The Fall Creek
A Localized Understanding of the Anthropocene Era

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Preamble

Still a ways from the river and under the canopy of trees, we noticed that the dappling of light revealed small flowers once hidden. Insects and moths came out from hiding and began to dance in the warm mists of the morning. I followed one of these bugs for a long moment, and while it spiraled farther and further down towards the water, a very odd yet interesting object came into view; it was a tire. I felt that the day almost immediately disappeared. Once I recognized the truth of what I saw, the only sounds and sights I came across were human made.

We continued walking the banks for quite some time, taking in all of the debris that had been washed down the river. It almost seemed like the contents of a recycling facility. What I once perceived as a clean and natural space became something much different. It was dirty, more akin to a magnified street gutter than to a river. My warm and timeless dream of nature quickly became a sense of stark reality. Clouds moved overhead, the warmth in the day began to fade; the wind started to blow and with it came the scent of a sewage drain emptying the night’s contents not far upstream from where we were.

We eventually came upon a bridge that was old. It was raining now and we walked underneath. There were cracks with leaks, and crumbling bits of concrete and mortar sloughing off from the bridge’s belly. Cars were traveling overhead and with every pass the entire structure seemed to shudder. We remained under the bridge as the rain picked up and the river began to boil. After a while the sound of cars started to resemble waves on the ocean, and the rain turned to white noise. There were no plants at all underneath the bridge, just dust and debris from years of the river swelling. Everything was caked with mud, and the broken glass was indistinguishable from crackling flakes in the dried sediment.
A couple weeks later, we were on a similar walk and noticed that the bridge had been closed. A large section of the road on top had crumbled away and fallen into the river below. We walked passed the roadblocks and crept up to the opening. Looking down we saw the water whisking and churning passed the rubble heap that had fallen from where we were standing. The river was higher now and covering the place we had once waited.

The workers started taking the bridge down not long after. They started with the crenels and worked their way inward, being careful not to let bits fall into the water. They used jackhammers and backhoes. They filled large trucks to haul the rubble off somewhere else. I watched them from the banks for quite some time, and even made photographs of the progress. I was alone this time but my camera kept me company.

Once the old bridge was down, the winter came. The workers paused for the season and the river remained. The water was no longer shaded by the bridge and caught the light in new but familiar ways. We continued walking the frozen banks, out into the river, close to the water. Sometimes the ice would break and we watched as it fell into the current. In the winter the banks are so frozen that the litter and trash become one with the soil, like some sort of sedimentary rock.
Introduction

The Fall Creek is a reflection of myself. While at the river, I immediately turn to a contemplative state of mind. The slow moving water and the meandering banks make for a traditionally picturesque landscape; however, the quality of the water and the quantity of trash serve as a constant reminder of reality. I see myself in this place, my scars and memories left behind as a kind of litter – these things make me who I am, just as the debris at the river provides a history and identity of place. The neighborhoods surrounding the lower Fall Creek are aged; riverfront houses do not have the appeal that they once did in this area of town.

Since moving to Indianapolis in 2016, I have been drawn to the natural beauty found in the wooded areas along the banks of the Fall Creek. The Fall Creek is a tributary of the White
River, which is the main waterway that flows through the city. There once was a system of paved pathways that allowed for activity as well as a connection to nature. The city began replacing culverts in the area nearly two years ago, as well as working to renew a bridge spanning the river. DigIndy is a project in Indianapolis that began in 2013. The city is placing massive tunnels far beneath the city in order to prevent sewage overflow into the White River and its tributaries, including the Fall Creek.

The extensive construction forced me from the pathways and into the wooded areas of the riverbanks. I found that these once beautiful areas almost fell apart when entered and examined more closely. Adhering to the paved pathways allowed for a kind of filter to be applied to the landscape. When using the path, I was simultaneously connected to and removed from the area. I could experience the beauty of the place without the up-close and personal reality of the littered waterway.

