

Becoming the Poem

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners. I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

My MFA thesis recognizes the interconnectedness of all living beings. The paintings I created immerse the viewer in landscape scenes spanning anywhere between eight feet in height to eighteen feet in width. Inspired by natural formations, an important aspect of my studio practice is engaging with my sensory apparatus (sight, sound, and touch) through which I attempt to materialize how I perceive other life forms and environments. In short, my painting methodology is heavily process-based where intuition and the senses direct the trajectory of the work. The pictorial language of my paintings is largely based on organic and biomorphic imagery which appears to grow, slink, and unfurl through the space of the paintings. These travelling forms on the canvas parallel the sensory processes of the human body. Conceptually I also explore my relationship to nature, the past and future through material means and methods such as rotating the canvas while painting, thinning and thickening the paint, pooling colours, and layering brushstrokes (Fig. 1). Through this, I seek to embed myself in the material processes, forming highly saturated, dense landscapes that speak to the vastness and evolution of nature as well as our own human embeddedness in it. I chose landscape as the main theme of my work because it represents an accumulation of deep time, present in rock formations, gigantic trees and ancient spaces that were formed over millions of years. More importantly, the resilience of nature resides in the fact that its creation is ongoing just like my painting practice which also evolves as each painting informs the next. Through its conceptual and formal elements this thesis exhibition considers nature's resilience, that is the ability to rise above ecological disasters, such as extinction, wildfires, flood and draught — nature's ability to survive.



Fig 1. Ashley Beerdat, *An Underwater Forest Emerges from the Amalgamation of Time*, 6 yards x 6ft, acrylic paint, chalk and oil pastel on canvas, 2024. Photo: Jean Stevenson.

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Thank you to my parents for always being there and never judging me. You have never questioned me for filling the house with stacks of paintings and you show up for me when I need you the most.

I would also like to acknowledge my paintings as they continue to manifest and take on their own lives. They are extensions of myself that bring meaning to my existence.

Land Acknowledgement

I am situated on the traditional territory of the Attawandaron (Neutral), Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee peoples. The University of Waterloo, was built on the Haldimand Tract, the land given in a treaty in 1784 to the Six Nations that includes 10 kilometres on each side of the Grand River from its source in Dundalk Township to its mouth at Lake Erie. The land was given in a treaty to support the Six Nations in perpetuity, but this did not happen.

As a non-indigenous artist who paints in dialog with the land, I acknowledge the significance of the local and traditional knowledge of Indigenous peoples who understood the Earth as a living being providing for human existence. Indigenous knowledge highlights the idea of reciprocity, to sustain the Earth that sustains us. As described by Robin Wall Kimmerer, an Indigenous ecologist, educator, writer and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation;

The moral covenant of reciprocity calls us to honor our responsibilities for all we have given, for all that we have taken. It's our turn now long overdue. Let us hold a giveaway for Mother Earth, spread our blankets out for her and pile them high with gifts of our own making. Imagine the books, the paintings, the poems, the clever machines, the compassionate acts, the transcendent ideas, the perfect tools, the fierce defense for all that has been given. Gifts of mind, hand, heart, voice, and vision all offered on behalf of the earth. Whatever our gift, we are called to give it and to dance for the renewal of the world. In return for the privilege of breath (Kimmerer, 384).

Kimmerer's affirmation reminds me to converse with the land from a place of gratitude, to learn from the wisdom of plant knowledge, and to respect the use of natural resources that replenish slowly over time. As an artist living and working on the land, I promise to educate myself about Indigenous environmental perspectives and move from a place of conscious decision making in the way I am consuming and creating materials. I reflect on the

Thanksgiving address¹ as a reminder that nature brings me to a place of healing, humility, and restoration by acknowledging the people, Earth, waters, plants, animals, trees, winds, sun, moon, and stars which are constant gifts that continue to cycle through my life (LaFrance, 3).

¹ The Thanksgiving address (*Ganohanyonh*- words that come before all else), Haudenosaunee greetings to the natural world (LaFrance, 3). These words remind me to be thankful for what nature provides and to acknowledge the ongoing impact of climate change on my life.

