

On Shaky Ground: Land, Paint and Change

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Dedicated to the memory of Dr Judith Tucker
1960 – 2023

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Abstract

For this practice-led research project, painting is the field through which the concept of landscape is explored. The paintings are a response to the contemporary climate of the Anthropocene; the site for the research is the canal network of Greater London and Hertfordshire, which is revealed as aesthetically and materially figurative of this chapter in climate history. As a form of human expression, an artwork can be considered to be a site where knowledge is created and meanings are made (Sullivan, 2010, p. 71). The investigation recognises the very unique properties of artworks, and in particular the ability of painting to communicate pertinent messages regarding evolving climate issues.

Materials and processes specific to the site are employed within the research; this disrupts the conventional approach to painting and situates the practice within 'painting in the expanded field'. The approach to painting developed through this investigation is informed by a novel bringing together of theories. A Romantic sensibility is married with contemporary New Materialism (Bolt, 2004; Bennett, 2010), the concept of slow violence (Nixon, 2011) and the subject of ecological grief (Head, 2016). Together these theories interlace and support a central argument that the paintings produced throughout this project are contemporary 'earth-life paintings' (Carus, 2002, p. 119).

This thesis articulates the development of the research; analyses and reflects on the body of work which has been produced; and explores the implications of the research. A critical analysis of the practice-led

research in addition to the account of methodology illuminates how component elements function in response to the research questions. The reviews of both literature and contemporary practice provide context for the specificity of this research, whilst establishing how this research forms an original contribution to knowledge.

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Abbreviations

RQ – Research question.

Map

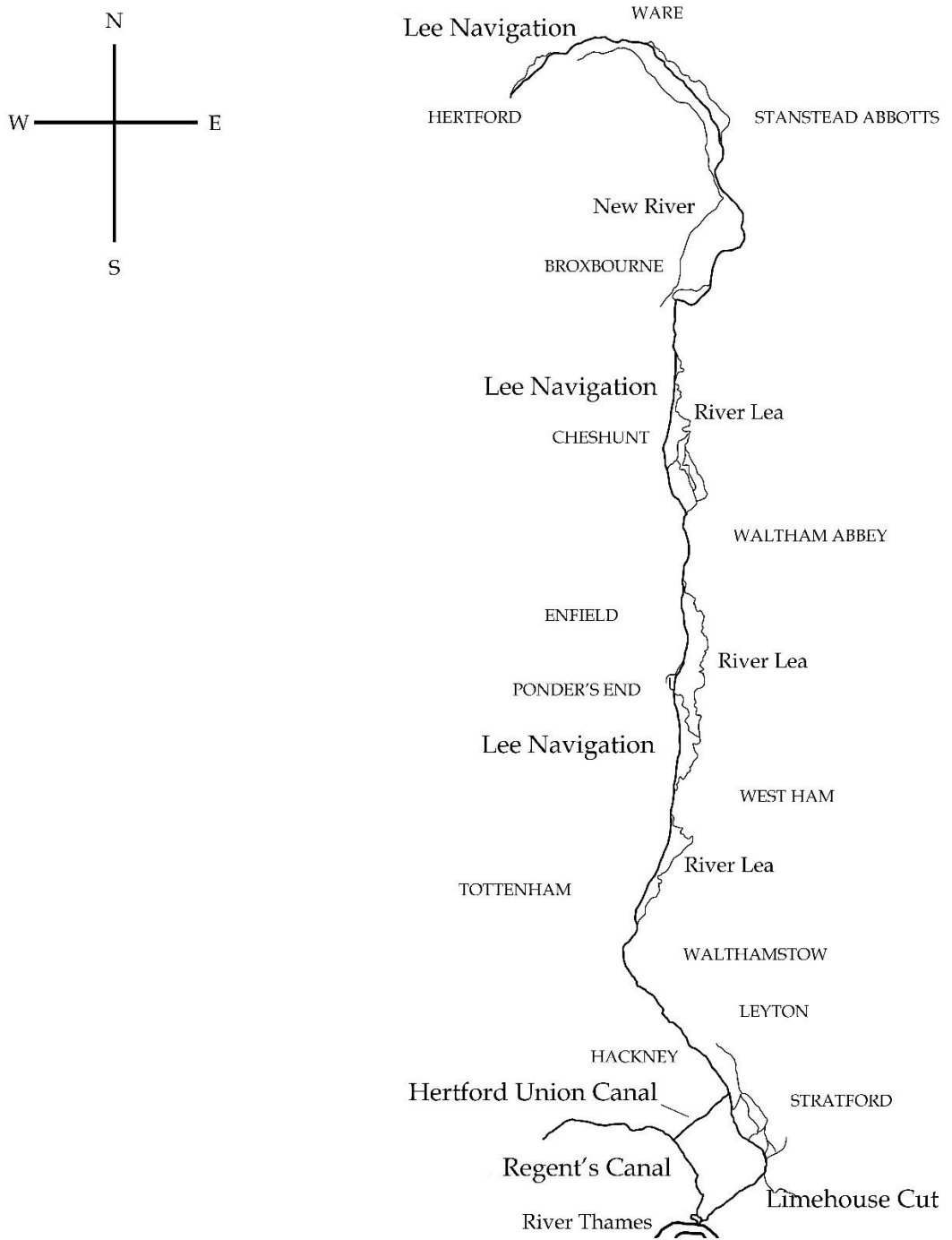


Figure 1. Map of the site – Greater London and Hertfordshire waterways

Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis accompanies and illuminates a body of practice-led research, realised within the field of painting. The research explores the pertinence of painting today – a discipline that shifts and evolves as practitioners develop radical new approaches – and the medium’s unique abilities to engage a viewer both sensorially and emotionally. The genre of painting explored in this project is landscape painting; what a contemporary aesthetic of landscape might look like, and how understandings of this term might have shifted since the development of industry in the eighteenth century to the present day. The thesis makes a case for the significance of these concerns, and furthermore questions to what extent paintings might be instigators of change. This body of research makes an original contribution to knowledge through a meticulously tailored approach to creating paintings. This starts in a personal capacity – a lived experience – but transcends this realm and becomes universal through the paintings when they are exhibited publicly. The knowledge which is inherent in the paintings adds to the story of canal painting in Britain to date (see chapter 7). The paintings themselves provide new knowledge specific to canal site with regards to the unique ecology which is found at this site, and ways it may be understood as vulnerable to the effects of the Anthropocene.

The focus of this enquiry is within the concept of ‘landscape’, both real and in paintings. This has become a concentrated interest in landscape sites which are particularly vulnerable to change under the cloud of the Anthropocene – a critical time in climate history. The

concept of the Anthropocene, what it encompasses and what the implications of it might be, is brought together with the concept of landscape, within the discipline of painting – which makes this study both timely, and urgent. Painting can, in a very tangible, uniquely human way, explore ways of understanding and interpreting the Anthropocene, which otherwise in many ways remains immeasurable and ungraspable. When scientists introduced the term ‘Anthropocene’, they wanted to emphasize the central role of humans in geology and ecology and to propose that the exploitation of Earth’s resources and subsequent growth in greenhouse gases had led to a new geological epoch (Crutzen and Stoermer, 2000, p. 17). The term has not been made official; however, ‘the Anthropocene’ has become the popular name used in debates around climate issues. This thesis adopts the word but understands it as an umbrella term which incorporates many other related titles around this era of climate crisis such as Donna Haraway’s ‘Chthulucene’, ‘Capitalocene’ and ‘Plantationocene’ (2016); Jill Casid’s ‘Necrocene’ (2019); and James Lovelock’s ‘Novacene’ (2019). These philosophical terms provide useful, alternate ways of thinking through the climate crisis.

The study explores a portion of the canal network in greater London and Hertfordshire (fig. 1). The canal was chosen as it is one example – amongst many – of a human built structure which intervenes with the land. Furthermore, it embodies a clear link between the Industrial Revolution (c. 1760 – 1840) and the Anthropocene, and its status today is vulnerable to the effects of a changing climate. As I live on a narrowboat and navigate this area of the canal, I have become more invested in it than ever before – it is my home (fig. 2, 3). The emotional power generated by attachments to place – such as my very personal relationship with this part of the canal network – can be an

invaluable resource for environmental mobilisation (Nixon, 2011, p. 242). This thesis explicates how this intimate relationship has been generative for this research, and moreover, how my paintings might contribute as one of the many forms of communication used to address the urgency of contemporary climate issues.

The Studio

The studio, self-contained and separate from the site, is where the practice research takes place (fig. 5). Although much has been said which romanticises the artist's studio (O'Doherty, 2018), and there might be an expectation of continuous exciting activity there, it is a neutral space where research can be carried out slowly, with care.

In the studio, the many component strands of this research – painting, fieldwork, reading and writing – coalesce via a bricolage methodology, and are centralised within the practice research. Explorative, dynamic approaches to making correlate with my various processes of engagement (Daniels et al., 2010, p. 1) with the site. Within this research, the notion of surface is addressed as a commonality between both the materiality of land and the materiality of painting. In both cases, surface is the outward face atop layers of ground material. Ground, in the geological use of the word, comes from the Anglo Saxon 'grund', and means 'bottom' or 'foundation', upon which Earth's topography advances (Cottingham, 1951, p. 160). For painting, ground is the base material that hosts the 'figure' of painting (Bois, 1990, p. 201). At a time when the ground of the Earth is frequently referred to as fragile through to damaged (Bubandt et al., 2017), the research acknowledges this double meaning through unusual materials, which

are employed to compose paintings which demonstrate tensions within the surface stability. This research explores the role of the ground in painting by exploring ways in which the figure/ground relationship can be made ambiguous. Materials and the way they are employed – such as staining, dying and casting – mean that visually, figure identifies with ground, and any duality between them is eliminated (Rose, 1969, p. 29). However, the structural integrity of a painting and its longevity may be compromised. The significance of this, and range of implications which such compromises bring forth, are addressed at length in this thesis.

The Site

The canal network across Britain is constantly in flux and has a complex history which has seen its usage change in many ways. The area of the canal network which this research focuses on is a defined research site where fieldwork is conducted continuously through a lived experience. The term ‘site’ is used due to the cartographic definition of the portion of the network which I navigate by narrowboat in a regular pattern of movement. As the map shows (fig. 1) the site incorporates the Regent’s canal, the Hertford Union canal and the Lee Navigation. These human built waterways are constructed around and within the course of the naturally occurring river Lea. An important note for the reader is that both spellings are used throughout the thesis; the name ‘Lee’ refers to the canalised section, whilst the original river is still called the ‘Lea’ (Lewis, 2017, p. 13). The pattern of movement is conducted between the end points of the Limehouse basin and the end of the Lee Navigation in Hertford (fig. 7; 8). There are conterminous zones within the site: some areas are

more populated with people, flora and fauna than others, which might be quieter and bear a different set of characteristics.

Built specifically for the movement of extracted materials (White, 2009) throughout the Industrial Revolution in Britain, the canal network today is a depository for the debris from the accelerated transformation of materials that this period of history produced. Kate Soper suggests that today we are “now living with all the consequences of two hundred years of industrial capitalism and its progressive globalisation” (2011, p. 18). Some of these consequences have tangible material forms, these can be found at the canal today. Industrial sites, when they are closed down and cease to operate, become unstable (Edensor, 2005b, p. 313). In parts the canal is unstable; the infrastructure, which is now centuries old, is vulnerable to collapsing in areas which have not been reinforced. Ironically, the canal continues to move materials, albeit in a very different manner than the originally intended organised transportation of goods. This research is concerned with the material relationships which are found at the canal site, and how these materials might compromise the integrity of the surface of the site, or how they might become embedded within and under the surface.

Not quite of the urban, developed land, and not quite of the wild or waste land, this area of the canal has its own unique atmosphere, which prompts my curiosity, holds my attention and encourages me to look closely at the small details which exist herein. In the contemporary, the canal is still haunted by its past, carrying the ghosts of industry and the decay of the abandonment it saw towards the end of its period of use as a commercial transportation system. Painting too, as Ralph Rugoff has recently pointed out, is – more than

any other artform – haunted by ghosts from its storied past (2021, p. 7) – this is another reason why painting is a relevant discipline in which to carry out this research.

Research Questions

The research has been guided by five research questions in its development. In the early stages of the investigation, the research questions were established and critically refined into RQ1 – which leads the investigation – and four tributary questions, which establish the specificity of the direction the research takes in its response. Vitality, these additional four questions explore the intricacies and value of the approach which the research developed. These questions focus on the different elements within the project of painting practice and fieldwork but are related to one another and work synchronously. By operating with a set of research questions which function this way, this practice-led research has developed a unique and original approach to navigating the vast subject of the Anthropocene, through the medium of painting. The questions are as follows:

1. How might painting address the landscape of the Anthropocene?
2. Aesthetically and materially, in what ways might this research reveal the canal system to be emblematic of the Anthropocene?
3. Why is ‘painting in the expanded field’ the appropriate arena in which to situate this research?

4. How might the integration of material processes, influenced by those which form the landscape of the Anthropocene, offer new possibilities for painting?

5. How might the employment of new and unusual materials challenge structural stability and threaten the painting's longevity, and through this respond to notions of instability in the earth's surface?

The first question is the fundamental driver of this research. It asks what a visual art such as painting might do in the face of the contemporary climate crisis. The notion of the Anthropocene has already seen a plethora of responses throughout the arts, these are explored in chapter 7. The contemporary moment brings with it a new set of landscape aesthetics, altering understanding of, and affecting, an established relationship to landscape. The legacy of the genre of landscape painting – assessed from the Romantic period, through the Industrial Revolution, to the present – archives a changing relationship between humans and the land and landscape painting. This practice-led research explores ways for painting to meaningfully contribute to the developing landscape aesthetic unique to the contemporary moment.

The second question takes a closer look at the reasons why a portion of the canal network of greater London and Hertfordshire has been chosen as the site of the research. Aesthetically and materially, ways in which the landscape evidences the Anthropocene are wide-ranging. Drawing on David Matless' term, this research considers the ways in which the canal qualifies as key within the "Anthroposcenic"

aesthetic (Matless, 2018). In this research my highly personal everyday involvement with the site entwines with fieldwork, and a close look at the ecology has led to the revelation of the aesthetic and material qualities that constitute the canal network as emblematic of the Anthropocene. Also within the scope of this question is the consideration of to what extent this network acts as an interruption to accepted 'natural' landscape (Soper, 1995; Morton, 2009; Giraud and Soulard, 2015), and how this might be interpreted and reconsidered through making.

Question three addresses the contextual position of this research and refines the specificities of the genre of painting to which my work contributes. This research is a material exploration which produces paintings which are different in various formal ways to more familiar painting formats. 'Painting in the expanded field' is an explorative territory, in which approaches to practice breach convention and create propositions for painting. This part of the enquiry considers how this way of working bears significance for the context of the Anthropocene and the changing definitions of 'landscape'. Paintings in these expanded forms can create uncertainties, tensions and questions. In doing so they invite a new or altered kind of understanding in relation to the themes they explore.

In question four, parallels are drawn between the formation of the land and the formation of paintings. The Anthropocene is a time of great change defined by the activities and impacts of the human, yet it is paradoxically also a period that is now out of human control, due to rapid, unpredictable and non-linear change (Head, 2016, p. 5). This question considers what the implications might be for paintings – in

terms of their aesthetics – when making processes adopt strategies in which control is relinquished.

Finally in question five, focus turns to the unusual materials which are incorporated into this research. The body of work produced through the research questions how specificity of materials affects the experience of contemporary landscape painting and might offer new insights into the relation of place, paint and environmental change.

Chapters Overview

The following chapters articulate the journey the research has taken over the course of its development, including the key developments in the practice research, fieldwork encounters at the canal site, the methodologies taken, and theories sourced from various disciplines which have all fertilised the outcomes of this project. The paintings are analysed alongside the research questions frequently throughout the text, to highlight the ways in which the research has developed in direct relation to the questions, and furthermore, met the criteria of what the questions explore. In addition, any new questions which arise along the way, and hold new significance for the research, are attended to. Literature from the arts, science, and philosophy – which have also played a critical role within this project – is embedded within each chapter, creating and emphasising dialogues between these key areas for this research. These dialogues are significant in establishing the ways in which my paintings are novel and unique propositions for painting today.

Alternating between chapters are a series of visual essays which might be thought of as interludes which complement the chapters they sit between. Images are arranged throughout the thesis in this way to provide the reader space for contemplation, but also to build a narrative between the practice research and how the paintings are contextualised within the fields they contribute to. Ever since John Berger's 'Ways of Seeing' (1972) the pictorial essay has been valued as an alternate yet effective way in which narrative can be built and through which art might be explored and analysed in meaningful ways. In this thesis the images are composed in collections which explore the resonance between individual paintings and the site, through detailed visualisations of aesthetic and material elements which relate to the themes of the research questions. These visual interludes within the text create a narrative of their own which explores the journey of this research – as described in the text – through visual means. Titles make clear which chapter or chapters a visual essay corresponds to, and the text does make reference to the numbered images individually throughout the thesis, though it is useful for the reader to bear in mind that within a visual interlude the images are not arranged in the order that they are referred to in the text. In this sense the images are presented as the core of this practice-led research, and these visual interludes make clear the originality of the contribution to the field of painting that my work makes.

Chapter 2: Methods and Methodologies: Painting, Immersion and Distance This chapter describes how different types of methods employed within this artistic, practice-led research, function symbiotically in a generative manner. Practice research paves the way for the component strands of fieldwork, observation, photography, critical reflection, reading and writing. The discussion

contextualizes the methodology particular to this project within the Bricolage approach and explains why this is an appropriate methodology for artistic research. The Arts and Humanities Research Council recognises the creative and cultural value and impact of practice research (2019), and Estelle 3 asserts the relevance of personal interest and experience as motivation, rather than objective ‘disinterestedness’ (2010a, p. 5). Ways in which this research is motivated by a personal lived experience is discussed in relation to how this experience has become integrated into the fieldwork research. As relationships between humankind and the landscape are emphasised during the Anthropocene, the lived experience of the canal site provides specific knowledge of the present and changing or changed conditions of the site, which has been fundamental in guiding the research in the studio. This chapter also discusses how the bricolage methodology operates in the studio through an account of various ways of making. Finally, this chapter explores, through a close visual analysis of one of my paintings, the themes of slowness and hope which have arisen through the course of this research, with increasing significance.

Chapter 3: Account of Practice This chapter focuses on the core of this research: the paintings and how and why they come into being. Through visual analyses of paintings in relation to the research questions, the nuanced contributions they make to the field of painting is articulated. The studio is where the practice research explores ways in which specific materials and processes can offer new possibilities for painting. This space – separated from the site – allows the paintings to reveal themselves through making in what might be understood as a non-representational practice (Bolt, 2004). This account of the practice research discusses how multi-directional

approaches to making in the studio are informed by my immersive relationship with the canal site. Pouring paint and plaster from above, laying fabric out flat and horizontal on the floor, facing the painting head on and in a vertical position, are ways in which the immersive experience of landscape is evoked through making. Dislocated from the site the paintings evolve in unpredictable ways, provoking continuous reassessment of the work, and generating new possibilities for painting. This chapter also discusses in depth the aesthetic which has developed in the paintings. Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence is introduced here as a violence against the climate which happens gradually, almost invisibly, and is by definition 'image weak' (2011, p. 275). Nixon asks how artists (amongst others) might negotiate the representational challenges of the slow violence which the Anthropocene brings to bear. This concept is significant in relation to the theme of slowness which is discussed in chapter 2. This chapter addresses how my paintings might respond to Nixon's appeal and the role that performativity takes in doing so. Barbara Bolt's theory of the 'performative power of the image' (2004) has been influential in this regard and is discussed here. Slow violence has not previously been applied to painting in this way, and the ways in which this project integrates the concept into the practice research are novel. The chapter concludes with the argument for my paintings as being 're-presentational' (Casey, 2002) of the site, and discusses why this is a pertinent element in both the development of the aesthetic for the paintings, and meeting the aims of this research.

Chapter 4: Vibrant Matter and Earth-Life Painting Chapter four brings together seemingly disparate theories in order to illuminate in greater depth my personal perception of the site, and how my experience of the site manifests in the paintings. It is important to articulate this

perception as it has influenced the manner in which the research questions have been responded to, and has ultimately shaped the aesthetic of the paintings. Furthermore, placing this perception within theoretical context distinguishes the uniqueness of the approach taken throughout this research. Areas of contemporary New Materialist thought are considered, along with the European Romantic sensibility which first arose in the eighteenth century. This contextualisation forms another facet to the contributions this research makes to art-historical discourse in that it provides a contemporary reading of Carl Gustav Carus' 1831 treatise on what he termed 'earth-life painting' (2002, p.119), through the adoption of Jane Bennett's notion of 'vibrant matter' (2010, p. 3); this confluence happens within the context of the Anthropocene. The chapter illuminates how my own Romantic sensibility is shaped by these theories and applied to my perception of the canal site, and moreover, how the aesthetics of my paintings are shaped by this. A contemporary reading of Carus' theories is timely and relevant and contributes to a sphere of discourse within nature writing which explores ideas around how people view, experience and connect with the natural world today (Wall Kimmerer, 2014; Baird, 2021; Jones, 2021; Macfarlane, 2013, 2019a). Through the recontextualization of Carus' treatise, this chapter establishes renewed relevance for his theory today, and explores the proposal that my paintings might be thought of as contemporary earth-life paintings.

Chapter 5: Painting Land through Ecological Grief In chapter five we reflect on the wider implications of the Anthropocene, namely through an exploration of what can be termed ecological grief. Previous chapters have provided the context for the emotional aspect of this research, and in this interlude the discussion focuses on the emotional

consequences of climate change, and specifically how this is part of my experience of the site. The emotional charge of the discourse surrounding climate change is increasingly present through the media as well as literature and the arts and it is important to contextualise how my paintings contribute to the ways in which this collective grief is manifesting; ways in which the residues of emotional grief might be present in the paintings, and the significance of this, are explored. This chapter also turns attention to the viewer, in considering how the emotional dimension of the paintings might be apprehended and in what ways this could produce a productive encounter which might bear the capacity to influence change.

Chapter 6: Changing Landscapes Chapter six addresses the relationship to the concept of 'landscape' which this research holds. Here the complexities of the term and how contemporary understandings have changed since this term first appeared in Europe in the sixteenth century are addressed. The discussion illuminates how my work adds to the contemporary understandings of the term and illuminates how this understanding of the term affects the ways in which the site is aestheticized as land rather than scenery in the paintings. This chapter explores the genre of landscape painting, and how this too encompasses many approaches and understandings. The discussion establishes my own relationship to both the term and the genre of landscape painting, in order to distinguish the ways in which this research engages with landscape in an immersive (as opposed to distanced) manner, and furthermore, how these relationships have shaped unique contributions to the genre of landscape painting.

Chapter 7: Contemporary Practice In chapter seven the originality of this practice research is established through a discussion which

contextualises this work within the field of contemporary painting. A section of this chapter is dedicated specifically to the ways in which the canals of Britain have previously featured in paintings. These paintings are selected for the ways in which various practitioners have responded to different apprehensions of the canal. In discussing the story of canals through paintings, the unique contribution my paintings make to this story is revealed. The latter half of this chapter analyses a range of contemporary practice which engages with the themes that this research examines. The Romantic sensibility is considered via the Neo-Romantic artists of the twentieth century. Ways in which this research engages with a Romantic sensibility, and more generally why artists might lean into this sensibility during times of global crisis, are made clear through this discussion.

Chapter 8: Conclusion In the concluding chapter, summatory points from each of the previous chapters are revisited in order to draw together the significant contributions to the field of painting, art historical discourse and the philosophy of New Materialism which this research has produced. The impact this research may have on peers and the wider public is attended to through an argument for the importance of exhibiting the work publicly, and an outline of plans for how this body of work can be exhibited. Equally, this discussion considers how this research is applicable and transferable to other studies and experiences of vulnerable landscape sites. The paintings are analysed in relation to the research questions to establish the ways in which they exhibit new understandings of the site. The implications of these new understandings are discussed in order to provide a coherent account of the ways in which this research contributes original knowledge to the contemporary field of painting.

Summary

It is important to bear in mind that the paintings which form this body of work are not a response to a singular meeting or material analysis but are built from the slow accumulation of lived encounters at the site, which distil in subtle ways into the work. This is not a chance visitation, nor is it static or isolated; it is extended looking, an entanglement with the site, it is a lived experience. The perspective is not linear, nor is it solely mine. It shifts, morphs and grows into a dialogue with the land, the material, and the atmosphere of the site conjured by an accumulation of encounters. This is one of the key ways in which this research shapes a unique approach which adds to the genre of landscape painting in the contemporary moment. The paintings are not representations of the site, nor are they scenic renditions of the canal. They are paintings which perform qualities of the experience of the atmosphere or feeling conjured by the site, where the locus for this is the very substance of the canal; the material and matter which make up the strata of the surface and the ground which shifts, cracks, and erodes where it meets water (fig. 14; 15).

These encounters with matter are "unspectacular but not insignificant events" as Sachs points out; they are "events that are characterised by an intensity of slowness that commonly escapes representation" (2018, p. 179). Yet what is important when it comes to thinking about what it is like to "be in the world and in a particular condition", as Neve reminds us, are "not the large events, or the plot that develops, but the day to day" (2020, p. 10). By treating materials as collaborators (see chapter 2), and transfiguring, or 're-presenting' (Casey, 2002) place through painting, rather than practicing in a

representational manner, the relationship between the two becomes generative. The paintings can nurture new understandings of the site in the context of the Anthropocene. The paintings expand upon the experience of the site in that they are able to show us what is *unseen* in the earthly encounter. The paintings can reveal the ‘slow violence’ (Nixon, 2011) that the site demonstrates. Painting, in this research, has become a way of encapsulating the site as a place in flux; a place which is haunted by its past; a place which contains the material entanglement of the conditions of the Anthropocene. The paintings provide “a different kind of witnessing: of sights unseen” (Nixon, 2011, p. 15). Their material forms are relatable in scale to the human body and they can make tangible the threats the Anthropocene poses. This is where the paintings become suggestions of what aesthetic form slow violence might take; and in doing so, they offer new possibilities for painting.

Visual Interlude A



Figure 2. The author's narrowboat, Cheshunt, 2022.



Figure 3. The author at Cheshunt lakes, 2022.



Figure 4.

Lee Navigation, Walthamstow marshes. From the boat looking out at the land. 2022.



Figure 5. Studio, various works in progress. 2022.



Figure 6. Lee Navigation, Enfield. Industrial material left on the towpath. 2020.



Figure 7. Lee Navigation, Hertford. The northernmost point of the site, and the end of the navigation. 2022.



Figure 8. Lee Navigation, the Limehouse cut. The southern most point of the site.

The water surface at this time was completely coated in duckweed, 2020.



Figure 9.

Regent's canal, Hackney. Items which have been collected from the canal and placed on the towpath. 2021.

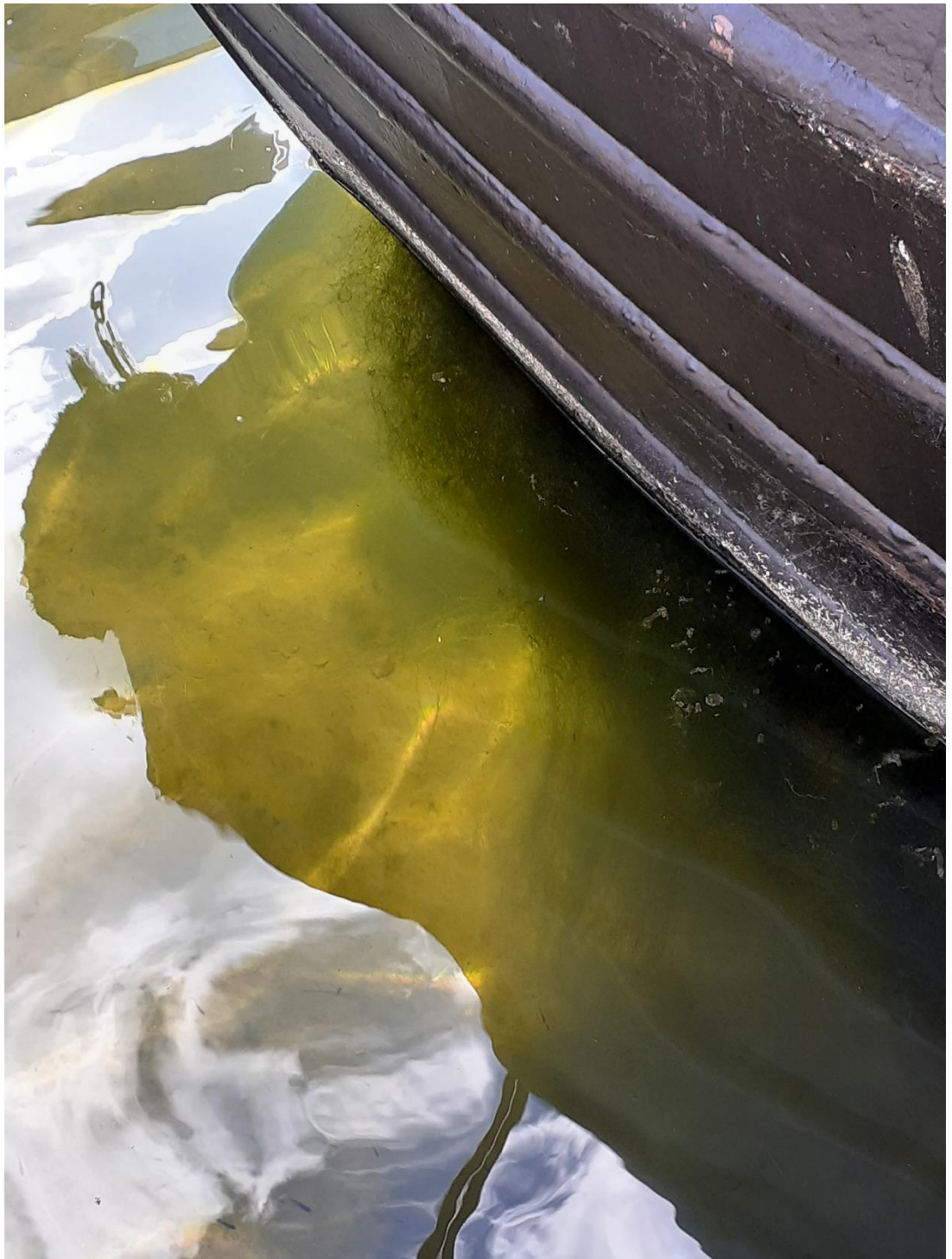


Figure 10. Regent's canal, Mile End. Narrowboat reflection in the canal water, 2020.



Figure 11.

Regent's canal, Mile End. Experimental installation of my artwork 'Glass Blanket'

(2021) around the towpath architecture. 2021.



Figure 12.

Lee Navigation, Bow. Rusty objects which have been fished out of the canal and placed along the wall. 2020.



Figure 13.

Lee Navigation, Hackney marshes.

Aquatic plants seen under the water surface. 2021.



Figure 14.

Lee Navigation, Hackney Wick.

Graffiti on surrounding buildings is reflected in the canal water amidst patches of algae. 2022.



Figure 15.

Lee Navigation, Tottenham.

Stonebridge lock, interior of lock chamber wall as the lock is emptied, 2022.



Figure 16. Marielle Hehir

'The Reeds Have Been Cut'

Pigment, binder, oil pigment stick on cotton.

H 40 x W 40 cm.

2022.



Figure 17. Lee Navigation, Rye House. Cut reeds in the canal water. 2022.



Figure 18. Lee navigation, Tottenham. Aquatic plant life sticks to the interior of a lock chamber wall as the lock is emptied and the water drops. 2022.



Figure 19. Lee Navigation, Ware. Towpath with leaves. 2022.



Figure 20. Lee Navigation, Hackney marshes. A typical array of wildflowers which line the towpath in spring. 2023.



Figure 21. Marielle Hehir

'The Deeps'

Pigment, rice paper, cheesecloth, natural dye,
photograph printed on synthetic fabric, steel wire, wood.

H 29.5 x W 19.5 cm

2021.



Figure 22. Lee Navigation, Walthamstow marshes. From the water looking at land, 2021.

Chapter 2: Methods and Methodologies – Painting, Immersion and Distance

“It is not just about making meaning with what we have at hand,
but of making new ways of making meaning through practical
invention”

(Barrett, 2010a, p. 191).

This chapter details the various methods and methodologies which are employed within this practice-led research. The following discussion enlightens the reader as to how the methods and methodologies are suited to the research questions detailed in chapter 1. At the same time, the discussion makes a case for the productive relationship this research holds with what Lury and Wakefield have termed “inventive methods” (2012, p. 1), and the pertinence of such an approach within the context of artistic practice-led research. The chapter also makes clear the relationship between the various stages of research which occur at the site of the canal (fieldwork) and inside the studio (painting research) respectively. Importantly, the fieldwork sees a gathering of multifaceted, aesthetic perspectives of the site, which translate into the studio practice through multi-directional approaches to making. In addition to this, the practices of reading and writing support a continuous pattern of critical reflection as the research develops. Furthermore, an attentive relationship with the work of other practitioners helps to map out dialogues between this research and the work of others, whilst also distinguishing the unique

contribution my paintings make to the field (see chapter 7). The chapter concludes with a close reading of one of my paintings which considers how the methods and methodologies function together, as well as an overview of the overarching themes of slowness and hope which have revealed themselves as such throughout the course of this research.

Bricolage

“Bricoleurs move beyond the blinders of particular disciplines and peer through a conceptual window to a new world of research and knowledge production”
(Kincheloe et al., 2011, p. 168).

Prior to giving individual analyses of the methods employed, it is necessary to introduce the term ‘bricolage’. As well as being a methodology in itself, it becomes an umbrella term under which all the methods and methodologies employed in this research fall. Explored at length by Claude Lévi-Strauss in 1962, the term describes an impulsive approach, which combines devious means; a making-do with whatever is at hand (1966, p. 17). Specifically for the arts, bricolage has come to be understood as a descriptive term for the process of construction or creation which benefits from a diverse range of materials or sources (Johnson, 2012, p. 356). As chapter 3 *Account of Practice* demonstrates further, my paintings are formed through this approach; methods are used collaboratively – never in isolation – in

constructing the paintings. In this section the usefulness of a bricolage approach in relation to the research questions is established.

Bearing in mind that the research questions are set in the context of the Anthropocene, (see RQ 1, 2 and 4), and the research develops through this lens, bricolage carries even greater significance. Resonating with Haraway's climate-crisis-orientated thesis of "staying with the trouble" (2016), the bricoleur finds ways to adapt and work with what is available. In the contemporary, Robyn Stewart highlights the pertinence of the bricolage approach for research when she points out the conditions of this rapidly changing, multicultural, post-colonial contemporary world, and the consequential notions of hybridity which increasingly inform our praxis (2010, p. 125). I would suggest that this is brought into sharper focus through the lens of the Anthropocene. During this time, as Colebrook speculates, "Certain types of humans (capitalist, imperialist, hyper-consuming, enslaving) have altered the planet as a living system to the point that one can no longer imagine a procession of 'endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful'" (2019, p. 264). In other words, the aesthetics of the planet are changing rapidly whilst humanity processes the realisation that the world's resources are far from infinite – parts of the Western world responding to this at a frustratingly slow rate compared to other parts of the world (Danowski and Viveiros de Castro, 2017; Rowlett, 2022). In this age which is over-shadowed by the continuing loss of what some have termed the sixth mass extinction event (Barnosky et al., 2011; van Doreen, 2014; Kolbert, 2014; Colebrook, 2019), a bricolage methodology becomes even more appropriate, vital even, because the bricolage approach allows the bricoleur to work with unusual materials in the face of potential scarcity – fragments and leftovers can be re-deployed in new combinations (Johnson, 2012, p. 355). The

bricoleur pools resources, recycles and repurposes. In this sense, this methodology marries well with environmentally friendly ‘green’ philosophies, and sustainable ways of making, which are increasingly relevant to practitioners working within the context of climate crisis.

Like the site of the research itself, this bricolage of methods and methodologies is amorphous – both open and knotted in some ways and not others (Haraway, 2016, p. 31). Methods are continuously changing, adapting, extending and weaving through other methods according to what is at hand as well as what is needed, and tools and materials can be used in numerous ways (Jacob, 1977, p. 1164). This is necessarily the case in a materials-driven research inquiry such as this one, in which, as Ingold puts it, “the conduct of thought goes along with, and continually answers to, the fluxes and flows of the materials with which we work” (2013, p. 6). Within this practice-led research, materials and methods already established and well known to the discipline of painting are present – these are “not innocent, they are encoded with historical knowledge and conventions and are therefore inextricably bound to conceptual and theoretical frameworks” (Barrett, 2010a, p. 191). These are employed in conjunction with other materials and strategies which at first might seem unlikely contributors towards painting research. For example, the regular, lived, sensory experience of walking slowly along the canal towpath at twilight, smelling the wood burning stoves from the moored narrowboats, hearing the soft mulch and crackle of the gritted towpath underfoot, and seeing the dimming light shine as it passes across the water’s surface, is a crucial method for this research, and is equally as important as applying pigment to canvas (Marland and Stenning, 2019; Tucker, 2019) (fig. 13; 19). These methods constitute very different experiences yet are entangled in one another; bricolage

enables us to collage experience (Stewart, 2010, p. 128). For creative arts research, such as this project, often the contribution to knowledge comes through the discovery of new methodologies and interpretive frameworks (Barrett, 2010a, p. 193). For this research, which heralds collaboration and notions of the speculative act of working-with and “staying-with” (Haraway, 2016, p. 133), seemingly disparate disciplines, time periods, and philosophies are brought together. This is an intentional, inquisitive approach, an essential aspect of this enquiry. In the context of the Anthropocene, a time which exemplifies human disconnect from the natural world more than ever, there is an urgent need to “make kin in lines of inventive connection” (Haraway, 2016, p. 1), which bricolage nurtures. “It is the frustrated desire of connection” as Paul Carter points out, “that inspires the recreative act” (2010, p. 21). It is through the fusion and collaboration between methods – which all have histories of their own – that frameworks shift, and the paintings can rouse new knowledge; new understandings of the site. These understandings are unique to the contemporary moment, and reveal new knowledge and meaning pertaining to the unique ecology existing here. Specifically, the paintings demonstrate the tensions which arise when synthetic and organic matter is forced to co-exist in an intimate entanglement. Rather than understanding the canal as an ‘edgeland’ (Farley & Symmons Roberts, 2012) – which is likely to be associated with the term wasteland – perhaps the paintings might cultivate awareness of the fragility of the matter, living and inert, which exists there, and is vulnerable to change under the Anthropocene.

Furthermore, as chapter 5 elaborates on, the paintings bear the capacity to stimulate emotional resonance in a viewer. My paintings are developed through lived experience and the embracing of the

personal; this is examined in the section below. Crucially for this research, Lévi-Strauss acknowledged that the 'bricoleur' always put something of their self into their work: by speaking through the medium of things and in doing so, giving some account of their personality and life by the choices made (1966, p. 21). The convergence of fieldwork garnered through the lived experience, within a bricolage methodology, is how the paintings become unique contributions to knowledge.

The Lived Experience: Autoethnography

The canals of the Greater London and Hertfordshire areas are both the stimulus of this research and the site where fieldwork research is carried out. Living here, my daily experience became embedded within this site. From the boat, I perceive the canals from the inside as well as the outside; the canal becomes a specific location that is known and familiar, entwined with personal experiences and known or unknown histories (Lippard, 1997, p. 7) (fig. 4; 22). Autoethnography, as a method for doing research, uses personal experience combined with the aims and practices of ethnography (Adams and Jones, 2019, p. 142). Highly personal everyday involvement with the site entwines with fieldwork, meaning that the fieldwork is incidental and based in everyday experience. The canal network is a constantly evolving site, open to factors which influence engagement. For example, due to the pattern of movement with which licensed live-aboard boaters must comply, (Canal and River Trust, 2022a), any portion of the site may be experienced under different seasonal conditions. Mooring at Bromley-by-Bow, London, in spring for instance, cultivates an intimate knowledge of the history, biodiversity and material structure of this

portion of the canal network; seasonal changes are revealed following a return to the same spot later in the year. As relationships between humankind and the landscape are emphasised during the Anthropocene, the lived experience of the canal network provides specific knowledge of the present and changing or changed conditions of the site.

This model for fieldwork, as a continuous act rather than designated, timed expeditions, has meant that the fieldwork has benefitted through chance encounters. The lived experience *as* fieldwork, vastly increases the diversity of what can be garnered from spending time at the canal. Without the time pressure that research fieldwork visits in other contexts can bring, slowness and close looking can thrive, and these have come to be core approaches within this research. A close look at the unique ecology of this site has led to the revelation of the aesthetic and material qualities that constitute the canal network as emblematic of the Anthropocene (see RQ 2). Yet to live on the canal in the contemporary, is to constantly be in the presence of the past. This way of life is an old one. The presence of what Haraway terms the ‘naturalcultural’ (2003, p. 3) is revealed through material relationships at the site: chopping wood with an axe to make a fire on the stove inside the boat or tracing my fingers over an iron plaque on a lock gate, the insignia relief revealing the dates of manufacture. In a twentieth-century chapter of the canal's history, writer and joint founder of the Inland Waterways Association L. T. C. Rolt similarly identified these material traces as significant in recapturing a sense of place, or *genius loci* (1948, p. 195) embodied by the canal. Co-existing with these material traces of the past is the materiality of the present. Crisp packets, plastic shopping bags, sequins and spent glo-sticks scattered on the ground are the material examples of what

makes the canal emblematic of the Anthropocene (fig. 9). Linking the present with the past, Claire Petitmengin points to the contemporary context of “extreme tension and urgency” that the Anthropocene brings and calls for an ‘anchoring in lived experience’ in order to create other ways of relating to the world (2021a, p. 172). For this research painting is the way of dealing with these arising tensions while relating to and forming new understandings of the site. Moments of encounter with plants, animals, built elements and polluting materials, are interpreted within the paintings as aesthetic and/or material summaries of the concerns within the research questions. Furthermore, the tensions are aestheticized in the paintings through materiality and surface integrity. This point is revisited in the conclusion for this chapter, where we take a detailed look at my painting ‘The Reeds Have Been Cut’ (2022) (fig. 16).

Significance of Canals

“A painter must be part of his landscape to find the best in it”

(Graham Sutherland, cited in BBC, 1941, p. 658).

In addition to what this discussion has addressed thus far, there are further ways in which the site of the canal relates to the themes of this investigation. One aspect of this research enquires how the canal system in Britain might be thought of as emblematic of the Anthropocene (RQ 2). Often built alongside the trajectory of natural waterways, this feat of eighteenth-century engineering intervenes structurally with the land, and once facilitated the movement of material, extracted from the land, around the country. Post-industry

and usurped by rail and road as the main carriageway for the transport of goods, the canal network has become an ‘edgeland’; defined by writers Farley & Symmons Roberts as “where urban and rural negotiate and renegotiate their borders” (2012, p. 5). Such places can inspire the artistic sensibility, and through careful study and inquisitive exploration can help with the meaningful development of an informed aesthetic in the artworks. Cultural geographer Harriet Hawkins argues that a nuanced appreciation of changing artistic orientations toward site is needed (2013, p. 57); validating this, the canal network is a constantly evolving site, open to factors which influence engagement. This research is a site responsive practice where the post-industrial landscape is of great significance regarding the Anthropocene. The site encapsulates previous actions which have shaped this landscape, in a material collision of the past and present. For this materials-driven research practice, the canal is a place which presents an abundance of materials; synthetic and organic, placed intentionally, or deposited by chance or accident – the exploration of this is discussed in the section on *Fieldwork* which follows.

Furthermore, the canal provides a very tangible link between this research and the Romantic era (1770 – 1850), which is significant to this research in many ways as chapter 1 articulated. Johnathan Sachs has described the “entangled senses of acceleration and slowness” that were fully felt and indeed a defining feature of the Romantic period (later eighteenth century), and how this can be felt again now, as we “grapple with our own current temporal confusions” (2018, p. 165). Sachs points to the “disturbance or unease” brought about by the “particular type of tension” which this sense of time provokes (2018, p. 164). The canal network was built slowly, over half a century. Transporting material according to need, the canals gradually

sprawled from a local to a national network (Wrigley, 2010, p. 104). Ironically, though it experienced its heyday during the rapid advances of the Industrial Revolution (1760 – 1840), there was still an inherent slowness to the canal, taking as it did weeks to transport goods around the country. The canal today is a changed place, but one where an atmosphere of slowness endures. Pedestrians take leisurely strolls along the towpaths, often moving at a pace which leaves the boats in the water behind – travelling at the speed limit of a mere four miles per hour (Canal and River Trust, 2022b). Away from the density of city architecture, roads and traffic, and the urgency that the urban environment fosters, stepping onto a towpath marks a distinct change in sensory atmosphere. The lived experience of the canal, then, becomes one which embodies slowness, in every moment.

Fieldwork

This section delves into greater detail on the component parts of fieldwork, and how each of the following methods are integral to the research. The fieldwork takes place at the site, the outer limits of which are demarcated by the pattern of navigation I adhere to, stopping for periods at various points and moving the boat to a different section of the canal every fourteen days. Frequently, as mentioned, this means points of the route are revisited several times in a year, whilst travelling north or south. The fieldwork, executed throughout a lived experience, is made up of various processes of engagement (Daniels et al., 2010) with the site. Navigation along the canals on a narrowboat, walking and cycling along the towpaths, close looking, photographing and collecting materials are the core methods,

which, supported by the bricolage methodology, work together and contribute to the research.