My creative work surrounding the Fall Creek is mainly a photographic take on the junction of nature and the human made, as well as a personal account of the environment. Indianapolis has many nature parks and trails, most of these carefully planned and carried out by humans. The paved trail in this location leads nature-goers past a stretch of river that is home to more than sixty rubber tires and a half dozen signs warning of sewage pollution. Even with these potential distractors, there is an overwhelming sense of beauty and nature present.

I believe that urban river systems provide ways that people can readily connect to the natural world, similar to a national park or protected forest. When in nature, some of us experience feelings of connection or perhaps a heightened sensory awareness. This feeling is somewhat distorted when experiencing urban riverscapes because they have historically been
used as a means of disposal for unwanted materials – not as a landscape meant for self-reflection and contemplation.

I am focusing on the Fall Creek in order to experiment and attempt to understand a more globalized quality of nature. It is my hope that the ideas and values found within my thesis work can be applied to many things beyond just a local river here in Indianapolis. Rivers, water, and the concept of nature are broad topics, and due to this, I believe they should be approached from multiple viewpoints. Using photography, coupled with found objects, I explore complex perspectives found in human interactions with the modern landscape. I want to understand how we as humans collectively decide which landscapes to frequent and which to forget about. Every landscape has worth, in one form or another, and it is troublesome that many are in ecological decline. My work seeks to examine why humans place hierarchies on the natural environment and how this affects our perception of the natural world.

**The Anthropocene Era**

The Anthropocene is the current age we are living in. The era dates back to when humans began altering the geological systems of the Earth, more than 250 years ago. Historian Jason Kelly describes the Anthropocene, in his book, *Rivers of the Anthropocene*, as, “an age in which humans are altering the planet to such an extent that we are leaving a permanent and irreversible mark on its biological, hydrological, atmospheric, and geological systems” (Kelly 18). These environmental concerns have been present in the scientific community since the early 19th century however it has taken nearly two centuries for a name to be associated with them. Many scholars and activists are working to understand the global state of the environment. Jason Kelly has become an important resource for my work because he is a local historian working on the
same campus as I have been.

Throughout my thesis project, I have used my own body as a means of primary research, hiking and walking along sections of the Fall Creek. The images that I make are firsthand representations of how the local landscape has been impacted negatively. My images are not meant to be shameful but rather to spur contemplation and conversation on the state of the environment, both local and global. I believe that through my artistic practice, I am bridging a divide that currently exists between factual concern and the cultural diffusion of responsibility that is impacting the environment. There is a tendency to ignore or give up when an issue feels too large to have an impact at a personal level.

The fresh water cycle is one of the environmental systems that is most threatened by the current state of change. Kelly argues that rivers are the ideal arenas for research because water security is one of the most pressing ecological concerns of contemporary society (Kelly 20). I have worked to meld the cyclical nature of water into my artwork, and it is my intent to liken this environmental system to us as humans. I have gathered and used river water in the chemical development of my film photographs in order to extend them conceptually. The images are permanently linked to the environments that they visually represent.

