

LEGACY JUNK: MFA THESIS EXHIBITION

by

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## Abstract

I recently purchased a tract of raw land with the intention of building a cabin, and wasn't terribly surprised to find the land came with some impressive piles of junk. I was frankly enamored of these objects, abandoned but not destroyed by the previous owner. They had a potentially useful quality that resonated with other aspects of the Fairbanks community; transfer sites, the airplane graveyard behind the airport, old couches and tables and wooden spools that littered the yards of countless homes. This rural detritus represents a confluence of natural and cultural forces that Alaskans experience every day. I wish to investigate this transitional territory by abstracting and amplifying the fine line between usefulness and decay.

I believe that in this modern life, it is all too easy to assume that the world of nature and the world of human culture are totally separate. For me, this assumption was repeatedly challenged after experiencing the destructive power of nature during my childhood in Tornado Alley, and more recently, the subzero temperatures of Interior Alaska. I typically draw inspiration from daily observations of my environment, and as a result my imagery changed dramatically after I moved to the far North. Despite the change of landscape, the core concept of investigating intersections of nature and culture remains the same. This is a fascinating task in the Alaskan Interior, as these intersections are clearly exposed. This community has a unique relationship to nature, as modern homes and businesses coexist with virtually untouched wilderness. These experiences have instilled in me a deep respect for the vast web of life that both supports and threatens my community, and motivates me to seek out and emphasize places where natural and artificial worlds collide using the malleable language of art and oil painting.



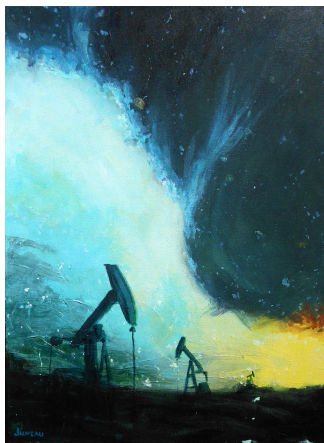
There is one simple expression that serves as the main thread running through my life and my work: nature gets the last word. From my childhood in Tornado Alley to the subzero temperatures of Interior Alaska, nature always gets the last word. One of my earliest memories as a child in rural Kansas was standing in the front yard, bracing against the gust front, watching finger-like tornadoes dance on the flat horizon. A peculiar optical illusion occurs on the Kansas plains: when you can see for miles, it is very hard to tell if the tornadoes are at a safe distance, or right on top of you. In this increasingly digital life, it is all too easy to assume that the world of nature and the world of culture are totally separate. For me, this assumption was repeatedly shattered in dramatic fashion after directly experiencing the destructive power of nature.

In 1998, my family home was badly damaged by a relatively weak F-2 tornado. On May 3rd, 1999, a severe and deadly F-5 tornado tore through neighborhoods less than five miles from my home, producing the highest tornadic wind speeds ever recorded on Earth (305-315 mph). The base of the tornado was a square mile. Entire neighborhoods were destroyed in moments. Even today, you can ask any long-time Oklahoma resident about May 3rd, 1999, and they will give you an exacting description of where they were and how they were affected.

These were formative experiences to say the least. Oklahoma has one of the most technologically advanced weather notification systems in the world, and yet deaths still occur during these storms. Despite these systems of warning and protection that create a sense of safety, nature still gets the last word. These experiences instilled in me a deep respect for (and admittedly, fear of) the vast web of life that both supported and threatened my community. It became very clear to me that the relationship

between nature and culture is uneasy at best, and motivated me to seek out places where natural and artificial worlds collide using the visual language of art.

In 2006, I enrolled in the University of Oklahoma School of Visual Arts to pursue my dream of becoming an artist. My undergraduate studies revolved around human intrusions into nature, and vice versa. In *Herd*, I wanted to describe these continuously moving oil pumps that are so common in Oklahoma as strange animals under a forbidding sky. The cloud formation I've depicted here is a 'wall cloud,' or a type of lowering cloud that has the potential to produce severe weather. Many of my early works have an ominous quality relating to fear about my environment.



