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From Beyond

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From Beyond

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Fine Arts

by

Dana DeNoux

B.A. Southeastern Louisiana University, 2013

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Abstract

My artworks are informed by my experiences in the landscape at dusk. As the sun sets, the energy of the landscape shifts and a whole new world of the unseen arise. Through my artworks, I seek to encapsulate the emotions that the landscape evokes at this time. I explore my own desires of being immersed in the natural world, as well as my wonder and respect for its mysteries. Through darkness and light, my artworks investigate the unknown, or the idea of the unknown, beyond what the senses perceive.

Keywords; painting, ominous, mythology, landscape, light, photography

Introduction

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
of elevated thoughts; A sense of sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man.¹

-Wordsworth

There is a special time of the day... that moment when the sun disappears and all the creepy-crawlies come out. The energy of the landscape shifts from light to dark, from quiet to loud, from tranquil to threatening. When in the wilderness at this time, I feel like an unwanted guest, an invader. As the sense of sight becomes compromised, all the other senses are heightened. Every other creature out at this time has evolved to adapt to this environment of darkness, but my senses fail me. My position on the food chain is suddenly threatened. It can be an enlightening and thrilling experience. The fear I feel is coupled with respect and awe. The natural landscape evokes a sense of presence and of presences, as exemplified in the Wordsworth poem, quoted above. It can be both disturbing and uplifting.

Throughout the centuries, much of the inhabited landscape has changed for our convenience and comfort. Today we experience the landscape differently than our primal

¹ William Wordsworth quoted by Joseph Campbell, *Myths of Light: Eastern Metaphors of the Eternal*, New World Library, Novato, California, 2003, 31.

ancestors. We are often distanced from the wilderness and are rarely confronted with our place in the circle of life. Most of the trees I see are through the protective glass of car windows. At night, artificial light blocks out the stars and headlights light my way through the dark. There is an eerie quality to the landscape when intruded upon by man-made alterations that subvert natural order.

My artworks are a visual investigation of the moments in which I feel reverence for nature and its foreboding and inviting qualities. Major themes include collaborations of the ominous, myth, the circle of life, and light. These themes help articulate my interests in how the wilderness shapes spirituality both culturally and personally. When I use the term spirituality I mean it in the broadest sense possible. For me, the spirituality I seek and experience is of feeling connected to the vastness of the universe. Nature especially channels spirituality because of its boundless mysteries. It has had a profound influence on myths and beliefs around the world. The forest in particular has been the source of fantastic tales for centuries. It is the realm of mythical creatures and horror legends, of fairies and monsters.

I want my artworks to exist in the liminal space between sinister and inviting, welcoming and inhospitable, grim and enchanting. I concentrate in painting, sculpture and photography. I create paintings of ominous landscapes which often contain gnarled branches, and dark pathways. My intention is to leave the viewer questioning whether or not they would enter this or a similar space. Depending on one's interpretation it can seem uninviting, or in opposition very appealing. I photograph state parks and wildlife reserves and try to express the dichotomies that I strive for in my paintings. Often my photographs inspire my paintings, although I usually rely on memory to paint. I also have a series of assemblage sculptures utilizing the physical remnants of these places (such as twigs, bark, and vines) to create skeletal animals. All of my artworks are

inspired by my experiences of the landscape around my home. I draw from moments when the landscape transfixes me and when I feel closer to nature.

The Ominous

The title for my Thesis exhibition, *From Beyond*, is borrowed from a short story by H.P. Lovecraft. In the story a man, through the help of a mad scientist, is briefly able to see into another dimension which contains monsters and ghosts, an experience that he carries with him for the rest of his life, to his horror. I chose to reference this story because my childhood home was haunted for a time. I had persistent nightmares. Years later, my mother told me about the incident, which allowed me to piece together something that had once happened. I thought I just had bad nightmares that would linger into the daytime. But once the notion of a haunting was introduced to me, some of the unexplained instances (of looming shadows, frightening visions, noises, and moving objects) started to assemble into a coherent order. The skeptic in me sometimes denies it, but there are a couple of very vivid memories that make me think, just maybe. In my oil painting *Nightmare* I painted what I imagine waking up from one of my nightmares look like.



Figure. 1: *Nightmare*, oil on paper, 12"x12", 2015

Blood red and black vines cover the image while a bright light peaks through the center. The ominous aspect of my artworks stems from my supernatural experiences as well as my fear of and respect for natural forces.

The ominous, is the feeling that something harmful is lurking. I have always found a kindred spirit in the author H.P. Lovecraft. He shares my love for the forest. He wrote, “Close by my home there lies a singular wooded hollow in whose twilight deeps I spent most of my time; reading, thinking, and dreaming.”² His writing is incredibly poetic and often takes the reader on a dangerous journey. H.P. Lovecraft is famous for his creation of the “cosmic horror” in which he describes ominous forces and creatures that lurk just out of sight.³ The sinister aspect of my artwork is up for interpretation. I never visually articulate any potential threat other than shadows. I like to leave room for the viewer’s imagination, as Lovecraft does. In *Coyote* (fig.2) I give the viewer a dark pathway, one that I imagine may contain an unseen threat, beyond the field of vision, waiting.