When walking, and sometimes cycling, along the precariously slim towpaths along the water's edge, one becomes hyper-aware of what is underfoot. As Ingold puts it, “locomotion, not cognition, must be the starting point for the study of perceptual activity” (2004, p. 331). The pace of walking (and cycling) is intentionally slowed down as I travel along routes of the canal. Moving through the canal network in this way plays a big part in the apprehension of the experience of the site. Through this slow pace, close looking is enabled, and it too becomes a collaborative method. Furthermore, familiarity with areas of the site, habitual gestures and movements (Edensor, 2005a, p. 80) in the way I move around it, and any habits that may develop, are constantly re-set as the boat arrives at different locales. Moving through the canal network on the boat offers a further, different perspective – looking towards the land from the water. The interior walls of the canal can be seen, and traces of how the water levels rise and fall against the verticality of the wall (fig. 18). The body of water the boat travels through is always in my peripheral vision; its slippery amorphous presence is felt at my side (fig. 10). On canalised rivers such as the river Lea, the ‘inside’, or towpath side of the canal appears as a solid line and is reinforced to a limited extent by dry bonded masonry, whereas the outside bank is seldom protected in any way (Rolt, 1979, p. 119). This juxtaposition of edges which are solid and edges which are ambiguous seems to highlight the canal’s position as in between the urban and the rural. Remembering that this is creative research, my orientation toward the site is an artistic one (Hawkins, 2013, p.57), nurtured by an immersion in the canal network. This immersive orientation of the land is counter to common understandings of how

we might navigate landscape – a point which is explored in chapter 6. A further method which operates alongside these modes of movement, is the method of sampling the canal, through collecting. The collection which has grown through fieldwork is made up of photographs, and physical objects. Exactly what is sampled is chosen through a particular process of framing, which, as is discussed in greater length in chapter 3, may mean the ensuing paintings resist becoming representational.

Photography is employed in ways that frame the vital characteristics of the moment of encounter and omits any sense of scale, orientation and perspective (Wells, 2011; Alinder, 2015; Heeney, 2017; Kolenda, 2019). A lot of vital visual information can be contained in a photograph; a large sweep of land held in a print the size of a piece of printer paper (Hildyard, 2021, p. 30). Aesthetically the photographs act as reminders of the sensory nature of the encounters with matter experienced at the site. The distorted sense of scale and perspective in the photographs marries with the anti-scenic approach to painting (see chapter 3) and engenders a sense of groundlessness in a viewer. According to contemporary thinkers such as Hito Steyerl and Claire Colebrook this groundlessness characterizes the Anthropocene as we lack any ‘ground’ on which to found a meaningful relationship to the environment (Emmelheinz, 2015, p. 137). It is important to note that the photographs are not used directly to compose images, as some painters do. Rather, the photos – printed onto paper or fabric and stored in the studio – become another material which has been abstracted from the canal. Throughout fieldwork, other unusual materials are selected and brought into the studio for their intrinsic vitality (Bennett, 2010, p. 3) and/or site specificity. Some examples have been shatter-glass, duckweed, and rusty objects fished out of

the canal water (fig. 12). When incorporated into the paintings the photographs lose their identity as photographs to an extent, as they become enmeshed with other materials.

Painting as Research in the Studio

The capacity for creating meaning, for revealing or producing new knowledge not anticipated by the curriculum (Barrett, 2010b, p. 5), already inherent in painting, is enhanced by an approach to methodology which reaches far and wide – what Donna Haraway terms tentacular thinking (2016, p. 30). Haraway reminds us that ‘tentacle’ comes from the Latin *tentaculum*, meaning “feeler,” and *tentare*, meaning “to feel” and “to try” (2016, p. 31). The studio plays a crucial role in this practice-led research. It is the laboratory where various methods come together and through making, I am reaching, feeling, making connections, weaving paths and consequences but not determinisms (Haraway, 2016, p 31). In accordance with the research questions, ways in which specific materials and processes can offer new *possibilities* for painting are explored (RQ 4 and 5). It is critical that the painting research (Sullivan, 2007; Fish, 2019) takes place in this controlled environment, free from influence or interference. Ironically, it is this controlled setting that is needed in order to relinquish personal control and bring to the fore the ‘agency’ of the materials themselves (Bennett, 2010; Coole and Frost, 2010; Barrett and Bolt, 2013). Additionally, it is necessary to be distanced from the canal site. The studio provides the separation needed to nurture a personal understanding of my experiences. This space, separated from the site, allows the paintings to reveal themselves through making in an altogether non-representational practice (Bolt, 2004) (this term is explored in depth in chapter 3). The practical research is,

however, interlinked with the component symbiotic strands of fieldwork: observation, photography, critical reflection, reading and writing. All these methods remain active in some form throughout the processes of making. Multi-directional approaches to making in the studio are informed by the dynamic engagement with the canal network, as described above. Pouring paint and plaster from above, laying fabric out flat and horizontal on the floor, facing the painting head on and vertical, are ways in which the immersive experience of the site is evoked or performed through making. Dislocated from the site the paintings evolve in unpredictable ways, provoking continuous reassessment of the work, and generating new possibilities for painting.

Much of what is fashioned in the process of making is contingent on factors that cannot always be foreseen (Roberts, 2018, no pagination). The studio nurtures this element of unpredictability and becomes a hub for risk-taking; a space which is curated to actively encourage chance and/or accident in the making process. In contrast with the site, it is still and quiet, a vessel to be filled. Whilst closeness to the point of immersion is essential for the fieldwork of this research, distance from the site is where the research becomes generative in the studio. This environment is crucial for this research. Just as the Anthropocene poses a speculative dimension where we cannot know precisely how the anthropogenic stratifications will develop (Davis & Turpin, 2015, p. 4), the studio provides a space where the research can develop in directions which cannot be wholly predicted or controlled. In this self-contained space, the research can grow; each painting manifests as an exploration of the research questions. The studio facilitates immediate access to a collection of unusual materials and tools – some collected from the canals, and some more typical for

a painting practice. Additionally, photographs from fieldwork may be displayed in the studio, prompting memories of colour, form and material relationships, and in turn provoking aesthetic, conceptual, material and processual decisions throughout making. Immersed in the studio, with all this so close to hand, the research can develop with an element of spontaneity. For example, the painting 'The Deeps' (2021) (fig. 21) was assembled from a collection of materials, some of which were left over from other painting experiments, and others were made exclusively for this painting.

The material choices made throughout the process of making are a way of gathering the past and the present and harbouring the tensions which are created through doing so. Ancient materials – oil paint, plant dyes, clay; contemporary materials – polypropylene, digitally printed photographs; and materials which are from outside of the painting discipline – concrete, shatter-glass, are all utilised collectively. By bringing the historical together with the contemporary, the research reconsiders a hierarchy of materiality within the painting discipline. This approach, as Herbert articulates, is a way of “reconnecting with something painting did for centuries prior: build thoughtfully on the achievements of predecessors to wrangle ways of expressing what it means to be human, now” (2019, p. 9). To be human now, as eco-critical writers such as Heather I. Sullivan contend, is to recognise “the reciprocity of our bodily materiality with energy forms, discursive information, and the other-than-human materiality of many species (2014, p. 80). Timothy Morton employs the word 'mesh' to describe this network of exchange (2011, p, 169). For this practice-research, the mesh includes “a collection of oddments left over from human endeavours” (Lévi-Strauss, 1966, p. 19), which a bricolage methodology embraces.

Shatter-glass, steel mesh, discarded plastic sacking are all found at the canal for example. By employing such materials in the paintings, the research might offer new visual understandings of the site.

By thinking-with materials as “sympoietic collaborators” (Haraway, 2016, p. 102) there is both a relinquishing of control at the same time as a pushing or even crossing of discipline norms, and with this comes an element of risk. The environment that a bricolage methodology creates is where this research becomes generative and enables the paintings to reveal themselves as material objects which are also objects of knowledge (Lévi-Strauss, 1966, p. 22). The wide-ranging methods and methodologies employed in this research embraces the risk described and cultivates a theme of hope, which is explored towards the end of this chapter. Some of the paintings may be deemed as ‘failures’ – in terms of surface integrity for example – but with each experiment, the pitfalls are balanced against the benefits that will potentially be prised from the experience (Roberts, 2018, no pagination). The unpredictability and potential for failure which a bricolage methodology rouses are central to this research, as this leads to a space for reflection and contemplation (Stewart, 2010, p. 128). In this space, the evaluation of the outcomes of the practice research not as ‘failures’, but rather as new possibilities for painting takes place. For instance: might a painting engage with the illusion of pictorial space at the same time as three-dimensional real space; might it employ more than one type of imagery; and might a painting incorporate materials which are also found at the site, but are employed to disrupt or slow down the reading of the work? These are examples of the propositional queries which are applied to my practice research, such as the painting ‘The Deeps’ (2021) (fig. 21).

Literature Review

In this section the methods of reading and writing are attended to, in order to establish how this research incorporates disparate areas of thought which are specific to the research questions. This incorporation forms a unique correspondence which has become fundamental for this project. A significant amount of reading regarding practice-led research methodologies helped to locate the theoretical approach in bricolage methodology, which in turn has harboured the incorporation of insights from many tributary disciplines, as well as painting. Key texts are highlighted here. It is to be understood that while they are singled out for their importance, they have been accompanied by further reading. Whilst some of the literature sources cited might seem unorthodox for research which is centred around painting, the bricolage methodology and the 'inventive methods' (Lury and Wakeford, 2012) employed account for the wide range of literature that has been addressed. The research has benefitted from the rich array of sources, and bringing together a new constellation of materials together in this way has helped the research to develop in original ways within a meaningful context.

Equally, it is important to point out that certain themes and subjects that might be on the periphery of this research have not been studied in great depth as they are not deemed crucial to the enquiry. For example, the theme of memory has been considered throughout the research period, and a selection of texts consulted (Schama, 2006; Farr, 2012; Heholt and Downing, 2016). However, it was decided that this research does not contribute to the field of memory studies, thus the selection of literature in this field was economical. Similarly, whilst the research does engage with the photographic image, it does

not seek to contribute to the field of photography. A selection of literature has been consulted to contextualise the place of photography within this enquiry (Wells, 2011; Alinder, 2015; Heeney; 2017; Kolenda, 2019). Reading in this area aided the understanding of how imagery is framed in the fieldwork photography, and how this approach to framing was significant for the aesthetic of the paintings. For example, photography allows for selection and cropping of visual information at the site, and this technique continued within the aesthetic of the paintings. In this sense, photographs acted as a 'go-between', which connected the experience of the site to the experience of the paintings.

Now that these areas have been accounted for, the focus of this discussion can turn to the key theorists whose ideas this research contributes to, and the areas which this research is both contextualised within and contributes to. As Barrett has pointed out, no practice occurs in a vacuum (2010a, p. 193). The areas which this research brings together are as follows. Painting is the core of this enquiry and contemporary discourse from both historical and theoretical perspectives around the discipline have been studied. In particular the reading has focused on the genre of landscape painting and 'painting in the expanded field': (Andrews, 1999; Graw, 2012; Crowley, 2019; Schwabsky, 2019; Herbert, 2019).

The approach to materials – both the experience of the materiality of the site and the employment of materials in the paintings – is contextualised within the theories of New Materialism. Texts by Jane Bennett (2010) and Barbara Bolt (2004) have been pivotal in establishing how this research relates to the notion of the 'agency' of materials. This research builds on ideas articulated in these texts by

applying them to the particular materiality of the canal site, during the time of the Anthropocene, and from a painter's perspective. Furthermore, New Materialist theory has been positioned in alignment with Romantic, or Neo-Romantic literature, in a novel collaboration which is a point of originality within this research: (Bate, 2000a; Carus, 2002; Soper, 2011; Sachs, 2018). This marriage of Romanticism and New Materialism contextualises the 'sense of wonder' – or phenomenological aspect of perception – which is present in the engagement with the site, and with the material experiments in the studio. Light-touch readings of phenomenological theory accompanied the above areas as an extension to the understanding of the perception described; (Merleau-Ponty, 2014; Petitmengin, 2021a). The phenomenologist Edward Casey brings forth the argument for the concept of 're-presentational' (rather than representational) which this practice-research adopts (2002). Importantly, the research expands on Casey's argument – which deals with landscape painting – by also considering ways in which a materials-led, expanded approach to painting might also create works which are evocative of the site. In continuum with this approach, critical explorations of waste have been conducive to developing an understanding of the ways in which the paintings employ a Romantic approach to the decay and pollution of the Anthropocene: (Douglas, 1966; Sullivan, 2017; Di Palma, 2014; Morrison, 2015).

Read concurrently, ecocriticism unpacks the existing and potential consequences brought by the concept of a new geological epoch, and urges a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of this time (Biermann et al., 2016, p. 342). The ecological thinking of Timothy Morton (2009, 2010) and the 'natural-cultural', 'symptiotic' theories of Donna Haraway (2003, 2016) have been influential in this regard;

they have also informed the approach to making with matter and materials. The emotional consequences and implications of the Anthropocene are present within this research, and texts by Lesley Head (2016) amongst others (Cunsolo Willox, 2012; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017) have been particularly important in contextualising a Romantic sensibility, as being vital for the development of paintings which create knowledge and meaning. Furthermore, this area of study has helped to establish how Romantic thought is relevant today, in terms of a contemporary 'green' politics, which prioritises care for the Earth and nurtures sustainable ways of being amongst living and non-living matter: (Coupe, 2000; Marland and Parham, 2014). Finally, Nixon's concept of 'slow violence' (2011) has become integral to the research, and indeed its themes connect in many ways to all aspects of this project. Moreover, in attending to the research questions, the practice research explores and creates unique propositions for the aesthetic predicaments Nixon lays out in his text.

In addition, texts from scientific inquiry, geography and geology have been key in comprehending the implications of climate change for landscape as well as maintaining an up-to-the-minute understanding of the current debate around the Anthropocene: (Crutzen, 2000; Zalasiewicz et al., 2011, 2017; Edgeworth, 2011; Ragusa et al., 2021). As this is a materials-led enquiry, scientific literature has also been crucial in developing understandings of the behaviours of certain materials – from pigments to geosynthetics – which have been incorporated into the practice research in various ways: (Chaplin et al., 2008; Shukla, 2002).

To summarise, texts are selected carefully but inquisitively for ways in which they may inform approaches applied in this research project.

This expansive pool of critical or creative thinking and scientific facts contributes to the research in varied ways. Scientific debate for example, can tell us a lot about how scientists understand the human relations to the more-than-human world (Head, 2016, p. 4). The ways in which the aforementioned theorists and areas of study are of significance to the research is attended to in greater depth in the chapters which follow. Graeme Sullivan states, at its core, the artefacts created in practice-led research are located in critical and creative contexts that are deconstructed, braided, and repositioned around other informing contexts (2010, p. 102). This practice research contributes to the field of painting, in particular the area of 'painting in the expanded field', and additionally, as chapter 4 elaborates on, through critical analysis they add to the realm of New Materialist theory. Through the regular engagement with literature which is imbricated within the practice research, comes the process of critical reflection; essential in enabling the research to evolve in meaningful, enlightened ways. A research blog has proved an indispensable repository for recording notes on key texts and exhibitions as well as notes on significant encounters at the canal and developments in the studio, helping to contextualize the growing body of work. Additionally, the blog has been a useful container for archiving the research; photographs are stored here as records of the research in its earliest manifestations. Critical reflection is engendered by the study of these photographs, and this directs the research to move forward in an attritional, exploratory manner. Additionally, some of the notes and in-depth, critical reflection recorded in the blog has been integrated into chapters of the thesis, this is a way in which the thesis text demonstrates first-hand experience or observation.

The nature of the bricolage methodology employed in the investigation is unpredictable and vast in potentiality. The blog has therefore supported the use of this methodology, in that I have tracked the journey of the research in the blog entries, and am able to return to these critical points at will, when needed. Re-visiting earlier stages of the research has been a valuable process which has refined both the practice research and the thesis. Furthermore, the blog records technical information regarding materials, techniques and processes that are the result of research in the studio. Keeping records of the practice research in this way, meant that I could adapt my approach in experimental ways, which were also guaranteed to be productive, and generative of new findings.

<https://onshakygroundresearchblog.wordpress.com/>

Methodology: An Example

To demonstrate the methods and methodologies discussed, their functionality and entwinement within the research process, and what the results may be, this section considers my painting ‘The Reeds Have Been Cut’ (2022) (fig. 16). It certainly meets the criteria of Martin Herbert’s description of much contemporary painting, which for him is “complexly layered and repays extended eyeing” (2019, p. 7). The painting is not easily apprehended through a cursory glance, nor are any of the paintings in this body of work. It is made bearing in mind the challenge of finding an aesthetic for the “slow violence” (Nixon, 2011) of change which the Anthropocene acts out – this concept is explored fully in chapter 3. The viewer who remains with ‘The Reeds Have Been Cut’ may come to appreciate the diaphanous

surface, layers of transparency which reveal underpaintings – traces of past marks and residues of pigments now ghostly in their appearance. The surface of this painting, and many of the paintings in this body of work “paradoxically possess both a heaviness of material and ethereality of atmosphere, as they reveal and obscure identifiable elements of their earlier incarnations” – to adopt Singer’s words (2015, p. 7). Through doing so, the painting embodies and projects a tactile sense of time (Singer, 2015, p. 7). The intermittent stages of action and pause which compose the work can be read in the painted layers, indexically connecting a viewer to the artist (Graw, 2012, p. 46). The act of layering paint is of course a formal methodology in itself, which in this case might also be suggestive of the sense of time conjured by the multifarious historical and material layers at the canal (Herbert, 2019, p. 10). Whilst the other materials employed reference the canal also – often they are literally collected from the canal or are materials which could be found at the canal. In the case of this painting, the “slowness” of oil painting (Westfall, 2018) becomes concretized evidence of fluid events (Tucker, 2007, p. 2) – the act of painting crystallises the perception of the phenomena of matter experienced at the site. The oil paint and the wooden frame signal established principles of painting practice (Bolt, 2004, p. 1) and in this way the painting engages with the Western tradition of oil painting on canvas. However, there is a deliberate unconventional use of the material which intervenes with this method (Barrett, 2010a, p. 191). This painting is made with cotton, two sheets layered on top of one another and stretched over the frame. Pigments, binders and oil pigment sticks have been employed in the colourful build-up of the surface. The cotton is thin and allows light to pass through its weave. As I layer the paint it touches the top layer and seeps through onto the second layer of cotton. It settles on both sheets, and the overall

effect is a shadowing of the colours on the first layer. What started as an experiment, a makeshift adaptation (Johnson, 2012, p. 356) to push how much paint to add before the thin cotton became saturated, has led to a new form of expression or way of revealing (Barrett, 2010a, p. 191). The paintings can be thought of through Petitmengin's curious proposition for "abstract concepts anchored in experience" (2021b, p. 201). 'The Reeds Have Been Cut' started outside of the studio, at the site where fieldwork entwines with the lived experience. If we retrace steps back to the canal, we can 'find' the painting before it was abstracted from the canal and revealed in an alternate way in the studio. What follows is an account of this explorative journey.

It took weeks to decide that work on 'The Reeds Have Been Cut' had come to an end. It had long since settled, dried, and sat still and quiet in a corner of the studio when finally it was deemed resolved. A few days later I 'found' the painting again at the canal. At this certain spot, at Rye House in Hertfordshire, reeds had grown against the bank, a cluster reaching eight foot high. But this particular day they had been cut and a gap formed in the landscape scene (fig. 17). Looking closer, I crouched down and saw the amalgamation of what was left of the reeds – stumps peeking out of the water's surface, around which lay pieces of the trimmings, and all of them reflected in the water. I took photos, from above, carefully framing the colours and textures, opacity and transparency of this collection of matter; this contingent tableau (Bennett, 2010, p. 5). It occurred to me that last year, in the same spot, these reeds had stood proud, reaching out of the water. This was an act of bearing witness to change; these reeds had altered, through different seasonal conditions. This was an encounter with matter relived again, at another time, in a slightly shifted context. The experience roused an understanding for the painting, which could

then be given its title. I realised where the layers and textures in the paintings had come from, and in turn, what they are evocative of.

On Slowness and Hope as Companion Themes

To complete this chapter two themes are discussed, both of which permeate the methods and methodology discussed, and have become increasingly meaningful to the research in various ways over its progression (see chapter 5 *Ecological Grief*). These are the overarching themes of slowness and hope which operate as companion themes to the research. In his book on Slowness, Carl Honore states: “When we rush, we skim the surface, and fail to make real connections with the world or other people” (2004, p. 8). Slowness, for this research, is not a method or methodology precisely, but is in part an intentional approach, which also occurs naturally, or through no other choice. The significance of this approach lies in the fact that through slowness, connections and understandings are nurtured. Through slowing down, perception becomes open to the micro-phenomenological dimension of experience: the micro-acts or micro-gestures and the felt dimension of experience (Petitmengin, 2021b, p. 200). These connections and understandings open up to a space of productive hope. As demonstrated in the example of ‘The Reeds Have Been Cut’, slowness and hope are also present in the aesthetic of the paintings, and therefore are part of what gives the paintings their originality, and ability to perform as objects which contribute to knowledge. ‘The Reeds Have Been Cut’ shares an experience and through doing so introduces a novel understanding of the ecology and vulnerability of the canal site.

Painting and Slowness

For painting, which is a time-based art (Westgeest, 2018; Herbert, 2019), slowness is embedded in the experience of making. Painting is an ancient art, which today also offers a counterbalance to an increasingly accelerating world (Cass and Fox, 2019, p. 5). Many artists consider their studio to be a sanctuary (Amirsadeghi, 2012); my time there is protected (for the most part) from extraneous time-bound commitments. Days or even weeks can pass in-between the preparation of materials and the building up of layers of paint. In this slow drawn-out way, each painting becomes part of my lived experience, I am as immersed in painting as I am the canal when travelling through it. As Martin Herbert points out, “painting has always been a realm that allowed for a more protracted unfurling than the rest of life” (2019, p. 7). What is important for this research, is how Herbert’s statement can be understood when we read it through the context of the Anthropocene. A time in which we are pushed into thinking about the ends of time, or the end of the world as humans perceive it (Colebrook, 2019, p. 265) – in such a context slowness and slowing down takes on a greater meaning. For the act of painting, slowness has obvious and less obvious implications. Bearing in mind that this research offers speculative possibilities for painting, the slowness that operates when making them develops a sense of care that leaves room for relationships to unfold (Modeen and Biggs, 2021, p. 214). This is significant for paintings which are made to be shared and experienced, and moreover, endeavour to rouse emotional resonance in a viewer (see chapter 5).

Whilst very few forces in contemporary life ever demand that we stop or at least slow down (Bois, 2009. p. 145) the experience of some

paintings “explicitly force us to decelerate” (Bois, 2009. p. 148). Of course, this is dependent on the viewer, but for this body of work, slow looking is encouraged. The paintings require patience, and a willingness from the viewer to adopt what Bennett terms a “particular perceptual style” – one of openness (2010, p. 5). This is a certain kind of attentiveness, one that could be at odds with modes of behaviour common in contemporary life (Westfall, 2018). Many authors (Clark, 2006; Bois, 2009; Reed, 2017) have asked the question of what certain qualities an artwork might embody which can slow a viewer down. It is a complex question, and beyond the parameters of this research. Yet it is notable that this body of work incorporates a vast array of materials, and as Westgeest points out, including more than one medium, is a major “slowing down factor” for paintings, as “this means that the viewer has to deal with the different conventions of both media when interpreting the image (2018, p. 2). The materiality of the paintings in this body of work complicates the viewing experience. The viewer is presented with an enmeshment of matter, textures designed to snag the eye (Herbert, 2019, p. 11), and “an ecology of colours” (Sullivan, 2014, p. 80), which, in their utilizing of light, embody the exchanges of living and non-living things that are found at the canal site. Herbert points out, in words which become entangled with Haraway’s theories, that “slowness is a testing of what happens if you stay with something” (Herbert. 2019, p. 14). To stay with something troublesome, is to learn and to be truly present (Haraway, 2016, p. 33) – it is to make a connection in other words.

Painting and Hope

To move this discussion into the realm of the theme of hope, and how it functions within the research, it must be mentioned that hope is

interpreted in the productive meaning of the term. When ‘The Reeds Have Been Cut’ was in the beginning stages and the cotton had been stained with an initial wash of Indian yellow pigment, I took a chance and rapidly brushed over some phthalo green pigment, in the hope that the yellow would glow through the darker green. The hope was that that these colours would be heavily pigmented enough to hold their own, yet also work together without cancelling one another out. The sense of hope lingered, and indeed fuelled each decision as I proceeded to layer the painting. As the painting developed hope worked in many directions; might the painting gain something through a further development? Or might it lose something? When immersed in this act, it is largely impossible to know what the outcomes will be. As Barrett describes, “...within the context of studio-based research, innovation is derived from methods that cannot always be pre-determined, and “out-comes” of artistic research are necessarily unpredictable” (2010b, p. 3). A reminder to the reader that this research embraces and encourages the agency of materials (Bennett, 2010; Coole and Frost, 2010; Barrett and Bolt, 2013), whilst I temporarily place in abeyance my own agency, or capacity to create effects in the world (Miyazaki, 2004, p. 7) – an approach which heightens the level of risk and chance at play. As mentioned earlier, risk and chance are the ingredients for hope, meaning that hope becomes a theme for the research, and much more than an emotional consequence of the making process.

Miyazaki argues that hope “is a method of formation” (2004, vii). Through embracing hope within a bricolage methodology, I was able to find out, to understand how the Indian yellow and the phthalo green pigment would interact. Hope used in conjunction with the rest of the methods discussed, doesn’t guarantee the production of knowledge

however – paintings might fail along this trajectory. But in the productive sense, hope regenerates beyond any perceived failures. As Miyazaki put it, hope “is predicated on the inheritance of a past hope and its performative replication in the present” (2004, p. 139). Not to be confused with optimism, this is an explorative, inquiring, determined kind of hope. For these reasons, this theme is a pertinent element of this research in the context of the Anthropocene. Resonating with Haraway’s thesis of “staying with the trouble” (2016), Lesley Head has made the case for the Anthropocene as a set of differentiated conditions with which we need to come to terms (Bulkeley et al., 2018, p. 325). Head acknowledges the tremendous sense of grief that the Anthropocene stimulates (see chapter 5) but asserts that this grief must take a productive form in order to tolerate loss and imagine new alternative futures (Bulkeley et al., 2018, p. 326). In terms of the act of painting – which can only exist in the present – it is, as mentioned, an unpredictable process. There is no knowledge of an endpoint whilst a painting is amid being made. During this time, the presence of hope both savours the present (Head, 2016, p. 11) and is galvanised by anticipation of “what has not yet become” (Miyazaki, 2004, p. 14). This open-endedness means that hope supports the bricolage methodology, and allows for experimentation, or tinkering (Bulkeley et al., 2018, p. 330) – tinkering being the analogous term which leads us back to bricolage (Jacob, 1977: Johnson, 2012, p. 356). Hope works with and through the bricolage approach, in that it enables productive collaboration between various forms of knowledge. Though there must be give and take between methods and methodologies, hope is what allows them to gel. When methods and methodologies are brought together in this painting research, in a reciprocal engagement, space is created for the emergence of possibilities (Head, 2016, p. 77); for alternate ways for

matter to coemerge and create an alternate aesthetic. As Ingold has described, hope is not about representing or describing, rather it is about opening up our perception to what is going on, so that we, in turn, can respond (2013, p. 7). The Anthropocene is what is 'going on' in the present and is what incites this research. In this context, hope is, as Bulkeley et al. point out, intimately tied to forms of catastrophe, grief, mourning, and loss, but it is through their kinds of disruption that alternatives may grow, and hope can be fostered (2018, p. 330). Through slowness, as discussed here, space can be created for reflection and connection, a space which as explored in chapter 5, is embodied in my paintings.

Summary

In this chapter, the discussion attended to the closely interwoven relationship between the lived experience of the canal site and the practice of developing paintings which are evocative of the characteristics of the site. This discussion has illuminated how a bricolage methodology, which houses many methods, is appropriate not only for painting research, but for painting in the context of the Anthropocene. We have seen that through the employment of this methodology hope and slowness arise as themes; as companions which guide the paintings in becoming meaningful evocations of the canal site. The following chapter explores these themes further, through an account which spans the development of the research from its inception to the present.

Visual Interlude B



Figure 23. Large scale works in progress on the walls in the studio. 2022.



Figure 24. Tests for plant-based dyes and dyeing with rust on polypropylene fabric in the studio. 2021.

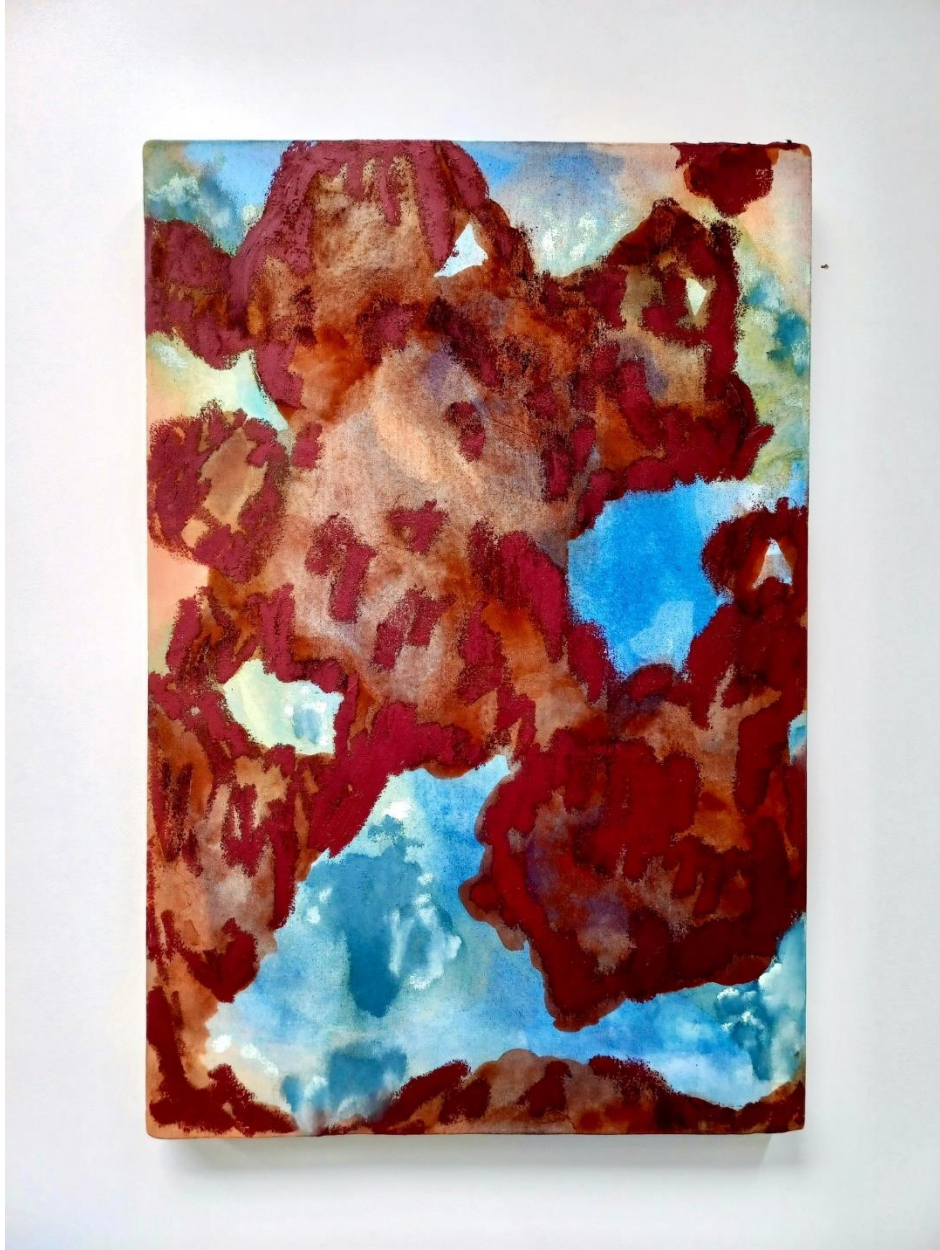


Figure 25. Marielle Hehir

'Scattering'

Pigment, binder, oil pigment stick on cotton

H 60 x W 40.5cm

2022



Figure 26. Marielle Hehir

'Brightening'

Pigment, watercolour paint, concrete

H 20 x W 20 cm

2021.



Figure 27. Work in progress in the studio.

Detail of staining two layers of cotton with paint.

2023.



Figure 28. Pigments in the studio. 2023.

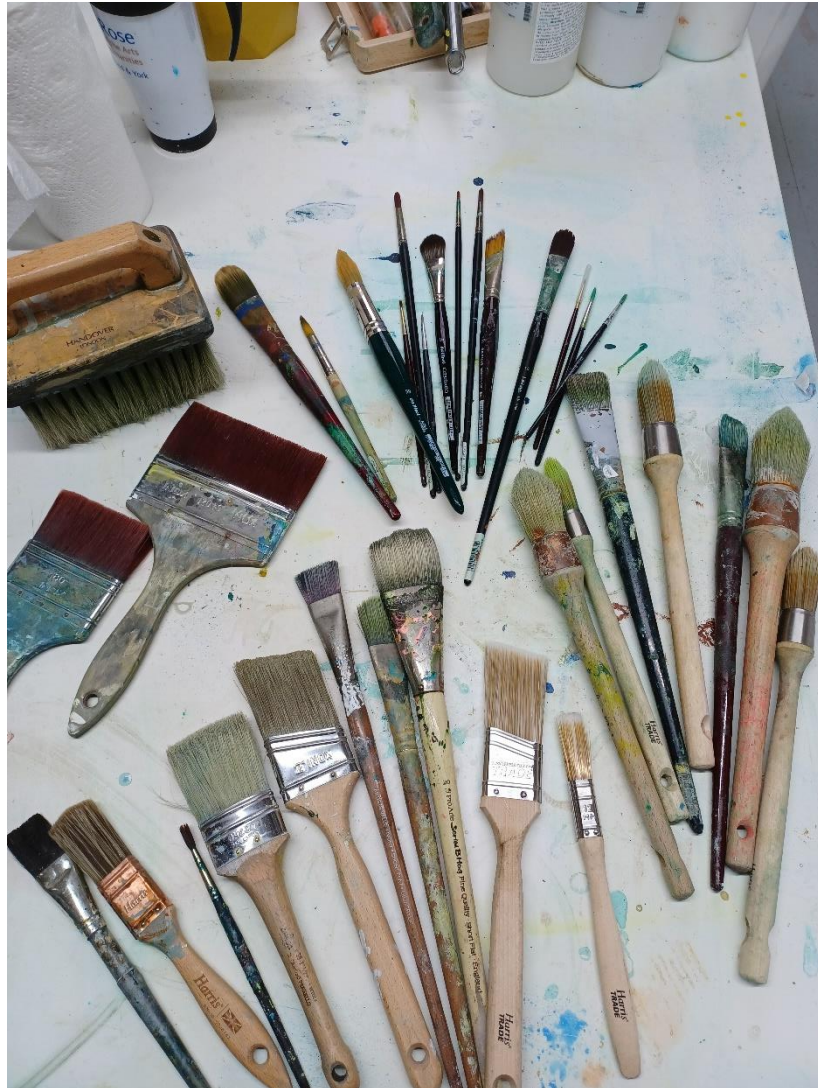


Figure 29. Brushes in the studio. 2022.



Figure 30. Mixing pigment with binder to make paint. 2023.



Figure 31. Thin layers of paint applied to cotton, staining it in transparent layers. 2023.

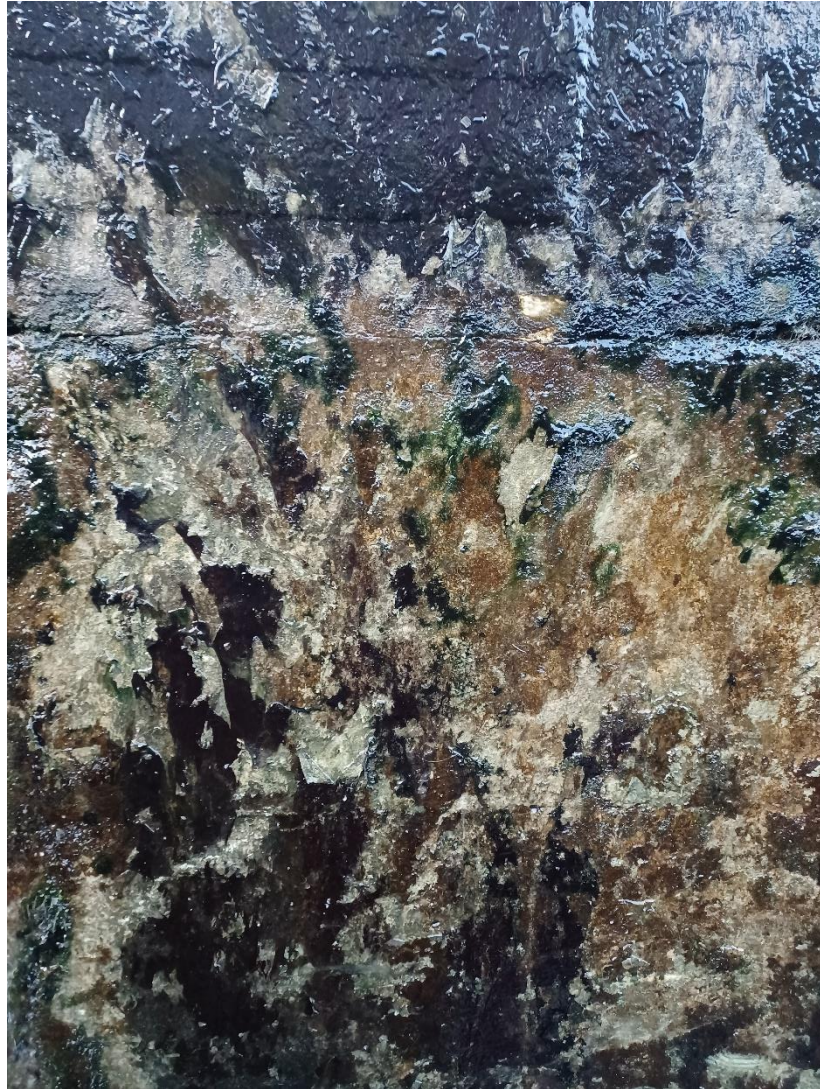


Figure 32. Lee Navigation, Enfield. Interior of a lock wall emptied of water. 2020.



Figure 33. Marielle Hehir

'Dead Leaves'

Pigment, wax pastel, plaster.

H 19.5 x W 23cm

2020.



Figure 34. Marielle Hehir

'Listing'

Pigment, watercolour binder, concrete. H 40 x W 40 cm.

2021.



Figure 35. Marielle Hehir

'The Leak'

Polypropylene, linen, plant-based dye, pigment, binder, glass

50 x 70cm

2022.



Figure 36.

Lee Navigation, Bromley-by-bow. The muddy riverbank at low tide with visible geosynthetic materials which reinforce the sides of the river. Rooftops of industrial buildings seen reflected in the water. 2021.



Figure 37. Hand building with clay in the studio. 2021.



Figure 38.

Clay forms, made by hand and left to dry out in the studio before firing in the kiln.

2022.



Figure 39. Ceramic forms after a first bisque firing being glazed in the studio. 2023.



Figure 40. Marielle Hehir

'Buried Refuge'

Ceramic, recycled clay with various glazes

H 14.5 x W 13cm

2022.



Figure 41.

Lee Navigation, Hackney marshes. Looking at the land from the water. 2023.



Figure 42. Marielle Hehir

'Creepers'

Pigment, binder, oil pigment stick on cotton

70 x 50.5cm

2022.

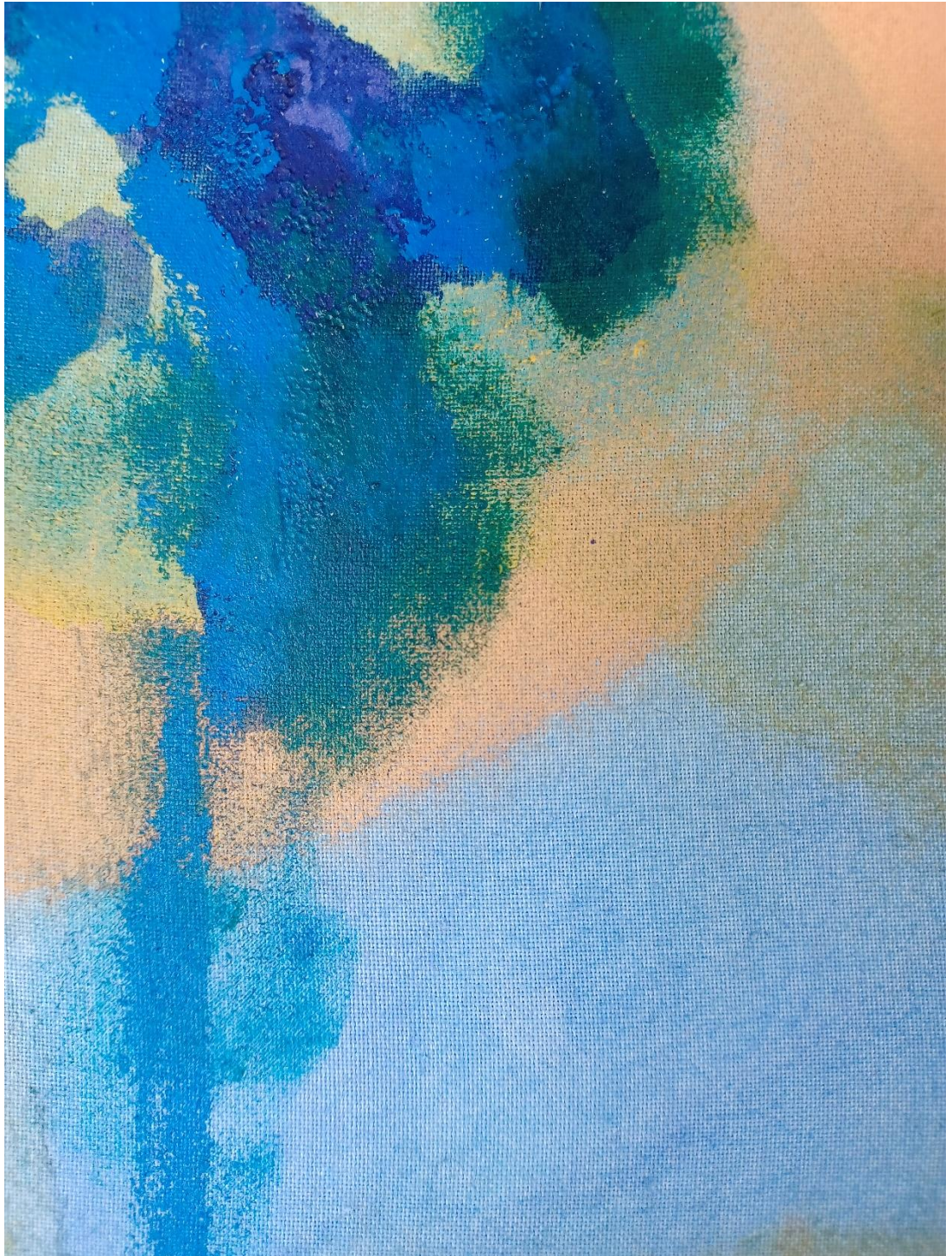


Figure 43. 'Creepers' (detail).



Figure 44.

Lee Navigation, Tottenham. Aquatic plants, blue plastic bottle top under the canal water surface which has become ice. 2020.

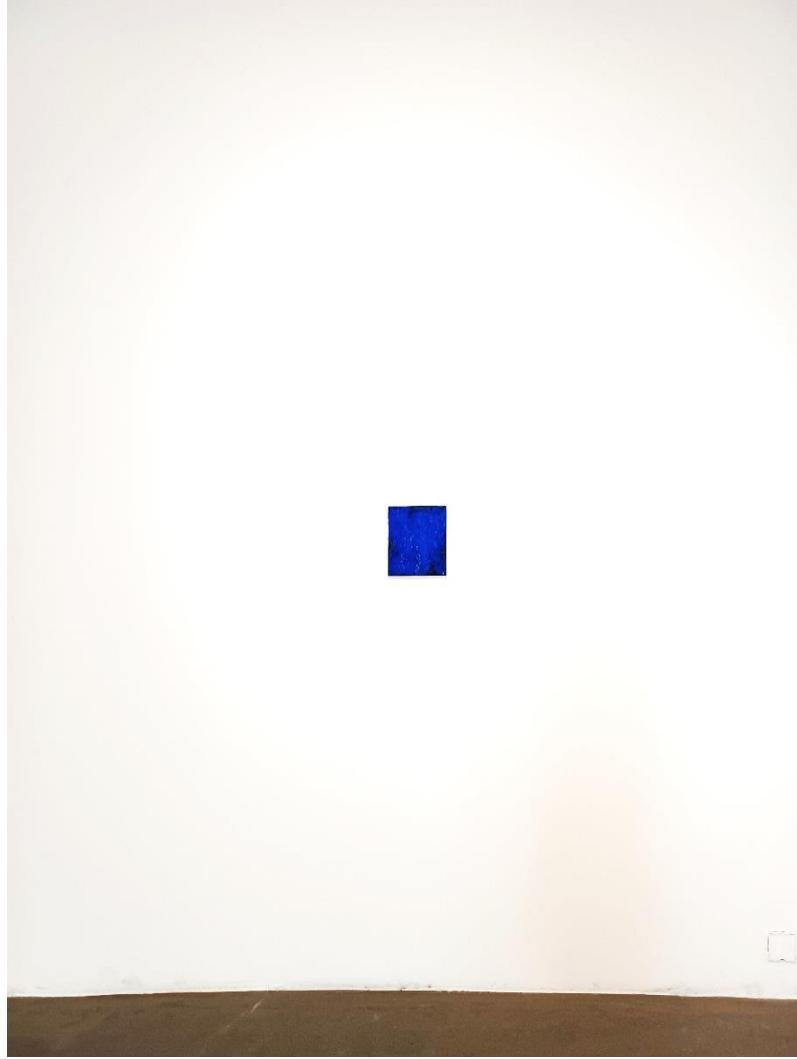


Figure 45. Marielle Hehir

'Hold Onto Water'

Pigment, aquacryl, plaster.

H 23.5 x W 19.5cm

2020

Installed at APT Gallery, 2022.



Figure 46. Marielle Hehir

'Hold Onto Water'

Pigment, aquacryl, plaster.

H 23.5 x W 19.5cm

2020.



Figure 47. Lee Navigation, Bow Locks. Reeds. 2020.



Figure 48. Marielle Hehir

'Tidal'

Polypropylene, plant-based dye, oil paint, photograph printed digitally, pins

H 70 x W 70 cm

2022.