Left: *Herd*, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 18 x 24"  
Right: *Crash Parts*, 2010, monotype with mixed media, 14 x 12"

I actually started out in the undergraduate program as a printmaker - many of my early works are etchings or monotypes with a mixed media element like ink or paint. I often depicted mangled, damaged, or otherwise forbidding cultural objects such as the forms in *Crash Parts*. Train tracks were an important symbol for me during these years. I imagined them as the skeleton of modern society. I kept warping them in my imagery, or placing them in unlikely destinations. At this point I began to realize that I was making monotypes simply as supports for painting, and that my true passion lies in the

field of painting. Since then, my many artistic interests have been set aside to focus almost exclusively on the study of painting. I continued these studies until I received my BFA in Art with a Minor in Art History from the University of Oklahoma School of Visual Arts in 2011.

After graduation in 2011, I found myself quite unsure of my direction in life. I was managing a custom frame shop I had worked in for almost ten years, living paycheck to paycheck and wondering if I would ever be able to truly advance my skills as an artist despite the hectic trials of adult life. I knew I needed a big change, but didn't know what form that change would take. To my dismay, nature answered that question with a series of disasters that I am still recovering from, in many ways.

On May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2013, yet another deadly tornado ripped through my community, mere miles from my home. In itself this would be a common story, as this happens nearly every spring in my hometown. This tornado, however, had a particularly devastating impact as it hit a hospital and two schools before dissipating. 24 residents were killed, 7 of which were children attending school. I put in volunteer hours at a local church to help sort an unbelievable outpouring of donations from all over the world to help dislocated families that were temporarily housed in the OU dormitories.

*Three weeks* after this disaster, I lost my apartment to flooding. Suddenly, I was the one who needed help from my community. I was the one who now needed a place to stay, clothes to wear, food to eat. My family and my community took care of me, and I am eternally grateful for their kindness. Amid all of this abrupt change, and the stripping away of my personal belongings, I found a strange truth: it is much easier to take big risks when you have nothing to lose. In this spirit, I planned to chase my dream of

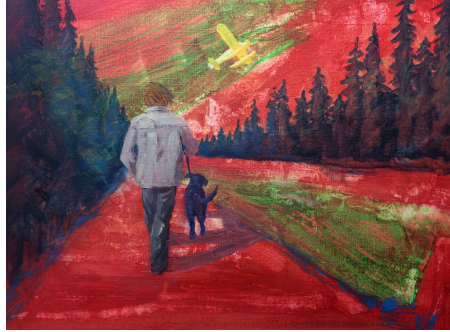
becoming a proper landscape painter by challenging myself to move to Alaska within a year. If I had not experienced these personal traumas, I may never have decided to pack what little I owned and drive 4,300 miles to a state I had never even visited. So, I decided to trade one inhospitable environment for a different sort of inhospitable environment and made the journey north.

Though I experienced many rapid life changes after graduation, my determination to study nature felt more vital and pressing than ever before. My experiences with natural disasters, along with the pure joy of exploring Alaska's beauty for the first time, led me to create a series of paintings in two distinct categories: traditional landscapes, and expressionist landscapes with wild texture and imagined color.



*Hush*, 2017, vine charcoal on paper, 24" x 12"

For the first two years in Alaska, I was trying to understand the new forms and landscapes that surrounded me. There are things I had never had the opportunity to paint from experience: snow, massive spruce forests, breathtaking lakes and rivers. In *Hush*, I depicted a scene right in front of my rent house. It's still astonishing to me that I can experience this kind of scene after a ten minute walk from home. *Hush* is part of a realistic landscape series I created while getting adjusted to this new environment.



