Our Mother Never Asked for This

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Our Mother Never Asked for This

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Abstract

Our Mother Never Asked for This, is a series of artworks consisting of paintings, sculptures, installations, and fiber art. The aim of the work is to capture the colors and emotion that I have encountered in my time outdoors.

My work examines a human connection with nature through the use of naturally derived materials used to create pigments, and recycled linen. In the age of Anthropocene and the ever present advancement of technology, and consumerism, my work looks at how these “advancements” have changed my relationship to the natural world. I use the context of art to explore the bigger issues of humankind's relationship to nature, and my own. World renowned artist Andy Goldsworthy once said, “We often forget that we are nature. Nature is not something separate from us. So when we say we have lost our connection to nature, we’ve lost our connection to ourselves.”¹ In this paper I discuss developing connection to what grows around me and how I came to rediscover the very nature of my artistic practice.

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Our Mother Never Asked for This

“The earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth…. Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.”

- Chief Seattle of Suquamish, 1855

Introduction

I grew up in a tiny city called Everett, adjacent to Boston, Massachusetts. As a child growing up in an urban city, I would walk past gray cement buildings everyday on my walk to and from school. Dodging traffic and trying to ignore the city noise I would look for the little bits of grass and dandelions that emerged from the dingy sidewalk. After doing my homework and eating a snack, I would beg my mother to go outside to explore what I thought was great outdoors; the 20ft x 30ft patch of grass in my backyard. My neighbor and I would go “grasshopper hunting”, we would pretend we were explorers who just discovered this land. We would collect and gather; rocks, flowers from my neighbors pots, pieces of grass, bugs etc, essentially any bit of the natural world that could be found in the industrial man-made city. Recalling what I was learning in school; I imagined I was living off the land with the Native Americans who once stood in the very same area that was now suppressed with cement buildings. My imagination would take me to a place surrounded by trees, the sounds of birds chirping, and the smell of pine. However, my surreal state would quickly diminish when the sound of city traffic emerged, bringing me back to the reality of this place I called home.
On long weekends my mother and father would take my sister and me up to the remoteness of New Hampshire. I marveled at Mother Nature's wonders, from majestic pine tree forests to tiny daisies. As I grew older, I began to get to know Mother Nature as a generous entity, and started to appreciate the many gifts she gave all living things to exist harmoniously together. I spent my summer days driving up the coast of the Northshore, being completely infatuated by the rocky shores of New England. Sometimes I would escape to the lush green forests of the White Mountains to find trails to get lost in. The more time that I spent in nature, the more I felt a sense of connection and tranquility with that space. I felt like I belonged, like I was supposed to be there, I felt at home.

During the chaotic years of my early twenties, I took a year off from my hectic work schedule, that our culture embedded in our heads to be natural. Instead, I sought to find a meaning for myself by visiting the natural wonders of our country. At each stop, I was frequently taken back by the one-ness I felt with not only the land, but the other seekers I met along the way who were observing and feeling what I was in that exact moment. While traveling, I made a point to collect art from local artists that gave a nod to the natural landscapes I was visiting. Within the mountains and reservations of New Mexico, I met an artist who combined natural dyes with sand and blew them by mouth to recreate images of the nature spirit Kokopelli, (who was honored by the Native American people for bringing rain). On the black shores of Hawaii I met a man that felt the spirit of the island so strongly through his calloused feet that he used them to
carve wooden blocks into totems. While standing in four places at once; where Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and Utah meet, I met an artist who chiseled sedimentary rock slices from the ground nearby, creating beautiful illustrations of a Native American chief who once lived at peace with the land I was standing on. During this time I collected rocks, sand and other natural materials for future use, never knowing if I would ever find a purpose I deemed great enough to part with my precious souvenirs. At the time of this writing, I still haven't found an exact use for those bits from my journey, but I did find a wholeness in the idea of using the land to tell a story.

