way of naming certain forms of information that arise through provisional making and deep-time consciousness. Temporalities and timelines break apart and are recombined visually and conceptually. This is not to be considered a unifying theory for solving the world in the way that modernism intended; instead, it follows that unity arises from acknowledging specificity and that the only constant is change. This is a situated framework that took form through lived conditions. That which becomes degraded may be repurposed and brought back to life.

I gravitated toward sensibilities which felt simultaneously ancient and post-infrastructure. I sensed that art's future would come from artists improvising new systems from the bones and wreckage of collapsing ones. In recent years, I became aware of the work of fellow artist-mother-scholar Sarita Dougherty, who wrote *A Textbook for the Ecocene*¹⁷. In defining *the speculative future time that we remember where we are once again free*, Dougherty gives us a more scientific name for the ancient future. In contrast

17 Soy Sarita Dougherty, *A Textbook for the Ecocene* (Los Angeles: Co-Conspirator Press, 2020)

to the *Anthropocene*¹⁸ or the *Capitalocene*¹⁹ and alongside Donna J. Haraway's *Cthulucene*²⁰, the *Ecocene* describes the world yet to come in which ecological reciprocity forms the foundation of our societies and their infrastructures. The *Ecocene* is the geological era of the ancient future.

Ancient future-making is resonant with the idea of "staying with the trouble", and the concept of sympoiesis formulated by Donna J. Haraway. Through her theory, decentralization and collectivism become generative states of being, as we exist within tangled networks of relation. Nonlinearity, recursion, and distributed structural mapping are also related to the concepts of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*. The structure of the rhizome describes something that grows laterally and non-hierarchically yet remains generative.

Perceptually, my concept is closely related to the idea of a constellation. I am interested in affinity without fixity. The metaphor of constellations has been used by Walter Benjamin²¹ and Theodor Adorno²² to describe non-totalizing conceptual arrangements. I utilize this construct for the purpose of describing the relational fields of

¹⁸ Erle C. Ellis, *Anthropocene: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018)

¹⁹ Jason W. Moore, ed., *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016), 1–11.

²⁰ Donna J. Haraway, "Making Kin: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene," in *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 99–103.

²¹ Walter Benjamin. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." In *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969). 253-264.

²² Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), 17. (162-166)

autonomous worlds. These worlds include art practices. Each element of the constellation, each star, maintains its own integrity while entering into temporary configurations with others. The lines of these constellations may be re-drawn at any point to form new clusters and groupings without erasing those defined prior. In this way, ancient futurisms take shape as a distributed field of multiples over many disciplines and dimensions, rather than as a centralized framework.

At different moments I was influenced by traditional lifeways and anarcho-primitivism. However, these philosophies sometimes fall apart when they rely on politics that overlook the realities of privilege within utopianism. “Returning to the land” is not accessible universally and tends to ignore urban communities, rural poverty and Indigenous sovereignty struggles. A more realistic approach could be to focus on retrofitting urban, suburban, and rural infrastructure to be sustainable. Although I have abandoned hope that technology will save us, it could be possible to use computational tools to study algorithms inherent in nature. Translating them into analog systems could create coherence and better relations across disciplinary divides. We could take the essential information, put it in a book and shut it down after. Any notion that ancient futures are possible while relying on tech that renders fresh water unusable at a rapid and exponential pace is dangerous. Current tendencies further the techno-fascist poles of modernism and futurism that I aim to counteract.

“*Ancient Futurist* aesthetics” do not exist as a stable style for me; they exist in multiplicity and heterogeneity. Simple juxtaposition of “ancient” with “futuristic” risks becoming retro or camp. In defining ancient futures, I am not referring to aesthetic trends such as solar-punk or other literal combinations of ancient and futuristic imagery. These

signifiers may be present but are not definitive. It does not boil down to “robot vs. caveman”. I draw from known history for function and meaning instead of style. I observe that ancient futures arise through selective adoption of postmodern strategies with an emphasis on the sincere production of sustainable culture. Latour explains that modernity is reified through the paradigmatic division of nature and culture. Only when these realms are reintegrated can we move past both modern and postmodern paradigms. This need not imply the impossible return to purity. To work with ancient futures, then, is to address local concerns and histories rather than pursuing avant-garde novelty through non-sequitur. It is a perspectival shift toward re-rooting social and infrastructural systems to be in ecological alignment.

The language of the “ancient future” has also appeared within Afrofuturism, notably in Wayne Chandler’s *Ancient Future*²³, where it is invoked to articulate that hermeticism, ancestral wisdom and futurity are essential to Black cultural survival and continuity. In this context, its meaning is inseparable from the specific historical conditions of the African diaspora. That specificity should not be generalized or subsumed. I do not wish to alter that articulation in any way. I use *ancient futurisms* in plural to refuse authority and acknowledge that multiple distinct approaches to speculative worldbuilding and nonlinear temporality exist throughout several contexts. These distinct discourses, while they may resonate with others, are not collapsible into a single framework. No one definition can stand in for the whole. Afrofuturism remains a vital and foundational point of reference, and my use of this terminology is done so with

²³ Wayne B. Chandler, *Ancient Future: The Teachings and Prophetic Wisdom of the Seven Hermetic Laws of Ancient Egypt* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2000)

intent to acknowledge such lineages respectfully. Engaging multiple uses of this phrasing does not extract from or delimit them piecemeal. I remain committed to alliance, affinity, and integrity. I am grateful to think alongside these precedents and remain in dialogue, while holding the specific awareness that my perspective arises from a different set of biographical conditions.

In October of 2023, Jamea Richmond-Edwards opened a solo museum exhibition called *Ancient Future* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami²⁴. This exhibition combined myth and world-building with cyclical time and ancestrally encoded memory. These concepts became starting points for monumental paintings, sculptural collage and video which expanded the discourse of art and Afrofuturism. In this work, speculative futures are also built from fragments of the present, assembled in maximalist density that centers material intelligence and situated knowledge to create a living cosmology through remembrance of the ancient, rather than technological progress.



Figure 8. Jamea Richmond-Edwards, Installation View, Ancient Future. Image courtesy of Zachary Balber.

²⁴ Jamea Richmond-Edwards: *Ancient Future*,” Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami, October 25, 2023–March 17, 2024.
<https://www.mocanomi.org/posts/jamea-richmond-edwards-ancient-future>.

These logics also appear within a variety of other contexts, though each arrives from distinctive circumstances. In ecological and Indigenous-informed thought, writers such as Robin Wall Kimmerer describe knowledge that is based in ancestral relationships to land that extend forward to future survival. In contrast to low-tech definitions, At MIT, Ancient Future Labs/Technologies are presented as research initiatives merging traditional, indigenous, or ancient knowledge with modern technology to create sustainable solutions. In 2021 a course called *Ancient Future Technology Course* was offered at the Media Lab. This course included topics such as “programmable mud”, ancestral typography and bio-cementing with microbes. These initiatives reinterpret ancestral wisdom to reconsider contemporary narratives concerning nature, materials, and culture. Although this version is hi-tech and ai heavy, it represents a move towards sustainability through the merging of traditional lifeways and worldviews with the digital age.²⁵

These examples put together do not constitute a unified field or share a singular origin. Rather, they indicate that similar affiliated concerns with temporality, ancestral wisdom and future dreaming have arisen across a multitude of non-equivalent contexts. Such resonances do not equate to sameness.

While this thesis and my early engagement with ancient futures were the starting point of an artistic practice, I also identify that there has been a recent groundswell of cultural reclamation occurring globally as a reparative response to post-colonial legacies. Reconnecting to ancestral lands, languages and lifeways impacted by those legacies does not necessitate a return to the past, nor does working with ancient futurisms need to imply

²⁵ Ancient Future Tech, “Ancient Future Tech,” <https://www.ancientfuturetech.org>.

primitivist nostalgia. However, exploring ancient monuments and reweaving connection to living culture lost through diasporic flight has inspired my artistic practice and commitment to conservation. Such continuity precipitates futurity. The late Manchán Magan²⁶, Irish language activist and writer, founded an online Hedge School that I was fortunate to participate in, starting in 2020. His work connecting ancient landscapes and language back to indigenous cosmology and ecology would not have been as far reaching without the internet. Through the use of technology, he was able to engage with people globally to inspire widespread mobilization to reclaim a language and its folklore that was almost pushed to extinction. Manifesting the wildest dreams of ancestors who faced bleak realities connects us to the past, and in doing so inspires a better future.



Figure 9. Sarita Dougherty, *The Old Ones We Weave With The New Ones*, 2017. Oil on Canvas. Image reproduced from Artillerymag.com.

²⁶ Manchán Magan. *Thirty-Two Words for Field: Lost Words of the Irish Landscape*. London: Ithaca Press, 2024.,
Manchán Magan, *Listen to the Land Speak: A Journey into the Wisdom of What Lies Beneath Us* (Dublin: Gill Books, 2022)

Checkmate, Duchamp! The Backwards Readymade, Part 1.

In 2009, in Dore Ashton's seminar, I wrote a speculative essay called

The Ancient Future that circulated in conjunction with my BFA exhibition. It began with a mini manifesto that continues to guide my ideas, an acorn I buried for later. Part poem and part dare, it made a proposal:

art objects as cultural artifacts from the ancient future

if history is a fiction, then perhaps time is a fiction, and

the future can be historicized.

the future can be invented by us

using objects as entry points—

the alchemical tools

for inventing new culture

kind of from the wreckage,

the symbols can't be new but meaning can be renewed.

ancient-ism antithetical to the fascism of futurism.

The 2009 text can be read as an account of pedagogical conditions at Cooper Union between 2006 and 2009. The theory of *the ancient future*²⁷ had done its job: to preemptively ‘predict’ patterns in art history that would later become visible. As a young painter, critical theory left me rudderless in my medium. As one does in art school, I read Walter Benjamin’s *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*²⁸, which elicited generative questions connected to the work I was already doing. Re-distributing the aura of the art object by thinking first through painting resolved the painter’s existential questions, posed by this lapse in historical record-keeping.

After 1981, with Douglas Crimp’s *The End of Painting*²⁹, critical discourse largely abandoned the discipline. Crimp writes that “*The discourse of art history ultimately reduces painting to a succession of styles ... governed as they are only by the individual choices of painters expressing their “boundless imaginations”*”³⁰, degrading the practice to “idiocy”. Yet people were still painting, just without critical supervision. If history is a selective fictional account, then the record of time is malleable. My proposal was that art objects could be understood as artifacts from possible futures: inventing culture rather than merely reflecting it.