*Black Spruce Reverie*, 2017, acrylic and oil on canvas paper, 12 x 9"

Concurrent with the realistic landscapes, I was also making wildly expressive and colorful studies to capture the feel of Tanana Valley, such as *Black Spruce Reverie*. I started these smaller paintings by laying down an abstracted series of acrylic washes without any particular finished forms in mind. Then I would compose my subject matter within the abstracted background using a layer of oil paint. This process allowed me to free myself up and reach for unexpected color combinations or unusual compositions to generate visual interest, and to better reflect the emotional experience of walking through an Alaskan landscape. Although I typically work in a realistic style, it helps me to parallel this work with abstraction so I can maintain my focus on paint quality and texture rather than adhering too closely to a photo reference.

The most important visual influence in my work as a nature painter is simply what I observe from day to day. In Oklahoma, I painted train tracks and big skies; in Alaska I'm painting an altogether different kind of rural reality. It's very important to me to lift my imagery from everyday life experiences that I have observed directly in order to present an honest view of the world around me, rather than an idealized landscape.

This is not to say that pristine, limitless landscapes are somehow dishonest. In Alaska it is quite possible to consistently paint a landscape untouched by power lines and snowmachine tracks; and there is a strong community of contemporary northern

landscape painters ready to prove this fact. Unfortunately, Alaska is fairly unique in that regard. In most of the continental U.S., it is increasingly difficult to find vistas where nature has more of a presence than human construction. I had to make an important decision as my paintings trended more towards nature work: would I go through all of my source material and excise any visual mention of human habitation? That's not the Alaska I know. Culture encroaching into nature, then decaying - this is the observable reality I wish to discuss in my work.

To further understand this idea of the 'honest' landscape, I am revisiting and researching work that I have always had a strong connection to. I believe that I have something to learn from every artist, but there are a few immense talents that I keep returning to, year after year. One of my greatest influences is the contemporary German painter, Anselm Kiefer. In 2010, I had the opportunity to see Kiefer's *Aschenblume* at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. This work demanded my attention, and I spent the better part of an afternoon getting acquainted with the entire Kiefer exhibit. Considering this particular canvas is in excess of 25 feet wide, there was plenty of work to study.

At that point, I did not know that Kiefer was a groundbreaking German post-war artist grappling with his national identity. I did not know that the room he portrays in *Aschenblume* was the seat of Nazi power in Berlin, Albert Speer's Reich Chancellery, and yet I still felt that Kiefer was tapping into an immense and very old shared sorrow. Kiefer's use of materials, size, and composition masterfully signifies the tragedies of war even without reference to his national identity.



Anselm Kiefer, *Aschenblume*, 1983-97, oil, emulsion, acrylic paint, clay, ash, earth and dried sunflower on canvas, 158 x 299  $\frac{3}{4}$ "

The physicality of the object was overwhelming, and not only because of the canvas size. The surface of *Aschenblume* is a blend of careful application and violence, as he builds up layers of paint (also dirt, barbed wire, dried flowers, ash), carves out the surface, and builds up again. The canvas is completely swallowed by the surface, and the composition becomes more of a sculptural relief than a painting. The result is archeology; the layers of material speak to cycles of history, ruin, and waste. Many of the materials used also signify the passage of time. Kiefer often uses temporary materials like straw, dried flowers, or clay. Impermanence is an inescapable fact in Anselm Kiefer's work - his paintings begin to decay and fall apart the moment he finishes making them, despite museum conservators' best efforts.

The formal qualities of *Aschenblume* are present in his many landscapes as well. Kiefer is by no means presenting a photorealistic landscape, but rather his spiritual vision of the post-war German landscape. The overwhelming sense of decay present in his work references the worst of humanity in large groups. These landscapes are not the least bit idealized; Kiefer pulls no punches. However, his imagery is not completely without hope. Decay also means transformation - the dried sunflower in *Aschenblume* will drop seeds and eventually create new growth.

In 2017 I applied to the Master of Fine Arts program at University of Alaska Fairbanks to continue my studies. Shortly after acceptance, I began work on a series titled 'Legacy Junk' while planning to build a home. I'd recently purchased raw land to pursue this dream of building my own home in a place I love. I didn't know anything about home construction — especially the specific kinds of requirements for a home in the subarctic — so I spent a year researching and planning before starting construction.