In Hawaii I stumbled upon a group of volunteers cleaning plastic from a local beach. The primary purpose was to return the land to its natural state, a local woman would then use the debris collected to make beads and jewelry to sell to tourists. Every bracelet simultaneously is a reminder of how our society is failing our planet, while making efforts to save it at the same time. My own carbon footprint is irreparable beyond my control. I throw away sterile packaging, miles of plastic tubing, hundreds of batteries and millions of tiny plastic strips in an effort to keep myself alive. For the longest time I felt that the state of our planet was something to just accept, much like my childhood diagnosis of diabetes. While in graduate school, my perspective shifted, and I became more aware of the choices I was making in my own studio, how what I used to make art could be more meaningful than what I was trying to depict or represent on a canvas.
In this paper I will discuss studio practices that emerged from studying ecological and land artists, as well as the discovery of my own nascent style. My work addresses the concern about how our society is living in conjunction with the natural world. Using natural materials and inspiration from the color palette of the natural world, my work has evolved from representations of the landscape into “conversations” with my materials. In the society that humankind has created, will our culture truly be able to reconnect with Mother Nature? Can the human race's worldly advancements live in a harmonious juxtaposition with Mother Nature's natural art, or are we destined to overtake the world's natural beauty through pollution, deforestation, and environmental decline? I use artistic practices in relation to the beauty of nature to answer this question. *Our Mother Never Asked for This*; is a series of flags that serve as symbols of appreciation for the very source of the materials from which they were made.
Ecology, Land, and Time

Land artists of the 1970s asked the question, “Can nature itself be considered art?” What is the concept behind something for it to be considered art? In the book, *Land and Environmental Art*, Brian Wallis and Jeffery Kastner introduce artists as individuals acting in a one-to-one relationship with the land. Some draw on conceptual art strategies, using words to substitute a picture of the land with its evocation as a physical experience. Landscapes may be revealed as a zone of invasion or exclusion. Divided by invisible yet complex networks of political and ethnic boundaries.\(^2\) In my work, I think about the land artists mentioned. I’m interested in time: time here on earth, the passage of time, the time it takes to create, and the time it takes to destroy.

![Fig. 1. Casey Cataldo. *Nature’s Crucifiction*. Natural and manmade materials. 6’x5. 2020.](image)

Researching both Land Art and Ecological Art led me to create the sculpture, *Nature’s Crucifiction*. This work touches upon the basic idea of life and death; the natural world, and humankind. There is no life without death, and humans could not exist without the natural world. In *Nature’s Crucifixion*, I used

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manmade objects such as chains to represent the way that humans are choking mother nature, continuously encroaching on her land and taking her generous gifts that she has to offer without giving anything back. The natural elements such as the grass and plants are growing in spite of this. Nature seems to always find a way back.

Citizens making their way through the busy streets of Somerville had the opportunity to slow down from their chaotic day and step into the space of this sculpture. It acts as an invitation to pause from all of the hustle and bustle, as it stood in contrast against the side of my overpopulated apartment. Nature’s Crucifixion, was a 5ft by 6ft sculpture installation that was made in response to the Land artists, and lived in an urban area surrounding Boston. Now only existing in photographs, this sculpture represents the short time all living beings have on this earth. Water was needed daily to keep this sculpture green in the blazing heat of summer. My hope was for the observers to have left with the intent to take a few moments out of their busy day to breathe in this homage to the earth. It was not meant to live in the remoteness of nature but instead was meant to coexist in the nature of the city that our society has created.

Land artists sought to draw people back into the natural world while creating art that blended and complemented its environment. Some of the first Land artists created pieces that now only exist in photographs, due to the fleeting nature of time in the natural world. They rejected the idea of museums and the
ability to sell art and instead created fixed pieces of work to show the power and constant evolution of the natural world. Notable Land artist Andy Goldsworthy stated, “We often forget that WE ARE NATURE. Nature is not something separate from us.” In other words, to live in the world as it is without an appreciation of nature would mean that “we’ve lost our connection to ourselves.”