Nicolas Bourriaud’s proposal that “*it is not modernity that is dead, but its idealistic and teleological version*”³¹ was a crucial influence. If modernity’s teleology has

²⁷ Alana Fitzgerald, *The Ancient Future*, 2008

²⁸ Benjamin, Walter. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” In *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn, 217–51. New York: Schocken Books, 1969.

²⁹ Page 81, *The End of Painting*, Douglas Crimp, 1981

³¹ Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics*. Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2002, p. 13.

ended, then meaning becomes a process rather than a guarantee. There would be no lasting solution; critique must continue endlessly. I described what I call the backwards readymade: a reversal of Marcel Duchamp's readymade in which art reverts to thingness rather than an ordinary thing elevated into art. An artist begins with a medium already canonized, then empties that form of all content, and signature until the artwork exists as a signifier of itself. When this happens, context determines meaning. The object itself does not disappear; it is reset to thingness.

The idea of the backwards readymade became clear to me in the contradictory environment of Cooper Union, where painting was treated with formalist rigor while post-structuralism and conceptualism were equally expected. Painting was both an object and a philosophical problem. I began to consider artworks whose meaning resided in their manner of operation, with the canvas as a prop or byproduct. How abstraction might behave when emptied of content and returned to the status of an object among objects?

In *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*³², Oscar Wilde imagines a society in which the artist's freedom is won through refusing conformity. "*Disobedience*," he writes, "*is the engine of progress*." The artist's role is to live in opposition to bourgeois respectability. When an artwork rejects its expected function, it reveals the assumptions imposed upon it. In the case of painting, *The Backwards Readymade* can be traced back to abstraction's supposed "zero point." Claiming to break totally free from the illusionistic, this zero point is yet another illusion.

³² Oscar Wilde, "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," *The Fortnightly Review* 49, no. 290 (Feb 1891): 292–319.

Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* (1915) was often glorified as the foundation of non-objective painting: a rupture with art history through total severing from representation. However, recent scholarship by Carey Dunne³³ has shown that *Black Square* is not pure at all. Beneath the void of black paint, there is an embedded racist joke. The myth of purity conceals the cultural violence it claims to transcend. *Black Square* seems to be the first fall from grace in abstraction. It is a painting pretending to exist in a vacuum, with an origin that was never clean, dubiously insisting on its own purity. In the essay "*Square Cookies for Black Hearts*"³⁴, Devin Kenny, who was also a student at Cooper Union during the years in question, writes "...talking about the 'zero point of painting' having a racist joke tossed in there somehow doesn't feel important enough. But it is." continuing, "... It hurt my heart... the radical 'artist's artist' was bumped down to below 'problematic fave' status.". Abstraction's founding fiction is exposed as such.

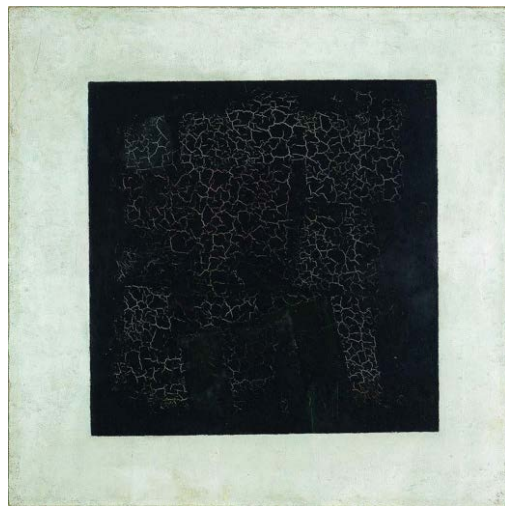


Figure 10. Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square*, 1913, Oil on Canvas. Image reproduced from <http://tate.org.uk>, "Five Ways to Look at Malevich's *Black Square*."

³³ <https://hyperallergic.com/art-historian-finds-racist-joke-hidden-under-malevichs-black-square/>

³⁴ <https://substack.com/home/post/p-180274575>

Clement Greenberg's³⁵ mid-century insistence on “purification”: that is, elevating form while erasing content and subjectivity, rests on a premise that abstraction could free itself from earthly concerns. By the time the artists in this essay entered Cooper Union, the myth of the ‘zero point’ persisted even as its foundation crumbled. In that moment, provisional painting rose in popularity, overlapping with Casualism as a feminist rebellion. Jutta Koether's pedagogy was crucial. Though painting had been repeatedly pronounced dead, she connected it to critical theory. Koether brought Walter Benjamin into dialogue with the medium, and the canvas became an altar where the angels and specters of art history could be invoked. Drawing from Beuys, her practice included music, writing, and participation. I saw it as relational aesthetics with art objects; style was less important than situation. Taken out of context and mistaken for style, even critical movements risk becoming co-opted, gentrified and exploitable. In her case, visual styles mattered less than the conditions that produced meaning, as I read things.

By the 2000s, the Greenbergian narrative had stalled; “What is painting?” became a mindless carousel rather than genuine question. At the same time, postmodern tactics were absorbed into the academic environment to re-create the decorative aesthetics they formed against. Shock value became background noise. Artists graduating between 2010 – 2015 inherited a field in which critique was no longer sharp enough to pierce through the thick ideological decoupage. Either this wallpaper goes, or I do.

That the Backwards Readymade happened in the early 2010s was not random. It arose from a specific historical confluence. When painting re-entered critical discourse, it

³⁵ Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” in *Art and Literature* 4 (1960): 193–201.

was to correct an existential catastrophe. Rosalind Krauss had announced the “post-medium condition,”³⁶ but did not say how painting might consider itself. The gap between lived practice and available language is the reason I attempted to create my own theory. I merely diagnosed from within, the eventual crisis that arose because contemporary discourse at that time lacked the means to describe the position new painters held.

Zombie Formalism grew from these seeds. In the wake of the 2008 financial crash, painting became a vehicle for finance. Online image circulation and art-fair ready presentation made it difficult to distinguish between genuine investigation and spectacular regurgitation. As Jerry Saltz observed, “all the new abstraction started to look the same,” a symptom of internet spectacle cashing in on the fruits of genuine research. There was a breaking point where visual novelty could no longer be generated. It is important to distinguish the logic of the backwards readymade from genuine research in abstraction. Walter Robinson’s “Zombie Formalism” describes a market preference for aesthetic trends tailored for flipping at auction. It looked like art, and that was enough. Provisionalism and Casualism embraced incompleteness and looseness as defiance and notation. Taken out of context, the Backwards Readymade tries to be a painting, which pushes it back to the status of a thing. Without recognition of conceptual value, that thing is not worth much. Abstraction risks becoming pure sign. It is at this moment in time that Lucien Smith makes his debut.

³⁶ Rosalind E. Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000).

Case Study #1: Lucien Smith: The Terminal Backwards Readymade

The artist Lucien Smith performed the terminal backwards readymade. His series *Rain Paintings* (beginning 2011) occupy a critical moment in this history. They are medium- to large-scale atmospheric abstractions made with two paint colors, applied with fire extinguishers. The application process creates misty layers of even, stippled color fields. Quickly produced, they are between haphazard procedure and precipitation. Although the gesture of raining upon to create the trace of rain is poetic, the attitude of disinterest is fascinating and unsettling. Smith could have been positioned with agency; his work has often been framed as more offhand than it likely is.

They are undeniably paintings, yet they also invert the painting into “painting-ness.” Generously interpreted, the *Rain Paintings* are notational abstractions. Chance is the method, and weather is the light, subject, and metaphor. Ironically, these paintings of “rain” were part of a perfect storm. Their legibility became their downfall. The repeatable spray, photo-ready surface, and subtle digestibility made the work perfect for integration into the post-2010 art market. Smith’s paintings were tailor-made for social media. I define them as paintings that signify painting itself. The gesture is referenced but not sincere, and the handmade is simulated. They behave like backwards readymades. The artwork becomes almost pure surface: emptied of craft, created for hype and circulation. Smith did not invent this breakdown, but he inherited and harnessed it until it bucked him off. *The Rain Paintings* carried out a threat to abstraction present since the end of modernism: the endgame of the zero-point myth and the spectacle that destroys novelty once and for all. What began as a conceptual proposal became, in Smith’s hands, the full execution of a backwards readymade. Smith became the poster child for Zombie

Formalism. This was not because his work was uniquely hollower than others', but because art collectors in that moment were predatory. Young painters were sought out and collectors flipped work before their practices matured. In my own reading of the paintings at the time, there was a phenomenological aspect. I never took them as pure non-objective abstraction. They held traces of experience, derived from the real world, represented obliquely. It was the sublime found by staring at a popcorn ceiling. With a pure enough heart, you can see it anywhere. In clouds, tree bark, wood paneling. I believe that the effect was crucial, it was a chill vibe.

The Backwards Readymade becomes dangerous here. Without sustainable contextualization, the artwork is untethered, referring only to its own surface. In the same period, Lucien Smith became the sacrificial lamb of a market that wanted to re-enact the myth of a historical clean slate. This was systemic hypocrisy, still pretending that the racism and spiritual bankruptcy hidden beneath the zero-point myth was no longer relevant. There is a direct line between the black square and the art-world fantasy of the “wunderkind” who is discovered and praised only to be demonized and discarded.³⁷

Through his own admission, Smith denied a connection to his own roots and identity, reinforcing myths about pure abstraction. He courted hype to position himself the next big thing. Even if he was virtuosic, the art world at that point couldn't tell, because it didn't care. Smith was framed as making work for the sake of the market, because that is what the market understood. It seems that the paintings were intended as a combination of critique and sincerity. However, they were seen through the lens of the

³⁷ <https://officemagazine.net/lucien-smith-constant-return>

machine that tried to process him. The theory I tried to write in anticipation of The Backwards Readymade was to prevent it from happening.



Figure 11. Lucien Smith, Seven Rain Paintings, 2012, Acrylic on Canvas. Image courtesy of Moran Moran.

Case Study #2: Leslie Martinez: Queer Materiality and Embodied Abstraction

Leslie Martinez studied at Cooper Union a few years ahead of Lucien Smith, and their time overlapped. In this story, Smith represents abstraction's symbolic apocalypse. The work of Leslie Martinez represents the crystallization of death and rebirth through regeneration. The paintings of Leslie Martinez are dense, multi-layered terrains built from scrap fabric, rags, paper, acrylic paint, pumice, glitter, and various forms of studio detritus. Martinez has referred to their method as "whole elk" painting: nothing is wasted; everything is recycled into an ecologically patterned system. Martinez's surfaces are dense with "more than human" life: geological stratification, rainbows of pride and pollution, borderland maps and topographies, the aggregation of sediment. Color behaves like weather; texture behaves like land; gesture behaves like shifting ground. Works such as *Blazing Bounty* function as portals into queer, wounded, but still-alive landscapes. A border cuts a fault line through the composition, but the true borders follow another pattern; the logic of color, atmosphere and other topographies. There is subtle defiance. Land remains land, and refuses modernism's detachment from the earth.