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Introduction

As a first-generation diasporic artist of Guyanese descent, my interest in landscape painting is two-fold. First, I situate myself in the present, wherever I am geographically located, which in this case is Waterloo, Ontario. Second, I engage with speculative imagination², by exploring the flora and fauna of the region where my parents are from in the West Coast Demerara near the Amazon rainforest. Using elements from both places, I invent worlds that collapse geography and time. By referencing the deep past and future states of the earth, imagining both without human existence, I am able to respond to present-day ecological crises and the accompanying anxiety of that reality in order to find hope. As articulated in chapter 4, *Critical Hope Relationalities in 21st-century Speculative Fiction and Art* by Dunja M. Mohr;

Hope locates itself then in the realm of speculation, both in fiction and in reality; it is a dreaming where the impossible becomes possible, the strange becomes familiar, the unknown becomes known. Hope is the unexpected, “an embrace of the essential unknowability of the world, of the breaks with the present” (Solnit 2004, 94). Art produces such “unknowabilities of the world” as emergent speculative narratives of hope, but, as Ruth Levitas emphasises, the imagined utopian future(s) needs to find a door back into our present reality and become part of the now. In that sense, utopia turns into a method (63).

This quote relates to my process of tapping into my imagination to envision our planet’s survival where the environment and non-human beings get center stage — that is I use paint as a means to open a dialogue of care for other living beings. In this process, speculative

² Speculative Imagination: A literary based discourse that goes beyond known boundaries to envision futures through mythical stories and meteorological phenomena. I enter this realm through the collective fusing of space and time processed through my body as I paint.

imagination becomes my call to action, opening a door of hope to dream of environmental restoration and longevity.

Like geologic formations, painting for me is an accumulation of deep time built through variations of gestures and layers of paint arising through experimentation and intuition. An outcome of this accumulation is that the trajectory of each painting varies. Surface treatments informed by colour and sound differ, vis-à-vis erasure and/or the build-up of thin washes, oily paint, mixing mediums and vibrant pastels. Here, my intuition serves as a guide, along with synesthetic ³ connections, in my case between sound and colour. This allows me to navigate both the pictorial composition, as well as elements such as movement and rhythm. With each painting I challenge previous working habits to foster experimentation, the unexpected, and a sense of the new. Through this process, I arrive at imagery in which abstract marks begin to suggest forms representative of natural elements such as flora, fauna, and geological formations — in short subject matter.

Evolution and the process of change is a key theme where the portrayal of hope resides in the aftermath of catastrophe and the life forms that survive. I exemplify this catastrophe through lyrical and rhythmic gestures that overlap in all directions, and then intermingle these moving forms to reveal creatures and plant life with anthropomorphic and naturalistic qualities. The final compositions contain a multitude of beings, some recognizable and others invented, all dispersed across the canvas with no central perspective, as a way to honour all creatures, trees, and insects as equal. Thus, interconnectedness is privileged over hierarchy and painting becomes an intervention towards envisioning a future with hopeful landscapes.

³ Synesthesia is a neurological condition which occurs when two different sensorial experiences become involuntarily linked — such as the perception of visual and audio stimuli. (Banisadr, 12).

Intuition-based Methodologies and the Senses

In August 2023 during my internship a crate fell on my leg causing a third-degree burn and a broken foot that resulted in long-term pain. This injury had a profound effect on my working methodology in the studio as I had to find new ways to work within these physical limitations. One outcome is that I have become more aware of my senses such as touch (i.e. tactility), as well as sound. I have also tried to practice mindfulness, to move with more intention as a way to gain a sense of the present. Through painting, I am reminded that my body is a self-regulating system with its own wisdom and knowledge. As such, painting has become a way for me to reconnect to my body and the outside world.

After my injury, I found myself challenged mentally and physically and began questioning my typical process of working in long, labour-intensive circumstances. Consequently, I adapted my studio methodology to ensure I could continue painting at a large scale, training myself to work in faster, more efficient ways. For example, I started working on unprimed and unstretched canvas rolls because it was less physically demanding than my long intensive oil painting sessions on stretched canvases that I built. I also transitioned to faster drying mediums such as acrylic and began drawing directly on canvas. This transition was extremely transformative for my studio practice and became a catalyst for my personal recovery as well. I no longer felt confined to old habits of working in rigid parameters and worrying about limited wall space in my narrow studio. Instead, I trained myself to further embrace the unpredictability of working and playing with new materials by applying paint with sponges and a large broom or pouring paint directly on the canvas. These new methodologies emphasized my gestural process that traced my movements around the canvas. As a result, I became more physically present in the painting evident in my loose, gestural, and bodily mark making. Paintings started pouring out of me at a time I needed it the most.