Fig. 2. Andy Goldsworthy, *Yorkshire Sculpture Park Two*

*works made in the same place/sticks and willow herb stalks/pushed into lake bottom/shallow.* Sticks and Water. 1987

Goldsworthy created site-specific installations involving natural materials, focusing on the passage of time. Before creating, Goldsworthy would become attune with his environment; mentally, physically, and emotionally, as he believed that the energy and space around the materials are just as important as the energy and space of his artwork. He allowed the natural elements to speak to him, then arranged them in a deliberate fashion. His art was not meant to last forever, but instead he let the natural world interact with his creations. Photographing and videotaping his process is a way that the viewer can see his

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success as well as his failures. His photographs are often the only record of his work, due to the ever changing elements of nature that interact with his work. Goldsworthy’s creations give a sense of transformation or the cycle of life; birth, life, and death. Although viewers can interpret his art in many different ways, his art offers a reminder that nothing lasts forever, even a photograph.

Like Andy Goldsworthy, my art was not intended to last forever. In order to preserve it for a little bit longer, photographing it was a necessary part of the process. My art falls under the umbrella of both land and ecological art. It is art that lives temporarily in the land that humankind has claimed. Instead of literally giving back to the earth and the community, like the work of Agnes Denes. My art gives back in a much more metaphorical way. People in the community in which it lived had a short window of opportunity to view this sculpture, but when they did they had the freedom to let their mind wander about the messages they were receiving.

Fig. 3. Casey Cataldo. *Human’s Touch.* Natural and manmade materials. 2020
*Human’s Touch*, is a freestanding sculpture. There are two sides to this sculpture, one resembling the world untouched by humans, and the other representing the demise that humankind has affected on the land. A reciprocal mirror that appears reflective on one side and transparent at the other is used as a divider between these two universes. In *Human’s Touch*, I am using a small piece of art to represent a very large issue. My intention is to address land degradation. Although humans are indeed part of nature, our society has created a world that is everything but natural. Globally our culture has created a world that thrives on the idea of consumerism, and the power of money. Creating the notion that everyone must buy in order to survive. Most of the products that are purchased are wrapped in plastic or made out of other materials that litter the earth. This constant need for materialism creates a world that is gray and dying. This piece allows the viewer to bring awareness to the destruction that humankind is causing our only home. However, this very issue can be reversed if every human being did a small part to rejuvenate the planet.

Fig. 4. Casey Cataldo. *Human’s Touch (Detail)*. 2020
This side of *Human’s Touch* (Fig.4), is a representation of the natural world without the destruction that human beings have caused. I used natural elements such as grass, flowers, rocks, and sticks. A one-way mirror is what separates the two worlds I am depicting. You are able to faintly see what lies on the other side of the sculpture. Revealing the decomposing world that the human race is creating.

![Fig. 5. Casey Cataldo. Human’s Touch (Detail). 2020](image)

This side of my sculpture, Human’s *Touch* (Fig.5) allows the viewer to recognize the depleting world that our society is creating. Humans are generating a world that is no longer green. I depicted the idea of pollution and disconnection by using trash, plastic, old electronics, and decaying materials. On this side the divider is now a mirror, allowing the viewer to see a reflection of themselves. No longer being able to see the beauty of the natural elements on the other side, the viewer is faced with contemplating what destruction themselves and our society may be causing to the natural world. This piece is intended for the viewer to recognize the destruction of the natural world and consider the changes that can be made to save the future of our planet and humankind.
In the book Absolutes and Intermediates; it becomes clear that Denes’ creations not only speak to the art community; but can be relatable to all. In her work *Wheatfield - A Confrontation*, 1982. Denes created an art installation that looked more like a scene from the midwest, only it was in downtown Manhattan. She worked with the community to plant 28 acres of wheat by hand, transforming a landfill in one of the world's most populated cities into an image of powerful irony. Her piece acted as a paradox; the untouched golden field of wheat worked in perfect contrast with the large industrial buildings, Wall Street, and Statue of Liberty just blocks away. The message behind this piece seems clear; it is meant to be ephemeral, like life itself, nothing lasts forever, there will always be growth and decay. Denes stated: “Conservation is both an individual and collective responsibility, extending far into the future”.\(^4\) She was not just an active artist but a dedicated activist; working for the environment and its direct connection to the preservation of humankind.