We are living in a cycle of our own, intrinsically linked to the natural cycles that we are threatening. It is my hope to gain an understanding of how exactly these systems are endangered and to present my findings as an interested observer. I hope to bring awareness to this topic that eventually inspires change.
I started my quest to understand different states of nature by creating diptychs; I placed photographs of flowers taken near the Fall Creek next to contact prints made from debris that I collected on the banks of the river. Flowers are a classic representation of beauty, almost in an idealistic sense; whereas river junk, in this case the bottoms of broken glass bottles, is not immediately thought of as beautiful. I made contact prints of these bottle bottoms, using photosensitive paper, in an effort to disguise and decontextualize them. The broken glass transforms into more of an abstract expression. Seen alongside a flower in a diptych arrangement, someone might view them as something beautiful. It is my intent with these diptychs to call attention to the difference that Immanuel Kant, an 18th century philosopher, suggested between “free” and “dependent” beauty. The difference here is that free beauty is based in purpose of form, whereas dependent beauty is the beauty that adheres to a concept (Vincent 7). The left image of the star magnolia blossom is an example of free beauty, while the beauty found in the contact print made from litter is dependent beauty. That image is only
beautiful based upon the condition that surrounds it. Stuart Richmond, author of the essay, “Remembering Beauty: Reflections on Kant and Cartier-Bresson for Aspiring Photographers,” suggests: “From classical times on, beauty has been defined or associated with such properties as symmetry, balance, variety, harmony, proportion, order, unity, and perfection” (Richmond 79). Within my diptychs I seek to beautify the ugly and elevate the mundane. This process works to justify metaphorically why the area of the Fall Creek is worthy of attention. The qualities of beauty that Richmond suggests can be found in both of the images within the diptych above. However, it is through artistic abstraction that these classical notions of beauty blur the broken bottle bottom; it becomes equivalent to the “purpose” of the flower. The piece of trash would be nothing more than a piece of trash if it had not been altered through an artistic practice.

2D Work – Process

My working process provides me with a retreat to the natural world. Some of the photographs that I make might take many minutes or longer to expose; especially those made with a pinhole camera, that is a camera without a lens to focus the image. This record of time speaks to more than just an instantaneous moment; it records everything that happened during that duration. The concept of the passage of time being rendered into one frame is fascinating to me. The time that it takes to capture a photograph could be a fraction of a second, days, even months to years. Using photography as a means of research can lead to a greater understanding of the Anthropocene Era. The ability that photography has to manipulate time introduces the idea of time as malleable and, through photographic vision, even traversable. For example, a photograph from the 1850’s can still be viewed today, and it is almost like we are stepping back in time using this mode of seeing. The concept of time and location specificity both emphasize the importance of using photography in landscape research. A photograph, whether taken in an
instant or an eternity, acts to squish time into a two dimensional space that can be carried or sent elsewhere. Time does not exist in a photograph, yet time is understood all the same.

Japanese photography has been a large influence on my work, specifically the work of Tokihiro Sato. Sato is a photographer who uses light to emphasize the movement of humans through time and space. He uses large format, black and white film photography in order to capture long exposures – some more than four hours long. During this time, he traverses the landscapes seen in his images and incrementally reflects moonlight back into the eye of the camera. These reflections record a kind of polka dot pattern, marking the path that the artist has traveled through the frame.

Fall Creek – Degraded, Image #4, Gelatin Silver Print, 2017, 8x8”

I have used a similar technique to Sato in some of my work, which can be seen in the image above. Many of my images have been taken underneath bridges along the river. The
exposure, for this image specifically, was taken during a period of twenty minutes. During this time, I quietly sat next to my camera and listened to the construction of a bridge up the river from where I was. The sound of the constant pounding of pylons is not understood in this photograph alone; however, that noise most certainly had an effect on my understanding of the scene. The sound contributed to why I chose this location at this time. The reverberation that occurs underneath bridges is quite unique, and this is visually captured by the reflection of the line where the bridge meets the water. This single image has a past, present, and future sense. The time that was recorded on film is not what it once was; it has fragments of a truth that share roots with my experience on location. As I continued studying the landscape, I began taking more and more time to photograph, pre-visualizing, and meticulously composing scenes in conjunction with my thoughts and feelings at the time. Pre-visualization is a term used in photography when the photographer has gained an experiential understanding of how different camera settings will provide different results. There is a growing amount of research on thoughts and feelings, and this is spurring increased recognition that “emotional intelligence” is essential to many fields, not just in the art world (Bump 59).

