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*James Madison University*

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Unearthing Strata and Changing Waters: A Landscape for Today

Mallory Burrell

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

School of Art, Design and Art History

May 2020

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## Abstract

My current practice culminates in generative acts that respond to the objects that I collect from Blacks Run in Harrisonburg, VA. The writing and artworks are extensions of my interest in hybridity and spaces where organic and artificial matter intersect. This thesis provides a conceptual framework for *Unearthing Strata and Changing Waters: A Landscape for Today*, an MFA body of work by Mallory Burrell.

## Part 1: Gleaning

When I am out there, I feel like a flower or a tree.  
I am a rooted plant to be sure of it.  
Something like a fern, or no, a peace lily.  
Maybe because I take care of them at home and the studio.  
My roots absorb all kinds of objects.  
Some are plastic, and some rubber.  
Lots of clothes and some metals.  
My favorites still may be the shoes...  
Some are below the surface, others come from embankments, and some just on walks.  
Mostly though, they come from the water.  
Places they were never intended to be, and many not close to where they will "end."  
From the collection and deposits something quite different emerges.  
Through the filtered toxins emerges a budding flower.  
Made to entice.  
But in my flowerpot, there is a dish below that holds the water.  
Roots travel far to get to it.  
This dish, this is where I investigate.  
My favorites dishes weave and wind,  
full to the brim with micro landscapes.  
Moreover, the dishes I prefer have memory.  
A line and a trace of a story.  
Above and below the landscape I am pulled,  
to places where the water flows.  
To imagined trashscapes.

Growing up in rural Virginia, it was just us three girls, my mom and my dad. We lived in ten acres in Caroline County, Virginia where my parents still are today. Growing up we had to entertain ourselves; our mother would quite literally kick us out of the house to play, telling us to not come back until we heard the supper bell. When you're the youngest of three it is easy to be kept out of things, and as older siblings do, they create clubs, and then don't invite you to be in them. At the ripe age of five, I decided I had enough of this nonsense and was going to be a part of this secret club whether they liked it or not. Well, to make a long story short,

not long after sneaking into my first meeting, an argument was brought to my dad about my member status. By parental demand, I was in the club.

The objective was to explore the woods around my parent's house and look for treasures. We discovered a red car with lots of blue and white tiles inside that we used to floor our forest meeting space. We found old tins and glass bottles. Some oddities included a toilet, a matted, old morsel of a rug, and an old slide. Our favorite collected item was a heeled flip-flop, bright yellow and blue. This flip-flop came up in conversation with my sister recently and we both recall it like it was yesterday. Some evenings if we got lost, my dad had to walk in the woods with the dog to sniff us out. Those were evenings where we knew to keep our silence, for he was upset we had gotten ourselves so far from base. The name of our club was the Moss Mountain Club and we explored for years together. We came home one day to find that our dad had cleared out our meeting place, saved some of the things he deemed had some value, and told us that we could keep exploring but to not "keep that crap right on the edge of the driveway for everyone to see." It was a disappointing day. After that our adventures became less frequent, and it was as if our magic was stolen by our dad that day. In the woods we made our own space, our own world, and our own sense of freedom and responsibility. In those hours with my sisters I carved into my soul a need for exploration, a need for walking under the canopy, a need for collecting items left behind, and a need to sometimes get lost in the landscape.

Chapter 1: *The Stream*

“For it is invariably *oneself* that one collects.”

Jean Baudrillard<sup>1</sup>

Somewhere ingrained in me is the thought that I must always be productive. Perhaps this is a prime example of how the capitalist agenda is programmed into my psyche. Four years ago, when I found myself wanting to explore the stream across the street where I lived in Richmond, Virginia, I was at times hesitant to go out there with the thoughts that this activity was purely indulgent and that I needed to make better use of my time. So, as a means of a compromise, I began to pick up the trash I found in the stream and woods. The tradeoff for helping the stream was being outside, enjoying the wildlife.

From day one in Harrisonburg, Virginia, I have been acquainted with Blacks Run, or what I simply call *the stream*. Flowing behind my apartment building, I discovered upon arrival that the stream would follow me throughout my day. The stream followed me to my new studio on campus, and I discovered that it also went to the park that suited me best for running. The stream has become a friend and a refuge. It is an isolated landscape that I roam within the city that has excited, scared, and comforted me. I have, in full adulthood, embraced my quest to explore the wild, while simultaneously collecting lost and forgotten detritus. In short, you may call me *the scrap collector* who partners with *the stream*.

Connecting downtown Harrisonburg with my studio is Chesapeake Avenue, or what I refer to as the Monger Lumber company road. Running adjacent to the stream, the road is full of trucks, piles of sediment, wood, timber-filled warehouses, and lots of flyaway debris. One

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Baudrillard, “The System of Collecting,” in *The Cultures of Collecting*, ed. John Elsner and Roger Cardinal (London: Reaktion Books, 1994), 12.



day, I noticed a piece of old plastic that had shriveled up and taken shape resembling a moth. There was something uncanny in just how lifelike it was at first glance. I pocketed it and glanced around to find a material that would blend well to fabricate into antennae. This became the first of many moths I would make from debris, utilizing textures of paper, cardboard, plastic, and rusted metal to mimic wings. The immediacy of the material and the joy in the spontaneity of the creation were significant and acted as a catalyst for incorporating found detritus into my work.