\(^4\) (Denes, Agnes, et al. Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates. The Shed, 2020.)
In comparison to the work of Agnes Denes, my art does not literally give back to mother nature the way her work accomplishes. Instead, my art leaves the viewer questioning the society in which humans have created. This piece created a speculation; what can each human being do to help reconstruct the world our society has destroyed? Is it possible for Mother Nature and humankind to live in harmony to support each other?
Origins of Color

My work is deeply motivated by color, and my desire to represent colors I have seen when I have stepped away from the built environment, and connected with green spaces. I searched for artists that also drew from the palette of the natural world, and found myself returning to the abstract expressionist, Helen Frankenthaler.

![Image of Helen Frankenthaler's Flood](image)

Fig. 7. Helen Frankenthaler. *Flood*. Polymer on Canvas. 124 x 40”. 1967.

Frankenthaler painted nature using nature-inspired colors. She often took inspiration from the landscapes of Massachusetts. In Frankenthaler’s painting *Flood* (Fig.7), she was not depicting the actual landscape. She focused more on her emotional reactions to the land she immersed herself in and transferred that emotion through color onto her canvas. I realized that I wanted to immerse both myself and the viewer into the beautiful spaces and compelling feelings that I felt when I was in the natural world. I returned to my memories of my trip across the United States, I pulled from my pictures of places that brought a feeling of awe, and started to paint.
Once I was able to fully immerse myself and remember the feeling I would get when I was in these amazing places, I was able to begin to paint more freely. The true feeling of not knowing what would happen or what could come next allowed me to focus on the emotions of color. “Color conveys moods which attach themselves quite automatically to human feeling. It is part and parcel with the psychic make-up of human beings.” (Beirren 162).

When asked why he didn’t paint nature, if he was so inspired by it, Jackson Pollock responded with “I am nature”\(^5\). The simplicity and heaviness of that statement led me to realize that I could share the emotions I imagine nature wants to express without needing to have it objectively present. This became a turning point for me to move away from the landscapes and still-life I was comfortable with, and to instead begin to focus on the power we have as artists to elicit emotional responses and cultural understanding. I quickly began to realize

that it’s not solely the product that I create that matters, but the process of creating.

Experimenting with oil paints opened a door to a new way of thinking about the material I was using. I worked vigorously in my art studio mixing a variety of oil paints trying to replicate the colors I saw in the natural world. I continuously compared the brownish red paint that I had mixed to match a souvenir I brought home from my trip out west. (Fig. 9). At first glance, this rock from Moab, Utah appears to look like any old rock; however, when observed closely, a variety of lively earth tones become revealed. This rock has a blue-green undertone, the prominent cracks and divots have a lasting residue of the red clay dirt that encompasses the land where it once lived.

Fig. 9. Casey Cataldo. Souvenir. Photograph. 2021.

As I continued to mix the toxic oil paints to simulate the natural earth tones, I began to inquire how these pigments came to be. The names of the colors on my tubes of oil paint consisted of; Yellow Ochre, Raw Umber, and Burnt Sienna. These color pigments can be found naturally in the land where my souvenir once lived, and I once stood. I could not help but contemplate why I was
using toxic oil paint. This led me to wonder what natural pigments could be derived from the urban setting where I now stood. The experience of finding color became a big part of my artwork.

After much research and a lot of experimentation, I began to use the elements that Mother Nature has given us for my final thesis series. I needed to turn to her for guidance. I began to collect elements found in the world around me; I crushed, burned, and saturated elements such as; flowers, dirt, leaves, etc. to create natural pigments.

