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Rewilding

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Abstract

My current work is a continuation of the popular motif of urban decay influenced by artists, writers, scientists, and philosophers. It presents my belief that over the past two centuries our fast-paced, industrialized, technology-driven world has disconnected people from nature and from one another. While industrialization and technology have wrought numerous benefits, this disconnection has had devastating effects on the health and wellbeing of humans, as well as the health of the environment. My current work is an artistic interpretation inspired by the theme of the Rewilding movement. Rewilding is aimed at restoring and protecting natural processes and core wilderness areas. It can also be defined as a means of restoring ways of living that create greater health and wellbeing for humans and the ecosystems to which we belong.

My thesis addresses social and environmental issues, which are the overarching themes of my current work. The following pages trace my personal and artistic journey to this point, illustrating how my own ideas, previous work, and research have informed my thesis paintings.
Rewilding

Introduction

I am considered a “typical” cisgender, white male by many standards—a mix of European ancestry with no religious affiliation—and was raised in an upper middle-class family in Connecticut. Family was marked by divorce in white suburbia. My generation was even given a label of ambiguity: Generation X.

My search for a sense of belonging, identity, and meaning is no doubt what attracted me to nature from a young age. It has always been a kind of home away from the fractured home I came from. The affluence that surrounded me, while providing me with numerous opportunities, heightened a sense of emptiness and desire for meaningful connection within me.

Living in Boston for the past four years, I have become increasingly aware of how much my sense of wellbeing depends on nature. I have continuously witnessed how communication technology has distanced people from one another. The experience of this urban lifestyle along with reentering academia, has helped me gain greater clarity around what I value and has made me more aware of these social and environmental issues. The exploration and research during the program have deepened my understanding of myself and my art practice.

In discussing the evolution of my work, I will address two movements that were foundational to my early painting style: the Hudson River Valley School, specifically Thomas Cole, and the French Impressionist movement, namely Claude Monet.

As I further discuss the evolution of my current work, I will step back and give a brief look at our human history and how connection is essential to human health. This
discussion will then turn to the present day as I explore the challenges and complexities of electronic communications. My thesis will also examine industrialization and urban decay in the context of landscape painting. I will reference the works of three artists across generations who have been influential in my studies and to the progress of my art practice: Edward Hopper, Alexis Rockman, and Simon Stålenhag.

**My Early Work**

Prior to entering graduate school, my work was influenced primarily by the Hudson River School painters and French Impressionists. I was in awe of their handling of paint and sought to replicate aspects of these classic styles. In so doing, I became a painting technician concerned with picturesque scenes.

![Fig. 1. Brian Sage. *Rainy Day NYC*. Oil on canvas, 30” x 40”. 2016.](image)

One of my earlier paintings, *Rainy Day NYC* (fig. 1), clearly shows the influence of these styles and contains an old-world feeling, even though the subject matter is modern. Horse-drawn carriages and cars fill the light-reflected streets as the rainy
atmosphere softens the towering buildings. Like Claude Monet, early on I romanticized aspects of the city.

The monochromatic Boston series conveyed a similar feeling of urban romanticism but with true historic subject matter. *Washington Street* (fig. 2) is one of my favorite paintings in this series. The complex architecture of the elevated railway looms over workmen and horses who look down the diminishing track, waiting for something. In my attempt to capture the expression and luminosity of the Impressionists, I often defaulted to overly rendering the scenes, which, interestingly, was an aspect of the Hudson River artists whom I admired but remained critical toward.

Fig. 2. Brian Sage. *Washington Street*. Oil on panel, 30” x 40”. 2017.

In retrospect, I can see my early paintings were an expression of my search for identity and connection to place. As I worked to create traditional and aesthetically pleasing paintings, it quickly came to my attention that my work was overtly nostalgic. Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia as “longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed” (Boym 7). This charge of nostalgia is still present in my work, driven by a
curiosity and desire to unveil a feeling of belonging and solid footing rooted in the home and self. This issue of nostalgia is not just personal. In my experience, it is a human desire. Boym says too that nostalgia is “…a symptom of our age, an historical emotion” (8). The further we have moved away from nature and the more mobile we have become, the more we long for “home.” I can only speak for myself in describing my desire to return to a slower pace, a rhythm more in tune with nature, the good old days of ticket stubs, eating dinner together around a table, and riding bikes until dark.