This is a project solidly connected to the world. It does not escape context, rather it multiplies it by layering meaning. The paintings reference climate change, queer and trans becoming and worlds in formation. They touch upon the digital, and deep time. Their surfaces shimmer with joy, and emotional intelligence is inseparable from the material. Martinez's practice is supported by their family and that kinship extends to studio work. Their trans identity refracts in rainbow light: hormone therapy shifted their color perception. That burst into technicolor is clearly integrated into the palette. These biographical anecdotes are integral to the work and anchor it in lived experience to create

materialist metaphors. Martinez's abstraction resists the backwards readymade because it cannot be hollowed out. The work is bound to body and land. In refusal of singularity or fantasies of purity, it is a phenomenological map, an archive and offering. Martinez shows a way to generate futurity connected to community and place.



Figure 12. Leslie Martinez, Your Life Became a Sundial When Your Body Dropped the Earth, 2021. Mixed Media on Canvas. Image courtesy <http://www.leslie-martinez.com>

Case Study #3: Eric N. Mack: Soft Architecture and the Material Archive

Eric N. Mack approaches re-worlding and abstraction through softness. As a painter, his work is described as post-medium abstraction. Though engaged with the conversations of abstract painting, Mack rarely uses paint. Instead, his works incorporate garments, silks, moving blankets, feather boas, scrims, curtains, and quilts suspended from ropes and armatures. These materials arrive pre-loaded with cultural references and biography, glamour, and tactility. Flags, clotheslines, sails, and drapery recur as forms. Fashion and affect enter meaningfully into architectural spaces as site specific interventions and provocations of emotional resonance. Where the Backwards Readymade empties objects of meaning, Mack's objects arrive saturated with material information- he mines the archives of fabric for color, texture and print. Gravity, weight, air, and time are collaborators. Quilted surfaces stretch across steel supports, conversing with the silhouette of a painting while shifting away from permanence to create new experiential fields.

Mack's *CARTOUCHE*, a monumental "clothesline" installed between the marble institutional buildings at the American Academy of Arts and Letters, is both intimate and civic. Hanging a clothesline is an everyday ritual of care and survival. It is humble: cleansed and purified by the elements, aired out. While this work references that, framing majestic architecture and working-class apartment buildings together, it is something else. At architectural scale, it becomes an ephemeral form of abstraction as shelter. Seeing such an unexpected visual intervention readjusts our view of reality. Mack's work reveals the cultural forces and conversations embedded in everyday materials. Unlike the 'pure' backwards readymade, his objects don't flatten into empty

signifiers but open to expanded meaning that moves outward into relational systems. The openness is not a projection screen for capitalism but for his interests; explored obliquely with measured whimsy and care. Similarly, the material histories and significations of his fabrics exist in conversation with one another and as a patchworked tapestry that employs a selective editing and archival practice as the unifying force. The hand of the artist is present in his choices. Ever present is the act of giving himself freedom. The work reserves the right to opacity without retreating into pure hermeticism. It engages with the world protected by its stitched textures. The word cartouche originates in Ancient Egypt. It is a protective oval for enclosing hieroglyphs. A cartouche is a spell, name-holder, and amulet. As an architectural ornament, naming the work this way frames and preserves its value. It also engages with the institution as a vessel for the protection of culturally sacred objects. Mack's use inscribes his abstraction with magical protection, connecting painting to aura and spiritual charge. His work suggests a triple movement: world to art and back to world again.

The otherness of Mack's work is light, magical, and silken. Who would we be if those were our clothes? I imagine the artist asking us to remember, by presenting a softer state of being, reminding us that deep inside, we are all gentle people. Mack's softness is a totally conscious refusal of hardness, offering abstraction as a vehicle for making a comfortable place rather than a spectacle. His materials converse rather than compete, structured through selective editing and discernment. In this way, his work extends Sam Gilliam's legacy of expanded painting into lived space. He not only releases us from the stretcher bars, but from paint itself.



Figure 13. Eric N. Mack, Cartouche, American Academy of Arts and Letters, 2025. Image courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

The saga of Lucien Smith represents the Backwards Readymade's terminal moment in which painting became its own signifier. Leslie Martinez offers a counter-narrative: rebuilding abstraction sculpturally through queer futurity and material intelligence, formally beautiful but also concerned elsewhere. Eric N. Mack continues the trajectory into a soft architecture of material archive that becomes a liberated form of abstract painting. Considered together, these types of abstraction clear a path for abstract painting to be reactivated, not abandoned.

The dialogue between these three artists creates a map of contemporary abstraction. Smith and painters of his moment initiated an imminent collapse. Martinez

rebuilds the ground through embodied practice. Mack brings magic and poetry into architecture, allowing painting to free itself from most prior constraints. These artists help clarify a big question: What kinds of worlds must artists create to sustain a healthy, autonomous artistic practice? Where can painting go? Martinez and Mack construct environments of meaning dense enough to resist the same void that swallowed Smith. Their works are artifacts of worlds in motion, adaptive and queerly ecological; speculative, and embodied. They are not signs or signifiers of painting; they are sites where life and art intersect through material exploration. I name the response to abstraction's rupture the *Activated Backwards Readymade*. Painting in the present moment is no longer at the edge of itself, but at the edge of us. The question to ask is how artists build the cultures, kinships, and infrastructures capable of holding their work.

Ripples

The previous sections establish rupture as the condition that precedes theory, and this one translates it into lived methods. A return to the art object after the Backwards Readymade can be understood by looking to postwar practices that blurred the lines between art and life. The social sculpture of Beuys emphasized materials within relationality, and the projects of Fluxus and Situationism dethroned the artist-genius by moving meaning away from objects and toward experience. Perception itself became the medium. These moves disrupted passive spectatorship to reclaim autonomy in a consumer-oriented culture. I position the art object not as a mutable artifact moving through lived systems. This section explores how theoretical rupture precipitates a practice. Ideas tested in abstraction became activated through ecological experiments and unforeseen events.

Inspired by films such as Jodorowsky's *The Holy Mountain* that break the fourth wall, I sought situations that defied "regularly scheduled programming." Hakim Bey's writing in *T.A.Z.* about so-called "pirate utopias" describes foggy jurisdictional states in which uncharted territories remained free from government oversight because they had not yet been officially "discovered." My friends and I sought such spaces within New York City itself. It felt like outrunning the searchlight of gentrification in pursuit of temporarily achievable freedom. If the image that comes to mind involves people hopping fences, you're not wrong. In *Cruising Utopia*, Jose Muñoz describes temporary utopias whose energetic imprint haunts the liminal spaces of New York City, particularly

within queer life. These are important histories, connecting adjacently to many webs of artistic temporary utopian convergences and communities that permeate a wide field of orientations. Seeking experience and community outside of permanent structures is an ultimate form of unattached freedom. Memory becomes a precious artifact.

Around the time I graduated from Cooper Union, I met Orien McNeill, who made impossible ideas seem attainable. I was invited to be an artist-in-residence at the 2012 *BOATEL* he was stewarding in Rockaway Beach. The Boatel was the best example I had of an ancient futurism in action: a small-scale, somewhat sustainable temporary village where artists lived and worked close to the water while retaining the benefits of urban culture. There was no prescribed aesthetic, it was a collection of distinct aesthetics contributed by individual artists. Time was measured by tides, weather, clocks, and calendars equally.

My involvement with the Boatel, which included the Battle for Mau Mau Island, was the most formative experience I had making art boats. Integrated into the first dock of a working marina, it was a floating village, B&B of sorts, and a temporary social space. It began as a residency, living on the boat 4-C's while renovating it into an art installation. I stayed on to help run the hotel aspect, functioning as an artist-housekeeper. The plan was to rent out the 13 or so boats as Airbnb experiences, expanding upon the previous iteration of the project initiated by Constance Hockaday. There were gardens and a family of goats wandering around. A group of us lived there and as feral wild-partying artists we provided entertainment to the guests. Life on the water made it obvious that thriving is best within a collective. Rather than re-wilding in the forest, we were living a rewilded life on the urban shoreline where the equality of fish and industrial

flotsam became apparent as the things to hunt and gather. In opposition to inner-city life, on the shore we were able to naturalize with the deep rhythms of place.



Figure 14. Alana Fitzgerald, Slime Witch Raft, The Battle For Mau Mau Island, 2012. Image Courtesy Tod Seelie.

When Hurricane Sandy destroyed the small house I moved into on Rockaway Beach, it was a mini apocalypse. This is an experience repeating at increasing frequency all over the globe. The ocean, wind and rain came as an unimaginably powerful force; roaring and unstoppable. I was pushed into survival mode for years to come. Walking around in the aftermath, I saw piles of debris mingling in the landscape with piles of donated food and clothing. Destruction became its own language and evidence. People were generous with one another in the wake of collective loss. The fractured and recomposed forms that I draw and paint were validated by this encounter. It was the moment my awareness of climate change fused fully with artistic method. Water has played an evolving role in my life and practice, transforming in the aftermath of Sandy. On the first anniversary of the storm, I gathered a group of women to sing at the ocean as an act of healing, an offering which linked climate precarity to community ritual. From there I understood ways that ritual could meet relational aesthetics and become integrated into my artistic language.

Ecological disaster was only one facet of the ongoing ruptures I experienced; displacement was not the only trauma. Anna Tsing's writing elucidates the interrelatedness: she argues that precarity is not an isolated event or exceptional but a condition of the Anthropocene.³⁸ There is shared instability woven into environments and systems equally. The practice of reconstructing the environment became a metaphor for reconstructing one's own life. Tending to the earth can be like tending to a violated body.

³⁸ Tsing, Anna, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt, eds. *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*. University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

I experienced the violence of extraction and being taken advantage of. In deep ways, ecofeminism confronts experiences like mine.

Lightning is mythologized as an initiatory force associated with a sudden shock. It can also bring clarity and illumination. Meetings with trees struck by lightning in 2008 and 2025 were moments when this symbolism lined up with my artistic process. Its aftermath is marked by the evidence that something has been split apart. As natural forces have frequently been activating agents, lightning becomes a thread among many others through which the project navigates forces of destruction and regeneration.

Rupture is an ongoing event and methodology. Each major disruption has helped to reorganize my perception. The work I create looks like what it does because it is shaped by biography, like the way that a storm carves a shoreline. Rupture creates openings or voids from which we can create worlds.