Figure. 2: *Coyote*, oil on paper, 12”x12”, 2015

² H.P. Lovecraft, *The Other Gods and More Unearthly Tales*, Barnes and Nobel Inc., New York, 2010, 2.

³ Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock introduction on Lovecraft, vii.

This painting was a recollection of when I was walking through the woods at night, taking photographs. The noises were an unexpectedly striking aspect of this event. Frogs and crickets were chirping louder than I have ever heard; and in the distance was the faint howling of coyotes. As the camera flashed, the tree bark shown bone white.

Process

My paintings start with recalling a moment in the landscape when I have stopped to take in my surroundings. In these moments I zone out of my usual brain patterns of thinking about stresses and things I need to do, instead I focus on the way the wind is blowing the branches or the way a shadow hits the grass. I am especially enamored with the way light transforms the landscape. In the evening sun, the sky reflects awesome colors onto the landscape, creating great contrasts of light and dark. As the evening turns to total darkness I enjoy the subtlety of the shift between the darkness of the trees against the deep blue sky and the unusualness of a street light lighting a tree. Sometimes when I am in these quiet moments I will realize that I want to make a painting of it, but others I paint from distant memories in which painting was not on my mind at all. The paintings do not end up looking exactly like the environment I took inspiration from, but they transform and are exaggerated because I do not rely on a photograph; I rely on my interpretation of the memory of a past experience.

Painting from memory is important to me. It helps me to be looser and more spontaneous. At the beginning of my academic career as a graduate student at the University of New Orleans, my artwork was much more calculated and pre-planned than it is now. I always painted from a photograph and as a result, my surface was flat and the painting barely differed from its source. For example, in *Astral* I used Photoshop to manipulate my photograph into a kaleidoscope-like swirl and then painted it. In *Untitled* you can see how the Photoshopped image is very similar to the painted one. I have learned that my artworks are more successful when I am not committed to a singular source image.

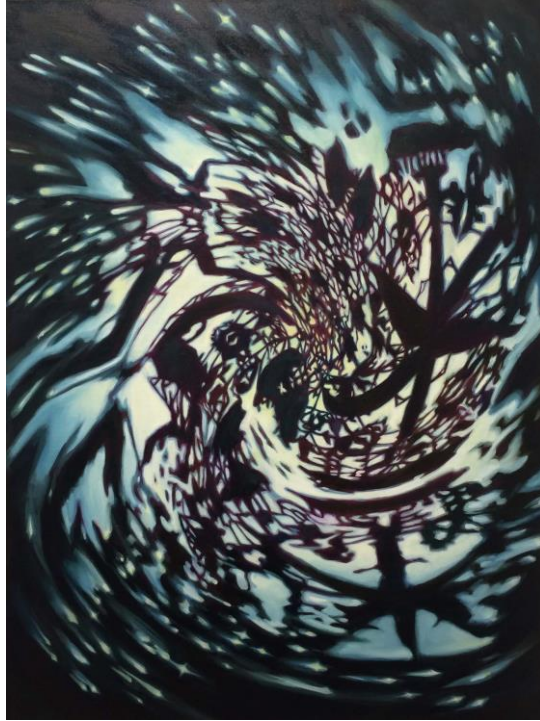


Figure. 3: *Astral*, oil on canvas, 48”x 36”, 2015

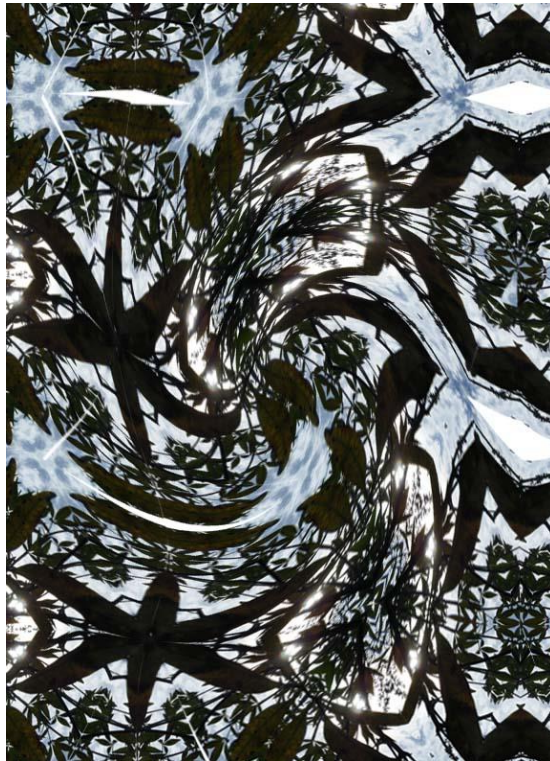


Figure. 4: *Untitled*

I take inspiration from the contemporary artist Rachel Jones Deris, in the way that she applies paint. As she declares in her artist statement, she wishes to fill her paintings with a “density that defies their size”.⁴ Her brush strokes have their own presence in her paintings. Although my brushwork is not quite as non-descriptive as hers, there has been a great transformation in the density of the surface of my paintings. I use dense brushwork or color and light as tools to create a more mysterious image.