Creating these pigments encouraged me to dye linen that would have just been donated, giving it a new meaning and new life. Manipulating this fabric was the beginning of my series of flags, Our Mother Mother Never Asked for This, my thesis work, which I will discuss later in the paper.
Fig. 11. Casey Cataldo. *Naturally dyed linen*. 2020.
Gathering

I understand that if I love nature enough to represent it in my artwork, I need to do my part to preserve it so it may be loved for generations to come. The idea of waste, even unconscious waste, was so striking to me in position as a millenial and person reliant on single use plastic to survive.

My own plastic usage, as it relates to the Great Garbage Patch in the Pacific Ocean, is hard to curtail. Though some would find it odd to find inspiration in 7.7 million miles of plastic waste and debris, I found motivation within the fact that every person on the planet has contributed. Through exploration about this issue, a quote by Rachel Carlson resonated with me, “Underlying all of these problems of introducing contamination into our world is the question of moral responsibility -- responsibility not only to our own generation but to those of the future”. I no longer wanted to recreate nature through art, but to source nature in my art. With the world rapidly changing as a result of the COVID-19 quarantine of 2020, perhaps we will begin to once again see a resurgence in the rejection of commercialism. Without shopping, traveling, or even museums, humans have begun to find solace and distraction in one of the few ways still deemed “open” the natural world.

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Ecology is a branch of science that focuses on relationships of organisms to each other and also to their physical surroundings. Incidentally, nature forgot to factor the emergence of capitalism into her food web. Jason W. Moore presents the idea that we aren’t living in an “age of man” but instead in the age of “capitalism”. Shortly after the demographic-destroying Black Death a previously feudal Europe began to recover in a way that “sought not to restore the surplus, but to expand on it.”

Evidence of the natural world influencing art and culture can be traced back to the age when hematite and charcoal were applied to cave walls. Organic material has been used for thousands of years to create pigment. These pigments can then be used to create paint and dye for a variety of aesthetic purposes. Through a lot of trial and error, I started to use materials that I could only find in nature. Instead of using paint to depict my concepts of the natural world, I shifted to arranging a variety of natural materials to inherit color, form, and texture.

This in turn led me to create a wall hanging titled Samsara (Fig. 12) where I used only natural materials. Samsara is a Sanskrit word meaning:

suffering, life, death, and rebirth\(^9\), a concept that has been continuous in my art. This wall hanging is made out of recycled linen, dried fruit, pressed flowers, vines, and rocks. It quite literally symbolizes a new beginning for all, by reutilizing these materials that otherwise may have had no other purpose.

Vivian Suter’s installation at the ICA called upon the natural elements to aid in her completion of each piece. She used a combination of conventional painting strategies and weathering elements such as rain, mud, or animals to manipulate the pieces completed on un-stretched and unprepared canvas. Suter used natural elements to completely alter her paintings. She would leave her canvas outside for an extended period of time to let natural elements manipulate, change, and add to the work. In doing this, Suter leaves nature as an equal contributor to her installations.

When looking at the installation in its entirety, Suter’s paintings are unconventionally hung next to, above, in front, and behind one another so the art is viewed in a nontraditional way. Suter’s art is arranged in such a way where it appears the paintings have their own dialogue to communicate with one another.

The role colonialism played in the capitalistic destruction of the natural world, allowed me to create my first flag, *Connected Prints* (Fig. 16). This piece consists of naturally dyed fabric with image transfer of tree rings and human fingerprints sewn together. This is a representation of the connection between
the natural world and humankind. The idea that we are all connected in this web of life, that one small action can lead to another that could be catastrophic or miraculous for every living thing it encounters. I needed to create art that could be conceptually comprehensive to any viewer. A well known artist Sheila Hicks, creates a large variety of fiber art. She once stated, “Textile is a universal language. In all of the cultures of the world, textile is a crucial and essential component,”\(^\text{10}\). I knew that it was necessary to use fiber in conjunction with natural materials.

Fig.15. Casey Cataldo. Connected Prints. Naturally dyed linen, thread, ink. 3”x 4” 2020

Mother Nature does not have an opportunity to voice her opinion about the way humans are treating her. She cannot defend herself against the negative impacts of economics, technology, and other man-made environmental catastrophes. “In the traditional legal understanding, nature is a thing or—even more technically—all parts of nature except humans are things. Things (e.g.,

\(^{10}\) https://www.moma.org/artists/2631
animals, plants, or stones), have no rights. They are goods, which can be owned and used, destroyed or protected” 11.