Figure 15. Alana Fitzgerald, Installation: This is Fine, Monument to the Red Flags, 2024. Image courtesy of Alana Fitzgerald

The Activated Backwards Readymade:
Return to the Land of the Living

The *Activated Backwards Readymade* names a mode of contemporary art practice that emerges in response to a crisis of meaning within abstraction. As art's most legible ambassador, abstract painting was the canary in the coal mine. Just as the *Backwards Readymade* diagnoses a condition in which painting becomes emptied of depth and reduced to a sign of itself, the *Activated Backwards Readymade* insists on recalibrating the place of objects. It is not an abandonment of abstraction. In this activated form, art is re-grounded through accountability. In my studio practice, it is abstraction specifically that is redirected to material accountability for the systems it participates in, ethical consequences, and context within social structures.

In this modality, the work resists spectacle without denying circulation or artists' needs for financial support. It rejects a nostalgia for formalism and novelty-driven market logic. Art objects are capable of generating meaning through relation rather than signification alone. Abstraction becomes a world-making practice, capable of holding complexity, contradiction, and assisting in repair despite collapse. I do not imagine this work as existing totally outside institutional and market structures, nor would such a fantasy be ethical or sustainable. Survival is part of the reality this practice addresses.

The *Backwards Readymade* is a historical observation and evolves into an ongoing conceptual framework for contemporary art. Initially described as "relational aesthetics but with art objects", I refer to an imagined quasi-prop within an institutional intervention. I define this 'prop' as an *Activated Backwards Readymade*. This idea

expands beyond the gallery and into ecological and cosmic domains, where art objects participate in social interventions. They may also become environmental talismans, artifacts within living systems that re-enchant. The aura of Benjamin returns in a distributed fashion beyond commodity and spectacle.

In moving to Western North Carolina in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, I found a landscape of abundant biodiversity alongside cultural dissonance. In the rural area where I lived, I faced subtle forms of erasure: disappearance into the background. My art practice was no longer legible out of context, dislocated from the network I'd built for over a decade. Yet the ancient stillness of the Appalachian Mountains and its waterfalls and streams offered forms of belonging that were new to me. Over nearly a decade I learned through direct encounters with land: working with animals, practicing herbalism and participating in land stewardship that reattuned me to the seasons.

Ancient Future Farm began as an art project aimed at building community in the form of artist residencies. I wanted to offer space for indigenous wisdom keepers to provide healing and learning to the wider community. It was an offering, a way to join in an intention of re-wilding and un-colonizing by creating the space for sharing perspectives. I did not escape the realities of patriarchy and capitalism. Descended from European immigrants who entered through Ellis Island, I questioned my own participation in the complicated dialogues of farms in the south; on stolen homelands, and my right to allow or deny access there. In my apprenticeship to the land, I helped facilitate temporary community, ritual and collective art making. It was an experiment that lasted around 7 years. In the end, I don't feel that I succeeded in solving a problem but rather conducted an experiment.

I found that making art and caretaking both involve immense sensitivity. Nature awareness and Motherhood helped to reorganize my understanding of time and labor. Maternal time is nonlinear. Becoming attuned to it changed my work patterns. It gave me permission to recognize and embrace my neurodivergence. *Maternal Time* moves through cycles of interruption, sometimes exhausted, and at other times completely present. The maternal body structures the logic of the worlds I build. Experiencing multiple pregnancies and surgeries helped me to become aware of processes of transformation; being dismantled and put back together. Motherhood helped to deepen an understanding of crossing thresholds. Waves of the ocean directly correlated to my experience of shifting physicality up until birth. The jetty, the raft, and the liminal passages in this exhibition all echo the emotional topographies and patterns of maternal time.

One major art project from my time in North Carolina was the co-creation of the Art + Alchemy residency at Soul Fire Sanctuary in 2019. It was a week of relational aesthetics-as-ritual. Space was offered for pedagogy and making art in the forest. This event expanded my understanding of how to incorporate art within natural spaces to foster community. During this week, art processes were integrated into ecosystems of gatherings and experimental sound. This project clarified an interest in hybrid materiality and installation as an activated environment created for community.



Figure 16. Art and Alchemy Residency, Soulfire Sanctuary, NC. 2019. Image courtesy of Alana Fitzgerald.

"Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association... "...

"Museums are like the family sepulchers of works of art. They testify to the neutralization of culture."...the artist in the studio who can only regard the museum as a place of "reification" and "chaos,"...Adorno assigns the alternative position to...Marcel Proust, who in this account begins ... with "the afterlife of the work," which Proust sees from the vantage point of the spectator in the museum. For the idealist viewer..., the museum perfects the studio: it is a spiritual realm where the material messiness of artistic production is distilled away...Rather than a site of reification, then, the museum for

*Proust is a medium of animation. However, opposed the two terms appear, "reification" and "animation" call out for one another: just as the viewer must be posited as passive in order to be activated, the artwork must be deemed dead so that it can be resuscitated. Central to the modern discourse on the art museum, this ideology is basic to "art history as a humanistic discipline,"...to "enliven what otherwise would remain dead."*³⁹

In the above quotation, Hal Foster compares Theodor Adorno and Marcel Proust's ideas about the museum and its existential stakes. If the museum has been described as a mausoleum and the art gallery is...a car dealership? Where is it ethical to present what we have made? It is easier for critics to muse on the viability of art spaces than for artists to critique what we depend on. I am interested in how these institutions are already being reconfigured as active centers for community. What seems visible currently is that things have been changing. Museums, galleries, and related institutions are increasingly working towards becoming spaces of gathering and pedagogical exchange in addition to being venues of display.

It is not productive to ask whether art belongs inside of institutions, nor whether institutions must be rejected to reimagine the roles art can play. More importantly, it becomes about how artistic practices, materials, and encounters can participate in expanded systems of responsibility as they circulate through those spaces. The Activated Backwards Readymade arises from this context; it does not refuse the museum, but it is attuned to how objects circulate, their histories and consequences.

³⁹ Hal Foster, "After the White Cube," *London Review of Books* 37, no. 6 (March 19, 2015): 25, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v37/n06/hal-foster/after-the-white-cube>.

In the case of the Duchampian readymade, displacement alone was sufficient to produce meaning. The *Activated Backwards Readymade* returns art objects to systems in motion. This does not undo abstraction or negate institutional value; it specifically repositions abstraction as an active participant in storytelling within material ecologies. It is not and has never been neutral. Questions of labor, maintenance, survival, and waste are no longer pushed away and externalized. They become structuring conditions.

This re-framing challenges the assumption that art is insulated from consequence. The studio can no longer be imagined as a sealed environment in which materials circulate without residue or responsibility. When attuned to contemporary realities, artmaking becomes accountable over time via practices of repair and reuse. What breaks is not necessarily discarded but folded back into 'the compost pile'. Forms of labor historically devalued or feminized such as mending, stewardship, and maintenance are central, not supplementary activities.

Hybrid materiality and sourcing are not stylistic choices; they result from necessity. After Hurricane Sandy, I began collecting plastic bags from around the beaches and roadsides of Rockaway. After the disaster, I felt I should glean materials with some form of ecological remediation in mind. I began braiding the bags into long ropes, tying them around a fence provided to me by the Rockaway Waterfront Alliance. They became draped loops, referencing fishing nets and climbing ropes; bringing 60s artist Eva Hesse outdoors. Later I became aware of Sheila Pepe and "hot mess formalism". They are provisional decoration, suggesting usefulness; but how? With no studio, I worked in my kitchen braiding plastic bags. I continued doing this for the past 13 years, and they persist as elements of my installation work. They shapeshift depending on the environment and

show that meaning is generated by tangles of ideas. Materials live on through evolving processes.

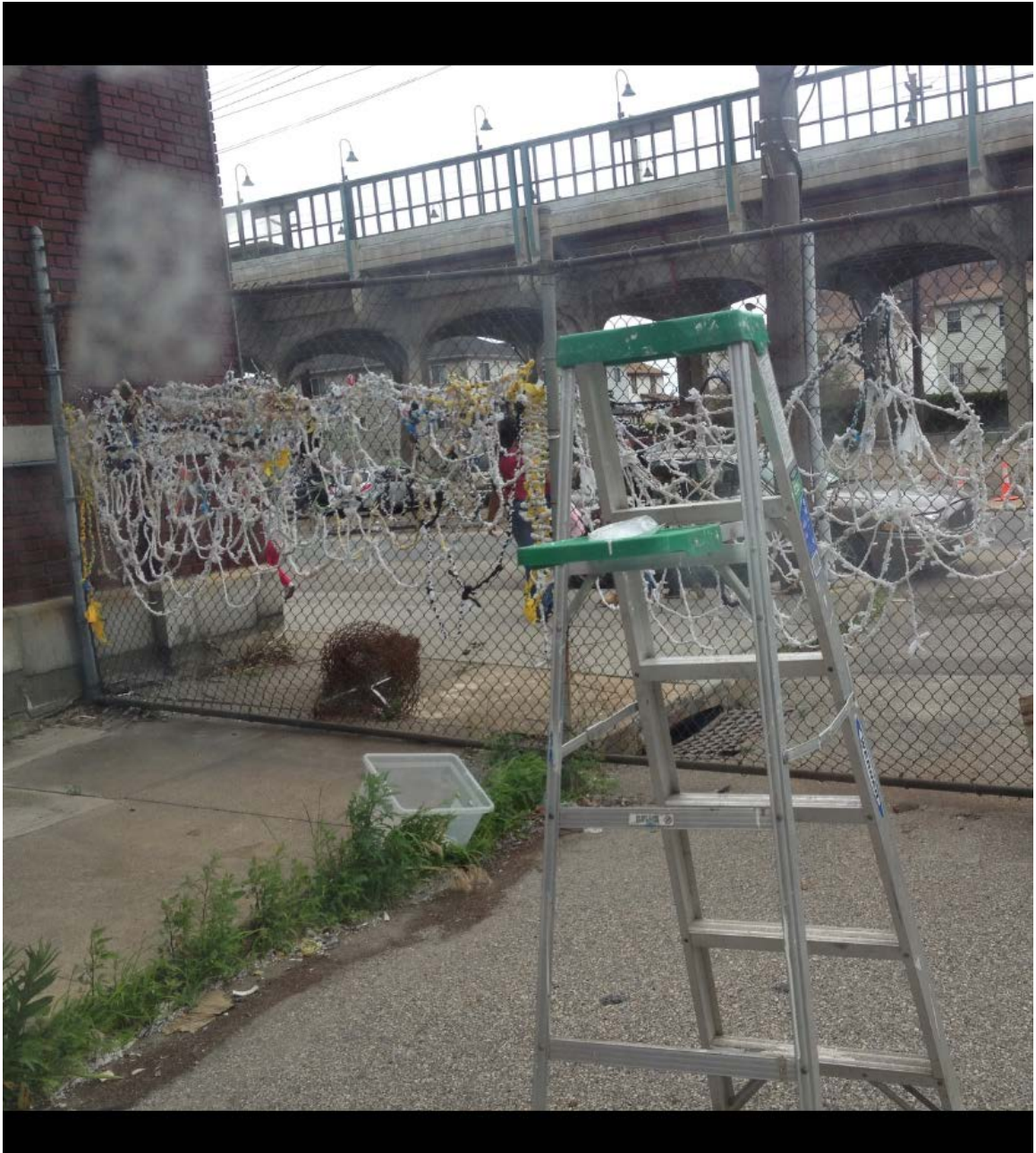


Figure 17. Alana Fitzgerald, Installation, Rockaway Waterfront Alliance, 2013. Image courtesy of Alana Fitzgerald.