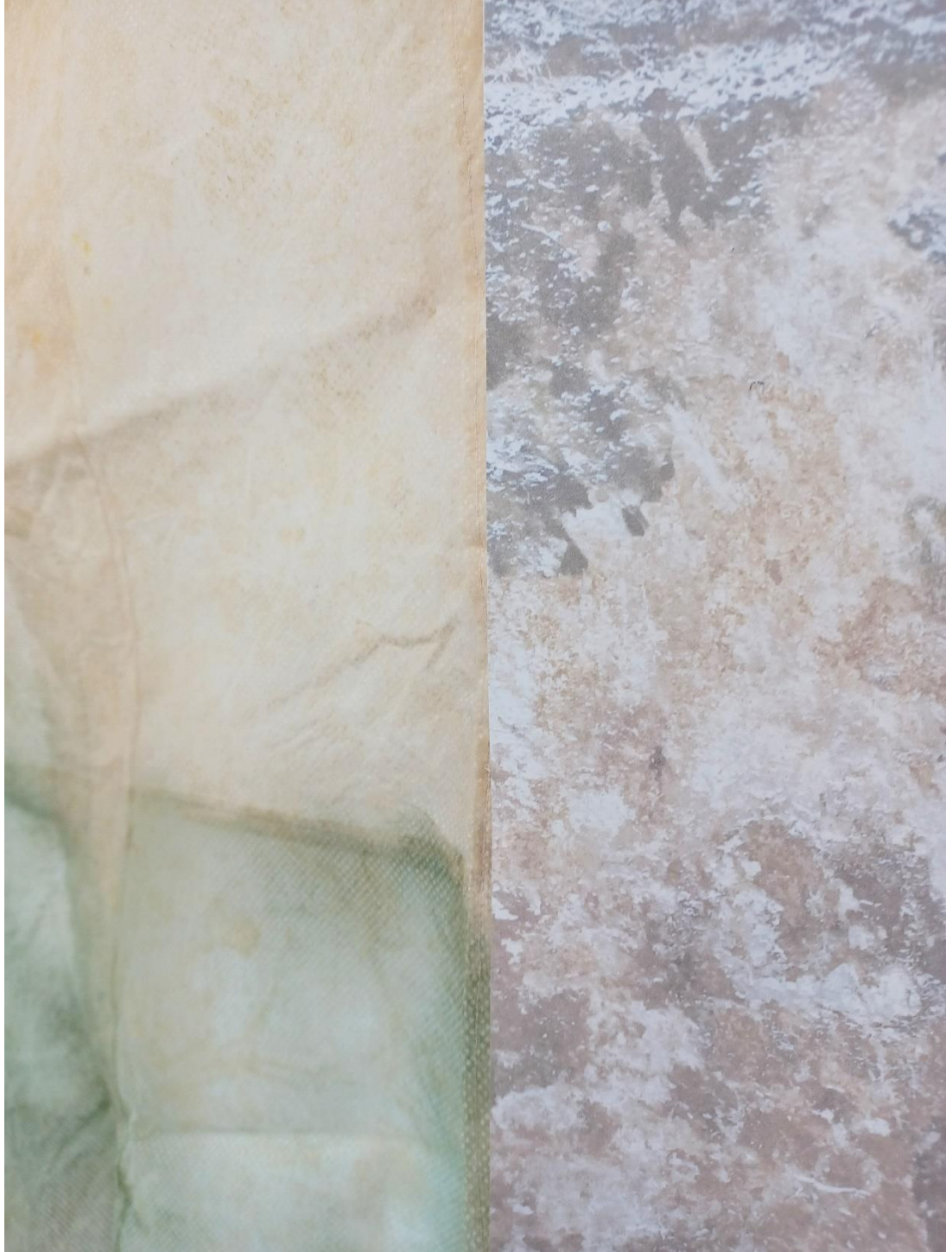


Figure 49. 'Tidal' (detail).



Figure 50. Marielle Hehir

'Single-Celled Saviour'

H 17 x W 17 cm

Stoneware, various glazes, graphite, oil

2021.



Figure 51. Shatter glass, collected from the towpath and stored in the studio. 2021.

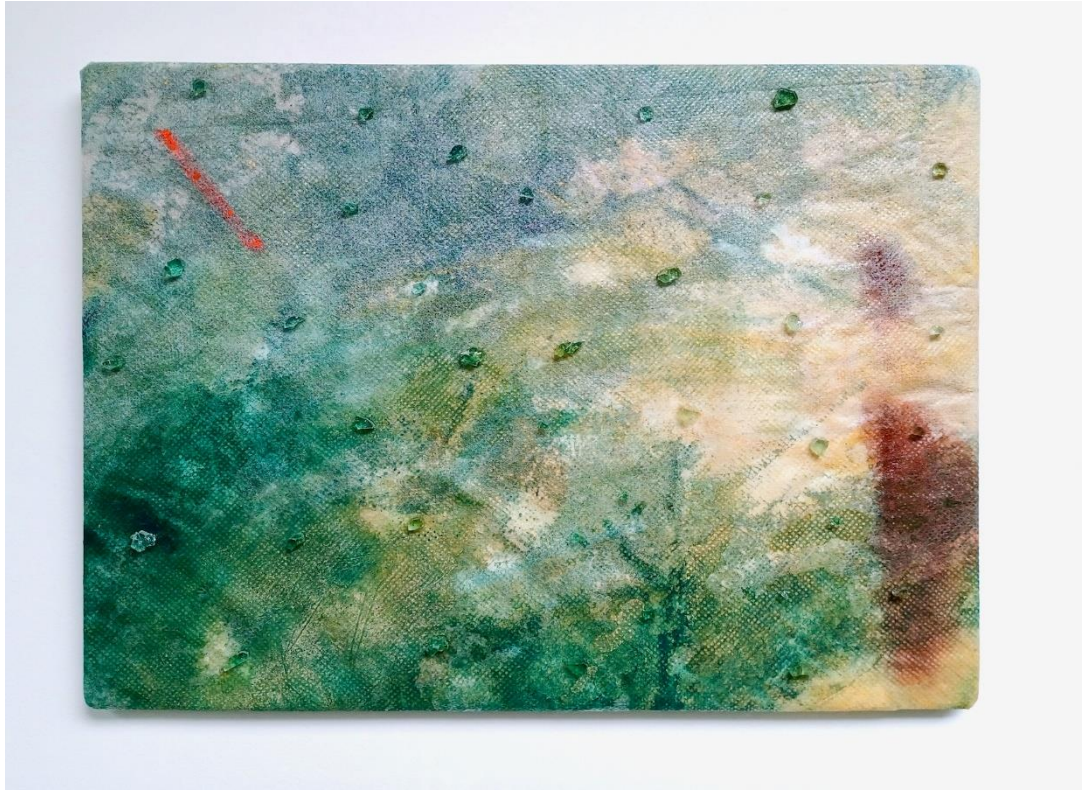


Figure 52. Marielle Hehir

'At the Bottom of the River'

Polypropylene, pigment, binder, oil-pigment stick, shatter glass on wood.

H 25 x W 35 cm.

2022.



Figure 53. Marielle Hehir

'Reminiscences'

Stoneware clay, various glazes, oil-pigment stick.

H 19 x W 18cm. 2023.



Figure 54. Various works in progress in the studio. 2023.

Chapter 3: Account of Practice

This chapter is a detailed discussion of the body of work developed through this practice-led research, and the processes involved in how the work came into being. As we have seen in chapter 2, all the research is imbricated in the practice – practical research in the studio develops collaboratively with fieldwork research and reading and writing. This discussion focuses on the practical component of the research and analyses key developments in the studio. Whilst the breadth of this chapter cannot account for every painting created throughout this period of research, close visual analyses of paintings which best embody the concerns of the research questions form the basis of the following discussion. These examples reveal how the paintings occupy and contribute to the explorative territory of ‘painting in the expanded field’ (Krauss, 1979; see chapter 7). Indeed, this body of work explores ways contemporary painting can *be*, and channels Isabelle Graw’s “elastic conception of painting” (Palmer, 2018, no pagination) in which the theoretical dimensions of painting are stretched through a formal exploration of how a painting might be made and how a painting might look. For the purposes of this account, in the first section of this chapter the body of work is partitioned into groups defined by their materiality. Rather than a chronological ordering, structurally, the initial discussion is organized around these groups. The materials selected here are those which have all proved to be of the greatest relevance in carrying out this research. Although all the works are in dialogue with one another, it is useful to group the works this way in order to assert the importance of the material choices made, as well as highlighting ways in which materials are used in unusual ways in accordance with the research questions.

The latter part of this chapter examines how this body of work – considered here in its entirety – responds to the research questions, whilst highlighting the dialogues which unify the paintings. A summatory proposal for my paintings as bearing the potential to be ‘performative’ of my encounters with the canal site is presented; an argument which Barbara Bolt’s theory of ‘The Performative Power of the Image’ (2004), and Edward Casey’s arguments for the representation of place through painting (2002) helps to illuminate. This chapter also brings to the foreground a relationship with Nixon’s concept of slow violence (2011), which has been prominent in thinking through RQ 1 and 2 in particular. In analysing the paintings as a collection, other tributary themes are established which in addition to material choices are significant threads running through the body of work and contribute towards creating meaningful understandings of the canal site – for example, ways of making, framing and perspective, and colour relationships.

It is critical to emphasise that the paintings are the result of a particular lived relationship with the canal site which continues on a daily basis. Ultimately, a relationship with this site has deepened over time, so far as the experience is not that of an observer, but as a participant – I am part of the ecology of the canal. For this reason, my relationship with the act of painting has changed also. The practice has embraced a collection of new and unusual materials, which are collected from the site, and are selected for their intrinsic qualities which can be explored in the studio. The control I possess when beginning a painting is often relinquished, and materials perform the way their inherent structure permits them to. Finally, the work of other artists, and literature significant to this research, is embedded throughout this discussion and where appropriate is mentioned in

support of the arguments. In addition this contextualisation distinguishes the unique qualities of these paintings and highlight ways in which they create new knowledge. However, the work of relevant practitioners is cited economically here as chapter 7 provides a lengthier contextualisation of this research within contemporary practice.

Paintings on Fabric

The first group of paintings to consider are those which begin by stretching fabric across a wooden stretcher frame, and for this reason it is logical to begin this discussion with this group of paintings, as they take the format most associated with the discipline. The stretched fabric holds a tension which becomes a suitable substrate for the application of paint (fig. 27; 31). However, the choice to create paintings on stretchers is not to do with the practicality of this format, nor that it is the dominant format associated with the discipline. It is to create paintings on different types of fabric, which – when stretched – allow different qualities when holding paint. Though this body of work includes many paintings on canvas, there are also paintings on cheesecloth, polypropylene, and fine cotton. The choice of these lighter fabrics, which are not as dense as canvas and therefore not as well-equipped at holding paint, was precisely to create a ground or substrate which would *not* be as stable as canvas. The fabrics remain un-primed, and their relationships with stability varies. Cheesecloth has a loose weave, and allows paint to pass through, which means that the underside of the fabric becomes stained with paint which is, to an extent, visible from the front of the fabric. Similarly, fine cotton, which I tend to layer twice, has a tighter

weave than cheesecloth, but still allows paint to pass through to the underside, creating a shadowing effect when viewed from the front. Polypropylene fabric, designed to be waterproof, resists watercolour paints, but when layered repeatedly, paint will stain the fabric gradually.

In these paintings, the paint is mixed from dry pigment with various binders. Both offer a spectrum of opacity and transparency, with some pigments being much denser than others. Colour is also employed as both a material and a compositional device. Often earth pigments are used alongside synthetic ones, to reflect the quality of colour relationships which are encountered at the site. Furthermore, paint is applied both as thin washes, and as thick impasto-like clumps. For example, in 'Scattering' (2022) (fig. 25) a dark, burnt-sienna coloured mass stretches across the entire canvas, splitting in parts and revealing a colourful underlayer. The dark mass has been painted with pigment in a watercolour binder, and on top of this oil-pigment stick, similar in tone, picks out facets of the mass, highlighting form and adding weight. The oil is applied thickly and quickly, creating marks where material drags and stretches in places, and in others the material gathers and is forced onto the cotton surface where it creates deposits of clumpy paint. Particularly in the top right corner, the paint deposited teeters on the edge of the frame. This contrasting combination of the weightiness of paint is significant in relation to the canal site, which encompasses matter in many states of being; the liquidity of the canal water, and the clusters of grimy algae which gather at the edges where the water meets the concrete walls, for instance (fig. 32). As mentioned previously, the engagement with the site through fieldwork is multi-perspectival due to my immersion in the site. These paintings explore the relationships between size and

scale, and perspectives which might seem subterranean, aerial or otherwise. The relationship with scale and perspective in these paintings is a device which allows for close consideration of the tiny increments of change which eventually lead to radical shifts in land over the course of seasons, decades, or millennia – what Nixon summarises in his account as slow violence (2011). My painting 'Creepers' (2022) (fig. 42; 43) could perhaps be read as an aerial view, its zones of colour perhaps denoting the boundaries between water and land, which is suggestive of an intrusion into land – such as the structure of the canal. The central compositional flow of the painting, appearing from the top to the bottom of the canvas in a loose zig-zag formation, is a soft blue pigment stain. Applied thinly in several washes, the blue doesn't quite block out the cotton it is applied to, it stains it, allowing the white weave of the fabric to remain just about visible and bring light to the surface. Seeming to hover just above this blue area, like mist settling on canal water on a cold morning, are hazy clouds of green and peach. These colours are watery echoes of the colours which compose the 'walls' at the sides of the canvas, as if the paint at the sides of this composition is decomposing and slowly polluting the central zone.

Usually in the studio, paintings such as these are made by starting with the stretched canvas laid out flat on the ground. Liquid paint is poured onto this substrate, then flows freely across the terrain of the fabric. How far it travels, and in which direction, is determined to some extent by the weight or density of the pigment. Compositions are formed which play with the opposing actions of zooming in to a microscopic level or zooming out to a great distance. Paintings which are small in size might contain an overwhelming amount of painterly information for instance, humbly exhibiting the gravitas of something

much larger, a world within a world (Allington, 2010; Godfrey, 2003). See my painting ‘The World of Invisible Things’ (2022) (fig. 119) for instance, in which a co-mingling of intricate, clustered marks and vast areas of flat, clear stained paint give the impression of something vast, which is complex but far away. Other larger paintings might be made up of gestures which appear to show magnified ecologies – see for example the painting ‘To Look Up or Down Was Frightening’ (2023) (fig. 64; 65). This abstraction is used throughout this body of work to give value to the perception of matter which is far away – be it through distance or size – and matter which is close at hand. Through doing so the paintings create meaningful encounters with matter from many perspectives, and might rouse an emotional resonance in a viewer, evoking melancholy, grief, and loss. For example, signs of erasure, or tonal qualities which are suggestive of a fading effect, might encourage these emotions in a viewer – the significance of this is explored further in Chapter 5.

Ceramic Paintings

Roberta Smith reminds us that, not dissimilar to painting, ceramics have one of the “richest histories of any medium on the planet”, and “that the art form incorporates quite a bit of painting and sculpture” (2009). This is one of the reasons why, for this research – which takes an expanded approach to painting (see RQ 3) – clay and the processes of making ceramics is relevant to this research. Secondly, clay is earth, and it is important to this research that the painting is developed from a combination of earth (naturally occurring) and synthetic materials. Not only is clay a product of the erosion of rock (Jones, 2017, p. 77), its tactile and sensory qualities can offer a way

of navigating the subject of grief, which permeates this research (see chapter 5). In handling this material, clay's grounding properties come to life through the marks left in the clay body; it marks our being in the world. It is highly appropriate for practice-research which responds to land that clay is employed. Lilley has observed the "tendency towards a physical and emotional relationship with the land" in the work of artists working with clay (2017, p. 12), whilst Schaffner points out the delight which arises from the alchemy of turning clay into ceramic in the kiln (2009, p. 25). In my ceramic paintings, colour is a material entity which is enmeshed within the physical form the clay takes. In the kiln, glazes melt under the heat and fuse with the porous clay, which becomes a sealed solid surface upon completion of the firing process. The clay forms are simple, two-dimensional, organic shapes with soft edges. Fingerprints and other signs of their making are left and become part of the final painting (fig. 37). The evidencing of the artist's hand in the surface of the painting is a significant and meaningful point in relation to RQ 1, as this part of the painting's aesthetic resonates with the prevalent description of the Anthropocene as human imprint on the environment (Crutzen et al., 2011). This intimate, visual signifier of touch often remains present in the paintings, in ways which explore a painting's potential to engage a viewer's sensory understanding of the painting, and perhaps stimulate an emotional response (see chapter 5).

Unlike the fabric paintings above, ceramic paintings are fixed, solid and final. Yet aesthetically, there are moments in which certain marks, colours and perspectival tropes echo the other paintings within this body of work. In 'Buried Refuge' (2022) (fig. 40) there is something of a clearing in the upper half of the panel: glaze has been applied sparingly here, exposing the clean sand-colour of the unglazed areas

of the stoneware ceramic. The panel is framed at its top edges with a canopy of glossy leaf green. This green is patchy in tone, as if fading away and disappearing. Lower down in the composition colours and textures become explosive but obfuscated, suggesting the collapse of something more structural. The aesthetics described here are in part shaped through their reaction to heat in the kiln, yet also are evocative of the precarious meetings of matter around the canal. Moreover, in ceramic paintings such as 'Reminiscences' (2023) (fig. 53) oil paint has been applied to the top area of the composition. How might the addition of other substances – to a sealed, non-porous surface – engender the painting's engagement with slow violence? The oil paint sits on top of the ceramic surface, and over time will be subject to deterioration, unlike the ceramic. Consequently, over many years, the ceramic and the paint will eventually split apart, with the painted area developing cracks as the oil in it dries out. The aesthetic qualities mentioned here, which either allude to obsolescence, (as in the first example), and/or aesthetic qualities which embody obsolescence, (as in the second example), offer a proposition for Nixon's appeal for the development of aesthetic strategies which address slow violence (2011, p. 32). Throughout this body of work the qualities of obsolescence manifest in other ways through material relationships. The next section examines works which incorporate yet more materials which, in accordance with RQ 5, both challenge a painting's structural stability and threaten its longevity.

Mixed Media Paintings

This third body of works are grouped for the mix of materials that they utilize. For this research, materials are selected for their

relationship to painting and for their relationship to the canal. There are tensions which arise through the material choices, and this creates dialogues and questions around elements of the paintings. Materials are brought together in ways that sometimes creates a state of stability, and sometimes a state of fragility or even temporality (see RQ 5). Throughout this body of work, all the paintings oscillate between varied levels of potential longevity – some might last longer than others, depending on their material configuration. Reactions between materials might be another way in which these paintings engage with slow violence. For example, in ‘Listing’ (2021) (fig. 34), pigment has been added to a mix for concrete and poured into a mould. As the mixture settled and cured, the pigmented areas dried at a different rate to the areas of ‘clean’ concrete mix, resulting in a surface which in some areas is fragile and crumbling. All materials employed exemplify the coalition of materiality which occupies land in the contemporary, and some are deemed signifiers of the Anthropocene: plaster, concrete, geosynthetics and glass for instance. Geosynthetics have been utilised in the redevelopment of the canal, typically as long-lasting, rigid canal linings (fig. 36). Geosynthetics is the term given to a group of synthetic materials used for reinforcement purposes in conjunction with soil, rock and/or any other civil-engineering-related material, which become an integral part of any man-made structure (Shukla, 2002, p. 1). However, over time and under certain climatic conditions, the canal lining may lose its waterproofing functionality and therefore its structural integrity (Blond et al., 2019, p. 69). Though they do not guarantee it, geosynthetics encourage the stability of the surface. In this sense they share a relationship with painting. Italian fresco painters stabilised their surface with a woven reed mat onto which plaster and pigment was applied, and modern painters stabilise their surface

through application of a liquid 'sizing' medium which fills the holes in the weave of the canvas, thus strengthening the surface by restricting movement. The direct link with painting means this group of materials has become a critical element of this research enquiry.

The discipline of painting, for decades now, has seen an exploration of materials which are outside of the set of materials deemed fundamental to painting (see chapter 7). There is an argument for this being, in part, how painting since the 1960's retains its relevance: painting has the ability to be open to the absorption of other artistic media and formats, and to reach far beyond any merely material definition as "oil on canvas" (Hochdorfer, 2015, p. 16). It is important to note that for this research, the engagement with unusual materials is in no way a critique of the traditional format of painting, such as oil on canvas. Rather, what has become a material investigation, has been guided by the research questions which ask how painting might respond to the conditions of land today, in the context of the Anthropocene (see RQ 1). Additionally, through the materials, the paintings retain a connection with the site. The painter Mary Weatherford will "reinforce a connection to a specific place by adhering an object, such as a seashell or starfish to her canvases" (Hoptman, 2014, p. 155) for instance. Elsewhere, Samara Scott, a visual artist working on the peripheries of painting, composes collages of materials encased in perspex vitrines. Materials such as plastic bags, held in liquid pigment, oil, and shampoo for example, are squashed against the perspex and come to resemble the gestural brushstrokes of an abstract painting (Cripps, 2021, p. 150). In a different way, in my paintings, found materials are incorporated into the surfaces, but never in their original forms – for example, broken glass which I collected from the canal towpaths in 'At the Bottom of

the River' (2022) (fig. 52). Shattered into tiny crystal-like forms, the reflective qualities of the fragments are brought into dialogue with all the other materials at play, whilst also presenting as a reminder of the place they were collected from. The fragments protrude from the painting, their physicality existing in the same dimension as the viewer. They appear as entities which exist within themselves; solid, rigid little forms which refuse to be consumed by the painting. Yet the little glass forms become portholes for encounter with the painting – moments of variance across the surface – whilst they are perceived at the same time as the pigment, the geosynthetic fabric and the oil-pigment stick. At the points where they rest, these other materials are also viewed through the glass, its pale blue colouration casting small moments of difference in the painting. These moments are multiplied as a viewer moves around the painting, for the light refracts through the glass, and there is a glittering produced across the surface. Photographs from the fieldwork research (see chapter 2) have also been employed as a further material which is collaged into a painting. Within the paintings they become camouflaged and lose their identity as photographs, or even as images. Painted over (and under) in parts, in areas where they can be detected and read as a type of 'matter' which mingles with other types of matter in the painting, the photos preserve something of a past encounter. The aesthetic they contribute is a ghostly residue of an experience of the site, which might not be experienced in that same way again.

So far in this chapter, the discussion has explored groups of paintings which offer distinct types of material engagement, yet they all, in various ways, offer possibilities for an aesthetic of slow violence – and, occupy the arena of the expanded field. In the second half of this chapter, focus turns to themes which have arisen throughout the

processes of this research. These are generative of further, tributary questions around how my paintings offer a unique contribution to the field of painting. This part of the discussion reasserts the significance of the canal to this research – and how it might be emblematic of the Anthropocene – whilst also visually analysing how the paintings attend to the research questions.

The Performative Power of Images

Let's take a moment to remind ourselves of the landscape being discussed here: a site which thrives with matter – living and inert – which is experienced fully, and which my paintings become evocative of. A place which is haunted by its past (Edensor, 2005a; Heholt and Downing, 2016), infected with the material signifiers of the present (Boetzkes, 2019, p. 196), and permeated with a tone of speculative uncertainty for the future (Colebrook, 2019). The canal is a place which harbours a unique experience of its own, resting in between, but different to, the rhythms of the country and the pulse of the city (Williams, 2011, p. 5, 9). Tacita Dean has described the “amorphous ungainly feeling that enables us to articulate feelings of familiarity or estrangement” that can arise through particular experiences of place (2005, p. 178). The feeling Dean describes can be present at the canal. Yet the lived experience that this research entails, which one might expect garners a comfortable understanding of the site, in fact reverberates ad-infinitum between a familiar and a strange apprehension. What is to be gained then, through paintings which find ways to evoke this strange quality, and furthermore, why indeed challenge painting with this task? What new insights into the site might this approach to painting offer? As is commonly the case with

artists, it is through a “creative engagement with the world” that this practice-led research is developed (Coole, 2010, p. 103). What carries through from the site into the paintings is a creative, playful engagement with materiality. Through evoking certain material qualities which are particular to the canal, the experience of the paintings might coalesce with the impression gained through experience at the site. How is it then that the experience of a painting – which is predominantly an aesthetic one and which happens very much in the present – can conjure a connection with a dynamic, bodily experience equipped with full sensory awareness? A painting which is visually evocative of the smell of the canal water for instance. My painting ‘Dead Leaves’ (2021) (fig. 33) has been described this way by a visitor to the exhibition *Spectral Ground*, 2021. What this example demonstrates is an embodied response to an aesthetic, which places the encounters with the paintings in the realm of phenomenology. The understanding of this philosophical area, for this practice-research, is informed largely by the theories of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2014) and Claire Petitmengin’s ‘micro-phenomenology’ (2021a), both of which offer explorations of the lived experience. An embodied response to an aesthetic activates both mind and body – they intertwine and constitute the self (Merleau-Ponty, 2014, p. 86). It is a sensory, rather than intellectual viewing experience, in which – as Maclagen describes – a viewer engages “directly with a work’s material properties, as opposed to a more detached, intellectual response centred on its representational or symbolic aspects” (2001, p. 38). This is significant for this practice research, which as we know, places an emphasis on materials when exploring ways in which painting might respond to the landscape of the Anthropocene (RQ 1). Whilst the integration of new and unusual materials into the paintings may compromise their stability and longevity (RQ 4), the aesthetic

outcomes of this experimental approach can also encourage an embodied response when a viewer encounters the work. Chapter 5 explores in greater detail the notion of a sensory engagement with the aesthetics of the paintings, and how this might stimulate emotions in a viewer – and moreover, why this is important for this research.

To proceed, the qualities present in my paintings which may provoke an embodied response should be considered through an exploration of how painting might come to ‘perform’ a multi-sensory experience of place. This is a curious but notably significant query which has been generative in the case of this research, where the materials are treated as collaborators (Barrett and Bolt, 2013; Haraway, 2016; Hesse, 2022), in that once they are engaged within the painting, they are invariably left to carry out their own journeys and emit their individual qualities. By ‘perform’, I adopt Bolt’s meaning of the term, in which “performativity could be posited as a counter-representationalist understanding of our being-in-the-world” and “art practice is performative in that it enacts or produces art as an effect” (2004, p. 151 – 2). The research builds on these ideas, insofar as the paintings might be apprehended as performative evocations of the site in some way. This has implications for the viewing experience – it might become a sensory engagement, in contrast to viewing a representational painting, which is more likely to be appreciated on a purely visual level. Perhaps, prior to the consideration of performativity, it is useful to bear in mind and bring forward with us Jed Rasula’s notion of ‘composting’ (2002). Bringing this notion into dialogue with painting is a point of originality within this research. Writing about poetry and thinking of “poems as ecosystems, precariously adjusted to the surrounding biomass” (2002, p. 7), Rasula posits that the past *composts* into and fertilizes the present.

Composting is a notion that I would like to suggest is equally applicable to painting, and certainly my paintings. Within this research, the past refers to the history of the site (Burton and Pratt, 2006; Wood, 2014), the history of painting land in relation to place (see chapters 6 and 7) as well as my own past experiences. These are all elements which circulate and compost into these paintings. How do encounters with matter come to insinuate themselves, to compost into the paintings and create a presence? The idea of composting plays upon an entanglement of things; both matter and meaning, as well as ourselves; our role within this entanglement. With this in mind we should now turn to the role of the painter.

Rasula suggests that “Poetry is a space in which we’re implicitly invited to deliberate on and make hay with” (2002, p. 24). I would like to suggest that painting also creates such space, perhaps more emphatically so. The painter after all is the figure that gleans the “vibrant matter” (Bennett, 2010, p. 3) and shows us the “thing-power” (Bennett, 2010, p. 5) of stuff (see chapter 4) and encourages us to muse, to take the time to ponder, and in doing so potentially effect changes in thought. As Susan Owens has articulated: “Artists [and writers] do not just describe our landscapes; they make it too. The pictures we see and the stories we read seep deeply into our minds forever changing the way we perceive the world around us” (2020, p. 7). What these words help to illuminate is how profoundly entangled paintings about place are with the place itself, and that painting does have the capacity to present a unique aesthetic which can offer a new understanding of land, our environment, and all the vibrant matter (Bennett, 2010, p. 3) of the non-human natural world. Regarding this practice research, perhaps these new understandings which the paintings rouse, may lead to a deeper appreciation of the canal site as

vulnerable to the effects of climate change. The questions with which we go forward with are many – not limited to ‘why might we need this reminder of the canal site brought to us by painting?’ First, might I remind the reader of the performative (Bolt, 2004) nature of this body of work, and in this case, attend to the query of how the paintings might develop an ability to demonstrate their entanglement with the site; and, through their painterly aesthetic, offer new understandings of the canal in the context of the Anthropocene.

To think through this question, focus is placed on the processes of making the paintings, for it is in this realm that there are clues to be found (see chapter 2). In thinking about how a painting does what it does (Staff, 2015b), we must consider how it came to be, and in doing so remember the role of the painter. This requires thinking of paintings less as images, and more as collections of ‘matter’; chapter 4 reveals that for this research matter is to be understood as having ‘agency’ (Bennett, 2010; Coole and Frost, 2010; Barrett and Bolt, 2013). However, as this practice–research evidences, collections of matter can produce an aesthetic which is as powerful as an image, and might rouse alternate understandings of the site. Of course, adopting New Materialist thought doesn’t mean that the paintings came into being by themselves. The painter still has some sway in shaping the eventual aesthetic, but relinquishes control of the materials at a given point. It might be argued that this is the case for most painting; however, the difference in the case of this research is the added layers of unpredictability and alchemy brought about by the meeting of materials which aren’t designed to sit together. For instance, in ‘The Leak’ (2022) (fig. 35), I poured ultramarine blue paint onto a sheet of polypropylene fabric which lay not entirely flush with, but on, the floor. Once the liquid touched the fabric, it trickled out in streams

over the creases of the fabric. Under the weight of the paint, the fabric buckled and became saturated. The paint ran its course and in some areas passed through the perforations in the fabric and pooled underneath. As the fabric is plastic, the liquid struggled to settle, instead repelling and bursting into tiny beads. Where it pooled, it eventually dried opaque, with the most concentrated hue. Where the paint seeped through to the other side, it dried faint and translucent, while the paint which had pooled underneath left printed shadows which darkened the fabric. The final stained surface gained its aesthetic from the behaviour of the materials. The rhythm the materials found when they met one another; the way they had effects on each other; matter composting with matter. Stable or not, these material coexistents, (Morton, 2011, p. 168), navigated one another into a state of coexistence. In moments such as this during the making process, I bear witness to the agency of materials at work as they mingle, react and settle, just as I bear witness to material agency at the site.

In the introduction to her book 'Art beyond Representation: The Performative Power of the Image' (2004), Bolt talks about a process of painting which "proceeds according to established principles of painting practice – blocking in shapes, establishing a composition, paying attention to proportion and the shapes of light and dark – a reiteration of habits and strategies of working" (2004, p. 1). She goes on to describe how eventually the painting "takes on a life of its own. It breathes, vibrates, pulsates, shimmers and generally runs away from me. The painting no longer merely represents or illustrates [...]. Instead it performs" (Bolt, 2004, p. 1). So, although a painting might start with the painter and with some control or idea, the materials and process take over. In the case of 'The Leak' (and the majority of

paintings in this practice-research) the process began with my encouraging of the materials to mingle; after some time the painting became more than its material parts. It became 'vibrant' (Bennett, 2010, p. 5). Moreover, the painting became its own entity, an entity which requires its own understanding. The chosen example emphasises the role of process in creating paintings which can evoke something more than themselves, paintings which are performative of a place or experience.

In another sense the painter's actions might also be thought of as a performative aspect of making; after all, the painter is not static during this activity. In the case of this practice-research, the approach to painting involves a certain repertoire of movements, some of which, it could be said, are performative of those which I make at the site. As previously mentioned, both the experience of the site and the experience of painting is immersive. An intimate experience of the site means that the site is apprehended as land rather than landscape; an ecology of matter, in contrast to the perception of land as a 'landscape' scene where only the visible surfaces are attended to (Evernden, 1992, p. 78). In the studio, I am distanced from the site, but traces of the experience grasped through my senses, via a whole complex series of transactions with the site (Greene, p. 225), linger and are re-animated through movement. Merleau-Ponty explains these traces as "kinesthetic residues" (2014, p. 110) which are the outcome of "the natural correlation between appearances and our kinesthetic operations which are not known through a law but are lived as the engagement of our body in the typical structures of a world" (2014, p. 323-4). I might slow down and move closer to the surface for example, when I perceive something at the bottom of the water; equally I might slow down and move closer to the surface of a painting

while making, in order to pay close attention to the interactions of the paint and fabric. It is a multi-sensory practice then, for the fact that it is bodily. Crouching, kneeling, reaching, leaning over, standing above – a kinaesthetic knowledge which provides the intrinsic link between the two experiences, the two places of the site and the painting. What then lies in wait for a viewer of the finished painting? How should these paintings be apprehended? Must a viewer orient themselves in a particular way, speed, rhythm? The paintings are to be perceived according to individual preference; however, we can muse on how viewers might also perform in the presence of a painting, and how this might affect their experience. Perhaps a body might have to physically move closer to appreciate the details of a painting; perhaps a body might need to crouch or stretch depending on how the paintings are displayed. For instance, my painting ‘Single Celled Saviour’ (2022) (fig. 50) is very small in size, and its surface is textural – it has something of a geological-like topography with evident crevices and depressions. It also has fleeting moments of luminous orange oil paint, and speckles of graphite powder which sparkle as they catch the light. The surface is a mixture of matt and gloss in areas where the green glaze sits. All of these aspects mean a viewer might physically be drawn in closer to the painting to study its surface. According to the logic of perspective it might be assumed that the viewer takes up a position that is identical with the position originally occupied by the painter, the maker of the picture (Barrett and Bolt, 2013, p. 1). However, this theory does not apply to my paintings, which do not seek to represent, but to *evoke* an experience. The viewer is likely to encounter these paintings head on, as the following section explains. However, as I have described, in opposition to the anthropocentric perspective that would position the human (painter) as central and in control of other materials, this is not the position I take when painting.

Furthermore, the materials within the paintings could be thought of as Morton's "life forms" which are "connected in a mesh without a centre or an edge" (2011, p. 169): the paintings are an enmeshment of matter which harbour small ecologies.

In summary, the employment of Bolt's theories around the performative power of images has been productive for this research, and significant in exploring ways in which these paintings might offer an aesthetic for slow violence, which struggles to find adequate visual representation (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). In finding ways in which a painting, through its materiality, might become performative of an encounter with the site – rather than seeking to represent this – we see that the paintings organically develop a unique aesthetic. But where, one might ask, is the power or effectiveness in the performative qualities of a painting? Might this type of painting be an effective harbinger of change? In initiating change, even? What performative painting does is offer an exchange between the conditions of contemporary land in situ, and the viewer in a separate, neutral space. By performing certain qualities of the site and bearing an aesthetic which is suggestive of the acts of slow violence which are in operation there, my paintings may begin to stimulate an emotional resonance in a viewer. The materials, in these paintings, become 'louder than words' in that although they are non-descriptive, they do harness new understandings of the site, and carry messages about what is at stake here in terms of the vulnerability of the site in the context of the Anthropocene. The significance of the emotional element encompassed in the research at large, and consequently carried by the paintings is examined further in chapter 5.

Modes of Display – The Contingent Tableau

The modes of display explored in this practice–research emerge from the encounters throughout fieldwork, where matter might be scattered around the site in clusters or groups. In addition, meetings with matter at the canal, can be very small and sudden; lonely, alien materials can appear in an instant amidst a conglomeration of other matter. A tiny, bright blue, plastic bottle top floating in the water surrounded by fallen leaves entangled in aquatic plants and ice for instance (fig. 44). These things might be witnessed from a distance, and intrigue the explorer to come closer, and examine in detail this mysterious concoction of matter. As Bois observes, distance plays a role in painting also, in that through distance, paintings can entreat us to come closer, and in doing so one feels the full effects of a sensory engagement with a painting (2009, p. 148). Up close, the details of surface are revealed in all their delicacy; material particularities and fractures complete the strange tension between image and material which paintings can harbour. Ralph Rugoff has described this tension as painting’s “capacity for formulating provocative uncertainties, for compelling us to not only wonder about what we are seeing but also about the ways in which we are looking” (2021, p. 14). In some instances, any one of these paintings might be displayed alone; usually on a wall with nothing else accompanying it. Often, this needs to be the case so that the painting can be encountered and experienced without external distractions. For example, amongst the many paintings in the exhibition ‘Genius Loci: Painting the Spirit of Place’ (2022), a small painting ‘Hold onto Water’ (2020) (fig. 45; 46) was installed alone on an expansive white wall. This curatorial decision could have meant the painting was lost within the expanse of white. On the contrary, the painting seemed to demand the viewer's gaze all

the more because of its lonely positioning – we might say it appeared “delicate and a bit vulnerable, standing alone in a sort of David and Goliath relationship to the space” (St John, 2015, p. 55). Presented this way a painting’s small size is emphasised, and the relationship between size and scale – as mentioned throughout this chapter – is exemplified.

Another mode of display explored through this research – which builds on the dialogues present amongst the paintings – is the clustering of paintings together, hung at slightly different heights perhaps, and in close proximity to one another (fig. 106). Displayed this way, the paintings seem to activate the aesthetic and sensory qualities of one another. A rippling effect passes across their surfaces, as colours, forms, gestures and materials resonate with one another. Experiencing the paintings this way brings the dialogue between the individual paintings to the surface, and it becomes clear that they are interconnected with one another, but also with the site. Discussing encounters within landscape, Bennett describes this kind of scenario between materials as “the contingent tableau” (2010, p. 5). In this, materials, matter, and their surroundings, are all elements at play – as well as the conditions at the time of the experience, for instance the weather. This research investigates this idea through the display of the paintings, and considers what the implications of a ‘contingent tableau’ might be for paintings shown in a gallery setting. Through the modes of display mentioned here, a viewer might be encouraged to slow their pace, and encounter these paintings slowly. As we have understood from chapter 2, the theme of slowness is critical to this research. What then becomes a sustained, drawn-out encounter, enriches a viewer's apprehension of the work, as they process feelings, sensations and impressions roused through viewing

a painting. These sensory responses cannot be comprehended on an intellectual level, but instead furnish the formulation of a viewer's own understanding of the work.

Representation/Re-Presentation

“Striving to represent the world, we inevitably forfeit its direct
presence”

(Abram, 1996, p. 40).

In this section, focus concentrates in more depth on how the paintings become performative through their evasion of representative qualities, as this is one of the aspects of how this practice-research addresses the Anthropocene through painting (see RQ 1). These paintings don't describe experience in the way a representational painting would, nor are they figurative: that is, they do not use line, form and colour to depict something recognisable. Instead, materials are employed to re-tell, in a novel and changed way, conceptions of a lived experience, which as we have seen, fosters new understandings of the site. The paintings are more akin with what Casey proposes as “modes of re-presentation: they present again, at another and more sublime level, what is first of all presented in perception” (2002, p. 270). Representations can present barriers which obstruct lines of communication with others, arousing the “possibility of misunderstanding, error or downright falsehood” (Mitchell, 1994, p. 12.) Whilst there is much to be lost through the practice of representation, the approach of ‘re-presenting’ remains honest in its

endeavour. Through adopting this approach and sharing certain experiences through the medium of painting, knowledge is created which can reveal vital truths regarding the site.

As chapter 4 makes clear, it is through the employment of both a Romantic sensibility and New Materialist thought that this body of work flourishes in unique and distinctive ways. These aspects of the research compliment the approach to painting which is 'representational' of experience. The Romantic sensibility is "impelled by the desire for discovery," and consequently involves "experiences of disorientation in the face of a material reality that cannot be fully comprehended or adequately named" (Rigby, 2014, p. 70). The perspectival approach which is often employed means that the paintings embody a kind of groundlessness; a sense of scale isn't made obvious for a viewer. The significance of groundlessness for the context of the Anthropocene was made clear in chapter 2. Further to this, an ambiguous sense of scale and perspective becomes an enigmatic quality in the paintings. Through the experience of this type of painting, a viewer might be able to perceive and interpret new insights into the material conditions which can be experienced at the site.

The subject of scale and perspective and how they operate within this body of work is returned to in chapters 6 and 7. For now, it is important to emphasise in relation to the theories discussed here, that this is an intentional jettison of perspectival devices which have historically been used in painting to depict the illusion of space in an orderly, mathematical manner (Alberti, 2005; Panofsky, 1991). Painting has come a long way since the time when this approach dominated, and painters have experimented with subverting

perspective in various ways and for various reasons. The invention of the camera (c.1816) played a huge role in this shift. No longer were painters challenged with the task of depicting three-dimensional space of a two-dimensional surface. Painters were free to push the boundaries of perspective. Graham Sutherland for instance – during his periods of painting inspired by the Pembrokeshire coast – “drew looking inland from inlets and estuaries” (Neve, p. 101.) and was interested in the disorientating effects when the horizontality of the coast became vertical in his paintings. As we have seen in chapter 2, close lived experience of the site throughout this research repositions me; the boat dweller is immersed into the land. The immersion I describe is not purely to do with the physical however. Familiar experience through daily engagement means that this is a relationship with land itself, rather than the distanced, scenic concept of landscape. Through this deep engagement I depart the role of an observer and become part of the ecology of the site. My being there has effects on all other forms of matter that collect at the site. This immersive experience engages all the senses (Berleant, 2012, p. 56) and does not seek to divide matter in such a way that is required by linear perspective. Through the aesthetic of a warped or confusing sense of perspective, might the paintings become performative of the immersive qualities which constitute this experience? As previously noted, in the studio I adopt a playful approach which engages the agency of the materials at hand. Neve asserted that is necessary first to relinquish the idea of a single viewpoint in order to have a chance at conveying the sensation of being in a particular place, and to summon its essential nature (1990, p. 161). Through this approach to materials, and the dynamic activity of painting, the paintings are evocative of the canal in myriad, subtle ways, whilst also being new experiences unique unto themselves. The paintings are abstract in a

way, in the sense that they are abstracted *from* the canal: an amalgamation of experiences, explored through painting. Perhaps they are places themselves; in each painting a “place is conveyed through another place: the place of the painting itself” (Casey, 2002, p. 121.) What might the implications be of the highly personal and complex set of relationships described here for the paintings, and how might this shape a productive, meaningful way in which painting can address the landscape of the Anthropocene (RQ 1)? It is critical to take into account that the experience of viewing a painting about the canal differs greatly from the experience of moving through the canal in person. Arnold Berleant comments on the fruitfulness of this supposed binary: “the process does not go from art to nature, as Wilde had it, or from nature to art, an order that Plato condemned. It is, rather, reciprocal, each nourishing the other” (2012, p. 58). The proposition Berleant offers highlights the dynamic, circuitous interrelation between land and painting about land, or indeed, any place we might encounter. This comes into high definition throughout the lived experience, where the experience of place – the site – starts to merge with the experience of the paintings. The paintings are evocative of the site, but in turn, my experience of the site is perceived with the developing aesthetic of the paintings in mind, as was exemplified in an analysis of ‘The Reeds have been Cut’ (2022) (fig. 16) in the previous chapter. My lived experience incorporates and folds together an immersion in both the site and in the practice of painting; therefore, understandings of the site and understandings of the paintings come to inform one another. Unlike conventional structures for the practice of landscape painting, in which a painter might work ‘en plein air’ responding directly to their chosen landscape, or cases where a painter might work in the studio responding to a photograph, this research subverts the approach to painting landscape, by drawing on

the lived experience. This entanglement is crucial to the practice-research as it allows a slow apprehension of the site to develop, which is informed from a multitude of different angles; a rich, deep relation with the site which informs the development of the paintings, and in turn might deepen a viewer's understanding of the canal site.

Collective Analysis

In this section we cast our attention once again to my paintings, so that the implications for the research which have arisen within this discussion so far can be considered in more detail. So far, as we have seen, these groupings of paintings are – to an extent – distinguished through their distinct approaches to materiality, all of which carry different histories of the respective mediums. However, all the paintings are in dialogue with one another, and in this part of the discussion, the ways in which the paintings might contribute to Nixon's challenge of finding ways to create meaningful aesthetics for the slow violence (2011) which the Anthropocene brings forth are explored. Moreover, this discussion considers this aesthetic in more detail, in terms of the implications for the paintings. How does this aesthetic create a 'performative' (Bolt, 2004) dimension embodied by the paintings? In what ways might this body of work be thought of as evocative of the site; how might the paintings be re-presentations (Casey, 2002) of experiences of the site? And finally, this discussion contemplates how these qualities are pertinent for paintings which endeavour to rouse emotional resonance in the viewer (see chapter 5). In addition to analysing the aesthetics of individual paintings, the discussion reaches further and considers how modes of display might

augment the new understandings of the site which these paintings yield.

Of the many aspects which link these paintings, perhaps surface is the logical starting point. Recalling the title of this research project – *On Shaky Ground: Land, Paint and Change* – brings to mind the central concerns of this research which are encapsulated in the surface of the paintings. The surfaces are what might be thought of through a Romantic sensibility as ‘shaky ground’: that is, they are fragile, precarious and in some cases compromised. As we know from chapter 1, ‘ground’ in this research refers also to the ground outside: the land, the surface of the site. Ground in terms of the canal, is also shaky: the site is in flux, and is structurally compromised at points by material scenarios. The paintings discussed in this chapter exhibit a spectrum of different surface qualities, all of which can be traced back to the surfaces encountered at the canal site. That is, they ‘re-present’ (Casey, 2002) certain surface qualities, and in doing so become performative (Bolt, 2004) of an experience of the site. They encapsulate an aesthetic which bears the potential to bring emotionally to life the threats that the Anthropocene brings forth – that never materialise in one spectacular, explosive, cinematic scene, but rather take time to wreak their havoc (Nixon, 2011, p. 14).

At times the paintings bare traces of one another. Stains seem to spread between different works, through different materials. It is almost as if we are seeing different perspectives of the same encounter, each haunted by the other. For example, in the painting ‘Brightening’ (2021) (fig. 26), the cement has cured leaving air-bubbles which pucker the surface much like the perforated polypropylene fabric used in ‘At the Bottom of the River’ (2022) (fig.

52) – the surfaces of both paintings are ruptured and compromised in different ways. The blue glow which emits from the centre of ‘Brightening’, has a similar tone to the blue which shines from the scatter glass distributed across the surface of ‘At the Bottom of the River’. Moments of resonance such as these, which occur numerous times throughout this body of work, are not intentional but a consequence of this exploratory approach to painting.