The color palette I use is inspired by the sunset/sunrise, which exist in the liminal space between day and night. The colors I use are mostly reds, blues and greens, with great contrasts of light and dark. I use concentrated light within the image to enhance the dramatic effect, and to single out the light, which symbolically has great importance. Both my color palette and my focus on a solitary light source, are inspired by the contemporary artist, Ross Bleckner. He uses primarily reds and blues with mysterious light sources within the image. As interviewer Robert Long states of Bleckner, “There are sheets of light washing over some pictures, and mysterious leakings of light that isolate certain areas of a canvas; sometimes light seems to shoot out of objects.”⁵ This can be seen in his painting *Birdland*, where the light is manifested within the hummingbirds.

⁴ Rachel Jones Deris, “Artist Statement,” <http://racheljonesderis.com/news.html>, (accessed October 10, 2016).

⁵ Robert Long, *Ross Bleckner: Artist Of Light And Form*, <http://easthamptonstar.com/Archive/2/Ross-Bleckner-Artist-Light-And-Form>, 1998.



Figure. 5: Ross Bleckner, *Birdland*, oil on linen, 96' x 96', 2000

The idea of an unknown light interests me because light has long been an object of mystery the same way darkness has throughout history. Light and darkness can both obliterate vision, and doing so, leave the viewer in uncertainty.

The blank areas in my paintings, obscured by light or darkness, help to communicate the idea of the unknown. For me, some of the most interesting parts of my artworks are the seemingly empty spaces. For these areas to have substance, I often use dense brushwork within them. Shadow and texture fill the surface of the empty spaces. My intention is to direct the viewer to wonder what exactly occupies that space. This is most prominently seen in my oil painting, *A Dark Path*.



Figure 6: *A Dark Path*, oil on canvas, 20"x16", 2016

The foreground of this painting, where light shines through the trees, contains soft brushwork and as the eye recedes into the background, where more and more darkness fills the image, the brushwork becomes denser. The dense brushwork in the emptiness creates shapes and movement in an otherwise blank area. This creates more mystery in those spaces.

For my paintings, I switched from using acrylic to oil paints because it improved my surface quality. My acrylic surface was very flat and matte and with the use of oil I was able to address those issues. My paintings have improved with a textured surface and density that oil paints assist in expressing the ominous theme of my paintings. The edges are thick and are primarily painted black, which makes the paintings appear heavy and moody. There is a large range of sizes from 11"x14" to 48"x48". This allows for an array of pricing and sale options, but it also changes the way a piece is interpreted. The larger paintings create more of a setting, whereas the smaller ones are more intimate. Once I have an idea of what I want to depict, I choose which size to make each painting. Not being committed to such a large format can be

freeing, so the smaller pieces sometimes allow for me to be more experimental. Ultimately, the materials I use are chosen in order to enhance the dramatic moods of my paintings, making them dense like an overgrown forest.

The Wilderness

As the sun disappears, the darkness can have a strange effect on the senses. The sounds I hear of wildlife moving around in the darkness can lead my imagination to the worst conclusions. As 17th century explorer, Hermann von Wissmann, describes the forest, “Be it imagination, be it excitement of the nerves, the slightest sound which at night interrupts the deep quiet seems to startle you.”⁶ When I rely on senses other than sight, the fluttering of birds becomes frightening bats and a rustle in the bushes becomes a predator stalking me. At this time, I have the knowledge that all other animals have senses far more adept to the environment than me, which leaves me at a disadvantage. The wilderness makes me feel alive and human because I am confronted with my own impermanence and that threat is always more prevalent in the darkness.

This “excitement of the nerves” when in the wilderness is what I try to articulate in my artworks.⁷ The dark areas of my paintings lead the viewer into the environment that I create, and often form a pathway. In *The Road Home* a dark pathway is illuminated by a mysterious light.

⁶ Hermann von Wissmann quoted by Alexander Porteous, *The Forest: In Folklore and Mythology*, Dover Publications, Inc., Mineola, NY, 2002, 16.

⁷ Wissmann quoted by Porteous, 16.



Figure 7: *The Road Home*, oil on canvas, 24”x30”, 2015

Many of my landscape paintings are an invitation on an uncertain journey. The pathways I describe are often covered in branches and dark, but for some, it may seem alluring. This journey may lead to a haven or to danger, which one is either escaping or heading towards.

Although many of my artworks may appear foreboding or sinister I have a deep affection, respect, and appreciation for the wilderness. After losing my home to hurricane Katrina I moved to the deep country for a year. It was a place where sunsets have never been so vivid and the land, never so vast. For the first time, I lived in an area where there was nothing but wilderness across the horizon, from edge to edge. Having grown up in an industrial town, this rural place was very foreign to me. It soon became a haven. For me, there was no better therapy than taking a walk amongst the trees, and that is what I did every day. The wilderness got me through one of the hardest times of my life, in which I was separated from everything I had come to know. Nature was the cause and the antidote for my grief.

The Romantics

There is nothing like creating an image from an empty canvas. The act of painting is very meditative and therapeutic, as is walking through the forest. They are both places to think or to find freedom from thoughts. I chose to primarily concentrate in painting because other painters inspire me, especially landscape painters. I enjoy paintings in which the setting is the subject.