Sometimes I think this attraction to the outdoors and desire to live a simpler life close to the land is in my DNA. I discovered an individual from my family history who gave me some connection to the past that I could identify with. Luther Sage “Yellowstone” Kelly (1849-1928), from Geneva, NY, just northwest of the Hudson River Valley, was an American soldier, hunter, scout, and administrator. A New York Times article later describes him as “one of the greatest hunters, trappers, and Indian scouts” (“Chief Scout Under Miles” 31).

Perhaps my connection to Kelly is why I was so drawn to the Hudson River Valley and their reverence for the natural world. The vast expanse of the wild and the spiritual qualities of light that the Hudson River School artists created was captivating. As an outdoorsman, the subject matter was attractive, especially because the depicted landscapes were areas where I grew up.

The French Impressionists painted scenes of nature as well, but I was more in awe of the freedom, expression, and texture they produced in the medium. I was fascinated with their technique because I was a perfectionist and grew up in a structured
environment, which was reflected in my apprehension to paint more freely in my medium.

**Nature and Emerging Industry**

Upon entering the graduate program at Lesley University College of Art and Design, I was encouraged to shift my focus towards the meaning beyond the surface of my work. The idea for the first *Urban Decay* series slowly emerged from my experiences living in the city and accelerated as I became immersed in a new academic environment.

Before I discuss the various bodies of work created during this time, it’s important to examine the term “nature,” which will be used repeatedly throughout this thesis. “Nature” is a cultural construct, the idea of which separates us from the ecological systems that sustain our very lives. The creation of civilization, by contrast, gives rise to the otherness that this term represents (Cronon). There is no question that we are all interconnected in this web of life. Ralph Waldo Emerson says, “First be a good animal.” This simple quotation reminds us that we are first and foremost animals, descendants of successful hunter-gatherers who have built into our DNA certain basic needs for wellbeing.

Biblical stories continuously refer to the wilderness as a place someone went against one’s will: Adam and Eve driven from the garden to the wild to redeem themselves, Moses wandering with followers through the desert for decades, and Christ’s forty days in the wilderness. In the 19th century, the cultural construct of wilderness took on a different sentiment (Cronon).

As we will see, the Hudson River School artists contributed to the glorification of nature, which then transferred to the sacred national myth of the American frontier, the
last place of rugged individualism and escape from the ills of progress. William Cronon says, “By fleeing to the outer margins of settled land and society—so the story ran—an individual could escape the confining strictures of civilized life” (Cronon).

The Hudson River School painters, active from about 1825 to 1880, echoed Christian undercurrents while at the same time illustrating a new evolving relationship with the wilderness. They idealized the beauty of this still-untamed American landscape as industrialization in the New World was just gaining momentum. Influenced by similar European themes of romanticism and nationalism, the Hudson River School painters glorified and celebrated the expansive wilderness of the young nation, and their work quickly became popular in American culture (Barrow). I appreciate the skill of these artists, but the Christian symbolism in some paintings is unsettling. While their work is beautiful and captivating, there is somewhat of an overly-structured quality present. This rigidity and lack of freedom were, perhaps, an influence of Puritanism.

![Image](image_url)

Fig. 3. Thomas Cole. *Sunny Morning on the Hudson River*. Oil on panel, 64.45 cm x 47.31 cm. 1827.
Thomas Cole was the founder of the Hudson River School, and in his painting *Sunny Morning on the Hudson River* (fig. 3), a massive dark mountain dominates and anchors the work. The big simple shape set, against the bright wind-swept branches in the foreground, suggests the sublime. This simplicity and contrast always appeal to me in any works of art. The atmosphere is another element that captures my attention, while the tiny fields along the bank of the river in the distance go unnoticed. These are the first scratches of a new and powerful presence in the landscape. The composition winds the viewer through the painting as the soft clouds add a peaceful element to the power of nature.