A perhaps less obvious technique which links the paintings is the approach to visual framing which starts at the stage of fieldwork (see chapter 2) and is carried through into the aesthetic of the paintings. This approach to framing visual information helps the ensuing paintings become ‘re-presentational’ (Casey, 2002) and offer an experience which is a reminder of the original encounter. Through close attention to the multi-sensory encounters at the site, I frame portions of the canal using photography. Framing continues through the act of painting, as I add or subtract material, develop a composition, and consider what might be worthy of the viewer’s gaze. By making paintings this way, the viewer is directed towards a new way of looking, and a new way of thinking about the canal. For example, in my painting ‘Tidal’ (2021) (fig. 48; 49) a polypropylene fabric has been dyed with a plant-derived dye and stained in the lower half with green oil paint. Attached to the painting is a print of a photograph – a fieldwork photograph which shows the grimy textures of a canal lock interior wall, taken at close range. The density of the printed image contrasts sharply with the ephemeral qualities of the fabric, which pinned to a wall, hangs loose and will shift slightly if there were to be a breeze in the room. Perhaps this painting is evocative of different sensory engagements with the canal. Perhaps it also embodies certain qualities of the canal-side reeds which shivered

as I photographed them, framed from a low perspective and at close range as if to suggest an immersion in this mass of tall stems (fig. 47).

Summary

In focusing on the practical side of the research, this chapter has established the position of the paintings as central to the project. We have seen how the paintings have come to embrace a spectrum of materiality, and how these materials are employed effectively in relation to the research questions and tributary themes which surround this research. Bolt's theory of the performative power of images (2004) is brought together with Nixon's challenge of finding a way to visualise slow violence (2011), which forms a novel theoretical framework for this practice research. Whilst Nixon acknowledges that tales of slow violence, unfolding over years, decades, or even centuries, cannot match the eye-catching and page-turning power of the imagery of violence so often found in the media, he also notes that emotionally, different kinds of disaster possess unequal heft (2011, p. 3). As we have seen, the canal site may not, on first impression, be explicitly suggestive of environmental disaster, but in many ways, it is host to processes of slow violence. In developing an aesthetic which encapsulates the slow, layered actions of matter and materials as they coalesce at the site, the paintings 'perform' the qualities of slow violence. In doing so, they bring to bear that which goes unseen at the site. The element of performativity within the paintings is important in that the experience of the paintings becomes multi-sensory rather than purely visual. This increases the likelihood that a viewer might have an emotional response to the work – the pertinence of this is

revealed in Chapter 5. In the next chapter, the discussion moves on to explore in greater depth the significance of the investigative relationship to materials which this research has developed, elaborating on how these materials are apprehended, and the theories which shape this understanding.

Visual Interlude C



Figure 55. Regent's canal, Broadway market. Towpath. 2021.



Figure 56. Regent's canal, Mile end

Lock architecture.

2022.



Figure 57. Hertford Union canal, Hackney. Towpath. 2021.



Figure 58. Marielle Hehir

'Haunt'

Polypropylene, pigments, binder, photograph on

synthetic fabric, oilstick, cotton, wood

H 65 x W 65cm

2021



Figure 59. 'Haunt' (detail).



Figure 60. Lee Navigation, Waltham Abbey. Towpath. 2022.



Figure 61. Lee Navigation, Bow locks. Towpath. 2021.

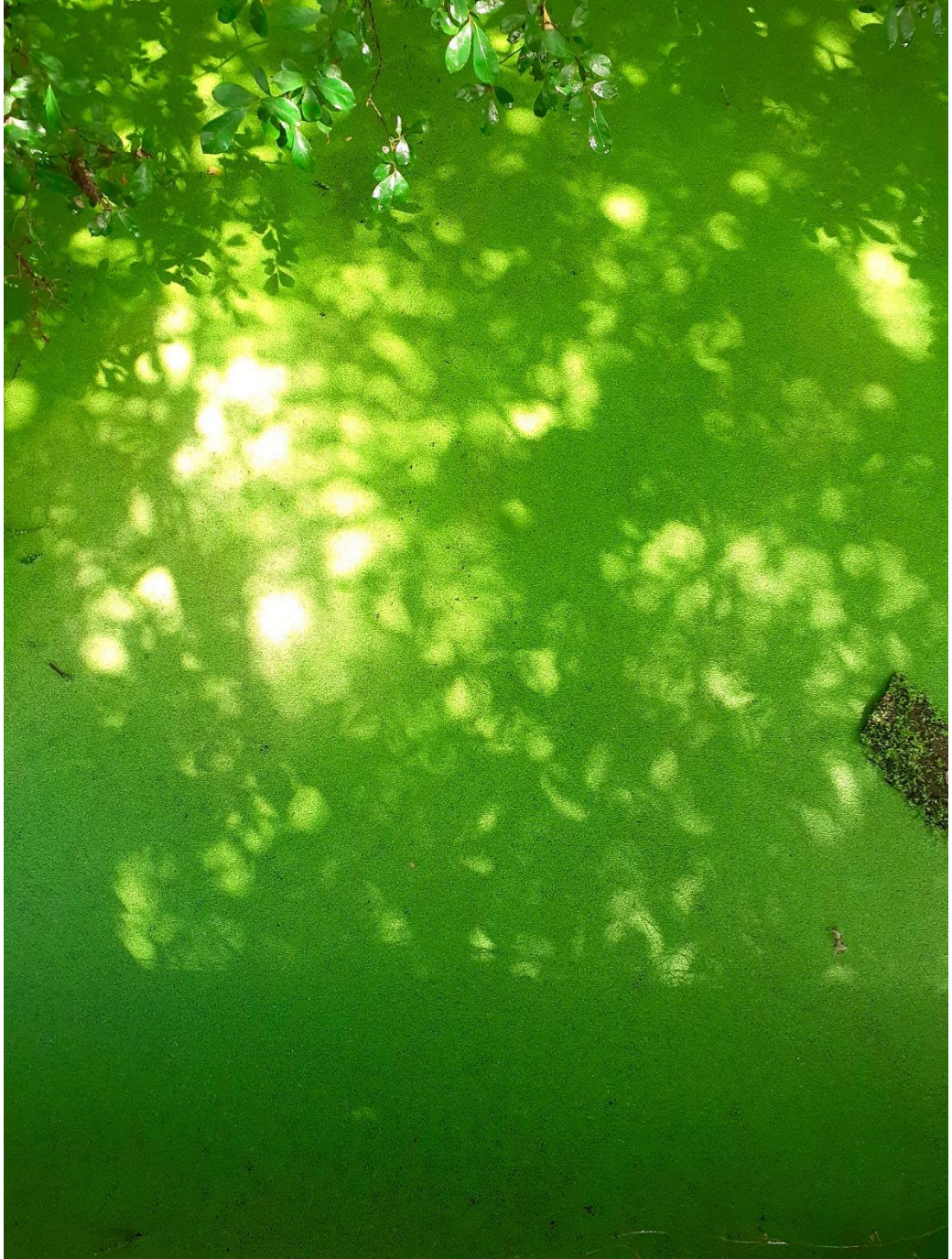


Figure 62. Lee Navigation, Cheshunt. Surface of the canal water. 2022.



Figure 63. Lee Navigation, Bromley-by-bow.

Surface of the canal water.

2022.

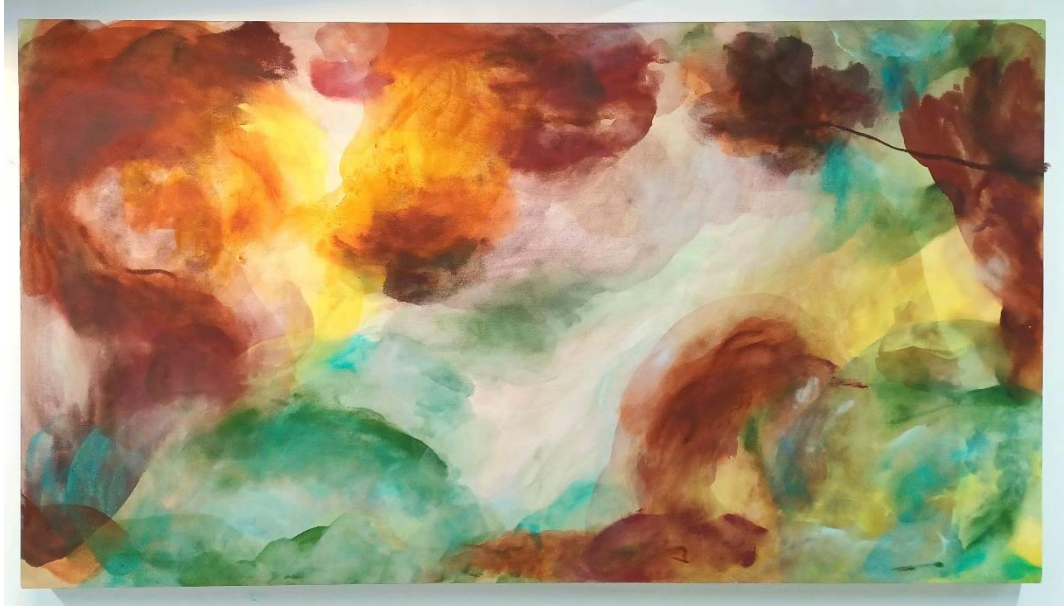


Figure 64. Marielle Hehir

'To Look Up or Down was Frightening'

Pigment, binder, oil-pigment stick on cotton.

H110 x W 200cm.

2022.

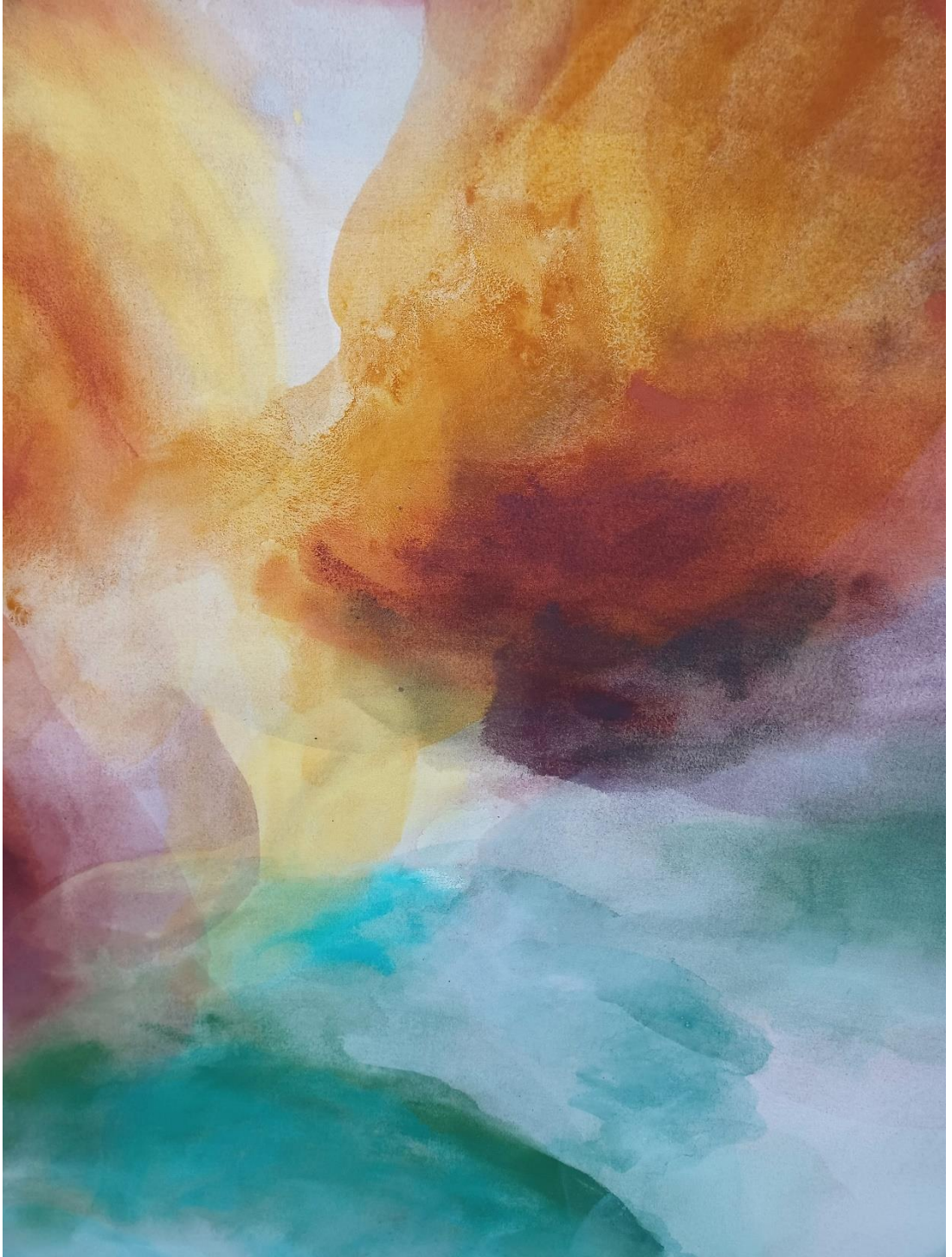


Figure 65. 'To Look Up or Down was Frightening' (detail).



Figure 66. Lee Navigation, Walthamstow marshes. 2022.



Figure 67. Regent's canal, Mile end.

Wier architecture.

2021



Figure 68. John Martin (1789–1854)

‘Ruins of an Ancient City’

Oil on paper mounted on canvas

H 95.6 x W 118.6 cm

c. 1810 – 1820

Photo credit: The Cleveland Museum of Art



Figure 69. John Constable (1776-1837)

'Hadleigh Castle, The Mouth of the Thames--Morning after a Stormy Night'

Oil on canvas

H 121.9 × W 164.5 cm.

1829

Collection of Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection

Digital image courtesy of Yale Center for British Art.

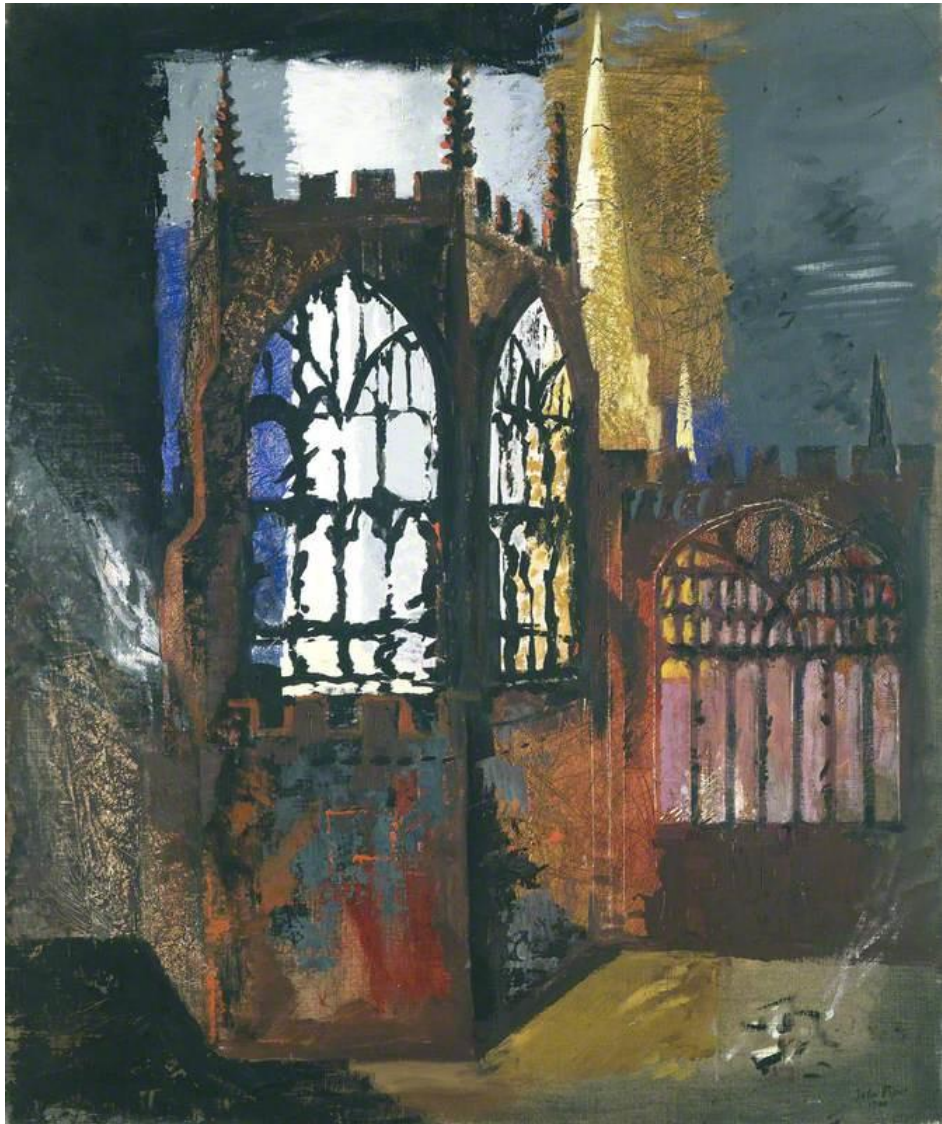


Figure 70. John Piper (1903–1992)

'Coventry Cathedral, 15 November, 1940'

Oil on plywood

H 76.2 x W 63.4 cm

1940

Manchester Art Gallery

Photo credit: Manchester Art Gallery



Figure 71. Lee Navigation, Hackney marshes. Towpath. 2023.



Figure 72. Marielle Hehir

'Pushing Across the Country'

Ceramic, various glazes, oil paint

H 13 x W 17cm

2023.



Figure 73. Lee navigation, Enfield. 2021.



Figure 74. Lee Navigation, Hackney marshes. 2023.



Figure 75. Regent's canal, Mile end. 2021.



Figure 76. Lee Navigation, Cheshunt. 2021.



Figure 77. Lee Navigation, Hackney Marshes. Canal water. 2020.



Figure 78. Lee Navigation, Bow. Towpath. 2020.



Figure 79. Marielle Hehir

‘Slipping Grade’

Oilstick, pigment, watercolour, cheesecloth fabric coloured with natural dye, plaster.

H 28 x W 33cm

2020.

Chapter 4: Vibrant Matter and Earth–Life Painting

The focus of this chapter is to elaborate on my engagement with the site as a deeply attentive perception of the material intricacies that make up land. These points are woven together with bodies of thought relevant to this research, all of which emphasise the act of close-looking, an awareness of the enmeshment of matter, and the interrelation of other elements – the weather conditions, location, and context for example – which effect perception. The bringing together of these seemingly disparate areas of thought in the context of this research from a painter’s perspective brings this approach into an explorative territory and is one of the key points of originality within this project. Although the theories being adopted here were written centuries apart, this discussion establishes links between them and discusses their myriad relations with this research, whilst asserting their relevance within the context of the Anthropocene. The discussion starts with a look at New Materialism; ideas from this area of critical theory which are key to this research, namely Jane Bennett’s notion of “thing power” (2010, p. 5) in relation to what she calls “vibrant matter” (2010, p. 3). Bennett’s theory is significant for this research in that she articulates a particular way of perceiving matter but assigns reason for this to matter itself – that is, she asserts the agency of matter. The discussion continues with an introduction of the term ‘earth–life painting’, (*Erdlebenbild*), coined in 1831 by Carl Gustav Carus (1789–1869) (2002, p. 119). In addition, ways in which this term resonates with the approach that this research takes to painting an experience of land are made clear. The parallels between Carus’ way of perceiving the natural world and key ideas within New Materialism are considered in a way that creates new knowledge regarding both. Furthermore, the chapter also explores ways in which

my paintings might be thought of as earth–life paintings (Carus, 2002, p. 119) in the contemporary time.

Ideas from these theories help to illuminate the mode of perceptive experience this research embodies, which draws largely on European Romantic thought of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and contemporary New Materialism. As Rigby suggests, we are still living in the wake of Romanticism (2014, p. 62), the movement which Isaiah Berlin, speaking in 1965, stated was the catalyst for “the greatest single shift in the consciousness of the West” (1999, p. 6). The core of the reasoning behind drawing these connections is that this current body of work has become a material investigation, largely due to my desire to explore unfamiliar territory for painting during this speculative time for the climate (Streeby, 2018; Tyszczyk, 2021). As chapter 7 makes clear, many contemporary painters are engaging in materials–led practices, which explore land and landscape, however, none of the practitioners selected for discussion adopt an approach which brings together the range of theories that this research does, in such a novel way. The area in which Carus’ Romanticism and contemporary New Materialism cross over carries a sense of the past within the present, and creates a powerful set of tensions (Bracewell, 2009, xiv – xvii). These tensions have become the realm within which this research operates. The emphasis of this discussion is in exploring the relevance and value of this mode of perceptive experience in the context of the Anthropocene, and what painting might do as part of this experience. Whilst the relationship between the Industrial Revolution and the Anthropocene have been commented on elsewhere (Zalasiewicz et al., 2008), concerning the fact that they exemplify turbulent times which give rise to the Romantic, and later Neo–romantic sensibilities (Macfarlane, 2019b), Carus’ theories have not

been re-contextualized for the contemporary time by a painter in the way that this research seeks to.

To explore the relevance which both New Materialism and Romanticism have for this body of painting research – framed by the research questions detailed in chapter 1 – this chapter is punctuated with detailed analyses of my paintings. These interjections demonstrate unusual possibilities for painting which are nurtured by, and come into being within, this zone of crossover. The discussion considers the renewed relevance of a Romantic position today, which is brought into the contemporary via New Materialism, whilst making a case for the experience of paintings as having a unique ability to cultivate change in thought. Kate Soper has addressed the productive potential of revisiting Romantic thought in the present, a notion which she terms “avant-garde nostalgia” (2011, p. 23). Soper admits to the “provocatively contradictory” nature of the term, (2011, p. 23), that causes our gaze to ricochet between the past and the future; a mirroring effect which the Anthropocene also catalyses. The advent of a new geological event “demands the simultaneous conceptualisation of temporal scales that once appeared incommensurable” (Dibley, p. 141) – in other words, it forces us to think of deep geological time as much as the relatively brief time of human existence and what might come next. The usefulness of avant-garde nostalgia (Soper, 2011, p. 23) is that it can “capture a movement of thought that remembers, and mourns, that which is irretrievable, but also attains to a more complex political wisdom and energy in the memorialising process itself” (Soper, 2011, p. 23). Chapter 3 *Account of Practice*, articulated how my paintings are made through an enmeshment of lived encounters: they embody the act of bearing witness to the present. In chapter 5, the discussion focuses in on the notion that the process of making the

paintings is a way of dealing with ecological grief that can be felt in the present – what Cunsolo Willox describes as “the work of mourning” (2012). Furthermore, for this research, which experiences the site of the canal as a place where a material exchange occurs between the past, present and future, (see chapters 1 and 2) the term “avant-garde nostalgia” (Soper, 2011, p. 23) is useful to carry with us. If painting can perhaps be thought of as a process of memorialising, or at least commemorating, (see chapter 5 for an expansion on this), then the attention given to the vibrant, out-of-context matter, both at the canal and in the studio, can develop new understandings and knowledge, of matter, place and painting. We can also think through the paintings as embodying the idea of ‘avant-garde nostalgia’ as their aesthetic is developed through a contemplation of my experiences which are now past, but also speculates on future potential material conditions within the context of the Anthropocene. In doing so, the complexity of the experience of the paintings is brought into new light and new possibilities for the paintings start to shimmer. For example, my painting ‘Haunt’ (2021) (fig. 59; 59) engages with certain aspects of the painting discipline that have come to be thought of as traditional; for instance, the painting takes a square format and is wall based. However, through the incorporation of materials which point to the Anthropocene (polypropylene), imagery of material artefacts at the canal (a collaged photograph), and the way this painting has been painted using techniques of staining and thin transparent washes of paint, an aesthetic develops which acknowledges the history of landscape painting, as well as being a novel, imaginative proposition for painting. Jill Bennet introduces the term “empathic vision” to describe an artwork’s capacity for revealing “a way of seeing and feeling” which arises from a maker’s “sustained engagement” with the consequences

of violent or traumatic events (2005, p. 21). I would suggest that this applies to my lived, embedded experience of the canal site, wherein I bear witness to the slow-violence (Nixon, 2011) which the Anthropocene brings forth. From the act of witnessing, through the act of making, my paintings commemorate past experiences; yet they are also relics for the future which may enable us, in some new and different way, to experience what we once could, but perhaps no longer can.

New Materialism: The Matter of the Canal

In chapter 2 *Methodology*, I elucidated on the material configuration of the canal site. In this chapter, the enquiry takes a deeper look at what these materials might be, whilst also incorporating matter – those material entities which are or have become unknown; seemingly without purpose and lacking an easy identification. Let us start where the paintings begin: by seeking insight into the encounters with matter found whilst moving through the canals. Let us look at what is meant by ‘matter’ in relation to this research specifically, and what forms that matter might take. It is the water, the aquatic plants which grow under the surface, the plant life which lines the towpath. But it is also the concrete which gives structure to the gentle undulation or crashing flow of the water as it passes through a lock, the plastic bags which lie exhausted and entangled in the shade of a bush, the rainbow-sheen of diesel which sits like a skin on the surface of the water in parts, and it is the fragments of rusting metal subsumed by the mud underwater (fig. 63; 67; 71; 77). It is all of these things, and more, which are taken into account for this research, and they are perceived closely, not from a distance, which guides an intimate

understanding of the site, and eventually crystalizes in paintings which are evocative of this understanding. These material encounters are what Jane Bennett would describe as “vibrant matter” (2010, p. 3). In her book Bennett describes an equivalent encounter, in which for her “objects appear as things, that is, as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subject sets them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics” (2010, p. 5). In other words, all of these entities have agency – which seems to become particularly illuminated when presented out of context. By focusing on the canal site, this research has developed an understanding of the vibrant materiality of the canal; what to expect there, or what might be found there yet still be apprehended as being out of context – as demonstrated in the examples above.

Paying astute attention to, and “reconfiguring our very understanding of matter are prerequisites for any plausible account of coexistence and its conditions in the twenty-first century”, as Coole and Frost have argued (2010, p. 2). At the core of New Materialism is the notion that all matter has agency and the potential therefore to influence other matter; material; things. It is pertinent to work with theories belonging to New Materialism thought in the context of the Anthropocene, which as we have seen, is the lens through which this practice research is carried out (see chapter 1). Moreover, by creating paintings which engage with New Materialism, this research adds to the arena, in that it creates unique aesthetic forms which assimilate elements of what these theories attend to. That is to say, the aesthetic developed through this practice-research, is a merging of a Romantic sensibility, with an appreciation for the agency of materials. This research draws out the matter of the canal, and takes a long, sustained look at it, in order to develop new understandings of

its unique ecologies, and question how painting may find ways to evoke this material experience. New Materialism calls for slow observation of all matter, including more-than-human living matter, and all other non-living matter (Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2012, p. 113). As we have seen in the previous chapters, the canal encourages, and in some respects, forces slowness. A protracted, slow understanding of time and what might characterise this (Sachs, 2018, p. 162.) is integral to this research. It is through slow movement that I become perceptive to the vibrancy of matter (Bennett, 2010). I start to notice, to dwell on the tiny specks of duckweed under the moving water within the canal lock, which dance like glitter as they are propelled by the flow. I notice also, the rope which lies stiff in the grass as the side of the path. Its neon orange colouring now only clinging on in the meeting points between threads, the rest, faded and frayed from its time underwater (fig. 62; 74; 76). How might examples such as these take on greater significance within the context of the Anthropocene, and when thinking through New Materialism? The Anthropocene is a material condition itself; the very classification of this new geological epoch is decided through material terms. The spectrum of materiality which catalyses the Anthropocene is all encompassing and wide ranging in scale and size. From the microscopic heavy metal and persistent organic pollutants which pepper the environment (Chen and Dong et al., 2021), nuclide fall out in the atmosphere from nuclear weapon tests, and spheroidal carbonaceous particles (SCPs) which are by-products of fossil-fuelled industrial activity (Tan and Wang et al., 2019, p. 1643), through to the enormous numbers of discarded bones from the specifically bred broiler chicken found worldwide, (the bone chemistry of which differs radically from their ancestors) (Bennett et al., 2018), and plastics as sedimentary deposits, buried in the earth's strata (Zalasiewicz et al.,

2016, p. 7). These examples of types of matter are all markers of the Anthropocene, and by this definition, are all human caused. Humans, composed of various material parts, are also matter – walking, talking, minerals (Bennett, 2010, p. 10). Humans are, overwhelmingly, the matter which has had the most influence on any other types of matter. We do things with and to matter and the Anthropocene makes it clear that we are manipulating and reconfiguring matter on an unprecedented scale (Coole and Frost, 2010, p. 8). Matter's entanglement with the conditions of the Anthropocene is such that it is both a cause of and product of the new geological era. As a host of material is extracted and deposited from and around the earth's surface through human activity, matter moves and displaces other matter on a gargantuan scale. Micro-plastics are now found both in Arctic waters (Lusher and Tirelli et al., 2015) and in human placenta (Ragusa and Svelato et al., 2021) for example. These conditions, which continue to shift in an ever more detrimental manner to life on earth, are testament to the pertinence of the close study of matter. For in moving from the global, to the local, we can zoom in, scrutinise and hope to develop new understandings of these conditions.

On first encountering the canal, and/or seeing the canal from a distance, this detailed amalgamation of matter might not be picked up on straight away. In scientific terms, the canal is not a marker of the Anthropocene: that is, it does not constitute a “golden spike” which is a “physical reference point in strata at one carefully selected place” (Zalasiewicz et al., 2017, p. 58), the canal, in parts, is certainly an example of the ‘*Anthroposcenic*’ (Matless, 2018). It has what David Matless describes as a particular landscape aesthetic (2018), which is important to consider when addressing the question of how art might go about depicting this new epoch (RQ 1). Relevant for this research,

Matless also uses the word 'emblematic' in his proposal for an Anthropogenic aesthetic. However, although his argument touches upon some of the concerns within this research, his considerations deal with a scenic appreciation of landscape. This project builds on the conversation Matless started, as my approach to landscape painting is not scenic, it is immersive – as chapter 6 explores further. Thus, the angle of the question which considers how landscape might become emblematic of the Anthropocene, shifts from a distanced perspective, to a close one. Moreover, perhaps, that which becomes emblematic of the Anthropocene (see RQ 2), expands beyond the visual. It is the matter which makes up the experience of the canal, which engages not just the visionary, but all the senses, that this research explores. There is a particular ecology of matter to be found at the canal. Some materials appear frequently; water, iron, concrete and hedgerows being the most obvious perhaps. Others appear frequently too, but in a less orderly matter; detritus, shopping trolleys, broken glass, collect in and around the canal towpaths, and often in the water too (fig. 61; 78). But always there are surprises, matter which is so out-of-place, or so worn and disfigured by its journey here that it has become unrecognisable. Nevertheless, such matter still has agency, the power to affect other matter and is a contributor to what makes the experience of the canal so compelling. To summarise, in the context of this research, 'matter' is to be understood as all the material entities which are encountered throughout the experience of the site, organic and non-organic. It is the materiality of the site, but it is also the particular combinations of materials, along with their decay and shifting levels of recognisability *as materials or things*.

Vibrant Matter: The Romance of Industrial Ruin and Debris

“One such is the romantic reflection on vanished or vanishing times and spaces, and the importance of promoting this kind of retrospection in the current context: of reconnecting with a tradition of acknowledged and lamented, if also always cognitively self-realizing, forms of loss”
(Soper, 2011, p. 23).

Thinking of the clustering of matter, material and things described above, which are repelled or absorbed, what might the ramifications of this be for the canal? It certainly serves as a reminder that, as we have seen in previous chapters, the use of the canal today varies since it no longer used for the industrial and commercial purposes for which it was built. The site of the canal this research focuses on, has been reclaimed by many forms of life – in parts this includes around 400 species of plants, insects and animals (Lewis, 2017, p. 31). However, despite this, or maybe because of this in some of the more overgrown areas, the canal in some sense sits in the margins of what might be considered an industrial ruin. As Soper describes in the epigraph to this section, it is important to retain a connection with past human endeavours; this connection might be established through considering the canal site through the forms of loss which it embodies. Furthermore, it is useful to consider the canal in these terms, as through doing so we are again encouraged to take a closer look at the materiality of the site.

The Romantic tradition recognised that ruins offer a powerful icon of decline made visible (Sachs, 2018, p. 119). Christopher Woodward (2001) has commented on the creative stimulus which architectural

ruins became for the Romantics; ruined amphitheatres, churches and cathedrals abound in both the prose and painting of this period. A select few examples in terms of paintings would be ‘Ruins of an Ancient City’ (c. 1810 – 1820) (fig. 68) by John Martin (1789–1854); ‘Hadleigh Castle’ (1829) by John Constable (1776–1837) (fig. 69); and, to include a much later example, ‘Coventry Cathedral, 15th November, 1940’ (1940) by Neo-Romantic artist John Piper (1903 – 1992) (fig. 70). For the Romantics, who experienced a rapid sense of acceleration in the pace of life at the time through industrial progress, as well as an awareness of the gradual changes this would have on the natural world, the ruin signified a particular type of tension that this entanglement brought about (Sachs, 2018, p. 165). This tension is recognisable again today in the context of the Anthropocene, and the material ruins which define it. These perhaps are not so grandiose, gothic, or enchanting as the crumbling, overgrown architecture the early Romantics were attracted to. Indeed, the canal is a very different type of ruin, to those which featured in the examples given. So how might the canal be situated within common understandings of what an architectural ruin is? Dillon suggests that “ruination is also a process or an action, not only an image [...] the ruin has a dialectical relationship with landscape” (2014, p. 36). In being in relationship with the land it was built within, the canal is not autonomous in its fall into ruination – there are other elements at play. Organic and synthetic matter which populate the canal site are engulfed within it and at points encourage decay or disrepair, and this is continuously changing and subject to further influence. However, there is a tangible presence of the past still to be felt and seen in certain remnants of the structure of the canal, and to be ascertained through witnessing the links it makes between the country and the city. Canals can reveal a lot about this country’s past. Their

trajectory reminds us of yesterday's ways of moving goods from one place to another (Hudson, 1976, p. 7), and with that Britain's place in the world at the time of the 'canal age' (c.1770 – 1830) as an industrial power – which was largely reliant on the economic foundation of slavery (McIvor, 2015, p. 107; Matthews, 2020). It is also thanks in part to the near abandonment of the canals from the 1830's onwards that they have become a haven for wildlife as mentioned and foster the unique ecology they do today. It is significant for this research to recognise the history of the site, as the canals are intrinsically linked to the contemporary climate crisis, in that they were the arteries of the Industrial Revolution (Sergeant and Bartley, 2015, p. 8), which some suggest is a marker in time which galvanised the Anthropocene (Crutzen, 2000, p. 17; Zalasiewicz et al., 2017, p. 56). The relationship of canals to the climate crisis is a critical point within this research. This relationship is assessed through addressing a material legacy; post Industrial Revolution, and post this prominent period of activity for the canals, it is pertinent to shed light on what is left behind at the site of these constructed waterways.

Whilst the Romantic painters mentioned earlier included ruins in scenic landscape paintings, this research contemplates the canal as a site in flux which, due to its materiality, becomes a site for creative practice full of expanding potentials (Heeney, 2017). There is a desire to explore the ruin, particularly for the artistically inclined, who might be attracted to “the romance of architectural decay” (Heeney, 2017, xx). Today, this enchantment means something different to the value the early Romantics placed on the ruin, and has other implications for knowledge-making within artistic practice. Whilst artists in the nineteenth century found inspiration in the deterioration of previously

magnificent structures, they employed ruins in paintings in order to adhere to picturesque ideals (see chapter 6). In contrast, for this research, understanding the site not as a static, 'dead' ruin, but as a structure which embodies the process of ruination, questions are raised regarding the legacies left through human intervention with the land.

As we have seen in previous chapters, I explore the canal and its varied stages of decay, ruin, and re-enforcement from a close perspective. I have become attuned to the vibrancy of matter at the site. How, then, might matter function within the idea of ruination, engage the senses and illicit a personal response? What to one individual might seem like a discarded array of stuff which holds little or no significance, to another who is willing to dwell in the phenomenological realm of perception, might be a collection of things which activate sensations and are compelling in their mysterious existence. Matter, once in the process of decay and positioned in new locations by chance, contravenes our usual sense of perspective and becomes unfamiliar and enigmatic (Edensor, 2005b, p. 321). For example, the scrap of rusting metal I encounter at the bottom of the canal is even more *vibrant* because it is not meant to be there. Bennett describes the term "thing-power" which she defines as "the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (2010, p. 6). In the case of the rusting metal, when encountered in this context, it is no longer merely an object – it is a thing which is noticed for the effects it produces. The metal shimmers underwater, its wholeness fragments as the water flows and refracts light. The colours of the metal shift as shadows pass over from the clouds above. What is left of the silver surface

glints in the light whilst the rusty patina camouflages part of the metal against the grimy floor of the canal.

A reading of Bennett's theory, within the context of this research, might lead us to a rather Romantic interpretation of matter, in which the detritus deposited around the canal is as meaningful in the contemporary, as the castles and cathedrals were to the early Romantics. But what are the consequences for this practice-research, of a sensitivity to matter at the canal, whilst thinking through Bennett's theories, and how might this help shape the paintings? In being openly perceptive to the 'vibrancy of matter' (Bennett, 2010), opportunities arise "to engage with the material world in a more playful, sensual fashion than is usually afforded in the smoothed over space of much urban space" (Edensor, 2005b, p. 325). I wanted to linger for example, with the translucent, white, paper-thin form which ballooned from the motionless, acid-green surface of the canal water. (fig. 75). In this instance, I allowed my engagement with this 'vibrant matter' to become playful, as I crouched down on the towpath to bring the form into my line-of-sight and experienced with all my senses, the rhythms of the white form. Three-dimensional yet hollow inside, the white membrane buckled under the breeze and the shape transformed. There was a delicate crackling of air between the densely packed leaves and a pungent, fresh smell of the duckweed completed the tableau. All the while the green carpet retained its velvet lustre, eerily calm and serene surrounding the form, which continued to move in a debilitated manner: the green trapped the shape in place and restricted its movements. And I realised tiny speckles of green had broken away from the surface and come to infect the pure white form. We see from such descriptions of experience that 'vibrant matter' engages all the senses. Might this be

then, a Romanticism for the Anthropocene – a changing world which prompts fluctuating understandings of the concept of what nature is (Soper, 1995; Morton, 2009; Giraud and Soulard, 2015), and gives equal attention to the discarded, forgotten, new, or foreign materials which have become part of the land.

Painting, which delivers an experience which is evocative of this original encounter, should also in some way, carry some emotional resonance and activate a viewer's senses. A lived, sensory experience has the capacity to create a changed or new meaning of the focused experiences (Fazey, I., Fazey, J. A., and Fazey, D. M. A. 2005; Paulsen, 2020), and the engagement of the senses is vital in creating memory and meaning. By this notion, paintings which engage with haptic or sonic potentialities, through the visual sensor, also share this capacity. In the following section the paintings, and how their materiality relates to the vibrant matter (Bennett, 2010, p. 3) at the canal site are explored.

The Vibrant Matter of Painting

Shifting from the encounters with matter at the site, and into the domain of painting, the question arises of how 'thing-power' (Bennett, 2010, p. 5) might operate within a painting. Can painting convey the thing-power as encountered between material beings at the canal? And through doing so, does the painting develop a kind of thing-power in and of itself? Paintings, after all, are collections of matter which sit together in such a way that – potentially – can attract a viewer's attention. As Christopher Neve put it: a painting “is not an inert object which apes the appearance of something else, but it must have a life

of its own as intense and readily communicable as the life we recognize in natural phenomena, and it should be as surprising and as difficult to pin down as they are” (2020, p. 162). In other words, paintings have agency, they can produce effects and even move a viewer in profound ways. The materials, paint and otherwise, employed in these paintings, are not used as a vehicle to render ideas; they are treated as collaborators. Throughout the process of painting, they exhibit their own qualities (see *Methodology*). The act of painting is therefore “a correspondence between maker and material” (Ingold, 2013, xi). Of course, the collection of matter which coalesces within a painting does so via processes which differ from the nomadic life of matter which is encountered along the canal. What the process of painting might do for matter, is imbue it with new, added or changed meaning. We recognise paintings as such before we recognise them as matter: then any *meaning* which has been instilled into the painting by the painter is brought to life. For these reasons, might this be thought of as a different type of thing–power (Bennett, 2010, p. 5) to that which vibrates from the matter at the canal. New Materialism recognises this entanglement of matter and meaning that makes up the experience of an artwork (Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2012, p. 91). We might ask how meaning comes to be imbued in a painting; or in other words, how does the experience of situated thing–power come to infect the ‘thing–power’ of a painting? The kinds of meanings which might be drawn from my paintings point to a profound experience which engages with the concept of landscape from many angles, and raises questions around how others my perceive landscape today. For example, in my painting ‘Slipping Grade’ (2000), (fig. 79) pigmented plaster melds with and traps a scrap of cheesecloth which has been dyed with chlorophyll (a plant–based dye). These materials are types of matter which have different physical qualities. The composition of

this painting allows space for both: the plaster at the top of the painting forms two irregular peaks, whilst in the lower half the green fabric, in contrast, rests softly within the directional flow of gravity's pull. Towards the centre, these types of matter become enmeshed within one another, the surface of the painting both undulates topographically and seems to shimmer as the green gauze weaves its way across the flaky blue plaster. These types of matter seem to set one another off, yet through their marriage the painting embodies a type of thing-power. In thinking through this question with the given example, we are reminded of both materiality and the importance of the relationship to the site; the experience which creates meaning. If it had not been for my encounters with geosynthetics or abandoned detritus left at the canal - types of matter which interweave and create meaning for this research - would this painting have come to be? In order to untangle our questions so far, and further define the characteristics of these types of thing-power, focus is now brought to the Romantic era once again. The following section considers how these questions - regarding relationships to landscape sites and painting - might have been approached previously, and what insights from a past era, which in some ways parallels the age of the Anthropocene, can offer this research.

Earth-Life Painting

In this chapter so far, I have highlighted the generative nature of matter through thing-power (Bennett, 2010, p. 5), and how a very particular relationship to the site of the canal can shape the paintings, which in turn are evocative of the vibrancy of matter found here. As I have described, this personal enchantment with matter has parallels

with the Romanticism of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which stressed the importance of expressing authentic personal feelings (Forward, 2014). What Romanticism and New Materialism have in common is the search for new territories of meaning which evade the facts of matter and instead concentrate on the experiential. In other words, matter, or things, are perceived through “their essential forms in the way they actually appear, not as they are “supposed” to appear according to the scientific concepts of our “natural attitude” (Johnson, 1993, p. 8). To explore this link further, and in a way that reveals a relationship with this research, I will now introduce Carl Gustav Carus (1789 – 1869) a German physiologist, naturalist, scientist, artist and philosopher and his theories on the experience of the natural world and the practice of painting. This section outlines how Carus’ thinking offers an interesting perspective on twenty-first century New Materialism, and holds new relevance in the context of the Anthropocene. The bringing together of these areas of thought, and these specific theories, is a novel lineage within this research. For example, when Carus said “There is an element of abstraction and abnegation involved in treating the external world no longer simply as the element in which we live and act but as something with a beauty and sublimity of its own” (2002, p. 39), he was touching upon a line of thought that, I would suggest, becomes all the more explicitly defined in the theory of New Materialism. He was calling attention to the force, operation and influence of things we encounter in the world; thoughts which preceded yet resonate in some ways with the thinking of twenty-first century New Materialism (Bennett, 2010; Coole and Frost, 2010; Barrett and Bolt, 2013). Mark A. Cheetham has previously made a case for recontextualising Carus’ work as “of the Anthropocene”, largely due to the understanding that “he construed human history and the history of the earth as

intertwined” (2018, p. 64) – Carus was aware of the interdependency of humans with all other organisms. Carus’ very personal way of perceiving meant that he appreciated the connections to be found through the mimicry of forms in the minutiae as much as on a larger scale he “saw rocks as elements and building blocks of larger landscapes” (Allert, 2016, p. 197). He was aware of what Bennett would later define as vibrant matter (2010, p .3), and the possibilities that things, including humans, possess for producing effects in one another. Cheetham’s argument focuses on eco-art in conversation with Carus’ ideas, and therefore differs from the concerns of this research. This project builds on his argument, by applying Carus’ ideas to painting, and specifically this body of practice-research. Examining Carus’ ideas from a painter’s perspective in the contemporary time re-affirms the Romantic bearing that this research takes, and how it might contribute to an environmental tradition that Jonathan Bate has termed “Romantic ecology” (Bate, 1991; Coupe, 2000, p. 13). A tradition which promotes the perception of all natural entities as interrelated (Rigby, 2014, p.65), which today we might think of as an expanding ecology which encompasses all non-living and other-than-human matter. When he introduced this term, Bate opened up the perception of Romanticism; he introduced the ‘green aspect’ of this sensibility. Dialogues around Romanticism since have recognised that a Romantic sensibility equates to a consciousness for the environment; moreover, one which cares deeply for the Earth. Bate’s term resonates with the notion of ‘composting’ (Rasula, 2002) – the paintings, as I have discussed in chapter 3, are a ‘composting’ of matter and meaning. For this practice-research then, a relationship with Romantic ecology draws on the perception of the tangible, entangled materiality of the site, but it also draws on the intangible layered history of the canal network, and ways of engaging with it.

Furthermore, this research contributes to Romantic ecology by re-visiting Carus' ideas and recontextualising them for the contemporary time in 'green' ways. By incorporating Carus' theory into the approach to painting developed through this research, the paintings might offer spaces for reflection concerning care for the land, counter to a dialogue around the subject of death (Barnosky et al., 2011; Colebrook, 2019) which arises through the Anthropocene.