I continued working with this concept in mind and created Fall Creek – Degraded, a series of five images all made using long exposures. Using contemplation and meditation on site
allowed me to gain an understanding of which areas were most meaningful to the location and landscape as a whole. The series is organized into two diptychs flanking one standalone image. The diptychs are of debris floating in the river, seen alongside light that is refracting off the water and entering the underpass of the bridge. To get these images, I had to wade into the river and place my camera and tripod in the water. The water is seen here with a smoothed quality, which is a product of long exposures. I made these choices to highlight both the movement of the water and the unrelenting quality of the debris. All of the images are abstracted in order to invoke mindfulness and contemplation similar to what I once experienced in these locations.

The fact that these images are companions to my own experience on-location makes them personal representations of that specific place and time. It is not just a two-dimensional recording of a scene under a bridge; it is a fragment of my own memory, emotions, and existence there as well. This, paired with my ability to share information with others, leads me to believe that shared experiences can be seen as the beginnings of a global understanding of an era, based in the self and the local landscape. My experience on location is effectively firsthand research on the state of the environment in the Anthropocene Era.

Image #2, 3, and 5 (from left to right), have all been chemically abstracted using water collected from the imaged locations. I utilize river water in my working process in the hopes of alluding to the decaying state of the river ecosystem. The work is best represented using diptychs, because this mode of viewing provides an immediate ability to compare and contrast. The prints that have not been chemically altered represent a landscape and space that is less touched by the negative effects of the Anthropocene Era. They are idealized representations of the Fall Creek. The abstracted images are my thoughts on how things might change if our collective impact on the environment remains unchanged.
2D Work – Common Motifs

The mirrored surface quality found in many of my photographs serves as a literal and metaphorical point of reflection. Reflections in the surface of water act as a kind of contemplative catalyst – they make me start questioning what I am actually seeing and even the space I inhabit. The reflection is a kind of copy of reality, just as a photograph is. By using water gathered from the imaged locations, I am emphasizing the fact that the photographic image is a copy of the actual place, or rather a mirrored version of reality.

Within my photographs, I often place the reflected sky in the lower third of the frame, and the ground or bank of the river in the upper third. I use this kind of upside down with the intent that it will start to introduce the idea of multiple perspectives. These are not traditional landscape images and because of this they call for a different mode of viewing and understanding. I believe that the mirroring and symmetry found in my photographs are an artistic manifestation of my obsession to find a kind of symbiotic relationship between nature and myself and by extension nature and humanity. Throughout my research I have discovered that I feel a great sense of connection to rivers in general, and more specifically the Fall Creek. This waterway is not perfect nor am I. These moments of symbiosis have inspired me to use the river as a metaphor in my practice.
The Biophilia Hypothesis

Keith Tidball is a Senior Extension Associate in the Department of Natural Resources at Cornell University. His main focus of research is on human interaction with the rest of nature, particularly in areas altered by natural disasters and war. The widespread human impact of the Anthropocene can start to be understood in a similar way to a natural disaster.

For nearly 99% of human history, we have been hunter-gatherers, who are intrinsically linked to the natural world (Tidball 1). Only in the most recent past have we started placing emphasis on tech-centered relationships rather than our relationship with the natural environment. Tidball explains that we as humans have an urgent need to remember the affinity for nature that we once had. There exists an urge to express this affinity through “the creation of restorative environments, which may also restore or even increase ecological function, and confer resilience across multiple scales” (Tidball 2). In our current Anthropocene Era, it is more important than ever to understand the significance of our relationship as humans with the natural world.

My experiences have led me to a concept known as the biophilia hypothesis. Biophilia is defined as, “the innate human tendency to focus on and affiliate with life forms and life-like processes” (Joye 2011). For me, this concept begins to explain why I have been returning again and again to the Fall Creek. The contemplative state of mind that I gain while there is a byproduct of connection and understanding; forms that repeat themselves in the water, reflections and growth, all act to ease the confines of urban life.