“A hybrid is an offspring of two animals or plants of different races, breeds, varieties, species, or genera, *or* having or produced by a combination of two or more distinct elements: marked by heterogeneity in origin, composition, or appearance.”<sup>2</sup> In my practice, acts of discovery and improvisation spurred my initial interests in the hybridization between artificial and organic matter. Operating in a world suspended between the one I occupy and an uncertain future, in 2018, I created the floor installation, *Insects of the Anthropocene* (Figures 1-2). Viewers are invited to actively engage in the discovery of camouflaged “insects” made from road detritus. In the quest of parsing out what is “insect,” there is an Alexis Rockman-inspired key for the viewer indicating the specimens and their location within the installation (Figure 3).<sup>3</sup> I simultaneously composed the installation *The Naturalist’s Cart (of the Anthropocene)* (Figure 4). In this installation, labeled moth specimen are juxtaposed with rudimentary tools and filled collaged cardboard drawers (Figure 5). Sweeping down from the cart’s push bar is a scroll made of stitched transparency sheets that knit together incoherent

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<sup>2</sup> “Hybrid,” Merriam–Webster Dictionary, accessed April 23, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hybrid>.

<sup>3</sup> At this time I was just beginning to be exposed to the work of landscape painter, Alexis Rockman. The attention to detail, and the inclusion of an identification key for his paintings, like the ones in natural history exhibits, most attracted me to his work.

bits of data. The phrases, cut from varying biology books on the bottom shelf of the cart, read as disjointed “informative poetry” about the specimen (Figure 6). For example, “The havoc age is dawning...Improved versions are constantly in search for one another...Continues to divide in a loose jelly-like matrix... and, Some dissolve into the remainder.” These installations were the impetus for questioning the role of hybridity in my work and spurred my desire to create works that meld natural history with the world of waste.

I began to collect with fervor, and the thrill of the hunt would spur my adventures as much as the desire to feel the sun and explore the wild. I was keeping most everything I collected from the stream, and I also began a digital archive of the trash, by either taking photographs or scans of the debris. According to collector, psychoanalyst, and ethnopsychiatrist, Werner Muensterberger, “Collected objects reflect aspects of the collector’s personality and function as an extension of identity, and the amassed objects allow for an escape into an isolated and private world.”<sup>4</sup> He argues that objects have a subjective value, and frequently become “symbolic substitutes” in order to mentally manage an external world they find unpredictable, dangerous, or incredibly out of control.<sup>5</sup> In my pursuits, I experience intoxicating thrills of discovery when I am collecting stream debris, especially when I pick up and archive a package that I have never seen before.

Sociologist, philosopher, and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard also analyzed the process of collecting and stated:

Thus, any given object can have two functions: it can be utilized, or it can be possessed. The first function has to do with the subject’s project of asserting practical

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<sup>4</sup> Werner Muensterberger, “First Possessions” in *Collecting: An Unruly Passion: Psychological Perspectives*, (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1994), 15.

<sup>5</sup> Werner Muensterberger, “Passion, or the Wellsprings of Collecting” in *Collecting: An Unruly Passion: Psychological Perspectives*, (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1994), 4, 21.

control within the real world, the second with an enterprise of abstract mastery whereby the subject seeks to assert himself as an autonomous totality outside the world.<sup>6</sup>

Discovery is anticipation, and the archive is control over the collected memory. The archive is the signifier of collected wisdom and is relegated as a space where things are hidden and steeped with mystery and potential.<sup>7</sup>

I am fascinated by the processes of archaeologists and scientists. There is the lovely phrase in these professions, “fieldwork”, that stirs my imagination because of the infinite possibilities any given “field” can provide for exploration. Call me crazy, but I can explore a vacant lot with as much excitement as I can a landfill. Taking on a role usually relegated to scientists, I collect stream samples and investigate under my microscope. In front of my eyes, new worlds of abstracted landscapes are realized. Within a tiny sample of algae, green, purple, and yellow rods appear with nematodes thrashing, diatoms traveling, and sometimes the razor knife edges of microplastic. Each sample is its own microscape, providing unique land markers, topography, and microorganisms. Unlike an archaeologist or scientist however, the rigor in my work does not result in calculable data. Rather it culminates in generative acts that respond to the objects I collect, and to my interests in notions of hybridity within the intersections between organic and artificial elements.

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<sup>6</sup> Baudrillard, “The System of Collecting,” 8.

<sup>7</sup> Sue Breakell, “Perspectives: Negotiating the Archive,” *Tate Papers* no. 9 (accessed August 2018): 1.

## Chapter 2: Blacks Run: A Brief History

You must get people to think about what beauty is. You must be conscious that life is everywhere, and the only way you can develop that is by going out and looking at it. Once you love something you care for it, and when you care for it you begin to act in ways that lead toward its healing. And then the community starts following.

- Wayne Teel, JMU professor and Harrisonburg resident <sup>8</sup>

Blacks Run is a microcosm of our vulnerable freshwater systems locally and globally. In the late 1700s, Blacks Run got its official name. It was named only after citizen Thomas Harrison, the city's namesake, deeded private land for public buildings in Harrisonburg, and in order to seal the deal, the stream needed an official name to obtain the patent.<sup>9</sup> The then-unnamed stream began on a property owned by a man named Black, thus getting the name Blacks Run.

A little over eight and a half miles of the stream's ten and a half miles length is located within the city, and over time certain parts have been entirely built over. Similar to other fresh waterways in the world, Blacks Run is victim to sediment and agricultural runoff. Informational signage can be found near certain sections of the stream indicating measures taken to improve stream health, such as reintroducing riparian buffers, rerouting water creating a more winding stream for more stable wildlife habitats, and annual stream clean-ups. These somewhat recent actions are all necessary because as the city grew on top of the floodplain, select industrial businesses, e.g., Houck Tannery, in the late 1800s, drained dangerous chemicals into the stream.<sup>10</sup> Industrial operations are still impacting the stream, such as the Monger Lumber company, which operates directly over the waterway. Even half a mile from

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<sup>8</sup> Scott Jost, *Blacks Run An American Stream: with commentary by citizens of the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia*, (New Mexico, Scott Jost, 1999), 23.