In the years 1815 – 1824, Carus grappled with the concept of 'landscape' in his writings *Nine Letters on Landscape Painting*, which was finally published in 1831. A passionate painter himself who studied under and admired Casper David Friedrich, Carus was interested in ways the natural world could be depicted through painting. In particular, paintings that were able to "highlight the unexpected and evoke an insight, an intellectual spark, or emotion" (Allert, 2016, p. 199). However, Carus felt qualified to critique the new generation of landscape painting of his time, whilst also heralding ideas which he insisted would take the genre in a new, elevated direction. Although in the letters he does not specifically name those he found guilty, Carus despairs of his modern painter's apprehension and rendering of the natural world, which for him is too often inadequate. For him this was the blame of teaching at the time, which encouraged young painters to copy the forms seen in the paintings of history landscape painters such as Poussin and Titian. Carus observes that this meant aspiring painters who wished to deal with landscape did so through engagement with the traditions of the field to date and fell into the habit of copying the work of others, rather than engaging with and experiencing land and place for themselves. He critiqued this trajectory which he deems "a principal source of the evils of modern landscape painting; for it gives rise to thousands of paintings that

remind us only of paintings and never of nature itself” (Carus, 2002, p. 124). Instead, Carus believed that paintings should express “life-forms and moods that are referred to as Grundtone or Stimmungen in German and are associated with being in tune with nature and the environment” (Allert, 2016, p. 201). In contrast to his wishes, Carus, in the early nineteenth century, was already bemoaning the dislocation between humans and the natural world, which today has led us to the Anthropocene (McKibben, 1990; Sullivan, 2017; Baruah, 2021. pp. 111 – 128). He identified this self-imposed separation as detrimental to landscape painting and any ability to evoke the true essence of place in a picture.

“People are strangers to the natural landscape itself. They look up at the sky just so much as is necessary to gauge the weather, in order to see whether it is fine enough for a drive or a journey”
(Carus, 2002, p. 129).

Proposing a shift in what had become customary, Carus called for what he termed “earth-life” painting, which, rather than the depiction of scenery which landscape painting tended to provide, would portray the phenomena of earth-life and be mystic in quality; the painter of earth-life paintings would “learn to speak the language of nature and uplift the viewer into a higher contemplation of nature” (Carus, 2002, p. 130). What makes Carus’ theory so significant for this research is that in placing emphasis on the importance of experience and paying attention to the physical matter which the land is comprised of, earth-life painting resonates with the perspective of New Materialism. We might regard the presence of paintings as an entanglement of matter (*earth*) and meaning (*life*). We might also think of Carus’ proposition as a forerunner to Haraway’s notion of the ‘naturalcultural’ (2003, p.

3) which also expresses an argument for the inseparability of the material conditions of earth and life.

As something of a formulation for the instruction of earth-life painting, Carus called for any aspiring painter to develop a deep understanding of the things, matter and materials which were to be the subject of a painting. He wanted young students to get up close to the natural world and experience it for themselves. Simply taking a look wasn't enough though. Carus wanted science to bolster this understanding. He believed the geologist was able to create earth-life renderings of mountains, due to their scientific knowledge of the strata: "in those drawings there was so much inner life, so much character. [...] One could not but prefer these, by far, to other and similar drawings made by experienced artists who failed to understand the true nature of the object represented" (Carus, 2002, p. 126). Aspiring painters, then, should study in micro detail the rocky cliff faces, the species of trees, the flowing water and how these elements interact with and shape each other. What Carus describes, is the intimate relationship with land that this research demonstrates through the lived, embedded experience of the site.

However, in this sense, Carus was unique to his time as he straddled the line between Romanticism and the emphasis on reason or fact which the Romantics tended to have a more flexible relationship with, favouring imagination. An approach which didn't fit squarely into the paradigms of his century (Allert, 2016, p. 201) and wasn't well received at the time (Bätschmann, 2002, p. 45). This is perhaps as Carus had an interest in science before he came to painting – his father was an expert in the chemical production of paint and dyes (Allert, 2016, p. 201) which no doubt would influence Carus'

inquisitive approach to materiality. Carus did, however, insist on the indispensability of experience, and unprejudiced observation (Allert, 2016, p. 201) in combination with a deep understanding of matter, or things which made up the experience. For these reasons, we might find new relevance for this approach in the contemporary, in the context of the Anthropocene. A word which comes from a scientific understanding of the climate, yet at the same time has a powerful effect on how we experience the natural world today. For instance, as has been explained in previous chapters, this research does investigate the science of the Anthropocene through scientific literature (see *Methodology*). However, anything gained from this dimension of the enquiry, serves to guide the inquisitive nature of the exploration at the canal, rather than explain these experiences.

It is important to note at this point that throughout the collection of letters, Carus does not offer us any examples of paintings which demonstrate what he means by earth-life painting (2002, p. 119), and so much is left open to the reader to interpret. This open-endedness is in part what makes the theory of earth-life painting, as Carus left it, so exciting and relevant to this research. In re-examining this theory, via New Materialism, a question arises: might my paintings be thought of as a contemporary example of earth-life painting, and that being the case then where does it sit in relation to contemporary landscape painting? And what new meaning or resonance might the notion of earth-life painting take on in the context of the Anthropocene? Today, the Earth itself, and relationships to and comprehensions of what the natural world contains are vastly different to the time of Carus' writing (Evernden, 1992; Soper, 1995; Morton, 2009), yet the lived, close relationship with non-human matter that this research practices resonates with what Carus called for.

In Carus' lifetime themes which dominated Western landscape painting include the picturesque, the pastoral and the sublime; which are explored in greater detail in chapter 6 *Changing Landscapes*. These types of landscape painting are linked through the ways in which they position the human against nature – human perspective is very much central to any scene and the natural world is portrayed as a scenic arena to be controlled and manipulated; an aesthetic amenity (Andrews, 1999, p. 56). However, in concentrating on the finer details of things, Carus' proposition of a radical earth-life (2002) approach to painting sought to debunk the dominance of the human figure and or perspective. Earth-life painting is painting which is created through true dialogue with a chosen environment. Only through this close dialogue can painting hope to achieve the ability to create an experience which somehow encapsulates some element of truth of the original encounter with the world.

The experience of land, of place, of the site which directs this practice research resonates with Carus' argument for the importance of painting to act, as he put it, as a *reminder* of nature (Carus, 1815–24, p. 124). The lived experience, which frames this research, epitomizes Carus' heralding of active dialogue between the painter and the land which becomes the subject of a painting. Whilst an engagement with the field of landscape painting remains on the periphery, (see chapter 7), it is through an intimate dialogue with the site that the work comes into being. It is because of this dialogue that the paintings shift away from common understandings of the meaning of the term 'landscape' and become material collaborations, which enables the paintings to bring forth a perspective that differs from the very human perspective that defines and dominates the wider field of landscape painting. (See chapters 2 and 3). The paintings created

through this research do not align with the picturesque, the pastoral or the sublime. Largely, this is because they are not representational of any particular moment of encounter with the site; they are not scenic, and it is not a process of projecting ideas onto land in order to present an encounter through painting. So, having established what they are not, could these paintings be thought of as contemporary propositions for earth-life paintings? In the following section, this query and the connotations of earth-life painting in the time of the Anthropocene, are analysed further.

Earth-Life Painting in the Anthropocene

An earth-life painting for today “must not be invented but felt” (Carus, 2002, p. 33), and as we have seen, for painting to align with this notion it is dependent upon a deep engagement with the site. Carus described the inner structure of mountain ranges; the specific places in which particular plants grow and why; the inner structure of a plant; the differences in bodies of water and their relationship to land; the formation, dissolution, movement of clouds (2002, p. 126) as elements which should be studied in greater depth to develop a practice of earth-life painting. Today, as I mentioned earlier, such a practice should also consider all of the synthetic, polluting, *vibrant* matter (Bennett, 2010, p. 3) which is encountered at the site. Carus was first and foremost concerned with the process of painting, and it was the painter that should be *feeling* in order to paint at all. But he was also troubled by the experience of the finished painting. What relationship might a viewer have with earth-life painting, when we position this query in the contemporary? Chapter 5 attends to this query. Carus’ instructions were expressed in the hope that paintings would be

created which in some way “enshrine the living archetype of nature” (2002, p. 128) and “which will uplift the viewer into a higher contemplation of nature” (2002, p. 131). Remembering the question which guides this research, of how painting might address the landscape of the Anthropocene, perhaps contemporary earth-life painting could have the capacity to draw attention to the vibrant, yet vulnerable matter relationships that make up land. This query is explored it in more depth in chapter 5.

In this age in which life in the Western world has never been more distanced from the natural world, a divide which leads to and heightens massive, detrimental environmental issues (Bate, 2000a; McKibben, 1990), the materiality explored in this chapter is a signature of the Anthropocene and a way in which the canal becomes emblematic of this time (see RQ 2). Whilst acting as a given name for an epochal event and, by its very nature therefore, ungraspable and unfathomable in size or scale, the Anthropocene also exposes and draws attention to matter, particularly microscopic matter (Bloom, 2015). For example, fly ash particles (SCPs), by-products of industrial fossil-fuel combustion, were literally examined under microscopes in the exploration into evidence of the Anthropocene (Rose, 2015, p. 4155). It is though excruciatingly close looking that scientists gain deep understanding of the lithosphere, biosphere, atmosphere and stratosphere, and are able to offer reasoning behind the explosive, massive and extreme so-called-natural disasters the planet experiences. What I endeavour to highlight here is that earth-life painting (Carus, 2002, p. 119), and a close relationship to the site which channels New Materialism, “grapples with the problem of thinking on a planetary scale while recognizing the need for the local” (Sullivan, 2017, p. 26). Furthermore, as Sullivan puts it, this closeness

to the local is needed “in order to make sense of, and care for, our world around us” (2017, p. 28). Recontextualising Carus’ theory through New Materialism shifts focus from a human-centric perception of the world, and in doing so I would suggest, attempts to heal the divide. For my paintings to have any kind of sway in nourishing thought and encouraging change in the social conscience then (Marland and Parham, 2014), herein lies the significance of this combination of thought.

Whilst the notion of earth-life painting (Carus, 2002, p. 119) is poignant when considered through the context of the Anthropocene, for the purposes of this research its messages become most productive when re-evaluated to consider New Materialist thought. As we have seen, Bennett’s thing-power (2010, p. 6) places even more emphasis on paying close attention to matter than even Carus might have envisaged. Furthermore, whilst it is useful to think through this body of work as contemporary earth-life painting, as an annexe to the field of landscape painting, obviously, this research departs from the framework for earth-life painting which Carus mapped out. Cheetham has suggested that the rather bleak “earth-death pictures” could serve as a “contemporary discordant echo and dystopic mirroring of Carus’ pleas in the early nineteenth century,” (2018, p. 62). Perhaps this research sits somewhere in-between the two proposals, as the paintings are as much about loss as they are about speculative future conditions of matter. The paintings make the history of the site, and the potentials for its future conditions “visible in ways that the *earth-life* picture could not 200 years ago” (Cheetham, 2018, p. 65). Two centuries after Carus’ words, there are many other ways of imaging the land, (see chapters 6 and 7) yet as we see through my paintings, Carus’ ideas may have been beyond the capacity of landscape painting

for his time (Cheetham, 2018, p. 64), but today they find new meaning in the context of the Anthropocene. If for instance we take a moment to consider my painting 'Pushing Across the Country' (2023) (fig. 72) as a contemporary proposition for earth-life painting, the matter which this painting is made up of – clay, glaze, pigment and oil paint – can be deciphered and contemplated as what gives aesthetic form to how these materials have come together in the painting. When we understand that these various types of matter are characteristic of this time, and in the making of the painting have behaved in fluid, unpredictable ways which resonate with material processes that occur within the canal site, (see RQ 4), it becomes clear that this is an earth-life painting which is unique to the materiality and emotional bearing that the Anthropocene brings forth (see chapter 5).

Summary

This chapter set out to illuminate how the notions of vibrant matter (Bennett, 2010, p. 3) and earth-life painting (Carus, 2002, p. 119) form an inquisitive bond and resonate with this practice research. All the elements here, across disciplines, time periods and localities, push for unfamiliar or even new territory within their respective fields. They establish theory which decentres the human and in doing so promote a reconsideration of the relationship between humans and all matter that is non-human. Moreover, in all of the texts embedded within this chapter, the agency of materials and things is celebrated and the close study of individual things, vital characteristics, and interdependency between things is promoted. Finally, the ideology of each of these strands of thought is established through lived experience, with special attention paid to bridging the gap between a

phenomenological and a scientific understanding of matter which is encountered through experience. This involves close, slow consideration of any material encounter, which leads to a deep understanding of the materials present throughout the encounter.

Contributing to the Romantic thought of the nineteenth century, Oscar Wilde celebrates the emotional force nurtured by this relationship when he says, “Art makes us love Nature more than we loved her before” (2008, p. 4). Carrying Wilde’s thoughts through to the twenty-first century, they become charged with new emotional meaning, particularly when read through the lens of the Anthropocene. For in exploring ways in which painting might contribute to an aesthetic for the Anthropocene – a material aesthetic, which is imbued with loss or absence, whilst also hinting at speculative future arrangements of matter – it becomes clear that these paintings are emotionally charged also. But how can this aesthetic become also productive – can it have the affects that Wilde claimed, in new and different ways? Perhaps the paintings might also percolate new ways of experiencing, perceiving and understanding the site. Of course, this research is still carried out from an anthropocentric point of view. However, owing to the intimate relationship to the site, and an approach to painting that takes on board ideas from both earth-life painting (Carus, 2002) and New Materialism, the anthropocentric perspective shifts and decentralises human perception and agency.

Carus’ *Nine Letters*, as Cheetham has pointed out, placed emphasis on “educating not only artists to see and render the Earth’s life, but also the museum going and art buying public to receive enlightenment through landscape paintings that are truly new” (2018, p. 63). Carus recognised, just as much as Wilde, the powerful effects painting can

have on shaping human relations with the natural world. In the contemporary, this green thinking – or environmentalist statement even, (Cheetham, 2018, p. 63) – is echoed and amplified in New Materialism. Bennett recognises the shortening of the life cycles of products to the point of disposability in a culture that privileges waste over care and repair of materials: “I want to promote greener forms of human culture and more attentive encounters between people-materialities and thing-materialities” (2010, ix). Similarly, Soper’s avant-garde nostalgia reflects on “past experience in ways that highlight what is pre-empted by contemporary forms of consumption, and thereby stimulate desire for a future that will be at once less environmentally destructive and more sensually gratifying” (2011, p. 24). For artistic practice such as this research, materials and tools are employed as more than a means to an end. Through exploring how approaches to making paintings can contribute to relations of care (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 69), they are appreciated for their agency. Again, the anthropocentric perspective shifts, as Bolt puts it: “Through attention to process and methodologies, the relationships between objects, artists, materials and processes, emerges as one of co-responsibility and indebtedness, rather than one of mastery” (2004, p. 9). Indeed, for this practice research, the process of making the paintings is not a straightforward, one-way relationship – on the contrary it is to be remembered that this project has the notion of collaboration at its core. Through this approach, which brings together theories from disparate, yet similarly turbulent eras, and summons the tensions that avant-garde nostalgia brings (Soper, 2011), I would like to suggest that painting can come to perform an act of repair and care in terms of relationship to natural world. In the chapter which follows, this proposition, and the significance of what painting might offer in these terms, is explored in greater depth.

Visual Interlude D



Figure 80. Lee Navigation, Bromley-by-Bow.

Surface of the canal water.

2022.



Figure 81. Hand-held ceramic, in the studio. 2022.



Figure 82. Lee navigation, Hertford.
Leaves under the icy surface of the canal water.
2023.



Figure 83. Lee Navigation, Bromley-by-Bow.

Flooding at Bow locks.

2020.



Figure 84. Regent's canal, Mile end.

Canal surface water in a lock.

2020.

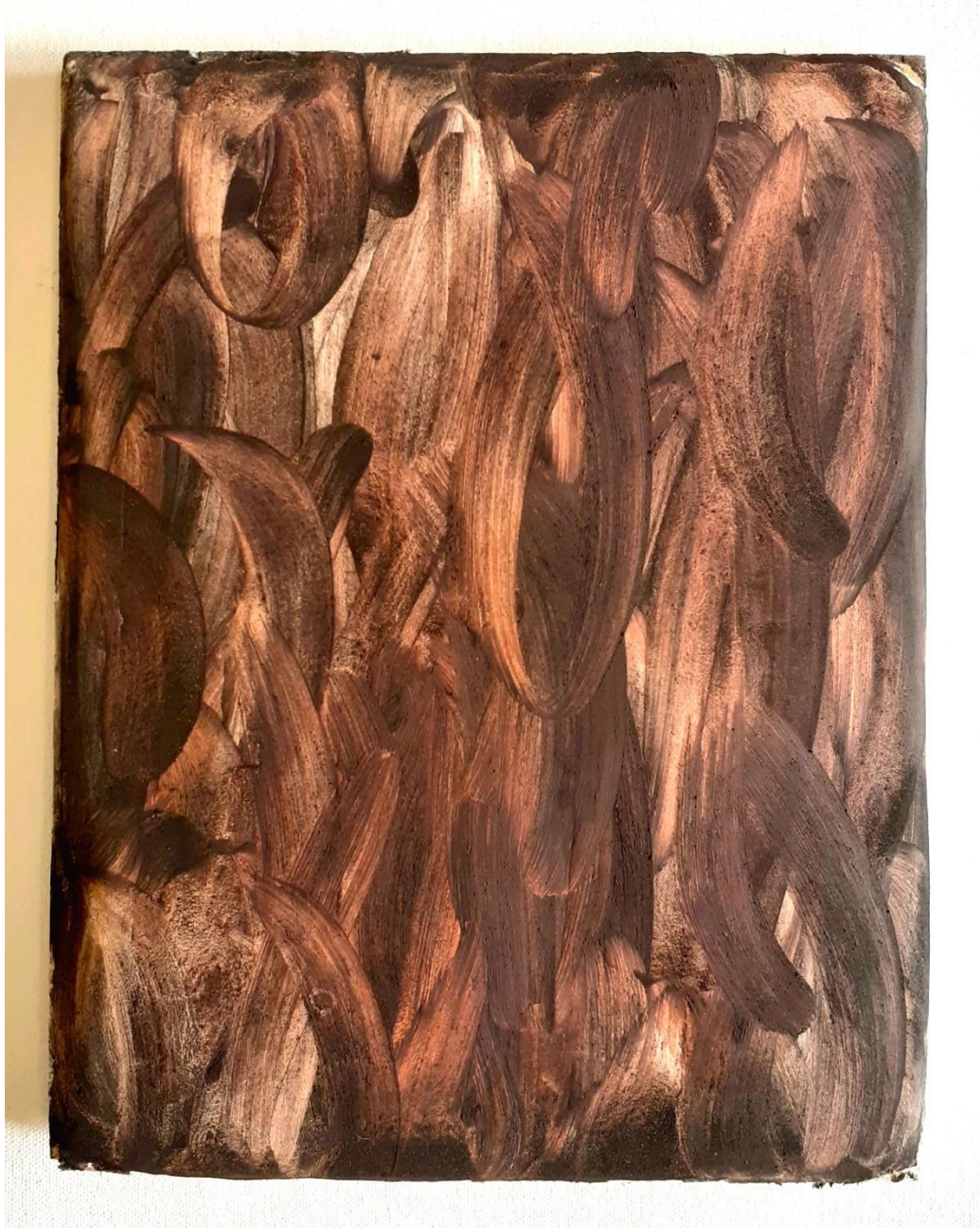


Figure 85. Marielle Hehir

'Faulting'

Charcoal, pigment, plaster.

H 26 x W 20cm.

2020.



Figure 86. Herford cut, Hackney.
Partially drained for restoration purposes.
2020.



Figure 87. Lee Navigation, Bow. Duckweed on canal water surface. 2020.



Figure 88. Lee Navigation, Bow. Underwater photography. 2020.



Figure 89. Lee Navigation, Bow. Towpath. 2020.



Figure 90. Marielle Hehir

'For the Last Time'

Pigment, binder, oil-pigment stick on cotton.

H 100 x W 100 cm.

2023.



Figure 91. 'For the Last Time' (detail).



Figure 92. Regent's canal, Broadway market.
Gas chambers reflected in the canal surface water.
2020.



Figure 93. Lee Navigation, Ware. Lock mechanism. 2022.

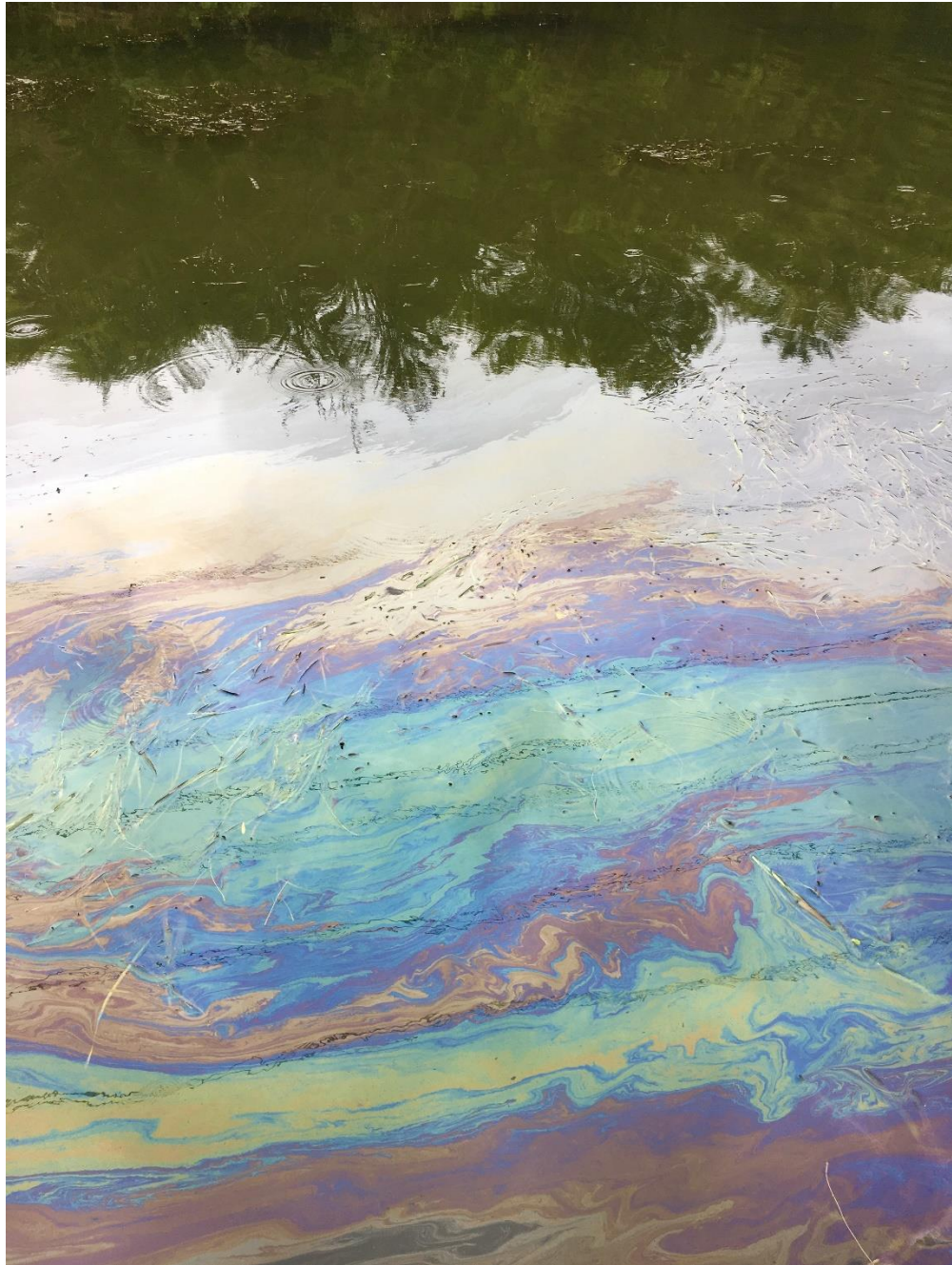


Figure 94. Lee Navigation, Ponder's End.

Surface of the canal water.

2020.



Figure 95. Lee Navigation, Walthamstow marshes.

Towpath.

2022.



Figure 96. Lee Navigation, Hertford.

Particularly icy conditions in winter where temperatures were often low as -8 degrees Celsius.

2023.

Chapter 5: Painting Land through Ecological Grief

In this chapter, we pause to reflect on what has been said thus far and bring to the foreground the subject of ecological grief. This is a condition, which is not new, but is becoming more widespread in the contemporary in response to the rapidly increasing issues which the Anthropocene encompasses. It would be remiss to proceed with this discussion without fully addressing the emotional weight of the context within which this research operates. Lesley Head argues for the need to take grief and its politics seriously, for “grief is a companion that will increasingly be with us” which must be acknowledged if we are to “enact any kind of effective politics” (2016, p. 2). Artists have previously engaged with ecological grief in various ways; the paintings by Mark Dion which often bear strong environmental messages, and the conceptual artworks by Katie Paterson for instance, both address themes of mourning for the natural world. However, this research engages with ecological grief in a novel way in terms of the role of aesthetics, in that it subsumes the emotive qualities of grief into an exploration of how slow violence (Nixon, 2011) might find visual form through painting. The significance for this research in thinking through ecological grief is the very personal nature of this project, which has an emotional drive. In what follows, the conditions that can lead to ecological grief are attended to, and what it is that might be being mourned, followed by how this plays out within this research, triggered by encounters along the canal. This discussion leads into an analysis of how my paintings can carry a productive, meaningful way of dealing with ecological grief, and also bear a pertinent, emotional resonance of their own.

What is Ecological Grief?

The Anthropocene is a label given to a period of extreme loss. A time of cataclysmic, so-called ‘natural’ disasters, which are aggravated by a warming planet. It is a time of great change, towards which human activity in the Western world has been the greatest contributor. Kick-started perhaps by Rachel Carson’s book ‘Silent Spring’ in 1962, there is a growing consciousness and concern for the environment, culminating today in movements such as Extinction Rebellion and Just Stop Oil. However, conservation efforts still proceed at a “snail’s pace” (Leopold, 2020, p. 159) in the face of accelerating rates of changes to the climate, which move further and further outside of human control as time progresses. For the near future, scientists forecast that “climatic and non-climatic risks will increasingly interact, creating compound and cascading risks that are more complex and difficult to manage” (IPCC, 2023). For some – scientists included (Duggan, 2014–2015) – living at a time which is provoking an overwhelming amount of loss carries with it an emotional consequence; grief. Cunsolo and Ellis have defined ecological grief as “the grief felt in relation to experienced or anticipated ecological losses, including the loss of species, ecosystems and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change” (2018a, p. 275). These words describe the continuous and expanding dimensions of grief, which is both lived and speculated upon. Elsewhere, they point out that although this type of grief is already being experienced, it often lacks an appropriate avenue for expression – we lack the rituals and practices to help address feelings of ecological grief (Cunsolo and Ellis, 2018b). Similarly, to the concept of slow violence (Nixon, 2011) which occupies this research, ecological grief does not easily lend itself to representation. However, the strength of the

emotive qualities of grief can be a “catalyst for critical enquiry or deep thought” as Jill Bennett has argued (2005, p. 7). Drawing on Gilles Deleuze’s creative interpretation of *encountered signs* (Deleuze, 1972, p. 161), which are operational in the realm of feelings rather than cognition, Bennett adopts his theory to demonstrate how emotion “grasps us, forcing us to engage involuntarily” (Deleuze, 1972, p. 160, cited in Bennett, 2005, p. 7). Moreover, Cunsolo Willox recognises the productive potential of the “work of mourning” (2012) – which for this research, manifests through the creative act of painting. But what is it, specifically in the context of this research, that is mourned, that invokes ecological grief? The following section addresses this point in more depth, whilst thinking *through* the assertion that my paintings as earth–life paintings (Carus, 2002) bear an emotive quality of their own.

Encounters with Loss at the Canal

“Land then, is not merely soil; it is a fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soils, plants and animals. Food chains are the living channels which conduct energy upward; death and decay return it to the soil. The circuit is not closed; some energy is dissipated in decay, some is added by absorption from the air, some is stored in soils, peats and long–lived forests; but it is a sustained circuit, like a slowly augmented revolving fund of life”
(Aldo Leopold, 2020, p. 166).

As we know, the canal is the focal site of this research for its materiality, its contemporary status and its history, as well my locality

to it. Up close, and through the intimate relationship formed with this site, the canal takes on the role of a visual device which directs perceptiveness to the surrounding organic elements and architecture, which are subject to slow violence (Nixon, 2011) and loss. Reflections in the water for example, often contribute to what is noticed. Upon noticing a reflection of the built elements around the canal for instance, I also notice what is occurring on and under the water's surface – such as unseasonable duckweed growth (fig. 80). As the canal became more than a place of curious interest for me, and became my dwelling, my home, it grew in personal meaning (Cunsolo and Ellis, 2018b). An increased sensitivity to the canal site means that the changes I bear witness to here, summon ecological grief. Lesley Head has analysed the many elements, human and non-human, which may contribute to ecological grief today. According to Head, through ecological grief one is in mourning for “the modern self” meaning life as it is currently known, and grieves for “a stable, pristine and certain past” as well as “a future that was always foggy but was presumed to contain the seeds of positive possibility” (2016, p. 22). As this is a personal investigation, I am attending to examples from my lived experiences at the canal, which invoke ecological grief – though it is important to note that this personal experience can be thought of as a symptom of wider losses we might all experience. I include the caveat here also that these examples are not grandiose, shocking or even particularly striking. Indeed, they may go unnoticed by other visitors to the canal site. But, due to my lived, embedded experience of the canal (as discussed in chapters 2 and 3), I do notice them. These are small, quiet examples, which can't be encapsulated into a single image: ones which epitomise Nixon's definition of slow violence as long in the making, gradual and attritional (2011, p. 3). I understand for example, that a rapid increase in duckweed growth during periods

of low rainfall and increased temperatures (Environment Agency, no date), means that the aquatic plants underneath the carpet of duckweed eventually become starved of oxygen (fig. 87). The case of 'The Reeds Have been Cut' (2022), (fig. 16) which was discussed in the Methodology chapter, is another case in point. These are small acts or events, which inflict or propagate a slow violence (Nixon, 2011) on the canal. As described by Leopold (2020) in the epigraph to this section, I am cognisant of the circuitry energy which flows through the canal site and connects everything. These small examples are connected to the bigger picture: the Anthropocene and all the consequences and harrowing emotions it generates. Whilst we have never been able to hold places or environments as unchanging (Head, 2016, p. 24), Leopold points out the complexity of thinking about change in this context: "evolution is a long series of self-induced changes, the net result of which has been to elaborate the flow mechanism and to lengthen the circuit" (2020, p. 166). However, he goes on to say that the invention of tools has enabled humans to make changes of "unprecedented violence, rapidity and scope" (Leopold, 2020, p. 166). For the canal site, change to the land was once fast and disruptive; the vernacular term 'the cut' given to the canal channel, reminds us of the violent act of cutting into the land and extracting earth to construct the canals. However, this disruptive quality has now been subsumed into the site, hidden and forgotten about. In the meantime, as we have seen, the slow violence (Nixon, 2011) which the Anthropocene brings forth, permeates and continues to gradually alter the site.

Visualising Ecological Grief

The element of ecological grief has a part to play in shaping the aesthetic of an artwork. That is, ecological grief is a factor in addressing the research question of how painting might address the landscape of the Anthropocene (see chapter 1). Art made in the time of the Anthropocene sees the emergence of new possibilities for painting which respond to the characteristics of this time, this is explored in depth in chapter 7. It is important to point out here too however, that this practice-research isn't the first time painting has been deemed the most appropriate medium for the task of responding to places which are threatened, fragile or unstable in the face of given circumstances. An artistic response to great and significant change in human perception of and relationship to the natural world can be traced back to the eighteenth and early nineteenth century Romantic thought, which as chapter 4 discusses, has important resonance with this research. Romantics in England at this time were horrified at the darkness falling onto the country throughout the Industrial Revolution. Robert Macfarlane points out the counter-narrative to the recognisable traditions of the picturesque and the pastoral, which (British) art made during or after times of crisis presents (2019b). This research aligns with his claims for art which emerges through turbulent times, not least as my paintings depart from the picturesque aesthetic (a point which is expanded upon in chapter 6). Macfarlane cites the economic collapses of the 1970's and 2000's, as well as the years around and during the Second World War as significant for artistic response (2019b). Artists living under the ominous threat of world war (Yorke, 1988, p. 146) such as Paul Nash (1889 – 1946), Graham Sutherland (1903 – 1980) and John Piper (1903 – 1992), revived the Romantic sensibility towards the natural world and were

labelled Neo-Romantics by critics of the time such as Robin Ironside and Raymond Mortimer. According to Mortimer, the work of Neo-Romantics held an appeal for people who feel a “fraternity, or even a unity, with all living things, to those with the ‘sense sublime’ of something far more deeply interfused” (1942, p.208) – a statement which precludes yet resonates with the contemporary ecological thought which permeates this research, from thinkers such as Morton (2010) and Haraway (2003; 2016) amongst others.

As a brief detour, I will draw on Kenneth Clark’s Official War Artist scheme (1939 – 1945) (Victoria and Albert Museum, 2016), which is significant for this research, as the scheme employed several of the Neo-Romantic artists mentioned above. Nash was employed in both world wars, whilst Sutherland and Piper were commissioned for the second world war respectively. In 1939, for an extended project entitled Recording Britain, Clark commissioned artists to paint parts of the country, the urgency being that under the threat of war, certain corners of Britain seemed vulnerable (Harris, 2010, p. 206) and the attempt to record them should be made. In other words, there was a great fear that aspects of the land as it had come to be known, might disappear. This is a feeling which has great parallels with the “eco-anxiety” (Gregory, 2021) and ecological grief increasingly present throughout the conditions of the Anthropocene. The Recording Britain project differs from this research in that it was a commissioned project, whereas this research is born through a lived experience, and operates within the context of the Anthropocene. Whilst these artists were responding to the gravitas of the devastating effects of war, looking at their work today within the context of this research, offers a fresh angle on the perspectives these artists presented in their work. There is after all, a huge amount of ecological grief felt as a

consequence of war. I make the novel suggestion that the notion of ecological grief might become a lens through which we can understand the work of the Neo-Romantics in a new way. A sensitivity towards the natural world, told through a Neo-Romantic imagining, can be seen in the close, detailed rendering of the meandering hollows and facets of tree bark in Sutherland's 'Tree Form' (1941) (fig. 127). Sutherland takes the gnarly surface of a tree, and in this painting, imagines it as a landscape infused with atmosphere, not unlike the tunnels in the mines he visited as a war artist. As well as visual signifiers of devastated land, titles of their paintings often allude to deep concern for the effects of war on the natural world, and other-than-human loss: Paul Nash's painting 'Totes Meer' (1941) (meaning 'Dead Sea') for example (fig. 132), and Graham Sutherland's violent 'Thorn Head' (1947) (fig. 128). The significance of the contribution a title makes towards the overall understanding of a painting is shared with this research. Often, the titles of my paintings give clues to the meaning which might be found in the work. For instance, the painting 'For the Last Time' (2023) (fig. 90; 91) might be read as a commemoration of a parting of ways, or a farewell message to something.

Over the decades since Clark's scheme, the Romantic sensibility in the arts has fluctuated, rising again recently in tandem with the events around the Anthropocene (see chapter 7 for an expansion on this point). Why is it then, that art – particularly painting – leans into Neo-Romantic thought in times of uncertainty? For this research, which does incorporate scientific knowledge into an understanding of the conditions and consequences of the Anthropocene, (see Introduction, and Methodology), the Neo-Romantic imagination shapes communication in a way that science cannot. For scientists, as

ecologist Phyllis Windle points out, don't usually in their literature express their love for nature or the aspect of feelings for the places and organisms that are part of their work (1992, p. 364). Cunsolo Willox for example acknowledges the role the arts can play in publicly sharing ecological grief (2012, p. 152). Drawing on Derrida's point that in mourning, "speaking is impossible, but so too would be silence or absence or a refusal to share one's sadness" (2001, p. 72). In finding ways and means to communicate ecological grief then, Head suggests the arts might be better equipped to speak the unspeakable (2016, p. 33). What a Neo-romantic sensibility paves the way for in this research is the imaginative, sensitive, personal handling of harrowing emotions.

The practice of painting is a vehicle for restoring connection in what Helen Martin has described as a world of loss (2022, p. 172). My paintings in their physical form are intensely personal responses to the present climate crisis, but they are also records of this time. Just as J. M. W. Turner's 'Rain, Steam, and Speed - The Great Western Railway' (1844) (fig. 109) reminds us of a significant development in the period of the Industrial Revolution, and Paul Nash's 'We are Making a New World' (1918) (fig. 133) is charged with the effects of war on the natural world, my paintings signify the contemporary conditions of the Anthropocene. They do this through the aesthetic they bear, which is shaped by a Neo-Romantic sensibility. The following section expands upon the material forms the paintings take, and how this is critical to the emotional resonance the paintings carry in relation to ecological grief.

What can painting do?

Increasingly, artists in the contemporary are speaking out about the sense of responsibility they feel in raising awareness of current climate issues. Painter Dianne Burko for instance has spoken of her realisation of the threat climate change has on the environment, and that she wanted to do something about it by folding these issues into her art practice (Braken, 2022). Chapter 7 explores further examples of these themes within artistic practice. But what does painting in particular – the practice and the painted artefact – offer in terms of providing a space where themes of ecological grief may play out? In addressing this question, might I remind the reader of the material exploration which is at the core of this research – thus, this discussion focuses on the significance of the physical, material form the paintings take.

Much has been said of the predicament a painter might find themselves in today; working in the shadow of the rich history of this discipline might be intimidating. Adding to the challenge is the frequent assertion of painting as being spent, worn out, even dead (Delaroche, 1840, cited in Barnes Foundation, 2019) since the advent of photography (c.1816). Contemporary painting exists at a time after it has been said that everything that can be done with paint on canvas has been done, and an end point declared by some (Crimp, 1981). It follows too, Rosalind Krauss's formulation of the post-medium condition (2000), and an expansion of the accepted forms painting might take, culminating in a productive realm of *painting in the expanded field* (Krauss, 1979; Staff, 2015ab; Titmarsh, 2017). Indeed, Graw reminds us that painting has departed from its “ancestral home” of the canvas and is now “omnipresent, as it were, and at work in

other artforms as well” (2012, p. 45). All of this is to say, that within this cacophony of debate, painting perseveres (Rottman, 2012, p. 10) and painters themselves aren't always troubled by such provocations. Amy Sillman verifies that “painters don't see any problem” (Hoptman, 2014, p. 23) within the field of painting today, and on the contrary, Hurvin Anderson argues that “it's only in painting that you can do everything you want” (2016). Furthermore, Daniel Sturgis describes these creative tensions as productive, as through contemplating the histories of the discipline, it is possible to find opportunity and a space in which to work (2011, p. 7). With all of this in mind, when painting can be anywhere and take any form, why then do my paintings take the physical forms they do? In the aftermath of navigating this history and discourse, the paintings which emerge can be read as a “singular condensation of its maker's and of art's histories” (Pollock, 1997, unpaginated). Paintings are, in other words, always a synthesis of the maker, and many other factors including the lived circumstances and conditions at the time of making. In this case, the paintings are a melding of my personal understanding of my experiences, along with the vibrant matter (Bennett, 2010, p. 3) of the canal, at the time of the Anthropocene. Additionally, the choice of, agency of and handling of materials.

The notion that human activity has caused an epochal shift, both propagates and symbolises loss, and invokes ecological grief as we have seen. These conditions also encourage a desire for the tangible. This contributes to an explanation of sorts, for the rise in materials led practices, surge in interest in craft (Smith, 2020) and return to art-objects (Foster, 1996; Eastham, 2018) which recent decades have seen. As was mentioned in the *Vibrant Matter* chapter, my painting practice might be thought of as a process of memorialising, or

commemorating. It is important to point out here, that for such a claim, it might be argued that photography is a medium better suited to the act of memorialising. Kenneth Clark of the Recording Britain project recognised the documentary value of photography (Saunders, 2011, p. 9), yet he insisted in its inability to "give us the colour and atmosphere of a scene, the intangible genius loci" (1941). For him, painting was *feeling* (Saunders, 2011, p. 9). A notion which resonates with this research, which engages with the experiential, sensory aspect of painting. The processes employed develop paintings which are image-orientated objects; they are relics for the future – an idea which has become intertwined in the claim that my paintings offer propositions for earth-life (Carus, 2002) painting today. On this note it is worth remembering Carus' conviction that "all art is dead and buried if the emotions are not moved" (2002, p. 82). He believed that through the practice of earth-life painting, a painting would stir a viewer's emotions and contribute towards profound and insightful understandings of the work. Whilst this research takes a more open approach to how the paintings might be received, earth-life painting by design does incorporate an emotional, Romantic appreciation of land, which isn't always the case for the genre of landscape painting. The present sees an expansion from 'landscape': both the contemporary understanding of the term and the genre of painting, (as is explored in chapter 6 and 7). In tandem with the context of the Anthropocene, now is a time which is often described as post-digital (following the rise and plateau of digital art forms since the late twentieth century). These are factors which are significant for painting in general, but also set the tone for the making of this research. It is a material investigation for the reasons discussed in previous chapters (see chapters 1 and 4), but in a wider context, this is also in part associated with the nostalgia for an analogue

craftsmanship (Goicoechea de Jorge, 2022) and a desire for the tangibility of material, which transpire through the post-digital condition. Another factor which has been bred via the post-digital condition, is the incorporation of ‘failures’ or ‘mistakes’ into an artwork. Casone points out that in the digital technological realm “failure is often controlled and suppressed”, yet he goes on to say, “‘failure’ has become a prominent aesthetic in many of the arts in the late twentieth century, reminding us that our control of technology is an illusion, and revealing digital tools to be only as perfect, precise, and efficient as the humans who build them (2000, p. 12-13). As demonstrated in the *Methodology* chapter, this practice-led research has a flexible relationship with the notion of failure, as by adopting theories from New Materialism (Bennet, 2010; Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2012; Barrett and Bolt, 2013), material behaviours which incorporate chance and accident are included in the paintings and shape the aesthetic of the paintings. In my paintings, this aesthetic functions as a carrier of the ecological grief which has been channelled into the paintings. The formal qualities, compositions, colour and material relationships within the paintings are all ways in which the paintings “arrive at a transpersonal, by way of the personal” (Bell, 2017, p. 131). That is, the paintings, through their aesthetic, bear an emotional resonance which commemorates the conditions of the Anthropocene, and in doing so they have the potential to stimulate an emotional response from a viewer.

Summary

In this discussion, we have seen how my paintings bear the weight of the emotional consequences which arise through the Anthropocene.

Equally, we have explored the pertinence of a contemporary Neo-Romantic sensibility, which is an emotional response. The residual question of what is to be gained through the development, and sharing, of paintings which may rouse ecological grief in a viewer, now hangs in the air. Cunsolo Willox reminds us that “mourning, and the associated work, is one of the most fundamental capacities of being human and may provide the means to move ever deeper into the sensorial present with humans and non-humans” (2012, p. 156). As noted earlier, the arts play a critical role, alongside and with the sciences, in finding ways to communicate the urgency surrounding contemporary status of climate change. Whilst this chapter has been tentative in articulating the devastating reality of these conditions, it must be said that ecological grief can be overwhelming, leaving one feeling alone and isolated, consumed by grief (Martin, 2022, p. 174). At the same time, for some, when in a state of mourning one is drawn to a desire to commemorate (Windle, 1992, p. 363). In the case of this research, the paintings commemorate, whilst also fulfilling a desire to find ways of understanding the effects of the Anthropocene on the land. The paintings record something, preserve some elemental information regarding this time; they are relics for the future. The paintings are made to be seen (Bell, 2017, p. 152); they share something of my personal experience and ecological grief. The paintings rise to what Yusoff describes as “the challenge” to “make present those barely visible sites of life and death” that nevertheless characterise the Anthropocene (2012, p. 578). In dealing with the slow-violence (Nixon, 2011) of the canal, the quiet, small, sometimes even seemingly insignificant changes to the materiality of this site, the paintings disrupt a hierarchy of what might commonly be mourned (i.e. human-focused losses). These words are a further reminder of the pertinence of the Neo-Romantic sensibility wrapped up in this

research, which “resists an anthropocentric view that privileges human experience over the natural and sublime” (Rives, 2015, p. 799). The paintings give voice to the non-human, small losses and changes which are also worthy of ecological grief. The sharing of the paintings is crucial, as in doing so, what I bear witness to is shared and this creates an “opportunity for individuals to connect with shared responsibility of this grief” (Cunsolo Willox, 2012, p. 153). Painting as we know is beyond the usual languages of communication; a painting can find tangible ways to express some things we cannot otherwise articulate. These paintings, therefore, create a space for individual and collective reflection, contemplation and a renewed appreciation for the non-human entities which share this planet. When viewed, the paintings may elicit feelings of wonder, grief and bereavement and in doing so develop sustained connections with forms of ecological loss. In finding ways to create an aesthetic which faces up to the subject of ecological grief, the paintings might offer a means to imagining alternate futures in a shared and rapidly changing Earth.

Visual Interlude E



Figure 97. Lee Navigation, Clapton. Towpath. 2020.