In contrast, painters of the Impressionist style, developing in Europe during this same period of time, created paintings with movement and attention to the nuances of color and light. Scenes of nature and ordinary modern life were often their focus, but aspects of industry were now a fixture in the landscape—the industrial revolution was in its early stages and its effects were embraced and romanticized. Monet did a series of paintings of *Gare Saint-Lazare* (fig. 4), a major train station in Paris. He painted the massive trains with billowing, cloudlike smoke of light blue appears more organic than hazardous. The structure that contained the trains further dwarfs the figures below. The brushstrokes are expressive and confident, adding to the spontaneity and intense energy of the action. Monet had a keen sensitivity to light, color, and atmosphere, which he developed over his career. He painted city scenes earlier on in his career and then later rejected modern living and retreated to nature. At age 55, he exclusively turned his attention to his gardens in Giverny (Varnedoe 10).
Fig. 4. Claude Monet. *Gare Saint-Lazare*. Oil on canvas, 83 cm x 101.3 cm. 1877.

Urban Decay Paintings

In my *Urban Decay* series, I don’t depart from the aesthetic conventions of the Impressionistic style. However, the subject matter has an element of darkness and concern. The familiar and traditional style is an entry point for the viewer to then discover the concern within the painting. The ambiguity and complexity present in this theme progressed across the semesters I spent in graduate school.

The first series of *Urban Decay* paintings feature fast food restaurants and corporate businesses falling apart and overgrown by nature. The slow march of the wild dominates the landscape as plants and animals reclaim the land. These oil paintings were produced earlier on in the program and were intended to represent a dominant shift to the natural processes of nature, in which humans might no longer be a factor. The hope is that nature will continue to reemerge and establish its own order across the landscape regardless of the presence of humans.

The first of these paintings, called *IHOP* (fig. 5), features the restaurant in decay as a lone Elk stands still looking back, engaging the viewer and activating the space.
Another painting, *McDonald’s* (fig. 6), shows cows roaming freely in the foreground of the crumbling fast food chain as vegetation creeps over the structure. The “M” on the sign is missing and only reads “Donald’s,” a rare allusion to our contemporary political context.

These paintings were a good start to this series of work, but I believe that they fall short in many ways. They are too literal and dogmatic. Looking back, I realize my perspective of the subject was limited. I was quick and reactionary in my opinions.

Fig. 5. Brian Sage. *IHOP*. Oil on panel, 30” x 40”. 2017.

Fig. 6. Brian Sage. *McDonalds*. Oil on panel, 30” x 40”. 2017.
Food from McDonald’s is mostly unhealthy, and its ingredients, especially the meats, are questionable, to say the least. Additionally, I view the visual rhetoric and marketing practices as off-putting and invasive. It is hard to go anywhere without seeing something from the behemoth company. However, millions of people value the restaurant and rely on it for their sustenance. To be honest, if I am traveling and starved, it is always there as an option. McDonald’s is a fixture in America and serves as a non-bureaucratic type of community center for the elderly, poor, and forgotten. It is a place where the food is cheap, and people can stay and socialize for as long as they want without judgement. Even the homeless are welcomed (Arnade).

With this new retrospect, my work then evolved to the next series. My mentor, Anna Conway, commented that I was acting like a teenager, saying “I hate that” without viewing the subject from a broadened perspective. This, along with encouragement in the many critiques to create more ambiguity in my work, pushed me to this next phase of this series.

In response to this constructive criticism, I painted another McDonald’s scene. In *Elk Playland* (fig. 7), a herd of elk graze by a smoldering campfire near a deteriorating structure in the snowy landscape. There is playground equipment in the foreground, and off to the right is a campfire with a McDonald’s sign on the ground that has been propped back up. The idea was to show the familiar comfort that this icon offered in the dystopian setting.
Fig. 7. Brian Sage. *Elk Playland*. Oil on panel, 24” x 36”. 2018.