*Elbow Room*, 2017, oil on canvas, 24 x 30"

I was not terribly surprised to find that my land came with these wonderful piles of junk left by the previous owner. I was frankly enamored of these objects, abandoned but not destroyed by the previous owner. They had a potentially useful quality that resonated with other aspects of the Fairbanks community; transfer sites, the airplane graveyard behind the airport, old couches and tables and wooden spools that littered the yards of countless homes. This rural detritus represents a confluence of natural and cultural forces that Alaskans experience every day. This land purchase cemented an idea I'd been pondering for some time - that Fairbanksans have a very special relationship with their garbage. I wished to investigate this relationship further and



continued making 'portraits' of these objects, as well as depicting them in more traditional landscape scenes such as *Twilight Theater* (2018).



*Twilight Theater*, 2018, oil and liquin impasto medium on canvas, 48 x 24"

In Interior Alaska, my daily routines are punctuated by brief moments of immense natural beauty. In *Twilight Theater*, I am combining a certain backyard banality with a sense of natural spectacle to present a genuine view of everyday life. The title itself is a pairing of nature and culture; *Twilight Theater* alludes to the stillness of a crowd or an individual as they experience this daily grand finale.

The composition is divided into three distinct horizontal bands that widen at the edges to encompass the viewer. To further the sense of meditative and respectful watching, the sky is painted in a large panoramic curve, like the backdrop of an immense theater. The opera-like bowl of the sky is anchored by a band of trees, bent double and heavy with snow.

The sense of weight increases in the bottom third of the composition. These barely discernible objects (toppers, trailers, and trucks) are rendered temporarily useless and unreachable under the heavy snowfall. This field may be fallow, but the strong wedge of fiery sunset light hints at spring and warmer days ahead.

Subarctic light is always a primary concern in my compositions because it is so very particular in this part of the world. It is so uniquely specific that it becomes a kind

of inside joke among those who can recognize its peculiarities. I find it fascinating that a local Fairbanksan can have an immediate sense of perfect recognition with the strange sideways quality of the light in this painting, whereas the scene might look inexplicably alien to someone from warmer climes.

From a personal standpoint, this image is dear to me because it is the first painting I completed using only palette knives and thickly tempered oil paint. The impasto process was nothing short of a revelation; until this point, my imagery was lacking this vitally important tactile aspect. I was very particular about layering the compositional bands in stages so the foreground objects would physically overlap the background objects. In this manner I attempted to develop a surface more closely related to relief sculpture than traditional oil painting.

Unfortunately, I was ultimately unhappy with the liquin impasto medium I used in this work. I'm traditionally drawn to oil paint because of the rich organic quality of the reflected light. The liquin impasto seems to detract from this rich surface quality, turning it into a slick, plastic surface not unlike acrylic paints. This minor failure led me to experiment with a variety of mediums, until I found the exact surface quality I've been searching for in cold wax medium.



*Cornucopia*, 2018, acrylic, oil, cold wax, and oilstick on canvas, 66 x 88"

*Cornucopia* can best be described as artistic transition, writ large. I had just purchased my first jars of cold wax medium, the same week I acquired a magnificent larger-than-life canvas. I felt that the best way to truly understand the medium's qualities was to expand my usual scale and play with material interactions. As a result, this image is a pastiche of acrylic underpainting, oil pastels, oil paint sticks, and broad swathes of cold wax mixtures applied with knives and printmaking brayers.

During the production of this work, I put some serious thought into the cold wax medium and how it functions. Cold wax is a carefully balanced mixture of pharmaceutical grade beeswax, alkyd resin, and odorless mineral spirits. Beeswax, of course, is a naturally produced material; whereas the alkyd resin and mineral spirits are synthetic. The beeswax is naturally solid at room temperature, but at the correct equilibrium of both compounds, the material is soft and workable. This idea of material equilibrium resonates with a conceptual balance of nature and culture that I am learning to express in my compositions.