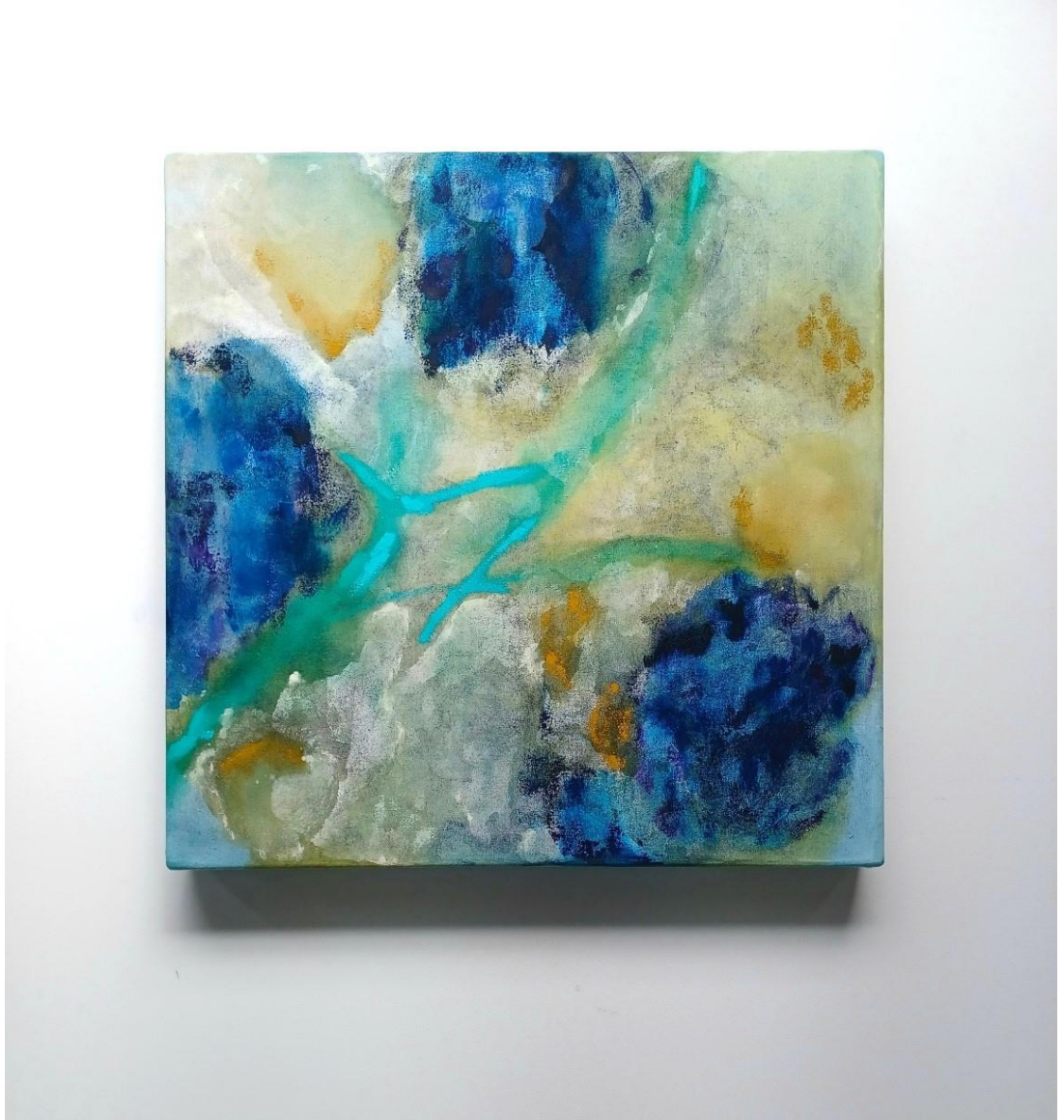


Figure 98. Marielle Hehir

'No Longer Part of the Ground'

Pigment, binder, oil-pigment stick on cotton.

H 52. 5 x W 52. 5cm.

2023.

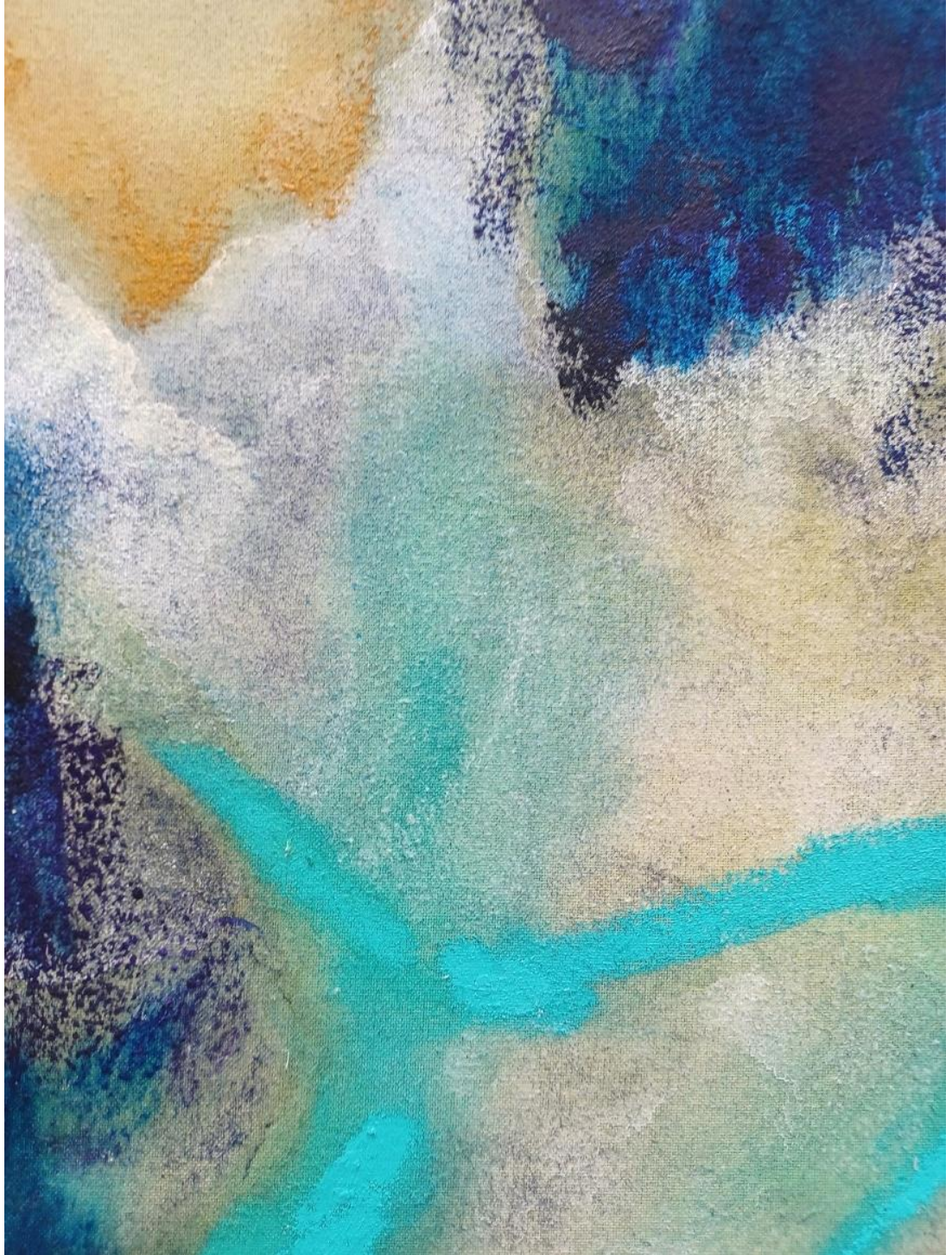


Figure 99. 'No Longer Part of the Ground' (detail).



Figure 100. Lee Navigation, Bow. Underwater photography. 2020.



Figure 101. Marielle Hehir

'Grime'

Pigment, oilstick, plaster.

H 24 x W 20cm.

2020.



Figure 102. Marielle Hehir

'Underwater'

Pigment, oilstick, plaster.

H 16.5 x W 24cm.

2020.

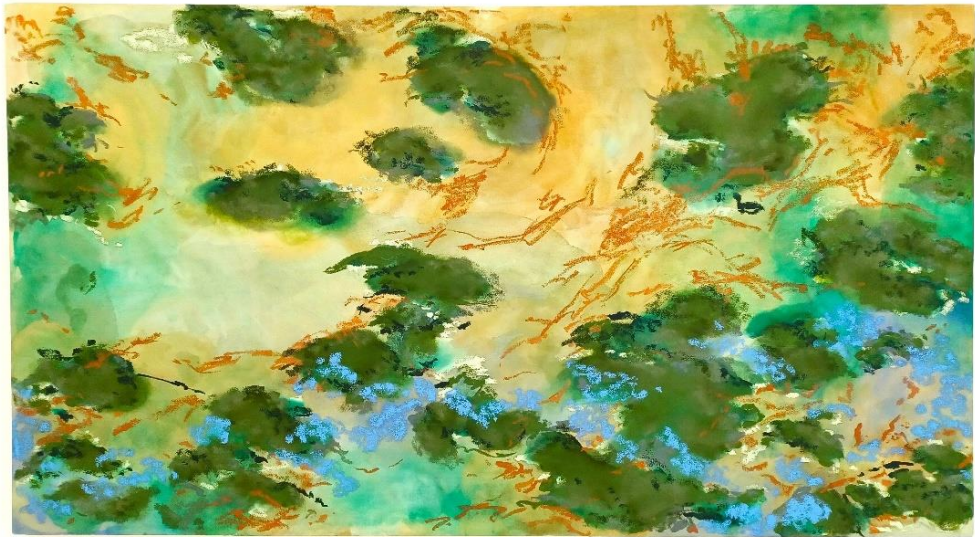


Figure 103. Marielle Hehir

'The Throwing Overboard of Things (Part II)'

Pigment, binder, oil pigment stick on cotton.

H 110 x W 200cm.

2022.



Figure 104. 'The Throwing Overboard of Things (Part II)' (detail).



Figure 105. Marielle Hehir

'It Seeps'

Stoneware clay, various glazes, epoxy resin, watercolour paint.

H 22.5 x W 19cm.

2022



Figure 106. Various works on display in the studio. 2021.

Chapter 6: Changing Landscapes

This chapter is an exploration of how this research sits in relation to the concept of landscape, the history of the term, and the genre of landscape painting which, as this discussion makes clear, expands in accordance with the evolving understanding of the term. This is a key investigative part of this enquiry, as this practice–research engages with landscape in a way which unsettles common understandings of the concept. Later in the chapter, the history of the term is discussed as necessary in support of my argument. However, the discussion is more broadly focused on the contemporary conditions and debate around landscape, for these are the elements with which this research engages most fruitfully, and indeed, contributes to.

From Landscape

Whilst it may always remain a contested term, it is widely acknowledged today that the understanding of the concept of landscape has shifted from its origins. Crouch challenges any lingering notion of a fixed and steady character of landscape as instead “shuffling, unstable and lively” (2010, p. 15). An awareness of the shifting meaning of the term in conjunction with the contemporary prospect of the Anthropocene, provides impetus for deliberation over the conditions of landscape painting today, and how this research should be placed in relation to it. As Biggs and Tucker have pointed out, “a more nuanced understanding of the complexity of ‘landscape’ as the relationship between place, memory, loss, recuperation, identity, etc. is now critical, suggesting the need for an ‘after

landscape” (no date). For this research, the concept of landscape is not stationary; it is amorphous, shifting, and like the nature of the canal site, constantly in flux. As we have seen throughout previous chapters, the relationship to landscape formed through this research derives from the land, and the very particular materiality of this site, partnered with the sensorial, experiential qualities of the canal site. The nature of this relationship means we can think of the position this research takes as coming *from* landscape. This research takes place in a time long after the understanding of landscape began to change and expand, and long after the conventional view pictured in landscape paintings started to shift. This posits the question, if we are coming *from* landscape, then where are we, and where are we headed? In response to this, might I remind the reader of the speculative nature of this research, which operates in accordance with the speculative dimension of the Anthropocene, (as described in chapter 2). What these conditions cultivate are new territories and new meanings with which painting may engage. With all of this in mind, we see that my paintings evolve with the changing understanding of what constitutes landscape and contribute to the moving terrain of landscape painting. The following chapter: *Contemporary Practice*, goes into more detail on contemporary practitioners whose work celebrates the many dimensions of how landscape might be understood today. For now, this chapter moves the focus on to how my relationship to the site helps develop a unique understanding of the term landscape, and in turn, how this informs an approach to landscape painting.

The View/The Immersive

The challenge for this research is in finding ways to distil the sensorial engagement with the site, into an experience which is separate and primarily visual. Through doing so what this research creates is a set of possibilities for engagement with land through the practice of painting. The following parts of the discussion explore how elements of a personal, lived experience of the site become embodied in my paintings – paintings which disengage with the reductive take on landscape as sheer spectacle (Casey, 2002, p. 261). Rather, they encompass the complexity of the ‘naturalcultural’ (Haraway, 2003, p. 61) conditions of the site, in which cultural and planetary histories are now irrevocably woven into one another (Yang, 2018).

As explored in chapter 2, my experience of the site is immersive, up close and entangled. It is more than a single, stationary view, and it is more than just visual. My role as researcher–practitioner is integrated within daily lived experience, which becomes fieldwork for this research. Whilst Carus, in his ideas for the teaching of earth–life painting (2002), suggested painters should get up close to the natural world which they wanted to paint and study it in order to understand it prior to painting it, this research goes a little further and paints from experience as a means to finding new understandings of the site. That is: through this microcosm of close experience the research can render new aesthetic understandings of global issues. So, we see how this research carries the torch for earth–life painting which Carus lit but offers a new reading of his ideas by re–working them in a contemporary form which is meaningful for painting today. By developing an intimate relationship with the site, I am able to feel the effects of the Anthropocene via the local, the close at hand. These

effects are read through the slow violence (Nixon, 2011) which changes the site continuously, yet so gradually that the effects remain concealed through a lack of spectacle or stark visual references (Fahy, 2022, p. 2). This closeness and theme of slowness, as we have understood from the *Methodology* chapter, continues into the paintings. The elements within the paintings suggest things which are near, not far; a visual evocation of the close perception of things experienced through an embedded relationship to the site. For example, my painting 'Grime' (2020) (fig. 101) became evocative of the viscous, murky qualities of the matter at the bottom of the canal seen through moving water. In an impression of things such as this example, where visual vocabulary appears so close that a clear view is obscured, there is no division between entities or horizon line between land and sky; and any sense of perspective or scale seems warped or confused. These things which I have pointed to here are classical tropes that one might expect to find in landscape painting, yet as the following chapter *Contemporary Practice* argues, this does not need to be the case for painting today. Over the course of this research, I have developed habits and strategies which are my own established principles of painting practice (Bolt, 2004, p. 1) – ways of starting a painting. However, in contrast with the strategies one might adopt when beginning to paint a landscape *scene*, which might involve a pencil sketch to plan out the painting to begin with for example, my strategies are very much materials led. This is a type of material-thinking is widely recognised as a creative means through which ideas are translated into an artistic artefact (Carter, 2004; Ingold, 2013; Haraway, 2016). That said, it would be false to suggest that my paintings have totally departed from the genre, as in some ways, the paintings return to, or at least nod to these tropes associated with landscape painting. For these reasons, and for the collections of

things encountered serendipitously that the research regards as part of the materiality of landscape today, my paintings exist tangentially to the genre of landscape painting.

The Wall/Experiencing the Work

In this section the discussion moves on to an exploration of the experience of my paintings, and how this experience might relate to the concept of landscape and the genre of landscape painting. As the artist, I acknowledge the subjective nature of my argument at this point, as well as the nature of experience, which is in any case subjective, and susceptible to countless influencing factors. The suggestions made here are to help illuminate the reasons why the paintings have manifested in the ways they have, in relation to the research questions.

As we have seen in chapter 2, the process of making these paintings is based in experience; the phenomenological encounter with matter, the *genius loci* or spirit of place (Owens, 2021), the agency of materiality and agency, and the sensory engagement which comes through the materiality of the site. My activity in the studio, and experimentation with materials, is in another way, also an immersive experience. However, the paintings which are born through this research, offer a different kind of experience. It will be apparent to the reader, that the body of work which this research has produced, are static, primarily visual, wall mounted paintings. Presented this way, they offer a particular experience, which is not immersive or lived, they are simply encountered. They do not trouble a viewer's path physically, and indeed, might even go un-noticed depending on a

viewer's willingness to perceive and stay with the paintings. It should be noted, that in the early stages of this research, ways of presenting and consequently encountering the paintings in different ways which touched upon the idea of the immersive or chance encounter, were explored. For example, paintings have been hung from the ceiling and suspended in the middle of a room, revealing two sides to the work. Additionally works have been placed outside, around the site of the canal, intermingling with the substances on location (fig. 11). However, as the research has progressed and developed its relationships with landscape, slow-violence (Nixon, 2011), and earth-life painting (Carus, 2002), the paintings have migrated onto the wall. The reasons behind this pathway are bound up in the value this research places on aesthetics (see RQ2), and the argument for the performative (Bolt, 2004) capacity of my paintings. As described in chapter 4, the experience of the site is punctuated by encounters with the vibrancy of matter (Bennett, 2010); entanglements of things which catch my eye and stop me in my tracks. These are quiet moments, often happening in the periphery of my vision, and muddled with the sounds and smells of the canal all at once. Although quiet, these encounters are enough to signify the residues of the history of the canals, as well as the effects of the Anthropocene. It is a vibrancy that comes through materiality, a slow layering of real and remembered encounters, and not through physical placement in space. The paintings have been articulated with this in mind; though on a wall and not immersive, and though not descriptive of a view, the paintings bear certain visual qualities which are evocative of the qualities of the vibrant materiality of the canal. These visual qualities are pertinent to the ways in which the paintings interpret an aesthetic of slow-violence (Nixon, 2011). For example, the ceramic painting 'It Seeps' (2022) (fig. 105) is divided by colour and composition into two zones.

The effect is a visual suggestion of two material entities co-existing up against one another. An atmosphere of calm emptiness pervades the painting, until the eye hits the vibrant green forms which seep into the top and bottom of the composition. These green forms suggest change, an interruption to the material scenario. They mirror one another and create a tension across the entire composition. Their matt surface contrasts the glossiness of the glaze, and the opaque green seems foreign amongst the tonalities of the murky colours of the glazes. They are small forms, but their presence has a significant, slow effect on the experience of this painting.

Mounted on the wall, my paintings do command subtle shifts in levels of bodily engagement. Some paintings are small intimate encounters which draw a viewer in up close in order to study the surface. Others are large in scale: the imagery they carry already appears up-close as if a microscope has magnified the land and enlarged a projection of it. See my painting 'The Throwing Overboard of things' (2022) (fig. 103; 104) for example. Furthermore, adopting Bennet's idea of the "contingent tableau" (2010, p. 5) (described in chapter 3), when installing the paintings in a space, enhances the stuttered navigation of a collection of paintings hung together. The exhibition which marks the culmination of this period of practice-research explores this mode of display - the concluding chapter details this. The implications of these strategies for display are that the experience of the paintings oscillates between something *like* the different modes of physical perception which occur throughout the canal site, and a straightforward visual experience of paintings. So, whilst the paintings are presenting an idea of an experience through another means, they also evolve as experiences themselves. Just as my experience of the site fluctuates, adjusts, adapts and regenerates, so too does the

experience of the paintings. As Crouch describes: “Even in familiarity and habitual rhythmic engagement, the meaning, our relationship with things, can change in register” (2010, p. 5). What these words elucidate is the manner in which this research embraces the tensions which arise through the familiar becoming unfamiliar. That is, though the experience of the site is understood to an extent through the lived experience, it also remains mysterious and strange. This tension is what provokes the desire to understand or decipher the unanticipated, surprising, *vibrant* (Bennett, 2010) elements of this experience, and this follows into the paintings. They are part of an established canon, yet through the approach to painting taken, which is open to chance and accident (see chapter 2) they step into the realm of the unexpected and create new possibilities for understanding and relating to the canal site.

A further point to address here – in relation to how they might be experienced – is the general transient nature of the paintings, which are objects. As Lippard articulates: “a painting, no matter how wonderful, is an object in itself, separate from the place it depicts. It frames and distances through the eyes of the artist” (1997, p. 19). Yet my paintings created through this research act as a connecting body between the artist (myself) and the place (the canal site). As art objects they carry an experience, but their object-ness doesn’t have to infer permanence. Painting is a discipline which privileges (or at least presupposes) continuity and fixity, however this research challenges this notion through an engagement with materiality that intentionally neglects any aspiration for longevity or conservancy in the paintings. Though the paintings sometimes give the illusion of something solid and closed, they are subject to change over time. This can be said for any work of art, however, unlike the case of this

practice–research, more often than not a practitioner will create their art to last as long as possible. The potential atrophy within the paintings might not instantaneously register with someone viewing the painting, as their fragility is concealed within their surfaces. They, like slow violence (Nixon, 2011), and like the Anthropocene which have no conclusive start and end points, have no definitive lifespan. The paintings, like the site, are vulnerable to change – in both cases materials are not to be imagined as crystalline, dry or elemental but as colliding, humid and combinatory; materials are always in a state of becoming (Carter, 2010, p. 19). This is promoted through the unconventional use of materials (see *Methodology*). For example, employment of materials in conjunction which have repelled one another throughout the making process; such as the use of natural dyes with geosynthetic (polypropylene) fabric in ‘Haunt’ (2021) (fig. 58; 59). Another reason might be the intentional use of materials which are known for their impermanence; for example, the painting ‘No Longer Part of the ground’ (2023) (fig. 98; 99) includes the pigment smalt. Made from cobalt–doped glass, smalt pigment particles produce a vibrant blue colour but are renowned for their fugitive nature (Chaplin, et al, 2008, p. 351). Though fluctuations in the surface of the paintings may take many years, and be difficult for the naked eye to detect, nevertheless, what this section has made clear, is how the overall sense of slowness and slow–violence (Nixon, 2011) which pervades the site permeates the paintings also.

In summary, what this section has attended to, is the connection between the sensorial, lived engagement with the site, which is not a still view, but a moving, changing, living ecology, and the possible experience of my paintings, which are primarily visual, yet are evocative of the qualities of the canal. For although they are a

primarily visual encounter, through their aesthetic, a kind of synaesthetic-like quality arises; reminders of the smell of the canal water or the grimy, sliminess of a lock wall are sensed through the qualities of the surfaces of the paintings. As the next chapter *Contemporary Practice* highlights, this is rarely encountered elsewhere – this is a dimension of this research which only comes close to resonance with certain moments in the work of Clough (1919–1999) or McFadyen (b.1950). This section has also highlighted that it is important that the paintings create the visual means they do. Their aesthetic offers a contribution to the potential aesthetics of slow violence, which Nixon (2011) identifies is un-representable, and therefore is remiss, and absent from the collective conscience. My paintings give shape to the formless threat (Nixon, 2011, p. 10) which slow violence carries out. Their aesthetic is one which translates a sensorial experience into a visual one which is performative (Bolt, 2004) of an encounter with the site. In doing so they create a very different experience, one which may create new understandings of the site.

As I mentioned in the opening of this chapter, it is the contemporary understanding of landscape that this research is best contextualised within. However, an awareness of the history of the term, and the origins of how landscape was first aestheticized through painting, remain on the periphery of this research. For this reason, the next section takes a brief look back at these histories.

What is Landscape Painting?

“Landscape is a series of incidents coming into being. Landscapes are managed aesthetically, economically, environmentally. They are processed. They make themselves. The verbs of geology: eroding, shifting, erupting, receding, compressing, solidifying, slipping, subsiding and recovering”
(Tania Kovats, 2000, p. 12).

It has been said that the continual insistence on the referral back to historical definitions in order to identify the meanings of landscape can be unhelpful in re-conceptualizing landscape (Crouch, 2010, p. 13). When this research is so speculative in stance and approach to painting, it might even seem distracting to look back at a genre which we already know has progressed in many ways and looks very different from how landscape was expressed in the eighteenth century, for instance. However, what landscape painting provides is a record of the evolving human relationships with surrounding environments, with all that encompasses the non-human natural world, and what humans do to shape it. From the agricultural, to the industrial; from the urban, to the wasteland, whatever the type of landscape, it is often visualised from a perspective which implies distance. This is in stark contrast to what I have described in the previous section regarding this research. In order to illuminate more precisely what it is that this research decouples itself from, and show how this research contributes to an aesthetic which is unique to the very contemporary moment in the story of human relationships with land (see chapter 7), highlighted here are several definitive stages in the history of landscape painting.

The term landscape arose in the Western world during the latter half of the sixteenth century. At this time, the advanced sophistication of agricultural procedures emancipated humans (to an extent) from the labour of farming, leaving them with time to observe and contemplate the world, and here the term landscape was devised by Europeans (Lippard, 1997, p. 8; Owens, 2020). The word landscape refers directly to a scenic panorama of land viewed from a human perspective, which by this distinction positions the visitor as separate from all else which composes a given vista. Increasingly in the contemporary, the term landscape is questioned and criticized, not least for, as Barbara Bender articulates, its roots in the “capitalist world of Western Europe by aesthetes, antiquarians and landed gentry – all men” (1993, p. 1). Additionally, Arnold Berleant has pointed out that the term ‘landscape’ becomes misleading in contemporary times and means different things to different people (2005, p. 31), as it refers as much to the organic world as it does to the urban, built environment, and the post-industrial wastelands, abandoned and left to ruin. With such conversations in mind, what becomes apparent, is how ‘landscape’ excludes the complexity and agency of the non-human world. A painting in response to a landscape might always be subjective, however what this research does is acknowledge the complexity of the non-human-world, the slow violence (Nixon, 2011) which inflicts change, and the mysterious coming together of vibrant matter (Bennett, 2010, p. 3). How it does this is through faith in the *agency* of materials, which coalesce in the paintings and produce effects which are evocative of the canal site.

How else might or has landscape painting exemplified human relationships with land? Historically, what painters have strived to

achieve through the practice of landscape painting can be organised into categories. Those mentioned here are significant in their contribution to this ongoing story, and are highlighted as they hold resonance in some way with this research.

Although the history of landscape painting has a much more extensive global history reaching much further back, the roots for this discussion are found in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century Western world. For, as articulated in chapter 4, this research shares something with the Romantic thought of this period. Movements in painting which were tied up in the political, theological, social, economic and environmental events of this time include concepts of the sublime, and the picturesque. Although they might be treated as opposing concepts, in that the sublime reflected the power of the natural world whilst the picturesque delighted in compartmentalising the visual enjoyment of landscape, these two concepts weren't always treated as mutually exclusive. Countless paintings adopt tropes associated with either concept – perhaps most clearly in the work of J. M. W. Turner, whose early paintings flourished within a picturesque aesthetic, but later began to incorporate sublime elements such as tempests, turbulent rivers, and precipitous cliffs (Barringer et al., 2018, p. 99). Eventually, the harbingers of the industrial revolution were to become the industrial sublime (Bate, 2000b; Schama, 2013) in Turner's paintings. Ultimately, and to begin with, the sublime, which, supported by Edmund Burke's 1757 treatise (1990), renders the natural world as an almighty and untameable entity. At this time of tumultuous change, driven by the progression of industrial technologies and the transition from sail-power to steam-power, the concept of the sublime reflected a new cultural awareness of the profoundly limited nature of the self (Morley, 2010, p. 14) in the face

of deeply felt, mystifying experiences – such as those experienced in the natural world. Renowned nineteenth-century depictions of the sublime landscape are epitomised in paintings such as “Coalbrookdale by Night” (1801) by Philip James de Loutherbourg, “Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog” (1817) by Casper David Friedrich, and “The Great Day of His Wrath” (1851–3) by John Martin. Conceived so as to provoke and sensitize the mind’s recesses (Bell, 2017, p. 135), the sublime operated in painting through effects of scale, often depicting the human figure as tiny against a vast vista.

In contrast to the suggestion of immeasurability that the sublime employed, the picturesque developed ways to contain scenes of the natural world within the perimeters of a painting. In 1768, William Gilpin conceptualised the picturesque; an aesthetic ideal which celebrates the beauty landscape presents. As a genre of landscape painting, the picturesque style thrived throughout the eighteenth century throughout Europe. Gilpin defined the picturesque as "a term expressive of that peculiar kind of beauty, which is agreeable in a picture" (1792, xii), and in doing so the natural world began to be framed, perceptually and literally within the frame of a painting. Elements which did not match the criteria of the picturesque were edited out. Thompson [no date] points out the paradox at the heart of the term: devotees of the picturesque impassioned by nature, also felt licensed to manipulate along the way to meet this aesthetic ideal. Adopting compositional aids such as the ‘Claude glass’ mirror, (a convex, pocket-sized tool), many eighteenth-century artists would turn their back on their chosen scene, and instead paint from a reflection which was thought to unify the palette, widen the view and make the foreground and vista pleasing to the eye (Matheson, 2007). Andrews points out, picturesque taste favours natural scenery for its

untouched status, its remoteness from the world of art and artifice in order to familiarise it in the commodity form of painting (1999, p. 129). Yet in the age of the Anthropocene, where nothing remains unaffected by the actions of the human species – specifically, Western capitalist extraction activity – the notion of a landscape protected from the effects of industrial capitalism is a fallacy. Indeed, the picturesque ideal today is widely critiqued for its human-centric perception of the non-human world and is problematically bound with issues of colonialism (Barringer, 2018; Smith, 2019, p. 280). The concept of the sublime has experienced greater longevity, due to a continual re-envisioning of the fundamentals of its meaning, which are in tandem with the evolving human relationship to land. The industrial sublime which I mentioned earlier developed in response to the Industrial Revolution. Many iterations have followed, as the categorisations within Simon Morley's 2010 compendium illustrate. Not least, a contemporary toxic sublime, epitomised perhaps in the photography of Edward Burtynsky (1955); and the technological sublime, within the realm of the digital. Meanwhile, although this is not to say it is without value, today the original meanings associated with the picturesque are now outdated and ill-disposed to promote a non-human-centric relationship to the land, which is desperately needed. Barringer points out however, that in the post-industrial contemporary, a new generation of British artists has emerged, who engage in artistic approaches which, consciously or not, perpetuate the traditions of picturesque nature worship (2014, p. 18). Whilst such practice disengages with the picturesque aesthetic ideal – as chapter 7 explores – Barringer's point touches upon a notion of care, that connects many approaches to landscape painting. This leads the discussion to another movement in the history of landscape painting; the realm of environmental art.

The field of environmental landscape painting, which attempts to show the devastating effects on the planet wreaked by human activity, is perhaps the most obvious sphere of the genre with which this research connects. Concern for the environment is not new; indeed, many of the artists previously mentioned incorporated signs of a growing concern for the detrimental effects of industrial activities upon the natural world. Having incorporated the polluted atmosphere of the industrial revolution into his paintings, Turner for example, was a precursor to environmental art. Such attitudes manifest more explicitly in the contemporary. In the practice of Emma Stibbon (born 1962) the changing effects of climate change on specific remote landscapes such as the polar regions are visualised. Justin Mortimer (born 1970) creates an atmosphere of palpable disquiet (Herbert, 2014) in his dystopian canvases which deal with the most destructive elements of environmental destruction. Increasingly, artists (this practice-research included), are seeking a more environment-conscious way of working and turning to recycled materials for instance, whilst painters such as Onya McCausland (born 1971) find sustainable ways to create paint from the waste produced by mining. Whether figurative or abstract, whatever the painterly vocabulary employed, artists are increasingly exploring ways to communicate what is at stake in a world already permeated by an increasing sense of loss (see chapter 5). This research builds on the approaches of the artists mentioned, and takes painting in novel directions by incorporating New Materialism with a Romantic sensibility, both of which help to imbue this practice research with a sense of care.

Landscape is a concept with a great historical legacy. However, what this chapter has shown so far is the various ways in which landscape does evolve with the concerns of the contemporary, and so does have

significant meaning within this research. This practice holds a relationship with all of the themes discussed, though they manifest through the paintings in subtle or unexpected ways. A relationship to the genre of landscape painting persists, insofar as this research shares the sense of curiosity and awe inspired by the non-human natural world, and which in turn inform landscape painting. However, paradoxically, this research emerges from a position which is contrary to the observational stance manifested by the term and differs from the history of landscape painting which offers countless examples that clearly reflect a “doctrine of separation and distance” (Berleant, 2005, p. 5). When discussing the genre of landscape painting, Corrine Fowler reminds us that the act of visualising landscape can, and has, belied some of the darkest and most troubling realities of the ways in which human activity has drastically changed the landscape (2022, p. 46). This description, as we have seen, is not true of the lived and deeply caring relationship to land that this research practices and conceptualizes through the paintings. In stark contradiction, it is Morton’s notion of a perforated, shared world, in which individual ‘worlds’ overlap (2018, p. 84), matter pertains agency (Barrett and Bolt, 2013, p. 6), and there is a “felt dimension of experience” (Petitmengin, 2021b, p. 200), which this research is both motivated by and develops from.

Summary

To summarise, what this chapter has explored are the various ways in which this research works with and paradoxically, against the traditions of the landscape painting genre, whilst at the same time highlighting the evolving nature of the genre. The practice research is

indebted to the field of landscape painting to an extent; undoubtedly the paintings are in continuum with a great lineage of the act of expressing land, and a personal relationship to it, through paint. Through this relationship my paintings address the contemporary world whilst connecting in meaningful ways both to painting's past and the present (Sturgis, 2011, p. 8). It is also important to point out in addition that whilst historically (since the Renaissance), landscape painting has celebrated the non-human natural world (Ratcliff, 2021), today, it means something very different to make paintings of land. Within the contemporary conditions permeated by crisis, disaster and loss, art must find new and meaningful ways to get across a message to which the contemporary viewer can relate. As Becker points out, the images of the visible nature art processed before "have lost their validity" (1999, p. 7). A more relevant approach to landscape painting today is to apply Haraway's concepts of the naturalcultural (2003), and tentacular thinking (2016), and furthermore, Timothy Morton's 'The Ecological Thought' (2010) – through which we see that there can no longer be a celebration of all things natural (Morton, 2010, p. 99), and instead the interconnectedness of things (Morton, 2010, p. 33) becomes the mode of perception which informs the paintings.

In this chapter I have begun to map out contextual connections with other painters, both historical and contemporary. The next chapter is dedicated to the question of where this research can be placed within contemporary painting practice whilst also highlighting the unique contribution the paintings make to this field.

Visual Interlude F



Figure 107. John Constable (1776–1837)
'Flatford Mill ('Scene on a Navigable River)'

Oil on canvas

H 101.6 x W 127 cm

1816–17

Photo credit: Tate



Figure 108. Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851)

‘Chichester Canal’

Oil on canvas

H 63.5 x W 132 cm

c.1829

Photo credit: Tate



Figure 109. Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851)

‘Rain, Steam, and Speed - The Great Western Railway’

Oil on canvas.

H 91 x W 121.8 cm

1844

Photo credit: The National Gallery, London



Figure 110. Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851)

‘The Thames above Waterloo Bridge’

Oil on canvas

H 90.5 × W 121 cm

c.1830–5

Photo credit: Tate



Figure 111. Christopher Richard Wynne Nevinson (1889–1946)

‘The Towpath’

Oil on canvas

H 76.5 x W 56 cm

1912

Photo credit: Ashmolean Museum, Oxford



Figure 112. Algernon Cecil Newton (1880–1968)

‘The Regent's Canal, Twilight’

Oil on canvas

H 76.5 x W 68.5 cm

1925

© the artist's estate.

Photo credit: Government Art Collection



Figure 113. Algernon Cecil Newton (1880–1968)

‘The House by the Canal’

Oil on canvas

H 50.8 x W 61 cm

1945

© the artist's estate.

Photo credit: Bridgeman Images



Figure 114. Albert Edward Turpin (1900–1964)

‘Canal Scene, Victoria Park Area’

Oil on board

H 47 x W 62 cm

No date

© the artist's estate

Photo credit: Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives

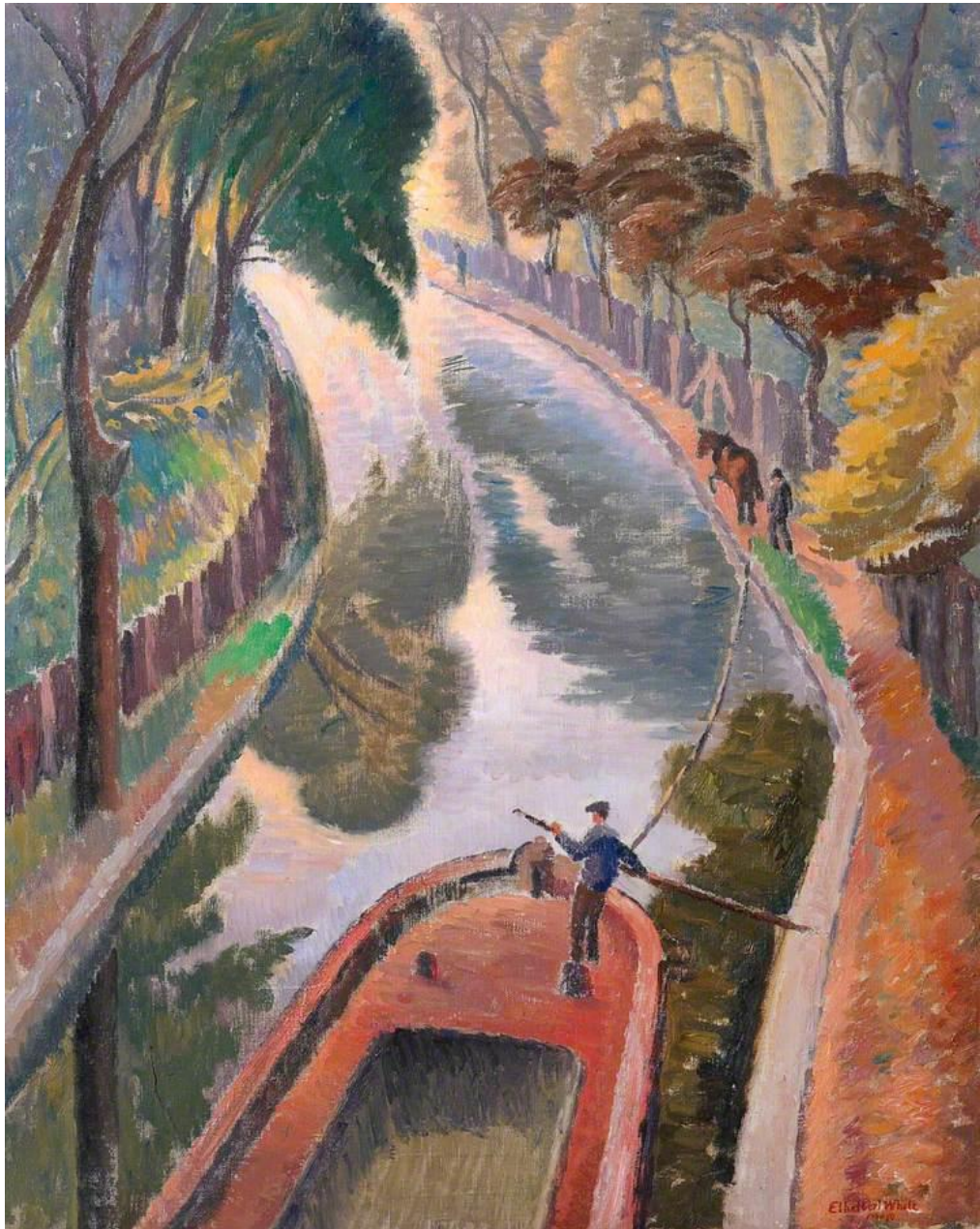


Figure 115. Ethelbert White (1891–1972)

‘Regent's Canal’

Oil on canvas

H 75 x W 61.8 cm

1920–1950

© the Ethelbert White estate.

Photo credit: William Evans Bequest, Bangor University



Figure 116. Irene Hawkins (1906–1979)

‘Gazebos on the River Lea, Ware’

Watercolour

H 39.4cm x W 57.5cm

1940

Photo credit: V&A

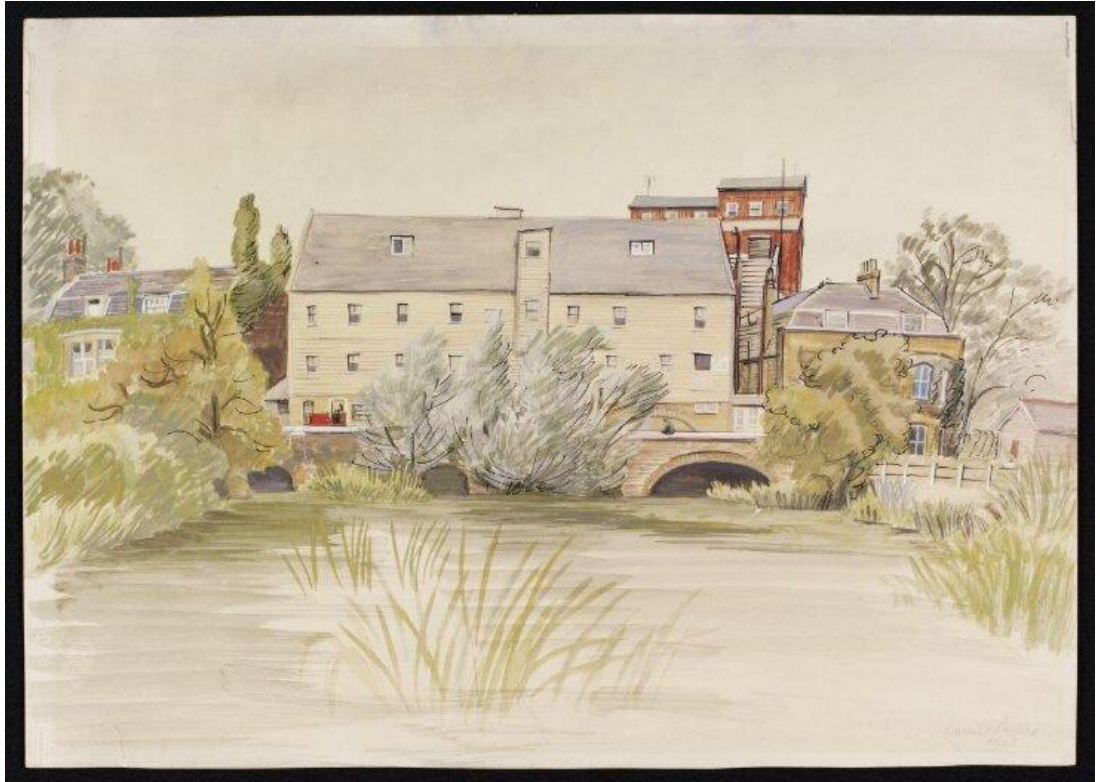


Figure 117. Louisa Puller (1913–1945)

‘The Mill, Ponders End’

Watercolour

H 33.8cm x W 47.6cm

1943

Photo credit: V&A



Figure 118. Lee Navigation, Ponders End. Looking at the land from the water. 2022.



Figure 119. Marielle Hehir

'The World of Invisible Things'

Pigment, binder, oil-pigment stick on canvas.

H 43 x H 43cm.

2022.



Figure 120. Trevor Chamberlain (b.1933)

'Hertford Lock'

Oil on canvas

H 43 x W 53 cm

1961

© the artist.

Photo credit: Hertford Museum



Figure 121. William Warden (1908–1982)

'Industrial Landscape'

Oil on canvas

H 100 x W 126 cm

1974

© the copyright holder

Photo credit: Rye Art Gallery



Figure 122. Prunella Clough (1919–1999)

'By the Canal'

Oil on canvas

H 182.9 x W 142.2 cm

1976

©Estate of Prunella Clough.

Photo credit: Tate

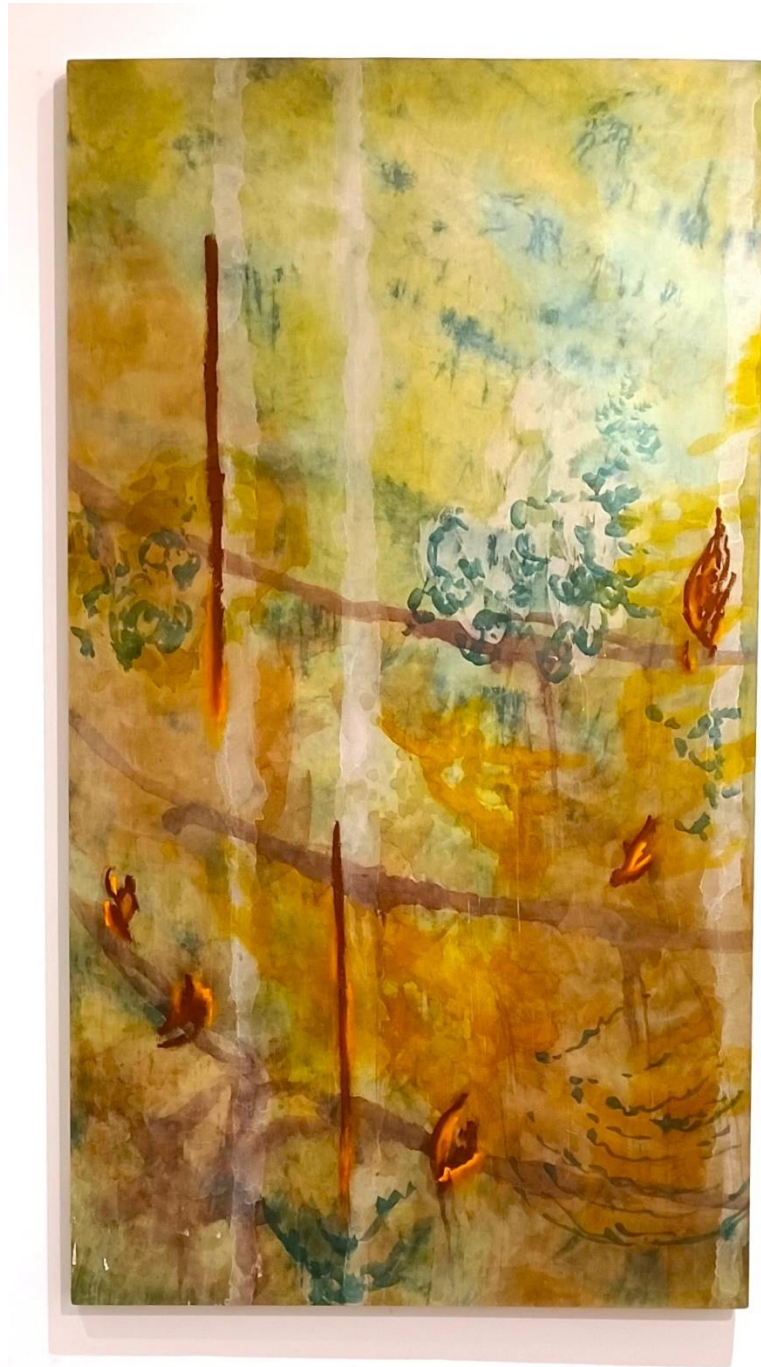


Figure 123. Marielle Hehir

'In the Lock'

Pigment, binder, oil-pigment-stick, natural dyes, cheesecloth

H 200 x W 110 cm

2021.



Figure 124. Prunella Clough (1919–1999)

‘Grand Union Canal’

Oil on board

H 25.5 x W 32 cm

c.1951

© estate of Prunella Clough.

Photo credit: Jerwood Collection



Figure 125. Jock MacFadyen (b.1950)

Canal

Oil on canvas

H 207.4 x W 149.9 cm

1990

© the artist.