To work in such a highly intuitive way, I had to develop strategies that still challenge my own habits as a painter. For example, I learned to embrace chance and uncertainty and to

lean more heavily into my relationship with mark making, colour, sound, and rhythm. In *Francis Bacon: the logic of sensation*, philosopher Gilles Deleuze explains that a canvas is never blank, it is filled with the clichés imposed by the painter who has certain habits and ways of constructing a painting (35). In consequence of my accident, I attempted to break my own habits by using new materials and changing my scale of canvas or approach to paint handling. I relied on instinct and synesthesia in search of the “best” sensation, or to use Deleuze’s words “the one that fills the flesh at a particular moment of its descent, contraction, or dilation” (39-40). Deleuze explains this further when he describes Bacon’s intention to paint the scream more than the horror, which is represented in Bacon’s painting [Head VI](#) (10). Bacon was more interested in capturing the feeling he had in his body rather than the event. Like Bacon, I searched for the right sensation that satisfied a particular moment in the painting, but I was also aware of the pitfalls of my painting habits, for example only repeating sensations that felt familiar and known to me.

I have also challenged the painting clichés by adopting methodologies of chance similar to Gerhard Richter’s [Abstrakte Bilder \(Abstract Paintings\)](#) series where he began with seemingly simple compositions such as single layers of colour that divided the canvas pictorially followed by his use of a squeegee method to disrupt the layers. This series exemplifies Richter’s investigations into chance occurrences and the painted medium’s historical and material characteristics (Schwarz and Richter). Richter’s intricately stratified surfaces using a squeegee emphasized the physical presence of paint and color that was both unplanned yet deliberate. Marks were continuously created through a process of elimination, destruction and questioning as he removed and added paint with a squeegee.

Similar to Richter, my paintings embrace this game of chance where it became difficult to foretell what would happen. For example, the initial stages of *When Anthropods Ruled the World* included cursory marks from frottage that were direct and immediate (Fig. 2). These traces represented my present location: tree roots in front of the building that houses

my studio, as well as textures/impressions picked up from my studio walls. I then expanded this vocabulary of marks and surface variation further by layering paint with an array of tools such as sponges, brushes, and brooms, as well as paint squished straight from the tube. I also moved the canvas' position, shifting between the floor and the wall, to affect how the paint reacted to gravity (i.e. pooling or dripping), as well as my body's capacity to move in different ways and cover more surface area by crawling, reaching, crouching, and standing. The outcome is a range of marks that moves in all directions, up, down, sideways, diagonally, and out.

By entering this dialogue between the material and what is intended to happen, I challenge the way I create imagery in less prescribed circumstances by exploring different ways of treating the canvas' ground, especially in the early stages. In this sense I move past the cliché of painting (i.e. typical patterns/habits of navigating a painting) to open new possibilities for originality and newness in the painting's trajectory. The intention of these gestures whether a flood of colour, stain or smear, is to shift away from learned ways of solving pictorial issues to open new possibilities around image-making. Under these conditions painting becomes a precarious operation that perpetually challenges and makes itself. Seeing painting in this fresh perspective—changing the way I move my body around a canvas to navigate mark making—is a cathartic moment in which I feel most connected to nature. In this moment the painting truly takes on its own life and every painting I make going forward challenges what I knew before.



Fig 2. Ashley Beerdat, *When Anthropods Ruled the World* (initial stages) 6 yards x 65 inches, oil pastel and chalk on canvas, 2023.



Fig 3. Ashley Beerdat, *When Anthropods Ruled the World* (resolved painting) 6 yards x 65 inches, oil pastel and chalk on canvas, 2023.

I see this process of losing control over the image, along with the unexpected outcomes, as a metaphor for the unknowableness of contemporary life and, like Richter, I embrace the role of chance, as a way to acknowledge the uncertainty of painting. This approach to painting that embraces feelings of tension, chance, and loss of control parallels my relationship to navigating the complexity of today's climate crisis. I am struggling to find hope in a world that I feel is crumbling due to human disconnect from the Earth as a living being that creates and sustains life, resulting in a lack of care towards the use of our planet's limited resources and fragile ecosystems. With painting, I have gained a deeper awareness of the living things around me, thinking not as a dichotomy that separates me from living beings but as a reciprocity in which I engage with living entities through imaginary travel to the Amazon rainforest. In this methodology of catastrophic metamorphosis, evolving gestures and marks on the canvas, I construct a tropical ecosystem that is living and abundant with life forms that have survived the earthly injuries created by mankind.