The reverence that I feel when in nature is something I share with the artists, William Turner and Caspar David Friedrich. There is a duality in their paintings between the terror and the beauty of the wilderness. The Romantic landscape paintings of the 18th century are often described as sublime. Art theorist Edmund Burke defines sublime as, “experiences which supply a kind of thrill or shudder of perverse pleasure, mixing fear and delight.”⁸ sublime artworks of the time usually portrayed a moment of awe over the overwhelming qualities of nature. For instance, In William Turner’s *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying - Typhoon coming on* (“*The Slave Ship*”),oil on canvas, 90.8 x 122.6 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston,1840

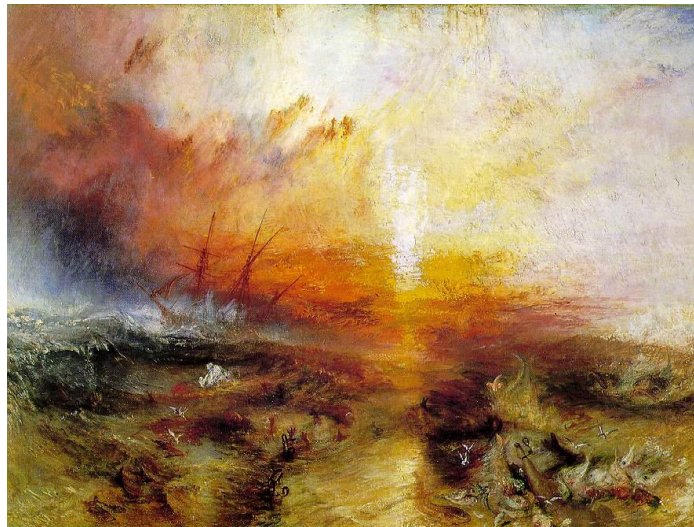


Figure 8: William Turner, *Slavers throwing overboard the Dead and Dying - Typhoon coming on* (“*The Slave Ship*”),oil on canvas, 90.8 x 122.6 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston,1840

⁸ Edmund Burke quoted by Simon Morley, *The Sublime*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2010, 15.

The overwhelming waves of the water and the bright light of the sun take over the image. The drama of what is happening on the boat is expressed through the landscape.

I would not describe my artworks as sublime because my artworks are not as epic and grand as those from the Romantic era. The wilderness in my artworks is not overbearing and can sometimes be inviting. The connection that I have with this era is that the wilderness is the subject matter and it has its own energy, often an ominous one. In Caspar David Friedrich's *Abbey in Oakwood*, he painted a bleak forest that contains a haze of light above.



Figure 9: Caspar David Friedrich, *Abbey In Oakwood*, oil on canvas, 43.3”x67.3”, Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin, 1809

Darkness is either approaching or receding. I would imagine this as a moment that someone would stop and take in their surroundings. These artists painted not only a faithful rendering of the landscape, but also something more vehement. They exaggerated the landscape, turning it into something that expresses its emotional and spiritual capacities.

Circle of Life

The Romantic era was a time of scientific discovery when Naturalists were finding parallels among the animal, mineral, and vegetable kingdoms.⁹ This inquiry can also be found in my artworks, in the theme that I describe as the circle of life. In *Cosmic*, I used skeletal imagery of plants and animals in hopes to relate the connection of all living organisms.



Figure10: *Cosmic*, Ink and acrylic on paper, 30"x 30", 2015

In this ink painting, I explored the similarities in structure of the branching in the veins of leaves to the branching of animal bones. I also took inspiration from photographs of galaxies, because

⁹ Nina Amstutz, "Caspar David Friedrich and the Anatomy of Nature," *Art History* 37, no. 3, June 2014, 456.

the connections of life are boundless. As astrophysicist Neil Degrasse Tyson often states, we are all made of “star-stuff.”¹⁰ The same elements of life are found throughout the galaxy.

I take inspiration from the contemporary artist Lee Deigaard, especially in her series of ink drawings of trees. She compared the veining of trees and leaves to human anatomy, as she states, “The fractal attenuation of trunks to twigs parallels the circulatory systems of humans and of rivers.”¹¹ Like Deigaard, I also make connections between animal and botanical anatomies. I often make comparisons between bone and tree structures. The branches that I paint can be bone-like in their whiteness and I also create skeletal sculptures out of tree parts. Deigaard’s comparisons exemplify my interests in the spiritual and scientific connections that all matter shares.

My interest in the bonds of the natural world stem from my experience as a tour guide at the animal preservation, Global Wildlife Center. While there, I closely observed the seasonal changes of its 4,000 animals for several years. The deer especially have distinct seasons such as, mating in the fall, when all the antlers lose their velvet and the deer fight all day, getting fat and fluffy for the winter, and then birthing season in the spring. I watched as animals died and new ones were born, year round. This experience influenced my artworks in which I explore, in part, the circle of life. This is best exemplified in my sculptures. I use twigs, vines and tree bark, collected from the forests that I like to spend time in, and I configure them to look like animal bones. For me, these sculptures represent the symbiotic relationship that animals share with the Earth. We need Earthly elements to survive and when we die, our remains feed the elements. In

¹⁰ Neil deGrasse Tyson, *Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey*, “The Lost Worlds of Planet Earth.” Episode 9, Directed by Brannon Braga and Ann Druyan, Written by Ann Druyan and Steven Soter, National Geographic, March 9, 2014.