Photo credit: Manchester Art Gallery

Chapter 7: Contemporary Practice

The previous chapter examined the many facets of the concept of landscape and the genre of landscape painting today, and in doing so established ways in which the paintings made through this research can be thought of as contemporary earth-life painting (Carus, 2002). In continuum with this argument, the discussion which drives this chapter is explored through a detailed look at the practice of others. In reviewing contemporary practice this way shared concerns and dialogues are revealed, and at the same time the originality of this practice-research is distinguished. A note for the reader: the visual essay which precedes this chapter includes the images of paintings which are discussed here as well as some which hold a more peripheral relationship to this research. There are myriad relationships between practitioners whose work engages with the territories of this research, and in varied ways can be contextualised through the lens of the Anthropocene. These artists are of significance to this research in terms of relationship to place and approach to painting, particularly through material specificity, and have been organised as such in this chapter. To start with, a collection of paintings which respond to the canals of Britain are selected for discussion. Though these examples do not always cross over into the exact geographical boundaries of the site which forms the basis of this research, it is useful to consider more generally the differences, and commonalities in feeling, aroused by the sensory experience summoned by canal 'territory' – which might be perceived through the paintings. James Purdon has in recent years surveyed a collection of paintings of Britain's canals. The collection dates from 1793 to 1997 and the paintings were selected to tell the story of how the canals came to be accepted as part of the British landscape

(2020). The discussion here sets out to offer a different angle on the trajectory Purdon takes. To begin with some examples are discussed which are significant in terms of location. The discussion then shifts from the narrative of social history which surrounds the canals, to a different perception of the network. This, as we know, is a perception which employs New Materialism, one which considers the canal as a place of material agency. This is a novel approach which builds on Purdon's survey and contributes to a shift in how the canal might be perceived by establishing this new understanding. Following this, a further grouping of practitioners – painters and those with materials-led practices – are examined. Similarities and differences are elaborated on throughout, in order to carve out the space in which this practice operates. This mapping of contemporary practice, which draws together material and creates dialogues with New Materialism, Romanticism, and is centred around the canals of Britain, is unique to this research. In doing so, both contrast and moments of resonance between this research and the work of other practitioners is established, and we see how this research, and my contemporary earth-life paintings, contribute to the vibrant field of contemporary painting.

Painting the Canal

“The story of canal painting in Britain is an important part of the story of landscape painting itself. The human made landscape of the canal clarifies the close relationship between nature and artifice, and demonstrates how the unfamiliar forms of a new technological era can become, over time, part of the scenery”

(Purdon, 2020).

From the advent of the canal network, and its interruptions to the strata of the land throughout Britain, and therefore the landscape view, painters have included canals in their paintings. This section discusses several paintings which respond to the canals in Britain and have been chosen for the ways in which they might share something with this research practice. As the paintings are so intertwined with the story of the history of the canal, they are discussed in chronological order of their making. The specifics of that which continues to draw artists to canals varies, according largely to the historical context of canals in an artist's own lifetime. Ways in which canals might feature, or be responded to, in paintings varies, and tells the story of the rise and fall of the canals, from their status as the beating heart of the Industrial Revolution, through to abandonment and decline. As James Purdon has spelt out, the canals took a while to be truly accepted as part of the British landscape, and therefore embraced by landscape painters. Purdon cites William Gilpin as leading the initial resistance towards the canals, which for him "disfigured" the landscape by cutting it into pieces (2020, p. 58). For Gilpin, particularly for the task of painting, the canals were the antithesis to his picturesque ideals, as we saw in the previous chapter. It is of note that with my paintings, the subject of the canals returns us to the anti-picturesque in a whole new manner – this point is elaborated on toward the close of this chapter. Over time, canals would nevertheless start to appear in painting, relegated to part of the background to begin with. They began to feature more prominently in the paintings of John Constable (1776–1837), amongst others. Constable's canal paintings were working scenes, often peopled, which emphasised the laborious everyday activities that went on at the canals in this era. 'Flatford Mill ('Scene on a Navigable River')' (1816–17) (fig. 107) for example, depicts human and animal

interaction with the canal, whilst also pertaining to classic tropes of landscape painting – such as the use of perspective, and the horizon line which divides land and sky. Constable (and others at the time) re-defined the notion of the picturesque and showed that the canals had indeed become an accepted part of the British landscape. Unlike the traditional style Constable adhered to, his contemporary J. W. M. Turner (1775–1851) – “perceptive chronicler of contemporary history, fascinated by the changing face of the nation” (Tate, 2020) – painted the atmospheric effects of a changing landscape. He took great interest in the waterways as a driving force of the early Industrial Revolution. Steam, smoke, ash, smog and fire are infused in many of Turner’s paintings of this time. The polluting byproducts of the burning coal – which fuelled the revolution and was transported throughout the canal network – integrate with natural phenomena and the industrial re-structuring of the land in paintings such as ‘Chichester Canal’ (c.1829) (fig. 108) and ‘The Thames above Waterloo Bridge’ (c.1830–5) (fig. 110). Turner’s vision was romantic in that his ideas coincided with the Romantic movement’s focus on individual feeling, human susceptibility, and reverence for nature (Rodner, 1997, p. 14); he was sensitive to the negative effects of the technological progress of his time. A sensitivity to the effects human activity has on the land is shared by this research, which explores this perceptive quality by looking closely at the minutiae of organic and synthetic material relationships throughout the site. Whilst Turner visited the hubs of industrial activity in towns and cities, for the purposes of his paintings which gathered the full effects of “picturesque history in the midst of the ‘industrial sublime’” (Rodner, 1997, p. 113) he would often choose to distance himself from the point of interest. The industry that Turner painted has long ceased operation for the most part, though

the canals remain a polluted site, as we have seen in the discussion of *fieldwork* in chapter 2.

To reach the next chapter in the story of the canal network in painting, we take a considerable leap forward into the twentieth century. The Regent's Canal has been depicted in many paintings and forms part of the geography of the site of this research (fig. 1). In the early part of the century, a slowing down of the industries which the canal threaded together meant that the canals remained a part of urban life, but were increasingly used for leisure, with pedestrians making use of the quieter routes the towpaths follow. Christopher Richard Wynne Nevinson (1889–1946) examples this in his atmospheric painting, 'The Towpath' (1912) (fig. 111). During this time Algernon Cecil Newton (1880–1968) developed a penchant for painting waterways, the canals of London in particular. Newton's 'The Regent's Canal, Twilight' (1925) (fig. 112) is painted from the perspective of standing on the towpath, looking towards the architecture which divides the water and sky. Yet unlike Nevinson, Newton's rendering of a scene is unpeopled; a desolate space yet one which appears tranquil, in the wake of its apparent retirement from the industrial years. Albert Edward Turpin (1900–1964) paints an area of the Regent's which is near to Newton's scene (fig. 114). Stylistically it is very different, but also shows us the span of trees, flora and fauna, which exist amongst the rising architectural structures. In Ethelbert White's (1891–1972) 'Regent's Canal' (1920–1950) she employs an almost aerial perspective, positioning the viewer up in the trees, looking down at the working barge which occupies the water (fig. 115). With hindsight, perhaps this could be read as unintentionally signalling the vulnerability of the canals – a

vulnerability which would become clearer during the subsequent chapter of global events.

During the second world war, the canals became a vital transport system in moving war employees and materials around the country (Canal and River Trust, 2021). The River Lee navigation was still used for commercial traffic; as it had been for decades the chief communication between East Hertfordshire and London, and the means by which the produce of the county was sent to the city (Palmer, 1946 – 1949, p. 190). Additionally, the safest way of transporting ammunition from the Royal Gunpowder Mills (situated in Waltham Abbey adjacent to the river Lea), was the slow and steady canal barges. Parts of the canal which map out the site of this research (fig. 1), including the River Lee Navigation, were responded to through painting by artists employed within Kenneth Clark's Recording Britain project, (which was discussed in chapter 5). 'Gazebos on the River Lea, Ware' (1940) (fig. 116), by Irene Hawkins, and 'The Mill, Ponders End' (1943) (fig. 117), by Louisa Puller, are both paintings of points along the river Lee Navigation, which the fieldwork for this research follows. Why these points were deemed of interest to Hawkins and Puller is unclear but can be ruminated upon. When we remember the brief for the project they were employed within – to make topographical watercolour drawings of places and buildings of characteristic national interest, particularly those exposed to the danger of destruction by the operations of war (Palmer, 1946 – 1949, v) – an interesting parallel with this research is revealed. The canals were seen as vulnerable to aerial attack during the war years, when Hawkins and Puller made these paintings. Whilst the cloud of war no longer threatens the ecology of the canal site, it is, as this

research explores, a place which is vulnerable to the deteriorating effects which the Anthropocene brings forth.

It is perhaps the case that Hawkins and Puller respectively were responding to the places which were local to them, as travel would have been limited during their time. As Saunders has pointed out: “in recording Britain many artists were local to their subjects which resulted in studies characterised by intimacy and affection” (2011, p. 210). These are places which are today local to me, as I travel through them regularly, and stay for sustained periods of time. Ware (see on map – fig. 1) is an example of one of these stopovers, and the gazebos Hawkins painted are still there today. Historian Jim Lewis clarifies that they are the last few remaining eighteenth-century gazebos which were the summer houses of the rich (2017, p. 29). Ponders End, and specifically, the spot along the navigation that is next to the mill which features in Puller’s watercolour, is a spot which is returned to repeatedly and can be seen in various fieldwork photographs (fig. 118), and permeates paintings such as ‘The World of Invisible Things’ (2022) (fig. 119) a painting which like the watercolours of Hawkins and Puller, is also characterized by intimacy, yet which manifests in an entirely different way. Whilst the watercolours depict scenes which include meaningful, and significant architectural bodies, my painting evokes qualities of the experience of this place through the materials, colours and textural qualities which make the painting.



Figure. 126. Wright's Flour Mill, Ponders End.

The mill which Hawkins featured in her watercolour came under Government control in 1939 to help secure food supplies for the nation, and to supplement the losses caused by the bombing of the mills situated in the London Docks.

(Lewis, 1999, p. 11).

Photo ©Wright's Flour Mill

In the postwar years, a decline in demand for certain produce, coupled with the dominance of other forms of transportation usurping the role of the canal for this purpose, meant that the canal fell into disrepair in many areas. The Inland Waterways Association formed in 1946 to restore, protect and conserve Britain's waterways, and has led to the restoration of over 500 miles of water navigation (Inland Waterways Association, 2023). However, still today, many of the country's waterways remain in a state of disuse and decline, even ruin. Paintings from this time show us the canals in yet another light, to follow with yet another chapter in their history; the post-industrial.

Hertford lock, towards the end of the River Lee Navigation and the northernmost point of the site of this research, features in the painting 'Hertford Lock' (1961) by Trevor Chamberlain (born 1933) (fig. 120). The shadow of the looming presence of a gas tower dominates one half of the imagery, juxtaposing a patch of green on the bank opposite. Standing in this spot on the towpath at Hertford lock, the Lee Navigation and the River Lea split off in different directions – the navigation taking the western route, alongside an industrial estate and the river veering off to the east, alongside an expanse of green fields. It seems Chamberlain concentrated this division – of the grey of industry with the green of the natural world – within his composition. William Warden's (1908–1982) painting 'Industrial Landscape' (1974) (fig. 121) is equally devoid of human presence yet appears haunted by the post-industrial; the murky greys, browns and ochres in this painting patch together in shapes which distil into a canal scene, under a horizon lined with chimney forms. Whilst this research also incorporates elements of the post-industrial legacies which are embedded within the canals, these paintings offer distanced, grand-scale perspectives on this issue – whereas this research zooms right in and takes a close inspection of the traces of industry, pollution and debris, which are woven into the natural, organic matter along the canals, and instead *re-presents* (Casey, 2002) this through the paintings.

Working around the same time as these artists, Prunella Clough's (1919–1999) paintings are often centred around sites of disuse and desertion, the London canals occupying several of her paintings. Clough's work is characterised as Neo-Romantic (which is returned to later in this chapter), and of all the artists discussed so far, shares the most with this practice research. In part this is due to Clough's shift

away from representation (Annely Juda, 2023) in her dealings with landscape, which, as we have seen in chapter 4 is an approach shared with this research. Whilst Clough found her moments of encounter in “the urban and industrial scene or any unconsidered piece of ground” (Spalding, 2012, p.16), her relationship to place was distanced, when compared with this research. Whilst I am living within the site of research and therefore becoming one of the ingredients of an existing hybridity (Lippard, 1997, p. 6), Clough was a visitor to a spectrum of places which are characterised by the post-industrial. Wandering the canal, Clough was most interested in the areas that at this time remained “a place of grime and decay, a no-go zone” (Purdon, 2020, p. 61). Her painting ‘By the Canal’ (1976) (fig. 122) is evocative of the murky textures of rusted steel, worn concrete and water which line the canals. What Clough picked up on in these areas was, like this research, the materiality of the site. This shared interest operates differently between my own and Clough’s paintings, however. As discussed in chapter 3, my paintings are made through the adoption of the framework of composting (Rasula, 2002), through which matter becomes intertwined. This is influential both within my experience of the site, and the processes of making the paintings and treatment of materials. For example, in the painting ‘In the Lock’ (2021) (fig. 123; 158), layers of paint overlap and seep below and through the open weave of the cheesecloth fabric. Colour stains the surface and thicker marks in oil pigment stick hover and recede into the depth of the painting. The painting is a slow build-up of paint, each layer infusing into the next, evocative of the slippery, patchy layering of brick, water and algae which coat the walls in a canal lock. Clough, however, often includes motifs and objects: recognised as such through their distinct outlines in her paintings. Not always identifiable, there is a sense that these objects are detached from their original purpose,

shown in isolation and implying only the memory of human contact. See, 'Grand Union Canal' (c.1951) (fig. 124) for instance, in which the harsh lines of scaffolding appear behind a horizon line.

Jock McFadyen's (b.1950) landscapes also feature the run-down or abandoned structures which populate the lonelier areas at the edges of towns or cities. McFadyen used the London towpaths in the 1980's as they offered the quickest routes to his printing studios. At this time the areas of the canal in East London which he traversed, and in which I now take up residence, were less friendly places than they appear today. Thanks to an increasing presence of liveaboard boaters across the London canal network, many areas are now cleaner and safer. In McFadyen's time as a pedestrian using the towpath, he preferred not to linger. In contrast to the slow pace and immersive nature of this research, his rapid walks meant he developed his paintings in the studio afterwards from the memories of his experiences. This pace means, in his words, one ends up "seeing things you don't really know you've noticed" (1991) – things which contribute to the atmosphere of grimy, smoggy foreboding seen in his 'Canal' (1990) (fig. 125) for instance.

To summarise, this section has elaborated on what Purdon refers to in the epigraph for this section, as a story. What the artworks discussed above show is the trajectory of canal painting in Britain, and its contribution to the bigger story of the evolving nature of landscape painting. By considering these works chronologically, it is made clear that the canals have played a crucial role in Britain's history, and consequently they bear an unusual array of qualities – qualities which the artistic conscience is frequently drawn to. We can also understand the changing approaches artists have developed in responding to the

canal through painting; approaches which coincide with the changing status, usage, condition and atmosphere of the canal over the decades. We see also how perceptions of the canals change in terms of material agency. The earlier paintings are often scenic and create narrative around the status of the canal, whereas once we reach the later paintings, artists such as McFadyen and Clough are creating paintings which are more concerned with the materiality of the canal, and what that might mean in contemporary times. What follows is how my paintings contribute to and are perhaps a continuation of this ongoing story.

Early on in this section, the curious observation was made that this research returns – in some sense – to the concept of the picturesque. It was the structure of the canal as an interruption to a view that Gilpin took issue with in the nineteenth century, causing him to deem the canals the antithesis to the picturesque. Yet what followed, as we have seen through this discussion, was a celebration of the canals as part of a picturesque approach to landscape painting – most explicitly in Constables' paintings. Following this were various responses to painting the canal which are bound with evolving approaches to landscape painting – which is explored in the following section. By its very nature, this research manifests through an approach to painting which is performative (Bolt, 2004), evocative, not seeking to represent but to *re-present* (Casey, 2002) – all qualities which mean these paintings continue to move away from notions of the picturesque. The research – as we have seen in previous chapters – does not take a distanced, scenic view of the canal site. Contrastingly, an immersive, up-close, lived exploration of the canal is a catalyst for the development of the paintings as earth-life paintings (Carus, 2002) for the contemporary. In this way, my paintings offer a new reading of

the canal site, which hasn't previously been responded to through the medium of paint like this. Previously, painters have told us stories *about* the canal; stories which are wrapped up in societal history and the fluctuating functionality and usage of the canal. This research however creates new understandings of the canal site today by working *with* the ecology of the site and incorporating its materiality into the paintings. In the following section I attend to the query of how the particular mode of perception that this research embraces also parallels the Neo-Romantic imagination.

Neo-Romanticism

A conversation regarding landscape painting, and this practice-led research, starts with a focus on the paintings of Graham Sutherland (born 1903). The reason for this comes from Sutherland's profound relationship with place, and willingness to work from memory when painting in the studio, in order to *paraphrase* (Sutherland, 1942) within his paintings what he encountered through the land he spent time in. Through his sensitivity to the subjective experience of place, Sutherland's oeuvre came to be received as part of the Neo-Romantic movement in British art in the 1930's and 1940's. As we have seen in chapter 5, this is a sensibility which is significant for this research, which leans into Neo-Romantic thought during this uncertain time for the climate. This was a period in history overshadowed by world war, and the response to landscape at this time by Sutherland and many of his contemporaries (Paul Nash, John Piper for instance) came to harbour the anxieties of what was to come. Painters at this time adopted an inventive approach to painting land, which as Gruetzner Robins points out, "had a long lasting effect, and English landscape art

was never quite so cozy again” (2017, p. 116). These words are pertinent when situating this practice–research; my paintings build on the inventive approach the Neo–Romantics initiated, and address contemporary issues concerning the landscape. What this research shares with the paintings of many of the Neo–Romantics, including Sutherland, is the use of paint in order to evoke, rather than represent places (Pallant House Gallery, 2022), (see chapter 3). In essence, like the approach that this research takes, Neo–Romantic approaches to landscape painting were infused with the legacies of human activity which in some instances has devastating effects upon the land. The conditions of the interwar years which gave rise to the Neo–Romantic movement, whilst not the same, share something with the conditions of the present, through the devastating effects that the Anthropocene brings forth. Rather than the cloud of war with which Sutherland and his contemporaries contended however, it is the cloud of environmental collapse which frames this research and shapes the relationship to place. Through these different conditions, a similar, shared relationship to landscape emerges. Sutherland’s place, or site, which he responded to through painting, was the coast of Pembrokeshire, west Wales. He spoke profoundly about the landscape there, which for him expressed an “exultant strangeness” that he attempted to capture through painting (Thuillier, 1982, p.28). Painting in the studio after his encounters, rather than ‘en–plein–air’, his memories of what he came across at the coast were coloured by the shadow of war at the time, and eventually, the things he had seen as an official war artist during the years 1940 to 1945 (Berthoud, 1982, p. 94). Sutherland’s paintings of Pembrokeshire were not scenic landscape paintings, rather, they brought to the fore the strange dimension of what this research refers to as ‘vibrant matter’ (Bennett, 2010, p. 3). Often giving prominence to stones, plant life, or even

shadow cast on rock surfaces in his paintings, Sutherland was fascinated by the “unimportant things”, which to him “seemed to have a kind of strange mystery about them” (1980, p. 16). For example, in ‘Estuary with Rocks’ (1937) (fig. 129), the land has been paraphrased into simple forms, which act as a vehicle for the colours and dramatic shadows Sutherland experienced at this place. In the background which surrounds the form in ‘Green Tree Form: Interior of Woods’, (1940) (fig. 130), Sutherland builds up the tonality of green, which in his painting embodies a quality as deep as the green he describes in his ‘Welsh Sketch Book’; “the left bank as we see it is all dark – an impenetrable damp green gloom of woods which run down to the edge of low blackish moss covered cliffs” (1942, p. 230). Sutherland’s use of colour, which he treats as a material, is shared with this research. However, in my paintings, colour is employed in ways which emphasise the coming together of matter, organic and synthetic, throughout the canal. Often, colour is encountered *as* vibrant matter; that is to say, colour is experienced as an independent phenomenon which has the agency to snag my attention as I move around the canal. In the paintings, colours are deliberately chosen for their contrasting qualities. In my painting ‘Lost Matter’ (2022) (fig. 131) for instance, a photograph printed in greyscale is painted in light washes of nickel-yellow, dirtied by the print which shows through. Atop of this, a thickly painted opaque form resides in king's-blue; bold, strange and luminous against its murky background.

It is compelling to consider Prunella Clough, discussed earlier in the ‘Painting the Canal’ section, alongside Sutherland. For whilst he focused his attention on the sensations he perceived through the minutiae of the natural world, Clough was similarly perceptive to the materiality of the industrial landscape – whilst this research responds

to an immersive, lived experience of these material realms which coalesce throughout the canal. When considering the paintings of both artists alongside this research, their work is brought into a dialogue within the context of the Anthropocene. Reconsideration of the oeuvre of these artists through an ‘Anthropocenic’ lens offers fresh and different readings and asserts the continued relevance of these practitioners to this research. At the same time, we see the bedrock for the foundations of the conversation from which this research follows on – my paintings share a great deal with the practices of both Sutherland and Clough: all are responding to *edgelands* (Farley and Symmonds-Roberts, 2012) which evidence human intervention with the land through industrial means. However, this research expands on these shared interests in many ways, but not least through the embracing of unusual materials which create new possibilities for painting. Whilst Sutherland worked predominantly in oil on canvas, Clough did experiment with the incorporation of certain materials into her paintings. Frequently Clough would use sandstone, marble dust or ash, mixing the substances with the paint she applied to canvas, giving her paintings a particular surface quality, the textures analogous with the landscapes from which they are born. The stains of industrial matter interested Clough as much as the object. Taking ‘Brown Wall’ (1964) (fig. 135) as an example, the brown wall is rendered in roughly applied, gritty oil paint. At points thick scabs of paint dapple the surface, evocative of historic wear and tear, which mark any wall over time. This painting is illuminated by the isolated diamond form, which ambiguously hovers against this dark brown chasm. As Catherine Spencer has said, it was Clough’s “cognizance of waste” (2015), her deep understanding of the residues of what might be left behind, that propelled her canvases beyond the realms of representation. Indeed, much like this research, Clough’s later paintings avoid direct

representation and instead emulate the qualities of the things Clough encountered. It could be said that it is my *cognizance of the site*, that takes my paintings into the realm of re-presentation (Casey, 2002), as opposed to representation. However, as stated elsewhere, it is the immersive, lived experience of the site that informs the paintings, which is an altogether more intimate relationship to place, than those described by either Sutherland or Clough.

Painting Now

This brings us into the contemporary, and the wider approaches to landscape painting seen today. The field of contemporary painting is experiencing a particularly vibrant chapter. In this section the discussion focuses on wider contemporary landscape practice, painting in the expanded field, and materials-led painting practice. These are three prominent areas of contemporary painting practice with which this practice-research has strong relations.

Recent years have seen a surge in approaches and styles which draw on the history of the medium and, in many cases, bring something new to the field. Numerous exhibitions have demonstrated the thriving status of what Graw terms “a success medium” (2018), several of which have been visited and analysed as part of this research. Prominent examples which hold relevance to this research through their themes or artists selected include: ‘Forever Now’, MOMA, New York, 2014; ‘Slow Painting’, Leeds Art gallery, 2019; ‘Mixing it Up’, Hayward Gallery, London, 2022; ‘Action, Gesture, Paint: Women Artists and Global Abstraction 1940–70’, Whitechapel gallery, London

2023. What these survey exhibitions demonstrate is the shared belief between practitioners in the vitality of paint as a medium.

The artists chosen to demonstrate these types of painting practice are not alone in their fields, but have been selected for this discussion as their work resonates in some way with this practice-led research. The idea of the survey show is taken as a departure point, and throughout this discussion readers are referred to the visual essay which gathers images of relevant works by various practitioners, grouped according to shared interests, which fall into the three areas described above.

Wider Contemporary Landscape Painting Practice

“Today, the artist is free to reinvent the idea of landscape according to his or her artistic needs”
(Schwabsky, 2019, p. 66).

It is pertinent to note that there has been a swathe of landscape themed survey exhibitions in the last two decades, which explore varied and changing relationships to landscape, through painting and other media. ‘Creating the Countryside: Thomas Gainsborough to Today’, Compton Verney, Warwickshire, 2017; ‘Unsettling Landscapes: The Art of the Eerie’, St. Barbe Museum and Gallery, Hampshire, 2021; Radical Landscapes, Tate, Liverpool, 2022; ‘Expanding Landscapes: Painting After Land Art’, Hestercolme Gallery, Somerset, 2022; ‘Arcadia for All? Rethinking Landscape

Painting Now', Stanley and Audrey Burton Gallery, Leeds, 2023. These exhibitions are specifically relevant for this research, for the particular ways in which they have questioned how landscape has been explored through painting previously and how the issues facing the contemporary time takes the genre in new directions. However, this practice-research differs from, and builds on, the themes which these exhibitions have explored, by engaging with the concept of landscape not from a scenic perspective, but for its material, and its immersive qualities. Moreover, as we know from chapter 4, my paintings might be thought of as contemporary earth-life paintings (Carus, 2002), which is a novel and unique proposition within the genre of landscape painting.

Although we have seen that this research shares a great deal with the post-war Neo-Romantic movement, and the radical approaches to landscape painting that came about through it, this research also shares common ground with many contemporary approaches to the genre which demonstrate a renewed element of the Neo-Romantic characteristics, for the contemporary. Landscape painting today has evolved into a nebulous, sprawling practice which demonstrates multiple strategies taken towards the task, and continues to compel artists in the practice of expressing land through paint. Barry Schwabsky's appraisal of landscape painting today celebrates the progression, development, and persistence of the genre (2019). As a genre with such a rich history it is a force of nature, one which has the "power to alter perception and redefine the range of possible experience" (Berleant, 2005, p. 117). In other words, landscape painting has the potential to influence human relationships to land, and more so the issues surrounding the environment entirely. Barbara Rose identifies connections between painting practitioners in the

contemporary, through similarities in their “worldview”, which she describes as being the result of living through “an extremely unstable and changing time, and that the problem of life, which can be expressed in painting, is a search for equilibrium in this fluctuating landscape” (2016). The following artists have been chosen for their worldview which manifests through their paintings, and which resonate in some way with this research.

Juliette Losq (born 1978) responds to places where, in her words, “society is broken down a bit and you’re just surrounded by nature” (Losq, 2015). Losq creates expansive watercolours of the industrial outskirts of urban environments, including the canal network, that have been abandoned and gradually find themselves rewilded (Freeman, 2023). Challenging conventional use of watercolour, her often immersive paintings are expansive in scale yet continue to express intricate detail. See *Proscenium* (2017) (fig. 136), for example. However, Losq’s paintings of ‘edgelands’ (Farley and Symmons Roberts, 2011) depict scenery, often in classically arranged compositions, whilst my paintings explore the immersive experience of the site. There is a tinge of romance in Losq’s paintings; unpeopled, desolate spaces are often coloured in an almost monochromatic way, giving them a melancholic feel. The Romantic perception of landscape is renewed again in the paintings of Sam Douglas (born 1978). Whilst working within a tradition of British visionary landscape painters of the nineteenth and twentieth century (Contemporary British Painting, 2021), Douglas, like Losq, makes paintings which are unpeopled and present a view of landscape which seems infused with nostalgia. ‘The Wanney Craggs’ (2020) (fig. 137) for instance employs classical perspective to draw the viewers eye and is painted in a soft, near-impressionistic manner, whilst the resin applied on top of the surface

of the painting adds a glassy sheen to the surface, but also acts as a barrier separating the illusionistic world within the painting from the viewer in their real space. It is through his use of materials that Douglas brings the paintings into the contemporary; obscuring the view and using materials in “the wrong order so the paint blisters or the varnish wrinkles” (Douglas, 2020). Both painters share with this research a worldview which takes into account the degradation of land through pollution. There are many other practitioners today who use paint as a means of communicating the issues the conditions of the Anthropocene brings forth. Julian Perry (born 1960), for instance, pictures the imagined futures of coastal areas which are literally experiencing rapid degrees of erosion, accelerated by the Anthropocene (Perry, 2010). Trees, caravans and houses are pictured floating mid-air; the ground upon which they once stood receding into the background of the painting or appearing to have disappeared entirely (fig. 138). Michael Porter (born 1948), particularly in his ‘Apocalypse’ series, (2020) (fig. 139) reflects on the mood that the Anthropocene, coupled with the Covid-19 pandemic, conjures. The paintings from this series might be read as a twenty-first century Romantic, imaginative approach to landscape, which draw on both the biblical scenes of John Martin’s (1789 – 1854) apocalyptic paintings – specifically, ‘The Great day of his Wrath’ (1851–1853) – as well as contemporary anxiety regarding the depletion of the natural world, extreme weather events and bio-diversity loss. The paintings of Robert Mead (born 1988) muse on the Anthropocene in a way which is more subtle than Perry or Porter. Combining compositional strategies and imagery with materials which are specific to the message of the painting, Mead’s paintings “reveal different types of residues of human impacts on our planet” (Mead, 2022). In ‘Cliff Fall’ (2022) (fig. 140) for instance, the image of the cliff is bound with the materiality

of its making: that is, the cliff visually appears to be crumbling, whilst the surface of the painting gives the impression of fracture through its material physicality.

Whilst this research shares a lot with the practitioners mentioned above, this brief glimpse at other practice serves to highlight the intimate relationship to place that this research fosters, and which nourishes the paintings through a unique understanding of the site. The artists discussed are similar in that they approach landscape through painting onto a surface, often as a scenic view, which implies separation between a participant and the land pictured. The paintings produced through this research differ in that they are not pictorial or scenic; generating instead paintings that are not about looking at the landscape but are about being immersed within the landscape (Berleant, 2012, p. 56). How might painting emulate this immersive, sensorial, lived perception of the site? This query is attended to below by looking at how this research relates to ‘painting in the expanded field’, particularly by thinking through how this approach to painting harbours a unique experience of its own.

Painting in the Expanded Field

‘Painting in the expanded field’ stems from the ideas laid out by Rosalind Krauss who introduced the term “expanded field” in her seminal essay “Sculpture in the Expanded Field” (1979), in which she aimed to address new approaches to sculpture at this time. For Krauss, the field, whilst expanded, is “finite” in terms of what the artist may explore whilst retaining their connection to the field (1979, p. 42). Krauss touches on the idea that there is a parallel expansion

within painting (1979, p. 43), which has been picked up on by Gustavo Fares, whose essay 'Painting in the Expanded Field' seeks to advance an understanding of painting as a field which can be enriched and expanded (2004, p. 480). It is to be noted that the term has since evolved and is used widely across other artistic disciplines such as photography and drawing; the question of what constitutes painting that operates within the 'expanded field' persists (Papapetros, 2014, p. 28) through this research, as well as other practitioners. Isabelle Graw proposes that painting be conceived, "not as a medium, but as a production of signs that is experienced as highly personalized" (2012, p. 50). This is formalised in Craig Staff's grammar of the pictorial, which includes support, facture, form, colour and surface. In an essay commissioned for the exhibition 'Real Painting', Staff suggests these component parts are not necessarily discrete elements that work independently; rather at work is a spatial co-mingling of parts (2015b). The contemporary voices in the conversation Krauss started help to establish the relationship this research holds with the concept of the expanded field. Noticeably omitted from Graw and Staff's theses, is the matter of paint itself. A critical point in regard to painting in the expanded field; the *painting* does not always incorporate or consider the very material of paint itself. However, as we know, (see chapters 2 and 3), the matter of paint is intrinsic to this research, and is at the core of a 'co-mingling' of other, more unusual materials within the paintings. This research is a materials-led investigation, and in challenging the integrity of a painting's surface through the addition of unusual materials (see RQ 5) my paintings contribute in quiet, subtle ways to the expanded field. Graham Crowley's argument for all painting to be considered as discourse, which not only has the power to conflate thought and matter but transform it (2019) is useful to bear in mind. This research is engaged

in discourse with both painting's past and present (see chapter 6). What this means, as this discussion continues to establish, is that my paintings are as much in conversation with the historical paintings mentioned previously as they are with contemporary painting practice, which embraces and pushes for expanded understandings of the discipline.

Perhaps operating with the most force amongst practitioners exploring painting in the expanded field today, Katarina Grosse (born 1958) demonstrates the potentials for painting existing outside of a canvas and frame. In works such as 'One Floor up More Highly' (2010) (fig. 141), the viewer is immersed inside a painterly installation, where paint has been sprayed across architectural features, soil and styrofoam forms. Like Grosse, this research explores the material intersection of the natural and the built materiality of land, and like Grosse, my paintings translate an immersive experience of land into painting. However, the *immersive* operates differently in this research. As we have seen, the notion of immersion first comes from my relationship with the site, which is a lived, embedded experience (see chapter 2). For the practice research, my approach to painting is also an immersive relationship, as we have seen through the processes of making which this research adopts. The paintings themselves, such as 'Spectropoetical' (2022) (fig. 142), distil the ephemeral, remembered layers of immersive experience, into material forms. These paintings are slower, quieter explorations of painting in the expanded field, which at the same time are reflecting on the gradual changes to land which Nixon's 'slow violence' (2011) addresses, and in doing so offer incremental, changed possibilities for painting.

In recent years, several exhibitions have showcased the types of painting practice which might be considered as painting in the expanded field, many of which share an approach to this explorative territory which aren't necessarily installations like those of Grosse, but often small, object-based explorations of painting. 'Painting in Time', curated by Sarah Kate Wilson, was a study of the contemporary hybrid practices of the medium, which considered notions of temporality, spectator/gallery participation, process as well as product, performance and theatricality (Bramley, 2015). The press release for 'Yellow Archangel: An Exhibition of Rhizomic Painting' curated by Paul Bramley, proposed we "experience the infinite possibilities of what painting is", describing the art of painting as "like a wayfarer of no fixed destination" (Oceans Apart, 2020). Whilst AIR gallery exhibited a collection of artists who apparently adopt "a more radical approach to painting" and push at "the boundaries of what a painting is, how it is made, what it is made with and how it is presented" (AIR Gallery, 2022). In the same year, Copperfield gallery presented 'Not Painting', an exhibition of work by artists which wouldn't necessarily be categorised as painting yet does demonstrate "a relationship to painting" (Copperfield Gallery, 2022). The exhibition mentioned earlier, alongside Craig Staff's essay, was a presentation of contemporary expanded field painting practice. In 'Real Painting', co-curators Deb Covell (born 1966) and Jo McGonigal (born 1970) exhibited their own work alongside other practitioners, such as Simon Callery (born 1960), Alexis Harding (born 1973) and Lydia Gifford (born 1979) (fig. 143; 144). The exhibition sought to broaden the discussion around contemporary painting (Jaspén, 2015) and posited the consideration of not what painting is, but what it does (Castlefield Gallery, 2015). Considering my paintings, which seek to evoke some quality of the experience of a particular place, we see how the

questions which fuelled 'Real Painting' share common ground with this research. For these are questions which resonate with Barbara Bolt's proposition that painting operates as a force in the world and should no longer be conceived of as solely images (2006, p. 57). For this research, approaching painting through materials, process and an immersive methodology (see chapter 2), whilst keeping these questions in mind, helps painting find its potential to transform an established perception of the discipline.

To summarise, painting has for some years been operating in an expanded sense, but what this research contributes to this arena is bound with the context of the Anthropocene, and the material conditions of the earth's surface at this time. Bringing to mind the title of this research, 'On Shaky Ground: Land, Paint and Change', we are reminded of the connection between the Earth's surface, and the surface of my paintings, which is the avenue through which this research operates as painting in the expanded field. In finding meaningful ways for painting to engage with the dimensions of the Anthropocene, painting in the expanded field is a zone in which this research finds room to disturb, uncover and reveal, whilst working with different tools to encourage other ways of thinking and looking (Skelton, 2004, p.181). Taking for example, my painting 'Puddle' (2020) (fig. 145), made from pigmented plaster and dyed cheesecloth, this painting departs from the typical structure between support and surface (Kirsh and Levenson, 2000, p. 3) -where the support functions as armature- to explore different potentialities for painting. The support becomes as important as the image (Butler, 2019), and transmutes into surface. The topography of the plaster affects the aesthetics of the painting as the undulations in the plaster influence levels of colour saturation as pigment and paint fuses with the plaster.

This is significant as regards the stratigraphic characterization of the Anthropocene, wherein the conditions of subsurface ground have indirect effect on the formation of surface (Waters et al., 2014). Thinking specifically of the ground which is encountered around the site of the canal, and the vibrant matter which seeps in and through the soil and concrete here, the surfaces of my paintings emulate this textural web. In addition to surface dimensionality (and fragility in some cases), materials play a critical part in how this research engages with and contributes to painting in the expanded field. As discussed in chapter 4, this painting practice takes a New Materialist approach to the materials employed within the makings of the paintings, and due to the gravity of this relationship, further approaches to materiality in contemporary practice are discussed in what follows.

Materials-led Painting Practice

Speaking on the work of Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011), Barbara Rose once described her preference for Frankenthaler's paintings over art of the past, because, she said, "they recreated a long tradition of painting within the terms of my own experience" (1969. p. 28). Here Rose refers to the contemporary nature of Frankenthaler's paintings, which, (for her), are both working *with* selective painterly traditions, and at the same time, moving somewhere beyond this. In part this was due to Frankenthaler's sensitive yet innovative handling of materials. This research intentionally incorporates materials which are understood as fundamental to painting, as well as unusual materials which are either collected directly from the site or derived from the spectrum of materiality at the site, and employed in the

paintings help to create new meanings. This discussion considers how painters have previously pushed, or continue to push, the materiality of painting in alternate directions, and – importantly for this research – the focus is on examples of practice which employ materials which are specific to the experience of certain places.

It is relevant to begin this discussion with a mention of the paintings of Frankenthaler, and specifically her technique of staining which was progressive for her time and is adapted by this research in a variety of different ways (fig. 146). My approach to working with the material of paint, which considers New Materialist thought, resonates with Frankenthaler's handling of paint. Frankenthaler disrupted the current of art history with her paintings in the early fifties (Rose, 1969, p. 29) with the stain technique along with her distinctive, colourful palette, which was also unusual for the time. However, whilst process provides a connection here, unlike Frankenthaler, who used oil paint on raw canvas almost exclusively, the materials which go into my paintings are specific to the site. For example, as well as paint, paintings might be stained with natural dyes derived from plants or rusty objects found at the site (fig. 24).

Moving into the contemporary, Melanie Rose is a painter who binds place into her paintings through their materiality, using chalk gesso made with chalk collected at the South Downs; the place she responds to in her paintings (fig. 147). Onya McCausland (born 1971) practices a similar entropic engagement with the materiality of land. For a body of work that continues under the title 'Turning Landscape into Colour', McCausland collects ochre residue derived from coalmine tailings that she then processes to make into paints. Often, in works such as 'Ochre Wall Saltburn' (2018) (fig. 148), the paint is applied to a

surface alone, without the addition of other material. Like this research, McCausland doesn't seek to represent the landscape in her monochromatic paintings, in her words: "the landscape is already present in the material, inside the painting" (2022). Whilst McCausland has developed exterior grade oil paint (Turning Colour, 2020) made from mine waste, which is packaged in 40ml tubes in collaboration with Michael Harding, this research employs materials often in raw, found form, as well as materials which aren't chemically prepared with longevity in mind. For example, in my painting 'Tidal' (2020) (fig. 48; 49), a geosynthetic fabric is dyed with plant dye and oil paint – a collection of materials which haven't been designed to sit together, and resisted one another during the making process, resulting in a final aesthetic which is faint and patchy.

In work which resonates with this painting in particular, Liz Elton (born 1970) creates paintings using waste material from vegetables, which are made into dyes that colour her work (fig. 149). Biodegradable food bags are often the substrate, which crease and buckle under the weight of the dye, and as the work dries out these crevices stiffen and hold their form in the surface of the painting, which evokes landscape topography. As we know (see chapters 2 and 3), this research also employs unusual materials which are sometimes fragile, to engage with temporality, as it is not known how these materials will respond throughout the making process and thereafter. However, my combinations of organic and synthetic materials mean that parts of a painting will be more vulnerable to change than others; whilst Elton's materials are (in the given example) all biodegradable and will degrade at similar rates. In Elton's work and my own, the materials synthesised are new to one another and therefore liable to behave in unpredictable ways. This unpredictability is harnessed in

another way, through the incorporation of ceramics into this investigation. Clays are an important family of materials for this research: as clay *is* earth and makes up a significant percentage of the earth's surface, which my paintings explore. Clay is an ancient material, which in Western history has predominantly been used in the production of 'craft' objects or armature in the production of works of art in other materials such as bronze (Elderton and Morrill, 2017, p. 9). In recent years however ceramics have increasingly become celebrated as a fine art form, which exhibitions such as 'Dirt on Delight: Impulses That Form Clay' at the Institute of Contemporary Art, (Philadelphia, USA, 2009) and 'Strange Clay' at the Hayward Gallery, (London, 2022) exemplify. Many other painters have been seduced by the tactile nature of the ceramics discipline, which through the alchemical processes of glazing, can offer new possibilities for painting. Betty Woodman (1930–2018) synthesized sculpture, painting, and ceramics in a highly original and immediately recognizable formal vocabulary (David Kordansky, 2023) (fig. 150). Mary Heilmann (born 1940) incorporated ceramics into her painting practice, which influenced her playful approach to abstraction (Whitechapel Gallery, 2016). Heilmann's wall mounted ceramic shapes are brightly coloured and usually have soft, hand-cut edges, affording them their "defiantly handmade" (Eastham, 2017, p. 116) quality, typical of the artist's oeuvre (fig. 151). Brie Ruais (born 1982) is another artist whose ceramics are often wall based and share a relationship with painting. Ruais' ceramics fully retain the form of their making: the topography of their surfaces evidences the artist's hands, records of her pushing and spreading the clay outwards into its final form (fig. 152). As described in chapter 3, my ceramics also often show the signs of their making. At points fingerprints leave evidence of the artist's hand in the surface of the painting, which resonates with the prevalent

description of the Anthropocene as human imprint on the environment (Crutzen et al., 2011). Elsewhere, comparable in scale to my small, intimate ceramic paintings, Liz Larner (born 1960) has produced a body of ceramics comprised of compact clay slabs. Working with the impressionable qualities of clay, Larner finds “poetic and physical resonance in the marriage of material, form and colour” (Ceruti, 2017, p. 156). Adding colour to the slabs in various ways and often coating the top of a piece with epoxy resin, gives the objects a glossy, transparent sheen (fig. 153). Also working today, Gabriel Hartley (born 1981) flits between paintings on canvas and ceramics which explore a similar abstract painterly vocabulary, whilst artists such as Kevin McNamee-Tweed (born 1984) and Charlie Duck (born 1985) create wall-based ceramics which employ a figurative language in the imagery they carry (fig. 154; 155). Whilst ceramics might commonly be thought of as belonging to the world of sculpture, or decorative crafts, what these artists demonstrate, alongside my own ceramic paintings, is that the field of ceramics has plenty of scope for exploration through a painter’s perspective. My approach to ceramics, and their incorporation into this research, differs from the artists mentioned above, however. Largely this is down to the addition of further materials after the clay and glaze have been fired in a kiln and transformed into ceramic. Firing makes the surface of the ceramic non-porous, as opposed to the very porous surface of un-fired clay. By continuing to work into their surfaces with other materials (epoxy resin, graphite, oil-pigment stick for example), the ceramic paintings become surfaces which maintain levels of finite and infinite materiality. This play with levels of permanence within a single painting emulates the spectrum of materials found throughout the surface of the canals – bits of plastic litter will remain there for a lot longer than much of the organic fabric of the site. In the paintings it is

not known how long these materials will hold together – oil paint in particular will be liable to crack and flake off as it dries out, as oil paint particles cannot grip and bond with the ceramic surface in the same way it does with the weave of cotton canvas. In addition, as Pegrum makes clear, “ceramic colour, realised by the glaze and fused by firing, unlike paint pigment, retains its freshness and brilliancy over centuries” (1999, p. 8). The agency of the materials employed means that my paintings, like the site which they evoke, are (as we have seen in chapter 3), vulnerable to changes over time.

Summary

To conclude this chapter, let us remind ourselves of the argument for my paintings as offering possibilities for earth-life painting (Carus, 2002) for today (see chapters 4 and 6). Furthermore, in the context of this research, which is carried out through the lens of the Anthropocene, the aesthetic of these earth-life paintings is bound with the concept of slow violence (Nixon, 2011). In assessing a selection of practice, from looking at how the canal has been responded to through painting previously; the Neo-Romantic imagination in painting; and finally, a survey of contemporary expanded, materials-led painting practice, the ways in which this research contributes to the field of painting is made clear. My paintings offer a distinctive, unique aesthetic which has been developed through this research. This chapter maps out dialogues between this practice-research and that of other contemporary practitioners. This mapping out is a novel and unique assessment. Connections between artworks have been revealed by considering this collection of artistic practice through the lens of the Anthropocene,

New Materialism, and the Romantic sensibility. Further still, we have seen how my paintings contribute to the story of canal painting in Britain, and that they offer a shift in the perception of the canal; a changed, novel understanding which attends to the contemporary chapter in the social history of the canal, but offers a material reading which expands beyond an anthropological one, and incorporates the more-than-human entities that occupy the ecology of the canal. This is a crucial offering for the contemporary time of climate crisis, and may help to raise awareness of the fragile, unique ecologies which thrive in edgelands such as the canal site, but which – at the same time – are vulnerable under the Anthropocene. Whilst there are many parallels throughout the sample of practitioners this chapter has discussed, unlike any of these artists, this research develops through the lived, embedded experience of the site that the paintings respond to. Furthermore, materials are not employed simply to depict ideas, but are employed for the inherent meanings they bear within the context of the Anthropocene, and moreover the new meanings that might be created by bringing many materials together in paintings. What distinguishes my paintings is the unique ways in which they can *perform* place (Bolt, 2004) through a combination of research activities and by challenging the materials throughout the making process in unusual ways. As Taylor points out, paintings “rely for their delicate effects on layers of fragile materials, all of which are subject to change and decay” (2015, p. 25). This research, in tandem with conditions of the hybrid-materiality of the site – which is compromised in terms of stability, integrity and biodiversity – pushes the fragile materiality of painting further, through the addition of strange, inconsistent materials and the adoption of New Materialism.