My methodologies revolve around constant transformation relating back to natural processes of growth and remediation in which living things develop gradually over time. Thus, my process is a mechanism of hope, where colour creates possibilities generative of progression and evolutionary accidents. Colour ties back to my body due to my synesthetic response to sound and my perception of it as it enters my body and I am drawn to bright, intensely saturated colours that match my energy in the studio and my emotional states. Intrinsically, I combine and clash colours in which a sky could be orange, a tree could be blue, and a snake could be pink. I cover the surface of the canvas in a field of colour treating it as a pictorial illusion, in which I can imagine, invent, and play.

One way I order and unify visual sensations like colour is through the element of rhythm. As described by Deleuze, rhythm is the essence of painting, referring to the passage of sensations throughout the body (16). Deleuze references Cezanne, who according to the author similarly shares a "logic of the senses" like Bacon which is neither rational nor cerebral

but responds to simply being in the world (42). This quote demonstrates that painting is not merely about painting an object (“the fact”). It is about realizing the sensations felt when viewing the object which requires the painter to break away from a visually accurate representation towards evoking the internal states experienced when encountering the subject matter. Despite differences in subject matter in figurative and abstract painting, Bacon and Cezanne both speak to the accumulation of sensations that pass through the body and directly act on the nervous system. It does not have to do with the nature of a represented object for this to be felt.

Rhythm transverses the senses by placing in each sensation the levels through which it passes in the body. Deleuze argues that “rhythm is more profound than vision, hearing, etc... It appears as music when it invests at the auditory level, and as painting when it invests at the visual level” (42). Rhythm runs through a painting just as it runs through a piece of music. It is as Deleuze described the “diastole-systole”; affecting the blood pressure of running to the heart and felt in the flesh of the body (42). Rhythm creates order within the chaos, but it is not the sole reason sensation is revealed. Painting is about trying to capture the forces of the body that causes the imagery. Invisible forces are not representative but are turned against themselves by use of blurring (i.e. textures and aspects without resemblance that begin to suggest resemblance within the painting’s composition). In these circumstances, I try to allow the imagery to arrive on its own terms through mark-making and colour that is created in response to the rhythm present in sound.

Bodily sensations are activated at different levels through time spent painting, and similar to a musician, I see myself as composing time. As I paint, it feels like time is folding in and on itself. Time also reveals my working process through my internal nature—moving from a place of anxiety and worry around living in an ecological disaster to finding a place of hope. Painting allows me to find a logic to these sensations. As such, some moments in my paintings feel quiet, slow and reflective whereas others feel fast paced and energized. These

moments reveal the closeness of my sensory apparatus as I paint and how I work with mark making and intuition.

Gallery Installation

My exhibition *Becoming the Poem* includes an installation of paintings stapled around the gallery walls. The feeling of being engulfment in painting and colour reciprocates my daily experience of working in my studio, in a room filled with colour. As such, my exhibition references my studio methodology, which is raw, impromptu, and heavily based on my immediate responses to working with the materials at hand. I refer to my studio further through traced marks from the studio's walls, and the negative and positive spatial relationships, which oscillate between busy moments of lucid and layered paint, and quieter instances of lighter marks and washy stains. The loose unprimed canvas stapled directly to the wall addresses a large, immersive scale, but was also a practical choice challenged by the limitations of my 15 ft x 8ft narrow studio. I used my studio to its full potential whether that entailed rolling canvas directly on the studio floors and painting on my knees, or standing up and stapling canvas to the walls, or building canvas stretchers to support heavy applications of thick globs of oil paint—and I reach a point where I feel consumed by paintings. With the installation, I attempted to articulate this through a kind of “wrapped-up” experience where the viewer is situated within the act of painting, a place where they can lose themselves. Embracing the looseness and transportability of working with raw canvas also allowed me to maneuver the material, where my gestures changed based on what I could physically access on the pictorial surface in relation to the walls, floors and/or tight corners. This handling of swaths of surface allowed me to approach mark making in experimental ways, but also denoted the immersive, horizontal landscape experience of being submerged in these poetic vistas (Fig.4).



Fig 4: Installation shot of paintings on unstretched canvas, 2024. Photo: Jean Stevenson.