¹¹ Lee Deigaard, “Trees,” <http://leedeigaard.com/writing-trees/>, (accessed October 10, 2016).

Zero I collected the bark and branches that had fallen to the ground of the woods near my house and sculpted the remains of an unknown animal.



Figure 11: *Zero*, bark, twigs, and glue, 2016

The head is too big for the body, which makes it even more curious. It is not grounded and looks as if it is in movement. The repurposing of fallen twigs and leaves also gives the dead and discarded another existence beyond life.

My initial inspiration for this body of work was Dominique Mazeaud's *The Great Cleansing of the Rio Grande River*, in which she ritualistically returns every month to pick up litter from the dying river. She made no object, but the action was documented in journals, and so, the ritual became the art. I began picking up trash around the woods, but I am attached to the art object. In *Tree of Life Incorporated* I used trash found in the woods to create a tree that contains animal parts such as a deer leg which takes the place of a tree root or birds wings that act as branches.



Figure 12: *Tree of Life Incorporated*, litter and acrylic, 30"x30", 2015

I removed the harmful plastics from the wilderness and created something seemingly organic. Those plastics represent the interruption of the natural symbiotic relationship of animals and plants. I had considered continuing to create sculptures like this one, but I felt that it was disconnected from my paintings because it was too literal, whereas my paintings had become more ambiguous. The biggest inspiration I took from creating this work was the process of collecting materials. The inspiration for all of my artworks come from the same places around my home and now even the materials come from them.

Mythology

Working at Global Wildlife Center sparked my interest in life cycles, as well as, animal mythologies. Global houses 32 different species including giraffes, llamas, camels, antelope, cattle, and deer. Although I learned facts about these animals from a manual, I often took it upon myself to research them on my own, to find new and interesting information. I especially liked to research the myths surrounding different animals. For instance, the sika deer, are known to be a magical deer in Japan because they blend so well into their environment, they are thought to magically disappear. Because of this special power, some Japanese people will grind up the antlers and use it for medicinal purposes, although there is no scientific evidence that it has any value as such.

In many of my artworks I include a hidden animal, usually a deer. In *White Stag* I painted a landscape in which a singular white stag is hidden amongst the brush.



Figure 13: *White Stag*, oil on canvas, 40"x60", 2016

This piece is about an encounter I had with a deer in the woods. There was a moment while staring at the beauty of the deer, staying as quiet as possible as not to frighten it off, that I realized there is something very predatorial about the way I was behaving. Once the stag is seen, it cannot be unseen, as is the experience of seeing an animal in the wild. It is bewitching. There is something magical about deer that mythology has expressed over and over again in stories and legends, the white stag represents a quest or an impossible journey. The quest for it is often a metaphor for the search for God.¹² The white stag is seen in storytelling as well, in the legends of King Arthur, *The Hobbit*, *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and *Harry Potter*, all stories which contain a grand and fantastical journey. It is illusive and is usually seen for a split second, then it is gone.

Many of my artworks contain trees, which also have a great mythological history. The forest has long been an inspiration of mystery and enchantment. There is a French proverb which states that “ the forest which always listens, has the secret of every mystery.”¹³ I believe that trees have inspired mythology because they are a source of shelter, have prominent seasonal changes, and that our primate ancestors lived in trees. The forest also awakens the senses, which gives one the thrill of life. As Joseph Campbell, scholar of comparative mythology, states, “People say that what we’re all seeking is a meaning for life. I don’t think that’s what we’re really seeking. I think that what we’re seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our own innermost being

¹² Jessica Dawn Palmer, *Animal Wisdom: The Definitive Guide to the Myth, Folklore and Medicine Power of Animals*, London: Thorsons, 2001, 107.

¹³ Alexander Porteous, *The Forest: In Folklore and Mythology*, Dover Publications, Inc, Mineola, NY, 2002, 12.

and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive.”¹⁴ Those feelings of rapture are what is experienced directly in nature and is what is being described in mythologies.

Almost every ancient culture has myths which depicts trees as holy or as sinister. Ancient Greeks attributed trees to Zeus.¹⁵ Ancient Scandinavians believed the forest is where “Wood-Spirits” dwelled, which are fallen angels, like Lucifer.¹⁶ The Burmese often built temples around trees to remind the people that Buddha attained enlightenment while sitting under a Bodhi tree.¹⁷ The world/cosmic tree is a symbol that spans many cultures including; Norse, Siberian, Greek, Burmese, and Mesopotamian. It represents the earths connections to both the heavens (its branches) and to the underworld (its roots).¹⁸ All of these cultures no matter how distanced they were from one another agree on one thing, that trees, and the forest they inhabit, are a source for spiritual awakening. Reading myths like these make the forest even more enchanting.

Contemporary artist Kiki Smith has, within recent years, explored myth. She dreams about birds and has stated, “Birds are stand-ins for souls.”¹⁹ She has created sculptures and drawings of birds, through their life cycles as well as humans, and sometimes human-bird hybrids.²⁰ She often borrows from Greek and Catholic mythologies as well as folktales like Little Red Ridding Hood. In her sculpture, *Daphne*, she depicts the ancient Greek myth, as the nymphs limbs turn into a tree. While Smiths artwork can take one into the dream-like world of mythology, the direct representation of mythologies that is sometimes present in her artwork is

¹⁴ Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, Anchor Books: A Division of Random House, Inc., New York, 1991, 1.