Although this work is too stylistically different from the *Legacy Junk* series to make it in the final thesis show, *Cornucopia* is a good example of how I employ

abstraction in my process. Most of my portfolio consists of realistic imagery, but I find it essential to parallel my representational practice with experimental abstraction.

Process-driven work allows me to limber up, reach for unexpected color schemes, and refine my compositional skills. It is entirely possible that I will develop this line of work more seriously after graduation; but for now, abstraction is a place for me to play and push forward without fear of failure.

I also get essential practice with plein-air paintings when the weather allows. Paints tempered with cold wax medium tend to keep very well in small portable containers, which is very useful for working outside. Plein-air work is direct and refreshing, although I typically find myself unable to really ‘finish’ a work outdoors. It turns out that I am a creature of habit, and I end up missing the reliability of my studio and access to all of my tools. The compromise I’ve come to involves making a rough composition out-of-doors as well as a photo reference. The finished work is produced from a combination of both references.



*Braided Haze*, 2018, oil and cold wax on wood panel, 10 x 8”

In order for me to develop my competency with cold wax medium and the impasto painting method, I made a series of smaller landscape works while researching the works of Paul Cezanne. Cezanne had a tendency to build up form using planes of

painterly color, and I was very intrigued by the possibility of adapting that stylistic tendency for knife-painting. I was very enthusiastic about this mid-degree turn towards impasto work, and I wanted to process everything I saw into this elevated textural surface.

I've always been drawn to the intense individualism of late 19th-century Post-Impressionism, and Paul Cezanne in particular. Cezanne's body of work is a perfect bridge between Impressionism and the dramatically exploded forms of Cubism. His landscapes pioneered a fine line between abstraction and realism where objects are still recognizable, but the artist's specific mark-making and peculiar quirks are allowed to speak.

Cezanne had a number of fascinating 'quirks,' although many of them have since become widely accepted painting methods. For example, Cezanne's *motif* is a method of applying a single color throughout the canvas to integrate a scene. *Passages* are another integration technique employing small hatched brushwork to break up lines between discrete objects. Both techniques are always worthy of further minute study. Since I am chiefly using a cold wax medium, I'm more and more often using a wet-on-wet impasto technique that by default creates a similarly unified look.

There is something masterfully awkward about Cezanne's forms, giving them an enigmatic quality I continue to puzzle over. He tends to casually disrupt normally perceived space in a way I find endearing. The resulting effect reminds me of the flawed aspects of human vision, or maybe hints at a dream-like and contemplative state. I often find myself trying to compose with this kind of gentle distortion in my own work. These are contributions that modern artists have built on for a full century, and it

is extremely helpful for me to fully consider these first abstracted departures from Western academic painting.



*Please Do Not Walk on the Grass*, 2019, cold wax and oil on canvas, 48 x 36"

This particular canvas represents an important milestone in the development of my thesis exhibition. During my exercises in abstraction while painting *Cornucopia*, I started to develop a better sense of how to generate visual interest through paint handling. I began to build up a more heavily layered surface quality consisting of thick impasto marks over highly pigmented oil stick drawings. The stick drawings make their appearance throughout the canvas, creating a cohesive *motif* that peeks through the developed surface.

The primary actor in this image is the subarctic summer sun drenching a hillside in Denali National Park. The broken and decaying tree serves as a focal point, centered in the natural spotlight. Its broken form recedes in space where it is contained by the branches — a visual barrier between the semi-circle of living trees in the background. The viewer is invited to make a continual comparison between the living and the dead, and nature's tendency for self-correction. A solid concrete path runs through the bottom right corner of the canvas, taking a figurative bite out of the overgrown surroundings.

The addition of the path, to me, represents a quiet acceptance of the reality of human presence and intervention.