Painting A Poem

While painting, I make connections to poetic strategies to aid my methodology. Poetry is rooted in ambiguity, cadence, metaphorical and rhythmic understandings to make the poem flow. Similar to poetry, I use these strategies by playing with line, rhythm and repetition to change the physical structure of how I visually read and organize my paintings. Like a poet, I work towards distilling ideas through time in which my internal states materialize through the language of painting. For instance, colour, line and shape are a metaphorical translation of how I perceive ecological restoration.

When experiencing poetry, I do not enter with the expectation of clarity. I stay open to complexity and meanings which change based on my personal experiences at the time that I read the poem. I am drawn to poems that are existential, meditative, and philosophical reflecting on human existence. For example, I often read and re-read poems such as Mary Jo Bang's translation of Dante's *Inferno* while working in the studio. From my interpretation, I see the *Inferno* as an examination of life and the struggle of what it means to be human by finding my way out of the disquieting landscapes of today:

Unlike here on earth

Where not even reason can help you see through

the haze of where you've been

And where you are going,

As well as where you want to be.

Where is that? Who can say

since you can only see what is

In front of you. Imagine a see filled with the unseen.

A Hell inhabited by those

you know and those you don't from every era but now, they have taken

new forms...

It's fine that we don't know.
Anything we do know will see us
Through the repeating days
And nights that
Are life. You can see how an allegory can become a path
By which we perceive
The invisible play-within-a-play.
(Bang, 23)

This poem made me think about hope accessed by tapping into the unknown, the realm beyond my scope of knowledge, and how this would not be possible without a studio practice that allows me to think, invent, and imagine. Thus, my paintings hold a kind of truthful hope in their potential to envision a new reality. This potentiality parallels the way reading can release or invite images to the imagination rather than cast them, as it triggers a range of senses.

An artist who is also process based and has constructed paintings from this poem includes contemporary Iranian painter Ali Banisadr. Like mine, Ali Banisadr's canvases from his exhibition [*Beautiful Lies \(2021\)*](#) are also sensory-based, connected to both Dante's poetry and synaesthesia. Banisadr's works are enamoured with turbulent energy and celestial or war-like figures emerging amongst a huge variety of painterly marks (Banisadr, 2). Similar to Banisadr, I listen to the melody present in songs by using the musical pattern I hear to create rhythm within a painting. Responding to sound in this way allows me to organize chaotic fragments of visual information and arrive at a point of pictorial harmony. I find that poetry and music connect to my painting practice because they contain layers of meaning that activate my senses serving as a way to open up imagined realities of metaphor, time, and space.

Imagination and The Sublime

My creation of layered imaginative futures of the Amazon relates to my perception of the sublime and hope. Like Henri Rousseau I have never been to the jungle, but I am obsessed with painting it. This is exemplified in Rousseau's painting [*The Dream \(1910\)*](#) showcasing his characteristic jungle scenes filled with thick foliage and spiked leaves in intricate crisscross patterns, with hits of pink, blue, and orange, tropical flowers and fruits. The paintings are not based on his travels to the jungle but rather visits to local Parisian sites such as the botanical gardens, the zoo, and colonial expositions as well as images of distant lands seen in books and magazines (Scobie, 4). Similarly, I have never been to the Amazon, and in this sense my paintings are a myth. However, in my mind I have traveled to these places.

In my paintings I step outside my current reality to envision something greater than me. I enter a liminal space, between my imagination and reality. Similar to the way memory, dreams, and hallucinations work, this moment captures being in the midst of transforming into something else. Painting transports me through time and on their surface, I experience the past, present, and future as it all collapses into a singular plane. My visions begin to manifest, and I experience the sublime. I experience something so immeasurable in scale and feel I am almost nothing in the face of it (Burke). The sublime as described by Kant “expresses an irredeemable tension between sensibility and reason: aesthetic ideas evoke the sublime precisely because they are presentations that aesthetically enlarge a concept in an unlimited way” (38). The sublime restores perspective, it is a psychological maneuver I use whenever I get caught up in the complexities of everyday life. When I enter this state of mind I no longer feel as though I am struggling alone but feel connected to humanity and the world over our shared environmental devastation.