¹⁵ Porteous, 149.

¹⁶ Porteous, 148.

¹⁷ Porteous, 153.

¹⁸ Moyra Caldecott, *Myths of the Sacred Tree*, Density Books, Vermont, 1993, 5.

¹⁹ Michael Kimmelman, “The Intuitionist,” *The New York Times*, Nov. 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/05/magazine/05kiki.html>, (accessed November 25, 2016), 1.

²⁰ Kimmelman, 1.

not the intention that I have in my artworks. I am interested in the emotions that the natural environment evoke, that is the inspiration for mythology.

When mythologies describe all of the living beings on earth as enchanted or holy, that they are more than what meets the eye, it makes the reader give their due respect to them. This is something that humans have distanced themselves from through the centuries. We are more enamored with the daily news and gossip than with myth. I look at the pathways I create in my paintings as the invitation to go on a journey, in the same way that mythology takes the reader on a spiritual journey. I present the viewer with what I think inspires mythology. It is not to make the viewer believe in anything other than they already do. It is more of an exercise to remind myself of how magical the world is, which is easy to forget sometimes. As Joseph Campbell states, “Nirvana literally means “blown out”; the image is that once one has realized one’s unity with what is called the Buddha mind – this is the Buddhist conception of Brahman – then one’s individual ego is extinguished like a candle flame, and one becomes one with the great solar light . . . But when you get over there, you realize, I was here all the time.”²¹ Attaining nirvana or peace does not mean going to some other place, it is here in the mundane, in something as simple as a tree or its leaves.

Art critic, Suzi Gablik, shares my fascination with myth. She describes the world as enchanted, “Primitive man’s inclination toward the mythic and the supernatural was not, as Freud (and others) have claimed, the result of cognitive inferiority, or wish-fulfilling delusions that we have now outgrown. Rather it was an alternative mode of consciousness that understands the world in a sacred manner. Because it corresponds to something universal in the collective unconscious, it remains with us, even though our own cultural response has been to deny and

²¹ Joseph Campbell, *Myths of Light: Eastern Metaphors of the Eternal*, New World Library, Novato, California, 2003, 11.

repress this mode.”²² Her writings relate the spiritual connection of humans to the earth, as she stresses the importance of myth. To me, mythology is the evidence of human’s ability to dream, to wonder, and to believe in the improbable.

²² Suzi Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art*, Thames and Hudson, New York, N.Y., 1991, 50.

Natural vs. Artificial

In Gablik's writings she also stresses the need for humans to regularly connect with nature. She believes that modern people have lost touch with the wilderness and therefore, have lost their connection to myth.²³ When I first began the graduate program my artwork was primarily about the loss of connection between people and the natural landscape. I wanted to find a way to combine the modern world visually with the timelessness of the wilderness. In *Whirlwind* I painted from a photograph that I manipulated in Photoshop.



Figure 14: *Whirlwind*, oil on canvas, 36"x 24", 2015

I used the obvious swirl effect in Photoshop so that it would be clear that this image had gone through an unnatural filter. It was not well received. The question was raised as to what was the point of painting it? Would not presenting the Photoshopped image be more direct? Knowing that I am a painter, I had to find another way to approach this, with paint. With the help of my instructors, I decided to focus on my experiences and emotions connected to the landscape and let go of any symbolic devices I had been using.

²³ Gablik, 53.

Today my paintings, which explore the duality of natural and artificial, are inspired directly by my experiences. I especially take inspiration from the transitioning light of the evening time, when the sunlight is dying and artificial lights take its place. In some paintings the artificial is more subtle, while others portray it directly. The painting *Red Light* was inspired by a moment while stopped at a red light in which the trees were illuminated bright red.

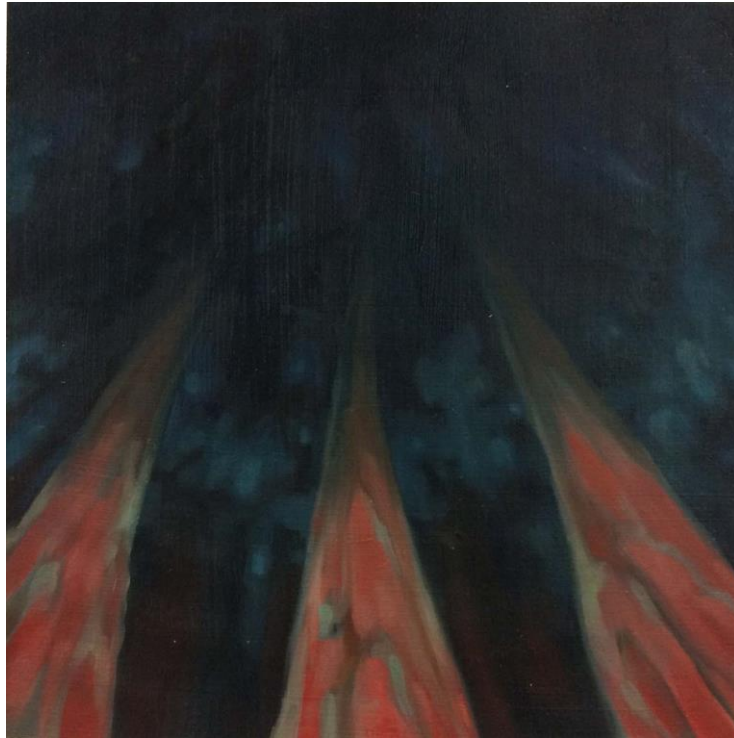


Figure 15: *Red Light*, oil on paper, 12"x12", 2015

The light source is uncertain in this image. Because the light source is not shown, it could be a stop light or the sunset, or something more unnatural or mysterious. In *Edge of the Forest I* painted from memory, an area where the dark woods begin.