Robin Wall Kimmerer describes reciprocity as the ethical starting point for ecological lifeways; proposed social ecosystems are inspired by healthy wild ones. Donna Haraway's concept of "making kin" supposes that survival depends upon interspecies collaboration. New definitions of kinship from humans only to include the "more than human" connects us to expanded webs of belonging. These catch us when other nets fail to. Participation in re-worlding involves acknowledging systems in collapse while believing that alternatives can be practiced now. In the context of the polycrises, artistic practice is its own type of infrastructure. It builds spaces for processing collapse. This is not to deny the continuing value of museums and galleries. On the contrary, as common lands, civic spaces and informal community infrastructures disappear, these institutions take on progressive roles as sites of gathering and interpersonal connection across differences. Contemporary art has become expansive enough to hold questions that reach beyond itself. Art is not supplemental, not simply what we use to decorate our homes. It is one of the most necessary tools we have for imagining our way out of crises and despair. We also need one another. I have learned that it is not enough to run to the hills and make art in the forest alone; it means more when the process can be received by and shared with an engaged audience. From this vantage point, I do not seek to solve institutional problems or propose ideal futures. I argue for the value of academia and arts institutions as vital nodes of community along with space for the transmission of creative ideas for artists and viewers alike.

Methods and Studio Ecology

My studio practice is animated by non-linearity. I do not develop works one at a time, everything happens simultaneously. Painting generates data through intuitive interfacing. Drawings generate content for paintings; paintings inspire sculptural forms. Next, sculptures and gathered elements expand into environments, and installations feed back into the languages of 2-D media. Photographs of installations and landscapes are incorporated into digital collages. At times these collages are printed and reintegrated into installations. Each element feeds and composts the others, forming a continuous loop of transformation. This self-generation is the work itself. Objects are artifacts. My goal is to resist hierarchical distinctions between the media.

Recursion as a concept is helpful to me because it allows for failure and revision. I utilize it more poetically than literally. Used in this way, it becomes a feedback loop: I re-humanize digitally mediated gestures seen through the screen, and re-employ ideas related to machine learning to turn back towards the analog. These inclinations relate to the rhizomatic theories in Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*⁴⁰, which borrow from nature to demonstrate a non-hierarchical and nonlinear arrangement of systems.

As with a fractal process, a computer program consults itself to generate solutions based upon its own precedents. In art or philosophy, it's a self-referential pattern. In an "ancient-futuristic" move, I borrowed the concept of recursion from computer science

⁴⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

and applied it to material practice. Rather than discarding things that I find unsuccessful, materials are reabsorbed into the system. This is a way to recycle or “compost”, keeping things out of the trash and in motion. Sources of waste become a valuable nutrient source, and the studio functions as its own environment.

Structure is built into the work through assemblage rather than decorative notions about design. Materials are stacked and accumulated, generating provisional spatial relationships. The work is an environment rather than a discreet object, which invites movement and dialogue with perception. Assemblage allows disparate materials to coexist without resolution. Art materials are paired with trash. It is realistic for things to resist coherence. Space in my work is layered with intersecting histories and conversations. It results in the production of atmospheric clouds of meaning that are felt as much as seen. We exist between two lights: the fading of the illusions of the past and the hopeful glow of possible futures. I encourage discernment as we face global reckonings between false light and truth. The sun burns brighter than the screen. This moment is disorienting but it is also generative. My work inhabits the in-between. *Between Two Lights* identifies a tension between opposites, as binaries appear and then fade.

The raft in the exhibition becomes a vessel for crossing. It’s something capable of moving between the institutional space of art and the outside world. Its meaning changes in relation to its context. In the gallery, my raft is a sculpture and a memorial altar. On water, it invites viewers to experience nature, build community, and create new rituals. The artwork becomes a microcosm. It does not try to resolve its contradictions but to shed light upon them by inviting viewers to encounter complexity without closure. In this

way a raft is also an activated backwards readymade; starting as an art object but returning to the world with purpose and gathering material significance. The form is accessible. It belongs to no single discipline: part sculpture, part ritual object, part offering, part vehicle.

The potential I seek is not only in an unfolding of either assemblage or autopoiesis, but in what Donna Haraway terms *sympoiesis* in her book *Staying with the Trouble*. It is where the work leaves the studio and encounters an audience. Haraway's concept is related to recursive dynamics but connects to outside influences (as in community). Sympoiesis means "making-with," and describes systems that emerge through decentralized networks of collaboration. "*Naturecultures*", again from Haraway. The notion of creativity in a vacuum is challenged, emphasizing the rise of form and content through a web of relationality. Within the studio, everything and everyone involved participates in feedback loops that shape results. Nothing operates alone but as interconnected processes within an evolving ecology, real and theoretical. Artistic output can be positioned within a wider exploration of environmental repair and collective reimagining. I propose that it would be beneficial to bridge gaps between art and science, art, and infrastructure. Haraway rejects categories between organisms and machines in *A Cyborg Manifesto*, which initiates important discourses around queer and gender theories. Rather than proposing a return to nature in its mythical prior state of purity, these ideas acknowledge that realities are more complex. It is more productive to work from where we are than to wait for an ideal future which will not appear. From this standpoint I justify my choice to work in heterogenous and hybrid materiality, embracing cycles of death and rebirth.

CHAPTER 2: SEA- RAFT, JETTY, THRESHOLD, RELATIONAL AESTHETICS AND INTER-DIMENSIONAL TRAVEL

Spirit Protector- The Raft, Cave Walls, and Ritual

Between Two Lights begins in the first chamber, corresponding to the ‘Earth’ realm in the cosmology. Earth, sea, and sky correlate to the ancient Irish cosmological structure. As conceptual registers, these realms allow material and gesture to move between them. Unstretched paintings that resemble cave walls cover the far wall of the lobby and its institutional signage. Mother Earth has entered the building. In temporal collapse and flattening, the past becomes accessible and experienced in dialogue with the present. The sediment layers of the earth hold not only what has come before, but what continues to exist.

Seated in the lobby is a full-scale 8x8 foot raft made of wood and food-grade barrels for flotation. It is a functional boat that began as a sculptural installation. Carved phrases mark the reclaimed wood, allowing inscription and graffiti to converge. By positioning it centrally in the exhibition, it asks the viewer to consider how we might navigate state changes.

The raft is an activated sculpture, a memorial that promises to move out of the gallery. Eventually, it will move into the world and onto water as a working boat. Positioned between cosmological realms, it becomes a reminder of ancient rituals and

burial boats. I invite viewers to make charcoal rubbings on the inscriptions. This recalls grave rubbings, activating it as a collaborative drawing apparatus. Within the exhibition, it becomes a landmark, offering a place to encounter memory and consider passage. It is an altar in its static state, hung with bells and fake flowers, illuminated by candles.

Unlike monumental forms of invoking permanence, the raft is scrappy and provisional. Tree branches from roadsides are combined with reclaimed wooden boards. It is designed to be expanded upon, drift to various locations, and exist in the elements. The sense of changeability guides us conceptually. The raft acknowledges that the water is an active, living participant, and that precarity is part of our present condition. Spirit Protector resists fantasies of mastery and instead proposes doing what we can with what is available.

The hanging cave wall paintings collapse distinctions between installation and architecture, painting, and sculpture. Their surfaces intervene in institutional space and their relationship to nature. Meant to be immersive, close-up details of the rock formations in underground caves, they're abstract "paintings" too. They incorporate clothing I've sewn in, reusing domestic debris. This fabric is layered and draped to resemble stalactites, stalagmites and fissures. Paint is crusted on repeatedly to become geological. The failed attempt to return human byproducts back to nature is poignant. What does it mean to re-introduce the land, however abstracted, into the space of the institution?

These abstractions are also realism. Across the globe, clothing mingles into mud, mountainsides, oceans and piles of debris. I'm recycling clothing my children have worn out or grown out of. I have mounds of leftover unsold products from my clothing

reselling business, and things I've gathered from the surplus of the goodwill by the pound outlet. Like Leslie Martinez's paintings, these works compost and incorporate fabric as topology. While Martinez's vistas seem photographically epic, mine attempts to become natural features. They are unstretched, existing in space as 2 and 3-D. It is my response to artists in the lineage of Sam Gilliam; I nod to his liberation of painting from the stretcher bars. I stretch them into architectural intervention and back towards the damaged landscape.

The first paintings were in caves. Hands, animals and traces of us as stick figures and outlines were common subject matter. From contemporary detritus, I want to return to that cave with everything we've created since. Mountains of clothing mixed with old computers and broken shoes, antique glass bottles. How can we make an offering of the things that we cannot get rid of? I have made failed attempts to return remnants of domestic life to nature through the creation of objects inspired by the natural landscape. There is no pure nature to return to; no community untouched by the environmental effects of human civilization. However, there are still ancient places in the land held sacred.

In 2021 I made a pilgrimage to the cave of the Morrigan in Ireland. She is a sovereignty goddess and shapeshifter. Patriarchal readings cite her cave as a mouth to hell, but upon entry into the dark, muddy cavern, it is a womb-space. Sliding into a birth canal-shaped passage to emerge reborn; it is a site of initiation that people have visited since time immemorial. It is a place of power, an expression of bodily resonances on the earth.

In Kentucky, where I now live, the landscape also includes many caves: ancient cave bare bones lie along a sprawling underground lake in neighboring Indiana. Deep in the earth, there are material archives and records connecting us to longer timelines of wisdom and story. There are languages older than human ones. My ‘cave paintings’ could be described as tapestries, their narratives reminding us that beneath the ground are hidden worlds. The story is embedded, not illustrated, through the up-close experience of a habitat.



Figure 18. Alana Fitzgerald, Installation View Cave Walls and Raft, 2026. Image courtesy of Alana Fitzgerald.

The raft in the gallery is for salvaging oneself, recalling adventures in earlier times and envisioning the possibility of future excitement. It is there for making rubbings on, rocking it back and forth to make the bells jingle. As a narrative anchor for me, it is dedicated to a person as well as the disturbed waters of the world. It is an offering to grieve and grieve. The raft can be an ark, a meditation pod, a bed, a platform for protest, a nest, an altar, and a sovereign territory.