The sublime is not just in the aesthetic presence of imagery, but the ways imagery is conjured and presented. Mark-making creates different associations that expands my

imagination by beginning to suggest forms of representation. The sheer complexity of meaning and representation by an artistic work is another way of representing the sublime. The formal limitedness of “aesthetic ideas evoke an endless diversity of meanings and images, representations, and connections that we can scan in principle with our imagination” (Kant, 38). Complex layering and variety in my paintings make it difficult to comprehend or reduce the composition’s logic within a single viewing. This elicits the artistic sublime. The immersive scale and vastness of my canvases, coloured with line and creature-like forms that appear through closer inspection, are grounded in the free yet harmonious play of imagination and understanding. Additionally, the sublime is a feeling accessed through a medium, where paint and oil pastels are tools that trigger this sensation.

I enter the sublime in two ways. First, my canvases have grown bigger and bigger in scale seeking to induce a feeling of physical engulfment (i.e. the ungraspable power of something too large to even take in). Second, on a spiritual level, the natural world feels almost supernatural to me. Nature holds ethereal sacredness, for me it is the light at the end of the tunnel as it encompasses both life and death. Nature neither towers above nor judges me, instead I perceive it as elevating me to move forward with it, as it is inescapable. For example, the presence of the sun can be so radiant that it can peer through a dense, dark forest such as in my painting *My Place is Placeless* (Fig. 6). The sun is a visual metaphor of how nature operates in a circular system that depends on both life and death.

My examination of the sublime engages in speculative imagination to affirm emotive and kinetic interactions between the human and the nonhuman world, moving through feelings of distress, empathy, and hope by picturing geological forces overcoming the challenges created by human civilization. Accessing my imagination through materiality is a way to reconcile my body and mind through this immersive act where I think about climate change in new ways and access hope. I complicate the Western exoticism of the sublime by reflecting on my personal relationship to the Amazon, thinking about my parent's history and

migration to Canada. My paintings are attributed to this state of creating passages between these two worlds to imagine how the South American landscape preserves after colonization. I have never been to Guyana and I feel an absence of roots as a diasporic individual, thus painting the South American landscape is a way for me to restore this loss and carve out space for understanding.

Imagination, Ecology and Hope

Painting as a diasporic person who is sensitive to the eco-crisis makes me feel safe to describe how I feel through vivid imagination, dramatic use of colour, interconnective ecology, and existential hope. I define ecology as the interrelated connections that co-exist in our environment and their dependency on one another. The eco-disaster is so complex it makes me lose hope for humanity, however, I regain hope by painting nature's regeneration. By reimagining planetary visions of hope, I find new ways of appreciating other living entities. Through this lens of compassion and care for other living beings, I enter an internal dialogue with nature, understanding that I am a part of the land rather than separate from it. Painting becomes a way of telling my story of nature's survival and how I find hope in the global complexity of climate change. Drawing on personal biography as a genre in painting, I construct a deeper awareness for the preservation of nature by tracing my familial origins in the South American landscape. I learned that at the heart of my parents' homeland in a small South American country is the Amazon rainforest, a monument built over thousands of years and known as the lungs of our planet.

As an environmentally sensitive area, Amazon "has enabled specific human adaptations, while also spurring the creative imagination of artists, some of whom share their knowledge, their experiences, and their art" (McMaster and Vincent, 1). I locate hope around ecological disaster in the Amazon because it is a hot spot for current climate change discussions, housing 10% of the planet's biodiversity and natural resources (McMaster and Vincent, 2). The Amazon is a "climate regulator, air purifier, recycler of carbon dioxide, manufacturer of rain and producer of abundant water", making it a symbol of hope and devastation (Botanova et. Latimer, 42). Painting the Amazon allows me to interlace ancestral roots with natural history through imaginary travel to the Amazon. My paintings are attributed

to the state of creating passages between two worlds. As a diasporic individual⁴ I have never been to my parents' homeland, and I feel a loss of roots in this absence, learning about the South American landscape through painting has been a way to restore this loss and carve out space for understanding (Fig. 5).

⁴ My parents left Guyana in search of a better life when they were 17 with little financial means but high hopes to carve a new life for themselves. I find that their migrant experience to build a life in a new place parallels my experience of choosing to become an artist. They left behind what they knew and what was comfortable to embark on a journey that was unfamiliar and uncertain. As the only artist in my family, I often struggled with the foreignness of where my artistic abilities came from. My parents' story of building their own path has shaped me in developing the courage to write my own life story. My paintings are inspired by their roots in South America and researching this place allows me to develop a sense of belonging.



Fig 5: My mom in front of her childhood house before she left Guyana and never returned. The house is now abandoned but it remains an important memory of her home.