Figure 16: *Edge of the Forest*, oil on canvas, 24"x30", 2016

There is a wooden streetlight over a gravel road and behind is the forest. I have begun to incorporate more man made subjects, while still maintaining the wilderness as the subject. I am exploring the relationship that humans share with nature, and how the wilderness is not often pristine and untouched by modern inventions.

Contemporary artist, Peter Doig, also investigates the human experience of the modern landscape. In *Concrete Cabin* he painted what seems like the fleeting moment of looking at a building through trees.



Figure 17: Peter Doig, *Concrete Cabin*, oil on canvas, 198 x 275cm, 1994

The foreground is covered by trees, whose organic lines greatly contrast with the geometric building complex, which peaks out between their branches. This contrast between man-made and organic is seen in my painting, *Industrial Park*, where trees create a vignette around the image, surrounding the center, that contains the metal siding of a building. My visual articulation of man-made inventions revolve around light.



Figure 18: *Industrial Park*, oil on canvas, 12"x12", 2016

Light

Light is a symbol of the divine. The earliest humans worshipped sun and fire gods. Light is often associated with enlightenment and revelation, because it reveals the world around us. In my artwork, I use light as a symbol for a spiritual presence. I use it in small concentrated areas or I use it overbearingly to where the landscape is obliterated by either light or darkness. In *White Light* over half of the image has been taken over by a white light, as tree trunks, surrounded by a red glow, are aligned in the bottom portion.



Figure 19: *White Light*, oil on canvas, 24”x24”, 2016

It is as if the viewer steps outdoors for the first time in hours and is blinded by the sunlight. The obliteration of vision by either light or darkness is a tool I employ in my paintings to convey mystery.

My photography also explores light. My initial intentions in using photography, were to capture moments of the landscape when time and place are lost to me. In *You're Not Alone Out Here* I captured a lovely moment when the sun was setting in the swamp.

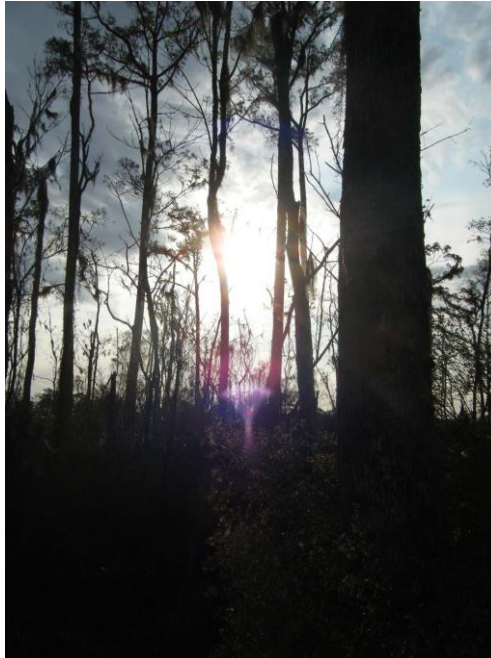


Figure 20: *You're Not Alone Out Here*, 2014

The sun created an orb-like presence that looks as if it is standing amongst the trees. This photograph sparked my interest in lens flares because of the mysterious presence that they create. The spirituality that I feel in the wilderness is visually manifested in the orb of light, which itself creates a presence.

In the quest to depict spirituality in the environment, I created orbs of light in my photographs to act as a symbol for a divine or mysterious presence. We are quick to disregard spirit orbs in photography because there is a long history of trickery associated with them and simple explanations, such as lens flares and dust, to explain their occurrence. The fact that it is all staged does not matter to me, it is the broadening of the imagination that interests me. I am

fascinated that there are people who believe in spirit orbs, as I imagine what that would mean if they were real.

In the late 19th century the accidental discovery of double exposures opened a new market for photographers to trick people by inserting images of passed loved ones, as exemplified in S.W. Fallis's, "*Spirit*".²⁴



Figure 21: S.W. Fallis, *Spirit*, 1901

It caused great scandal. Photographers were arrested for swindling those in mourning.²⁵ Photography was expected to capture the truth, a record of real events, so people believed the double exposures were the ghost of their loved ones standing beside them. Even today, accidental double exposures, or dust and reflected light can alter an image, which can lead some into believing that there was an invisible presence that only the camera could capture.

²⁴ Louis Kaplan. *The Strange Case of William Mumler, Spirit Photographer*, University of Minnesota Press, 2008, 10.

²⁵ Kaplan, xv.