The title of this work alludes to this uneasy relationship between human spaces and the natural world. There are very particular guidelines on how to experience Denali Park depending on the needs of the environment; in some areas, human traffic can be devastating to the delicate undergrowth and straying from the paths is discouraged. In other areas, hikers are asked to spread out as much as possible for the same purpose - keeping the thin layers of nutrient-rich topsoil intact. By explicitly naming these invisible boundaries, I am asking the viewer to contemplate their personal experiences and interactions with the natural world.



Left: *Soft Deadline*, 2019, cold wax and oil on canvas, 20 x 20"  
Right: *Soft Deadline II*, 2020, cold wax and oil on canvas, 20 x 20"

Many of the works in the *Legacy Junk* series reference woodcutting in some way because in Alaskan culture, woodcutting is the most immediate and most often utilized method for changing our immediate environment. In the companion canvases *Soft Deadline* and *Soft Deadline II*, I am using woodcutting imagery as a way to discuss missed opportunities. Both images portray jumbled log sections left uncovered and heavy with snow. These piles were carelessly left in this unfinished condition; they will not dry properly or burn cleanly. I painted these images to be interesting compositions



and to play with representations of subarctic winter light; but I also wished to communicate a feeling of stress regarding preparations for an upcoming harsh winter. This push and pull of calming imagery with stressful undertones is an important central theme to the *Legacy Junk* series.



*Skeleton*, 2019, cold wax and oil on canvas, 20 x 20"

*Skeleton* (2019) also plays with the idea of trying to race through completing winter preparations. While I composed this piece, I was trying to finish the framing and roof of my home before winter made the work much more difficult. I was able to finish, although after completion I had the unique experience of shoveling snow out of a roofed structure. I tried to think of the construction process in terms of nature, in comparison to how animals deal with the winter months.

If I think of my home in relation to other cultural structures and homes, it seems quite modest and small, with little environmental impact. When I think of my house in terms of nature, and myself as this human animal, the process seems insanely destructive. This image has a somewhat ominous feel for me personally, as I try to confront how much I had to destroy in order to live even a modest modern life. The lighting also adds to this ominous feeling and perhaps only to those who live this far north; the light is fading and the roof isn't complete.





*Resting Place*, 2020, cold wax and oil on canvas, 48 x 36"

*Resting Place* (2020) is a centrally important work to the *Legacy Junk* series. I made two versions of this painting, one in 2017 and one in 2020. I loved the composition of the earlier version I created in 2017, but I felt that the surface was lacking in visual interest and texture. I decided to recreate this image using the knife-painting skills I had developed during enrollment in the Master's program. I originally intended for the simple imagery of two empty and rotting chairs to allude to ideas of loss and decay, both personal and physical. During the final preparations for my thesis exhibition, the coronavirus pandemic swept the globe. In my small corner of the world, my thesis and graduation was postponed out of necessary caution and public safety. During the fear and uncertainty of the initial breakout, I revisited *Resting Place* and realized the underlying meaning had changed dramatically for me.

This canvas in particular draws specific attention to the lack of figures in my show. It was important to me to leave figures out of these works because I wanted the timeline of each scene to be ambiguous. Did people interact with these objects recently, or have they been left unattended for years and years? I wanted viewers to be reminded of the possibility of a world without people, where the physical legacy of our

species lies in the billions upon billions of objects left behind. I found it strangely fitting to exhibit works on this theme in the middle of a pandemic. Essentially, nature is doing what it does best and self-correcting by developing competition. We as a species are doing what we can to mitigate the damage with masks, the tools of public policy, and the incredible development of an effective vaccine.

I never expected a global pandemic to affect the meaning and reception of a show I've been working towards for three years. In a minor sense, I also never expected how this series would change my day-to-day habits either. Before beginning this body of work, my approach to recycling was hit or miss; now I find myself with a dedicated recycling routine. I'm also much more aware of the products I buy and how the materials I purchase will outlive me. I've put a lot of work into finding sustainable replacements for plastic products and trying to adjust my lifestyle to reduce my impact. The *Legacy Junk* series draws attention to how we live, and how to better understand our relationship to our environment.