Fig. 8. Brian Sage. *Transfer Station*. Oil on panel, 36” x 48”. 2018.

The painting *Transfer Station* (fig. 8) has a similar feeling. It features a lone figure leaning against an old abandoned gas station wall. A rusting car sits idle as horses graze nearby. The out-of-service station and car suggest that these objects are obsolete in this new space, where the original horsepower on the land seem at home. This painting was directly influenced by the paintings of transfer stations created by the American realist Edward Hopper. In Hopper’s *Four Lane* (fig. 9), a man is leaning against the wall of a house with gas pumps out front as a woman speaks sharply to him from a nearby open window. As in so many of Hopper’s paintings, the figures are beautifully depicted with contrasting dark and light, as the relationship of the individuals appears disconnected. Evening is closing in across the scene as the dark forest looms across the quiet street.
Edward Hopper emerged as a prominent painter as industrialization and urban development reached new levels in the United States in the late 19th century. He witnessed the rapid transformation of New York City during the unpredictable era of prohibition and the Great Depression (Slater). In his view, the rapidly-growing city posed a threat to man’s connection with nature, the tension of which manifested in his work. Some of his paintings are void of human activity and have an eerie sense of loneliness. When figures do show up in his work, they appear isolated and displaced. Grinding steel structures often loom with pensive figures who seem to be contemplating their place in the new landscape.

Hopper has said, “Great art is the outward expression of an inner life in the artist, and this inner life will result in his personal vision of the world” (qtd. in Slater 140). This quotation is one of my favorites. I often find my own personal vision of the world to be confusing and contradictory, which is why my work is constantly changing and evolving as my perspective changes. I have always felt a certain affinity for Hopper’s work due to
his use of light, the sense of isolation he captures in his figures, and his concerns regarding industrialization.

Fig. 10. Alexis Rockman. *Forest for the Trees*. Oil and acrylic on wood, 54” x 96”. 2008.

Another influential artist of a different generation, depicting a much more hyper-advanced view of industrialization, is contemporary artist Alexis Rockman. His dystopian-themed paintings often utilize dioramas in a theatrical style that are influenced by his interests in natural history, the industrial revolution, and environmental concerns.

In the painting titled *Forest for the Trees* (fig. 10), he departs from a clearly-defined scenic background to that of a color field. He explains that many interpretations could be given to such work: the use of toxic acrylic paint in the 1950’s, a toxic waste spill, a psychedelic space, or a harmful product of the industrial revolution (Tranberg 91).

Rockman illustrates horrific scenes and humans’ terrible actions toward the environment. At the same time, I see that he has a sense of humor in his work, as he extravagantly pokes fun at the absurdity of human actions. The potent elements of humor and absurdity are ones I may consider utilizing more in my future work.

I view Rockman’s paintings as historical warnings that promote awareness and activism, but I find no inherent path to correction and healing. My work presses towards
an awareness of nature’s intelligence and a hope that humans gain a greater respect and reverence for the environment.

**Time-Based Projects**

As my *Urban Decay* series developed, I felt the need to make a conscious departure from painting to see how this same theme might manifest in different mediums. My *Parking Meter* installation and the *Time Collapse* photographs came out of that departure. These projects contain a similar thread to the urban decay-themed work but focus more squarely on our interpretations of time.

The *Parking Meter* installation (fig. 11) involves two old coin-operated parking meter heads welded on a base to create a free-standing sculpture. The meters were presented in the second residency, where I a plant wrapping around the structure like a vine. After much interest and feedback in various critiques, I decided to transplant the meter to the middle of the woods, sticking out of the earth like one of its neighboring trees. I then set up a fixed camera mount and captured an image from the same location every week. This then evolved to a photographic time lapse series called *Parking Meter Time Lapse* (fig. 12), which continues. Presently, I have over 50 images. These images are mounted on 5” x 8” wood panels and displayed horizontally in chronological order. The nuance and slow progression of the seasons were fascinating to document. I feel this series was a success and will only become more impactful as more images capture the forest bed consuming the displaced object.