If we’ve learned anything from the discourse around consent and agency, it’s that we can’t speak for other people. And we obviously can’t speak for things. We can only speak for ourselves. I created my series of flags as a way that I can speak on behalf of Mother Nature in a hope to provide some sort of protection for her. If the earth could speak to us, what would it say? These flags are a way I honor Mother Nature and translate her blessings for all that she has given to us. I am using these flags to unify the world and all living beings that coexist on this planet.

![Fig. 16. Casey Cataldo. Colder Weather. Naturally dyed linen, sticks, thread, walnut ink. 4’x5’. 2021](image)

In my flag; *Colder Weather* (Fig. 17), I used natural elements that are found in cold weather climates such as; holy leaves, cranberries, pinecones,

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walnut ink, and twigs. This flag represents the resilience that Mother Nature and humankind both have. The idea of global destruction is prominent in the world that we created. However, if every human being acknowledged and did some part to reduce ecological decline we could rejuvenate our planet.

![Flag detail](image)

**Fig. 17. Casey Cataldo. Colder Weather. Detail. 2021**

My flags do not encourage separation, we cannot be separated from the mantle of our planet or exclude ourselves from the air in our atmosphere. We do not need to fear Mother Nature reclaiming her land, instead I want viewers to unite behind my flags and move forward as citizens of the world. My work addresses the concerns for the future of the planet. The world that humans have created causes us to have a disconnection to nature, and what is actually "real".

My last flag *Colors In The Wind* (Fig. 19), represents a hopeful future for our planet. I focused on using natural elements that can be found in the season of Spring. I printed flowers on recycled linen (Fig.18), fresh herbs and rose petals for dye. Cheese cloth was used to create negative space between the bright
swirling colors and pattern of the fabric. Viewers should be able to visualize the hope and potential for the future of our planet, but first we must give gratitude for all that Mother Nature has given us.

Fig. 18. Casey Cataldo. Colors Of The Wind, Flower print detail. 2021
Conclusion

Nature has always held a unique space in my heart; the unending beauty and the brutality of natural selection sharply contrasting. When in the openness of the natural world, I’ve always felt the release of the jaded society we live in, and instead found peace in something so unphased by the mundane modern world. That has and will never change. The limitlessness of nature has always been an escape for me and an ability to surrender to something larger than myself. Being, using, and engaging with nature is a part of my artistic experience.

Nature is the inspiration for my art. Hence, the recurring themes of time, space, life and death in my work. I believe that the admiration for nature is in all of us, however our interests can easily be persuaded to focus on the busy consumer lifestyles. The concept of rebirth, recycle, restore, regenerate, rejuvenate continue to resurface throughout my time creating art. The prefix “Re” simply means to give back. It is now our turn to give back to our Mother and thank her for all that she has given us.

I continue to find serenity in the natural world as an adult still living in a cemented built environment created by humankind. Time and time again I find myself driving to the White Mountains to hike, ski, or explore as a coping mechanism that I use to dismiss myself from the stressful environment that our civilization has created. Only when I am standing amongst the canopy of the
forest, do I realize that is where I belong, that is my home. My art is meant to raise awareness, question the society that humankind has created, and encourage our community to reconnect with mother nature. Not only do we as humans embed a fingerprint on the natural world around us, we also leave an imprint on each other. Like ripples expanding across water when an object is dropped into it; we can spread knowledge to one another. As an artist I create art that brings the viewer back to the serenity of the natural world, and our impact on it.

Fig. 19. Casey Cataldo. Colors In The Wind, Anti-Flag. Naturally dyed linen, thread, cheesecloth, sticks, flowers. 4’x5’. 2021

Fig. 20. Casey Cataldo. Connected Prints, Anti-Flag. Photograph of it interacting with the land. 2021.
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