<sup>9</sup> Nancy B. Hess, *The Heartland: Rockingham County* (Park View Press, 1976), 232.

<sup>10</sup> Randi B. Hagi, "Long-polluted Blacks Run is Making a Comeback. Ducks and Fish Love it. Now a New Program Can Spur Residents to Help" accessed December 28, 2019, <https://hburgcitizen.com/2019/06/21/long-polluted-blacks-run-is-making-a-comeback-ducks-and-fish-love-it-now-a-new-program-can-spur-residents-to-help/>.

the business, tarps that once covered wood and plastic bands that held shipments together can be found throughout the streamscape.

In 2020, I set about to make a pilgrimage of the stream. Always bound to my task, before this I had never set about to simply walk the stream from beginning to end without collecting anything. For this journey, I had a companion for both safety and the company. We discovered multiple sections that went underground for blocks that were too dangerous to walk in the pitch black. We walked upstream for several days, splitting the journey into segments and coming back both exhausted and enlivened. There are sections too deep to wade, while other sections are arid. This voyage led us to a blue heron (a first here), several crayfish, and although unidentifiable, the biggest fish I had ever seen in there. It exposed us just how closely the stream follows the paths of poultry plants, as we noted the lack of stream life near these polluting factories. In terms of trash pollution, the cleanest sections of the stream were not even half a mile from the worst.

The stream is still recovering from past ecological abuse from mismanaged agricultural ventures and poorly managed sewage lines, and continues to be affected by unsafe levels of E.coli. I must wear waders, muckers, and long, bright-yellow rubber gloves to protect myself. Many spots on the stream are incredibly beautiful and inviting, that all I want to do is strip down and dive in. I want to sit on the large rocks and let the water flow around me. Despite not being able to get in physically, I have stood in schools of minnows, been tricked by a snapping turtle, and learned that some of the best dancers on earth are water striders. From my perspective, the stream is the best place to go in the city. Being under stretches of the canopy with the sounds and sensations of water flowing past is a dynamic connector to something beyond... to the wild, intangible spirit of sun energy.

### Chapter 3: Poly-present

“Local Landscapes reflect global crisis. Nothing is more local than ecology.”

Lucy Lippard<sup>11</sup>

There is a feeling in my body when I unwrap a tree. Layer upon layer of plastic bags, sediment, broken down leaves, and plastic fragments come off until the bare trunk reveals itself. Damp from a prolonged period of being hidden from the sun, I can feel the tree breathing fully. I imagine myself in the spring when I can finally get into a tank top and feel the breeze on my skin, and every centimeter of it soaks up the sun and gulps fresh air. That might be how the tree feels, just as alive as myself absorbing earthly sensations.

As individual objects, plastic bags are forgettable, and when presented as a disgusting mass, they, like all disposable items of convenience, become vessels of guilt from expedient, thoughtless grabs. As found plastic bags accumulated in my studio, the mass was heavily textured and abjectly appealing. In three months, I had amassed the raw materials for the installation *Wall of Shame: Blacks Run (Stream)* (Figures 7, 8). The installation blocked out other elements in the room. On the ground around it, a thin layer of dirt had fallen, creating a conversation and relationship between the plastic material and the land from which it was excavated. The mass became the elephant in the room, each person contemplating their involvement in the structure. If I were able to summon every bag that lay waste in the Earth's waterways and soils and make a cumulative wall of shame, how large would it be, and how large is my section from days past? Could I ever make up for the damage I exact?

Small gestures are easily ignored. Most forms of maintenance work slip under the radar, even though they are indispensable to systems of operation. As a means of paying the debt I

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<sup>11</sup> Lippard, *Undermining*, 111.

feel I owe to the land, I decided to keep the stream clean and continue to work at that task. Questioning the role of the artist, waste, and systems of maintenance, Mierle Laderman Ukeles' 1969, Manifesto for Maintenance Art was designed as a proposal for a show called "Care." Her advocacy is that maintenance work itself should be valued even when the worker in question struggles with certain aspects of the repetitiveness of it. The problem she says is that culture values advancement and development, while maintenance "takes all the fucking time."<sup>12</sup> Perhaps her best-known work, Ukeles created the *Touch Sanitation Performance* project, spending a year's time meeting and doing the work of NYC sanitation workers and shaking their hands, thanking all 8,500 of them, which inspired me to tour my local landfill.<sup>13</sup> My practice also aligns with artist Dominique Mazeaud's seven-year performance piece, *The Great Cleansing of the Rio Grande*, 1987-1994. Finding solace in walking waterways collecting leftovers, Mazeaud cleaned out the Rio Grande and referred to some of the trash she found as "gifts": a favorite of hers was a plastic crucifix.<sup>14</sup> I can relate to this all too well. While being frustrated by the amount of debris, like Mazeaud, I feel as though I am contributing to some greater good, and I cannot help but enjoy some of what I find. My favorite found object is an

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<sup>12</sup> Jillian Steinhauer, "How Mierle Laderman Ukeles Turned Maintenance Work into Art," accessed November 2, 2019, <https://hyperallergic.com/355255/how-mierle-laderman-ukeles-turned-maintenance-work-into-art/>.