Today spirit orbs are one of the many occurrences attributed to capturing the supernatural on camera. Spirit orbs were introduced to me when a friend of mine showed me pictures of her trip to a famous haunted plantation. There were pictures of open fields and dusty interior spaces with orbs of light seemingly floating around, which she believed to be evidence of ghosts. In my photograph *Orb* I created a spirit orb by using a spray bottle and the flash of the camera.



Figure 22: *Orb*, 2015

It is completely staged in the same way spirit photography was. Although, historically photography has been used to record true events, in this era of Photoshop, images are always in question of their reality. That is why I have no problem with creating a staged image. It is not about presenting something false to get the viewer to believe in. It is about expanding ones mind into contemplating and questioning the existence of paranormal or spiritual presences.

Contemporary artist, Susan Hiller, shares my interest in how irrational phenomenon, like orbs, have stood the test of time. She also explores topics, such as, levitation, auras, telekinesis, and flying saucers. In Hiller's audio piece, *Witness*, she collected descriptions of alien and UFO

contact from around the world.²⁶ She does not necessarily require the viewer to believe in alien contact, rather asks, what might the belief signify and how might it be understood?²⁷ Hiller said that she is “making work that increasingly puts the viewer where I am, in this situation of undecidableness”.²⁸ I share that sentiment. I do not ask anybody else to believe in spirits. I just want to express that feeling of spiritual awakening that I get when in certain environments. It is exciting to toy around with the idea that maybe there is more to life than what meets the eye.

Moving forward from this body of work, my photography has changed in the same way that my paintings have, I have let go of using blatant symbolism and focused on more subtle ways of communicating a spiritual presence within the wilderness. In *Dark Forest* the sky has almost turned black and a single tree is singled out amongst the others.



Figure 23: *Dark Forest*, 2016

²⁶ Richard Grayson. "Susan Hiller." *Art Monthly*. 2011. *Biography in Context*. EBSCOhost (accessed November 17, 2016), 24.

²⁷ Grayson, 24.

²⁸ Grayson, 24.

There is a foreboding quality to the image as if one is being swallowed up, of trees and darkness. It reminds me of the dark forest in the fairytale Snow White, in which the trees are able to reach and claw at her. There is a threat of darkness in this image. For me, it represents life cycles because the space is in transition into darkness. In *Stunted* I also explore cycles.



Figure 24: *Stunted*, 2016

The foreground consists of a row of trees that have been chopped down, for unseen cables above. They visually line up with the fully grown trees in the background. Together the foreground and background create an almost half alive and dead forest.

Lately I have been incorporating more artificial light in my photography. It is a practice that started when I was creating orbs and curious light flares in my earlier works, but now my work is more about the modern experience of the landscape. I enjoy the duality between the natural and artificial lights. Because natural light has always had correlation with the divinity, the artificial light for me represents the modern deity of technology. I use flashlights, headlights, and the flash of the camera to illuminate the landscape, which can have curious effects. In *Limbs* I

photographed a small crepe and myrtle from a Chuck E Cheese parking lot, which was lit up by the headlights of my car.

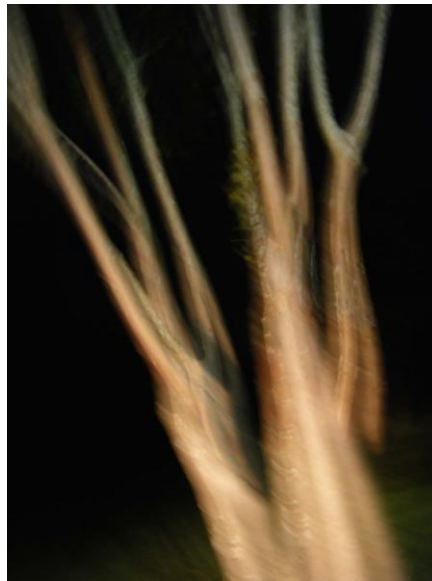


Figure 25: *Limbs*, 2015

This mundane space was completely transformed by the light, turning a simple tree into something ghostly and bone-like.

My photography often informs my paintings and visa versa. In *Forest Floor* I used a flashlight centered on a pile of branches and vines.



Figure 26: *Forest Floor*, 2016

The human footprint is obvious through the light source, yet the image still provokes an ominous expression, as if there is something more foreboding there than meets the eye. This photograph was inspired by an earlier painting I made, titled *Spotlight* , which recounted time I spent in the woods at dusk.



Figure 27: *Spotlight*, oil on canvas, 20''x20'', 2016

Conclusion

The time that I have spent at UNO has prepared me for a professional life as an artist. When starting out in this program I had many doubts in myself and knew vaguely what my identity as an artist was. With the help of my instructors I feel quite the opposite now. My artwork has gone from being literal interpretations, relying on symbolic devices to something more emotional, personal, and poetic. The overall themes of myth, circle of life, light, and the ominous have stayed, however I have learned new ways in which to communicate them.

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Vita

Dana DeNoux graduated cum laude with a BFA from Southeastern Louisiana University. She was employed as a gallery assistant at Southeastern Louisiana University Contemporary Art Gallery and is currently working as a costume designer and fabricator for Artistic Creations. DeNoux is pursuing a MFA at the University of New Orleans.