Further, the concept of experience being a form of research is explained through rhizome theory. A rhizome in nature is a tubular root system. The system may have parts that are distant from one another but they are still part of the same plant. The rhizome connects and assembles in
movement without losing or gaining anything, and without giving more importance to one element or another (Van Der Klei 48). The object of research itself becomes the rhizome, growing in one direction of interest, moving in another for other interests, all the time growing in multiplicity, while finding stability in common themes (Van Der Klei 52). This theory is necessary to bring into the discussion of biophilia because there is no hierarchy set in place with the rhizome. Each part of the system is just as important as the next because it is one living thing. There may appear to be distant parts and sections that are not as useful but in reality each system is codependent on the rest. Rhizome theory fits in to the discussion of biophilia because it metaphorically represents the importance of the system as a whole. This idea can be linked to ecosystems on large or small scales, and begins to introduce how it is important to respect nature and recognize that we as humans are part of the nature that is at risk in the Anthropocene.

**Biophilia and River Cleanup**

Immanuel Kant once stated, “beauty becomes the symbol of morality” (Richmond 80). Many river cleanup organizations have used Kant to justify the organized cleansing of river ecosystems. David Nemeth and Deborah Keirsey, geographers working in Toledo and Baton Rouge, suggest a different approach to debunk the moral justifications of organized river cleanup. Their paper, *Elaboration on the Nature of Woody Debris: An Ethical Snag in the Aesthetic Justification for Organized River Cleanup*, offers a different view of this type of work, questioning the reality of the situation. They suggest that the river cleanup is partly successful because it instills an appreciation of nature that is promoted through the tradition and educational narrative of “ecological restoration” (Nemeth 88). However, they go on to critique these cleanup organizations for not including the counterview – the potential disruption of an aquatic habitat
through the cleanup process. They suggest that the cleanup is merely for the aesthetic appreciation and health of a natural space, rather than the overall health of the river ecosystem. For example, there is a concern that the removal of debris disrupts certain parts of the river that could be potential hatcheries for fish, shelter for crawdads, growth areas for beneficial algae, etc.

I am working to cleanse the waterway by beautifying it though my artwork and photography. My artistic process works to aestheticize the river in a way that does not bring in the ethical pitfalls suggested by Nemeth and Keirsey. It is through beauty that we might be able to regain a stronger sense of human values and a pleasure in living (Richmond 79). I think that the emphasis on contemplation that I present with my artwork can act as a medium in itself to bring about conversation regarding the ethics of pollution, both on the micro and macro scales. The example of the Fall Creek is tiny when thinking about the environment in its entirety; however the ideals and arguments that arise from using this one tiny river as an example can be applied elsewhere. John Simaika, a Conservation Ecologist and Entomologist working in South Africa, expertly summarizes this notion:

“This appreciation of nature helps preserve it because we do not actually know how much nature is needed for us to survive. Thus, biophilia sits comfortably with conservation biology because already the negative effects of anthropogenic change bear on our physical and mental health” (Simaika 904).
Along with my photographs, I have been collecting litter and debris found along the riverbanks. This started when I was taking the long exposure photographs for *Fall Creek – Degraded*. Some of these exposures would take up to thirty minutes, and I started wandering the riverbanks and collecting items because of this wait time. I then arranged the collected items into a series of jars saved from my own recycling. This is both an aesthetic representation of the litter, along with a symbolic effort to help reduce the amount of trash present.

Unlike my photographs, beauty in form was never one of my concerns when making these jars. Beauty has never been a central aim of contemporary art, which has tended to focus on deeper meaning and politics rather than formal values, conceptual art being case in point (Richmond 78). The jars could be viewed as a mode of control over the environment, the curating of the objects contained in the jar seen as mimicking the way in which we control
natural elements of the landscape. I am not opposed to this viewpoint but it is not my intention when collecting and displaying objects in this manner. The jars become almost a kind of time capsule. They are representative of the spaces along the river where I collected the debris and the water. The jars change over time with the different bacteria that have been trapped within, unlike the static nature of my photographs.