<sup>13</sup> Inspired by Ukeles, I visited and toured my local landfill and local plastic manufacturing plant. In my own experience, landfills are fascinating places. An enormous basin, with a layer of plastic as a buffer between what will be dirt and tons of human waste and discard, is known as a cell. The name "cell" given to these spaces surprised me. Unlike cells that are more commonly associated with the formation of life and biology, this place will only create one product in the end and that is methane. Landfills are necessary and helpful, and the mechanisms of production that keep them filling up are continuing to rise. In Harrisonburg, Artisan Packaging (formerly Graham Plastics) produces roughly 800,000 plastic cosmetic and beauty product bottles every day. Located less than one-quarter of a mile from Blacks Run Stream, the stream of bottles flowing throughout the conveyor belts is akin to the flow of bottles and debris traversing *the stream*. During the tour, the smell lets me in on the toxicity in the materials. Despite the loudness and stench, the plastic production system is somewhat mesmerizing. In the painting assembly line, back to back, different layers of paint are administered, and in under one minute, a shelf-ready bottle is generated. In one year, this one small plant in Harrisonburg will create roughly 200,000,000 bottles.

<sup>14</sup> Dominique Mazeaud, "Material is Matter... is Mother," *Women Witnessing: Dark Matter*, October 2016, [http://darkmatterwomenwitnessing.com/issues/Oct2016/articles/Material-is-Matter-is-Mother\\_Dominique-Mazeaud.html](http://darkmatterwomenwitnessing.com/issues/Oct2016/articles/Material-is-Matter-is-Mother_Dominique-Mazeaud.html).

overgrown Styrofoam egg crate I found nestled on the embankment (Figure 9). I depart from Mazeaud however, because I generate new works from the detritus.

The most significant influence on me as an artist has been Chris Jordan's *Albatross* project. This project culminated in a film documentary and a photography series. Centered on the remote island of Midway Atoll in the Pacific, Jordan photographs dead Albatross juveniles. By carefully cutting them open at the stomach, his documentary and photographs reveal the amount of plastic they ingested before succumbing to starvation. Though being aesthetically beautiful, they are horrifying photographs. Blending the practices of the arts and natural science, Jordan provides evidence of the plastic pollution issue much more effectively and emotionally than hearing the data-dump pile of facts about plastic production and marine debris. When I think about letting a small piece of Styrofoam remain in the stream so I can move along, I think about those birds, and I patiently clean.

During the summer of 2018, I was collecting near Purcell Park when I noticed three bizarre flower formations on the side of the embankment. They were not flowers at all, but instead, three stick-like plants had amassed a collection of organic matter and plastic detritus at their tops. I was not sure what to think of them, so I took my pocketknife, cut them, and took them back to my studio. There I photographed them, and they became the first three specimens of the series, *Flowers of the Anthropocene* (Figures 10-11). I have collected and have photographed over fifty "specimens," each given pseudo-scientific names and presented mainly as photographs.<sup>15</sup> In the naming of these new hybrid-flowers, many of them use the term or descriptor "poly" in them. Names such as *Polyflous pholentina* and *Polyflous botanim* directly reference the polyethylene (most common plastic) found within them. The flowers are

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<sup>15</sup> I still have most of the specimens in storage, but the aging to the organic material has made them incredibly fragile and, in some instances, altered the appearance immensely.



genuine hybrids, and my contribution comes only in the form of documentation and assigning nomenclature. They are evidence of a hybrid landscape, straddling two plateaus, neither breathing nor dead, yet existing.

## Part 2: Roads to Hybridization

Two degrees removed, and another universe opened.  
A rebirthing day so to say.  
Submerged.  
All around are schools of fish,  
plus, some goldfish crackers.  
Birding activity today, white owls.  
All cigarillos.  
Keep treading, for a blue heron awaits.  
Fortune of the roamer.  
Interventions of life  
meeting something else.  
Here to stay, some to play.  
Reformations of convenience,  
lingering just beyond.  
Tangible for the seeker.  
And below, also from this place  
In a plastic universe, there is a space untouched.  
Requiring amazing feats of feet configuration to reach.  
Some take peanut butter sludge hallways with glittering walls to reach.  
Through the birthing canal, deep dark, deep time, and out the other side.  
Another rebirthing day.  
So strikingly different from above to below.  
A container for the remainder, and the memories of water.  
Memories of the moments shed.  
Hybrid existences from one another, time's experiment.  
For sun is the strategic maker of life.  
And water is the sub creator of time.  
Above or below, wherever one roams.  
Streamscapes are places to feel small, places where to feel whole.  
Trashscapes are places to feel your weight, to place your debt.  
Amongst the rocks, dirt, and water.

## Chapter 4: Trashscapes

“Landscape pictures can offer us three verities: geography, autobiography, and metaphor... what a landscape photographer traditionally tries to do is show what is past, present, and future all at once.

- Robert Adams <sup>16</sup>

It is meditative for me to clean and organize spaces, explore facets of organic and inorganic materials, and to generate worlds and conversations from the mundane, the leftover, and refuse. I am a flower in this way, collecting pollutants from the water and transforming them into something attractive. According to social psychologist Karen E Dill-Shackleford, humans are not built to discount what we see, and in fact, are biologically designed to do just the opposite. <sup>17</sup> As consumers, we are exploited by powerful images and messages that capitalize on social motivations. <sup>18</sup> Lately, I have been photographing and scanning advertised images from packages and recomposing these manipulative, profit-driven images into digital collages. Some works are generated entirely from scanned images, and others are split compositions that incorporate the gleaned, advertised imagery with photographs of objects found in situ in the streamscape. The compositions have an abject quality because of the weathered grit that accumulates on the original packaging, deceptively advertising a myriad of falsehoods, such as, green fields, flowers, and clean waters.