By painting from my imagination, I build my own interpretation of the Amazon, I have a metaphysical experience that allows me to access this place and feel a sense of belonging outside the boundaries of my known physical world. This is exemplified in *My*

Place is Placeless (Fig. 6 and 7), a series of two large-scale oil paintings on canvas, that trace the formation of the Amazon Rainforest through catastrophes such as the extinction of dinosaurs—a time when plants went dormant, and the skies grew black from dust and fire smoke. This example of extinction leads to creation and in this cycle of nature I find hope that what we are experiencing today will spur on new evolutions of life. *My Place is Placeless* (Fig.6 and 7) is a line taken from Rumi's poem *Only Breath*. The poem acknowledges the denial of physical and geographical origins to suggest a spiritual experience, one that finds origins existing beyond time and space limitations (Adiwangsa). The poem also references the idea that everything has equal importance; a rock, a plant, a human being and the air. This is an interconnected ecological system. I think about ecology in my paintings as I maintain consistent energy in the painting to show that every element and every part is just as important as the rest. In my paintings, I intertwine lines and connect passages between pictorial elements to create a unified, connected system.

Another example of how I conjure hope through speculative imagination is demonstrated throughout the development of *When Anthropods Ruled the World* (Fig. 8); I was studying the Carboniferous period from 280-350 million years ago. This period in history was filled with dense swampy forests, giant club mosses, tree ferns, giant horsetails, towering trees, and plants with strap-shaped leaves (Monastersky, 294). It is known as the age of mammals; however, insects were far more abundant with about 10 quintillion species living at the time. For example, in the Carboniferous period, the existence of the smallest insects we know today are some of the survivors of these past landscapes who continue to outnumber humans. Thus, natural history reminds me that even the smallest living creatures are pivotal to the creation of our present world, and at some point, in history, these creatures thrived. The dragonfly was once one of the most vicious predators that grew to the size of seagulls (Monastersky, 294). Anthropoids were also giant in size such as the *Arthropleura*, an ancestor of the tiny millipedes which in prehistoric times were about two meters long and a half a

meter wide. Today there is about 21% of oxygen in the atmosphere but during this age of insects, it peaked to nearly 35% (Monastersky, 294). This oxygen rich environment was possible due to the immense runaway plant growth and huge forests full of ferns, mosses, and some of the other earliest vascular plants. In these primordial forests, wood eating bacteria that decomposes trees did not exist and as a result carbon dioxide was not released back into the atmosphere. Thus, oxygen in the atmosphere was high, making these giant creatures possible as anthropoids could more easily absorb oxygen. Today, swamp habitats continue to provide valuable sources of oxygen and water for all life. *When Anthropods ruled the world* (Fig.8) is my portrayal of a murky swamp filled with thriving giant creatures that are symbolic of ecological hope and the cyclical nature of life. For me the swamp is a place both familiar and terrifying. It portrays the visceral force of nature that allows me to mediate my relationship between the modern world and the natural world. Learning about Carboniferous period prompted me to imagine a world void of the anthropocentric perspective of our present reality. This made me rethink how weeds are perceived including burdock, sorrel and dandelions that bring nutrients from lower soil levels to initiate soil remediation. This process is called phytoremediation and these typically unfavoured plants can reduce toxins and contaminants in the soil (Rohr et al., 9). In doing so, nature reminds me that there is room for healing, repair, and growth. Thus, by re-evaluating my relationship with the land and other living species, I move towards a way of being that honors stewardship, care, reciprocity and even the magic of a garden.



Fig 6. Ashley Beerdat, *My Place is Placeless*, (series 1 of 2), Oil on canvas, 8ft x 92 inches each, 2023. Photo: Jean Stevenson.



Fig 7. Ashley Beerdat, *My Place is Placeless*, (series 2 of 2), Oil on canvas, 8ft x 92 inches each, 2023. Photo: Jean Stevenson.