We are all familiar with the excitement of finding a parking spot and the dread of a ticket on the windshield. The meter, with its own finite measure of time, right at this moment, is a silent witness to the slow march of winter. Nature and the meter are an
unlikely pairing of two worlds, neither of which has an indication of time. A familiar object in such a setting can trigger a new awareness of environmental concerns as well as feelings of nostalgia and our understanding of time.

![Image of Parking Meter]

Fig. 11. Brian Sage. Parking Meter. Steel sculpture, 50” high. 2017.

Fig. 12. Brian Sage. Parking Meter Time Lapse Series. Photographs, 5” x 8”. 2018.

The Time Collapse Camera (fig.13) utilized, of all things, the camera on an iPhone. This photography series is a body of work that focuses on exploring technology and time through the fabrication of the device and the imagery it produced. I built a camera that combines two forms of photography separated by more than a half century. I constructed a wooden camera housing, which utilizes an iPhone and a 1950’s German Primar Flex II camera. The iPhone was positioned above the image created by the old German camera at the correct focal length, so the smartphone could auto focus and capture a digital image. The results were nostalgic, gritty digital images with an interesting halo effect and depth of field.
Fig. 13. Brian Sage. *Time Collapse Camera.* 2018.

The digital photograph *Jerome Trucks* (fig. 14) was taken with this camera and produced a beautiful depth of field, and the bright halo spotlight gives the image an interesting focal point, similar to what I aim for in my paintings. Another fascinating element of this work is the mechanical area around the image on the viewfinder that was captured by the iPhone. Although the viewfinder interrupts the composition of the digital photograph captured by the iPhone, it creates a layer of mystery behind my photography process, so I did not crop it.

I further explored this new device by putting different transparencies over the viewfinder and then capturing the image in the same manner. These filters acted like small slides and were created by cutting out areas of comic book images and other small printed images that related to the subject matter I was capturing in real time. The results have a primitive and layered photoshop quality but with a contradiction, as time and technologies collapse into a new space. The image *Out of the Woods* (fig. 15) was taken in New Hampshire outside a McDonald’s after a snowstorm. The small transparency I used was a photo of Robert Redford dressed as a mountain man in the movie *Jeremiah Johnson.* The result is an analog clip art-style image of a mountain man who seems to have stumbled out of the woods after a century had passed, only to be greeted by the golden arches.
Connection and The VW Bug

Recent testing of skeleton remains in Somerset, Britain has proven that humans are social primates with an unbroken DNA lineage that dates back at least 10,000 years (Junger 21). These early Western European, nomadic homo sapiens thrived during the Mesolithic Age (McKie). Now, we are driving and texting, posting, and swiping with the same genes that allowed the hunter-gathers to be successful. We are social primates, and an essential part of our wellbeing is derived from working together and connecting in authentic ways.

In more affluent areas of the US, financial independence can lead to isolation and can put individuals at risk for depression and suicide. The impulse for safety and independence is natural and healthy for humans, but when it moves away from a balanced interdependence, there is a significant reduction in a sense of wellbeing.

I witnessed the power of connection firsthand while on a one-month art residency in Puebla, Mexico. There, friendly greetings are a major part of daily life, and gatherings such as lunch and dinner are never rushed. I noticed that children in Puebla hold hands
with their parents until a much older age compared to the US. As children grow up, they don’t seem to have the same intense need to distance themselves from their parents. Girlfriends hold hands or walk down the street arm in arm, and couples aren’t shy about demonstrating affection in public. There also appears to be a more carefree sense of play amongst the children.

As I wandered the streets with my camera, I quickly learned that many do not like their picture to be taken, which I respected. Instead, I shifted my focus to ruin imagery, particularly old buildings and various old vehicles around the city. One very popular vehicle kept catching my attention. It seemed to appear all over the city in various conditions, colors, and uniqueness. Photographing old Volkswagen Beetles became the focus of my art residency.