Spirit Protector was originally conceived in deep black as a static presence for the lake at Bernheim forest. The drawings showed native water lilies planted all around it. I had got Orien on board to come to Kentucky and help me get it afloat if I were successful in my proposal. He called my prototype a “pixie battle raft”, and it was. It was designed to evoke the vocabulary of Louise Nevelson’s assemblages. Her monochrome wooden structures turned everyday into monolithic without the pretension of minimalism. She is a guiding figure, as she had challenged her role as a homemaker to become an artist at age 40. At Cooper Union, a big Louise Nevelson assemblage watched over students in the foundation building. Her witch archetype, affinity with the queer community and refusal to be limited by her age speaks to my identity. She was unafraid to be campy and uncategorized. Referencing her work’s black color was meant to act as a protective shield. It is the color of the void, from which all things come and in which all colors converge. The wood was designed as a diamond shaped accumulation, vaginal, and explicitly oriented to the feminine. It was called Spirit Protector.

When Orien left us, I could not think much of the raft. I could not even leave my bed. He looms large as a figure in my personal mythology and was truly aligned with the

work I hold dearest. He was important as a friend and confidant. During the years I felt stuck in the mountains, I imagined one day we could make a treehouse village or that I would be able to collaborate with him again after completing my MFA. When I took my work back up, we reconnected and schemed about future collaborations. I thought that there was more time.

When I did get up, it was to pray. Singing turned into instinctive *keening*. I pulled together a group of women for a grief choir, inspired by keening but allowing for an experimental bespoke sonic grief-ritual. Fire and flowers were on the water again, colorful smoke rising to the sky as the sun set.



Figure 19. *Between Two Lights*, Installation View, 2026. Image courtesy of Alana Fitzgerald.

Walking around New York, one sees many makeshift altars known as Ghost Bikes in honor of cyclists killed in accidents. It would have to be a ghost-raft. I thought of the women, singing at the water, a recurring theme. These rituals arise out of necessity, not for performance, but for genuine grief work. I do not pursue them, but these moments come and are important to my work. Ghost bikes cling to lampposts and electrical poles, usually painted white and adorned with flowers and trinkets. I re-imagined the raft as white, an altar and offering to the one who introduced me to the world of boats. It would not be a vessel for self-imposed solitude, but for healing and unity. It became obvious that isolation is not the answer. Through the aesthetic of the ghost bike (ghost raft), I acknowledge loss. It is a critique of violence against bodies, rivers and ecosystems. It is a ritual object and a peace offering. As a spectral presence on the water with its bells tinkling, it insists on attention. The sound marks perpetual interruption. It will temporarily reclaim the water for honoring, gathering, and environmental art-activism and play. The raft is a psychopomp: a substitute body, a vessel for the human spirit, and a go-between.



Figure 20. Alana Fitzgerald, *Spirit Protector Detail*, 2026. Image courtesy of Alana Fitzgerald.

The Jetty

Connecting the lobby with the gallery is an altar made with hybrid sculptural elements and readymade debris. Acting as a bridge, I call this piece the “domesticated jetty.” Its spiral shape spans two spaces and opposes an open horseshoe, suggesting a journey. The jetty is constructed from cardboard, plaster, cast and dripped concrete, paper mache, clothing, and stones from the city of Louisville and Ancient Future Farm. Through accumulation, it sits between ancient monuments and contemporary constructions. The materials carry histories that do not often cohere. They come from industrial production, domesticity, and wild areas.

Unlike monumental earthworks that attempt to be eternal, this jetty remains obviously haphazard and ephemeral. It falls somewhere between a ruin and a pathway. It is the spine of the installation, and its shape is inspired by ancient patterns. Drawing on Donna Haraway’s theory of situated knowledge, the spiral threads through multiple histories, including those I carry through research and lived experience. This work draws upon experience with the jetties of Rockaway Beach, New York, a symbolic memento of the sea. It merges personal and ancestral histories, and its haphazard presentation is derived from memories of nature as well as the compositional strategies of Russian Suprematism.

The installation also engages critically with the history of land art. Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*⁴¹ is canonical but marked by frontier logic and the imposition of a monumental gesture upon "untouched land". My version engages domestic materiality as a starting point. It reverses the impulse that drove land art: instead of imposing human touch onto the landscape, the landscape returns to symbolically enter the institution. In alignment with Haraway's call to "make kin, not monuments.", the hybrid land is invited into the gallery.

The piles of clothing embedded within the jetty reference donated clothing I encountered and helped sort after Hurricane Sandy. These mounds evoked ancient cairns and burial sites. Research into megalithic structures and ancient earthworks inform the jetty's form and placement. These historical sites functioned as communal constructions shaped over generations, with meaning evolving. Within the installation are fragments of paintings in various stages of deconstruction. In some cases, they are sewn into boulder shapes, stuffed with household plastics. Paintings are materials among other materials. This reconstruction resists the obsessive preservation of painting in a single sentimentalized form.

The jetty's relationship to the raft expands these concerns. Contradictions and meetings come into view: the womb and grave, land and water. The raft and jetty are companions in assemblage and in navigating the liminal, both move between stages of narrative and conceptual dimensions.

⁴¹ <https://www.artforum.com/news/robert-smithsons-spiral-jetty-added-to-national-register-historic-places-1234724179/>

The domesticated jetty is a repetition of the forms of ceremonial architecture that are continuous and repeatable. Ancient cosmological structures and symbolism are not lost; they have been obscured by modernity's dirty lenses. This installation reflects a larger project of rebuilding grounded worldviews through hybridity, creating conditions for sustainable systems to develop. The transformation of shifting material narratives is a reflection of the exhibition's drift from Earth through Sea toward Sky. The spiral becomes a visual and physical metaphor for patterns that recur over time, where the past and future overlap. In this way, it becomes an instrument for interdimensional navigation.



Figure 21. Robert Smithson, Spiral Jetty, 1970. Photo Courtesy of Nancy Holt/Holt/Smithson Foundation.



Figure 22. Alana Fitzgerald. *Installation View, Domestic Jetty*, 2026. Image courtesy of Alana Fitzgerald.

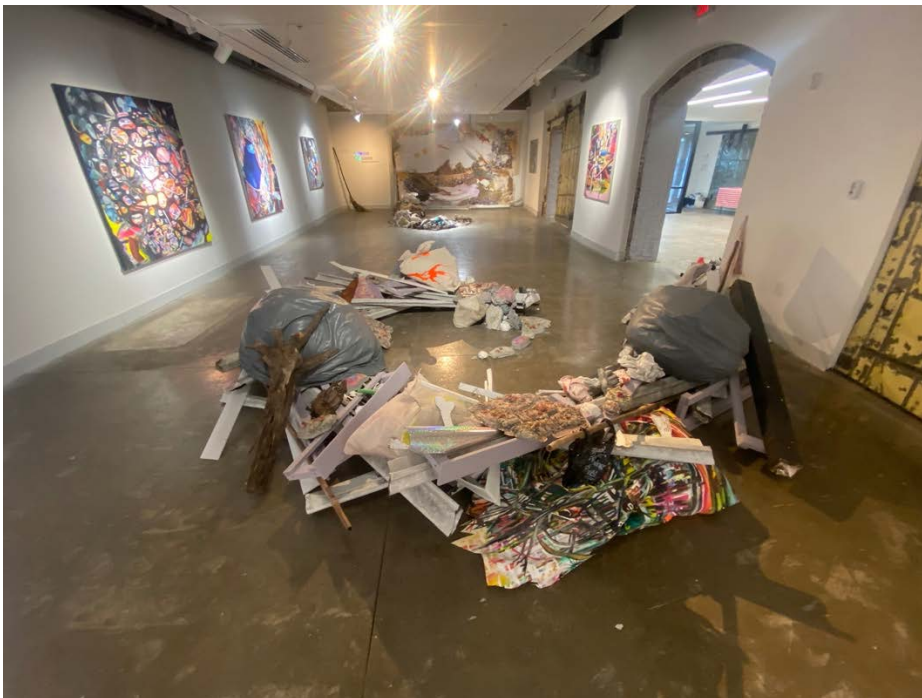


Figure 23. Alana Fitzgerald. *Installation View 2, Domestic Jetty*, 2026. Image courtesy of Alana Fitzgerald.

CHAPTER 3: SKY- LIMINALITY, INTERDEPENDENCE AND EMERGENT FUTURES

The Gallery as a Time Machine

The MFA Gallery opens to the viewer as a temple for speculation and vision. As viewers approach the gallery, the fractured jetty continues inward like a pathway that spirals through the room guiding movement. Large-scale paintings line the walls, functioning as discrete objects, atmospheric conditions, and a codex. It is a body of work in conversation, each speaking across the room in different languages. The architecture of the gallery is subtly altered through the installation of a painting that became incidentally pictorial through texture. It relates to the work in the lobby but creates a next iteration of it. It obscures the windows. With natural light scarce, distinctions dissolve between interior and exterior, ancient and contemporary. It is intended as something between a natural history museum and a cave. The goal is to perpetuate a feeling of timelessness and dislocation. The installation becomes portal-like, establishing a link to the corresponding one installed in Kore Gallery, as does the final wall piece. This suggests an endless loop between two places. In doing so, I suggest parallel realities coexist rather than locating it all within one gallery. Movement through the gallery becomes a process of navigation across timelines.

Awareness of a portal connected to elsewhere is intended to activate the imagination. It proposes that perception is the bridge between two places, connecting fragmented environments through memory and speculation. The location of the exhibition is not fixed, because it is a complex of interacting forces and timelines. The aura of this work, in the spirit of Walter Benjamin, is Re-Distributed.



Figure 24. Alana Fitzgerald, Small Domestic Jetty and The Wild Winds, Kore Gallery 2026.

Image courtesy of Kore Gallery.

For this exhibition, painting operates as a reflective medium. The large-scale canvases surrounding the space are meant to be perceptual tools that modulate thinking.

They create emotional resonance that accumulates through layering. The paintings are intended to create conditions that viewers inhabit phenomenologically. The gallery space represents the sky, engaging the future as a place upon which to project possibility. It is the place for cloud-gazing. Donna Haraway's concept of sympoiesis, or collective "making-with," and call to "stay with the trouble" provides a goal. Rather than escaping ecological and social issues through purely utopian imagery, the work acknowledges disturbed ground as a place that possibilities emerge from. I do not attempt to resolve the tensions introduced in *Earth and Sea*, but allow them into a space of becoming, where evolution might be collectively negotiated. The future appears here as something that may emerge in multiple forms. Sometimes this manifests as horror and sometimes as joy. Most of the time it is something normal and in between, like a bag wrapped around a tree branch or a bottle on the ground between wild flowers.