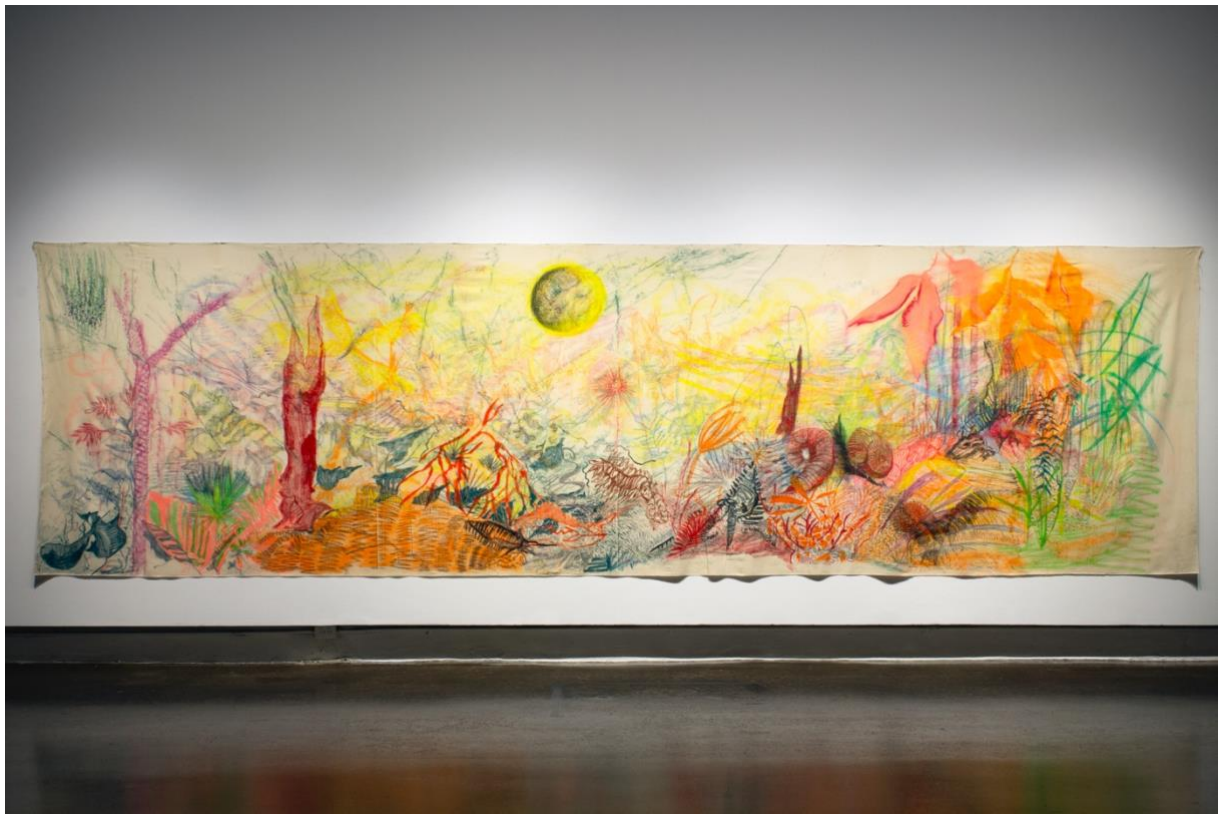


Fig 8. Ashley Beerdat, *When Anthropods Ruled the World*, oil pastels, chalk, soft pastel on canvas, 6 yards x 6 ft, 2023. Photo: Jean Stevenson.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we live in divisive times, however I believe nature can shift and adapt despite humans' destructive manipulation of it. I locate hope by painting the Amazon rainforest through my intuitive, bodily processes that parallels nature's regeneration. This installation of paintings encourages me to decolonize my language around climate change. To remember that I come from people who were once indigenous and to reclaim my memberships in the cultures of gratitude that formed my own relationships with the living earth. Gratitude is a powerful antidote to Windigo psychosis⁵. "Gratitude for all the earth has given us the courage to turn and face the wendigo that stalks us and refuse to participate in an economy that destroys the beloved earth to line the pockets of the greedy" (Kimmerer, 377). Kimmerer encourages me to shift my language that does not "other" the earth as separate from me. Rather, it acts as a reminder that the Earth is tied to our existence, and we must act with care to make change. I paint from a place of gratitude for the land and all that it offers. Painting is both a philosophical and physiological engagement I use to understand that my existence is tied to the cumulative experience of long histories made possible by this land. My paintings reflect the geological build-up of deep time, where an intuitive process helps me to understand humanity through the natural world. I expand my conscious mind and uncover a reoccurring internal narrative that nature is the story of survival. Nature gives me hope that the world will survive the catastrophes of human life, and this is the moment that I feel my paintings become a poem.

⁵ According to Robin Wall Kimmerer, she defines *Windigo* psychosis as the greedy part of ourselves that a capitalist society encourages to consume more than we need without considering the consequences (374).

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