I captured over 100 photos of classic VW Beetles from the same perspective and decided to first create a one-minute video flipping through about 60 of the digital images. The series then evolved when I realized the VW Beetles were far too interesting to skip through so quickly. I wanted to find an interesting way to display them in a grid pattern. The *VW Bug Tiles* (fig. 16) were created out of this contemplation. I photo transferred the images of the VW Beetles onto 6” x 6” tiles that were made in Mexico. When put together, all the Beetles blend into a unique pattern. The series is not only beautiful but also a poignant indirect reminder of issues surrounding immigration and labor. For me personally, the tiles portray an unlikely ambassador during my visit to Mexico.
Despite my experiences of connection in this culture, Mexico is not exempt from the use of smartphones and their isolating effects. Throughout the world, technology is tapping into a basic human need to be accepted, admired, and to feel good about oneself. The media’s intentions, for the most part, however, are not concerned with the wellbeing of users but with profit margins. Algorithms are increasingly used to “hack” and manipulate individuals. Their agenda is to tell us who they want us to be, what they want us to look like, and how they want us to act, all driven by consumerism. The effect is the unnatural skewing of our identities and loss of conscious choice.

Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook posts are too often an inaccurate representation of the individual and are instead a select self-curation of the ideal image, message, or thought one wants to convey to the world. The truth is that these self-filtered images often mask and/or create depression, hypocrisy, and a sense of lack experienced by many. The media, proliferated by the Internet, now has a disproportionate influence on all who are immersed in technology (Taylor). The French philosopher Michel Foucault writes,
“What we perceive as true is a result of the regular effects of politics and the social rituals which has then reinforced cultural institutions, the media, and changing political discourse” (Foucault).

Simon Stålenhag, the last of the three artists I am discussing, emerged at the turn of the 21st century and has embraced technology completely, both in subject matter and medium. He is an artist at the edge of being a digital native (b. 1984). Technology has already achieved a dangerous foothold in his world, and its impact has reached out to the rural landscapes of his childhood in Stockholm, Sweden. His paintings capture intimate and ordinary moments in the country, but, unlike Hopper, his work is more dramatic.


One of his digital paintings from his book *Electric State* (fig. 17) shows a girl and her small yellow robot encountering the remains of a much larger robot. The figures seem accepting of what they have come across, as the distinctly 1980’s style vehicles in the distance sit undisturbed. The science fiction robots and technical machinery that consumed his youth now have a presence in his landscapes as he transports us back to time to his childhood, where these machines dominate, or have once dominated, the terrain (Crum). The figures in his paintings appear to have a sense of acceptance of the
threats around them. Many of his landscapes take place in the forests of southern Sweden, which, he mentions, looks like New England terrain (Pangburn). His use of a Wacom Tablet for his digital paintings is a medium that Hopper couldn’t have dreamed of but creates an even greater sense of the fearful urgency depicted in Hopper’s city paintings of the city.

**Rewilding Paintings**

As I mentioned earlier, the term Rewilding has numerous definitions, all of which have contributed to my curiosity and knowledge as my final series progressed over the second half of the program. The path towards this final body of work was not linear, as I explored different mediums along the way, which informed and solidified my vision. The *Rewilding* series of paintings integrates themes of urban decay, nostalgia, technology, and connection. These themes echo on many levels throughout the paintings and point towards a more uncultivated and restorative state.

![Image](image.jpg)

Fig. 18. Brian Sage. *Shadow of Buck*. Oil on panel, 3” x 5”. 2018.
The first part of the series consists of small paintings the size of cell phones. The paintings feature old, decaying walls that I photographed during my trip to Mexico. Against these colorful and gritty structures, I cast the shadow of a single animal. These creatures are cautiously reemerging into an urban space that was previously unwelcoming. In *Shadow of Buck* (fig. 18), the animal's shadow is cast on a crumbling graffitied wall as overgrown vegetation creeps out of an above window. The fact that the animals appear as shadows gives a haunting quality to the paintings, as if the spirit of the animals has never left or is omnipresent.