The exhibition may be experienced through modes such as the drift: a type of movement that seeks viewer engagement and offers choices about what to engage with and when. Viewers navigate without a prescribed path, encountering forms through intuition. This is related to the Situationist *dérive* but extends beyond urban psycho-geography into varied environments and situations.

Rather than accepting the loss of aura described by Walter Benjamin as permanent, my project proposes that aura may be redistributed through certain decentralized methods of activation. Objects become charged with energy or cultural value through context and the specificities of their encounters with people and other

objects. While Isabelle Graw talks about paintings acquiring quasi-personhood⁴², I draw on traditions of animism and object fetishism to claim that these inclinations are still alive.

An example of this is seen in my installation *Ritual Container for the Inversion of Power Structures* (2013), which invited participants into a sculptural space constructed from reclaimed trees, salvaged fabric, plants, and printed digital collages. Visitors sat together on the floor within an inverted pyramid sculpture suspended from the ceiling, creating a temporary social environment. The work became a vessel for relationality, demonstrating how sculptural forms can generate social transformation. The pyramid in the center of the ceiling compelled most people who entered the space to sit on the floor and meet one another at the same level.



Figure 25. Alana Fitzgerald, *Ritual Container for the Inversion of Power Structures*, 2013. Image courtesy of Alana Fitzgerald.

⁴² Isabelle Graw, *The Love of Painting: Genealogy of a Success Medium* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2018), [23]



Figure 26. Alana Fitzgerald, Ritual Container for the Inversion of Power Structures, 2013.

Image courtesy of Alana Fitzgerald.

In a different way, the broom, a sculpture which appears in the corner of *Between Two Lights*, emerged as a recurring symbol within my milieu. It moves between its mundane role, ritual significance, and place as an artist's tool. It is an alchemical transformation: the housewife's broom becomes a witch's broom and then a paintbrush. Although this sorcery took place in my mind, it enabled me to change my circumstances.

The broom became a symbol of agency and reordering, of repair. Through this transformation, ordinary objects are reclaimed as technologies of liberation.



Figure 27. Alana Fitzgerald, Between Two Lights: Re-worlding After Abstraction, Installation view, 2026. Image courtesy of Alana Fitzgerald.

Painting- The Primal Interface and Portal

Contemporary painting exists in a paradoxical state. It is inseparable from commodity culture, yet capable of important existential questioning. I would like to sustain a practice that treats painting as a technology for thinking. It is a primitive computer, a receptacle for my mind outside of my body. The paintings do not operate only as autonomous objects; they function like codex pages embedded within installations. They become part of rituals for self-knowledge and investigation. There is strange and nostalgic beauty in the bright plastic colors that define consumer culture in America and make their way into our landscapes. I also acknowledge the magic in recording and discovering the uncanny through the interface of painting, opening visual portals between works and into surrealistic worlds.

In addressing contemporary critiques of “undead” abstract painting: there is a perpetual flow of work with surfaces that mimic historical motifs yet fail to engage with conceptual stakes. I feel that relying on aesthetics rather than reasons is what creates this emptiness. Additionally, the paintings are not sealed icons. They are interdependent members of a larger system, responding to history and current events. Their meaning intensifies through relation to context rather than through simple formal coherence.

The idea of the codex is an organizational concept useful for demonstrating how knowledge is presented through this body of paintings. Rather than a linear narrative, the

codex is a layering of knowledge distributed across multiple substrates. Each painting is a world of its own, but its meaning multiplies within the grouping. There are windows between them, in each one. This interpretation of the codex allows for opacity: the work does not need a historical background or single interpretation. Viewers are invited to navigate the exhibition as a landscape of symbols, where personal readings and perceptions assist in making meaning.

In my work, painting holds multiple timelines at once. Ancestral forms appear through symbolic references and contemporary correlations to current circumstances. The present time appears through chaotic compositional presentations, color, and recognizable representational objects. Speculation about a future time comes through in the way that the uncanny is combined with the known. Rather than seeking coherence; the paintings are places where things do not need to make sense.

Gestures are mediated rather than heroic and expressive. I tend to paint my paint marks. Juxtaposing precision with directness, I edit, smooth and layer marks. Surfaces of the canvas become a record of time, with space constructed from that buildup. Constant photographing and editing for digital clarity and coherence confuses an easy or apparent distinction between mark-making that is digital and analog. The handmade may resemble the slickness of screen space because I tighten my colors and shapes in an analog Photoshop process. The surface lives in innovative ways as a thinking platform that stretches the distance between the otherworldly spiritual dimension, the physical and the digital. My labor is obvious, creating richness through the investment of time spent working.

Symbols recur across the paintings. Planks, portals, trees, and clouds recur as ecological motifs. They are examples of the species within my built ecosystem. Boulders are compositional elements that give structure to the paintings, and they are also the building blocks of the world we inhabit. These repeated characters give us a sense of adjacency between worlds. The work insists on its opacity. Gestural mark making lives in the same forest as leaves and graphic stars. The symbols function to form environments that do not find themselves forced to confess specific personal meaning.

Ritual in painting is not distinctly performative. When painting is considered a ritual, we observe that composition constructs internal architectures. I have specific symbols that I allow in, ones that match up to elements both natural and formal. My work in painting contributes to the formation of its own ritualistic continuum by combining the energy of symbols with the crystallization of time. Objects and vessels extend this logic into the room; an installation becomes the container or temple wherein a ritual-like condition is activated. Its motifs and atmospheres hold and describe complexity. The paintings echo the 3-D installations without being diagrams. Within the meta-art ecology, painting is not obsolete and it can't be purely commodified because to do so would interrupt an ongoing conversation. It is a vessel for holding and sharing information, and an interface for generating it.

In this thesis, I use the term abstraction differently. I connect this twist to the lineage of Philip Guston⁴³. When Guston turned from pure abstraction toward reforming pictorial worlds, he returned with the residue of the otherworldly: the mysterious world of

⁴³ Dore Ashton, *A Critical Study of Philip Guston* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990)

non-objective reality. In this way he was able to signal the eerie fractures that have haunted the world for too long.

I consider abstraction to be a valuable means of coding and communication. I was trained in lineages of postwar abstraction in New York. My goal is to re-inscribe the language of painterly abstraction with eco-feminist and mythic frameworks. I privilege sensory intelligence and connection to place. It returns to traditional patterns that contain the language of landscape. I envision painting as a living, auto- or sympoietic ecology, returning it to realms and concerns it once obscured.

Re-worlding abstraction means refusing its historical association with universalism. It can no longer withdraw from the world and sit in a high tower. The year 2012 brought serious disruption to my emerging artistic practice and life. My practice had to reach beyond itself to bring research gained through lived experience back into visual form. Abstraction after 2012 is not disengaged but profoundly imprinted with subjectivities and stories told through materiality. I lived through this shift.

Painting in this body of work is intuitive communication. It explores what lives beyond words. In its production, it allows for a private space for self-determination without external mediation or imposed laws. It resists the sense of disposability that defines visual and internet culture, slowing us down to create a continuity of attention. This interrupts the speed and extraction that define contemporaneity.

The hand is a site of intelligence on somatic and sensory levels. The resulting information is unavailable through spoken or written language. Through touch I process memory, grief, and express neurodivergent perception. The gesture is mediated and by

self-consciousness and becomes a form of embodied thinking. My paintings carry traces of touch and pressure. The surface is slowly built by time and rhythm. Physical marks hold emotional and sensory knowledge. Painting remains important because it bridges the metaphysical and the material. The canvas becomes a 'place' where the visible and invisible meet.

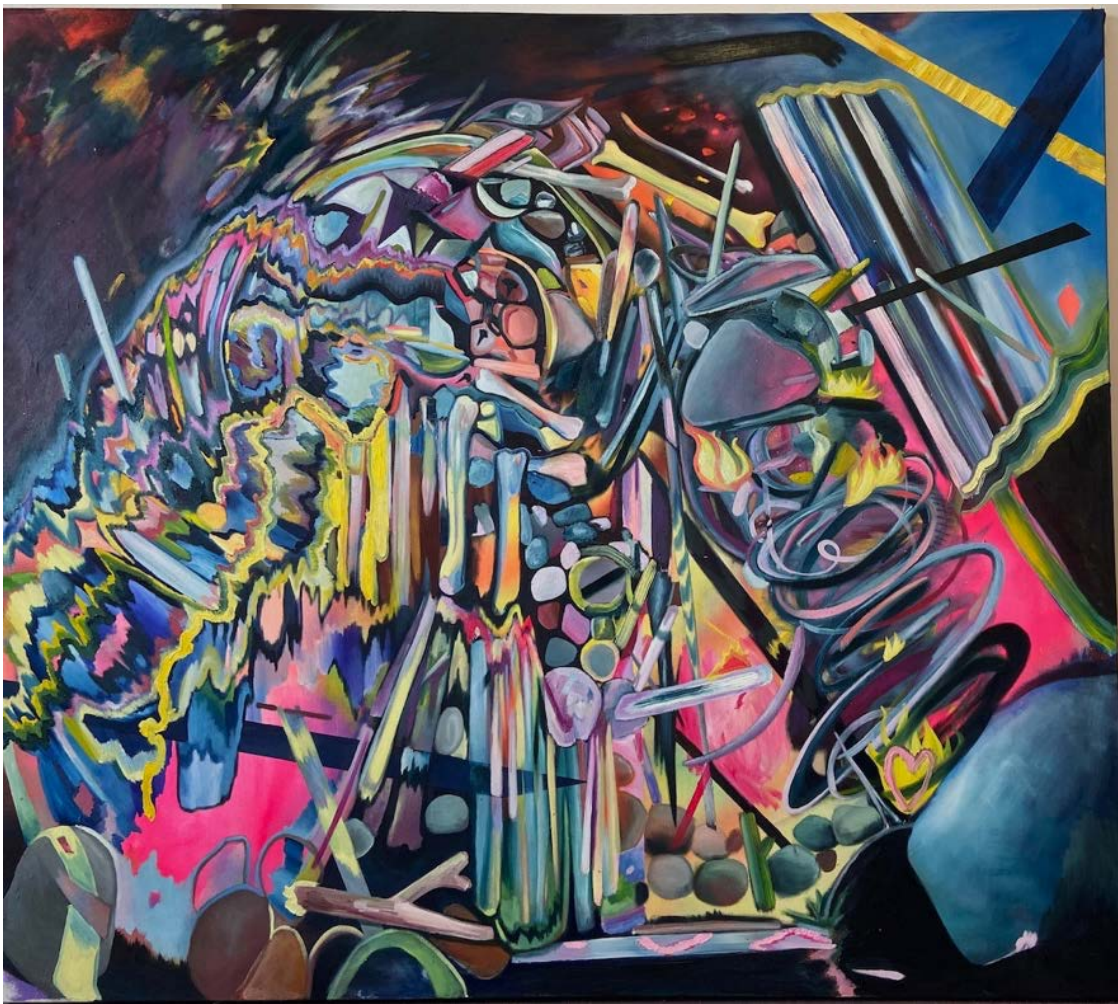


Figure 28. Alana Fitzgerald, To The Mound!, 2024. Oil on Canvas. Image courtesy of Alana Fitzgerald.