The exalted experience of nature has been a popular subject throughout art history, and the influence of early American landscape artists had a pronounced effect in the nineteenth century. Thomas Cole was a leading figure coming from the Hudson River School painters and

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<sup>16</sup> Lippard, *Undermining*, 173.

<sup>17</sup> Dill Shackleford, *How Fantasy Becomes Reality*, 150.

<sup>18</sup> Karen E. Dill Shackleford, *How Fantasy Becomes Reality: Information and Entertainment Media in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 142.

often painted the natural scenery as he imagined it must have looked before “culture.”<sup>19</sup> For instance, in his most famous painting, *The Oxbow*, Cole’s composition does not include the tourist refreshment pavilion that was erected at the top of the mountain since 1821. This evidentiary omission is significant because it illustrates how sacrificing the wild in the progress of culture-making is a pattern that has continued to be perpetuated in America. These inherited ideas about a romanticized landscape influenced my desire to infiltrate a beautiful, sublime-inspiring scene with a taste of culture’s byproducts.

My work entitled *Deer Park, after a Thunderstorm*, deliberately singles out the Deer Park water bottle made by Nestlé, advertising pure water with an image of a pristine forest and waterfall (Figure 12). This brand and image display a false purity in its advertising. Using five found Deer Park labels, I recreated a landscape featuring countless weathered waterfalls cascading into one another with a faint hint of text in the sky. The work exists in a space between photography and painting. It is printed on fabric at a scale comparable to the sizes of Thomas Cole’s paintings. Flooding the scene at the bottom, tainting the inherent beauty in the landscape is a barrage of plastic water bottles. This piece— and the other digitally-collaged landscapes I generate— are trashscapes of today.

*The Stream and the Scrap Collector* is a surreal landscape influenced by the Poland Spring water bottle label. Filled with mountains, trees, and water, this piece is tainted by a pipe that is expelling trash into the water. A mix of grayed landscape plays with a colorful and polluted streamscape (Figures 13, 14). The rock cliffs are made from manipulated photographed plastic tissue wrappers; in its entirety, the composition is filled with trickery. In another way, it

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<sup>19</sup> David Schuyler, *Sanctified Landscape* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2012), 32.

functions as a self-portrait of my artistic practice as a system. The power in these collages is that they are entirely generated by waste and my hand in its excavation.

I ask myself the question posed by artist and writer, Jenny Odell: “What does it mean to construct digital worlds while the actual world is crumbling before our eyes?”<sup>20</sup> In response, I channel the message of writer and feminist, Donna Haraway, who writes about the Anthropocene, or in her writings, the *Chthulucene*, and ultimately lean in and “stay with the trouble.” She states: “It matters what thoughts think thoughts. It matters what relations relate relations. It matters what worlds world worlds. It matters what stories tell stories.”<sup>21</sup>

These landscapes, a few shades removed from an actual place, allow for narrative and imagination to enter the realm. Sometimes in order to make these works, I too must engage in practices that are not entirely sustainable. Every time I use my digital equipment or print my collages, I recognize that I am extending my footprint while creating work about a collective footprint. I continue to work with both digital and print media while being conscious of the contradictions embedded in or a result of my practice. I work to find ways to reduce the hypocrisy in my materials. For example, in my installation *Debris Nation*, I use chalk to recreate my digital collage *Utopia* (Figures 15,16). Each element in the composition was given its own number based on the trash it was extracted from and is presented as a large key. Seven of the twenty-one pieces of trash are presented below the chalked landscape and serve as an avenue for the viewer to engage and mentally recreate the landscape. For example, the canine advertised on the dog poop bag on the floor also engages with other pseudo-animals in a strange new environment in the drawn composition. Like any experiment where there are

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<sup>20</sup> Jenny Odell, *How to do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (New York: Melville House, 2019), xiv.

<sup>21</sup> Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 35.

limited amounts of information, one makes sense out of the constants provided, here being the trash on the floor. The variables here are the recognizable, yet unidentified elements whose origins are left for debate and contemplation. Ultimately, this experiment still proved not completely sustainable because to get the gallery walls back to square, a layer of latex paint was required because water alone was not enough to remove the chalk residue. By living, I create residue... where is the paint?

## Chapter: Wild Plastics

“For collecting is always a struggle between order and disorder; to achieve the wholeness of a collection, one creates order and gives meaning to objects so that they form a universe of their own, which in turn, becomes a mirror of the world in which those objects originated.”

-Massimiliano Gioni <sup>22</sup>

I find more wildlife in the packaging I pick up than I do in the actual stream. Taking ideas of hybridity into my drawing practice, I began blending printed advertisements and graphite-drawn animals (Figures 17-20). They emerge from a byproduct filled landscape that is becoming just as familiar as the traditional “natural world.” In split compositions, part drawing, part advertisement, the advertised animal exists outside of its intended purpose. Pseudo-scientific nomenclature is assigned to the different drawn specimen, and the classifications are indicative of a split species in names such as *Castor cacao* (*Chocolate-Chip Beaver*), *Camelus nicotiana* (*Camerillo*), *Sylvilagus artificialis* (*Cottonstuffed Rabbit*), and the *Ursus glucos* (*Harizzly Bear*). The drawing portion of the compositions are reminiscent of early wildlife and botanical natural history sketches and prints. The worn material of the packaging and the quality of grit becomes magnified at this large scale.