These smaller works were my initial thoughts for my *Rewilding* series and were influenced by the story of Plato's Cave. In the allegory, the prisoners of the cave think that the shadows of the objects cast by the fire on the cave wall are actually the real thing. These prisoners are chained and forced to live a superficial reality at the hands of their captors. In modern society, many are locked on their devices and experience a similar illusion, an altered or fabricated reality that they are continuously encouraged to engage with. The self-curation on social media, propaganda, and manipulation of all varieties support the agenda of those behind the scenes, the puppet masters in the cave producing the shadows.

The larger paintings in the *Rewilding* series are intended to be more cinematic. Constructed with this goal in mind, these paintings are built to the same dimensions as modern flat screen TVs. The scenes depicted are layered and more complex, as humans gaze out towards an urban setting that is being reclaimed by nature. Humans have a presence in this new space and are in the midst of navigating this new terrain. In *Bridge is Out* (fig. 19), the figures in the distance are fishing together with a net below a fallen
bridge, a symbol of disconnection. The two figures in the foreground huddle close and gaze out at the scene. Similarly, in *On the Bench* (fig. 20), the figures in the distance are engaged in playing catch among huge decaying satellites. Playing catch seems like one of the simple pastimes that has been disrupted by devices that have consumed children and adults in the recent decade. The figure in this painting is by himself and sits fixated on the scene with a baseball glove by his side.

Fig. 19. Brian Sage. *Bridge is Out*. Oil on canvas, 35” x 61”. 2018.

![Bridge is Out](image1)

Fig. 20. Brian Sage. *On the Bench*. Oil on canvas, 37” x 65”. 2018.

In the foreground of both of these paintings, the figures are captivated as they look out into the distance. The placement of the figures, along with the benches and
directional signage, suggest a museum setting, perhaps a natural history-type exhibit. This might be a futuristic *Rewilding* exhibit catered to the individual. Technology and all its targeted algorithms might be utilized to help humans step back and relearn essential human behaviors and to help them connect with the environment. My intention, like that of a museum, is to archive and educate. The viewers looking at these paintings are another layer in the story. The uncertainty and ambiguity in these oil paintings seek to encourage the viewer to consider these issues of connection and the environment as it relates to them. Are those figures looking back on a reproduced moment in history, or are they watching the scene in the distance unfold in real time?

**Conclusion**

Painting over the centuries has been used to tell stories and to pass essential information from one generation to the next. Historical paintings became more clearly defined during the Renaissance period and were considered the most elevated form of art. These concise narratives told people how to live and what was to be valued. By the mid-19th century, these stories began to shift towards more commonplace scenes of daily living, which included landscape and still life painting (Walsh).

The trajectory of my painting during the course of my graduate studies seems to have taken the reverse path. It began with the more commonplace and evolved into a personal layered narrative, with the intention of posing questions toward the critical issues concerning the health of humans and their relationship to the environment.

My work doesn't intend to encourage everyone to move back to the great outdoors. If everyone in urban areas did so, the environment would be quickly destroyed. The undercurrent that runs through the *Rewilding* series of paintings is a connection to
nature and one another. Those connections can take place in a multitude of ways. One connection could take the form of a butterfly nursery in a kitchen in New York City, another a community garden on a street corner in LA, or wild edible foraging in the suburbs. Wilderness is not found only in remote areas of the planet, but its power and wonder are within us and at our doorstep (Cronon). City and suburban living can be isolating, as many people often retreat to their phones and apartments while making no eye contact with others. In my own life, I’ve been fortunate to live in an artist community in the city that has given me a new appreciation for the power of connection, despite living away from areas of wilderness.

The intention of my *Rewilding* series of oil paintings is to set a stage wherein the viewer may contemplate these critical relationships in an uncertain and changing landscape. The aesthetics of my work and the concerns presented combine to hopefully unsettle the viewer so that they take a step towards a more connected life. As I look at my current work, it occurs to me that it is a culmination of my life experience. Perhaps artist and author Rupert Spira best sums up my relationship to my work: “We do not view a work of art, we participate in it. The nature of art is to bring back the world that we have rejected, the world that we have deemed other, separate, made out of dead matter…to bring it close, intimate, to realize our self as one with its very fabric” (Spira 133).
Works Cited