Visual Interlude G



Figure 127. Graham Vivian Sutherland (1903–1980)

‘Tree Form’

Oil on canvas

H 39.3 x W 30.5 cm

1941

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Figure 128. Graham Vivian Sutherland (1903–1980)

‘Thorn Head’

Oil on Canvas

H 40.9 x W 40.9 cm

1947

© Estate of Graham Sutherland

Photo credit: Pallant House Gallery



Figure 129. Graham Vivian Sutherland (1903–1980)

‘Estuary with Rocks’

Oil on canvas

H 27.1 x W 41.5 cm

1937–8

© estate of Graham Sutherland.

Photo credit: Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales



Figure 130. Graham Vivian Sutherland (1903–1980)

‘Green Tree Form: Interior of Woods’

Oil on canvas

H 78.7 x W 107.9 cm

1940

© Tate. Photo credit: Tate



Figure 131. Marielle Hehir

‘Lost Matter’

Digital photograph, oil-pigment-stick, perspex

H 50 x W 70 cm

2022



Figure 132. Paul Nash (1889 – 1946)

‘Totes Meer (Dead Sea)’

Oil on canvas.

H 101.6 x W 152.4 cm

1941

Photo credit: Tate



Figure 133. Paul Nash (1889 – 1946)

‘We are Making a New World’

Oil on canvas

H 71.1 x W 91.4 cm

1918

Photo credit: Imperial War Museum



Figure 134. Marielle Hehir

'Pieces of the Moss Body'

Pigment, oilstick, wax pastel, plaster.

H 23.5 x W 19.5cm.

2020



Figure 135 Prunella Clough (1919–1999)

‘Brown Wall’

Oil on canvas

H 111 x W 101 cm

1964

© estate of Prunella Clough. Photo credit: Pallant House Gallery, Chichester



Figure 136 Juliette Losq (b. 1978)

‘Proscenium’

Ink and watercolour on paper, mounted on canvas

H 200cm x W 280cm

2017

© Juliette Losq

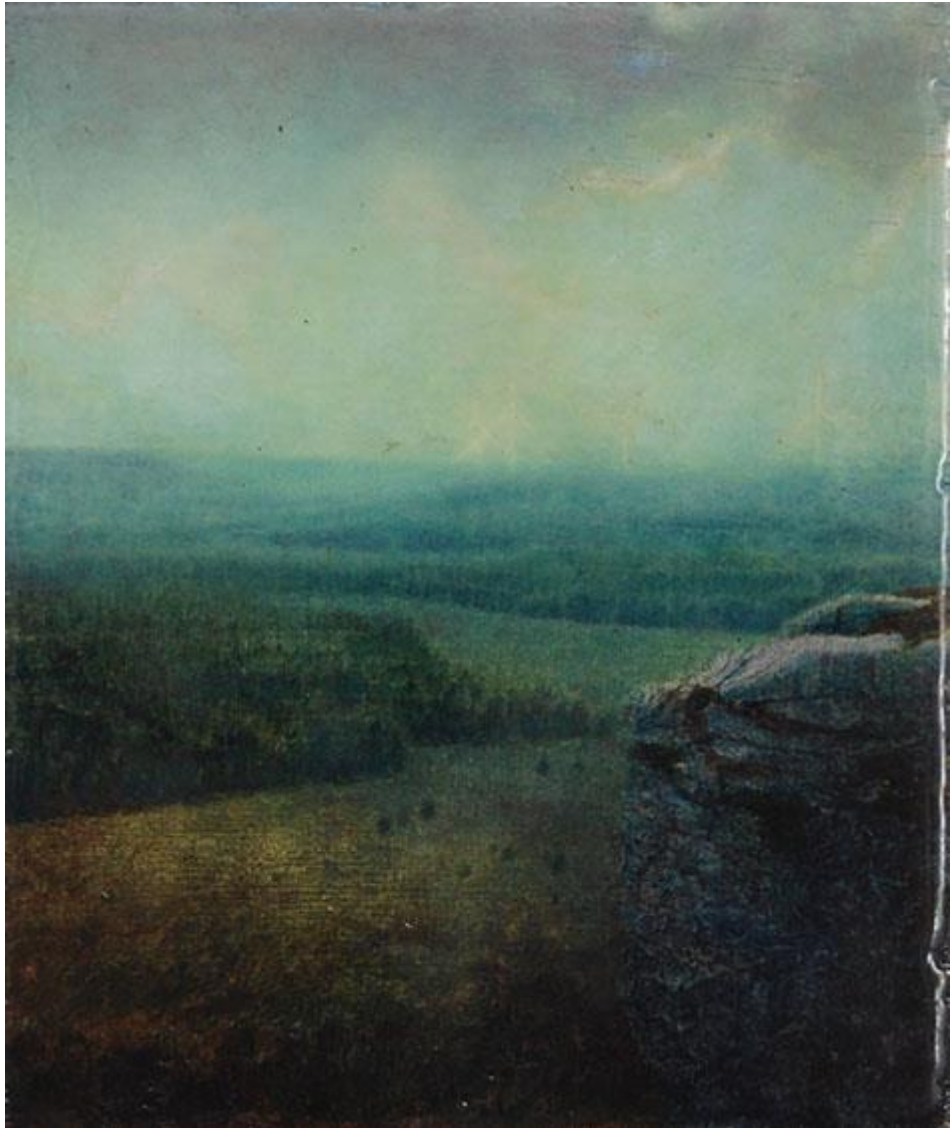


Figure 137. Sam Douglas (b. 1978)

'The Wanney Craggs'

Oil and resin on board

H 19 x W 16cm

2020

© Sam Douglas



Figure 138. Julian Perry (b. 1960)

‘Coastal Tree’

Oil on panel

H 122 x W 94.5 cm

2010

©Julian Perry



Figure 139. Michael Porter (b. 1948)

'Apocalypse series (Untitled)'

Oil and acrylic on paper

H 29 x W 41 cm

2020

©Michael Porter

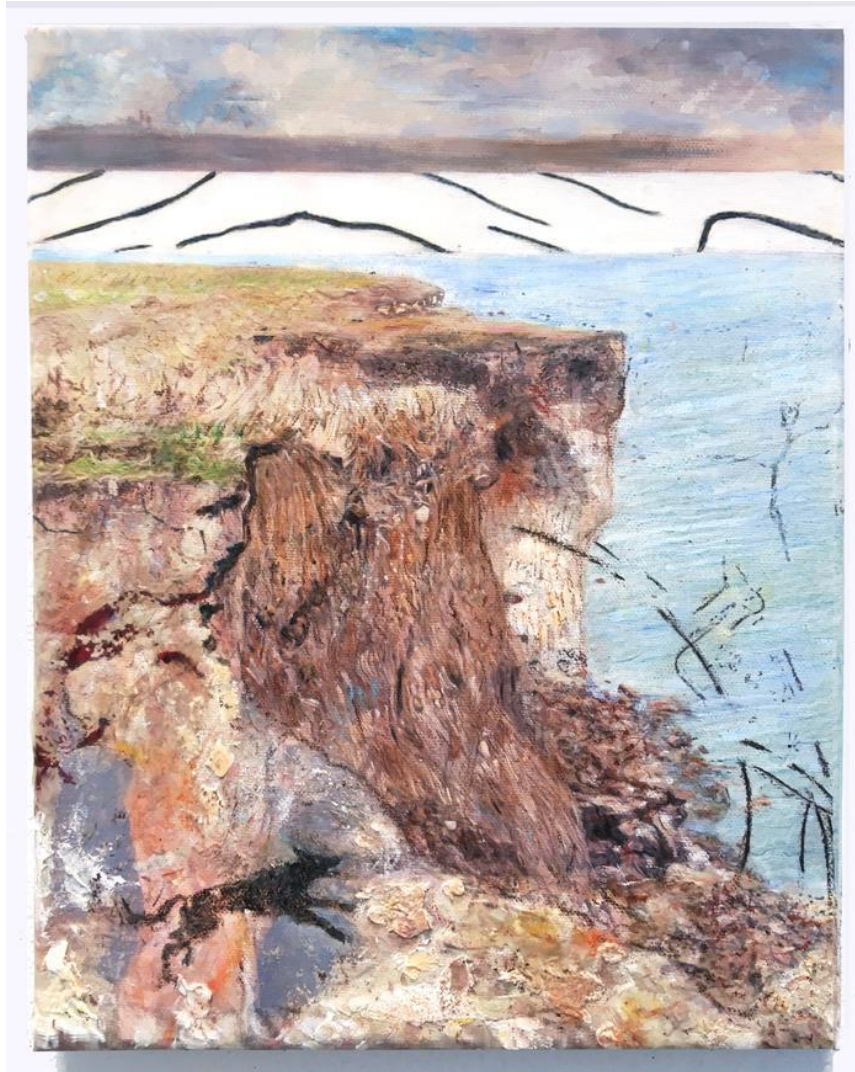


Figure 140. Robert Mead (b. 1988)

'Cliff Fall'

Oil, ink, acrylic, pastel, pigment bound with gum arabic, beeswax and plaster on
canvas

H 80 x W 100 cm

2022

©Robert Mead



Figure 141. Katharina Grosse (b. 1961)

'One Floor Up More Highly'

Paint, soil, styrofoam

(Installation, dimensions vary)

2010

Photo by Arthur Evans.

© 2023 Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art



Figure 142. Marielle Hehir

'Spectropoetical'

Ceramic, steel wire, glass, nails

H 60 x W 20 cm

2022



Figure 143. Jo McGonigal (b. 1970)

'Yellow Yellow'

Cotton T-Shirt / Silk Scarf

H 60 x W 110 cm

2015

©Jo McGonigal



Figure 144. Real Painting, installation view at Castlefield Gallery, 2015

(foreground)

Deb Covell (b. 1970)

'From Nowt to Summat'

2014

Acrylic paint.

Dimensions variable.

(background)

Simon Callery (b. 1960)

'Wiltshire Modolor II'

2010

Canvas, distemper, cord, thread, wood and steel brackets

H 240 x W 240 x D 60 cm

© Image courtesy Castlefield Gallery



Figure 145. Marielle Hehir

'Puddle'

Plaster, pigment, oilstick and cheesecloth fabric coloured with natural dye.

H 26 x W 32cm.

2020



Figure 146. Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011)

'Mountains and Sea'

Oil and charcoal on unsized, unprimed canvas

H 219.4 x W 297.8 cm

1952

©Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, N.Y.



Figure 147. Melanie Rose

‘DEVILS DYKE’

Egg tempera, chalk gesso on birch plywood

H 30cm x W 30cm

2020

© Melanie Rose



Figure 148. Onya McCausland (b. 1971)

‘Ochre Wall Saltburn’

Sustainable paint made from mine trailings.

Dimensions variable

2018

© Onya McCausland.



Figure 149.

Liz Elton (b. 1970)

'Field 2'

2007

Water mixable oil on compostable material.

Installation – dimensions vary

©Liz Elton



Figure 150.

Betty Woodman (1930–2018)

'Il Giardino Dipinto'

1993

glazed earthenware, epoxy resin, lacquer, paint

H 274.3 x W 1066.8 cm

Image © David Kordansky Gallery



Figure 151. Mary Heilmann (b. 1940)

'Red Tile Piece'

1994

Glazed ceramic

H 47 x W 43.8 cm

Photo: Thomas Müller

©Hauser and Wirth



Figure 152. Brie Ruais (b. 1980)

'Desiccating From Center (Salton Sea), 130lbs'

2019

Glazed and pigmented stoneware, hardware.

H 83 x W 80 x D 2 inches.

Collaged with photo of the Salton Sea, CA

©Brie Ruais



Figure 153. Liz Larner (b.1960)

'viii (subduction)'

2015

ceramic, epoxy

H 24.1 x W 85.7 x D 2.1 cm

Photo: Joshua White

©Liz Larner



Figure 154. Kevin McNamee-Tweed

'Saxophone Evening'

2021

Glazed ceramic

H 25.4 × W 20.3 × D 1.3 cm

©Kevin McNamee-Tweed



Figure 155. Charlie Duck

'Untitled'

2021

Glazed stoneware

H 26 x W 20 cm

©Charlie Duck



Figure 156. Marielle Hehir

'Cloudbursting'

Stoneware clay, various glazes.

H 24 x W 20cm

2022

Chapter 8: Conclusion

“Contemporary artworks then, can act as powerful signifiers to a forgotten past and important visual symbols of a new future”
(Heeney, 2017, xx)

In this concluding chapter, the findings and contributions of this research are critically evaluated against the research questions. The extent to which trajectory of the research carried out raised any further questions is also be examined. The following discussion works through, from a painter's perspective, the implications of this research and the crucial role that painting has played in developing new understandings of the site. The chapters of this thesis are reviewed chronologically, highlighting key developments of the research. This review articulates the unique approach that has been taken in exploring the site – an approach which draws on a diverse array of sources. The subject of exhibiting the paintings is also attended to; both analysing previous exhibitions and what this prompted in the direction of the research, as well as some speculation on future exhibitions and how ways of sharing the work publicly may nurture new ways of understanding the paintings. In the latter half of this chapter, the key findings of this research are summarised to establish how this investigation contributes to the field of painting, and – tangentially – adds to the areas of New Materialism, art historical discourse and understandings of the Anthropocene. Crucially, there is also space for critical reflection. A final consideration of the implications of this research looks at ways the research project might

be carried out at other sites and how the current approach might be developed in further ways.

In the epilogue to this chapter, Heeney points us towards an understanding of an artwork's engagement with the past and the future. This is an important point in the contextualisation of my paintings, and in how this research is situated as new knowledge. The paintings draw on the material legacy which the past created, and in doing so raise complex questions regarding the history of the site, and imagine ways in which the ecology present here might change and adapt under the Anthropocene. Though this is a very personal response, the findings of this research are transferable to other landscape sites which are vulnerable to change. The paintings might prompt responses which associate them with other places and material ecologies. By proposing that these paintings are earth-life paintings (Carus, 2002) for the contemporary time, this body of practice-research builds on the growing understanding of landscape painting today. Furthermore, by developing an approach which incorporates New Materialism, contemporary understandings of ecological grief, and slow violence, this research builds on Carus' original treatise for earth-life painting and makes it applicable for the Anthropocene epoch. Moreover, the ways in which earth-life painting embodies a vital message for this time are revealed through this research.

The findings and contributions of this research are discussed below. To lead into this discussion, revisitations of the chapters of this thesis provide context, and remind us of the journey this research has taken in its development.

Review

The impetus for this research began through a personal relationship with the site. A desire to understand how the history of the site, and its origins in industry have led to – and may be evidenced still within – its present usage. I maintain a curiosity for the materials found here which seem strange and out of place, yet also settled as if they form part of the foundations. Why do I frequently stumble across fragments of glass on the towpath, how did they arrive there and why do they seem to merge with the earth and foliage that surrounds them? (fig. 61). And why is it so common for plastic bottle lids to appear through patches of algae on the canal water surface? (fig. 44). Moreover, what are the implications of these material encounters which are both familiar yet unfamiliar, and what does this say about the contemporary climate crisis which we have come to understand as the Anthropocene? Painting, I believe, has the ability to offer alternate understandings of what it means to be in the world, and create profound encounters for a viewer which might be sensory and emotive, and in doing so nourish an element of change. The research began with a query: might painting offer a way of exploring new understandings of the site in the context of the Anthropocene?

As this research got underway the research questions took shape and were solidified into the set of related questions reviewed in the introductory chapter of this thesis. As has been discussed throughout this thesis, the studio and the site are both containers and catalysts for the research. In chapter 2 *Methodology*, we saw how the fieldwork research is carried out at the site, and how my immersion within the site is echoed in an immersion within the studio practice. We came to understand that although these two places were integral to the making

of the paintings, the separation and the different characteristics which these two environments offer were crucial in developing an aesthetic for the paintings. This chapter also established the appropriateness of employing a bricolage methodology for a painting practice which responds to the context and implications of the Anthropocene. The themes of slowness and hope were introduced here, having arisen as a consequence of the approach the research took, yet they became increasingly significant in guiding the research as it progressed. The embracing of these themes has helped the paintings become meaningful evocations of the site. This has aided this body of work in forming its original contribution to the story of canal painting in Britain.

The following chapter, *Account of Practice*, was dedicated to the practical component of research that is the core of this project. Visual analyses of the paintings structured the discussion and focused on key material groupings which are of most significance to the project. This chapter also established the relationship to Nixon's concept of slow violence (2011) and Bolt's theory of the performativity of images (2004). As Nixon's central argument regarding slow violence is based in aesthetics – rather, an absence of an aesthetic for this type of violence – Bolt's argument helps to articulate how my paintings create a proposition which might be an answer to Nixon's plea. In becoming 'performative' of elements of an experience of the site, the paintings bear trace residues of the slow violence which is active there. My argument in this chapter was supported further through Casey's notion of ways that paintings might be 're-presentations' (2002) rather than representations. By the end of this chapter a thorough account of the aesthetic that the research has developed, and the reasons and implications for this, had unfolded.

Chapter 4 *Vibrant Matter and Earth-Life Painting* expanded on the aesthetic analyses in chapter 3, and delved into how and why my particular apprehension of the site has evolved; and, moreover, how it has influenced the paintings. This chapter establishes one of the key ways in which this research is an original contribution to knowledge, in that it draws together Carus' early nineteenth century Romantic treatise on earth-life painting (2002, p. 119) in alignment with contemporary New Materialist thinking – predominantly Jane Bennett's notion of 'vibrant matter' (2010, p. 3). These theories came to be comprehended as meaningful for this research in that they both push for new and alternate ways of perceiving the world around us in a way that de-centralises the human and shifts perspectives to consider all other matter, living and inert. Furthermore, in addressing the incorporation of New Materialist thinking within this research, we came to understand how the argument for the 'agency of materials' (Bennett, 2010; Bolt, 2013) has nourished the processes of making in the studio, and therefore the aesthetic of the paintings.

In the following chapter *Painting Land through Ecological Grief*, the reader was given time to reflect on what had been said throughout the thesis so far. In this chapter we paused to consider in greater depth the emotional gravitas of the Anthropocene, which – as a propositional term for an epoch which houses many real events, changes and disappearances – bears unmeasurable consequences. Having already come to appreciate the Romantic sensibility which is embodied by this research through previous chapters, this discussion considered the implications of ecological grief, both for the experience of the site, the experience and approach to painting, and the potential experience of the paintings in retrospect. In recognising the productive force of the personal, emotional and sensory nature of this research, this chapter

articulated how the paintings carry residues of these qualities. Moreover, we saw why this plays an important role in shaping the aesthetic of my paintings. These paintings, which have the capacity to stimulate an emotional resonance in a viewer, when shared may play a critical role in communicating the devastating effects of the continuing changes to land which the Anthropocene brings forth.

In chapter 6 *Changing Landscapes* I addressed the complexity of the relationship to the concept of 'landscape' which this research negotiates. We came to understand that this body of paintings is developed through a contemporary understanding of 'landscape'. This understanding recognises the history of the term, which has evolved with the changing human relationships to land and has come to mean something very different in the contemporary. Adopting the ecological thinking of Morton (2010) and Haraway (2003; 2016) I argued for an understanding of landscape that shifts from the human-centric origins of the term and expands to include relationships to land such as the one I have fostered throughout this research. In this chapter I also addressed the genre of landscape painting and how my paintings may or may not be thought of as being part of this genre. Perhaps instead, earth-life painting (Carus, 2002, p. 119) is a more fruitful, significant context in which to understand my paintings through the lens of the Anthropocene.

Finally in chapter 7, *Contemporary Practice*, a survey of painting practices which in some way share something with this research was discussed in order to bring the originality of my paintings into sharp focus. A discussion of the ways in which the canals of Britain have previously been responded to through painting clarified how a lived experience of the canal, in conjunction with a Romantic sensibility and

a consideration of New Materialist thought, has enabled the creation of paintings which offer a different understanding of the canal than has been previously seen in the field of painting.

Further to this, the chapter explored other ways in which my paintings are original within their field, through contextualising the paintings amongst an array of different types of painting practice. The discussion illuminated how my paintings can be situated within the realm of 'painting in the expanded field' whilst also considering ways in which they can be read in relation to the Romantic and New-Romantic approach to painting, as well as materials-led practices. Within this research, these approaches to painting are all in some way present. Yet in discussing these many approaches to painting in relation to this practice-research, we see how my paintings carve a space of their own which sits amongst these genres and within their peripheries.

To summarise, this thesis has provided an account of this painting research, and revealed the many ways in which this project contributes to knowledge. Each of the chapters has centralised painting, whilst focusing on the individual contributory elements which have ultimately been crucial in shaping the aesthetic of the paintings.

Exhibitions

Throughout the period of this practice-led research, the practice has been exhibited in various ways, whilst key developments of the research and thesis have been presented and shared at several

symposiums: 'Encounters', Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art & Design, Dundee, 2019; 'Annual Practice Research Symposium', School of Design, University of Leeds, 2020 and 2022; 'Summer Symposium – Experiencing Artistic Research Through the Senses', The Nordic Summer University, Oslo, 2022. The studio has doubled as a gallery setting – a space to test ideas for exhibitions elsewhere. Periodically the studio has been open to visitors which has provided useful opportunities to discuss the paintings and works in progress, and to gauge viewers responses to the paintings. Frequently, viewers have expressed comparisons between my paintings and the canal environment in London: commenting on the distinctive and evocative colour palette and the presence of unusual materials employed in the paintings, which other people have also encountered at the canal.

The practice-research has also been exhibited digitally on occasion, which has been beneficial in that the online arena offers a space for wide dissemination of the research. First was a solo exhibition with the School of Design, University of Leeds, entitled 'On Shaky Ground: Landscape, Paint and Change – an artistic exploration of the canal network as an anthropogenic site' (2019). Following this I co-organized the symposium 'Process, Practice and Environmental Crisis' (2021) hosted by the University of York. Accompanying the symposium was an online exhibition which I organised and curated. The artists selected for this all demonstrate ways in which artistic practice can engage with contemporary climate issues. As my own work was also included, this was a very useful way of contextualising the paintings amongst contemporary practice at an early stage of the research. Moreover, throughout the symposium the artworks from the exhibition were brought into the various discussions, which served to

highlight ways in which the visual arts can contribute to increased awareness of the climate crisis.

In 2021 the painter Robert Mead and I were hosted by 'The Woodshed Gallery' in Folkestone for our duo exhibition entitled 'Spectral Ground'. Mead's work is discussed in chapter 7. This opportunity allowed us to explore dialogues between our individual bodies of practice-research. In a similar vein to my own practice, Mead is a landscape painter who engages with the debate surrounding the Anthropocene through his work. Employing a figurative style of painting, Mead's canvases often include fragments of the symbolism seen in ancient cave painting, juxtaposed with sections of grandiose architectural structures (for example St. Pauls Cathedral). In this way his paintings comment on time and the longevity of materials - questioning what 'will survive us?' This is an enquiry which crops up frequently in Anthropocene focused literature. Our human legacy is largely material, some of which will degrade at a much slower rate than ourselves and merge with earthly matter, as I have demonstrated throughout this thesis. From the 'plastiglomorate' (the term given to a new "stone" formed through intermingling of melted plastic, beach sediment, basaltic lava fragments, and organic debris) (Corcoran et al., 2014, p. 4), through to a discussion of the broiler chicken's genetically modified skeletons becoming fossilized markers of the Anthropocene (Bennet et al., 2018), - these are examples of materials which have become part of the Earth's surface strata. Stratigraphy is a formative link between the paintings made by Mead and my own. Our individual research enquiries both include an investigation of the material layering of the land, from the surface, to the under layers and into the depths of the earth. This manifests in diverse ways in our respective practices. In Mead's work, strata are

explicitly evident pictorially – a layering of divided material zones becomes a compositional device. The engagement with strata in my work is through the subtle layering of materials which often form one surface. Of course, painting is usually composed through a layering process, but in the case of my work it is intentional that the layering of materials not only builds the painting, but also exposes the reactions or tensions between layers. By doing so my paintings comment on the stability of the ground at the canal site, which is compromised by the intrusion of polluting materials.

Another commonality is a shared interest in materiality, and the employment of specific materials. For example, the use of natural dyes juxtaposed with plastic fabric in my work, or found materials which bring their own history to the final painting as discussed in chapters 2 and 3. Mead often paints sites of extraction and employs a range of material in his practice, often making his own pigments, most notably manganese black which he harvests from recycled batteries. Following ‘Spectral Ground’, Mead and I exhibited our paintings together again in 2022 at ‘APT Gallery’ in London. In ‘Genius Loci: Painting the Spirit of Place’ we were able to exhibit in an altogether more ambitious manner – with APT gallery being a large professional gallery. Both exhibitions had significant footfall and fostered many conversations around the themes which the paintings address.



Figure 157. Installation at The Woodshed Gallery, 2021.

L – Robert Mead

‘Mapping of Cave and Strata’

Ink, pastel, gouache, reclaimed manganese black pigment from battery on canvas

H 29.7 x W 21 cm

2021

R – Marielle Hehir

‘Pebble’

Oilstick, watercolour, plaster on wood.

H 24 x W 17cm

2020

These exhibitions were a productive way of directly exploring dialogues between the work of one of my contemporaries and my own. It was valuable to place the paintings side by side as in doing so the unique aesthetic which my paintings embody was made palpable. For example, an interesting dialogue became apparent between the paintings 'Mapping of Cave and Strata' (2021) by Mead and my own painting 'Pebble' (2021), hung together on the gallery wall. (fig. 157). The striking thing about this pairing is the lack of colour in Mead's painting and the heavily saturated, almost luminous colour in 'Pebble'. In 'Mapping of Cave and Strata' areas of density and ephemerality are composed through delicate line drawing, and in 'Pebble' the pigment creates a similar range of lightness and depth through the tonality of the orange colour and the levels to which the paint has been absorbed into the plaster. In other words, this pairing makes explicit the agency of materials at work in my paintings. Whilst Mead's painting has been created through a process in which the painter retains control, in 'Pebble' the aesthetic of the painting is due to the behaviour of the materials. The two paintings both respond to the geological conditions of the Anthropocene, and both could be read as offering a foreboding sense of earthly terrain beyond the present moment. 'Pebble' is simultaneously soft and hot, with the organic edges of a clump of soil or clay yet glowing with the heat of a scorched earth. The lines of fracture which travel across the body of 'Pebble' suggest fragility of the surface; ground which has cracked under the pressures of time. This painting is made from plaster which was cast in a clay mould. It is three dimensional, a softly curving form which protrudes from the wall in real space. From the engagement with Mead's 'Mapping of Cave and Strata' which portrays the illusion of space through painted lines, 'Pebble' creates a sensory, bodily engagement with the work in real space. As we have seen in chapter 5, the potential for a sensory

response to a painting is essential if the emotions are to be stimulated during a viewing encounter. The exhibition at APT was accompanied by a conversation event for public dissemination, in which Dr Ruth Siddall (UCL) geologist and pigment scientist was invited to discuss the paintings and themes of the exhibition with Mead and myself. This was a very meaningful conversation which delved into a reading of my paintings from the perspective of a scientist, which as we have understood from chapter 1, is a critical part of this research.

Finally, the culmination of this period of research is marked with a solo exhibition in October 2023 in the gallery space at the School of Design, University of Leeds. This exhibition brings together key paintings which mark significant ways in which the paintings have responded to the research questions. The complex and vast collection of materials which create these paintings is laid bare in this display, which leads to a dissolving of any material hierarchies which might be at work in the work of other painters. The exhibit makes clear that this engagement with a broad spectrum of materiality is a key way in which the work contributes to 'painting in the expanded field'. The paintings are installed on the gallery walls in a way which explores the 'contingent tableau' (Bennett, 2010, p. 5) discussed in chapter 3. Works are fixed to the wall slightly outside of the usual guidelines for exhibiting paintings, (normally hung with their centre point aligning with one metre and forty-seven centimetres from the ground to meet an average eye level). This results in subtle changes to the viewing of the paintings; slowness of movement around the gallery space may be encouraged, and in turn a sustained attention to the paintings. Through lingering, and staying with the paintings, a viewer has time to contemplate them and draw meanings from them. In addition, a selection of fieldwork photographs are projected onto one of the

gallery walls. The photos are shown in a succession, each held in view for a few seconds. Showing the photographs this way gives an ephemeral quality to the visual information they bear. These are fleeting encounters. The photographs contrast with the solidity of the paintings, further developing the idea that the paintings commemorate experience (see chapter 4).

Findings and Contributions

Thus far this concluding chapter has reviewed the elements which have contributed to the shaping of this practice–research, as well as key moments in the development of the research. This discussion now collates the research findings and outcomes to demonstrate how my paintings are an original contribution to the field of painting, and furthermore, distinguish additional contributions to the areas of New Materialism and art historical discourse.

The threats which the Anthropocene poses to the unique ecology of the canal and its structural integrity underscore the significance of this research in relation to the site’s history. The research offers a timely contribution to discourse around the material legacies of human industrial capitalism. Approaching the research through the practice of painting means that the research contributes to the changing face of landscape painting today. The area of the canal in Greater London and Hertfordshire which has been the site of this research has not previously been the focus of a painting–led investigation, which combines a specific bricolage of methodologies centred around a lived, immersive experience. In addition, as was established in chapter 7, never before has the canal been responded to through an approach

to painting which marries a Romantic sensibility with New Materialism. Although other artists have engaged with Nixon's concept of 'slow violence' (2011), a reading of the canal site in relation to this concept has not previously been produced. Nor has the canal been painted in such a way that the concept of slow violence may be inferred from the paintings. Finally, Carus' notion of earth-life painting (2002, p. 119) has not previously been recontextualised for its significance in the contemporary through a painter's perspective.

There are several ways in which this body of research is an original contribution to the field of painting. Primarily this originality derives from the importance of the lived experience of the site, which has been the impetus for the paintings, as this has been greatly influential in the development of the aesthetic of the paintings. The contributions the paintings make have been shaped by a bricolage methodology which incorporates a lived experience together with a novel selection of methodologies which work productively within my approach to developing an aesthetic for paintings. The uniqueness of my personal lived experience and rich understanding of the site has been shaped and enhanced by a Romantic sensibility, theories from the arena of New Materialism, the concept of slow violence (Nixon, 2011), contemporary understandings of ecological grief and a recontextualisation of Carus' early nineteenth century treatise on earth-life painting (2002, p. 119). This culminated with the proposition for my paintings as being contemporary earth-life paintings.

In asserting the relevance of the lived experience within this approach to the research, the paintings have developed in relation to the research questions in an authentic way; they are direct evocations of the site which have not been influenced by external factors. Finally,

the paintings contribute new and different ways of understanding the canal site within the context of the Anthropocene. Previously, the canals have been appreciated as a place of social and historical significance, through paintings and literature which has been drawn on throughout this thesis. Today, the understanding of the canal as an ‘edgeland’ (Farley and Symmons Roberts, 2012; Shoard, 2017) is moderately widespread, but this understanding neglects that there is a unique ecology which thrives at this site. What this research does is contribute an aesthetic understanding of the canal which shifts from the social and historical perspectives, into the realm of the material – the more-than-human – and what this new perspective signifies about the larger, global issues surrounding the climate today.

Reflection

“..the quiet, gradual violence of forgetting, against which the work of
art pushes back”
(Nixon, 2011, p. 250).

To conclude, this thesis closes with a space for reflection. The ways in which this research contributes to knowledge are many; the paintings bear the capacity to spark multiple conversations, to shed new light on the material conditions of the site, and to nourish changes in thought, and maybe change. Ultimately, the paintings embody the knowledge which has been produced through an intimate, tailored relationship with a particular site. When these paintings are shared through public display, this knowledge is transferred, and adds to a changing understanding of the unique ecology of the canal –

which is becoming ever more fragile through the effects of the Anthropocene.

The paintings bear residual traces of the site; they give tangible form to my experiences which have been abstracted from the canal and carried with me into the studio. The making of the paintings enables these abstracted experiences to distil in the formation of new knowledge; the paintings embody aesthetic understandings which can be shared with others. The questions, ideas, and theories which have shaped the research, and the themes which have emerged through the research process are carried now by the paintings. In this sense, the legacy of the research expands through individual encounters with the paintings – the questions continue to be re-formed and posed by others.

The personal nature of this research positioned me as part of the ecology of the site. Yet the paintings became independent entities; they remain personal to me in a different way, yet they are evocative of – and connected in that way – to the site. The attention to the processes of slow violence (Nixon, 2011) which are at work within the site increased my awareness of my own sensorial engagement with and impact on the site. In turn, this necessitated a heightened attention to the shifts in the matter and materials which are enmeshed within the site, strengthening my connection with the site. The levels of engagement with the substance, matter and biodiversity at the site which I have fostered throughout this research echo what Carus called upon his painting students to develop (2002). The paintings I have produced through this research are earth-life paintings for the contemporary, shaped by close sensorial engagement through the lens of the current climate crisis; the Anthropocene.

The findings of this research, and the implications of paying close, slow attention to the matter which makes up land, reach beyond this personal account of a site which is my local environment – my home. These findings can be applied to other places, and the approach to engagement with land – with a site – can be carried out elsewhere. Equally, the approach to painting which has been developed through this research can be continued, adopted and adapted. Importantly, the call for earth-life painting (Carus, 2002) which has been recontextualised through this research, may benefit other painting practitioners who are concerned with the developing climate crisis and perhaps have a personal attachment to a landscape or site of locality. Indeed, painters who study and take on board the concept of earth-life painting in an approach to landscape painting, may also come to appreciate the relevance of Carus' treatise, in an age which bears witness to the rapid decline and disappearance of many of the component parts of what constitutes landscape.

The research does not end here, and I continue to explore ways in which the aesthetic that we have seen throughout this body of work can live again in further paintings. The approach I employed in this research can be taken to other areas of the canal around Britain, which are also vulnerable to the effects of the Anthropocene. Furthermore, this body of work will be exhibited elsewhere in collaboration with my contemporaries. Through doing so the paintings continue to contribute to the field of painting and offer alternate ways of understanding the current climate crisis.

In summation, what is so pertinent about these paintings, is whilst they do not seek to represent the site, they do 're-present' (Casey, 2002) a personal, abstracted experience of the site, at a particular

moment in time. In other words, they crystallize something of the world which is transforming, maybe slowly, but perhaps with more significant implications than we can currently comprehend. As Nixon suggests in the epigraph to this reflection, artworks can help us remember. This research shows that paintings can also help us to form or strengthen connections to parts of the land. At a time which is characterised by loss, change and speculation for the future, paintings can anchor us in an experience which is unique and subjective, but which nevertheless has the capacity to offer hope and instigate change.

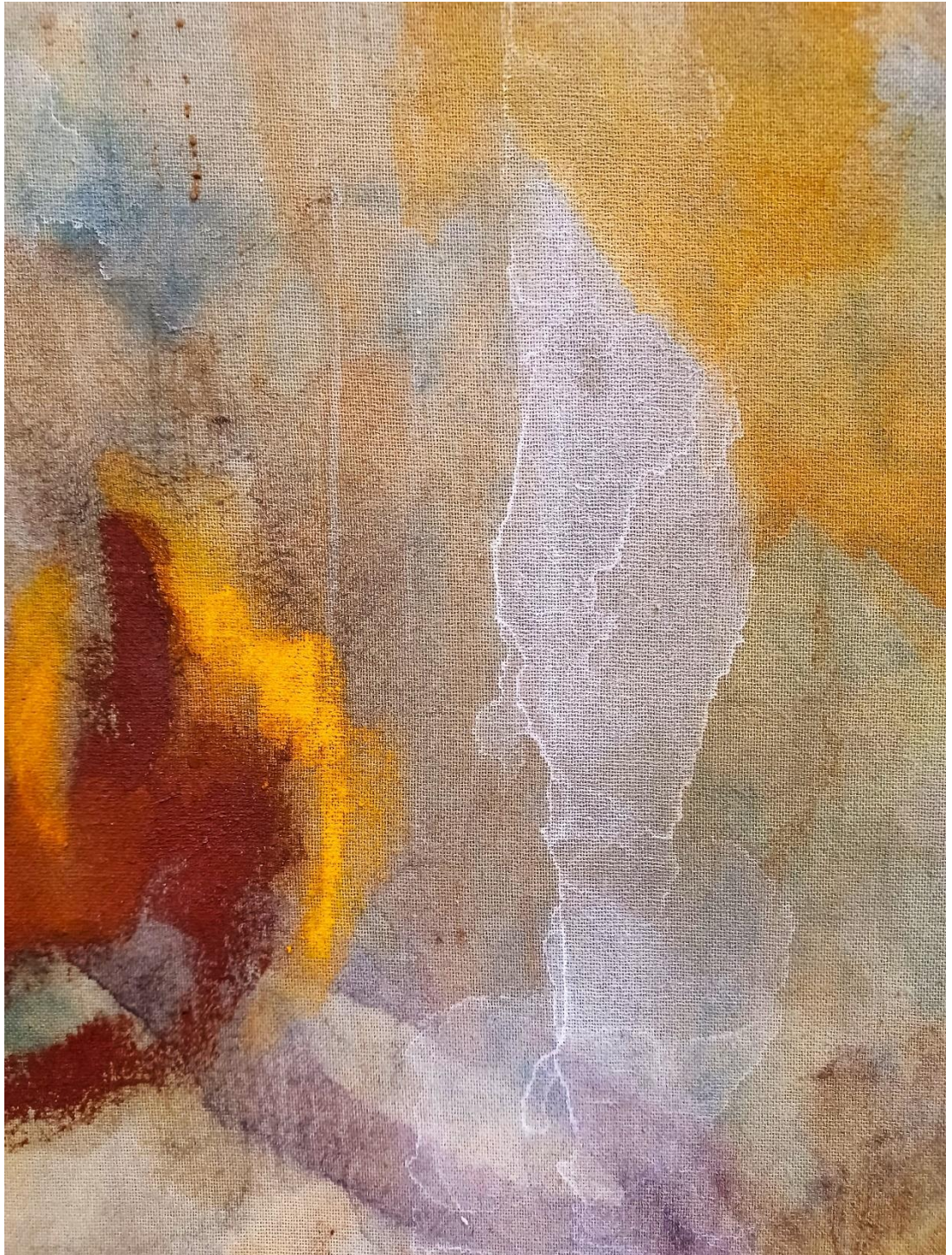


Figure 158. Marielle Hehir

'In the Lock'

(detail)

2021

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Appendix: Images from exhibition at Space at Design

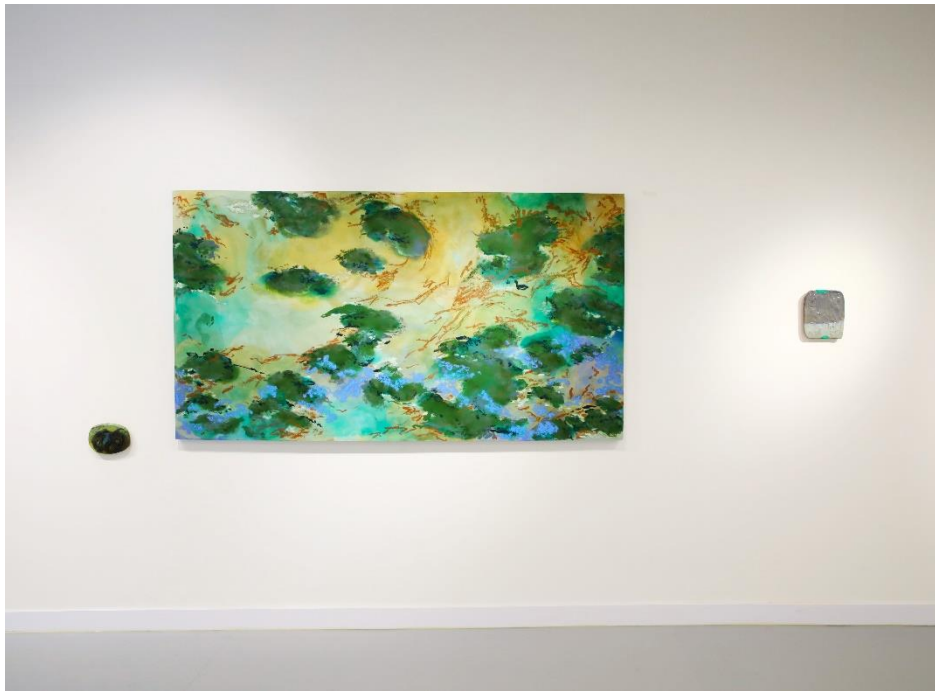
In October 2023 the body of work created through this practice-research was exhibited at the gallery space in the University of Leeds: Space at Design.

On Shaky Ground: Land, Paint and Change

October 18th – November 3rd, 2023.



Installation of works in the gallery



Paintings were installed in groups or pairings of large and small works which demonstrated the employment of various materials and created dialogue between individual paintings.

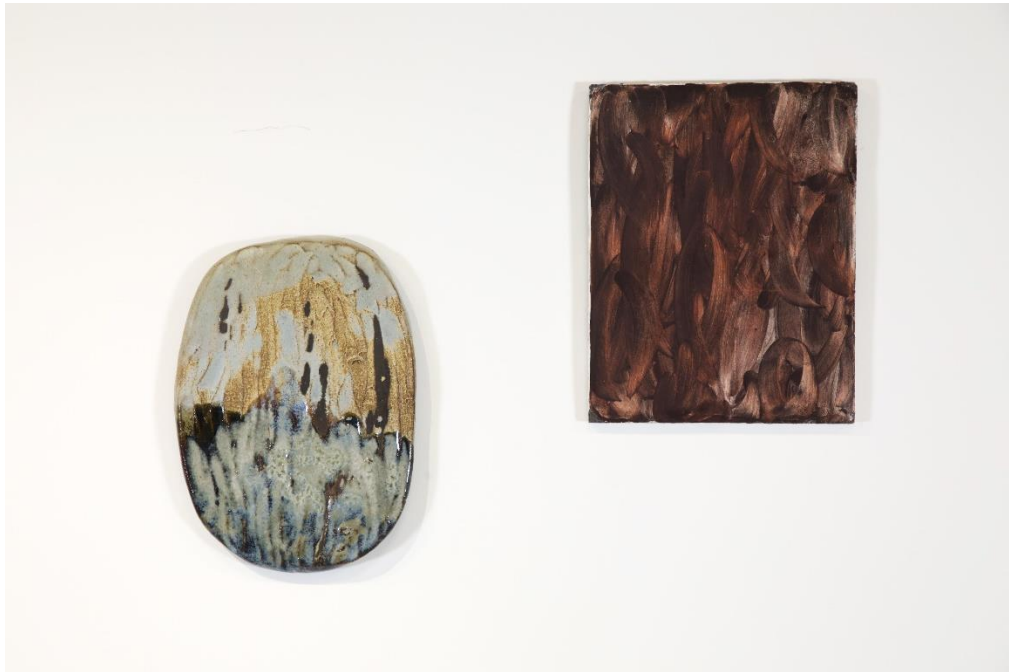


'Lie Long in Soil'

Ceramic made with recycled clay, various glazes and graphite

13 x 18cm

2023



L – ‘Cloudbursting’, Stoneware clay, various glazes. H 24 x W 20cm. 2022.

R – ‘Faulting’, Charcoal, pigment, plaster. H 26 x W 20cm. 2020.

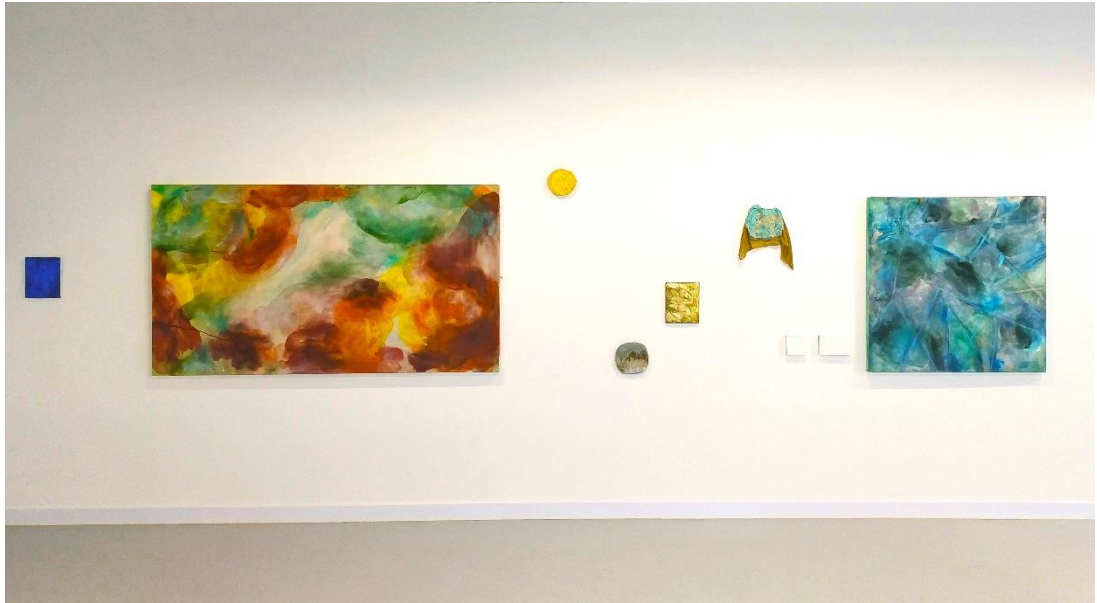


Fieldwork photography (40 images) was projected on a wall alongside the work as part of the exhibition.

L – Projection of fieldwork photography

R – ‘The Leak’, Polypropylene, linen, plant-based dye, pigment, binder, glass.

H 50 x W 70cm. 2022.



Installation of paintings



Paintings were hung at various heights to encourage slowness in a viewer's engagement with the exhibition.



'Thing of Shadows', ceramic made with black clay and various glazes.

H 20 x W 20cm, 2023.



Installation of paintings.



'Fluid Pasts', Ceramic made with recycled clay and various glazes. H 30 x W 35.
2023.



L - 'To Look Up or Down was Frightening', Pigment, binder, oil-pigment stick on
cotton. H110 x W 200cm. 2022.

R - 'Out of Place', plaster, pigment, shatter-glass, wood. H 12 x W 12cm.
2020.