In 2018, I began working on a video piece titled *What Lies Beneath Blacks Run* (Figure 21). In this video, the leading performer is a reed of attached plastic bags, that when activated, appear to be a living, aquatic creature. Coming in and out of the scenes, there are overlays of microscope-captured organisms from original water samples collected from the bags themselves. I was fascinated by the idea of transforming bags into performers and finding the performers within the bags. The underlying theory behind the piece rests with the evolution equation: organisms evolve and morph into other units of life resulting from learned behaviors

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<sup>22</sup> Gioni, Massimiliano, “The Country of Last Things,” in *The Keeper*, ed. Massimiliano Gioni and Natalie Bell (New York: New Museum, 2016), 10.

and adaptations to their environments. Blacks Run is flowing with plastic bags, and I find heaps of them. Perhaps the future organisms in the stream will come to mirror the waste that occupies it.

Coming back to this project a year later, I created a second version, *Polyrhizomatic nematoda*, 8:10 min. (Figure 22). Eerie, guttural sounds come from the creatures in the film as they use sonar to hunt, eat, fight, and mate. In undulating struggles for survival these creatures mimic the motions of the nematodes I have observed under the microscope, as indicated in the title. They are simultaneously beautiful and horrifying, like all rejected plastic bags flowing underwater. At times the creatures are violent, which sends conflicting emotions as they are simultaneously magnificent as light pours underwater through their varying textures and colors. As static specimen, they resemble the human form through scale and shape, and are seemingly adversarial because of the reasons for their existence (Figure 23).



## Chapter 6: The Pandemic Exhibit

“The anxious often violent, aspects of nature emulate our internal struggles; the abject terrain suggests our own solitude and sense of loss; and works that address science serve as cautionary tales about humankind’s ability to at once enhance and destroy through the manipulation of nature. Such works demand that we hold a mirror to ourselves, replete with reflections of our fears, vulnerabilities, and fantasies.”

Julie Sasse<sup>23</sup>

I am trying to stay on track, while the world around me is falling apart. Once again, systems are operating on global scales that I physically cannot control. Sometime in late March 2020, my relationship to trash changed. Covid-19 had migrated to the U.S., and the report of the devastating effects that the virus was having was taking over the news and the minds of millions around the world. The pandemic, with the need for social isolation and stay-at-home orders, exposes the fragility of our lives, livelihoods, and lifestyles. The virus has not changed my relationship to the stream, but trash has become unsafe and unwelcome in the studio because of its potential to carry the virus. Covid-19, a strain of the Coronavirus, an extremely contagious respiratory disease, has utterly uprooted the trajectory of my graduate studies and impending thesis exhibition.

Ultimately, because of safety restrictions, the exhibition for this body of work may never exist together in the gallery. To counteract this unfortunate truth, I have created digital mock-up installations that provide a context in which the works would have been installed and experienced in Duke Hall Gallery of Fine Art. The centerfold installation of the exhibition is *Blacks Run, Harrisonburg, VA, November 2019- March 2020*, and is a lifeline to the other works in the exhibition (Figures 24, 25). The installation is an archive, a quilt, and evidence of a

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<sup>23</sup> Julie Sasse, “Intro,” in *Trouble in Paradise: Examining Discord Between Nature and Society*, ed. Julie Sasse, Emily Handlin, and Lindsay Russell, (Arizona: Ben Franklin Press, 2009), 35.

period of time that I spent in the stream. Everything from the coloring in the advertising, the dirt and grime, the waste and pollution, the specimen and their insect pins, the aesthetics and the packaging, the references to a place and class, the systems of organization and waste — all enter the conversation. This installation becomes a site-specific commentary on Harrisonburg and its connecting regions. This installation asks the following questions of me: What have I contributed to this wall over my lifetime? Why am I attracted to this wall despite it being on many levels disgusting? Do these images and characters, despite the weathered quality, attract others? What does this wall say about Harrisonburg, Virginia specifically? What do packaged animals look like in the waterways of other places? What would a series of gleaned animal hybrids from across the world resemble?

In the exhibition, viewers are first taken in by the visual stimulus of the *Blacks Run, Harrisonburg, VA, November 2019- March 2020* installation while the video at the far end, *Polyrhizomatic nematoda*, hits your ears (Figures 26, 27). The sounds of thrashing creatures and piercing sonar create an eerie mood within the space where visions of mysterious beauty meet violence. The creatures are human-scale and are displayed as lifeless specimen next to the footage. Upon concluding the film, viewers curve around to the drawings in the exhibition. Beginning with *Camelus nicotiana (Camerillo)*, and going down the line, viewers would have the opportunity to source out the original packaged element in the *Blacks Run, Harrisonburg, VA, November 2019- March 2020* installation. Upon approaching *The Stream and the Scrap Collector*, the scale of the work overpowers the viewer (Figure 28). Stretching twenty feet wide and twelve feet high, the landscape allows viewers to get lost in the details, textures, and vistas I find myself captivated by. The composition has come to be an agent of pollination: a way to germinate my process, fascinations, and practice upon my audience.

Conclusion:

“After the revolution, who’s going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?”

– Mierle Lauerma Ukeles

I wonder, if everyone in America were required to pick up litter weekly, would we still allow corporations to make non-compostable products? When I am in the stream, I do not walk through picking up trash in anger. I am disappointed but not angered because I have found myself here. I see myself and my life through the water, trees, birds, fish, moss, soil, microorganisms, etc... as well as in the plastic, packages, Styrofoam, and bottles. I am a collector and world-maker, a roamer and a cave dweller. Above, below, and within, I explore where water traverses and the strata comes to meet it. I am a millennial living a hybrid existence of convenience and uncertainty. I am an artist on the hunt for places where the artificial and organic meet. I am a composer of hybrid creatures and an archivist of scrap. In my practice, beauty meets disgust, and the works I create are in response to the landscapes I roam, and the objects I collect. If searching, you may find me weeding the in-between, where wilderness meets culture.