My method of collecting is almost archaeological. A big influencer of mine has been Mark Dion. Dion’s installations exemplify minutely specific environments, sometimes areas as small as ten square feet, and their connection to the globe. This kind of research is important because it provides insight into how certain environments are being utilized. His work also provides insight into the traces of humankind on the environment. Not all of his work is cynical; it more just provides a starting point for a conversation. My thesis work seeks to provide a similar starting point.

Installation and object arrangement are both important and supplemental facets to my photography. I am interested in objects because they can be symbols for additional ideas and concepts. For instance, when placing the objects that I collect at the river into jars from my own recycling, this directs the statement towards my own personal strives to preserve the environment. The jars are just as conceptual as the images I make while collecting the contained litter. The contents of these jars are curated in a manner that is similar to the way in which I photograph. I let go and follow my own intuition and wisdom, which leads me to each of the items that I collect. I feel that due to this mode of collection, these jars are necessary companions to the images taken at the Fall Creek and are supplemental to the work as a whole. They provide insight and further investigation into a singular place and time.
Graduate Thesis Exhibition

The images below represent my thesis exhibition that opened on May 2\textsuperscript{nd} 2019 at the Herron School of Art & Design in Indianapolis, Indiana. I was part of a group exhibit that included the other six graduates of that year. The show was in the Berkshire, Reese & Paul Gallery located at Ezkenazi Hall.

My thesis exhibit is a compilation of the themes I have explored over the past two years. In the center of the display is my series *Fall Creek – Degraded*. It is a framed inkjet print that spans eight feet across. It is strategically placed in the center of the display because the series encapsulates the idea of landscape degradation that I want to highlight. On the right I included the *Defining Nature Diptychs* that I explained earlier. The arrangement is similar here to the
series in the center. The idea is based on symmetry and comes from the visualization of ripples in water propagating outwards from a central point. On the left of the display are four separate works. From right to left is, *Surface Tension, Snagged, Fall Creek – Preserved, and Balanced #1*. These pieces were thought of independently but work well together because of their placement. The tangle of film in *Snagged* was installed above the jars in *Fall Creek – Preserved* because this arrangement turns the shelf and jars into a kind of weighted base, allowing the eye to explore upward and downward. The strips of film hanging down also appear to be connected to the jars, which further demonstrates the found objects from the river.

The display as a whole can be read in any direction, but it is important to note that the work moves from a removed perspective down to an isolated understanding of specific plants and debris found in the Fall Creek.

*Tim Faris*

*The Fall Creek*
Left: Jar from *Fall Creek – Preserved, 2018*  
Right: Film Close-up from *Snagged, 2019*

*Defining Nature #1 Alternate, Gelatin Silver Prints, 2018*
Conclusion

My thesis research has led me to believe that relationships between humans and natural environments are vitally important to our collective happiness and wellbeing. While researching on location and following the actions and concerns of the biophilia hypothesis, I have noticed firsthand the effects of studying nature and natural processes for extended periods of time. Photography has provided me with the vision and conceptual understanding to document these findings in a way that can be visually transferred to others.
I am personally responsible and contribute to the quality of nature found in the Anthropocene Era. However, it is my belief that a certain balance is important in order to remain productive and environmentally conscious. It is not reasonable to give up on all of the advantages that technology has to offer, but it is just as unreasonable to give up on the positivity and well-being that nature provides.

I hope that through my artwork that I have started a domino effect in awareness on pressing ecological matters. I am not yet confident that there is a clean-cut answer to the issues at hand, but I do think that aestheticizing certain landscapes through photography and art will start to bring about a change for the better, or even spark a conversation on the matter.

Aesthetics and emotional research are important supplements to the factual understanding of the Anthropocene Era. It is necessary through art and through writing to shed light on these concerns and to help bridge the current gap that is found between fields. Interdisciplinary coordination is paramount in both the understanding and in the attempts to better the environment.
Resources


Vincent, Timothy C. “From Sympathy to Empathy: Baudelaire, Vischer and Early Modernism.”