Figure 29. Alana Fitzgerald, *Caught Red Handed*, 2026. Oil on Canvas. Image courtesy of Alana Fitzgerald.

Re-Worlding After Abstraction

In this exhibition, I argue for abstraction's capacity to be ethically reactivated during times of planetary instability. This occurs when it is grounded in accountability for its materials and intentions. Re-worlding describes a process of rebuilding meaning from fragments. It is a method and guiding principle: working with what remains and what is available. Re-worlding includes the acceptance of damaged conditions as starting points, emphasizing repair and adaptation. Material reconstruction operates as a speculative practice. By reusing and recontextualizing forms and materials, the work models alternative systems of value. These forms do not predict the future but propose ways of inhabiting it differently than we have been.

The art gallery is reimagined as a temple, with the work as a rustic engine for generating ideas through material interplay. The multidimensional vocabularies present are offered as a bridge between individual narratives and shared experience, opening the work to multiple interpretations. I reach toward a living system that constantly transforms itself; dies and is reborn.

"Titled 'It all goes somewhere': in this painting we see the stick witch standing atop a stone monument containing the memory of the artist's pre-childbirth stomach. The stick witch battles a tornado of magic and garbage with a larger and more magical stick. There is an old television blazing with the fire of love within, stuck upside down in the trees. Shiny blobs of pink and black goo, stored in a chaotic bubble of material power that is likely living on the satellite of the moon, waiting to be beamed back to earth and disseminated at a later date when earth is once again safe. Trapper keeper of the apocalypse, archive of

the height of civilization- the 1990s- colliding with the ongoing poly-crisis and the forces of re-awakening elemental consciousness. “- Prose from Journal Notes.



Figure 30. Alana Fitzgerald, It All Goes Somewhere, 2025. Oil on Canvas. Image courtesy of Alana Fitzgerald.

Conclusion: Earth / Sea / Sky Converge

This thesis has presented the case that abstract art can connect to material accountability and theory, looking beyond aesthetics for meaning. *Between Two Lights* proposes a practice of re-worlding as a viable way of rebuilding within damaged systems, without seeking transcendence. However, I cannot pretend that there are *no* aesthetics at play in my work. My work's appearance is genuinely formed by repeating what I see. During an artist talk at Kore Gallery held in conjunction with the closing reception of *Between Two Lights*, a response from the audience revealed an expectation surrounding what "the earth" is presumed to look like in contemporary art. This response suggested that the earth is legible only through limited visual signifiers: brown, gray, green, understood as markers of a "pure" nature. That type of utopian fantasy does not help us. It reflects a widespread cultural tendency to equate ecologies with a narrow aesthetic field, visualized through nostalgia for a pre-industrial landscape. These landscapes, once a birthright, are increasingly privatized; available through privilege alone.

There is almost nothing to be encountered that is *not* of the earth. Plants, stones, bones, synthetic pigments, plastics, construction debris, and domestic remnants all participate in the same material continuum. We dig up and reveal matter that should have been buried; we compost the un-compostable. As oceans accumulate islands of plastic, construction netting, and industrial residue, the world no longer conforms to how "nature" is remembered to be. Purity is a fantasy. Hills conceal twists of garbage, fabric and bone. Bottle caps, pink barbie doll shoes and bits of tin live together with the worms in the mud. The traditional landscape persists as a mythic memory of virgin land that

never truly existed. To insist that only certain images or palettes can stand in for the earth is to deny the material conditions of the present.

My worldview aligns with Bruno Latour's demystification of divisions between "nature" and "culture" that have hung in the rafters of human consciousness for hundreds of years. Such separation is fiction, a negative fantasy obscuring reality. We inhabit hybrid systems where technologies, social realms, and materiality are inseparable within the confines of this planet from which most all matter comes. He describes this condition as a Gordian knot; it is an unsolvable problem that cannot be cut apart without misrepresenting it. Rather than isolating elements into separate domains, Latour insists that we attend to the ways these forces operate concurrently. Within this framework, my work does not position synthetic materials, pigments, or constructed forms as opposed to the earth. Instead, they are treated as evidence of the earth's contemporary condition. It is shaped by extraction and the effects of over-consumption. It is in need of sincere repair. Re-worlding does not seek to restore a lost or "pure" nature, but to work from within such complicated conditions.

My conclusion is to insist that the art object is not simply a product to consume but a portal into a worldview and a participant within larger webs of meaning. I believe that artists must take care of the context of the work's production. The ethical values from which it emerges are noted so that the conditions of production align with the values the work claims to hold. We might at least discuss and expose the trouble or lack of coherence therein. It is not meant to be moralizing, but to lean in closer to that which we hold dear. One observation I have gleaned from this research is not formal or art-historical but ethical in nature. The solution is not a novel aesthetic, but the intentional

cultivation of conditions that allow art to mean anything good at all. We need conditions that are self-sustaining. The work that I ask for is an artifact from or model of worlds yet to come, powered by our silly little imaginations.



Figure 31. Alana Fitzgerald, We Can't Go Back, 2026. Mixed Media. Image courtesy of Kore Gallery.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

Alana Fitzgerald, b. New York City.

EDUCATION

Master of Fine Arts, Studio Art and Design, 2026 University of Louisville, Louisville, KY

Bachelor of Fine Arts, 2009 The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, New York, NY

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

SOLO

2026 Between Two Lights: Re-Worlding After Abstraction, Kore Gallery, Louisville KY

2026 Between Two Lights: Re-Worlding After Abstraction, Hite MFA Gallery

2024 After Making Monuments, Hite MFA Gallery, Louisville, KY

2012 The Shape of Magic, Magic Pictures Gallery, Philadelphia, PA

2011 Mysterious Mysteries, Magic Pictures Gallery, Philadelphia PA

GROUP

2025 Thresholds: Nothing is Fixed Here, Northern Kentucky University

2025 COLOR, CICA Museum, Gimpo, South Korea

2025 Color as Space: Modes of Abstraction, Capacity Contemporary Exchange,
Louisville, KY

2025 Shifts in Scale and Perspective: Alana Fitzgerald and Nahla Joy, Hite MFA Gallery,
Louisville KY

2025 If they Told You, Would You Listen? Karen and Ted Koskores Gallery, Thayer
Academy, Braintree MA

2025 *Meeting* at Shaker Village, Harrodsburg, KY

2025 Paired Influence, Schneider Hall Gallery, University of Louisville, KY

2024 LVA Juried Exhibition, Cressman Center for Visual Arts, Louisville, KY

2024 Fresh, Madison County Arts Council, Marshall NC

2024 *Not Another Group Show*, Hite MFA Gallery, Louisville, KY

2024 *Beyond the Elements*, Hite MFA Gallery, Louisville, KY

2023 *Recent Relics*, Hite MFA Gallery, Louisville, KY

2023 New Love, Madison County Arts Council, Marshall NC

2022 *Three Points of Light*, Soulfire Sanctuary, Black Mountain, NC

2020 Distanced but not Distant, Art Garden AVL, Asheville NC

2016 Water is Life Benefit for Standing Rock, Salvage Station, Asheville, NC

2013 Noodle Beaches for Meeting Witches, Secret Project Robot, Brooklyn NY

2013 *Headscapes*, Chasama Art Space, Long Island City, NY

2012 – The Brucennial, NYC (The Bruce High Quality Foundation)

2011 The Brucennial, NYC (The Bruce High Quality Foundation)

2011 – *The Bricoleurs*, BRIC Rotunda Gallery, Brooklyn, NY

2009 The Antepenultimate Jubilee: A Survey of Ancient Futures, The Cooper Union,
NYC

2008 Goodbye, Utopia! La MaMa La Galleria, NYC

2008 *Yale Norfolk Annual Student Exhibition*, Norfolk, CT

2008 *The Right People*: Alana Fitzgerald, Eric N. Mack and Eleanor Swordy, Houghton
Gallery, Cooper Union, NYC

2007 Lo-Fine: Works in the Pixel Process, Cooper Union (co-curated with Devin Kenny)

RESIDENCIES/FELLOWSHIPS

2008 Yale, Norfolk Summer School of Music and Art, Yale University, Norfolk CT

2012 – Marina 59 BOATEL Artist Residency, Rockaway Beach, NY

2011 – Pequignot Palace Residency, New Hampton, MO

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Instructor of Record, University of Louisville, Foundation Drawing 2025-2026

Instructor of Record, University of Louisville, Foundation 2-D Design, 2024-2025

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Intern, Duke Riley Studio, Brooklyn, NY 2024

Studio assistance and fabrication support for large-scale multidisciplinary projects.

Independent Curator, Asheville, NC 2016–2023

Founder of Ancient Future Farm, Western North Carolina 2014–Present

Arts and Crafts Coordinator and Curator, Nature’s Corner Country Store, Barnardsville,
NC 2013–2015

Production Designer Film and Television Productions, New York, NY 2010–2013

Scenic Painter Film and Television Productions, New York, NY 2010–2013

Prop Buyer and Prop Fabrication Assistant Film and Television Productions, New York,
NY 2010–2013

Studio Assistant, Calvin Grimm, Woodstock, NY- 2010-2011

Studio Assistant, Wayne Gonzales Studio, New York, NY 2007–2009

Studio Assistant, Lisa Sigal Studio, Brooklyn, NY 2008 Fabrication and installation for the Armory Show and the Whitney Biennial.

Studio Assistant Katrín Sigurðardóttir Studio, New York, NY 2006–2007

Video Editor Tomashi Jackson Studio 2008

Honors/Awards

Outstanding Graduate Student Award, Hite Institute of Art and Design, University of Louisville

Graduate Teaching Assistantship, Hite Institute of Art and Design, University of Louisville 2024-2026

Dr. Mary Craik Scholarship for Women Students, University of Louisville 2024-25, 2025-26

Graduate School Scholarship, University of Louisville, 2024

Michael S. Vivo Memorial Prize in Painting, 2009

Academy of American Poets Elizabeth Kray Prize, 2008

Full Tuition Scholarship to The Cooper Union, 2006-2009