Figures:



Figure 1: *Insects of the Anthropocene* floor installation, 2018



Figure 2: *Insects of the Anthropocene* detail of floor installation, 2018



Figure 3: *Insects of the Anthropocene* key, 2018



Figure 4: *The Naturalist's Cart (of the Anthropocene)*, 2018



Figure 5: *The Naturalist's Cart (of the Anthropocene)* detail, 2018





Figure 6: *The Naturalist's Cart (of the Anthropocene)* detail, 2018



Figure 7: *Wall of Shame, Blacks Run (Stream)*, 2018



Figure 8: *Wall of Shame, Blacks Run (Stream)* (detail), 2018



Figure 9: *Egg Crate*, 2019



Figure 10: *Polyflous pholentina*, from the *Flowers of the Anthropocene* series, 2018



Figure 11: *Polyflous botanim*, from the *Flowers of the Anthropocene* series, 2018

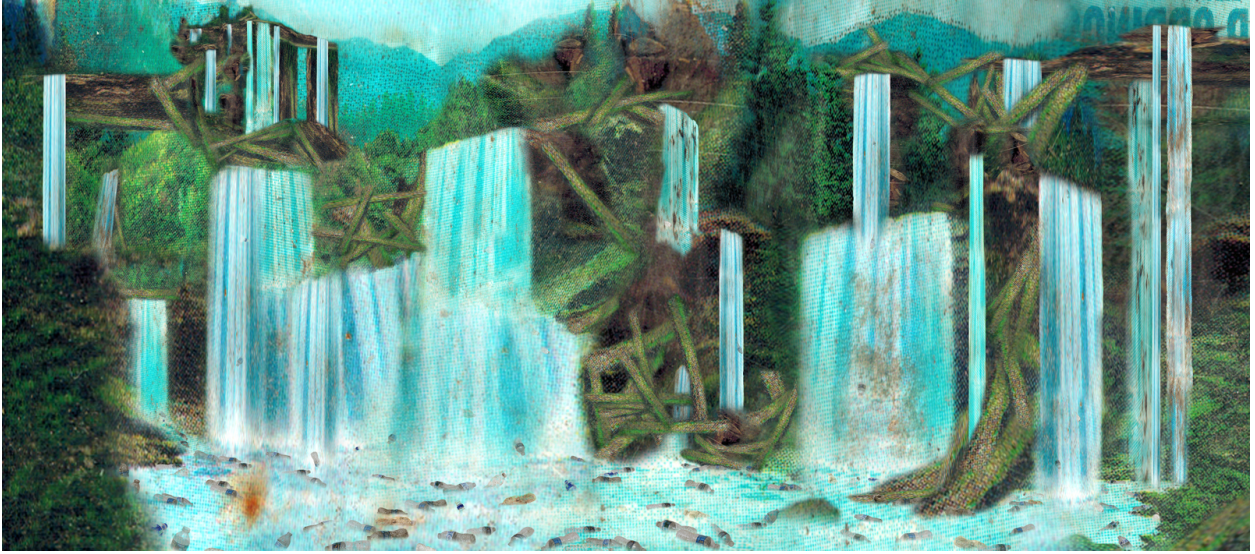


Figure 12: *Deer Park, after a Thunderstorm, 2019*



Figure 13: *The Stream and the Scrap Collector*, 2020





Figure 14: *The Stream and the Scrap Collector* (detail), 2020

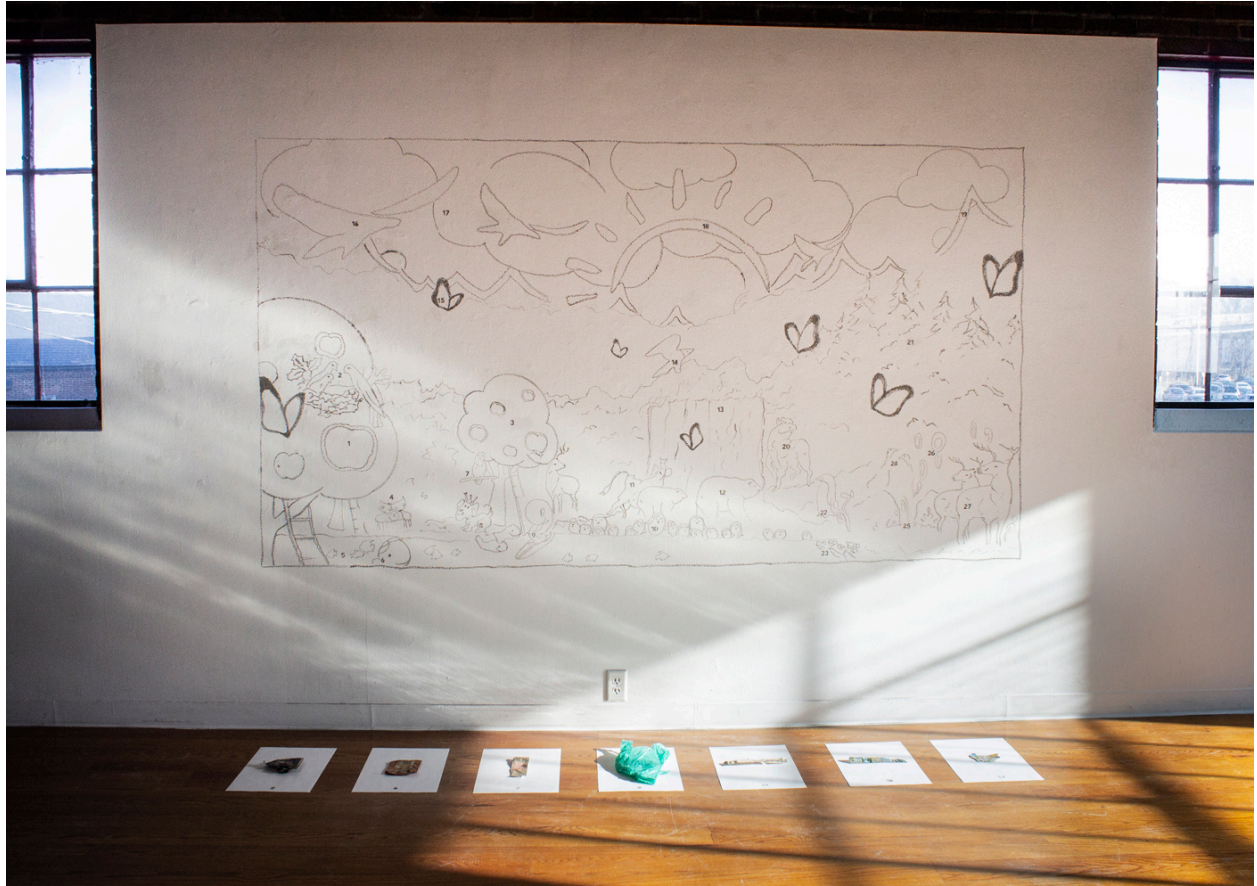


Figure 15: Installation, *Debris Nation*, 2019



Figure 16: *Utopia*, 2019



Figure 17: *Castor cacao* (Chocolate-Chip Beaver)

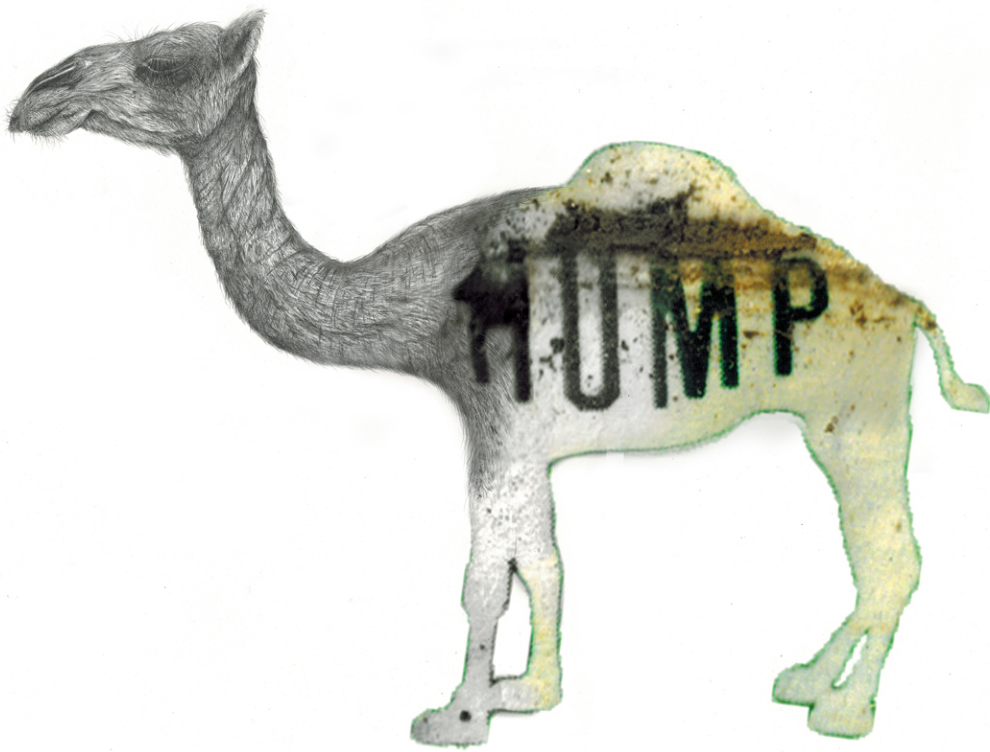


Figure 18: *Camelus nicotiana* (Camerillo)



Figure 19: *Sylvilagus artificialis* (Cottonstuffed Rabbit)



Figure 20: *Ursus glucos* (Harizzly Bear)



Figure 21: Video still, *What Lies Beneath Blacks Run*, 30:27 min, 2018

Link to video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yNJTKPXLzfo&t=1408s>





Figure 22: *Polyrhizomatic nematoda*, 8:10 min., 2020

Link to video: [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1iAv6Hg1VRXi\\_E7XMIGBtDMQq-P00nAis/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1iAv6Hg1VRXi_E7XMIGBtDMQq-P00nAis/view?usp=sharing)



Figure 23: *Polyrhizomatic nematoda* specimen, 2020



Figure 24: Blacks Run, Harrisonburg, VA, November 2019-March 2020, 2020



Figure 25: Blacks Run, Harrisonburg, VA, November 2019 -March 2020 (detail), 2020



Figure 26: Virtual exhibition view, 2020



Figure 27: Virtual exhibition view, 2020



Figure 28: Virtual exhibition view, 2020

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